



Education In Mere

The earliest schoolhouse in Mere was probably the Chantry. Before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when the house was the home of the Chantry priests, it seems likely that they would have taught some of the boys from the town as well as carrying out their other duties in the Chantries of the church.

In the 17th century there are references in the Parish registers to schoolmasters living in Mere. In 1680 George Gerard is mentioned, and later, in 1697 is the name of Nicholas Goldsborough, another schoolmaster.

In the 18th century we know of two schools which were founded in the town. Sir Matthew Andrews provided a schoolhouse, appointed a schoolmaster and by his will in 1711 left £50 per annum for its endowment. A few years later, however, his son refused to continue it. Dr, Thomas Tatum, whose memorial tablet can be seen in the Parish Church, left, in 1765, £10 per annum for the schooling of ten poor boys. Charles Glover who was the schoolmaster at this time included the ten boys in his school in the Cross Loft over the Market House.

William Barnes opened a school in the Cross Loft in 1823. He moved to the Chantry after his marriage to Julia Miles in 1827, when it became a boarding school for girls as well as boys. Another private boarding school was carried on at this time by the Rev. R. Cosens at the Vicarage as referenced in the South Wilts Journal of June 1832.

In 1840 the National School was founded by the Church of England in the building now used as the County Library. At about the same time the British School, founded by Non-Conformists, was opened in a room built beside the old Congregational Chapel, which has now been demolished. Both schools flourished and enlarged their premises.

In 1922 the two schools were amalgamated, the Senior School used the buildings of the Old National School and the Junior School took over the British School premises. The infants were all housed in the Infants School in Dark Lane built by the Non-Conformists in 1910.

In 1929 the Senior School became a Central School serving the surrounding villages, and was equipped for practical subjects. In 1937 all three schools were taken over by the Wiltshire County Council, so that the Managers no longer had to carry out any financial responsibility for the premises. Then by the Education Act of 1944 the Senior School became a Secondary Modern School. It was still housed in the two buildings either side of Barton Lane, and in a mobile classroom next to the Churchyard. Pupils now took the 11 Plus examination and those who passed attended Gillingham Grammar School. In 1947 the school leaving age was raised to 15.

A new school building had been promised in 1938 and in 1964 the Foundation Stone was laid by the Chairman of the Governors, the Rev. N. E. E. Johnson. The site was off Springfield Road, to the east of the town. It was officially opened by Earl Waldegrave in July 1966 though it had been in use since the previous September. The site was leased from the Duchy of Cornwall and the school was called Duchy Manor Secondary School.

The new building was well-equipped and had a large assembly hall which doubled as a gymnasium. There was also a science laboratory, craft rooms, domestic science rooms, a library and extensive playing fields.

A swimming pool was built with money from the Town Swimming Pool Fund which was started after the silver jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary in 1935, a grant from the Wiltshire County Council and contributions from parents and friends.

Funds for various projects and amenities have been raised by an annual Governors' Ball and by sponsored walks round the parish boundaries. Among other things a school bus and camping equipment were purchased. There were thirteen members of staff and 260 pupils and an extra special needs class with its own teacher.

In addition to the traditional subjects there was more emphasis on "learning by doing". Weekend camps, and outdoor activities such as rock climbing, fossil finding and forestry work. There were many trips abroad and to exhibitions.

In 1972 the schools in Mere were re-organised and the 11 plus abolished. The surrounding Junior village schools became First schools, their pupils going to the Duchy Manor after 9 years instead of 11. The Mere Junior School was disbanded and the infant school became a First school taking in children from Mere and West Knoyle for a further two years. The Duchy Manor became a Middle School with an age range of 9-13, pupils going to Gillingham School at age 13.

The Infant School buildings had considerable improvements and additions made in the late 1950's and 1960's. It remained a three Class School until 1972 when the two Pratten huts in the grounds were taken over from the Junior School and it became a four Class First School. It was a happy well-equipped school run on up-to-date lines. Various educational outings were organised each term for the older children. Among other things bantams, guinea pigs, rabbits and tropical fish were kept and the children were encouraged to take an interest in their immediate environment. There was a very active Parent/Teacher Association and many parents volunteered time to help out during school hours.