

# Visitors and Other Interruptions

The work of the school caused a good deal of interest among the adult population of the village, particularly in the early days when it was something of a novelty. It is easy to understand why members of the Board would visit. It was their enterprise, they were proud of it, and besides, it was their duty to supervise it. Both rectors of the period, the Reverends Coldham and Hall were regular visitors. But they also brought their friends and family. The school seems to have been part of the social circuit of the village, and ladies would call at the school "to hear the children sing". On several occasions in the 1870's, two ladies "from Foxearth rectory" did the same. Some visitors, however, were less welcome than others. Occasionally, parents, not in the least in awe of the school, would arrive unannounced: "30 November 1885 Mr James Game this morning came shouting into the school and interfered with the children ... and also called one girl from her class."

A month earlier, "School work [was] interrupted by one of the parents." In 1875, the Mistress, Eleanor Lilley, was none too impressed by the visit of Mr Samuel Allen<sup>11</sup>, who obviously did not appreciate firm discipline:

"On Tuesday I had occasion to keep my 1st Class Girls a few minutes after the others; one of them had told me an untruth and I wished to find out who it was. I kept them from 5 to 10 minutes (not exceeding the latter). In the afternoon, the father of one of them came and complained because his child was kept with the others..."

Very unusually, Miss Lilley had made an entry which she later eradicated, quite against the rules. The original entry included the words, which she took out and was later forced to re-insert: "...and discoursed me in a disgraceful manner..." Apparently it was the word "disgraceful" which was objected to! The confrontation did not end here because, also in the log, but crossed out, is the additional entry: "... and threatened to take it before the Board, and if that would not do, he would write to the Education Department, he also shouted he would do all in his power to injure me." Not a good day.

More expected were the annual Inspectors' visits and the regular arrival of Board members, or Medical Officers, and Miss Lilley was ready to use the log book as a means of defence against criticism: "

Admitted several children. They are all very backward. They come into this school so old that it is impossible to reflect credit." (27 April, 1877). " ...The Infants are fairly taught, but the children over seven are very ignorant. More efficient discipline should be maintained. ..." (Inspector's Report, received 3 May, 1877).

Visits could cause some disturbance. 1892 was a typical year. January brought three visits, February four, including a register check and inspection. March had no visits, but few children either, because of persistent bad weather. There was a two-man register check on April 27th (after a week's holiday). On May 13th, the Rev. Hall brought a "young lady" with him; one Board member dropped in on 16th, and three appeared on 25th. Another Board member called on 26th, to be followed on 27th by the Rev. Hall, this time with three ladies. June produced three separate visits, including a register check, July one, and August three before the Harvest Holiday began on 19th. In September two Board members called together on 28th (school having re-opened on 19th September). October saw three callers. November and December were relatively quiet with a total of five individuals dropping in. The school averaged an outside visitor per week, and it has to be remembered that most of these visits involved some disturbance to lessons. A register check, for instance, meant making sure that the children marked present were actually there, and there was only one way of doing that.

Instances of the children themselves actually leaving the school in the course of the school day are very rarely mentioned. It was only in the very early days of the school that the children were taken, by their Mistress, for a "ramble in Mr Goodchild's meadow". After that the world had to come to the children.

Life in Glemsford School had many varieties. Comings and Goings were expected, and the staff got used to them. Although the logs are not an accurate statistical record, and the registers are not available, there are times when comings and goings among the pupils are much more noticeable. The log books are not a total social record of the village either, but there are times when they reflect the problems which Glemsford families faced.

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, are described by Victorian observers as broken down hovels, desperately 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.

It was inevitable that such poverty should touch the school. Children at school could not contribute a wage to the household, as they always had done. George Ewart Evans lists numbers of ways in which even the youngest could earn: bird scaring, stone-picking, gleaning, for instance. But as well as threatening the income of the family, education also added to the expenses, because, to begin with, at least, education was not free. This seems to have been a concern of the Board from the start. In 1875 they passed a resolution to investigate "whether this Board can in consequence of poverty legally repay to parents any part of the School fees which have been paid by parents to the Board." They must have felt that 1d a week would have made some difference. Frequently, the Board agreed to waive fees for parents who were sick or unemployed. At the same time they were quite prepared to summons other parents for non-payment, and they instructed the Mistress to support their case in Court on at least one occasion. Children were regularly sent home for not bringing their pence for the week.

There are other hints of economic problems. In 1885 a slump hit the village factories; the Girls' School Mistress noted that "as the half-time girls are without work they are not attending school". Half-timers were something of a thorn in the flesh of the Girls' School. Having passed the required Standard, they received a Certificate which allowed them to attend school half a day and work for the other half. Apart from the obvious disruption to the school programme, these girls were poor attenders, despite threats from their employers. All manner of methods were used to try to persuade them to attend regularly, most of them unsuccessful. When work ran out, there was even less incentive to attend.

Another effect of unemployment was the inability to pay for school equipment as well as fees: "Many of the poorer children are unable to bring pence for Copy Books as their fathers are out of work."  
(January 1886)

One period above all witnessed a steady trickle of families away from the village. The strong suggestion is that they went in search of work. The first mention of such a migration occurs on 2 September 1896 with the departure of Lavinia Green, to London, with her parents. By 11 September, another five children had gone from the school, if not from the village (some of the very young children were kept at home for the autumn and winter). At the end of the month, one boy left because of his parents' "removal to Cavendish" and in October another girl left as a result of her family's "removal ... from the District". Others "removed to Stanstead" or "returned to London to live". In January '97 Eliza Smith and her family went to Sudbury. In September 1896, there had been 175 names "on the books"; when, on 1 February 1897, 46 children transferred to the Boys' and Girls' Departments, there were only 99 left, and only 109 at the end of February. Although the total had reached 148 by July, families continued to depart. The Jarmins went to Sudbury, the Newtons to Clare. The Hughes and Twinns simply "left the district". Sudbury received three more families, London two. On 28 May '97 there is a unique entry in the log, when "a little girl of 4 years has been taken into the workhouse for a time, her father having deserted his children." Her name was duly removed from the registers, but she was readmitted at the end of September; perhaps that family crisis was resolved. A crisis for the school was approaching.

Then, as now, staffing depended on pupil numbers, and a falling roll could lead to all sorts of disruption. The following entry from the log shows this quite clearly, but it also confirms that the school was only part of a living, changing and sometimes suffering community:  
January 31st 1898: "School year ended this afternoon. Notice received on Friday that owing to the reduced number of children on Books, because of the steady failure of employment in the village, and consequent removal of people to other places, the Board have decided that Standard 1 shall remain in the Infants' School."

But the school bounced back. From that low point, by July of the same year "the numbers having increased so rapidly in the lower class, the Babies must now be taught separately from the "Fours"" and Miss Bowrey was looking for an extra teacher to avoid using her two Pupil Teachers for more hours than was permitted.