



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Charlton Church School

by Reg Wilkinson

The old National School which is located at Charlton, near Wantage, is one of the most interesting buildings in the village. It was built nearly 125 years ago and just over a decade before the Education Act of 1870 was passed by Parliament.

The Act of 1870 was aimed at providing education for all children from five to eleven years of age. It formed the basis of the present system of education by establishing school boards to fill the gaps in the existing voluntary educational facilities, the majority of which were provided by the Church. The boards were cautioned to spare the public money wherever possible.

Initially, the newly-formed school board did not have to spend any money on the education of the children of Charlton because, according to Kelly's directory of 1899, a village school was built there in 1858 by the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church. This Society had started building schools as far back as 1811, and naturally they became known as 'National Schools', although the school at Charlton is generally known as the 'church school'.

When the school was built, it was large enough to provide eight square feet of floor space for each child. Later on, however, the authorities decided that this was not enough, and because of the new regulations the school had to be enlarged in 1893 to accommodate sixty-five children, with ten square feet of floor space apiece. Although the allowance was for sixty-five children, however, the registers show that there were never more than about forty pupils in the school at any one time.

The building consists of a single classroom and a minute entrance hall, which also serves as a cloakroom. A short flight of stone steps leads up from the footpath to the outer entrance. The inner door is thick and extremely heavy, and the windows are set high in the walls. The whole place looks as though it was built to withstand a siege or an escape attempt by the pupils from within!

It is not difficult to imagine the children hunched over their desks, probably arranged in rows of ascending order of age, under the eagle eye of the school-mistress, who sat facing them at the front of the class, on the wall behind her the rolls of honour for the prize awarded each year to the best pupil by the Diocesan School Inspector - an incentive to greater efforts in learning the 'three R's'.

According to the two rolls of honour painted on the school wall, the prize was awarded for eighteen years. One complete roll runs from 1881 to 1891, and the other, which is incomplete, runs from 1892 to 1903. The reason why the school inspector ceased to award the prize after 1903 is a mystery.

The children did not have a proper playground until 1907, and that only came about after much argument and exchange of letters between the school managers and the county education department. When the matter was first discussed in October 1904, the managers

did not think a playground was necessary. However, a year later, Mr A.S. Castle of Home Farm, Charlton offered them a plot of land at the rear of the school, and the offer was gratefully accepted. Two years passed before the land was fenced and asphalted, and in October 1907 the managers reported that the new playground was 'in every way a great addition to the school'.

Another matter which involved Mr Castle as the school's correspondent, was first brought to the notice of the managers in January 1910, when the medical officer decided that the water in the well used by the school was not up to the required standard. The county authorities suggested that a well be sunk in the playground, but the managers thought it would be too dangerous. As an alternative Mr Castle undertook to secure the removal of some rabbits which were kept near the well and the managers proposed that the water should be boiled.

The problem was eventually solved by having a jar containing two gallons of water drawn from the town main delivered daily to the school by Mr King, the local carrier, 'at the county's price'. As the years went by, different carriers were employed, although the school went back to using well water for a brief period at the beginning of 1920.

In the autumn of 1915 the school managers were told that the authorities proposed to close the school for reasons of economy. The Bishop urged them not to consent to the proposal and the school correspondent informed the authorities that the managers did not think it advisable to close the school owing to the distance between Charlton village and the schools in Wantage. No further mention of the closure was made until July 1921, when the managers received a letter from the Berkshire Education Committee informing them that it would cease to maintain the school after the end of October, and instructing them to give the headmistress, Miss Blanch Green, three months' notice. The managers appealed against the decision, and the school was given a short reprieve, finally closing in December 1921.

Although it has not been used for the purposes of full-time education for over sixty years, the old school still echoes to the voices of the younger generation. In the past few years it has been used by a pre-school play group, for meetings of the Brownie Guides and for rehearsals of the Wantage Silver Band, many of whose members are school children. In all probability, the building will still be performing a useful service to the community for many years to come.



Charlton - view towards church from N - c1960 - No.24 in foreground;
Old Charlton School and Nos.34 + 36 behind. Details on back of
print. (bld047)



Charlton School - national school built 1858 - see Life of Butler
p100 (sch054)



Charlton School 1960s? - view from road - national school built 1858 - see Life of Butler p100 (sch055)

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