

Education

Aston Rowant is still fortunate to have a viable village school with around eighty pupils attending up until the age of eleven years. It is situated on School Lane, which leads off the village green. The earliest record of any sort of school in the parish is a charity school for girls in 1771, which was supported by the squire, General Caillaud. A Sunday school had been established by 1787 and by 1818 the vicar, John Holland, reported two Sunday schools, one in Aston Rowant with twelve boys attending and one in Kingston Blount with twenty boys and ten girls. The vicar and a few other contributors supported one of these schools. The children were taught the catechism and to read the prayer book and testament. The dissenters also set up their own Sunday school in 1818 and in that year there were one hundred children in the three schools. By then three lace making schools had also been set up where girls were also taught to read. In Crowell there is mention of a writing master in 1713. At a churchwarden's meeting in 1813 it was unanimously agreed that a school, supported by the parish, should be opened as soon as a house could be found. The teacher would be paid £20 out of poor rates. Perhaps a suitable building was never found as no further mention is made of this school.

The first formal day schools had been set up by 1833, one was a National school supported by Lady Lambert and there were two others taking children from six years of age in Aston Parish. In Crowell, at this time, there was a day school for thirty children supported partly by the rector and partly by payment from parents. There was also a Sunday school for thirty children. Both these schools were still in existence in 1854. In 1871 there was a private school in Crowell with twelve children in attendance. In the Crowell census of 1861 Susannah Rigson is described as a teacher and in 1871, Sophia Allen. They may have taught at this school, which was closed by 1878

For the wealthier, there were private schools outside the parish, such as Howard House Academy in Thame, where Masters Deverell from Copcourt and Beckinsale from Aston attended in the 1850s. The Hill family from Kingston sent their children to a private school, High Street House in Watlington, in the 1880s. There was of course Thame Grammar School as well. There is mention of a night school in Aston Rowant in 1867 and in 1895 the school log said a Mr Couch had visited the night school. These evening classes were probably connected with the church and may have been run by the vicar.

In Aston the present school building of brick and flint was built in 1844 and has had a continuous history since then. Sir Henry Lambert, lord of the manor and others, donated the land. The head teacher in 1851 was Miss E.A Roadley. We are unsure if she had been there since it opened. In 1865 two rooms were thrown into one to make one big



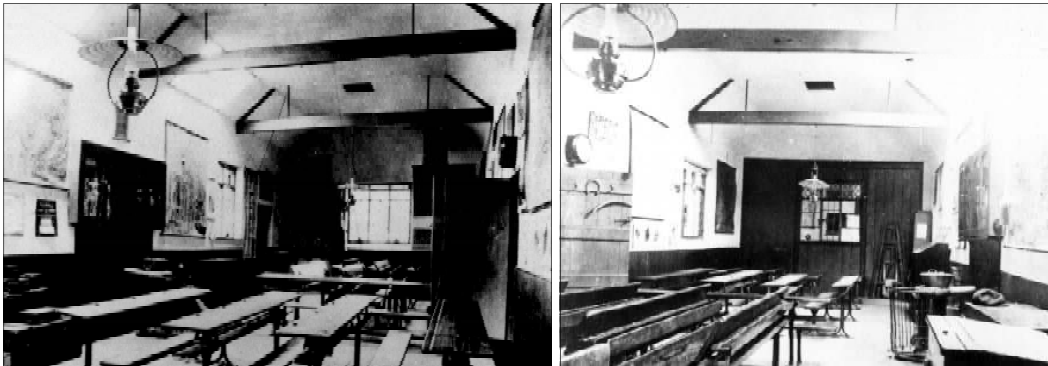
Aston school c.1910



The former Kingston school c.1910

classroom, 41ft by 15ft. The school was altered again in 1871, when it was enlarged at a cost of £114 5s. A new room, measuring 25ft by 15ft and 14ft from floor to ceiling, was added to meet the requirements of the 1870 Education Act. The head teacher at this time was William Edwards who originated from Cornwall. In 1946 improvements were recommended including the addition of an indoor cloakroom. However this didn't happen until the 1980s. The school now has some portable buildings and a new hall was recently erected.

In 1872 there was a school in Kingston Blount run by Miss Deverell. It was located in Vine House in Park Lane. Elizabeth Stevens of Kingston Blount is described as a



Interior of Aston School taken in 1910

schoolmistress in 1871, she may have taught at this school, which would have been private. In 1877, a church school was opened; the head teacher was Mrs Elizabeth Ditton. It was situated on the corner of Pleck Lane at the junction with the High Street. It took children from the village and also Crowell and Crowell Hills. The older children from Crowell had previously gone to Chinnor. Kingston Blount School was only an infant's school, the pupils transferring at seven to Aston Rowant. The pupils from Crowell could transfer to either Aston or Chinnor. The school at Kingston Blount had a short life and closed on 31st May 1898.

In 1851 over half of the children in the parish didn't attend school. The youngest child we found at school was aged four. If they attended school the girls stayed on until they were thirteen but the boys left at ten, usually to work on the farms. All the working girls were lace-makers, the youngest being only six. In 1851 there were equal numbers of boys and girls at work but by 1881 it was mainly boys. This was probably due to the decline in the lace-making industry, which meant less work for the girls so they remained at school. The majority of children between five and eleven years old were now at school, the

youngest being three years old. The youngest child at work was a boy of eleven and the youngest girl was aged thirteen. The boys were mainly still working as agricultural labourers whilst the girls were lace-makers but there was also a dressmaker and a nursemaid. No child was allowed to attend school after fourteen years of age.

We are very fortunate that the logbooks for Aston Rowant school survive for the period 1893 to 1952 and for the whole period of the Kingston school. These log books give us a wonderful insight not only of school life at the time but also of village life. The managers of the school were usually the local vicars and the lords of the manor; they made frequent visits to the school along with their wives and families. Henry Clerke-Brown was a manager of Kingston school and it was his duty to sign off the inspector's annual report. Mrs Taylor from Aston House often visited and sometimes heard the children read. Her daughters would sometimes take the first class for arithmetic. She would also give sweetmeats for the children at Christmas and sometimes invite them to Aston House for tea. It seems that the local dignitaries were much more involved in the school than they would be today. Another regular visitor to the school was the attendance officer; he would visit a child's home if the head teacher reported poor attendance.

When Kingston school opened the numbers on roll were sixty one. This dropped to forty seven in 1882 and remained around this until it dropped to around thirty in the year the school closed. In 1883, the head teacher was Miss Harman. The Crowell children were often unable to attend because of the severe weather. Heavy rain and snowfall prevented the young children walking to school. The logs describe the winter of 1890/91 as being very severe. The school had only one teacher throughout and it isn't until 1892 that a monitor is mentioned. Monitors were usually older children who were paid to help. In 1892 Grace Meeks was appointed at 6d a week. Consequently if the head teacher was sick or absent for any reason the school was forced to close. The head teacher often notes in the log that children repeatedly fail to bring in their school pence. Often they were sent home for them. Although a school place was made available for all in 1870, compulsory schooling did not come in until 1880. A school fee had to be paid, usually 1d or 2d a week. This obviously put a burden on poorer families and it was abolished in 1891.

There were two examinations each year, a Diocesan inspection, which was a religious exam and the H.M.I.'s visit when the children were tested in the 'three Rs' as well as other aspects of the curriculum. The children would take the 'standard one' test before leaving Kingston. In the 1870s this would require them to read from a text book including some words of more than one syllable, write a few words of dictation, some simple addition and subtraction and know up to the six times table. On March 25th 1880 the log book says 'twelve first standard children were transferred to Aston, two of which have passed the exam'. Therefore you didn't have to pass the exam before you moved up. This was perhaps a good thing as in Oct 1886 the log book states 'a child was admitted from Crowell who is backward and has never been to school, she is nearly seven and does not know her letters'. In 1891 the curriculum was extended, mat plaiting and pricking and embroidery were started and the children seemed to enjoy it. In 1895 new technology came in when the children began the use of ball frames in oral arithmetic. These presumably were a form of abacus. Often the head teacher would put the children through test exams before the day of the inspection, as they were so important. There was a payment by results system, so part of the school's funding and teacher's salary was dependent on the report. In 1891 the report says 'A good report with the exception of the mental arithmetic and knowledge of the object lesson which were a bit disappointing, otherwise the highest variable grant might have been given'. In 1886 the report said the boys' needlework was only just passable and the girls not good but by 1890 both had improved.

The school was often closed for half-day holidays, for school treats or a school feast. For instance, in July 1893 it was closed for the Duke of York's birthday. There was usually a holiday for Stokenchurch fair in July, feasts at Crowell and Wycombe in September and the Sunday school treat in October. From 1883 a holiday for May Day is mentioned and from 1892, in October, Thame fair. In July 1881 the school was closed for a Band of Hope and Temperance fete. The Band of Hope sought to promote temperance amongst the impressionable young. In June 1880 the school was closed for the Jubilee and for the reopening of the village church and in October 1884 there was half a day for the reopening of Aston Church. On the 25th June 1897 a very important half-day was given for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria and a note in the log says that several children stayed away all week.

In addition to all these holidays, in the summer, the children were often required to help their parents with the harvest, so attendance was poor. Even though the children were very young, if they didn't do the physical work, they asked to leave early to take their father's dinners to the fields. The summer holiday was taken later than now, from the middle of August to early October but if the harvest was late the children wouldn't return, as they were needed for gleaning. Also in October the children would be in the potato fields.



Children potato picking in the fields 1940s

The summer of 1881 was described as very hot and the headmistress says 'the first class is not very bright as the heat makes them troublesome and lazy'. It was obviously quite cold in the school in winter. In December 1881 the log book says 'the little ones are tiresome, they need to keep warm'. There is no mention though of anything being done about the heating until an unannounced visit by the H.M.I. in Feb 1892 when he says 'the room is imperfectly heated and a slow combination stove in the centre of the room would be better than the present flu grate'. The inadequate heating probably contributed to some of the illnesses the children suffered. For instance most winters there were chil-

dren absent with 'chilled' feet. This probably refers to cases of severe chilblains when the children were unable to get their boots on. In 1892 both Aston and Kingston schools were closed for two weeks because of a prevalence of influenza in the villages. In 1897 the school was closed for two weeks because of scarlet fever. Whooping cough and measles were also major problems and it is not unusual to see in the log book that a child had died. In October 1894 one household had typhoid fever and the two children of the house were ordered by the sanitary inspector to stay at home. Children with ringworm were often refused entry to school and there was a report of a boy being sent home from school because he was untidy and dirty. Another report tells of the teacher visiting a family and they were found in a very dirty state with scald heads. This was an infectious disease of the scalp like ringworm.

On the 29th December 1884 Miss E. Green was appointed head teacher and she served for ten years. Miss Gibbons replaced her in September 1894 and she stayed at the school until November 1897. There were three more head teachers before the school closed six months later and the children were transferred to Aston.

Aston Rowant school had sixty six on roll in 1893. This increased to one hundred and seven in June 1898 when the children were transferred from Kingston. The number of pupils remained around ninety for several years before starting a gradual decline. There was a considerable amount of fluctuation in the numbers due partly to people moving in and out of the villages. Surprisingly, some of the movement was over long distances, people moving from Birmingham and London were noted. Some of these moves were probably associated with the manor house. For instance on the 4th June 1895, Ella Clark was admitted to the school. She was the daughter of the new gardener at Aston House and had previously been at a private school in Derby. The numbers on roll re-

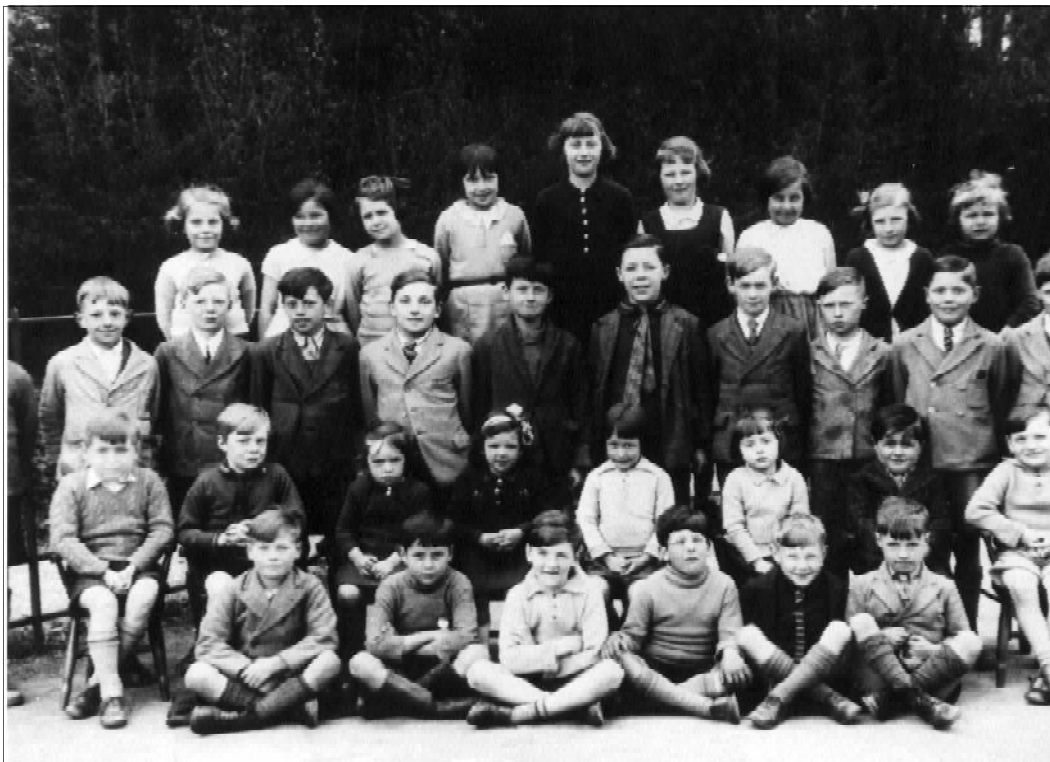


Aston Rowant infants in 1909

mained around sixty or seventy until 1920 when they started to decline again. In 1931 the school became a junior school with eleven senior boys being transferred to Chinnor

but by the end of the year four boys had been readmitted on medical grounds as they were unable to walk to Chinnor. There were thirty three on roll in 1934. It remained at that level until 1944 when nine and ten year olds were transferred to Chinnor leaving only twenty three on roll. In more recent years numbers have fluctuated greatly and in 1992 the school went back to taking children up to the age of eleven

The school usually received good reports from the inspectors. In 1879, Mr Smith was headmaster and the pass rate in the examination was 83%. The best results were in reading 92% and the worst in maths 75%. The only complaint was the state of the playground, which was said to be in need of re-gravelling. By 1889 the head teacher was Mr Ripper. He was described as a teacher of remarkable skill. The precision of his work was said to merit the highest praise and the children achieved 100% pass rate. Unfortunately he left that year to take up a better post. In 1894, the head teacher was Robert Hibbs and Miss Seymour from Lewknor came as infant teacher. She was obviously popular as several children followed her to Aston. In 1898 Mr Blackman



Aston Rowant school children in 1939

became head and his wife started as sewing mistress. They stayed only a short while because he obtained a better appointment. In 1900 Miss E.Green from Welwyn Infants School took over. She was the same teacher who had previously been head of Kingston Blount school. In 1903 the teachers applied for and received a pay rise because the managers said they had done well with the school over the last three years and they couldn't exist on their current salary. The managers said it was very difficult to recruit good staff on the existing salary. In 1911 the school was described as being economical as the expenditure per pupil was £2 18s 8½d compared to the county average of £3 6s 6½d. Miss Green stayed until her retirement at the end of 1922. When she retired a collection was made for her in recognition of nearly forty years service in teaching in schools in the parish. Maggie Saddler was authorized by Mary Clerke-Brown to make

the collection amongst the schoolchildren and she collected £1 2s 3d. Mr Quigley replaced Miss Green; he stayed for a short while and was replaced in 1925 by Mr Welchman. Just before he left in 1928, he noted that he had had to use corporal punishment for the first time; two strokes of the cane. In the meantime there was a big turnover in the supplementary teachers probably because they progressed to better positions. Lillian Meredith took over the headship until 1944 when she retired. There was only one mention during her time there of bad behaviour and that was in June 1932 when she had to visit the Director of Education at Oxford with the managers, regarding the use of bad language at Kingston Blount.

Over the years there were always many visitors to the school. These included Mr and Mrs H.Clerke-Brown of Kingston House, who along with Colonel Ballard, regularly visited and inspected the registers and log. Sir William Plowden of Aston House also visited and then the new owner Charles Sale. In 1927 the annual tea and sports was held in the grounds of Aston House by kind permission of Mr Sale. The next year he gave the school a cricket set. After he left Edward Dashwood lived in the house. He gave annual school treats at Christmas at the house and also allowed them to use the long gallery for concerts. The vicar was also a regular visitor and in July 1893 Rev. Sparkes invited the children to a firework display in the meadow. The H.M.I., Diocesan inspector, attendance officer, reorganising master and drawing inspector also visited in the early years. By 1907, school medical inspections had been introduced and Dr Summerhayes would visit to inspect heads and remove verminous children. By 1926 the visitors also included a dentist who treated children on the premises including carrying out extractions. The Medical Officer of Health, a nurse and the local doctor, who carried out immunisations also visited. There were also inspectors of gardening, needlework and physical instruction, who called regularly. Of course the Board of Directors, religious inspectors and the H.M.I. also came. The Diocesan inspectors gave a religious exam and awarded the Bishop's prize and some commendations annually.

Like Kingston school, heating at Aston was also a problem. In 1893 there was a coal strike so there was no heating. Another strike in October 1920 meant the afternoon hours were reduced to save coal and this was still a problem in April 1921. One day in February 1917 the head teacher noted that 'the inkwells were still frozen at 10 am and the children's desks were moved nearer to the fire'. In 1936 the problem still existed and the head noted 'the schoolroom has not been above fifty degrees all week and one day it was only forty six degrees'. In 1941 and 1942 there was a coal shortage due to the war and the temperature only reached thirty four degrees, there was heavy snow on the ground in both years. When a delivery finally came it was five hundredweight.

Illnesses were still a major problem until the 1930s. The school would frequently be closed for two weeks at a time for whooping cough, measles, chickenpox, mumps and influenza. In March 1907 the school was closed for four weeks for mumps and if one member of the family contracted the illness then all the other family members had to stay at home. In 1913 the school was closed for two whole months because of measles and chickenpox epidemics occurring together. The most unusual school closure seems to have been for a month at the end of 1915 because of an outbreak of infectious catarrh. In 1910 there was an initiative in Oxfordshire to try to tackle the high level of tooth decay. Low cost toothbrushes were supplied which could be bought from the head teacher. Aston received a circular about this from the education committee and a survey was done of the children. Thirty of them had toothbrushes, which they used no more than once a day. The cost of the toothbrushes was one penny. In 1923 the log noted that there were many absentees because of vaccinations.

The children often had half-day holidays; the regular events were Stokenchurch fair, the Sunday school treat, the chapel tea at Kingston and fetes at Aston and Kingston. There were holidays given for marriages, Mr Hill from Kingston in 1896, Mr John Clerke-Brown in 1911, H.R.H. Princess Mary in 1922, H.R.H. the Duke of York in 1923, Mr Walter Sale in 1928, Princess Marina and the Duke of Kent in 1932 and the Duke of Gloucester in 1935. There was also a holiday for the King's Silver Jubilee in 1935. The school was closed for the funeral of Mr Clerke-Brown in 1919, which the older scholars attended and in 1936 for the funeral of George V. Again a holiday was given in 1937 for the Coronation. Holidays were given for other events, for instance in May 1900 for the Relief of Mafeking and regularly in later years for the general elections.

In 1895 the summer holiday began early because the hot weather caused an early harvest. Like Kingston the school was often closed because of bad weather. There were other causes of absenteeism. In 1898 some boys were absent because they had gone with the fox hounds that met at the Lambert Arms. The same year the choirboys were away for one day playing cricket and also a circus in Chinnor lowered attendance.

The school curriculum and hours were very rigidly adhered to, any alteration being noted in the log book. In 1898 a play interval of fifteen minutes was introduced in the afternoon. In the same year lace-making classes commenced, aided by Mrs Clerke-Brown. In February 1905 the older girls (over twelve) attended a cookery course in the old Kingston Blount infants school. The County Council instructress gave this. At the end



Aston Rowant school in 1977 on the occasion of the Queen's Silver Jubilee

of the course an exam was held when Miss Clerke-Brown, Mrs Clerke-Brown and Mrs Ballard examined the children. A good report was given and they concluded that 'cookery classes are a very useful form of instruction for the older girls in elementary schools'. By 1928 the girls were going to Chinnor for cookery but the boys did gardening instead of handiwork as the woodwork benches had been removed. However, two years later the boys were able to go to Chinnor for handiwork. By now the children could take the scholarship exam and the few that passed would go on to Thame Grammar school.

Competitive sport had been introduced and there are reports of a football game against Lewknor in 1928 and both football and cricket against Chinnor in 1929.

By 1905 extracurricular activities were taking place. The children attended a musical competition in Reading in 1906 and the choirboys went to London and to a choral festival at Watlington church in 1907. In 1911 some of the boys went to Crystal Palace and in 1914 there was a visit to the zoological gardens. There were further trips to London presumably on the train. Another musical competition was attended in Beaconsfield in 1926. The school regularly celebrated Empire day on May 24th. The Earl of Meath was determined that the youth of the time should honour the King and Empire and that date was chosen as it was Queen Victoria's birthday. In 1925 Mrs Clerke-Brown obtained the services of Major General Sir Robert Fanshawe K.C.B. to address the children. There was a celebration on The Green and a programme of music given by the children. A half-day holiday was also given. In the 1920s the children attended the Armistice service each year and by the 1930s they were going to hear the broadcast



School children enjoying a parade in 1992

from the cenotaph on the radio in the schoolhouse. Today the children have no regular half-day holidays for village events but they have a vast number of extracurricular activities including a field trip to Somerset for a week each year.

In the early years the children were attending church regularly as part of the curriculum. In 1895 they attended the church every day in Passion Week. They usually attended church for Ascension Day. However in 1939 the Vicar complained that the children did not go to church on Ascension Day as other church schools did. It was noted that after that they regularly attended again.

Both of the world wars had a significant effect on the school. In 1916 shorter school hours were introduced and a longer lunch break, as the children were needed in agriculture, some to work on the land and some to take their parent's tea. This was repeated in 1917. The Second World War seemed to have a greater impact. At the beginning of the war in September 1939 London children were billeted in the district and the school had to work two four hour shifts, the morning shift being used for the evacuees. By November the school had returned to normal hours, the evacuated children and their two teachers using the infants classroom and the local juniors and infants sharing the large classroom. In January 1940 all the evacuated children were moved to Chinnor but in June of that year five evacuated boys came to the village with their teacher from Northbury Church School. There was also a school for evacuees from S.S.Ethelburga and Joseph's school, Barking, at Warren Farm. This closed in early 1942. In 1940 the Whitsun holiday was cancelled because of the war. This was announced on the radio. Only two weeks holiday was given in the summer of 1940 with a week later in the year. In 1941 only one week was given in the summer. There were five weeks in 1942 and three in 1943. School hours were also changed due to the extension of summer time and the consequent dark mornings. As part of the war effort some of the biggest boys went to Mrs Clerke-Brown's lawns to collect horse chestnuts for fodder. They were able to collect ten hundredweight in a day. In 1942 they received a cheque for £3 12s for the chestnuts from the company they supplied. £3 was kept for the school and the 12s divided amongst the pupils. Later they received another 18s for chestnuts and 3s for hips.

In 1937 the milk scheme was introduced. This was supplied by Mr Dashwood. School dinners were introduced in 1947. The P.T.A. was formed in 1952. Over the years there were some improvements made to the school but after the large extension in 1871 they were relatively minor. In 1895 the H.M.I. said the rooms were dark due to the diamond panes of glass and because some trees needed lopping. Better infant accommodation was also needed. This resulted in a new skylight being installed. Another one was fitted in the large room in 1898 together with a new window and a ventilator in the roof. The report of 1911 said the school needed better lighting and ventilation and the desks needed backrests. There was no further mention of improvements until 1923 when new furniture, desks and chairs were delivered and some new books. The school was also cleaned and redecorated. The final improvement noted was the installation of electricity in 1942. A few more changes have been made to the school in recent times. A small extension to house inside toilets was built in the early 1980s and part of the small room was converted to an office. Otherwise the school building itself looks much as it did at the turn of the century. Fortunately the diamond panes have gone and the schoolroom is much lighter.