

St Nicholas School Memories

By Dafydd Williams.

I realise that none of us were present when this school first opened in 1872. Certainly the village and surrounding district was very different then. Built on what was then common land when public services were poor. It was as a result poorly financed by the Church and County Council. Its annual financing depended on the number of pupils attending each session. Any child late in arriving in the morning or afternoon could not be registered. As a result in bad weather when pupil numbers were often low the headmaster would often record the school as closed, though open, so that attendance figures were not too badly affected. At lunchtime, children either brought their own food, went home, went to relatives' cottages or simply did without. Some children walked from as far as Tresinwen, Aberbach, Bwcidwll and Jordanston parish. When on arrival there was often not enough money to buy coal for the fire to get warm or dry their clothes.

Other reasons for closure were Mathry fair, hay, corn and potato harvesting. Closure was frequently because numbers attending were so low. There are also records of closure due to disease, scarlet fever for instance resulting in a long closure in the thirties. On that occasion some children were removed to the isolation hospital in Pembroke. There was no parental contact for months and households isolated for weeks and early death was a fact in some village families. Is 2020/21 a repeat of what had happened to others in the thirties, and previously in the 1918-20 flu epidemic?

The education was basically very English with a strong Imperial leaning but by the mid-thirties there were some strongly worded criticisms by HMI's of this bias and neglect of the Welsh language, culture and history. By the time I began to experience formal education the only evidence of the past regime was a huge map of the world hanging on the wall behind the headmaster's desk, very yellow with age, and very red with all the countries which had once been part of the empire. By then much of the walls carried posters on National Savings and, very interesting to curious children, warnings of all the metallic objects of all shapes and sizes that were not to be touched, and to be reported at once. My sister and I promptly did this on seeing a very large black ball with prongs on Aberbach beach one morning. It took some time to persuade our father to believe us but when he did our evacuation from Aberbach cottage, (our first ever family holiday) was hasty. The fountain of water when it was blown up was visible for many miles.

During my time it was very much a community school largely because of the quality of the staff, helped by the fact most of the time the headmaster lived within fifty yards in Tý'r Sgwlin with the assistant in lodgings in the village. One assistant teacher pre 1940 was Miss Lloyd, Clyngim. Despite her abilities as a teacher, recorded in the school Log she was also severely reprimanded for being late on several occasions. She had failed to arrive on time on her bicycle because of deep snowdrifts and had

had to walk across fields and Clegyrn Moor in a snowstorm! One temporary headmaster came from near Llanelli, by train to Clarboston road on Monday morning, then by Ernest Lawrence's milk lorry arriving around ten, but without reprimand. He did have another plus, an identical twin brother who was also a teacher. We sometimes suspected that they swapped schools as they wore different coloured socks. The absolute ruler of the school was Mrs. Phoebe Lloyd, the cleaner. As her duties included disposing of the contents of the toilet buckets every evening, she fully deserved our respect. The house where she lived now carries her name.

The building of the concrete kitchen extension in the mid-forties resulted in hot meals and a water supply for the first time. Mrs. Lloyd's daughter Letty became the cook resulting in probably the best school dinners in Pembrokeshire. If the official supplies were deemed by Letty to be inadequate she would go round gardens and fields with the result that her apple and blackberry tarts were a welcome alternative to the mysteries of sago.

I would not be surprised to find that much of our education would fit in very well with the syllabus now being adopted in Wales. Geography involved building large relief maps of Pembrokeshire, and Wales in plasticene on blackboards placed over tables. We then painted in the main roads, railways and rivers. Everything had to be scaled up from small maps in books. The same happened when building models of the ferries then working out of Fishguard harbour. For these we used matchboxes and papier maché, paint and varnish. In good weather in the spring part of what is still known as Gardd yr Ysgol was cultivated by the boys. It was another opportunity for the headmaster to get us mathematics without the pain. If the rabbits allowed and local cattle did not break in, it provided a welcome supplement to the official kitchen supplies.

The annual concert resulted in some surprises, and disasters. I have a clear memory of a very clumsy attempt to do a traditional dance involving brooms which scarred my dancing abilities for life! Another such memory is of the wry smile of the visiting music teacher when listening to my singing accompanied by his harp playing.

Over the decades pupils from this school have succeeded in many fields varying from weaving to skilled farmers, from civil engineers, to rocket scientists, solicitors, one of whom became a president of that profession, poets, councillors, nurses, doctors, businessmen and women together with many others who have always been an integral part of a viable Welsh community. Sadly the school closed in 1955 despite a long campaign to improve the building and playground. There are records of many visits by architects. Meetings with Councillors and Governors but all to no avail. The headmaster was transferred to Mathry leaving all the work in the very capable hands of Mrs. Fitzgerald but suddenly in October of that year, with virtually no prior notice it was closed leaving a gap in our community.

To a very large extent that void was eventually filled by the community buying the building, acquiring the funds both locally and elsewhere to establish the village hall

as we now know it. At present we can only wait patiently for the opportunity to meet there again.