

Children of the Parish: the Log Book and Admissions Register of Llangwm National and C E School, Monmouthshire, 1871-2 (newsletter 11, Summer 2003)

Gwent historians owe a great deal to the Rev. William Price of Llangwm, the late nineteenth-century clergyman who was responsible for restoring Llangwm Uchaf church and reconstructing its magnificent rood screen. (He seems to have lost the Doom wall painting in the process but hey, no-one's perfect.) But William Price also did a great deal for the secular life of the community in which he worked - notably by establishing and promoting the first village school. This study of the early years of the school was written by a student at Newport, Lisa Drewett, as part of a module on Reading Everyday Lives.

The Log Book and Admissions Register for the first year in the life of a small rural school were studied in order to discover something of the nature of the community, and the reaction of that community to an organised education system. Some later entries in the Log Book have been included to give an indication of the school's progress. The school opened in 1871, following the Education Act of 1870, which ordered the provision of elementary education, supervised by school boards, to be made available to all children. In a speech to parliament in 1867 the educationalist Robert Lowe, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, pointed out that to exercise the political power given by the Reform Act, the people must be educated. (Sylvester 1974 pp118-119) Education was not compulsory until 1880.

There is a newspaper advertisement pasted into the front cover of the Log Book:

'Wanted in Feb 1871 for a mixed school, Llangwm, Nr Usk, a certified master who can play the harmonium, and sing and whose wife or sister can teach sewing. Guaranteed salary £30 exclusive of children's pence and government grant. Excellent house and garden. The school will contain 85 children.
Rev Wm. Price, Vicarage.'

The Log Book itself is an indication that education had become standardised. The printed foreword of the Regulation Issue Book contains an extract from the 1862 Revised Code of Regulations which states 1 exactly what should be written daily in the Log Book, 'the briefest entry which will suffice to specify ordinary progress..', and also what should not be included, 'reflections or opinions of a general character.'

This is followed by a printed letter from R W Lingen Esq.,² urging teachers to use the Log Book to record 'items of experience, because a teacher who performs this duty simply and regularly will find it a powerful help in mastering his profession, as well as an honourable monument of his labours.'

The first entry in the Log Book reads:

'May 1st 1871.Llangwm National and C. E. School opened for work this day. Present 18. Revd. Wm. Price, G. Dew, J. Blower also present as managers. Taught grace, and a new song.'

This was a National School, affiliated to the Church of England, with considerable input from the vicar, who visited the school regularly, inspected the children, checked the attendance register, and listened to the singing, Some Nonconformists feared that state education would further empower Anglicanism (Fraser 1977 p23) The children all attended church on Ascension Day, but there is no evidence of the discrimination against Nonconformists, or of attempts to indoctrinate them into Anglican thinking. Davies makes the point that the Select Committee on Education of 1865 found that the Church was depriving her own children of instruction in the Catechism rather than offend Nonconformists (Davies 1957 p99). The Baptist Chapel in Llangwm flourished, and the number of children who attended Baptist picnics and teas suggests that the school had little influence on family worship.

Education was based firmly around the 3Rs. In the early months of the school the master recorded the teaching of reading, arithmetic, spelling, poetry and singing. None of the children had any previous education, and it seems unlikely that their parents were literate. The attitude of the children, and presumably their parents, to regular education is reflected in the low attendance of pupils on days which offered time honoured entertainments such as Usk Market, Usk Fair, Chepstow Fair, Usk Races, the Temperance Tea and hounds meeting in the village. These were important punctuations of amusement in lives which were physically hard, with little excitement. School attendance dropped dramatically at harvest time and for fruit picking. This was a farming community which also grew cider apples on a large scale, and unfortunately the summer vacation fell between the hay harvest and the apple harvest.

The Admission Book shows a large number of children entering the school in the first months. This may have been due to pressure from the vicar. The first two entrants to the school were the fourteen and sixteen year old daughters of a Vicarage servant. Conversely, there may have been great enthusiasm amongst local parents to give their children the chance of literacy and a better future. If so, the enthusiasm did not last, or was overtaken by reality in the need for extra hands to work or earn money, because the Admission Book shows that many of the children remained in school for a matter of months, and in some cases only days. The state grant to the school was dependant on the number of children enrolled, the influence of the vicar seems more likely than the desire for literacy, although the attractiveness of the idea of education should not be underestimated.

Attendance, was the predominant issue in the Log Book, along with the weather and visits from the vicar. Very wet weather caused a drastic reduction in attendance. The main reason for this was the appalling condition of the roads, mentioned in a number of entries. At times of heavy rain the roads 'became flooded and impassable,' 'running like rivers,' and many children lived some distance from school. Of the 125 children who entered the school in its first year, 64 were from the village or within a mile radius, 53 lived two to three miles away, and 6 lived six miles away. As Llangwm is in a valley surrounded by steep hills, these journeys would have been difficult. Attendance was also poor during very hot weather.

The failure of the children to get to school in wet weather also suggests poverty, that they did not have suitable clothes or footwear. The Admission Book shows that of the first years intake 72 were the children of labourers and 32 were the children of small farmers. The occupations of the parents of the other children were publican, sempstress, carpenter, shoemaker, mason and miller. This was a scattered agricultural community, serving the markets which supplied food for the industrialised east of the county.

On 10th January 1872, the report of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools read:

'This school, which has only been open for seven months, is well organised and appears carefully and consciously taught, though the attainments at present are below par. Reading is very fair, and writing also. Spelling moderate, but arithmetic is the really weak point, especially in the upper classes, in this marked improvement must be made. Special infant apparatus (object cards, ball-frame and Form and Colour Box) is needed. The Discipline and general tone are good. Signed, William Price, Vicar.'

The needs of infant teaching were recognised, although the presence of 3 three year olds and 5 four year olds amongst the early entries suggests that the older children were accustomed to look after the little ones, so the babies went to school too. The majority of the children were between the ages of seven and twelve, but there were also 9 fourteen year-olds, 3 fifteen year-olds, 3 sixteen year-olds and 2 seventeen year-olds. Again, there is nothing to indicate whether the older children were keen to obtain some education or just making up the numbers. Unfortunately the Admission Book at this stage rarely gave either the date or the reason for leaving school. Neither does it indicate the standard of education reached, except a few entries which note 4th or 5th standard reached. This may be a reflection on the low standard obtained by the others, but the masters were not punctilious about filling in records.

On days when the school was well attended it is difficult to imagine how one master could keep order, let alone teach such a wide age range of children. In a similar rural school, described in *Lark Rise to Candleford*, the very young children endlessly recited the alphabet, the infants practised drawing pothooks on slates, supervised by older children, while the rest of the school learned their lessons by rote. The girls practised their needlework. Thompson describes the difficulty of making these country children, accustomed to freedom and fresh air, sit still and learn facts and skills which they probably felt were irrelevant to their lives (Thompson 1945 pp167-182).

Thompson also clarified another small but interesting point. It seemed odd that none of the girls on the register were named after Queen Victoria - the most popular name was Elizabeth, by a huge margin, and it was the same at Fordlow School, because, Thompson said, it would have been seen as presumptuous to use the Queen's name.

Of the first 125 children, five died. The fact that no comment is made, or reason given, suggests that death of children was commonplace in 1871. A later entry reads 'Feb 22nd. Two admissions, one promising boy of fourteen removed by death. Two others withdrawn. Commenced a new song.' The Log Book makes few comments on the children's health, except to note an outbreak of Hooping Cough (sic), which caused a number of absences. Colds also kept pupils at home, and on a number of occasions the master himself was 'absent with a severe cold'. Generally either health was robust, or was not considered a notable subject.

The Log Book reflects the attitude of the master. Although mainly concerned with attendance and weather, perhaps showing some concern for his income, he kept the Log meticulously at first. However, by Feb 1874 the daily entries had ceased, replaced by a brief weekly summary. The HMI Report for 1882 ordered a one-tenth reduction in the grant as a result of faulty instruction, and 1st June the master resigned. His replacement lasted a year, after which the Inspectors found the 'infants know hardly anything and are in a very backward state.' When the new master, Reuben Bond, and his sister Emily took over, there were only 17 pupils, which was a sad comment on the first decade of the school.

References

1. The 1862 Revised Code of Regulations introduced the system of payment by results, and gave minutely detailed instructions on all aspects of teaching and examination (Davies 1957 p109)
2. Lingen was one of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth's Blue Book Commissioners. He had a degree in classics but no teaching experience. He succeeded Kay-Shuttleworth as Secretary to the Committee of Council on Education. (Jones 1978 p133)

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