

Rearsby Village School in its Early Days....

For the greater part of the nineteenth century most of the rural population was illiterate, and not many children were fortunate enough to receive an education. Early records are sketchy, but in 1818 three poor children in Rearsby received instruction from a schoolmistress who was paid £1 per annum from the Faunt's Gift charity, these children were selected by the Rector. Other children may well have walked daily to the school in Syston, or attended a dame school in the village. Dame schools were small private schools for young children run by women; such schools were the precursors of nursery, or infant, schools in England. They existed in England possibly before the 16th century in both towns and rural areas and survived well into the 19th century.

The Education Act of 1870 introduced regular, formal education to Rearsby as to thousands of other villages and towns up and down the country. A school board was formed, and Emma Green was appointed to start a school in the former Methodist chapel on Mill Road. The venue was a stopgap while a purpose-built school was erected on land on Brookside donated by the Lord of the Manor, Mr William Ann Pochin.

The Diocese of Leicester, St. Michael and All Angels C of E (Aided) Primary School, opened on 8 January 1872. The school was built in what was referred to as an 'I style' at a cost of some £800 which was raised by subscription. It consisted of two rooms; the schoolroom which was 36 feet long and 17 feet wide, and the babies' or infants' room, which was 15 feet long and 12 feet wide. There was a window in the partition between them so that the schoolmistress could supervise both rooms at once. A house for the schoolmistress was built onto the school and this was opened at the end of March 1873.

The two rooms together made up the school, and soon after it's opening it had to hold several different age ranges of children all in the same main classroom. The first entry in the log book is for January 8th. 1872, when the school opened with seventy two on the Register (which made the building very full indeed considering its moderate size).

It reads:- "Jan 8th. 1872 - School opened - children very backward, unable to spell words of two syllables and they are entirely ignorant of notation in the first class. Arranged in three divisions - Standard II, Standard I and children too young for examination".

The new school seems to have had a very shaky beginning with rather erratic attendance from it's pupils. The girls were often kept at home, if they could get work to do, as the parents badly needed the extra money that they could contribute to the family income. Recurring excuses for absences included fieldwork, seaming socks, bean dropping, helping at home etc., and the Head at the time makes the comment that "remonstrance is useless, the parents complain that they cannot afford to spare them always".

For March 4th. - 9th. of the first year, the entry reads:- "The numbers in the Upper Division have considerably decreased. Fieldwork employs most of the children now for a time. Out of 72 on the Register only 45 were present on Friday afternoon".

Conditions must certainly have been very hard for the first headmistress of the new school. She often writes that it is impossible to teach the children anything, because of such prolonged absences. As soon as any progress at all was being made, the children would stay away, usually because of fieldwork, and by the time they returned to school the small amount of progress would have been completely forgotten, and the teacher would have to start right from the beginning again. How would the teachers of today feel if they were confronted with days such as:-

"May Day 1872 - 20 absent in the morning. Registers were not marked" June 29th, 1872 - Haymaking has begun, consequently there are fewer children than ever.

July 6th, 1872 - Seems that the greater part of the Upper Division will be absent for fieldwork until after the harvest, and those left are more and more irregular as the summer advances"

In addition to these difficulties it was not long before the Head made the observation that:-

Ap. 11th. "I find difficulty in attending to the little ones and teaching three standards. A pupil teacher or monitor would be a considerable help. The amount of room too in the school is insufficient to accommodate the classes at a convenient distance apart". It is easy to imagine the very great difficulty of teaching such a wide age range of children in one room. It is something of a miracle that the teacher coped at all!

A custom in the school that gives some indication of how schoolwork had to fit into the main events of the home was the Harvest Holidays. On August 19th. of the first year (1872) a Monday, the school opened as usual but only fourteen children attended and they were mostly little ones. As a result of this they were dismissed and the school closed for the Harvest Holidays. Even when it did reopen again on September 16th. there were only twenty children present as the rest were still gleaning.

Miss Green was thoroughly disheartened by the backwardness of the children, by their perpetual absences, and by the problems attached to teaching so many children; after struggling for a couple of years she resigned. At the end of the school holidays on August 4th 1873 Miss Housecroft was the new headmistress.

A succession of schoolmistresses followed, usually dubiously helped by a monitress or pupil-teacher. The chief problem was always irregular attendance. Poor families needed their children's labour, and boys and girls were withdrawn from school for bird-scaring, 'dropping beans', pea-picking, helping with the harvest, gleaning, gathering cowslips, twitching, or seaming socks. Floods, deep snow and storms often kept children from school. After heavy rainfall the flooding of the brook was a common event and when this happened it became impossible for the children to get to school. The year of 1875 produced extensive flooding and some cottages were flooded up to the top of their fireplaces and boilers. There were frequent entries in the school log book that children could not attend school.

They would take time off to watch the hunt meet, to attend the village feast (Thrussington's as well as Rearsby's), to take part in the Plough Monday celebrations, and in the various Sunday school treats, to go to a bazaar, or to have tea with the local gentry. On 3 October 1876 Mrs Pochin 'and a gentleman' visited the school to invite the children to a tea-drinking; a holiday was given in the afternoon for that purpose. On the 20th of the same month the schoolchildren spent the afternoon drinking tea with Mr and Miss Woodcock.

The school received a lot of visitors, Mr Hassall, the rector, and Mr Woodcock being the most diligent. In December 1874 Mr Woodcock called to request that the school-bell should not be rung quite so long at a time because it annoyed Mrs Needham; another time he gave two oranges to each child. Mrs Woodcock took a particular interest in the girls' needlework, on one occasion buying two shirts which they had made.

As the syllabus widened, and as in the early years work seemed to concentrate almost entirely on the three Rs, but as time went on the children were taught songs and rounds, the girls took up sewing, the boys geography (studying such subjects as 'British Colonies' and 'Hindoos'), and poetry was taught. The infants were given object lessons on such topics as 'the goat', 'turnips' and 'a shoemaker's shop' in an attempt to follow the German Friedrich Froebel whose teaching philosophy was very much in vogue at this time. He believed that in play children constructed their understanding of the world through direct experience with it, and activity based approach to teaching young children involving playing with objects, plus singing, dancing and gardening and the like, was very important. He introduced the term "Kindergarten" or 'child's garden' into the vocabulary.

Attendance improved with the 1880 Act which made schooling compulsory (a doctor's certificate now had to be produced if a child was absent through illness), the standard of education improved. In 1899 there were 59 children on the Register. The qualified mistress was Frances Sarah Sutton with two helpers, Emma Wittering (replaced by mistress Alice Billson in 1900) and Alice Sharp. The Diocesan

Inspector was able to report: 'this is now one of the best small country schools in the Archdeaconry'. Rearsby was raising its first literate and numerate generation and the community were well aware that they were a part of a wider world.

There was an outbreak of scarlet fever that closed the school for some weeks in 1902. In 1903, Edith Miles a pupil of the school received a medal from the Christian Mission newspaper for pulling a boy out of the brook when it was in flood. In the first ten years of the century there were many staff changes. In 1904 there were 66 on the register and in 1905 the staff went down to two, Miss Stanton was certificated mistress and Emma Wittering is supplementary teacher. In 1906 Claire Violet French joined the staff but she is replaced by Helen Cooke Harvard in 1909. In 1910 Miss Stanton resigned as Headmistress. In these years the school logbook shows the doctor paid several visits to the school to see individual children.

In 1910 Martha L Todd took charge of the school with Helen Harvard and Emma Wittering as the other members of staff. This status quo was maintained until 1929 when Emma Smith was appointed as new Supplementary Teacher. From 1939 Miss Todd suffered from ill health but carried on until 1945 when she was unable to continue. She had been head for 35 years.

Some children started work at the age of 12. Birdscaring paid eight pence a day. Some worked with horses ploughing scores of acres. "Plough Monday" persisted until about 1925/6. On this day the boys dressed themselves up and knocked on people's doors saying "Can you remember the Plough" and expected small gifts. They had candles in scooped out turnips.

Outside school In those days the lives of children were dominated by the elements, daylight and the ability to amuse themselves. On May Day the girls of the village went around with a trimmed maypole, and a clothes basket trimmed with flowers containing a doll. On some feast days the Parson, the Squire and the gentleman at the Old Hall each gave one bun to every village child, and on Easter Sunday pot eggs were hidden in the vicarage garden for children to find and exchange for an easter egg! (It is not known whether these were real eggs, or the chocolate variety, which probably were not available at that time). Favourite games of the children were rounders, fox and hounds, hide and seek. They used to play these until it was dark and then they used to go to bed. Any amusements that the children wanted, they had to make for themselves, there was no television or wireless! The activities at the school illustrate this. On 21 May 1900 the school was closed in honour of the relief of Mafeking 4 days earlier, a major event in the Boer War. King George V's jubilee in 1935 and King George VI's coronation in 1937 were celebrated with one-day holidays, the church bells were rung, and the boys and girls were given souvenir medals. When the ocean liners Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth were launched in the 1930s, the children were taken into the schoolhouse to listen to the wireless broadcasts. The only form of amusement that might have been provided was music in their homes on Sunday evenings.

After leaving the village school, children had to travel daily to further afield. There is even a record that showed that in 1905 a boy had actually moved on to the Wyggeston School. Rearsby's school became a Junior School in 1929, and after that it was usual for children to continue their education at Roundhill School (until Wreake Valley College was opened in 1971) or perhaps at Melton Grammar. Eleven plus examinations were used to stream junior school pupils and in the early days these examinations took place at Hoby School.

Rearsby was a tight-knit community early in the twentieth century, and an expression of the community feeling was its approach to the building of the Village Hall in 1924. George Pochin leased the land by the Leicester-Melton road for 999 years, and well over £600 for the cost of the building itself was raised in a very short time by subscription and by fundraising efforts by the villagers. From the day of its opening the Village Hall became the venue of Rearsby's many groups and societies, and provided the school with an extra classroom to accommodate some of the schoolchildren when the school became very crowded.

Miss Sibley took over as Headmistress in 1946 and retired in 1964 when Miss O Hewes took over. During this period at different times, Miss Rigard, Mrs Barnard, Mrs Knight and Mrs North were staff members.



The coming of the wartime Ordnance Depot at what is now the village of East Goscote (built on a maze of now sealed underground storage tunnels and bunkers) meant that there was an influx of servicemen and their families to the Depot and the area, and an accompanying increase of children requiring education. Auster Aircraft manufacturing was in full swing (before evolving into Rearsby Automotive). All this industry plus the post war baby boom meant that a second extension to the school was required, and this was built along with a new playground alongside Melton Road, and opened in 1959. The extension consisted of two new classrooms and a cloakroom block joined to the old school by a passageway.

In the mid sixties the large schoolroom of the old building was the infants classroom with Mrs Knight in charge. The smaller classroom of the old building was a staff room. The lower junior class was in one of the new rooms with Mrs Swinglehurst as teacher. The top junior class occupied the other new room with headmistress Mrs Hewes. There were 70 children on the register and school meals were served in the old schoolroom and came from Melton Mowbray. Oil fired heating had been installed to replace the old combustion stoves. The school was thriving at this time and put on a display and exhibition connected to a school project on the Police Force. The whole school took part in the project and they had various visits from the special branches of the police force such as dog handlers, frogmen, and car patrols. From modest beginnings Rearsby Village School had evolved into a desirable school with an excellent reputation for educating its pupils.

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