

MINUTES OF THE 98th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 28th JUNE 2017

Present: - Rupert Clark – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Secretary's Report

Peter has given his Village History Talk and Tour to members of U3A, Buckingham.

2) "A Sunday afternoon with a School logbook" – by Alan Parr

Well into the nineteenth century England was known as having the worst schooling in Europe. No one – the church, gentry, employers, parents – had any wish to see all children educated, and it wasn't until 1833 that the Government first budgeted funds to build schools. Even by the middle of the century there were still nearly a thousand "teachers" who were not literate enough to be able to write their name on documents.

Once momentum did build up, increasing expenditure forced the government to impose stringent cutbacks on schools from 1862. Every school had an annual visit from one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools to test every child individually in the "Three Rs". Inspections were highly stressful upon both teachers and pupils; Flora Thompson's "Lark Rise to Candleford" recounts her own miserable experience as a pupil a few miles from Aynho in Cottisford. The Head Teacher's livelihood depended upon the performance and poor results might cause dismissal. At least one Victorian Head killed herself rather than face the inspection, not due to bad results but administration overload.

A further consequence of the inspection system was that schools were required to complete a logbook; Mr Parr's own interest stems from the chance opportunity to look at the Aynho logbook one Sunday afternoon two years ago. He was surprised just how interesting he found it and he was delighted to be invited to extend his knowledge and talk to the Society. Actually there are many surviving logbooks, to be found in local and national archives.

The simplest arithmetic – as is still the case today – formed the basis of the curriculum, and every logbook tells that schools concentrated (with only partial success) on teaching multiplication tables and the like.

Children were put into six Standards or levels, with Standard I being the most elementary, and most children left school long before reaching the upper standards, so for most schools at least 75% of their pupils would be working at Standard I or II. The irony is that at the same time this was the era of Victorian self-improvement, the library movement and the establishment of the applied science institutes. This was an era of huge diversity, at the top the need for technicians and at the other children standing in fields as scarecrows. World War 1 was just a handful of years away.

The surviving Aynho logbook records the period from 1871 to 1908. The first third of the book covers the period up to 1897. Head, Richard Poole left very brief entries, with a single line reporting on an entire week. He did on occasion write favourably about the children's attention and behaviour.

From November 1897 when a new Head who wrote in much more detail, Allen R Hill aged 51, comes across as a very austere man. His first page records that he found the children very talkative, and this is clearly not a compliment. He rarely gives any information not directly related to the classroom. Heads in other schools tell about the annual treat given to children, or playing in the playground, but Allen Hill never does. On one occasion the Govenors insist he closes the school for Christmas on December 23rd, but he complains he's only part way through the December examinations!

As was often the case, the school had two rooms; classes were mixed but split by age. The smaller room was for the infants and the larger one for pupils aged from about seven. Many schools had very cramped conditions; for example at Cheddington the Head writes of having 104 children in his room – so many they cannot all sit down at once – and at Littlehampton the Head needs to schedule lessons in the playground whenever the weather allows, even in mid-winter. However, at Aynho the building was of good size and the main room fifty feet long, very comfortable given that the numbers in the school rarely exceeded fifty.

The school is very favourably staffed; there is an assistant teacher, Millicent Baughan. She would have been 24 in 1901 – we hear little of her, but she must have significantly lightened the Head's load. Allen Hill's wife Rosetta acts as sewing mistress, and his daughter Edith takes charge of the infants, usually about twenty in number. Edith is 19 in 1899 and the inspector invariably praises her for operating in a kindly fashion, though he usually recommends she needs further training "in a good Oxford school". Throughout Allen Hill's time from 1897 to 1908 he reports misbehaviour on an almost weekly basis. He records the case of Oliver Garrett, who "cannot be left a minute without his getting into mischief". The following week Allen Hill reports "on Wednesday Oliver Garrett was again in mischief ... when he fell and broke his leg."

The character appearing most often is Minnie Wrighton, who is reported as being very talkative through being saucy and impudent to outright defiant. Week after week Minnie's behaviour is bad enough to warrant reporting in the logbook, often with her friend Ethel Williams. Amelia Gurney is frequently associated with them, but it was interesting to see that a few years later Amelia was sufficiently rehabilitated to help out when the infant section was short-staffed.

Minnie wasn't the only Wrighton to cause problems; Reginald regularly misbehaved and was recorded to have molested girls on their way to school, while the Head found Clement "a vicious-tempered boy, is generally put away by himself, as he is not safe". We look back on this period as one of respect for authority figures. Shockingly, Clement and another boy "waylaid their teacher on her way home and stoned her [Miss Baughan]".

Allen Hill records using the cane on just a dozen or so occasions, and when he does so it is a single "stripe" to the hand. Wherever possible he deals with indiscipline by standing children on a form, separating them from the group, keeping them in, and setting extra work. Even after Miss Baughan was stoned, the school's Correspondent (rather akin to today's governing body) requires the culprits to be dealt with by sending them home and making an apology.

In fact, on just one occasion did Allen Hill record the use of two strokes of the cane, when the Humphris brothers so injured a donkey by stoning that it had to be put down. This was a sufficiently serious case that the police were called, but on a subsequent occasion the Head records that for the Humphris boys "corporal punishment is not the slightest good to them, too hardened and bad."

Even after ten years at the school Allen Hill was still facing challenges, and on the very last page of the logbook he complains again about Joseph Humphris.

Many of those mentioned in the log fought in WW1. Clement and his elder brother Alfred were killed on the Somme within two days of each other in August 1916. Edward Secull, Wallace Williams and Reginald Wrighton also lost their lives.

3) Forthcoming Meetings

There are no meetings in July or August. Restarting in September.

September 27th "A History of Libraries" - Keith McClellan