

EDUCATION IN BENSON

extracted from *The Ditmas History of Benson* by Edith Ditmas.

Systematic primary education did not arrive on the Benson scene till 1851, when both National and British schools were built in the same year. The British school, being non-denominational, was favoured by the Dissenting element in the population.

The National Society for the Education of the Poor's involvement in Benson arose from the initiative of a newly appointed vicar, the Rev Samuel Hay Cooke, who, in 1851, wrote to the Society to ask for its help. He pointed out that education in the village was at a very low ebb and was being conducted in an old stable and a shed. Many children had not been baptised and the moral standard was low. Moreover he drew attention to the fact that there were many Dissenters in the village and that there was a rumour that a "*British school would be built through their initiative.*" If that was not matched by a Church of England School, local education would be dominated by the Dissenters.

This 1852 National School consisted of two rooms with accommodation for 90 boys and 80 girls and, as can be seen from the existing buildings on the Oxford Road, had a master's house attached. According to the prevailing practice, part of the back of each class room was arranged as a series of broad steps on which stood long benches. On these the children could sit, close together but clearly visible to the teacher, for oral lessons and singing. For the infants, at least, desks did not replace these so-called *galleries* until 1891. Fees of one or two pennies a week per pupil were charged by both the British and the National schools. In the National school children were accepted from the age of three.

Regular attendance was hard to achieve, particularly in winter. The children came from quite a wide area including Roke, Berrick Salome, and Clacks Farm near Beggarbush. There was no public transport and, when they arrived, wet through in wintry weather, there were no facilities for drying clothes. Inevitably attendance in winter was irregular and epidemics of infectious illness aggravated the situation. In summer there were other interruptions. The school holidays were designed to fit in as far as possible with the farming calendar. Children's labour was still considered a necessity at busy times in the farming year.

1900 was a significant year for Benson School. The British school closed and the pupils of both schools were brought together under the headship of Mr Palling-Smith, newly appointed Head of the National School. With Mr Palling-Smith came his aunt, Miss Palling, who was his housekeeper but also acted as assistant teacher and sewing mistress. A new large classroom for the infants was

added on to the old school buildings to cope with the increased number of pupils and was opened in 1901.

When wartime came, economies of many kinds became essential and the children were given special leave to help in the fields and in such tasks as the gathering of blackberries and chestnuts. There were occasional excitements such as the time when 49 children played truant because of an impending visit by troops to the village and, in 1916, official leave was given to them to attend the presentation to an old pupil, Joey Baker, winner of the MC.

In 1918, the Fisher Act tightened up many regulations concerning school children. Fees for elementary pupils were abolished, the provision of nursery schools for children between two and five years was encouraged, and the employment of children under the age of twelve was forbidden. Standards at the Benson School were being well maintained and in 1928 four free places at the Wallingford Grammar School were held by Benson school children and nine former scholars were reported as attending secondary schools.

In 1937, we also have the record that a rummage sale was organised by the staff, the proceeds of which were used to install electric light in the school, a great advantage on dark winter days.

In 1939, war broke out again. This time Benson found itself designated an area suitable for the reception of children evacuated from other places and sixteen private and thirteen government evacuees attended the Benson School. Benson, however, was no longer purely an agricultural community, for in 1937 the Royal Air Force had started to build a new airfield between Benson and Fifield. On the outbreak of war, the station became No. 12 Operational Training Unit with the task of training pilots, observers and air gunners. Inevitably this attracted the attention of enemy bombers, but although the airfield was attacked many times, little damage was done and there was only one fatal casualty.

For the children it meant the usual blackout precautions, windows protected by paper strips and wire-netting to minimise the effect of shattered glass, and interruptions to school routine when the air-raid warning sounded. The school itself seems to have escaped any direct damage. School holidays were organised to coincide with the potato harvest, and some of the senior boys were employed by the farmers to help with the agricultural work. An unexpected by-product of war conditions led to the addition of a playing field to the school property. It happened when the runways were being constructed for the RAF airfield and the contractors found that they had a large quantity of waste soil. The vicar, the Rev G West, had the bright idea that it might be used to fill up an old gravel pit on land adjoining the school and that the land so reclaimed

might provide a much-needed playing field. The owner of the land, Mrs Young, agreed to provide access and to sell the ground for £300 which was raised locally. What in the old map of 1883 is shown as the Horse Pool, but which had degenerated into an untidy swampy area of about 3 acres, became a valuable asset to the school.

In spite of wartime restrictions a school canteen was planned and by 1944 a cook and her assistant were engaged and the provision of school dinners was started. In 1944 Butler's Education Act was passed which affected all parts of the national educational system. The school leaving age was to be raised to 15.

By 1948, the new regulations took full effect and Benson School was classed as a primary taking children only up to the age of eleven. Older children were to go to Dorchester School or to Grammar Schools in the area. After this reorganisation, ninety-nine children were left on the Benson School roll, but the steady growth of the village population in the next ten years was such that it became necessary to build a new classroom for the infants in 1957.

Mr JR Fletcher was succeeded as headmaster by Mr G Howard in 1964. Meanwhile Berinsfield, just north of Dorchester, was developing as a new community and in 1958 the Abbey School there was classed as the Berinsfield Secondary Modern School, to which children over the age of 11 from Benson were transferred for their further education. A further development of the educational ladder took place in 1968 when the Abbey School was designated a Junior Comprehensive School from which the senior children passed on to Peers School at Littlemore.

At that time tightening educational controls meant that Benson children no longer had the choice of going to Wallingford Grammar School since it lay over the border in Berkshire. The re-drawing of county boundaries, by which Wallingford is now included in Oxfordshire, has meant that once again children leaving Benson Primary School can graduate to Wallingford Grammar School, now a Comprehensive and from 1976 known as Wallingford School.

Benson Primary School continues to develop and to expand. In 1967 there were 160 children and a new hall, kitchen and two classrooms were built on at the rear of the older buildings in the Oxford Road. By 1970 the number of pupils had risen to 270 and plans were made to build additional classrooms for the infants. The new site was on County Council ground on the Westfield Road, but still administered by the headmaster, Mr G Howard. This new Infants School was opened in 1971 and enlarged in 1976 by the addition of a three classroom block. The County Infants School site was sold for a housing development in

about 2006, and the infants were rehoused in new classrooms, built onto the Oxford Road site.