

# Wheathampstead National School

## The early years of the Infants School – an account based on the first logbook, 1862 to 1897

*This account is based on an essay by Ruth Jeavons written in 1997, with additional research by Patrick McNeill in 2014.*

### Headmistresses

**Rachel Dowsett:** 29 December 1862 to Christmas 1864

**Mary Searle:** 9 January 1865 to Christmas 1879

**Ellen Morton:** 5 January 1880 to 14 May 1880

**Phoebe Hannell:** May 24 1880 to late October 1883

**Emily Lynes:** 29 October 1883 to (date not given)

**Mary/Marianne Walker (Hands):** 7 January 1884 to 23 December 1891

**Alice Maud Key:** 4 January 1892 to 12 February 1897

**Emma Grace:** 15 February 1897 to (logbook ends)

**Rachel Dowsett** was the first Mistress of the school and the first day opened with prayers at nine o'clock in the morning on December 29 1862. The 'Grand opening' took place on Tuesday 20 January 1863 when the school was dedicated by the Lord Bishop of Rochester and the children were given a dinner.

Miss Dowsett 'began to organise the school' on Tuesday 30 December, and began teaching the children to sing on Wednesday – a hymn, no doubt. An HMI report facing the first page of the logbook and counter-signed by the rector the Reverend Canon Davys records that under her aegis 'the infants are managed with considerable skill'.

The number of pupils is not given but on 27 June 1863 'Emily Gilbert entered as an extra monitor in consequence of the increased number of children'. Eighty-one children were present when the school was inspected on 3 November 1864.

The monitorial system, introduced in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, involved more able pupils acting as unpaid 'helpers' to the teacher by passing on what they had learned to younger pupils. This made it possible to reduce class sizes.

In the 1840s, this system began to be replaced by the 'pupil teacher' system. In this, boys and girls were apprenticed at the age of 13 for a period of five years during which they trained as teachers, with pay, while continuing their own education.

As a church school, the involvement of the church was strong from the start and there were regular visits from various representatives of the church, at both parish and diocesan level. The Reverend Mr Denton was an early visitor on 5 January 1863, bringing with him a supply of new apparatus, though precisely what that constituted one can only guess, perhaps slates or blackboards. Canon Davys also visited, though less often than in later years, and there is sometimes a sense that his visits are almost intrusive as he encourages the teachers' efforts and strives to ensure the success of his work in establishing the new school.

The canon presided at Diocesan inspections, no doubt striking even more fear into infant hearts. The comments of inspector the Reverend A Buckland, written on 1 May 1896, hint at what these may have been like: he wished the children would not intone their creed quite so monotonously: 'I was very glad to find the children make such a good return for painstaking and definite Church Teaching. I must add - tho' it may appear ungracious to do so - that the Apostles' Creed, well known as it was, should be recited naturally, i.e. not in an assumed voice.' Little did he know of the rector's usual high intoning church style, well remembered by some of the oldest inhabitants of Wheathampstead whose memories were recorded in 1956.

Her Majesty's Inspectors were usually clerical gentlemen; they inspected annually and sometimes more often in the early years. The Reverend Mr C.J. Robinson inspected the school on 28 October 1864 and again on 3 November when a total of 81 children were recorded as present in the morning. It must all have been quite a strain, as a holiday was declared on the afternoon of the next day and tea was given to the children as a reward for regular attendance. It is also worth noting the greater detail of the entries in the logbook immediately after this inspection.

Canon Davys did not always respond to the recommendations of the HMI. Following the inspection on 1 November 1866, the headmistress Mary Ann Searle requested larger slates 'as HM Inspector directed'. The canon, however, replied on the 28th that she must 'make the old ones do'. In fairness, however, it must be said that he had only the week before supplied new natural history cards in response to a request for a 'fresh supply of apparatus' for the Infants School. Perhaps he felt, having received two requests in one week, that enough was enough,

One of the most frequent logbook entries during Rachel Dowsett's time as headmistress is 'Taught the children a new song' or sometimes 'hymn'. Music was perhaps her way of sugaring the pill of the constant teaching of Holy Scripture. The sight of a well-trained group of infants singing in church would no doubt also have impressed the villagers when the children appeared in public at church on the main festival days. The infants were taken twice to church on Good Friday 3 April 1863, and in the morning only on Ascension Day, 5 May 1864. In addition there were regular annual concerts and festivals. St Helen's church later developed a wide and established reputation for its choral singing, a particular enthusiasm of the rector with his cathedral background. His influence perhaps spread to the school. Concerts were given by the school on 24 June 1863, for which a holiday was given, and again on 17 December, a half holiday being given for rehearsals on both occasions.

Miss Dowsett resigned her appointment at Christmas 1864 after three years at the school, when she married and was therefore obliged by convention to devote herself to marriage rather than her career.

Further research has shown that Miss Dowsett, aged 22, married James Duke, a schoolmaster aged 26, at the church of St George in the East, Middlesex, on 27 December 1864. The parish was later subsumed into the parish of Stepney.

**Mary Ann Searle** was the next headmistress and signed herself into the logbook at Wheathampstead National Infant School on Monday 9 January 1865.

The 1871 census shows that Miss Searle was living alone at 37 Brewhouse Hill, aged 26. If her age is correct, she must have been 20 when she took over the school.

She was to stay until 19 December 1879, a total of fifteen years, as she reckoned it. Many punishments are recorded in the books in her early days: Annie Ephgrave for breaking a pencil (10 January 1865); Frank Welsh (three times in February, for lateness on the 9th and 14th, then again 'for playing truant' on the 28th; Edwin Rowe was punished twice for disobedience on 10 January and 14 February; Arthur Gaiswell was sent home on 24 February 'until he could bring arrears of school pence due' and on 10 March 'Sent Frank Welsh home for his school money'. Others were punished for 'bad behaviour in church' and for 'loitering on way to school'. Girls seem to have been punished less frequently than boys but one little girl was sent home twice in one day on Monday 27 March 1865 to have the curl papers taken out of her hair. Parental support was not instantly forthcoming in this case.

Clearly the new headmistress was not going to stand for any nonsense and was aiming to make a strong first impression. Her struggles were compounded by the bad weather which reduced the attendance so badly on 27 January 1865 that only eleven children were present in the morning. 'School thin' is a common entry in the logbook through the winter months: rain, fog and snow all made it difficult for children to attend. In this respect the logbook is a useful guide to climate conditions at the end of the nineteenth century. Snow, in particular was a great deterrent to attendance. The numbers of children attending school fluctuated dramatically according to the weather. For instance, on 17 January 1867 only four children were present in the afternoon owing to the severity of the weather but, by 12 April of the same year, there were a total of 60 children present out of 62 on the books and, for the week ending 2 August, average attendance was 103. No doubt the prospect of the school feast at the end of term the following week encouraged a better than usual attendance on that occasion. However such variations in classroom size must have brought organizational and administrative headaches for the teachers and made it very difficult to keep to a regular timetable.

Mary Ann Searle was clearly a great stickler for punctuality and there are frequent records noting children's names for being punished four, five and six at a time for lateness. On 12 June 1865 three children were punished 'for bad behaviour in church on Sunday'. On Tuesday 20 June she kept in George Munt and George Lawrence, refusing to allow them to go home for dinner 'for playing truant', showing that she was not afraid of incurring parental displeasure. On 27 July 1866 'George Lawrence was sent to school but instead of coming

was seen playing in the neighbouring fields; he was fetched and punished openly as a warning to the other children’.

A pleasing aside for local historians is a note in the logbook on Tuesday 24 April 1866: ‘Holiday all day owing to reopening of the Church after its restoration’. The architect for the restoration was the same Edward Browning who had designed the new school and the driving force behind the work was, again, Canon Davys.

Miss Searle took a proactive view of absence and on 17 October 1867 sent to enquire the reasons for Abraham Saunders’ absence, to good effect as it turned out as the absentee appeared for school the following Monday. Attendance continued to be a problem and other means to motivate the children to better attendance were pursued. By November 1869 it was noted that the ‘children present under the age of six who had attended school 200 times were 38 in number’. Teas were given as treats for regular attendance, for example on Friday 20 November 1868, presumably provided by the rectory. The new methods of reward rather than punishment were perhaps proving beneficial.

Neither was the headmistress afraid of making moral object lessons of the children themselves, in the best Victorian schoolmistress manner. The logbook recounts how on 15 July 1868 she punished Frank Gatward ‘for telling a falsehood and spending a penny which was given to him for some other purpose’. In this she had the father's support as the next day ‘Frank Gatward brought back to the school by his father who returned the money from the child's money box and expressed his sorrow for his son's fault’. The same Frank Gatward went on to become a pillar of the community and is pictured in photographs of early parish Vestry meetings, so he went on to make good after his early lapse.

At the school inspection by HMI the Reverend C.J. Robinson in October 1865, 87 children were present and it was recorded that ‘Miss Searle makes a happy and orderly infants school’. Thirteen girls and eleven boys were promoted to the Upper School. In 1866, the inspector’s report stated that ‘the school is doing well’ and in October 1867 that ‘It is a good Infants School’. By 1868 the inspection reported that ‘the school is in a very fair state of discipline and attendance’. And for Miss Searle’s final inspection in 1879, the report stated that ‘The school is going on well.’

More children were being admitted all the time so more staff were needed. Emily Gilbert was appointed ‘extra monitor’ in June 1864, Mary Ann Abbott is noted as assisting in the Infant School on Tuesday 23 May 1865, and Sarah Nash had been chosen from the Upper School to be a monitor for the Infant School since at least October 1866 and possibly from the day that the school opened; by 1872, she was ‘senior monitor’. Jane Nash (not a sister to Sarah) was made assistant monitor in October 1867.

The 1871 census shows that Sarah Nash, aged 20, lived with her parents, brother and sister at Bury Green. Her father, Henry, was a blacksmith, a relatively high status occupation in a rural community.

Jane Webb was appointed pupil teacher in December 1872. Emily Gilbert was appointed Assistant Mistress in October 1874 but moved to the new school in Gustard Wood in January 1875.

In the 1861 census, Emily appears as a scholar aged 12 living in Gustard Wood with her widowed mother, a straw plaiter, two brothers, and Sarah Wright, who was probably a lodger. Her appointment as Assistant Mistress must have brought great pride to her family and her new post at Gustard Wood was a great achievement for someone from such humble origins.

There are some signs of Miss Searle's irritation, perhaps at what she considered to be undue interference by outsiders or even of being picked on by the inspectors. Some of her entries are almost defensive; for example, there are many references to the school 'adhering precisely' to the timetable and, on 20 December 1870, the logbook states: 'I, M.A. Searle, gave three months notice to quit Wheathampstead'. There is no further mention of this in the logbook, though she suffered several days' illness in February and March of the following year, which may be significant.

It would also be interesting to know the story behind the fact that, after the logbook entry for 3 April 1874, there are no more entries until 29 July when Her Majesty's Inspector visited and noted 'Article 39 of the Code not observed'. The next entry is for that same week and there are regular weekly entries thereafter.

There are many entries in the logbook at this time, and later, that throw light on life in a rural community at this time. For example, on 23 February 1877, Fred Andrews was half an hour late to afternoon school 'in consequence of having had to take his father's dinner to him at his place of labour'.

During Miss Searle's years as headmistress, the school settled into a regular routine, according to the seasons and the cycle of the church year. One can detect the extra efforts made to encourage attendance in winter months with the donation of extra clothing by the rector's wife, and the special teas given for good attendance. There were also visits by the gentry in the form of Mrs Drake Garrard of Lamer, also known for her gifts of soup and clothing and presents at Christmas.

The extra difficulties brought about by winter snow and ice particularly reveal the hierarchical nature of village life at this period and highlight the role of patronage played by those in the higher orders. After all, they had established the school for the benefit of the 'labouring, manufacturing and other poorer classes', as was stated in the wording of the original documents. There was a village Clothing Club Book, organized by the rector, with tickets being given for payments. Mrs Garrard paid visits to the school to check up on these, for example on 6 March 1868. Charity had to be seen to be practised by those with rank and privilege for the benefit of the less fortunate.

The summer was occupied with half holidays for choral festivals and cricket matches, church and chapel teas, also the Wheathampstead Fair and other local events including the

Foresters Fair (a local friendly society), demonstrations at Lamer Park and Church Temperance Society outings to Brocket Hall.

One gains a strong impression of a cohesive local community of which the school was an integral part. The school rooms, a useful facility, were used then as now to host a variety of village activities: for parish Vestry meetings, for robing choirs and candidates for parish confirmation services, to name but a few. The overriding pattern, of course, derived from the main festivals in the Christian year when the children would troop to the church: Rogationtide, Ash Wednesday (or Day of Humiliation, as it was called in the entry for 28 March 1865), Easter, Ascension Day, Harvest Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Their behaviour at church on any ordinary Sunday, as we have seen, was particularly noted by the school mistress and, if out of order, incurred punishment on the following Monday. These are clear indications of the combined forces of village, church and school at work on the moral and Christian education of the children.

### **The curriculum**

The logbook starts to give more information about the curriculum during the 1860s and 1870s, and we learn that the infants do a great deal of sewing, often supplied by the rector's household. Mrs and Miss Davys bring needlework to occupy the small hands. There were set exercises in stitching on calico, flannel, long cloth and muslin for the different standards. A leaflet appended at the front of the logbook lists the sewing tasks that must be completed by pupil teachers' for their examinations over a five-year period. The entry for Friday 28 June 1867 states that "Mrs Davys consented that I should purchase some calico for Infants' needlework. 2 yds at 8 ½". One can imagine the hot, sticky, small fingers of boys as well as girls as they struggled over their regulation stitching in the hot summer classroom. The inspectors frequently report that the boys' sewing is not as good as that of the girls. Equality of opportunity was clearly not an issue in the latter part of the nineteenth century village school curriculum, so far as infant needlework was concerned!

'Object lessons' were also given and are listed in the logbook as being, for example, on the subjects of coal, butter, the coin, rice, pins, an egg, and tea. The idea of an object lesson was to expand on a given theme by generalizing from the particular, using the visual stimulus of a picture or an actual object.

Natural History lessons also begin to make an appearance alongside the Holy Scripture lessons, and we see that in February 1866 the children were taught about 'The Cow' on the 8th and their 'Duty Towards God' on the 9th.

The list of object lessons and of natural history lessons changes over the years. In 1895, for example, the list is as follows.

<b>Object</b>	<b>Natural History</b>
The Primrose	The Bee
Gloves	The Sheep
Bread	The Spider
Sugar	The Robin
Meat	The Butterfly
Gold	The Hen
Coal	The Camel
The Policeman	The Cow
The Shoemaker's Shop	The Monkey
The Post Office	The Ostrich
Spring	The Beaver
A Storm	The Peacock
The Sea Shore	The Zebra
A Bell	The St Bernard's Dog
A Railway Station	The Eagle

It is the Holy Scripture lessons that are most carefully recorded in these early years, lessons such as 'Elijah carried to Heaven' on 6 March 1866 and 'The baptism of Christ' on 29 March. The lesson on 3 May, received with particular interest, was on 'The raising of Lazarus': 'Children particularly [*sic.*] attentive and enquiring', noted the teacher. They were also very 'still and attentive' for the lesson on 'The Agony and Bloody Sweat' on Wednesday 16 May 1866, which perhaps shows that children then, as now, had a rather ghoulish interest in death.

Eighty-nine infants were offered for Reverend C.J. Robinson's inspection in October 1867, and seventeen were promoted to Standard 1 in the Upper (or Mixed) School. 'It is a good Infants School,' was the report. The village must have been proud of its efforts. Visitors were numerous, particularly from the gentry who liked to see the children perform. On the afternoon of 5 November 1867 the Infants School was honoured with a visit from the rector's wife Mrs Davys and Mrs Stanley [wife of Dean Stanley] who asked to hear the children sing. There was certainly an air of patronage about these visits. The rector's wife sometimes brought cakes and, in winter, clothes for the small children. She also presented prizes and gifts at Christmas and, along with Mrs Drake Garrard, supplied the materials for needlework.

**Ellen Morton** began her duties as the new headmistress of the Infants School on the cold winter's morning of 5 January 1880 and made almost daily entries in the logbook. She immediately began to reorganize the classes, and even opened school a quarter of an hour earlier for the afternoon session 'so that the children might leave so much earlier and reach home before dark' -- a sensible and humanitarian approach to the problems of small children walking to and from school in icy weather. The year started with a total attendance of only 36 children, declining to a mere 18 by the end of the month, owing to the severe weather. Both the curate and the rector continued to pay several visits each month, no doubt keeping an eye on progress, with the curate taking weekly lessons in Holy Scripture.

Eventually the attendance officer, Mr Everitt, visited and took a note of the names of ten absentees. His resulting visits to the homes of the defaulters evidently bore fruit, as by 23 February, with the milder weather, attendance was up to 47, three or four children visited by the attendance officer having put in an appearance for the first time this year. However, on 30 March Ellen Morton gave notice that she wished to be released from her duties at Whitsuntide to take up another appointment in Blackburn, her native town. She left on 14 May, though she visited the school once more, in July 1881.

By the time of the annual diocesan inspection on 27 April, the school was able to muster 75 children.

**Phoebe Hannell**, who took over as Mistress on 24 May 1880, was perhaps a more local girl, having trained at Hockerill College. The local gentry all visited during her first month in charge, Mrs Drake Garrard bringing with her a present for each of the 78 children present on 11 June. Canon Davys and the curate, Mr Curtis, continued to visit regularly.

The 1881 census states that Arthur Curtis M.A. Cantab., aged 32, lived with his wife Fanny, 40, their two daughters (one aged 3 years, the other 3 months, both born in Wheathampstead), a servant and a nurse at 79 Wheathampstead Hill.

Several half-holidays were granted during the summer term: for the visit of the Church Temperance Society to Brocket Hall, a Chapel Tea in the village, and a Foresters' fete, also held in the village. One gains the impression of a happy village enjoying its summer months to the full, with the school children joining in as a matter of course. Average attendance during the month of July was 85.5.

It is interesting to note that it was during the year 1880 that legislation imposed compulsory attendance on all children up to the age of ten, and that staying on school to fourteen was conditional upon the number of attendances. The effect of this legislation can be seen in the struggles of the staff to cope with greater numbers of pupils in a limited space. There is considerable disruption and loss of continuity in the governing of the school in the years following this legislation with the effects on attainment made clear in some less favourable reports from the inspectors.

The inspector's report for the year to September 1880 says that 'Two changes in the Head Teachership of the Infants Department have somewhat affected the progress during the past year, which on the whole has been satisfactory'.

During Phoebe Hannell's tenure, the logbook makes frequent mention of the pupil teachers and monitresses - the increase in class sizes demanding extra pairs of hands. Sarah Dawes became a temporary monitress on 25 June 1880 but in the week 25-29 October 'left...for the winter'. Ellen Morris began as a new pupil teacher on 14 January 1881, but there were not many pupils to teach as, by 7 February, only 16 children were present - owing in part on that particular occasion to a snow storm at the end of a period of bad weather. Martha Clark, who had been a pupil teacher when Ellen Morton took over the school, left for teacher training college at the end of 1883.



In 1881, Ellen Morris, aged 14, lived at 63 High Street (Mr Bullock's Yard) with her father John, a labourer, her mother Emma, a straw plaiter, and her brother Edward who was 13 and at school.

In the summer of 1881, Phoebe Hannell's first full year of headship, the low attendance is noticeable with only 52 children noted as being present in June and numbers declining to 45 in August, considerably down on the previous year. Numbers were slow to pick up at the start of the new term in September, the reason given being that 'Several children absent owing to gleaning not being finished.' The average attendance picked up to about 80 but so many children were absent picking up acorns on 14 October that the mistress was forced to allow a holiday for those that had attended.

Not surprisingly, with such variable attendance, the report following the inspection in summer 1881 was not favourable: 'Discipline should be more precise. Some of the work is well done in the first class. Reading in the second class should improve.' Twenty-four children were promoted to the Mixed School.

Numbers were not to remain in decline, however, and the following September they increased to over a hundred. At the next annual inspection, reported on 29 September 1882, 103 children were present. The inspector again remarked on the discipline problems, adding that 'The teacher works under the disadvantage of an overcrowded room and an irregular attendance'.

At this point some of the entries suggest that the Mistress is struggling to cope. Ellen Morris, the pupil teacher, was absent for two weeks and on 27 October, Miss Hannell writes 'I have substituted Arithmetic for Kinder Garten occupations, and shall do so until I obtain necessary materials.' Later entries reveal that the kindergarten occupations included paper plaiting, for instance, and such craft-based activities.

In June 1883 there is a mention of much 'inconvenience from the building and falling of the plaster'. Hopefully this meant that some repair work was being done - perhaps an extension to the area for the infants in response to the inspector's comments about overcrowding.

By 21 September of that year the Mistress is noted as being absent through illness, which appears to have continued until at least 5 October. The inspector's report for 1883 states that 'The Mistress had just resigned owing to ill-health and in her absence the school was creditably managed by the Pupil Teacher'. This was Ellen Morris.

Further research suggests that Miss Hannell recovered from her illness, since she visited the school in July 1894 and died unmarried in Luton in June 1944 aged 91.

The next we know from the logbook is that her place has been taken by Emily Lynes who declares herself as Headmistress on 29 October, noting of the 70 children in attendance that they were 'fairly orderly'.

The new headmistress did not have a high opinion of the educational attainments of the first class whom she considered to be 'very backward in Arithmetic and Reading.' She spent her first weeks trying to teach them to form their letters properly. 'Only about half the class can do the addition of units,' she noted, but the singing was 'a little better'. She did not stay long to improve the situation, however, and had left by the end of the year.

The inspector reported in September 1883 that, due to the creditable management of the school by the pupil teacher, Ellen Morris, during the absence of the previous headmistress due to illness, 'the general result was fair, the first class was good, the third fair, but the second somewhat backward'. However, he recommended that Ellen attend to her history and map drawing.

The work of the pupil teachers was generally instrumental in improving standards, and Ellen Morris is praised for keeping her class in 'capital order'. She applied for admission to a teacher training college in November 1883, her application forms being brought into school by Canon Davys. She was given many periods of school time to study for her exams and moved to the Mixed School on 3 November 1884 as Assistant Mistress having 'qualified under Article 50 but not under Article 52'. She must have been 18 at the time. This was a considerable achievement for the daughter of a labourer and a straw plaiter.

**Mary (Marianne) Walker** took over the post of headmistress of the school on 7 January 1884. Not surprisingly, with so many headmistresses in so short a time, she too commented on the backwardness of the children in maths. Only a little over 50 pupils attended in January and February but, by June, the number present was often in the region of a hundred and the report for her first year was favourable: 'a good deal improved. The children are in good order and are now making satisfactory progress though there should be more modulation and expression in the reading. The sewing was very good.'

From this point the school seems to settle down and the annual inspection reports reflect the greater continuity and stability in the administration. Marianne Walker was a probationer teacher; it is noted on 30 November 1885 that she 'will shortly receive her certificate'.

However, the school's grant for 1886 was threatened under Article 115 (II) by the possibility that Edith Sear the pupil teacher, who had failed her exams in 1885, would fail them again in 1886. Her results in 1885 had shown 'some slight improvement' but this only 'counted' if she showed a very great improvement at her next attempt. The 1886 inspection report shows that it was thought unlikely that she would make the grade as a certificated teacher and, as matters turned out, poor Edith, though she kept on trying, passed her exams 'unsatisfactorily' - which presumably means that she failed them - again in 1887. On 23 September of that year the managers gave her notice to quit and she finally left on 29 February 1888, having taught 'the babies' and sometimes 'helped' in the Mixed School in the meantime.

In this period, there are several mentions in the logbook of 'equipment' being supplied. New pictures and reading books, new slates and stationery, even hat pegs since the inspector had commented on the great need for these in his report. More children demanded extra resources. In October 1886, attendance was regularly more than a hundred.

The numbers in the Upper School had also increased and were overflowing into the infants' classroom which became very crowded. By 20 May 1887, it is noted that the infant children are 'very much crowded and it is not possible to use the classroom all day'. It must have been a great relief therefore to declare a half holiday for the Church's dedication festival, and two whole days for Her Majesty's Jubilee in June.

Following changes in government regulations which affected the timing of the school year, the inspector's report for 1887 noted that 'the shortened school year has affected progress to some extent'. However, 'a much more serious drawback has been the loss of the classroom which since Christmas has been used by the Upper School.' The inspector went on to observe that 'where the infants are crowded together they have lost much of their former brightness, diligence and attention, and the work is not as good as usual, though the mistress is a painstaking and efficient teacher and has worked with very fair success under circumstances of very considerable difficulty.' More particularly he noted 'Sewing is good; singing by note is not up to the mark'. It was imperative, he said, that additional space be provided immediately, or under Article 96 (a) of the current version of the Revised Code, the school would lose its entire grant for the year.

Before there was any sign of additional space being added to the new building, however, nature took a part and the close and unhealthy proximity of so many children in a confined space combined to bring about a sudden decrease in numbers. An underlined entry for 18 October reads, 'Sixty three children absent with measles'. It goes on 'Classes are so small that it is not necessary to use the classroom at all.' Contagions and medical problems were various, and the entry for 5 March 1888 records 'many children absent with mumps. Others still unable to come because of chilblains'. Three days later five more children, who had been present the day before, were absent the mumps having spread so that only 73 were present out of a possible 116 on the books. It is possible to trace the rapid spread of the disease that month, as we can see that by 19 March numbers had declined to a mere 45 children, severe weather and mumps together bringing about a drastic fall in numbers. It was, moreover, noted that several children had not returned to school since their absence in October the previous year due to the outbreak of measles - a total of five months' absence for some.

At the end of April 1888 the mistress complained to the attendance officer, Mr Everitt, about the particularly poor attendance of children from The Folly - a small community to the west of Wheathampstead and some twenty minutes' walk from the school - which fact may in itself provide part of the explanation for irregular attendance. On 31 May she complained again, this time about 'the bad attendance of several of the older children who were well but kept at home to mind babies'. At this point the struggle of those early teachers and educators of the poor becomes very clear, and one can understand the demands made by large families coming into conflict with government requirements for school attendance.

No adverse effect was noted at inspection time (the end of May), however, and the inspector noted 'the Infants School is much improved and making good progress. The elementary work was creditable throughout and sewing is very good. The children are in very fair order but rather restless. Recitation might improve.' The teacher seems to have triumphed in spite of all.

Infections continued among the children during 1888 and through into the following year. In December the mistress commented on there still being a 'great deal of illness among the children'. Canon Davys, more optimistically, had been reported as having complimented the children earlier the same month on their 'brightness and cleanliness'. However, this was not enough, for after the Christmas holidays measles had again broken out at The Folly, and on 11 February 1889 the logbook records that while 'snow prevented many children from attending school ... others are not allowed to come on account of infectious diseases in their neighbourhood.' On the same day 'a Sanitary Doctor called and examined several children's hands and forbade any children from the Folly Hamlet to attend school.' Previously children had been sent home with suspected ringworm on their heads, hands and faces. Children from The Folly were clearly a problem not only for poor attendance, cleanliness and hygiene leaving something to be desired.

Childhood diseases of one kind and another feature strongly during this period and the year 1889 continues with several mentions of blisterpox (probably chicken pox) spreading among the children during May and June. Twenty-five children were absent with this particular ailment on 7 June. The number of children promoted to the Mixed School following the inspection does not seem to have been affected, with a record 44 being transferred. Three were kept back for reasons of weak health or lameness.

On a brighter note, Phillis Seabrook, the pupil teacher, passed her exams on 13 April 1889, was appointed Assistant Mistress at St Matthew's Infants School in Luton, and left on 6 March 1891.

Mary Walker must have become Mary Hands at some point in 1888, as by the time of the Inspector's report that May her surname has changed.

The 1891 census shows Mary Hands living with her husband William in School House, Church Street. William was an Assistant HMI. They had two children: Mary, aged 2, and William, aged 1. Other members of the household were William's widowed mother Matilda (68), a boarder - Charles Frood (24) – who was a schoolmaster, and Maude Thompson, a nurse aged 14.

Her resignation in December 1891 followed absences caused first by the illness of one of her children, mentioned on 22 October that year, then from 14 December by her own illness. She had suffered that summer, as had many of the children, from a bout of influenza, and during the three days of her absence the Reverend Austin Oliver, one of the school managers, had given permission for the school to be closed. Perhaps seven years of coping with an augmented intake following the 1880 legislation (128 children were present on 12 May 1890) had taken their toll. Judging from the evidence of the inspections in the logbooks, she had been an efficacious headmistress - the report for 1890 commending the discipline and efficiency with which the school was run as 'decidedly creditable' and her last report in 1891 stated that the children were '...under very good discipline and has been taught with care and creditable success'.

**Alice Maud Key**, the next headmistress, took up her duties on 4 January 1892 while still a probationer. Canon Davys paid no fewer than three visits during her first week. The absence of the monitress, Edith Jarvis, was no doubt felt more keenly at such a delicate time of transition than it might otherwise have been, for it was noted three times and lasted until 25 January. On 30 March it is recorded that the said Edith, identified as a 'candidate' pupil teacher, had left the school altogether but no reason is given.

Again the problem of poor attendance beset all efforts to provide a regular education for the little ones, caused at this time of year by the cold winter weather and another widespread epidemic of measles lasting well into the spring. Eventually the mistress herself seems to have succumbed, though we do not know whether it was measles that affected her or the usual winter illnesses, perhaps brought about by the exigencies of her new job and its attendant difficulties. She was away for one week, 'due to illness', and 'recommenced duties' returning to school on 11 April. By 20 April, after the Easter holiday, only 67 children were present out of a total of 163 on the books, 'owing to measles and chickenpox'. The entry for 2 May records the death of a child during the previous week 'owing to measles'.

One advantage of the low attendance figures for this period was that it provided an opportunity for the pupil teachers to study for their examinations. On 16 February, for instance, we read of it being a 'very snowy morning. Attendance very bad, only 43 children. Teachers sat down in turn to study as school was so small'.

The headmistress, the two pupil teachers, the monitress and especially the school managers must have been pleased, even relieved, when the HMI report for 1892 included that '...in spite of weak staff, increased numbers, and very irregular attendance in the lower part of the school, very creditable work has been done...discipline, recitation, singing and sewing deserve high praise'.

One of the pupil teachers, Verina Vass, failed her exams in that year and left on 19 September.

The 1881 census shows Verina, then aged 4, living in Hamwell (now Amwell) with her four older brothers and sisters, her father James, a farm labourer aged 44, and her mother Mary Ann (46) who was a straw plaiter.

Verina had been christened in Wheathampstead in 1877 and married Thomas William Howard in Wheathampstead in 1899. However, something may have gone wrong soon afterwards as the 1901 census shows that she was working as a servant in a large household in Ramsbury Road, St Albans. The head of that household is listed as 'Moneylender and political agent'.

More favourable results of the pupil teachers' studies were reported by the inspector after his visit on 31 May 1893 where we learn that 'M.L Wilsher has passed fairly but should attend to Geography' but that M.J. Ducker had not succeeded. 'Failure (Arithmetic)' having been recorded against her name, she left in October 1893. There had been a falling off in the

elementary work in the school, with the work apart from reading and writing being 'barely fair', with 'unsatisfactory...general efficiency of the large third class of nearly 60 children (who are taught by a mistress in a classroom much too small for the number in attendance)'. Strong practical measures were required to improve the situation. 'Additional light is required for the classroom, the cloakroom should have doors and fireguards should be provided.'

The managers took note and two fireguards were supplied, arriving on 9 October in time for the start of the winter lighting of fires two weeks later. The hazards to safety of unguarded fires with so many children in such a small room do not bear thinking about. It is probable that covered-in metal 'tortoise' stoves were being used. In recollections recorded in 1956 past pupils remembered the smell of steaming boots and wet clothes draped over the fender surrounding the fires when they were at school in this building. In one particularly cold February in 1895 even these were unsuccessful in warming the 26 children present on the 8th and the mistress recorded that she could not send the children home as they were 'crying with cold'.

A range of other equipment and apparatus was provided throughout the early 1890s and the 1894 inspection report states that '...with a stronger staff there has been a very marked improvement in efficiency and the higher classification is fully justified by the results'.

Alice Key resigned on 12 February 1897, leaving behind an infant school straining at the seams but being nevertheless recommended for the highest grant and given high praise for its efficiency in spite of 'special difficulties' (1895 report).

Her successor, Emma Grace, started work and made her first entry in the logbook on 15 February but was absent because of 'illness in the house' two days later. She experienced her first inspections within six months of her appointment – the Diocesan inspection on 10 May and HMI on 27 July but both were favourable.

The last entry in this, the first logbook of St Helen's Infants School, was made on 23 December 1897.

It is clear that the early headmistresses at Wheathampstead Infants School had, for the most part, managed under the most severe difficulties to impart to their charges the recommended curriculum of the day - predominantly Church of England Christian doctrine, together with reading, writing and arithmetic. One cannot fail to be impressed by the tenacity displayed in the face of adverse weather, continued bouts of illness among the children, shortages of equipment and materials and, following the 1880 Education Act, inadequate space.

## **Sources**

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