The Infants' School

The Infants' School was designed to accommodate 150 children. It was built as a single room. It occupied what is now the school hall, separating the Boys' School from the Girls'. At each end of the room were "galleries", banked rows of desks with plain benches. The dimensions of the room were 61 feet by 25 feet, little more than a square yard for each child. No lighting was provided, the room was heated by open coal fires and ventilation was provided by the familiar windows.

These let in not only air, but also snow and rain when the weather was severe. Outside there was a playground, covered with gravel. There, also, were the lavatories.

It is not difficult to imagine how hard it was to teach or be taught in these conditions. When various mistresses tore a strip off their Assistants or Pupil Teachers for *"keeping bad order"* among their children, we should probably view their concern with sympathy: *"Obliged to complain of the discipline in the class Miss Springall teaches. The children cannot possibly get on when all are playing...."* (Sarah Roberts, 17 July 1891).

The work of the whole school would be affected if one group was out of control. The log book tells us little about the way the lessons were conducted, but it is certain that most were extremely formal, even for work which today would give the opportunity for "free expression", such as drawing. The room would allow nothing different.

Equipment provided by the school was very limited. "Copybooks" for handwriting had to be bought by the pupils; otherwise their work was carried out on slates. This was normal. There are few specific references to slates in the logs: once, in December 1889, when the light was so bad that *"the children could not see their slates"*; and once, when Edith Downs (daughter of Edward Downs, "machinist employing 4 men, and Ann - Fair Green"), a Pupil Teacher and later Assistant of the 1870's, was accused of striking a younger child with her slate!

Classroom equipment was equally limited. In 1877, the Inspector mentioned the lack of easels in the school: Pupil Teachers were often criticised for poor use of blackboards. It must have been considerably easier to pay attention to the rest of the room than to one paltry blackboard being managed by a nervous fifteen year old.

The original provision of space for 150 pupils was an example of opting for a nice round figure, rather than using any skill of prediction. Within three years of opening the roll was 191 and, although the numbers fluctuated wildly, as did attendance, the 1880's reveal typical pupil numbers of 165 and 167. The 1890's opened with a roll

of 168 which rose quickly, fell to 165 in February 1897, but generally held above 160, reaching 188 in September 1900 and held at 179 in 1903. Only after 1905 did the school roll begin to match the falling population of the village, rarely again topping 100. The logs suggest that in the early years there must have been regular and real overcrowding. This had a physical effect as well as an influence on the quality of education. Miss Roberts commented on this point in October 1889: *"Infant Class not making satisfactory progress. There are too many in the class for a monitress to manage."*. An all-time peak was reached when 198 children were actually present on 21 October 1890, let alone on the books. Miss Roberts made a particularly harassed comment the following day. An Assistant and a Monitress were away for a few days and, as a result, *"Order not so perfect as should be - 57 children without a teacher, and 37 left to the care of a Monitress."* Part of this was a staffing problem. Miss Roberts had full-time help from just two Assistant Teachers (who had been trained), and two monitresses who would have been pupils from the Girls' School aged less than 15 years (who hadn't even started training). The problem of coping with a pupil:teacher ratio of 40+:1 was not made easier by working in a room designed for 25% fewer children.

The problem of space was not picked up by the Annual Inspections until the 1890's. In 1893 the Inspector made his usual positive report, but commented that the school was*"overcrowded and the accommodation for the babies barely sufficient."* The 1899 report suggests that *"more suitable accommodation for the Babies Class is desirable."* After this gap of 6 years, the recommendation was translated into practical measures on 12 June: *"The second set of Babies desks arrived on Friday last, and have been fixed so that they were ready for use this morning. The advantage was felt at once, in the increased comfort of the little ones, and the decrease of disorder in consequence."*

The practice up until this time had been for the Inspector's visit to be noted in the log and the relevant section of his report copied into the book when it was received, probably a couple of months later. Since their opening, just two Inspectors (Messrs Claughton and Wheeler) had ever visited Glemsford Schools for these annual examinations. Mr Claughton must have known the place particularly well. On 19 November 1900, he broke from tradition by writing his own comment

in the log. It bears out the difficulties of working in the school room and the extent to which theory and practice were developing: *"...Too much oral work is taken simultaneously for a school without a classroom."* In other words, the old design of a single school room had had its day. Strangely, Mr Claughton's formal report, when it arrived, states only that the Infants' School is *"well-taught and disciplined".*Since regulations required Inspectors' comments to be recorded exactly, it is unlikely that the Mistress, Miss Bowrey, would have dared omit any criticism. Perhaps Mr Claughton recognised the gulf between theory and successful practice in the 26 year old school.

Perhaps, though, he had other thoughts, because even more unusual than his written comment in 1900 was the fact that in the course of two years Glemsford Schools received no fewer than five inspections - November 1900, July and November 1901, May 1902, and in November 1902 as well. These visits were of particular importance to the Infants' School. The 1900 visit commented on old-fashioned methods and the lack of a classroom. The November 1901 visit coincided with a dreadful Whooping Cough outbreak. In 1902, the Inspector put pressure on the Board to increase staffing and as a result of the November '02 visit, things actually began to change. *"On advice from HMI, the first class take oral lessons in a classroom belonging to the Boys' Department."* At the end of the first week *"this arrangement is proving successful."* Thus, after 28 years, as the Board was nearing the end of its existence, outside influences were beginning to make themselves felt, and the structure of the school was beginning to seem inadequate for the new thinking in teaching. The report on the November '02 inspection crystallises the point: *"The absence of a classroom is the chief defect in this school. The work is excellent as usual."* In September 1903, a new pair of eyes surveyed the problem. The long-serving Eleanor Bowrey departed, replaced, by Miss M. Eglington. Within three weeks she had *"concluded [her] examination of the school".* She obviously agreed with that the old school building was a problem because she considered that *"the working of this [Babies'] class would be greatly benefited by the introduction of curtains or moveable partitions to separate it from other classes."* The disturbance caused by the "Babies Class" may be explained by the introduction of new methods of teaching.

The original idea of the "kindergarten" was developed by Froebel (1782 - 1852). Private schools based on kindergarten techniques had opened in England as early as 1854. In 1874 a Froebel Society was formed. The purest form of Froebelism suggested a school which devoted its WHOLE curriculum to the encouragement of self-expression through play and related activities. Such ideas were not easy to adopt in an Infant Board School, and it would be totally wrong to claim that Glemsford's was a Froebel-based curriculum, just because the word "kindergarten" appears in the log as early as November 1883. What seems to have happened is, as Professor Barnard suggested: ""Kindergarten" appeared on time-tables as a kind of extra subject, ... in order to brighten the curriculum and afford some relief." That suggests that the pupils of Glemsford did not suffer entirely the sort of unpleasant and repetitive education which is portrayed in the "popular" view of Victorian schools. There were toys and games, there was needlework, and fraying and bead threading, particularly for "the Babies". Lessons were given in History and Geography and Nature Study. The delivery may have been very formal, but it was often in story form, or by way of Objects. When Ellen Robinson was appointed mistress in 1894, the Board thought highly enough of the new system to mention the teaching of it in the advertisement, and presumably part of the reason for Miss Robinson's appointment was her familiarity with it. Kindergarten subjects are mentioned regularly from the 1890's onwards. Sometimes they were used outside the normal timetable, as well. Often, they were used to provide suitable occupations when the school room was too dark. On a number of occasions when bad weather severely restricted attendance, the few children who did arrive were "entertained" with the Kindergarten toys until they could safely be allowed home, or when their older brothers or sisters could collect them. Perhaps the oddest, and saddest, postscript to this topic appears in 1903, after an outbreak of Measles:

"During the five weeks the school was closed for Measles, (owing to the faulty lock of the cupboard in which it has been kept for years) the box containing the model railway train and rails was pulled about, - the engine and tender with the winding key taken entirely away. No trace has been found of the missing portions, and the caretaker denies any knowledge of the thief. The train is therefore incomplete and useless." A clockwork train set, complete with rails, does not conform to the rigid, formal picture of a Victorian school. It would be fascinating to know who was responsible for the theft, and whether this early example of a model railway is still hidden in someone's attic

in the village! Its existence explains, at least, the frequent appearance of "A Station" and "A Train" in the lists of lessons copied dutifully into the Log book.

So "Kindergarten" was part of Glemsford children's experience. Obviously, however, babies at play would not encourage older children to work, and the 1904 Inspection STILL records overcrowding as a problem; as late as 1909 the Inspector was just getting round to recommending *"the abolition of both galleries and the unsuitable desks in the Infants' Department."* An era was beginning to fade.