

The Glemsford Schoolmistress

In praise of undervalued teachers

There is no doubt that pupils of the early Board Schools looked back on their schooldays remembering the fear with which they had approached their teachers. "If you stepped out of line, you got a whack." Perhaps, however, the time has come to review the tradition of the school-room tyrants so often described in fiction, or portrayed in film. After all, those portrayals are often the product of very biased evidence. We depend so much on the recollections of those who were on the "receiving end", seeing everything as they saw things as young children. If the "echoes from the past" are to be believed, it seems to me that, at least, there is another side to the story.

The teachers in Glemsford were confronted by a multitude of problems, professional and personal, niggling and serious, short- and long-term. Would it be unreasonable to expect that, as human beings, they might allow their bearing to be affected by the conditions in which they had to live and work?

The Infant School Mistress had to share her home: she expected to. There is some evidence that, even with the lower housing standards of the day, the accommodation was not as good as it should have been. Her working day began more than an hour before the pupils' as the Mistress had to spend that time conducting the lessons of the young Pupil Teachers; the same process was repeated at the end of day. In her early incarnation the Glemsford Mistress was also expected to organise adult evening classes. In the course of the working day, the Mistress had to superintend large numbers of very young children in overcrowded conditions; at the same time, she had to oversee the work of Pupil Teachers and Monitresses, all of whom were of an age at which, in today's terms, they would almost certainly be still at school: "The Teachers are thoroughly stupid at Arithmetic & it seems a hopeless task to teach them. Sums that they work one week, they entirely forget the next & are utterly careless. ..." (Eleanor Lilley, 19th February, 1878).

Her workplace was not only overcrowded, it was badly lit, ill-equipped and inefficiently heated. Some children arrived at school dirty; many fell ill and probably threatened the health of the teacher herself. On more than a few occasions, she had to face a roomful of children in the knowledge that one of her "Babies" had died and others were in danger.

The Mistress was responsible to the School Board, not all of whose members were totally sympathetic to her work. She could expect frequent visits from members of the Board at any time during the working day. Such visits represented open checks on her work.

Inspectors made regular visits. The results of those visits affected the Mistress' salary, as well as resulting in a direct professional assessment of her work. The Inspector's report affected the relationship between the Mistress and the Board, often putting extra demands on the work and finances of the school.

The Mistress was responsible to the parents; there is definite evidence that parents in Glemsford most certainly did NOT regard the Mistress with fear and trembling. There is certainly plenty of evidence that, although education was valued, it did not take top priority in every family, and certainly not in the family finances when it came to regular attendance.

Education was, to an extent, a controversial issue. The great national debate of 1870 centred to a large degree on the matter of religion and religious education. That issue was still very much alive in the 1890's. The Mistress in Glemsford had to be extraordinarily careful not to offend any faction. In 1896, the Board was predicting "sectarian strife" in the County over the issue of compulsory religious education. The Mistress of the Girls' School at the turn of the century found herself ordered to institute religious education by the Chairman (Rev. Hall) even though all the Bibles in the school had been "sent away several years ago, by order of the Board". Beyond religion, there are veiled hints that the work of the school, or at least the relationship between the Board and the Mistress, may well have been affected by the internal politics of the Board and the village.

The Mistress was expected to be unmarried. The tasks she carried out and the responsibilities she carried were demanding. Her role hardly matches the stereotype against which the Suffragists were campaigning, nor that their opponents were trying to maintain. In a world largely untouched by feminism, the school Mistress had to rely on her OWN wits, unsupported by a reliable "Head of the Family": one is tempted to suggest that such a role is yet another example of 19th Century hypocrisy. The Mistress had to be self-reliant, independent-minded and resourceful. None of the early tenants of the post saw Glemsford as their home. They were on their own, in a locally male-dominated society. Yet each Mistress obviously acted as a role-model for her charges. She was expected to set standards, and there is clear evidence, year by year, of pupils of the Glemsford

Schools setting out themselves to become teachers. A number sat successfully for the Queen's and King's Scholarship examination and went on to College.

Undoubtedly these Mistresses were strict. They had to be. There are very few references to punishments in the Log Books, probably because punishments were recorded elsewhere. Those punishments which are mentioned do not suggest savagery; the punishments were in line with Victorian thinking, certainly, but they were meted out for relatively serious offences - violence, throwing stones, destroying property - and were only given as a last resort, after warnings had been ignored: "Caned four boys for stealing elastic from the hats in the porch. This is the second time, the same boys have taken elastic from the children's hats. I warned them the last time but it did not seem to do any good, so have punished them." (M.G. Telford, 17 December, 1891).

In Glemsford, certainly, there is every reason to believe that the Mistresses worked long and hard for their children, with varying degrees of success, and they deserve more credit for the work done and the battles won, than they may have been given.

Eleanor Bowrey left Glemsford School on July 31st, 1903. There was no song and dance; school merely closed for the Harvest Holiday. She left a thriving, changing school. Like her predecessors and successors, she had made a major contribution to the future of the village. We owe her recognition.