



# *Schools*

# *Oaksey*

## **Early Schools, Oaksey**

In 1818, there were two small day schools; 20 children were taught there in 1833. In 1846 it was recorded that there was a thriving Sunday school where 70 children attended.

## **Oaksey Church of England Primary School**

The National School, now Oaksey Church of England Primary School, was built in 1854. This initially housed 70 children. Four years later, in 1858, 40-50 children were on the roll of the school. Until the start of World War One numbers of children remained around that mark; there were 54 in 1906. In 1937 there were 37 on the roll. The attendance officers who checked that the registers were correct were first recorded as visiting the school in 1880.

As with all other schools, Oaksey was subject to inspections from both a Diocesan Inspector and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). These reports fluctuated greatly, even from year to year. In 1889, the H.M inspector wrote: "The children are exceedingly well behaved, and, though sickness has been prevalent for some time, the results of instructions in the elementary subjects are on the whole credible." But in 1898, an inspector wrote: "The state of the infants is scarcely satisfactory." Their progress cannot be considered more than fair. Considerable improvement must be shown next year in order for them to retain the Higher Variable Grant. They need a classroom very badly and a more qualified teacher must be provided for them."

In 1892, lessons outside the core subjects also included object lessons on, candles, India rubber, bread, the cuckoo, sheep, camel and beer. Poetry ranged from Byron to Walter Scott's 'Lady of the Lake.'

In the 1890s a system to encourage attendance was introduced, with prizes given. A grant given (£16 16 s 0d) in February 1898 was specifically for new desks and new staff. But new members of staff are not mentioned in the next few years, although desks were delivered.

Attendance fluctuated greatly depending on the weather, illness and if children were needed working for in the fields or looking after younger siblings. A common occurrence was for older children to be absent for either potato planting or picking. Attendance is commented on in the school log books with an almost regular monotony, but this is because attendance was key to the school receiving money in the form of a grant for much of the 19th century.

Other events also caused the school to close; for example on 6 May 1886 the school was shut because of the annual horse racing event. This race took place up until 1914, when it was halted because of the First World War.

The school was closed for a month in May 1898 because of an outbreak of measles. The trouble did not end there for diphtheria came to Oaksey in 1899. The school was shut for nine weeks prior to the opening in January and was closed for another month in April. Cases of diphtheria were recorded in the parish for the rest of the year and there was a minor breakout in 1901, which meant the school broke up earlier than normal for summer holidays. Within the school logs books there are even rather alarming references to young boys who were sent home because they were suffering from the early stages of consumption.

In 1906 ownership of the school passed to Wiltshire County Council, as the education authority, but the local

management committee remained in place. The headmistress was advised to form a school library with the help of benevolent managers and local gentry and, in 1912, history was included in the curriculum.

The children at the start of the 1900s learnt quite a lot about nature. On 30 September the school mistress calmly writes that they were sent six live bats to study by a local farmer who was keen on children learning about nature. A visit from the school doctor is first mentioned in 1908 when there were 60 pupils at the school.

In the first part of the 20th century, if the weather became bad or the number of children in school became too low, the head teacher would often send pupils home early or shut the school. On 24 February 1924 there were only 12 children at school because of a heavy fall of snow.

Eastcourt School, in Crudwell parish, shut down in 1923 and in June of that year eight children who were displaced arrived at Oaksey.

On 24 October 1924 head teacher Jane Mayo wrote: "Still no more help. The infant room cannot hold all the children. The children admitted are so backward and require much individual attention." Mrs Mayo retired in 1925 after 39 years at the school. In 1929 R.C. Warner paid for a large open air classroom to the south of the school.

Evacuees arrived in Oaksey during in 1939 but no detail is given in the log books as to the number of new pupils.

The school was shut for three days at the end of World War Two to mark "the cessation of hostilities in Europe."

School dinners were introduced in 1948 and in December 1949 the school became a voluntary controlled school. From 1954 Oaksey became a primary school, instead of an all-age school, when all pupils aged eleven and over went to Malmesbury for their secondary education. In 1986 there were just 32 children and two teachers at the school.

This situation changed considerably by the early 21st century. An ambitious school building programme saw a new school hall, entrance and library area plus new toilets completed. In September 2007 children returned to their school to find a new classroom, a new full time Reception class and a designated outside courtyard play area. There are three classes in the school, each with additional teaching support and the pupils can enjoy a large outside play area, their own gardens and a large playing field. In June 2009 Oaksey became the first school in Wiltshire to achieve the prestigious NACE Challenge Award for excellence in provision for able, gifted and talented pupils. In May 2010 there were 88 children attending the school.

**Wiltshire Community History**