

Chilmark School

The first school in Chilmark was recorded in 1783 and another in 1818, which at that point taught 35 children; these may well have been the same school. Between 1824 and 1826 the Rector built a school in The Street and in 1833 there was said to be 136 children at the school; this was probably incorrect as this number was a quarter of the parish population at that time. William Warburton's Census of Wiltshire Schools of 1859 says, 'Stone building, roof and windows low, floor of stone, area insufficient. 40 to 50 children, mixed, are under instruction. Hitherto the organist has been master, assisted by his wife, but a trained master and mistress have just been appointed, and the clergyman is just about to build a classroom and teacher's residence.'

The new classroom and adjoining teacher's house was built at Chilmark in 1860 with the aid of a building grant of £1,000. The school was officially opened on 7th September 1860 by the Bishop of the Diocese; a service was conducted at St Margaret's parish church then a procession was formed with the Bishop leading the way to the new school. The land given for the building of the National School was from the Earl of Pembroke and was donated on the understanding that the school would conduct itself in accordance with the principles of the Church of England. To this end it followed the principles of the National Society. The school was designed by W. Robson and built by Mr F. Harvey from Teffont and is constructed out of Chilmark Stone. It was enlarged in 1895 at a cost of £200. In 1902, there were 95 pupils and three teachers at the school.

The following general information would be relevant to the school for the latter part of the 19th century. Fees were paid for each child until 1891, normally at the rate of one penny (pre-decimal currency) a week and the 'school pence' were collected by the schoolteacher. There would have been a schoolmaster, or schoolmistress, with an assistant teacher and perhaps a pupil teacher. The pupil teacher was taught by the head teacher before lessons started; they took exams, sometimes went to the Diocesan Training College to eventually become a teacher themselves. The pupil teachers mainly taught the younger children.

School holidays were at similar times to those of today but often there was only 2 days at Easter but a week at Whitsun. The summer holidays were of four, five or six weeks and were called the Harvest Holidays as the children either helped with the harvest or carried food and drink to their parents, who were working in the fields. There were more half-day and whole day holidays for special events. Half a day would be given after the annual H.M.I. or Diocesan inspections and there were holidays for school treats, choir outings, chapel teas, Christmas parties and at times when the school was needed for other purposes.

There were also many unauthorised absences. These would be for seasonal work, such as haymaking (June) and early or late harvest (July or September), being kept at home to help their parents, and working when they should have been at school. Bad weather such as heavy rain, cold weather, or snow kept children away from school, often because their parents couldn't afford to buy them suitable clothes and boots.

The elementary subjects were the '3 Rs' - reading writing and arithmetic. Scripture was often taught by the vicar and children would have attended church for services on some days. Older children were taught history and geography and there may have been some study of natural history. Singing was taught to all ages and all the girls and some of the boys would have done needlework. Drawing had been introduced by the 1890s.

In 1906 overall control of the school passed to Wiltshire County Council although a local board of managers remained. In 1907 there were 90 children; this had decreased to 52 by 1924. As with all schools at that time, there were many illnesses that kept children away from their education. A range of illnesses attacked youngsters in the early 20th century; chicken pox, scarlet fever, measles, mumps and whooping cough to name just a few. Chilmark School seems to have been affected more than most and was often ordered to close because of the severity of an outbreak. For example, in February 1911, the school was closed for three weeks because of measles and influenza, in September 1911 it was closed for a month because of whooping cough, and in the summer of 1929 it was shut for six weeks because of diphtheria in the village. Snow and rainfall also kept children away from school, especially if they lived on the outlying portions of the parish. Attendance was of course encouraged; Lady Pembroke gave prizes for regular attendance and it was hoped that this acted as an incentive.

When World War I broke out in 1914, there was a decline in boys attending the school, as they had been tasked to work in the fields because of a loss of manual labour. In December 1920 His Majesty's Inspector wrote: 'The order has been found good on the whole and the lessons have been given methodically and generally with a fair amount of skill, but on investigation the attainments of the children give abundant evidence that the teaching needs to be more effective.'

The Diocesan Inspector of 1925 wrote: 'This school, considered as a whole, is doing good work in religious instruction. The children of the senior group have a very good knowledge of the text. They also know the details of the selected Bible stories and are able to translate the lessons taught into terms of daily life.'

In September 1939, despite the school opening a week later than planned and being prepared to receive them, no evacuees arrived. This seems a little unusual; most rural schools in Wiltshire began taking in evacuees immediately. The school had to wait until 14 June 1940, when 14 evacuees arrived in Chilmark from Rayleigh, in Essex. By August 1941 only three of these evacuees remained, but 12 more arrived in February 1942 from the east end of London. Three more arrived a month later.

The school was shut for two days in May 1945, to 'celebrate our great victory against the Germans.' When the children returned to the school on May 10 they were given a Victory Tea and played games.

The school celebrated its centenary on 20 July 1960; there was a tea party for the children and then a service at St Margaret's Church.

In 1971 the school at Fonthill Bishop closed and merged with Chilmark to form Chilmark and Fonthill Bishop Primary School. To allow for the extra children, more space was needed. A parcel of land was bought by Wiltshire County Council and the School Hall was built upon it. The playing field at Kent's Hill was given in 1960 by the owners of Manor Farm.



On 17th September 2010 Chilmark & Fonthill Bishop School celebrated its 150th anniversary with a thanksgiving service in St Margaret's parish church. The children paraded to and from the church wearing Victorian costume, after which the Earl and Countess of Pembroke unveiled a plaque - at the school - to commemorate the anniversary.