

SCHOOLING IN KING'S WORTHY

by Trish Bright

"The British labourer," said a 19th-century writer, "is the best living tool in the world. But here all his knowledge and intelligence end. Beyond his field or his workshop he generally knows nothing. There is no amount of ignorance or error of which he is not capable. Art, science, literature, history and the accumulated discoveries of centuries upon centuries are for him as if they had never been."

This was possibly not an untruthful picture of the mental condition of the labouring poor in the last century at a time when the idea of educating the children of labourers was to gain popularity. Employers were fast becoming aware that the value of the able body, great though it might be, was far behind that of the able mind. They also realised that by inculcating feelings of responsibility, industry and thrift they would hopefully avoid feelings of unrest and dissatisfaction amongst the lower classes.

It was in this sort of atmosphere that the village school in King's Worthy was established. The education was to be quite unlike that which the children of the gentry received but, as an agricultural book of the last century stated, "the lowest stage of a charity education, the mere faculty of reading, scarcely remains the same in value from year to year - its practical usefulness advances daily as the works of the press become cheaper."

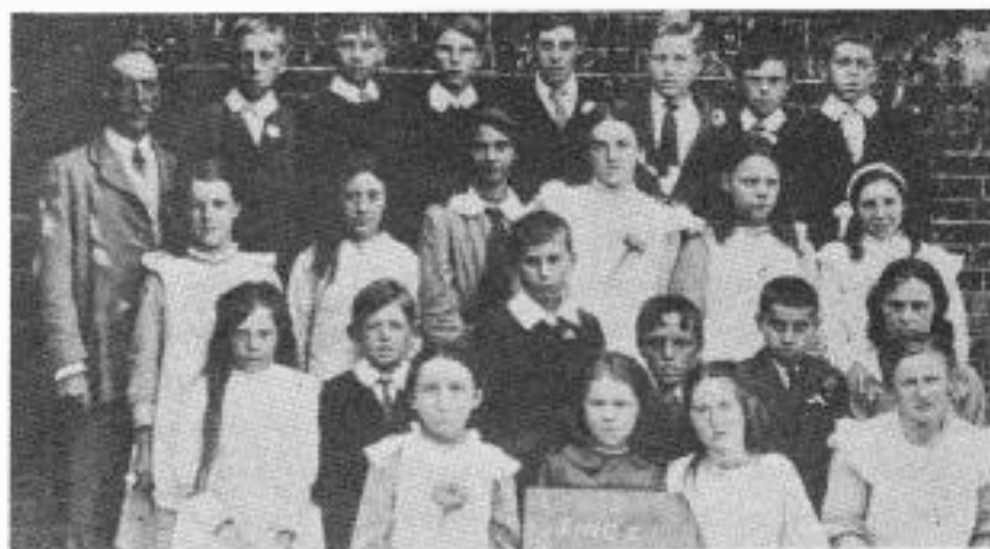
The first local school was a National School set up by the rector, Thomas Vowler Short, in the 1830s in a flint house on the Alresford Road, now known as The Old School House. It was succeeded by a new school, opened in 1854 and built close by on land donated by Lord Northbrook of Stratton Park, Micheldever. This second school with its flint walls and slate roof was to be the place where for nearly a century the village children were to receive their education.

The building, now converted into a private house, must

have seemed very spacious to the initial forty or so children who started their school life there. But by 1952 the Managers Minute Book records that the staff were "handicapped by a building which of recent years has fallen far short of standards of modern education". The school roll had by then risen to 100 children resulting, in severe overcrowding.

The original children at the school received their education at the cost to parents of a penny a week, paid to the rector. He also oversaw the running of the school, appointed teachers, dismissed the school for holidays and at intervals checked the registers. Notes of his visits were recorded in the School Log by the master. One rector, Thomas Short, appears to have been mightily displeased at this and added a note of his own, saying:

The rector visits the school as often as it may appear to him expedient to do so. But as he declines to come under the supervision of the Master or to consider himself accountable to "Mylords" for his presence or absence he has desired the Master to make no note of his visits in this book.



Mr A. Beacham, who left the school in 1923, taken with a class in the 1920s. (Courtesy Sue and Barry Jones)

The alliance between the church and the master was, therefore, perhaps an uneasy one.

The wife of the rector also played a large part in the life of the school. She ran a Clothing Club to which families could pay money during the year for clothes made for themselves by the children at school. The older girls would go to The Rectory nearby to help with church decorations and the rector's wife would visit the school to inspect the sewing and listen to the singing. An interesting note in the School Log shows that the rector's wife also sent medicine to the school for the children:

January 23rd 1871. Scarlet fever in the Parish - Mrs Bacon brought some Belladonna (Deadly Nightshade) for the children to take on entering the School as a preventative from infections

The log shows no record of how successful the treatment was!

The children were divided into standards within two classes at the school and in 1862 a system of payment by results (cf. current Government thinking!), with an annual Inspector's Visit, was introduced. There was, however, no compulsory attendance for children, which must have made the teacher's life a difficult one. The temptation of parents to send children out to work to earn a few pence at busy times in the farming year must have been very strong in households with low incomes.

The Log Book shows regular absenteeism in May when the boys helped with the hay harvest by leading the horses. Poor weather also led to a drop in the numbers, as did such attractions as May Day. In 1864 the teacher noted:

A fine May Day. Only 25 present in the morning, the rest gone a garlanding.

The 1870 Education Act, with its provisions for compulsory attendance, was to change all this. Moreover, with the

added incentive of half-a-crown offered by the rector to every child who attended 400 half-days, there was an upsurge in the attendance at King's Worthy school.

The children could start school at the early age of three and a half, usually on trial and on the condition that they knew their letters. However, the long journey to school and the length of the school day proved too much for some. In 1868, for example, the master writes: "Obliged to send C. Hawthorn home because he was crying all morning and caused great disorder."

School life was not without its lighter side. There were visitors such as the Misses Daniel, who came to hear the singing, Lady Watson to inspect the needlework and Miss Princep, who in 1863 gave the children a German Christmas tree to celebrate her wedding! The Log Book also records the Children's Festival, held in the rector's meadow, half-day holidays granted by the rector for a game of football on the downs and early closing to allow "sliding on the ice".

The punishment records give a more intimate picture of the children - such things as stoning Mr Benny's gardener, being rude to Mrs Chivers "the school neighbour", damaging the rector's fence and stoning his walnut tree and fairly frequently playing in church on Sunday.

By the end of the 19th century we see King's Worthy school providing a sound education in the "three Rs" and religion, with sewing and cooking for girls, plus singing, gardening and agriculture, with human physiology and chemistry in addition (probably for the boys). Thus, although the children finished their education in their early teens, the foundation for a lifetime of learning had been laid, and with it the narrowing of the gulf between the social classes.