

BISHOP MOSS'S SCHOOL

The early days

In 1811 Dr Charles Moss, Bishop of Oxford, left the sum of £3000 in his will for charitable causes, including the establishment of schools at Wheatley and Cuddesdon "for the education and bringing up of children of the same parishes". Eventually in 1818 a house on the High Street, now known as Mitcheldene, was purchased by the Trustees of Bishop Moss's will, for the purpose of establishing the first school in Wheatley. A large schoolroom, which still stands in the grounds of Mitcheldene, was used for the boys, while the house itself provided a classroom for girls and accommodation for the Master and Mistress.



The first Master of the new school was Valentine Guy, with his wife acting as Mistress, and they ran what became known as Bishop Moss's school together until 1828 when he handed over to his wife's nephew, William Saunders. During those years we have some inkling of what life was like at the school from accounts entered into the official school log books in January 1826. At that time, 43 boys are recorded as reading and 16 writing, while 43 girls could read and 11 could write. Income for the school was partly provided by the children's "school pence", partly by subscriptions from local gentry (often paying for children whose parents were unable to pay) and partly by the income from Bishop Moss's endowment.

In his will, Dr Moss specified that the school should be set up as a National School, in 1808 two Quakers, Joseph Fox and William Allen, had taken over a one-room school on Borough Road in London and formed *The Institution for Promoting the British System for the Education of the Labouring and Manufacturing Classes of Society of Every Religious Persuasion*. This roused the established church and in October 1811, to combat the non-conformists, *The National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales* was formed. These two organisations competed with each other to create schools across the country and in this the National Society had a considerable advantage in that it was able to operate within the parish diocesan system already in existence. The new school in Wheatley was duly set up as a National Society school and used a system common in such schools where older and more able pupils were appointed as monitors, or 'pupil teachers', and paid a small allowance in return for their assistance with teaching duties. By 1814 the National Society had 230 schools and about 40,000 pupils. The dual system of National (Church) Schools and British (Nonconformist) Schools lasted until 1902 when the Balfour Education Act was passed, making local authorities responsible for education.

William Saunders was officially named Master of the School in 1838 on Guy's death, and he and his aunt oversaw the school until his resignation in October 1846 to take up the post of master of an agricultural college near Bath. His aunt's resignation followed the next year.

In 1840 an Infant School was established in Bell Lane by the Misses Tyndale of Holton and responsibility for its running was given over to the trustees of Bishop Moss's estate in September 1841. Mrs Hunt of Wheatley was appointed to run the Infant School and, following the departure of the Saunders in 1849, her son William became Master of the Boys' School and his sister Sarah took over responsibility for the Girls' School, with all three Hunts residing in Mitcheldene. Sadly, however, the Girls' and Boys' schools did not prosper under their new leadership, falling into serious debt and disrepair. Eventually William and Sarah were asked to leave, although their mother stayed in Wheatley for a further 25 years as a loyal and excellent schoolmistress of the infant school until her death in 1870 aged 77.

A most difficult village

By October 1849 the first signs of a change which was to have profound effects on the village and the school became evident. The energetic Bishop Samuel Wilberforce had been in office since 1845 and he was concerned about Wheatley, which he must have passed through frequently on his way from the Bishop's Palace at Cuddesdon to the city of Oxford. Until this time Wheatley had neither a vicar nor a squire to take the position of moral leadership in local affairs, and consequently was a village struggling with poverty and social problems. As a staging post for coaches travelling between London and Oxford, Wheatley's many inns became the focus for revelry; an illicit trade in cock-fighting and badger-baiting sprang up, attracting students from the nearby 'holy city' of Oxford to this outlying village away from the watchful eye of the university. In an age when squire and parson acted as magistrates for the local community, the absence of such figures made Wheatley the ideal refuge for people of dubious character, creating a village overcrowded with people with very little means of supporting themselves.

Bishop Wilberforce described Wheatley as "the most difficult village in my diocese" and, to address these problems of lawlessness and immorality, decided to raise the status of the parish from a curacy to a vicarage, resulting in an invitation to the Rev Edward Elton to become Wheatley's first vicar. This was a significant appointment as the Rev Elton was a man of great energy and missionary zeal, whose legacy to the village is the building of the parish church of St Mary's, a new parsonage (now Morland House) and a new school on land next to the church generously donated by the Oxford brewer, James Morrell. The opening of this new school on 5th May 1858 by Rev Morrell, Rector of Henley-on-Thames and a member of the Morrell blowing family, marked the beginning of a new era for the children of Wheatley, Holton and Littleworth.