

Account of Purley on Thames

Back to School

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An article from Jean Debney's "From My History Notebook" originally printed in Purley Parish News September 1981.

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"School re-opened - five weeks (holiday) being given owing to the late harvest. Attendance rather small being a fine harvest. All the children very good". (22 Sept 1879).

The above is an entry from the Log Book (1875-1906) of Purley School which is now in the Berkshire Record Office. I have looked at the first 7 years of it so far, and found it very interesting as it is full of the mistresses' comments about the children's school work, their behaviour and appearance, their illnesses, the weather, and so on.

The present school building dates from 1873 when it was built by the then rector, Rev. Richard PALMER. Supported by voluntary contributions there were places for 55 children; but the average attendance in 1875-82 was 27 children whose ages ranged from 3-10 years.

Every year the school was visited by an inspector who examined the children and in the subsequent reports it is interesting to note the order of priority given to the subjects taught, especially when compared to today's schools: "The careful teaching which the children received in Religious subjects bears fruit. In the Higher Classes especially the answering was good. Catechism is very well known. Writing, spelling and arithmetic good. Needlework very good." (12 July 1880).

Some of the children were very shy, and two years previously he wrote: "... the oral examination was less successful on account of the shyness which prevented some children doing themselves justice."

Sometimes the Inspector commented on other matters: "I would recommend the Managers to have separate paths to the Boys and Girls Offices, and a barrier or partition to prevent access from one office to another." (!)
(23 April 1875)

There are frequent references to the boys being "very troublesome" or being kept in and "punished for

disobedience". One suspects an element of desperation in Mrs. Storer's offer of two extra prizes to the boys for "good conduct". The girls did not seem to give any trouble and spent a great deal of time doing needlework, sometimes all day.

A nearby tree caused a lot of problems: "Three boys were punished for pelting the missionary walnut tree" (Oct. 1877) and "Edward Josey and E. Kirk were punished for gathering walnuts (sic) in the school ground." (11 Sept 1877). Things had improved by the following year - perhaps they had been "severely spoken to"? - for the mistress recorded that "the children were very honest in bringing in all the fallen walnuts." (3 Oct 1878).

And so the school continued each term until the holidays and the "school closed for a fortnight's holiday - by kind permission of the Rector." (21 Dec 1877).

Jean Debney

