

September, for most children means the start of a new school year and this prompts us to reflect upon education in times past within the village.

Our present national system has its roots in late Victorian reforms which locally led to the building of Bicton primary school in the 1860s. Before then, children would have used a 'charity school' across the road in 'Old School House', paying a small amount each week. The original small cottage here dates from the early nineteenth century, when landlords, the Mytton estate, rebuilt several old cottages which they had acquired through the inclosure of Bicton Heath in 1768. Following the sale of this land (to pay 'Mad Jack's' debts) in 1824 it was acquired by John Gittins and became attached to the 'Red House' farmland, where it has since remained.

The succession of tenant school teachers, mainly widows and single ladies, included Sarah Boot, 1812, Mary Boot, 1824 and Mary Vaughan, 1830. In the 1840s the situation is not clear as Thomas Edwards; agricultural labourer is the only recorded tenant. However, the school certainly continued in the 1850s under Frances Bowlker, a widow with one son. The last teacher before closure was Harriet Shuker from Hyssington, who was only 21 in 1861.

The origin of this mixed charity school is not clear, as records are lacking. Certainly in 1676 Richard Taylor, owner of an estate including Bicton Farm, left a bequest to support a B.A. to teach in the chapel at Bicton. What became of this is unknown, but it was not unusual for churches to host schools at this time, while clergy may have been the best educated teachers available. For instance, in Shrewsbury, the Unitarian Minister also ran a small school which included the young Charles Darwin amongst its pupils. Otherwise here, Thomas Bowdler and John Allatt had already founded schools, both as an act of philanthropy and the recognition that the town's business relied upon an educated workforce. As part of St Chad's parish, Bicton pupils had access to these, especially for limited secondary education beyond eleven.

In Bicton, Calcott, Isle Lane and Montford Bridge, the total number of 'scholars' listed in the 1851 census was 54, made up of 29 boys and 25 girls of whom only 2 boys and 5 girls were aged 12-14. Clearly boys were put to work early!

Apart from these charity schools, elementary education was provided by various private establishments and home tutors, which could be of variable quality. Charles Dickens used his novels, so full of 'larger than life' characters, to expose the worst aspect of these. His hero Nicholas Nickleby experienced the horrors of Dotheboys Hall, run by the sadistic Wackford Squeers and then later became a home tutor himself. We hope that the small boarding school for boys in Bicton was run on far more humane lines, even though the accommodation must have been rather basic and crowded.

The school owners, Thomas and Christiana Jellicoe, had appeared in the village by about 1800, occupying Bicton Cottage together with about 18 acres of land. This was hardly a commercial farm and one suspects that Thomas, who may have come from Sherrifhales, had other professional interests (A William Jellicoe was later one of the surveyors measuring Rossall Heath in 1830). However, by 1812, he had died, leaving widow Christiana and eldest daughter to run a small boarding school, perhaps out of sheer economic necessity. They also sold part of their land to neighbours at Bicton Hall.

In 1841 there were 15 pupils; boys aged 6 to 10, with two other young assistant teachers. By 1851, when mother and daughter were now 81 and 60 respectively, the recorded household was smaller, while directories suggest younger daughter Christianna had taken over. In 1861, the house was 'unoccupied' and appears to have been pulled down soon after leaving only its coach house cum school block as the present 'White House'.

Otherwise, the main reminders of this family are prominent 'table top' graves in the old churchyard, which incidentally record several early deaths (full inscriptions need to be recorded before they fade any further).

Similar education for girls was, at this time, more likely to be provided at home by a governess. For instance, in 1841, Henry Whitley, a Shrewsbury architect, who lived at Udlington with his wife and their four daughters and one son under 10, employed Ann Cooper, 20 as well as a nurse and two other servants. An agency recruiting such governesses in the county was still advertising its services in the 1870s.

Meanwhile Mary, daughter of Griffith and Elizabeth Breeze of Shrewsbury, born 1798, was also probably such a governess in the county and thereby remained single. By 1851, as a sort of second career, she had set up her own small boarding school for girls in Calcott House (on the site of Haughton) where the 1851 Census records a pupil aged 11 from London.

Mary was later joined at Calcott by her younger brother John, when he became Rector of Hanwood. She then moved her school to Dogpole in Shrewsbury, the advertisement for which throws light on the curriculum followed:

"Board and instruction in English grammar, Geography, General History, plain and ornamental needlework etc., 26 guineas per term. German, French, Music, Writing and Arithmetic, Drawing Dancing and Deportment by a master as usual extra charges."

How this enterprise prospered is not known, since it faced competition from other providers in town. Significantly, she had returned to Calcott by 1871 but not to a restful retirement on a teacher's pension! Instead, she cared for an 'imbecile gentleman' until her death in 1889 aged 91. Skills learned in teaching young children can still often help when dealing with victims of dementia. She is buried in Bicton but the grave is not obvious.

Finally, today's youngsters, as they sit on comfortable chairs working computer keyboards, need to be reminded of those far off days of hard benches, chalk and slate!



HOME TUTOR  
AT WORK—cartoon

