

Thomas Clark of St Helen's School, Wheathampstead

By Patrick McNeill

Thomas Clark was Headmaster of St Helen's School, Wheathampstead for nearly 36 years from 2 November 1891 to 13 April 1927. This period included, of course, the years of the First World War. His entries in the school logbooks for the whole of this time, but particularly the war years, show him to have been a fine Master who cared deeply for the children and was profoundly conscientious, sometimes at a cost to his own health.

His family came from Northamptonshire. The 1851 census shows that his grandfather William, aged 37, lived and worked as a blacksmith in the village of Holcot, sharing his home with his wife Sarah (36) and sons Thomas (14, an agricultural labourer) and Isaac (spelled Isack) who was four years old. Given the ten-year age gap between the two sons, it is possible that other children had died in infancy but this is yet to be researched.

By 1861 Thomas, now aged 24 (and spelled "Clerk" in the census return), was a blacksmith's journeyman, living with his wife Martha (28), at No.41, Waterloo, Moulton, Northants. At that time, they had two children: Sarah, aged one, and William, aged eight months. His employer, John Love, lived with his family at the same address.

Next door but one, at No. 39, was the Artichoke Inn. This pub is still there and its website includes a short history, which shows that it dates from 1680 and that, in 1856, the building was put up for auction with cellar, brew house, dray shop, blacksmith's shop, pig sties and a rich pasture, for an annual rent of £30.



The birth of young Thomas, later to become Headmaster at St Helen's, was registered in Towcester in the second quarter (April/May/June) of 1862. By 1871, aged 9, he was living with his parents at the Artichoke Inn, together with his sister Elizabeth (now 11), brother William (10) and little brother Isaac (1). The older children were all at school. Thomas senior was now a Master Blacksmith employing one man. It seems likely that he had taken the tenancy of at least the smithy part of the Artichoke.

In 1881, the Clark family are still living at the Artichoke. The eldest brother, William (20) is a blacksmith, presumably working with his father, and young Isaac is still at school, but Thomas, now aged 18, is a pupil teacher, though we don't know at which school.

Sometime in the third quarter of 1890, Thomas married Louisa Alice Stanley. She was the daughter of a brassfounder and came from the Edgbaston area of Birmingham, where she worked as a clerk. They married in Kings Norton, Birmingham.

By 1891, Thomas's teaching career is under way. The census, taken in April, shows him living with Louisa (30) in Chesterton, Staffordshire, and working as a schoolmaster. While the census report does not say which school he taught at, his first entry in the St Helen's logbook states that he came from "The Chesterton Boys (??) Staffs." Without more research, we cannot be sure which school this was but it could have been Chesterton Dunkirk Church School, which had been established in 1876 under a School Board. However, the two question marks above represent an illegible abbreviation in the logbook entry that may be "Nat'l". This would suggest the Chesterton National School, established in 1814.

Thomas Clark arrived in Wheathampstead in 1891. Charles Froud had been appointed Master on 9 February of that year but resigned on 28 September for reasons which are not stated in the log book. Thomas took over as Master of the school on 2 November, as he recorded in the school logbook:

"I, Thos Clark, formerly Master of The Chesterton Boys (??) Staffs,
opened school at 9.00 am."

Thomas and Louisa's first child, Louisa Lynex, was born in Wheathampstead in the last quarter (October/November/December) of 1892 and baptised on Christmas Day, the birth being registered in St Albans. The unusual name 'Lynex' was from her mother's side of the family; both her brother and her father had it as their second name. A second daughter, Martha Elizabeth Clark, was born in the third quarter (July/August/ September) of 1894.

In 1901 Thomas (now 39) and Louisa Alice (40) were living with their children Louisa Lynex (8), Martha Elizabeth (7) and Beatrice Bertha (1) at "The Schools", Wheathampstead. All three children were born in Wheathampstead. The Master's accommodation was part of the school building that had been erected in 1862; this part was demolished in 1970 or 1971.



School photograph from the early 20th century

The logbook records that daughter Louisa was appointed monitress at St Helen's School on 5 March 1906, when she would have been 13 years old. The logbook also records, on 14 November 1907, that she 'gained a 1st prize in needlework in a competition for monitresses' and, on 9 September 1908, that she had 'obtained a 2nd class in Scripture'. Her father must have been proud of her. On 6 September 1911, however, he recorded that 'L.L.Clark has not

passed the C.S.L. exam so she still remains a monitress'. On 13 December 1911, she was 'absent this week attending the Senior Cambridge at St Albans'.

In 1911, the family were living at Sunnyside, on Wheathampstead Hill, with Thomas recorded in the census as "Head Certificated Elementary School Master". Martha and Bertha Beatrice (note the changed order of her names) were at school and Louisa, now 18, is recorded as "Teaching Monitress Elementary School". The term "Teaching Monitress" is curious since the monitorial system had been abolished more than half a century earlier, having been replaced by the pupil teacher system.



Thomas Clark with the staff of the school in the early 1900s.
It is likely that one of the young ladies in the front row is Louisa.

Thomas Clark clearly worked extremely hard and, in 1912, his health failed. On 22 July 1912 the logbook records: 'Headmaster absent suffering from sunstroke'. The school closed as normal for the summer but on 3 September the logbook states: 'Headmaster still away suffering from sunstroke and nervous breakdown'. He was away for another two months and did not return to work full-time until 28 October.

World War One broke out less than two years later and was a difficult period for the school and the Master, particularly the last two years. The routine life of the school carried on through 1917 and 1918 but there were problems with staff sickness, staff turnover and the sometimes poor quality of their work, disruption of the curriculum, reports of deaths of former pupils, and the possibility of male teachers being conscripted, let alone the usual problems of illness and epidemic among the pupils. The strain on Thomas Clark must have been considerable.

This may explain why, on 5 March 1919 and without explanation, the handwriting in the logbook changes - someone else has taken over the Headmaster's responsibility for the book and presumably for the school. This unnamed person continues to make the entries in the log book until 5 September 1922 when Thomas Clark's handwriting reappears. This is immediately preceded by an HMI report dated 20 July 1922 which is by far the worst of any made since Thomas Clark became Headmaster. For the next three years, the logbook entries show that he made a point of regularly visiting every class; the HMI report dated 6 January 1925 is much better, though it points out that Mr Clark having to teach a class of 49 children while also managing the school makes great demands on him.

Thomas Clark retired at the age of 65 on April 13th 1927. He had been in post for nearly 36 years and was presented with a gold watch as a parting gift. He lived in Wheathampstead for the rest of his life. Mr W.J. Housden took over as Headmaster.

Thomas Clark was buried with his wife in the churchyard of St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead on 8 March 1945. A number of children, two teachers and the Headmaster attended the funeral.

