

The History of Potterne School



In 1819 between 40 and 50 children from Potterne, Worton and Marston were being taught at Potterne, with the expenses paid by their parents. In 1831 the yellow brick school was built, funded by the vicar, opposite the churchyard on the Devizes road. A two-storey schoolmaster's house was attached. In 1832 a trust was set up and the school was united with the diocesan board of education. The teaching was Church of England but the school was not associated with the National Society.

By 1859 there were separate schools for boys and girls in the school building. About 50 boys were taught by an uncertificated master in a 'fair room', with a wooden floor, on the ground floor, while in a 'fair room' upstairs 50 girls were taught by an untrained mistress. The rector's wife taught 20 children in her cottage and presumably these were infants. There was also a 'middle' school with 25-30 pupils. In 1865 the school was rebuilt and enlarged and it is likely that the infants were then accommodated in the main school building but in a separate department. From 1874 the Managing Committee were charged with running it as a public elementary [all age] school within the terms of the 1870 Education Act. The school logbooks, which tell us a great deal about school life, date from this time.

Until 1889 the school was run as three separate schools, the Boys, the Girls, and the Infants, under a master and two mistresses. In the Infants' School there was a Mistress, Emma Rumble, a certified teacher, and Alice Yeats as Assistant Teacher. Charles Wilshire was the Master of the Boys' School with an Assistant Teacher and a Monitor. Unfortunately the logbooks of the Girls' School do not seem to have survived but doubtless there was a Mistress, Assistant Teacher and Monitress.

The infants learned to read and write and do simple arithmetic. Needlework was important and they learned many songs, such as 'The Old Black Cat' and sang

hymns. Object lessons, in which all aspects of a particular object were covered, were given and these included lessons on colour, the cat, the elephant, the peacock, the wolf, wood, salt and a knife. Attendance was fairly good and averaged from 45 to 55 in the late 1870s and early 1880s and had risen to 90 by 1892. The H.M.I. reports on the Infants are generally good with only an occasional backward area in some years. Later on prizes were awarded at the Christmas holidays to the children for good conduct, needlework and punctuality.

The H.M.I. reports on the Boys' School are good in the 1870s and early 1880s but only fair in the late 1880s. The inspection in 1874 was the first with a view to the school being given a government grant, which depended upon the performance of the school and the results of examinations. Attendances, gradually increased from around 20 to 30 boys in 1875 to 50 in 1884. Subjects taught were reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, dictation, religious education and singing. There seems to have been a fair amount of truancy.

All the schools had many things in common. School holidays were two weeks at Christmas, Good Friday plus the following week for Easter, one week for Whitsun and five weeks Harvest Holiday in the summer. There were special holidays including a half-day holiday for Ascension Day, a day for the annual school treat in July and two days (Monday and Tuesday) for Potterne Feast in September. No school fees were charged for the remaining three days of this week and many children took the whole week off school. Normally school fees were one penny (0.4p) and later twopence (0.8p) a week. A half-holiday was given after the H.M.I. examinations, Diocesan religious examinations and for the Band of Hope tea.

Unofficial absences, particularly among the boys were numerous and continued until the end of the 19th century. There was seasonal work on the land; March/April, potato planting; June, haymaking (although the attendance improved on wet days) and pea picking; July, fruit picking with harvest work for the older children; September, potato picking and fruit picking; October, potato picking and acorn gathering; November acorn gathering. Other regular absences were in April for Devizes Spring Fair and October for Devizes Autumn Fair. Some children went to the Agricultural Show in Devizes in June, while in 1890 many skipped school to watch military manoeuvres at Devizes. Bad weather also caused low attendances and there are comments in the logbooks concerning very wet weather and severe storms. In October 1891 a severe storm caused absences for two reasons. Firstly the bad weather and secondly boys collecting fallen branches for firewood after the storm. Heavy snowfall was also a problem and deep snow of December 1890 continued with frost and ice in January and February with more snow through to March 1891.

A big change occurred in the school in 1889 when, on 9 September, the Boys' and Girls' Schools combined to become a Mixed School. A new master, Harry Hughes,

and Assistant Master, Horatio Whitting, were appointed. Mrs Wilshire was still the Sewing Mistress and John Smith the paid Monitor. By 1892 there was also an Assistant Mistress, Miss Julia Wiltshire (daughter of the Sewing Mistress), and Ethel Privy had become the paid Monitress. In 1890 the H.M.I. report stated that Mr. Hughes had found the school in a backward state six months ago and had brought about much improvement, but there was still a long way to go. He continued to be successful and in 1891 the report said the school was in very good order and the children much improved. There were 122 children on the register in 1890 with 108 present for the H.M.I. examinations and 83% of these passed. By 1892 there were 130 children on the register of the Mixed School and the master recorded that on two occasions there were 210 children present in both Mixed and Infants' Schools. The average for the Mixed School in some weeks was 120 and this had increased to 140 in 1893, although some children were illegally working instead of being at school. Despite these number Mr. Hughes records a lot of problems with children, particularly boys, not attending school. The Attendance officer seems to have been somewhat lax in his duties and did little for long periods. Extensive problems in February 1893 led to Mr. Hughes proposing a course of punishment, to which the parents agreed, and one boy who was extremely awkward was nearly expelled.

In 1891 school fees were abolished and education became free nationally. In common with many schools a Penny Bank was set up instead, which attracted about 50 depositors – nearly half of the children in the Mixed School. By now more subjects were being taught. Geography was first taught at the school in 1890; there were drawing lessons and the children had excellent results in examinations; music was taught as well as singing and history lessons had been introduced. In 1893-4 the boys in the first three standards studied 20 subjects from the Ancient Britons and Romans to the Death of Wolfe and the last English Slaves. The higher standards were looking at the Tudors in depth. During Advent Standards 4 and 5 received their religious education lessons in church on Wednesdays and Thursdays and the vicar regularly taught this subject to the upper standards. In 1898 the children received lessons from a working potter.

The H.M.I. reports continued to be good and teaching in the school was very thorough. In 1893 the highest possible grant was given to the school. During the winter afternoons lessons were changed from 2.00 – 4.30 to 1.30 – 4.00 so that children could get home before it was dark. The school was extended in 1893 and accommodation increased to 213; the average attendance in that year was 199. The school choir seems to have been successful and regularly attended festivals, taking the village children to such places as Salisbury (1889 and 1894), Bradford on Avon (1890) and Bristol (1898).

During the 1890s Potterne suffered one of the longest outbreaks of serious illnesses in children that occurred in Wiltshire in the 19th century. Influenza had struck the village at the beginning of 1890 and on 11 February only 65 children came to school,

but had to be sent home as there were no teachers well enough to teach them. The school was closed for a week and there were only 80 children present when it reopened. Another influenza epidemic lasted from December 1891 to April 1892, there were cases of scarlet fever at the end of 1892 and measles struck the village in January 1893.

The main epidemic began in July 1893 and lasted until 1895/6. This was diphtheria and the school was closed for 8 months and 2 weeks from July 1893, with about half the children contracting the disease. It was felt that it may have originated in the cramped conditions of the school and strict procedures for disinfecting, cleaning and ventilating were put into place. The school was closed again from 20 June to 20 August and one child died at this time. A six-week leave of absence for harvest work was given as there were no summer holidays but the school had to be closed again from 26 September to 7 January 1895. During this time a patent Boyle's Ventilating shaft was put into each classroom, extra windows inserted and existing ones adapted to provide more fresh air. In January 1895 the children who were now nearly 13 and would have passed the exemptions standard in 1894, allowing them to leave school if they wished, were allowed to leave and start work. There was another outbreak of influenza in March 1895.

The 1895 H.M.I. report stated that there had been good progress in the school despite all the illnesses and closures. They recommended that the playground be enlarged and commented that the boys' toilets were insufficient and too close to the school building, indicating that could be a cause of the diphtheria. This resulted in building work from June to early October. Classrooms and porches were enlarged, an infant school provided, the playground extended and new toilets built. The school reopened on 7 October, with accommodation for 246 children. The school now had a large room, 54 feet by 16 feet, a South Room, 31 feet 9 inches by 16 feet 6 inches, a small classroom and the Infants' school, 16 feet by 32 feet. Cases of diphtheria continued but became fewer. Penicillin, which is used to treat the disease, was not discovered until 1928.

Unfortunately this was not the end of the school's misfortunes with diseases. Influenza came again in March 1895 and there were outbreaks of measles, chicken pox and mumps in 1896. A whooping cough epidemic closed the school for four weeks in February/March 1897 and from May to June there were cases of German measles, scarletina and scarlet fever, from which one girl died. The school was closed again from July to 20 September because of a scarlet fever epidemic in which seven older children died. In June 1898 61 children in the Mixed School were affected by chicken pox and this was followed by an outbreak of mumps. Finally after six years of continuing epidemics good health seems to have returned to the village children from mid 1899.

In 1905 the school was taken over by Wiltshire County Council and the average

attendance was then 205. By 1910 the number of children that could be accommodated was 160 in the Mixed and 86 in the Infants; the average attendance was 202. By 1938 the school had become a junior school of 108 pupils with children over 11 years going to school in Devizes. In 1950 controlled status was granted and in that year there was a headteacher and four teachers, with 114 children. The number had risen to 134 by 1955.

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