

Whilton Local History Society

In September we heard about "**The story of Whilton School.**" The school was founded with money left by an old bachelor farmer, Jonathan Emery, who died in 1768. Jonathan made his will when he was blind and near death. His executor, Thomas Freeman, was "*to lay out and expend the sum of Five hundred pounds in founding a Charity School for teaching poor children of the parish of Whilton aforesaid in such manner as he shall think fit and approve of* "

Yet it was 21 years later that the school's foundation document was signed in 1789. We heard about some of the reasons for delay and how the trustees finally purchased a barn, to be adapted as a schoolroom, and a farmhouse for the schoolmaster. These are now the Village Hall and the Old School House.

The first schoolmaster, Thomas Taylor, was lame; teaching may have been a seen as a suitable employment for him. His wife from Everdon could not write when they were married, but we hope that as infant school teacher she had learned a little more!

The school later became a National School, using the Madras System, to which Thomas and Comfort Taylor had to adjust late in life. We can choose how we interpret a letter sent to the National School Office in Northampton in 1834: "*The Revd John Rose desires me to inform you that he thinks it would be time and labour lost to examine his schoolmaster and schoolmistress, and that therefore, you may spare yourself the trouble of exercising your office in the Parish of Whilton.*"

The system of mutual tuition through monitors continued in Whilton through the 19th century. A few days before our meeting I had been contacted by a descendant of John Adams, a pupil here in the 19th century. As a result, we were able to see pages from a mathematics book used here in the 1850s. The book impressed us with the high level of understanding required and we hope to find out more about this pupil. His teacher was Shelah Walker or possibly his successor Charles Branson who was here by 1861.

Because Whilton School was never purpose-built there was a constant stream of problems with facilities and poor heating. Major improvements were made in 1891-2 and the headmaster, James Dyer must have felt the school was now in better shape. He was used to working with children who were not accustomed to many home comforts. He would not have questioned the inefficiency of coal fires or the "pail closets" under a thatched roof in the playground. These outdoor "offices" probably did not change between this period and 1914, when they were described as: "*Boys: two seats in one, partially divided by a partition. Girls: two seats in one entirely undivided.*" Facilities remained basic. Children carried water in from the pump as they did in their homes, and kettles were heated over the open fire.

The quality of education in the school varied dramatically over its life from the 1780s to the 1950s when it finally closed. There was a very difficult time from the late 1890s until the outbreak of the First World War. An 1895 report on Whilton School included these depressing words:

"Handwriting generally is very poor indeed. .. Spelling This subject is radically weak. .. Arithmetic Lamentable weakness is apparent in this subject."

By 1921 Hilda Osborne was the headmistress, who raised the standards and was very popular in Whilton. A 1932 inspection recorded: "*This is a good small school. The Head*

Mistress is to be congratulated on the results of her unstinted efforts to prepare the children for their work in later life."



Mrs Osborne and pupils on a school outing.

We were delighted to welcome Nigel Steele and Joyce Poole to our meeting. Joyce had been a pupil of Mrs Osborne in Whilton in the 1930s, and brought photos to share.

Despite her commitment to the pupils and the school, Hilda Osborne found the conditions were not congenial to learning or even surviving. Mrs Osborne wrote in June 1935, "I was absent from School from 28th May to 7th June suffering from Tonsillitis caused by a bad smell. Several drains in Whilton want attending to." In January 1936 she was still worried: "There is a terrible

smell of drains again in the school this morning."

Apart from the awful smells of open drains in the road outside, she had to contend with cold and damp indoors. The winter time was the worst. Mrs Osborne was constantly recording temperatures, and complaining, but to little avail, as her 1931 log reveals:

"12 Jan. No fires going Temp 42° large room, 39° Infants. Walls wet. Took all first lesson to get a glimmer of fire. No real fire until 11 a.m. in large room, not much in Infants. Spoke to Caretaker in afternoon, told her how many times I have had to re-start fires and have not complained but that if rooms were cold as they were today children's parents would complain. She said "I do not think so, what I think is that it is simply a bit of fuss."

Mrs Osborne continued until her retirement in 1942, having coped with the traumas of evacuee children, scarlet fever and lack of fuel.

The post war years saw decline in numbers, expectations were higher and Whilton School was not comfortable. The school finally closed in 1955.