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Back to School in the Wychwoods

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(This article was written to accompany an exhibition of photographs held in the Wychwoods Library in April 2024.)

The Easter holidays are over and ahead stretches the long and, we hope, sunny summer term of new sandals, games in the playground, lessons outside, school trips, sports days and proms. The only cloud on the horizon is exams for the unlucky ones. At least that's the way we may remember it, but it wasn't always like that.



Pupils at Shipton School 1904

Private education was available spasmodically from at least the 18th century in the Wychwoods. By the early 19th century both Anglican and Nonconformist churches ran Sunday Schools teaching amongst other things reading, but not writing, so it was common for people to be able read, but not write.

Gradually Industrialists started to press for mass education as vital to the nation's ability to maintain its lead in the manufacturing industries. But not everyone was convinced of the benefits of mass education in creating a 'steady, honest, God-fearing, Church-going population'. If everyone was educated, it was argued, no-one would want to do menial jobs on the land and 'the rest of us would have nothing to eat'. Fortunately, not everyone shared these fears and from the mid-19th century for more than 120 years each of the three Wychwood villages of Ascott, Milton and Shipton had their own National, in the case of Milton later Board, schools. These schools were initially provided with support from wealthy local benefactors such as the Lord Churchill in Ascott and in Milton by J.H. Langston of Sarsden, who was also instrumental in the building of the school in Lyneham. Teaching in Board schools (which were brought into being by the 1870 Education Act) was non-denominational, whereas the National schools provided education in accordance with the teachings of the Church of England.

The cost of learning

Although education was available it was not compulsory, nor was it free. Until 1891 parents who wanted their children to receive an education had to pay a weekly fee. At Milton School fees were 1d per week for a labourer's child, 3d for tradesmen's children, and 6d for farmers' children. Attendance was therefore irregular, especially in poorer households, where low wages and uncertain employment meant that families often could not afford to send a child to school on a regular basis, if at all.

In Ascott in 1873 the schoolmaster noted that the Moss children '*returned to school this week after a long absence without money and without apology. They came again this week without pence. I sent them home to get it, they live close by, but they did not return and have kept away all week.*' Shipton's schoolmaster seems to have spent a lot of time sending out accounts and requests for payment of fees and arrears, often to no avail.

From the surviving school logbooks, we learn that children frequently missed school to contribute to the family income by working in the fields at harvest-time, or on the family allotment in the spring, or to mind siblings whilst their mother worked on the land.



Threshing in the Wychwoods late 19th century

In April 1871 the schoolmaster in Ascott noted in his logbook *'Many children kept at home potato planting'* and in July *'some work in the hayfield. Some mind their little brothers and sisters while the mother is haymaking, some have to carry refreshments to father or mother.'* In 1875 many children did not return to Shipton school at the end of the summer holidays as they *'had not finished picking'*. In Milton in 1891 the School Board decided to extend the summer holidays by two weeks *'on account of the backwardness of the harvest'*.

A narrow curriculum

From 1863 in order to receive government grants schools had to keep logbooks and submit to annual visits by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs), who also conducted examinations in the 3Rs. Payment of the grant was based on exam performance and the numbers of attendances by pupils. Money was deducted for each child who failed the exam. In March 1873 the schoolmaster at Shipton recorded that, following the annual inspection by the HMIs, the school's entire grant was at risk of forfeiture unless in future they were able to *'report better of the infants'*. It is therefore not surprising that the elementary(primary) school curriculum was for many years dominated by the 3 Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic. The curriculum gradually expanded to include practical skills such as needlework, gardening, crafts, music, drawing and 'object lessons.' By 1929 Ascott children were also receiving woodwork and cookery lessons taught in the 'practical subjects hut' at Shipton school. Subjects such as nature study, history and geography gradually introduced children to a wider world. But emphasis was still on the 3Rs. On one occasion girls at Milton school had to give up their needlework lessons in order to concentrate on improving their maths.

When do you leave school?

If parents were able to pay the fee, it seems that some children might start school as young as 3 and leave when their parents chose. In 1880 attendance was made compulsory between the ages of 5 and 10, in an attempt to limit the use of child labour. But truancy and non-attendance were frequent problems. Thomas of Shipton was noted to have been absent for 60 out of 92 occasions and was said to be 'running the streets.' Many children continued to work outside school hours, in 1901 an estimated 300,000+ did so. In 1891 schooling effectively became free as the state provided for the payment of up to 10sh a year per child. The minimum school leaving age subsequently rose steadily from 11 in 1893, to 12 in 1899, 14 in 1918, 15 in 1947 and 16 in 1972.

Secondary schooling

Apart from the few elementary school children who won scholarships to grammar schools, secondary education was denied to most pupils.



Pupils in Standard VI (11/12 year olds) at St. Mary's School Shipton:1929

In 1939 Shipton Church of England school was the only school in the Wychwoods to take children for the full elementary age range of 5 to 14 years. Children from Ascott transferred to Shipton at 11. Milton school children were bussed to Burford at 11 or, if the parents preferred a Church of England education, they transferred to Shipton. Access to Burford Grammar school was by payment of fees or by gaining a County scholarship. The pace of change speeded up after the 1944 Education Act, which gave all eleven-year-olds the right to secondary education.

Dulcie Arundell from Shipton, in an interview recorded in 1993 and now in the Society's archive, was awarded a County scholarship to Burford Grammar School. In her first year she was provided with a brand-new bicycle to get herself to and from school. She recalls that it was hard work cycling, as there were steep hills in both directions. At the end of the year the bicycle was taken away and the following September a 'charabanc' (bus) provided to take her and others to school. She also remembers some girls obtaining scholarships to Milham Ford Girls School and catching the train to Oxford each day.

The best days of your life?

It's often said that schooldays are the best days of your life, but for many the school day was long and filled with hard, repetitive lessons and cruel treatment. Talking in class, unless answering a teacher's question, was forbidden and punishment was handed out if you didn't understand a lesson or got your spelling wrong. Girls, as well as boys, received corporal punishment delivered by a cane to the boys and by a wrap on the knuckles with a wooden ruler for the girls. An entry in the Shipton School logbook for January 23rd 1884 records that '*Richard King punished twice today for disobedience. Four strokes each time*'. On a subsequent occasion a boy was '*punished for leaving school without permission*', for which offence he was given 6 strokes of the cane. This was seen as overzealous and led to the schoolmaster being summoned to appear before the magistrate, but the case against him

was dismissed. As late as 1946 the single remaining teacher at Ascott school was forced to resign for what was considered to be her 'noisy and rough treatment' of the children.



Children at school in Ascott 1932 or 1933

School meals

1906 free school meals were provided for needy children, and free milk for all from the 1940s. Although many children went home for lunch or brought something with them, a school canteen was opened at Milton school in 1941 and remained in use after the War. But there seems to have been little enthusiasm for school meals. *'I can remember school dinners'* recalls Valerie Davis from Milton *'it was always the same..... there must have been some food parcels came to school and we had some chocolate rice and the headmistress said how wonderful it was and how grateful we should be, but it was really not very nice, but you were made to feel you'd got to eat it..... because it was good for you'*. Conditions in the school buildings were basic by modern standards.

Cold classrooms

Large, high-ceiling classrooms were heated by coal or wood-fired tortoise stoves and toilets were usually outside and had no heating or hot water for handwashing. Windows were set high in the walls so children would not be distracted by what was happening outside. During the Second World War it was especially hard to keep schools heated as a result of coal shortages and difficulties in obtaining cleaners to light fires. There were often long spells of icy weather when water froze in the taps, followed by thaws that saw the drains blocked. In January 1941, Shipton school logbook recorded *'School very cold, although good fires are burning. Temperature at 10am only 38 degrees F' (3.3 C)*



Classroom in Ascott school early 1900s Image courtesy of Oxfordshire History Centre

Going to School in Ascott

In the early 19th century Ascott had a Baptist and an Anglican Sunday School attended by 30-40 children, with numbers later rising to 107. A 'aged woman' ran a day school teaching her 'little pupils' the catechism, reading and knitting.

By 1838 a National School, supported by Lord Churchill, occupied a property on the south of the church. Numbers attending continued to grow and by 1868 the school was overcrowded with 79 children on the role and an average attendance of 67. But standards were low. When a new schoolmaster arrived, he made a damning entry in the logbook *'a week's work has shown that the children are backward. No home lessons are done....The children attend irregularly'*. He was also concerned that *'There was no playground..... the children had been accustomed to run about the road in the recreation quarter of an hour.'* He also had to *'reprove the children for climbing the churchyard wall and playing in the churchyard.'*

In 1872 a purpose-built school was erected on Crown-owned land on the south side of the village green. An Infants classroom was added a few years later to ease overcrowding as the numbers attending continued to rise. By 1883 92 children attended the school and it was receiving favourable reports from the school inspectors.



Ascott school children early 1900s

From 1930 onwards senior children (11 and over) were transferred to Shipton School and by 1938 there were only 21 pupils aged 3-11 and a single teacher. Numbers were swelled by an influx of 56 evacuees from London in the early years of the World War 2.

By 1946 the evacuees had returned home and only 19 children remained on the roll. A school swimming pool was opened in 1967. Although numbers had doubled by 1968, by which time the school was a Church of England (controlled) Primary School, the numbers attending again declined until in 1986 the school closed with the remaining 17 pupils being transferred to Leafield.



Children at Ascott school in 1955

The school premises were sold to an independent preparatory school in Burford (Windrush Valley School) which relocated there the following year.

Going to school in Milton

As in the other Wychwoods villages there was a school in Milton in the early 18th century and, as in Ascott, a century later 'aged people' were teaching 'small children reading reading, writing, knitting, sewing, and the catechism. A day school paid for by parents opened in 1825 and another in 1828, and by 1833 there were three schools teaching a total of 60 children, while a free Baptist Sunday school was attended by 40 boys and girls.

A National school and schoolmaster's house were built in 1853-4, contemporary with the adjoining church which also ran a Sunday school. By 1880 the school taught 128 children. From 1878 younger children were taught at the former Baptist schoolroom (built in 1867).

But as elsewhere some parents did not send their children to school.



Children at Milton school, Church Road 1923

The mixed school continued to expand in size and pupil numbers, with average attendance being 165 in 1897-8, but thereafter a falling population reduced the numbers attending. Tensions between Anglicans and Baptists over school appointments and unfavourable reports caused the Baptists to refuse to renew the lease on the infant school premises in 1930, resulting in its closure and the mixed school's reorganisation as an infant and junior school. Children over the age of 11 were transferred to Burford School, despite their parents' protests.



Country dancing in the yard at Milton School: 1956 or 1957

The school roll was dramatically increased by the arrival of more than 100 children and their teachers, evacuated from London at the outbreak of World War 2. This forced the school to find additional premises including the Baptist schoolroom, Anglican Church room and the

British Legion Hall. In 1951 plans were announced to close the school and transfer its pupils to the proposed new Wychwood primary school in Shipton, but the new school did not open until 1972 and in the meantime the school became increasingly crowded as the population of the village grew.

Following the school's closure the building was converted into a private house.

Going to school in Shipton

The earliest mention of a school in the Wychwoods dates from the later 16th century and refers to a schoolmaster being paid to train the youths of the parish in virtue and learning. By 1808 there were three private schools in Shipton and a Sunday school, which by 1819, was teaching 200 children.

Shipton National School (later St. Mary's Primary) opened in 1854. Income to support the running of the school came from voluntary contributions and individual donations as well as local charities. The school was enlarged in 1887 and again in 1898. By the turn of the century average attendance was 126. New lavatories and heating were provided in 1926 and in 1928 a 'practical subjects hut' was built in the playground.



The class of '58 Shipton School

By the 1940s the school premises were deemed unsatisfactory, and the situation was made worse by the arrival of 63 evacuees and their 5 teachers in 1939. The loss of its senior pupils (aged 11-14) to Burford school by the 1960s may have eased the overcrowding.

By the 1960s the school had changed its status from aided to controlled and became known as St. Mary's Church of England primary school. In 1972 pupils aged 9-11 were transferred to the newly-opened Wychwood primary school which received St. Mary's remaining c40

pupils in 1985 following the school's closure the previous December. Following the school's closure the building was converted into three cottages.

In 1972 a new Church of England voluntary controlled primary school was opened on land off Milton Road. Purpose-built to accommodate 200 children from both Milton and Shipton, it initially took only older children from St. Mary's school so as to avoid overcrowding; most of its pupils came from Milton primary school which had closed earlier that year. A school swimming pool was opened in 1973. Increasing numbers led to a significant expansion of the school's buildings and facilities in 1991 and today more than 300 children are taught there in 11 classes.

St. Michael's College, later St. Michael's Home, Shipton



St Michael's shortly before demolition in 1989

In 1869 the Christian missionary Catherine Barter, sister of the new vicar of Shipton, Henry Barter, opened a private girls' boarding school in two adjoining houses near the Crown Inn (site opposite The Wychwood). Known as St. Michael's College it moved into purpose-built premises on Milton Road in 1881, with 18 pupils. It remained open in 1895 (the year of Catherine's death) but closed soon afterwards.

Following remodelling it re-opened in 1900 as a girl's home run by the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society, which transferred disadvantaged girls from a home in Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire. Initially the girls, some 24 of them, attended Shipton school, but from 1902 they were taught in an industrial school at St. Michael's. Inspectors in 1903 found the girls 'very much out of hand' but things gradually improved and in 1911 the school had 4 staff and 40 resident girls. The school closed in 1924, but the building continued in use as a children's home until the late 1930s, its residents attending Shipton school. The building was sold in 1945 and subsequently demolished.



Girls attending St. Michael's College, Shipton

Much of the above information about schooling in each of the Wychwood villages is drawn from the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire Vol. XIX: Wychwood Forest and Environs (copy available in Wychwood Library) and material held in the Society's Archive. The original school logbooks for Ascott can be seen in the Oxfordshire History Centre. Photocopies of the logbooks for Shipton and Milton are held in the Society's Archive, please contact us if you would like to see them.

For memories and photos of Milton school in the early 1960s see

<https://wychwoodshistory.uk/early-1960s-milton-school-memories/>