

HERITAGE SHEET 8

EDUCATION IN MIDDLETON PART 2

THE NEW SCHOOL

In 1872 in the wake of the 1870 Forster Education Act plans were drawn up for a new National school for 135 children under the auspices of the Church of England. The architect was S Rollinson of Chesterfield and the construction work was carried out by W Eastwood of Middleton. The building which is situated at the west end of Front Street on the north side was opened on Tuesday 1st October 1872. Only 14 children were admitted on that first day because of a misunderstanding on the part of the parents with regard to the scale of fees to be paid (fees were abolished in 1891 and before that concessions were made for poorer parents).

The first pupil on the register was Arthur Appleton and Mr Wilsh Crowe one of the managers was present. Edmund Hill was the certificated master and his wife Susan was the seamstress. Also admitted on that first day were their daughters Helen (later to become a pupil teacher) and Laura. The family lived in the school house and like their successors took an active part in village life.

Three days after the school's opening Mr Hill stated that reading, writing and arithmetic had been very badly taught in the village and he was giving the children special attention in those subjects. With regard to reading he was particularly trying to remove a sing-song tone (something which was to persist). Work progressed and four years later the grammar taught was said to include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs whilst geography teaching included the counties of England and in history, the Crusades. Object lessons were also a feature and the children at that time did their written work on slates. Mr Hill in his log entry for 16th November 1875 stated "One great cause of failure is a want of intelligence arising no doubt from the fact that most of the children being related".

In 1880 "singing from notes" ie tonic solfa was introduced and in the early years the children learned the following songs:

Since first I saw your face
In a Pond
The Warrior Norseman
Softly shines the pleasant morn
Last Rose of Summer

God Bless the Prince of Wales
Ring the Bell Watchman
While at Night
Hearts of Oak
Good King Wenceslas.

Captain Brooksbank (the squire) from the Hall visited the school regularly and Mrs Brooksbank made frequent appearances to inspect the sewing. In keeping with its Church school status the Reverend Blanchard often opened the building and gave scripture lessons and in this connection there was an annual Diocesan inspection. The quality of teaching in other subjects was tested in a separate HMI visit.

In those early days the teacher's lot was not an altogether happy one. The certificated system had been started in 1846 and lasted in that form until 1906. A pupil teacher could be apprenticed at the age of 14 and subsequently secure a certificate through attendance at a training college or a course of part time study. In 1845 the Church of England had 22 training colleges. In 1875 the average annual salary for a male certificated teacher was £109 and for females £65. Nor was their standing particularly high. A government minister of the time likened the notion of consulting teachers about what should be taught to "asking chickens with which sauce they should be served!"

For years the headmaster had to contend with many problems not least of which was hostility of the parents who would rather have had their children in paid employment. In an agricultural community like Middleton the demands of farm work and the economic needs of the parents meant unauthorized absences and even after compulsory school attendance was required in 1880 summer holidays were arranged to coincide with the demands of harvesting. Headmasters were of the opinion that attendance committees and school officers were slow to take action against parents who broke the law.

But there were exceptions even in the early days. A report of a court case in the Driffield Times on 21st June 1884 stated the "R Sutton Towse, Middleton was ordered to pay 2s 6d for neglecting to send his son to school. One of the extenuating pleas was that whenever there was a cricket match, village feast or anything of that kind, the schoolmaster invariably went and parents did not know when the school was closed; and it was contended that parents had as much right to keep their children at home when they were of service as the master had to close the school and thus prevent them putting in attendances".

Another case not without its humorous aspect reported in the local press in the early years of the 20th Century shows the continuing conflict between the demands of education and work. The man in question, the tenant of a local farm, said that his boy who was over 12 years old was kept away from school to help with the harvesting and it saved him £1 in wages which he would have to pay a man. He strongly criticised the action of the authorities in closing the school for the annual "harvest" (midsummer) holidays three weeks before harvest commenced. He added that the lad was much better at work with him than at school "drawing donkeys". If he had to send him to school until he was 14 he would then be "ower big and awkward" and he then could make "nowt of him".

The Chairman of the court said "The law says you are not entitled to keep your child away from school". The defendant replied nonchalantly "It's a funny law it wants altering and the man that made it wants hanging". In the end, after being warned as to the seriousness of the offence the defendant was fined 13 shillings. He left the court still muttering.

To be continued

