

NORTHFIELD AND EDUCATION

A

HISTORY

OF

ST. LAURENCE SCHOOL

1714 - 1970

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A history of St. Laurence School : 1714-1970

The school was originated in 1714 when a newly-appointed Rector of Northfield, Dr. W. Worth (also Archdeacon of Worcester), wrote to the S.P.C.K. for help in founding a Charity School in Northfield. The S.P.C.K. helped in the provision of books, but Dr. Worth seems to have made himself responsible for the maintenance of the school. He also ensured that the school should continue after his death, his will providing £100 as an endowment. The next Rector, the Rev. Lockey Soley, left a further bequest, and so did Mr. Thomas Lloyd. The interest on these endowments is still part of the Managers' income.

Began in Vestry

Teachers of today, accustomed to classes of 50, might envy the Charity Schoolmaster of Northfield in the eighteenth century. His class consisted of 20 children, and this was later reduced to 12. The first schoolmaster was paid by results; 2s. 6d. when each child could "name and distinguish readily all the letters in the alphabet, and the like sum when he could spell, and 5s. more when he could well and distinctly say the Church Catechism, and 15s. 0d. more when he could write." Later on he was given a regular salary of - eight guineas a year!

The school was for many years held in the vestry-room but in 1820 a schoolroom was hired. One tradition says that this room was at the Bell House. A Sunday School was opened to be held in the same place. This was a more important event, for Sunday Schools of that period were more than places of religious instruction, but were meant to teach the 3 Rs as well. It was quite

common for children of seven, eight or nine years of age to be apprenticed to a trade, and during the week all children were expected to work in farm, household or workshop. Thus schools on Sunday were the only solution.

First Separate School

In 1834 the Rev. H. Clarke became Rector, and within a few months of his induction he was looking for a permanent building for the school. Backed by a parish collection of £118, he secured a grant of £100 from the National Society and in 1837 the building on Church Hill was opened. Granted that the building was quite small by our standards, we must admire the energy and drive of a man who could propose and carry out a project so rapidly. This building is still in use and is referred to as "the old school-room". At one end of the room is a door which is now never unlocked. It leads into the caretaker's house which was originally the residence of the schoolmaster. It must have been a great convenience for him to rise from breakfast, open a door, and be straightway at his desk.

The house was apparently build as a bait to attract teachers to Northfield, "as without a house no satisfactory teacher could be got." There was good reason for this statement. Between 1840 and 1841 four individuals were recorded as Northfield schoolmasters; James Dutton, James Hopkins, John Robinson and Isaac Baker.

All this time the Charity School had been carrying out its normal function of teaching twelve poor boys of the parish. Though a separate establishment from the National School, its fortunes had become more and more tied up to it. They were near neighbours, separated only by the schoolmaster's house, and about 1844 an amalgamation took place. John Robinson, who was the Charity Schoolmaster of that date, became

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the first master of the joint schools. At the same time the Sunday School became a National School open all the week.

The school was now organised on a monitorial system and by 1847 Mr. Robinson had an assistant mistress and two female monitors to help him to teach 32 boys and 26 girls. As there were 45 children in 1845, the numbers were increasing rapidly. One might expect that a staff of four with 58 children to teach would achieve high results. So they would today, but it must be remembered that education was not compulsory, and the fees payable were not always easy for mothers to find. It was quite common to keep children at home if farmwork or housework had to be done, or if the school pence were not to be spared. Truancing too is often mentioned in old log books. Attendance often fell so low that the schoolmaster was in despair; he found it impossible to make any progress at all. Those who praise the past at the expense of the present should read the records of a hundred years ago. "I think the old sturdy sort of Englishman exists no more", writes a schoolmaster of that time.

There was also the handicap of distance in bad weather, as children came from as far as Cofton and Weoley Castle. By 1850 it had become necessary to open another school at Bartley Green, in charge of Miss Taylor. In that same year the numbers were up to 70, and a new schoolmaster, Richard Thomas, was appointed master of the school. "Ah!" some of the older ones will say at this point, "Dicky Thomas! I remember him", or "I remember Dad talking about him". Yes, perhaps he will be remembered for a few more years. He was Northfield's schoolmaster for 30 years and his grave can still be found in S. Laurence Churchyard, marked by a plain stone cross, unlettered, uninscribed.

By 1869, when the population of Northfield was

just over 3,000, there were 114 children in the school, and two teachers. Most of the parents were nailers, labourers and farmers. The weekly fee ranged from 6d to 1d according to the number of children at the school.

The Education Act of 1870 brought Northfield Schools into the National system of education. Mr. Thomas continued as head of the Boys' and Girls' School and Miss Robins became Headmistress of the Infant School. Further additions to the buildings were made at intervals during the nineteenth century, the last being in 1898, when the girls were given a separate school. The names of many of the masters and mistresses of the last eighty years must be familiar to many natives of Northfield, and it is a testimony to the happy atmosphere of the school that so many of them held offices for extremely long periods. The name of Fewster is legendary. Braithet Llewelyn Fewster was Headmaster for 41 years and established a tradition which is still alive. His successor, Mr. Albert Sage, after serving as an assistant on the staff, filled the post of Headmaster for 26 years and his memory is still a powerful influence in Northfield, though he is in retirement on the South Coast.

Mrs. E. Harper, having been Head of the Infant School for six years before her marriage, returned to her post in 1901 to serve for another 25 years. Miss Trembath was head of the Girls' School for 24 years, and her successor, Miss Whitehead, who is still a very active attender at the church, held office for 18 years.

The most recent decisive step in deciding the fortunes of our school was taken by the late Rector, the Rev. J. Crowle Ellis. Faced with the issue after the 1944 Education Act, between "controlled" or "aided" status, the latter giving a large measure of independence, but also of heavy responsibility, he fought for aided status with almost fanatical belief in the destiny of church schools. Many will remember with sadness

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that he is no longer with us to delight in the new, bright and airy building on Bunbury Road and to say with a chuckle, "You see. I was right all the time".

In 1960 there were over 800 children on the roll, housed in scattered sections, with all the Infants and five Junior classes on the Church Hill site, the remaining Junior classes at Northfield Institute and in the first part of the new Bunbury Road building.

In 1964 the school celebrated its 250th Anniversary and the Juniors also moved into their new Junior School, leaving the Infants to occupy the Church Hill site.

The plans are already drawn for the new Infant School, also on the Bunbury Road campus, and we all hope that the completion of this school will not be long delayed.

E.A.P. June 1970.

The line of Head Teachers

Headmasters

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 1840 - 1850 | James Dutton, James Hopkins, John Robinson, Isaac Baker. |
| 1850 - 1880 | Richard Thomas. |
| 1880 - 1885 | Humphrey Heward. |
| 1885 - 1926 | Braithet Llewelyn Fewster. |
| 1926 - 1952 | Albert Sage. |
| 1953 - 1970 | Edwin Arthur Penny. |
| 1970 | Eric Ivor Page. |

HeadmistressesInfant School

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 1870 - 1892 | Miss Robins, Miss Humphreys, Miss Banks, Miss Monteith, Miss Sedunary. |
| 1892 - 1895 | Miss Elizabeth James (later Mrs. Harper). |
| 1895 - 1901 | Miss Simmons, Miss Rogers, Miss Mainhood. |
| 1901 - 1930 | Mrs. E. Harper. |
| 1930 - 1939 | Miss F.M. Turner. |
| 1964 | Mrs. Barbara Davis. |

Girls School

| | |
|-------------|----------------------|
| 1898 - 1922 | Miss C.J. Trembath. |
| 1922 - 1939 | Miss E.F. Whitehead. |

In 1939 the three schools became one Junior and Infant School under Mr. A. Sage.

In 1964 the Infant School once again became a separate school.

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