EDUCATION, EDUCATION

For a small village, Dorney was and still is quite well endowed with places of learning.

In the early 1800s, education of the young was by no means universal. Working class children whose parents chose to send them to school might attend a dame school, where a few children would receive a basic schooling, often in a private house. Two organisations then began to establish schools where larger numbers of children could be taught, with the aim of making education available more widely. National Schools, affiliated to the Church of England, were opened in many places and in 1823, two children from Dorney attended a National School in Windsor.

The first school in Dorney was set up by the Palmer family in the late 1820s. This was a private initiative, for the benefit of the tenants' children. Lessons were given in a classroom in Dorney Cottage on the estate and there was room for 45 pupils. During the 1850s, the schoolmistress was Susannah Hazell, the wife of a gardener at Dorney Court. As well as receiving an education, the children were provided with clothing.

Offspring of the middle or upper classes were generally privately educated, at home or as boarders. It was quite common for a vicar to take in and teach a small group of boys, as did the vicar of Dorney from 1856 to 1867. He advertised that he prepared pupils to become officers in the army or navy. In 1861 he had four teenaged pupils, three of whom had been born overseas. At least one eventually retired as a Lieut Col in the Royal Artillery. In May 1862, five of his eight pupils found themselves before the magistrates in Burnham accused of repeated trespass and damage to property in Dorney over several years. The final straw had been when they threw stones at Dorney Court servants after the latter complained to the police about damage to fences. Difficulty in identifying the culprits meant that just two of the boys were fined. I have found reference to a boys' boarding school on Dorney Common in 1810 and there may well have been other small private schools in Dorney at various times.

For a brief period, the need for adult education was addressed. By 1860, most towns and villages made some provision for their adult population. Burnham opened its library and reading room in the High Street in 1855, replaced by larger premises in Church Street in 1876 and eventually by a Workmen's Institute in 1903. As well as books which could be borrowed and newspapers which could be read on site, there was a programme of evening lectures on diverse general knowledge subjects. Bagatelle, an early version of bar billiards, was a popular pastime, and the reading room even put out a cricket team. A workmen's reading room in Dorney finally opened in early 1886. It occupied a room next to the post office and the cost of fitting it up was met by local residents and through fundraising events. Newspapers and games were provided, and it was hoped to add a small library of books. There is little information about how much the reading room was used, by the predominantly agricultural workforce of Dorney. The only record I could find of their activity was a report of a return bagatelle match between Dorney and Burnham in 1888, at Dorney, which the visitors won. It looks as though interest gradually fizzled out as I could trace no reference after January 1893.

Meanwhile, the education of children had become subject to a national system. Dorney was expected to set up a School Board and to provide capacity for the number of children

living locally, taught by a qualified teacher. The old schoolroom was replaced by a new school built in Dorney village, on the edge of the common, with an integral schoolhouse for the teacher. It opened in late summer 1876, with 75 children from Dorney, Boveney and Lake End. Under the first headmistress, the school got very good exam results, but she resigned after two years and her replacement was an abject failure. Dorney School Board was singled out in a national report in 1881 as “the extreme of laxity” for its poor performance in ensuring that children attended school; “of 83 children whose names were on the books, three only were qualified for examination by attendance”. One week in 1880 only a quarter of the pupils on the register were in school. Fortunately, after 18 months, the headship changed again, and after this low point the school ran on a fairly even keel in spite of frequent changes of headteacher.

In 1903, further changes in the organisation of schools resulted in Dorney school becoming the responsibility of Bucks County Council. Two notable headmistresses were Miss Jane Trotter who was there from 1892 and Miss Eleanor Bennett who presided over the school from 1919 to 1952.

An inspection report in 1931 commented favourably: “In this somewhat detached rural school the present Head Mistress has worked for 12 years, and her keenness and energy have not abated. She takes much interest in the welfare of her children and has not lost touch with modern educational ideas. The children are quite alert and responsive; in general, this small school has a vigorous life of its own”.

During the 1920s, the number of pupils at the school was increased by up to 40 children from the children’s home which operated in the village from about 1923 to 1928. Further upheaval arrived in 1939, when evacuation brought 68 more children to Dorney from London at the outbreak of war. These children were accompanied by some of their teachers. The school absorbed this influx and adapted its routine, initially operating a system of teaching half the children in the morning and half in the afternoon. Later on in the war, the village hall was used as an extra schoolroom and full-time schooling restarted.

In 1958 Dorney school moved to the site in Dorney Reach which it still occupies. Today our “local school with a big heart” continues to prepare children for life just as the first school did 200 years before. And the vicarage has again become a place of learning, as Eton Dorney Independent Therapeutic School, a specialist school also seeking to help children fulfil their potential.

You can read much more about the history of schooling in Dorney on the Dorney History Group website. There you can find the Village School History written by former headmaster Len Eastgate, a great selection of old photos and Miss Bennett’s recollections.

Virginia Silvester