

From: One More Millennium

The Story of Wheatley and Holton Park

Schools, Old and New

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In 1688, Lady Curson of Waterperry bequeathed £100 for good causes, including 'schooling for poor children of Wheatley'. At one stage in the 18th century, six pupils attended. Bishop Moss, who died in 1812, left a legacy of £a,5<x) for 'a [National] school for the children of Wheatley, Cuddesdon, Denton and Chippinghurst. Trustees drew up plans for an elaborate, two-storey building on Ladder Hill, but when costs rose and the site was vandalised it was decided to buy a house instead. *Mitcheldene* (35 High Street) was chosen and opened in 1818. Clothing and blankets were even offered as inducements to attend. At the time, four Oxford Sunday schools, three of them Church of England, were the only other provision for the local poor. Over one hundred pupils were registered in the *Mitcheldene* National School in 1826, girls accommodated in the house and boys in a large building which still stands at the top of the garden.

In 1840 another gift, reputedly from the Biscoe sisters of Holton Park, provided an infant school at the top of Bell Lane (Wren Close). This remained in use until the 1960s. Apart from carefully posed (and starched!) photographs, early records of this Dame School are scant and it took a new Vicar and a newly independent parish, to see in a purpose-built school. Vicar Elton begged a site from Mr Morrell, 'a very rich man, a brewer' and built there the new Wheatley National School. Fundraising and a Government grant paid off the £1,000 bill. School opened in 1858, two classrooms and a master's house, and remained in use until 1983 when all the children were moved to Littleworth Road, originally the Secondary' Modern School. The church school site was sold and is now St Mary's Close housing development. The outer walls of Mr Elton's school still stand; the horse chestnut tree and seat surround from the children's playground also survive where, if 'Sir' and weather permitted, some outdoor lessons took place. A night school for about 30 scholars, which Elton opened in 1863, lasted until 1914. The nonconformist High Street Chapel also conducted Sunday School from its earliest years and added a Night School in the later part of the century.

The Three 'Rs'

The first curriculum consisted of the 'Three Rs' with Bible and Catechism, but from 1862, when headteachers were required to keep daily logbooks, we discover more. That year Needlework for girls and Drawing for boys were added. Music came in 1875: a list of songs for that year included *Men of Harlech*, *Bluebells of Scotland* and *Three Blind Mice*. Maths requirements included, wine and spirit measures. The logbooks also record the weather, epidemics, celebrations, holidays and the regular visits of inspectors. In 1891 the first of three long-serving heads was appointed: Rees Leyshon (1891-1925) was an effective teacher with wide interests—beekeeping, gardening (which he taught the boys), carpentry and music. He was also church organist, a magistrate and helped farmers measure out their holdings. He advocated the metric system enthusiastically. Thanks to him we have exact statistics for the 1910 flood. His daughter, Winifred, won scholarships for Oxford Technical School and Bedford College, London. During the First World War she was employed in developing 'wireless' for military purposes. In February 1923 she and her father 'set up a receiver set in the school so that the children could listen to Cinderella broadcasted by Marconi on 2 LD'. There were two sets of earphones and each child was able to listen for a minute. Winifred later became tutor in physics to the London School of Medicine. Another former pupil was Andrew Cruickshank, a pilot in the 1914 War and a later pioneer of flying in Canada.

Two heads succeeded Rees Leyshon: John Key in 1925 and Glen Evans in 1956, both serving nearly 30 years in post. Many expeditions, school activity camps, visiting speakers and team sports enriched the normal curriculum. Under the present head, Clive Hallett, appointed 1983, volunteers help in school, the roll stands at 400 and the hall is an asset for village drama and concerts. Roald Dahl opened the school's new site in memorable and eerily child-friendly fashion! In recent years the John Watson Special School and Nursery' School have been relocated on the Primary' School site which makes integration with mainstream schooling easier.

LOGBOOK OBSERVATIONS:

April 1899: 1 child made eight years' full attendance, 1 made seven years, 1 made six years, 18 made three years and 10 made one year.

April 1908: 9 girls obtained first prize in the Needlework Scheme, 2 girls second prize.

June 9th 1910: No p.m. session owing to violent thunderstorms and torrential rain. The High Street was flooded. Between 12.45 and 1.50 over 4 inches of rain fell.

Such successes as those of 1908 occur till 1914. The Scheme was set up by the Oxford Local School Board. An elderly resident remembered that no male in the family was allowed near his sister's garment when she was working on it. In September and October 1917 and 1918, the children went blackberrying 'for the soldiers'. In 1918, 3,305 lbs were collected and sent by train to Cooper's jam factor) in Oxford.

Secondary Education

Until 1950 the only secondary school in Wheatley or Holton was the Girls' Grammar School. Previously it had been in Thame, but in 1948 moved from there to the Manor House at Holton Park which had been bought for the purpose by Oxfordshire County Council. At this time, part of the wartime military hospital housed in single storey buildings in the Park was still operational, handed over by the Americans for British use. When it closed, its pre-fab buildings served as temporary classrooms at various stages until as late as the mid-1990s; two still stand near the Sports Centre, one formerly a ward for NCOs and the other a Red Cross hostel.

To that minority of girls in east Oxfordshire fortunate enough to pass the Eleven Plus selection examination, (and the even smaller number allowed by social pressures or family means to take up the places they had won) the Grammar School offered a classical education, life skills and lessons in etiquette and how to dress. Today at the end of the millennium, life skills in schools are more likely to include self-assertion, instruction in contraception and drugs education.

The 1944 'Butler' Education Act aimed to provide 'Education for all', brought in Secondary Modern schools and raised the leaving age to 15. Wheatley's Secondary Modern, The Shotover School, was purpose-built on land donated by the Miller family of Shotover Park. It opened for 280 pupils, even though it was unfinished, in December 1950. According to the first headteacher, Fred Anson, beginning under such wintry and makeshift circumstances 'moulded the school into a community' more quickly than would normally have been the case.

The school wore winter and summer uniform. To ease the expense, the girls and their mothers were helped by the needlework mistress, Mrs Anson, to make their summer dresses. Material cost three shillings a yard, or one old penny per inch. As Secondary Modern schooling changed, Oxfordshire introduced a Test of Achievement which earned a good reputation among employers and gave access to further education. By 1959 academic GCE ('O' courses were offered, commercial courses for girls and technical subjects for both boys and girls. The name was changed accordingly from Wheatley Secondary Modern to Wheatley Bilateral School. This was followed by the introduction of CSE courses alongside GCE which resulted in the 1980s in a final merger of the two into the GCSE format current at the end of the millennium.

Comprehensive Schooling

Comprehensive education came to Wheatley in 1972 with the amalgamation of the Girls' Grammar and the Bilateral School and the leaving age again went up, this time to 16 (when it finally overtook the legal age for marriage). Fred Anson retired and Mrs Mills of the Grammar School took charge of the new split site, Wheatley Park School, Upper and Lower, divided by the new A40(M). Serious logistical problems included staff having to walk, cycle, drive and use taxis between the two sites to meet the demands of the timetable. Only pupils aged 15 and upwards could be accommodated on the Upper School site. Two lots of infrastructure and services also had to be maintained in a wasteful expenditure.

A new head, David John, helped rationalise the overall provision in Wheatley. The Primary School moved from its limited Victorian site to the Littleworth Road Lower School site and the Lower School moved into Holton Park, creating a single-site Wheatley Park School. It must be one of few state comprehensive schools to have its own Park and historic house. Wherever possible the heads of primary and secondary schools had encouraged the integration of pupils from the John Watson Special Needs School and the integration was strengthened when the John Watson was accommodated on the Primary School site in 1991 / 2, while still maintaining a base in the secondary⁷ school.

The Sixth Form (Years 12-13) then took over the



Pupils line up in the playground, Wheatley Church of England Elementary School, c.1900. Church Road is to the left of picture and the gatelamp is just visible. It is still in place in 2000. (*Wheatley Society Archive*)

The Sixth Form (Years 12-13) then took over the adult training centre of the old John Watson School and vacated the Holton Park Manor House, which in turn has now become an Arts Centre for school and community. The final stage of a 2.5 million, three year project was the conversion of the old Stable Block of the Manor House into classrooms and the building of the Holton Sports Centre. The result was village education run as an entirety. Popular education has changed in Wheatley beyond the wildest dream its first champions. It has kept pace with the champions in society, industry and technology, and is no longer for the privilege of the few but a vital element in every one's prosperity and future. In the last month of the old millennium the school won a new role as a school specialising in Media Technology.

Lists of Heads

BOYS

1813-1819	Valentine Guy was paid by the overseers to teach boys
1819-1839	Valentine Guy appointed head of Bishop Moss's School, but in 1828 William Saunders was given "uncontrolled management" because of the illness of Mr. Guy.
1839-1846	William Saunders, nephew of Mrs. Guy
1847-1849	William Hunt Head
1849-1852	not known
1853-1855	Mr. Wilson
1855-1871	George Wright
1871	William Bailey
1872	William Prewett
1872-1874	Owen Stone
1874	James Castle Parker (Culham Student)
1874-1880	William Thompson
1880-1883	John R. Knight
1883-1886	George Wright (re-appointment)
1886-1891	Henry James Wooldridge
1891-1925	Rees Leyshon
1925-1954	John George Key
1954-1956	Ronald A. Murry Ransome
1956	Glenville Rees Evans

GIRLS

1819-1846	Mrs. Guy
1847-1849	Sarah A. Hunt sister of Wm. Hunt
1853-1859	Elizabeth Colston
1859	Miss G. Marshall
1863	Miss Baker
1863-1864	Miss Clara Johnson
1864	Caroline Froud, a Pupil Teacher, who was appointed a Mistress at Ledbury School in January 1865
1865-1866	Miss Emma Smith
1866-1871	Miss Daniels
1871-1884	Girls school combined with Boys
1884-1886	Miss Charlotte A. Price (Girls in separate school)
1886	Girls School again combined with Boys

INFANTS SCHOOL

1840-1863	Mrs. Hunt, mother of Wm. & Sarah Hunt, heads of Bishop Moss' s School
1863-1866	Jane Marshall
1866-1871	Ms. Corfield
1873	Miss S. A. Brown
1874	Miss Cousins
1875	G. Hanley
1875-1881	Emily Beasley
1881-1916	Miss Emma Ellen Christian
1959	Miss Wren