

Clophill through the years

The Early Years of Education in Clophill

Early Schooling

Towns, like Bedford with its Harpur Trust, set up after Sir William Harpur and his wife Dame Alice gave an endowment in the 16th century, have been well provided with schools but poor rural villages like Clophill struggled to finance schools. It was mainly through local voluntary effort, led by clergymen, that early education developed in the village.

Clophill was an agricultural community where the men worked mostly in the fields as Agricultural Labourers and their wives and children worked at straw plaiting, a common cottage industry. There were straw plait schools for the young children where, as well as learning to plait straw, they may have received some basic education such as learning to read. Older boys would be sent to join their fathers working on farms to supplement the family income.

For those that could afford it, there were what was known as Dame Schools run by women in their own home. Children were given a basic education starting with reading and writing. The better schools may have taught some mathematics and English grammar.

Initially the clergy set up Sunday Schools. These were schools that took place on Sundays as the children were either at straw plait school or working in the fields for the rest of the week. Here they were taught to read the bible and instructed in the Liturgy and Catechism.

Central Government

In 1807 Samuel Whitbread (of Southhill Park) introduced a bill in parliament to give each child two years of education but the government did not see the benefit of educating the rural poor. It was considered too expensive to implement and it was also thought that the introduction of such a scheme would take the people away from manual work and make them dissatisfied with their social situation.

In 1818 the government started to see the benefit of the education of rural children and carried out a review asking four questions. The response for Clophill was:

1. *CLOPHILL population 721*
2. *A Sunday school for 60 boys, the funds of which are £6 per annum.*
3. *Two Sunday schools for 80 girls, 30 of whom are clothed.*
4. *The poor are desirous of education*

Elementary Education Act of 1870 was the very first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain. The Act made provision for the elementary education of all children aged 5-13 and established school boards to oversee and complete the network of schools and to bring them all under some form of supervision. Elementary Education Act of 1880 finally made school attendance compulsory between the ages of five and ten. 1893 Legislation in extended the age of compulsory attendance to 11 and in 1899 to 12.

Churches

Despite the government view there were many people that wanted to provide education for children. In 1811 the *National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales* was founded. Known as the National Society, it started to make grants towards setting up schools. The society believed that the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education.

To counter this, in 1814 the *British and Foreign School Society for the Education of the Labouring and Manufacturing Classes of Society of Every Religious Persuasion* was founded based on non-sectarian principles

Clophill went with the National Society and C of E schools.

Schools in Clophill

The first mention of formal education in the village is in a deed of Mr Richard Read dated 1630 which concerns the gift of a plot of land to build a school but there is no evidence that it was built.

There were probably schools before 1799 but in that year Rev.

Nethersole, the rector of Clophill, started a school for thirty girls at what is now Taylor's Cottage in the High Street near the Old Rectory

There are many references in the records to schools in the village but where the schools were held is not known. For example the Parish Notes record that in 1809 "*a Sunday School for 30 boys was set up by private contributions*".

In 1835 the National Society made a grant towards building a school for 110 boys. This was the building later known as the Reading Room that was to the east of the church in the High Street. It was demolished to make way for a detached house.



Taylor's Cottage



Reading Room

The Parish Notes of 1844, lists the following schools in the village :-

<i>Boys' Sunday School</i>	<i>100 boys</i>	<i>Mr Chapman, Headmaster.</i>
<i>Girls' Sunday School</i>	<i>80 girls</i>	<i>Mrs Neal, Headmistress</i>
<i>Boys' Reading and Writing School</i>	<i>130 boys</i>	<i>Headteacher not listed</i>
<i>(National School) held on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturday mornings.</i>		
<i>Girls' School for Reading and Sewing</i>	<i>20 girls</i>	<i>Miss Spicer, Headmistress</i>

In 1871 the National Society made a Grant of £100 in aid of building schools and a teacher's residence. This school stood on the land in front of the present St Mary's School and was officially opened in 1872

The curriculum as stated in the Log Book was arithmetic, reading, writing, dictation, scripture (often taken by the Rector) and sewing for the girls. About 50 of the older pupils were 'part-timers' due to the plait, horticultural and agricultural work, and many pupils went missing during the summer terms because they were working on the harvest.



National School

Here are some examples from the school log book:-

23 June 1893 Some children have been irregular [this week] owing to their mothers going out and gathering peas or fruit and the children kept at home to mind the house and baby.

15 March 1822 16 boys left school for a few weeks to go stone-picking. 5 went to Countess Cowper`s to work.

6 October 1829 Owing to the harvest being so backward this year another week's holiday was given to enable the children to go gleaming.

In 1973 St Mary's School was built and the Old National School was subsequently demolished.

I am indebted to Ian Gordon for permission to quote from his dissertation The History of Education in Clophill.