

# One person's view of the realities of life in 19th Century Glemsford

*Sources: the logbooks of the Infants section of Glemsford Board School, 1874 - 1903*

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It is important that we should look at the past realistically. There never was a Golden Age, when people always lived contented lives, and there was always "real butter for tea". Take the 19th Century, when, if we believe today's romantics, all was peace and light, crime was non-existent and morality was taken for granted: an age, indeed, to yearn for.

So let it be with Glemsford. Life in a rural area in the late 19th century was certainly no "roses round the door" dream. British farmers were, for the last thirty years of the century, facing fierce competition from the New World and the New Empire. Industry was subject to growing competition and the whims of the market. A village like Glemsford, with its roots in both agriculture and industry, was doubly vulnerable. Villagers were always likely to suffer in times of unemployment. In an effort to save their businesses, farmers cut wages and, ultimately, manpower. The cottages which, today, are so attractive, were often broken down hovels, overcrowded and insanitary. The attraction of new housing in the growing towns of Bury, Sudbury or Haverhill, or the cities further afield, with the promise of piped water and even gas, must have been great. In the introduction to "Reuben's Corner", Spike Mays hints at both features of life in Glemsford at the turn of the century: the decay of Industry and Agriculture and the poverty that was the partner of poor housing.

A detailed examination of the Glemsford School log-books shows the ill health prevalent at that time. The Infants' School had not been open 6 months when, on 4 September 1874, Annie Forbes made this entry: "One little girl - Ellen Underwood, died this week of Scarlet Fever." A week later "one little boy - Albert Butcher died...": again, the cause was Scarlet Fever. Throughout the first thirty years of operation, the school faced regular epidemics of Scarlet Fever. The 1874 outbreak continued throughout the autumn and winter. No more deaths are recorded, but on October 30th "a great number of children are ill with fever". Miss Forbes' successor, Eleanor Lilley, notes that, on 1 December 1876, attendance had been "... bad chiefly owing to sickness in the village ... I sent several children home whose brothers and sisters have the Scarlet Fever". The next outbreak is first noted on 5 December 1882, in the Girls' School, with the death of Euphemia Salter. "Very few children are present" in the Infants' School on 11 December "owing to fever in the village". On December 15th "School closed for three weeks by order of Dr Holden [the Medical Officer of Health] in consequence of Scarlet Fever among the chn: ..." Apart from maintaining this form of quarantine, Dr Holden insisted that the "Schools ... be fumigated before the chn. reassemble". School duly recommenced on 8 January 1883 but there were "many chn. still absent owing to fever" and a fortnight later "several chn." were still absent. In 1896 an outbreak carried over Christmas into the New Year. December had been wet and stormy, and January began similarly wet, before heavy snow set in in mid-month. The Mistress by this time was Eleanor Bowrey, and it is worth looking a little more closely at her log entries for a devastating six weeks:

"1897 January 4th School reopened this morning after the Christmas Holidays. Attendance very poor to-day, much sickness being still prevalent among the children. ... January 5th ... Received notice that Katie Pleasance, aged 4 years, who was present on Dec. 18th, died yesterday afternoon of Scarlet Fever.

January 7th A very rainy morning reduced the attendance to 69, the greater number of absentees being the lower classes. ...

Friday January 8th ... Three fresh cases of Scarlet Fever are reported by the Attendance Officer today.

January 11th Received notice that Elizabeth Boreham, aged 6 years, died on Saturday last of Scarlet Fever. The numbers are still very poor indeed owing to the prevalence of sickness in the village.

January 14th The attendance is still very low and fluctuating.

January 18th ... The heavy fall of snow on Saturday evening has prevented many of the little ones from attending. ... Received notice that Florrie Watts aged 3 years, will not be able to return during the winter months.

January 19th ... Gertrude Hartley aged 6 years is obliged to remain away from school as her brother is suffering from Scarlet Fever. ...

January 20th Weather still very severe, and numbers consequently much lower than the amount of sickness which is prevalent would account for. ...

January 21st Received notice that Nathan Webster is suffering from Scarlet Fever. ...

February 2nd School closed this afternoon, the room being required for examination purposes; - also from today by order of the Sanitary Authorities, for disinfection and cleaning. "

Diphtheria is not mentioned until December 1895, and then only "in one family" with no apparent further cases. The next reference underlines the fear with which Diphtheria was greeted. On 1 June 1898, Mr Oscar Clarke sent the school a note ordering that Thirza Mead and her sister Flora (from the Girls' School) were to be excluded "on account of there being Diphtheria in the house". The following day, the pair were readmitted, a "certificate having been received from Dr Waring contradicting Mr Clarke's note". There was no outbreak. But when the disease did next strike, in 1900 and 1901, it was much more serious. On 21 September 1900, attendances were well up, "but a case of Diphtheria is reported...." Miss Bowrey records "the enforced absence of two little ones in the same family". Without mentioning names, she had, the following week, to write that "the two cases of Diphtheria reported last week ended fatally on Monday and Wednesday of this week...".

Deaths among the Infants happened occasionally. Children came and went, through removal or ill-health. Even so, to record the deaths of pupils whom she had brought through the the school, for whom she cared, must have been painful for Miss

Bowrey. They were her "little ones". It is difficult to believe she did not feel the pain of their deaths. When the school was closed because of an epidemic, she must have feared the worst, but the 1900 cases did not develop into an epidemic. Attendance through the autumn remained high

School re-opened on 7 January 1901. On 11th January, " a case of Diphtheria is reported - Aubrey Waterhouse ... living at Duff's Farm. This necessitates the absence from school of his brother, Leslie, and of Herbert Upson. ..." Six days after the death of Queen Victoria on 22 January, things had taken a turn for the worse:

"Dr Holden (Sanitary Inspector) visited. Owing to the increase of serious cases of Diphtheria in the village during the last few days, the Dr ordered the Infants' School to be closed until further notice to obviate the danger as much as possible. ..." The closure only lasted a fortnight, but, on 15 February, attendance was "very poor ... owing partly to the convalescents still being absent ..." On 28 February the school "received notice that George Cross, aged 7 years (nearly) who has not attended school since January 25th had died on the previous day, of Diphtheria ..." A mild form of Measles followed, but George Cross' death is the last record of Diphtheria before 1903 when the Glemsford School Board ceased to exist.

Although it would be wrong to apply late 20th Century standards to earlier times, there is nothing romantic in this particular picture of the past

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