

☞ My Poor People, They Be Well Instructed ☞

The rectors and parishioners of Finmere have long supported school education and there has been a school in Finmere since the eighteenth century. In 1739, Rector Thomas Long told his Bishop that Finmere did not have a 'Free School' but there was 'a small school in my parish where a few poor children are taught to read at my Expense.'

William Malins is the first recorded teacher. He was master of a school at Finmere from 1779 or earlier and taught seventy children. This seems a large number for a parish of about three hundred people, but Malins had ten children himself. The school was financed by subscription, with major contributions from the Rector and the landowners, the Grenville-Temples of Stowe. Finmere lacked a school building at that time. In 1808, the parish clerk, John Fox, was teaching twenty-four children reading and the catechism in a house provided rent free by the Marquess of Buckingham. The school had twenty-five pupils, the Rector paying for eight pupils in 1815 and thirty in 1817.

The Rector William Jocelyn Palmer considered these arrangements unsatisfactory. In 1824, he persuaded Richard Temple—the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos and landowner of Finmere—that a new school should be built.

The new school was built to be 'for the use and benefit of the poor children of the parish, under the direction of the Church and its ministers.' At first, the churchwardens agreed to erect a lean-to against the church but there was a change of mind and the school was built as a freestanding building in the grounds of the Rectory.

The School

The school, now a house, immediately catches the eye of people walking towards the church. It housed up to twenty-five pupils in the 'school room' and twenty-three infants in the 'class room.' To ensure that the children were constantly aware of Palmer's strict approach to schooling, he had four plaques carved with lines from the Bible. The present owners have restored the three external plaques; a fourth plaque is preserved inside the building.

The School Mistress initially lived opposite the school in a cottage rented from the Duke of Buckingham. From the early 1840s, Rector William Jocelyn Palmer leased the house now known as Glebe House, initially for a curate. It was later known as School House and accommodated Mrs Catley between 1932 and 1935 and probably other teachers.

The Duke of Buckingham was passionate about schools, as revealed by this letter written in 1824 to an unknown recipient.

I send you a letter on the eternal subject of Schools. If half the Schools to which I subscribe are effectively administered, my poor people they be well instructed. I do not grudge the money...

We have no evidence that the Duke complained about Finmere school and it would be surprising if he had done so as it was strictly administered by the Rectors of the parish.

West wall

'Whoso loveth
instruction loveth
knowledge: but he
that hateth reproof
is brutish'

PROV:XII:1

West wall

'He that spareth
his rod hateth his
son: but he that
loveth him
chasteneth him
betimes'

PROV:XIII:24

Over entrance

MDCCCXXIV
'For as much as ye
have done it unto
one of the least of
these my brethren,
ye have done it
unto me'
MATT:XXV:40

In school room

'Apply thine heart
unto instruction;
and thine ears to
the words of
knowledge'

PROV:XXIII:12

The school plaques



Church House (left) and School House early in the twentieth century



Children leaving the school in the 1880s
The watercolour was painted by Louisa Ashwell.

Quotes in this chapter are from the School Log Book unless stated otherwise.

Day, Night and Sunday Schools

The new schoolroom was used for weekday lessons and as a Sunday school. The children were taught in two classes, infants and children over six. In the mid-nineteenth century, the school experimented with evening classes. Rector Frederick Walker reported in 1854 that:

Evening schools for boys were tried in the spring of the year. The success was not very great, writing was the great attraction. A Sunday evening class for girls is now being tried with better success.

Most children attended Sunday school until their Confirmation.

Resolved at vestry that Benjamin Elkeston be appointed to supervise the conduct of the children upon the Sabbath day and that he is to receive the sum of ten shillings and sixpence for his trouble. (Churchwardens Account Book 1806)

Elkeston was employed until 1817. Stephen Painter bequeathed £100 to endow the Sunday school in 1834; this produced interest of £4 10s from 1840. In 1854, the Sunday school had a roll of sixty boys and girls.

A few children were taught privately. In 1851, sixty-year-old spinster Ann Molder had three girls resident as visitors. They were all from the Knibbs family and aged four, seven and nine, and were probably attending a small 'dame's school' run by Ann.

The Thirty-Nine Teachers

The school employed thirty-nine head teachers in the seventy-four years from 1874, when detailed records begin, to its closure in 1948. The longest-serving teachers were Annie Hubbard, who taught for ten years and three months from 1886 and Miss King, who taught for nine years and ten months from 1897. Just seven of the thirty-nine teachers taught for two years or more, and government Inspectors' reports reveal that the rapid turnover of teachers was often detrimental to the children's progress.

The teachers were supported by an assistant, who taught the infants class. The longest-serving assistant was Mrs Sarah Davis, who taught for more than twenty-six years. She was unqualified as a teacher and was permitted to teach subject to the Inspector's annual approval. He was invariably pleased with her work.

8 July 1898. The long association of the Infants teacher with the school and her patient persevering work in it must be reckoned amongst its good influences.

In November 1901, Miss King recorded in the log book that Sarah, then eighty-five years of age, was ill. She did not return to the school.

6 January 1902. Mrs S. Davis has resigned her duties owing to old age.

Sarah died at Tingewick aged ninety-three years and was buried at Finmere on 29 August 1910.

Ashwell's School

In 1874, the newly appointed teacher, Miss Barbara Stephen commenced a log book to record the daily events in the school. Rector Seymour Ashwell was formally responsible for finance, attendance, discipline and religious education. He viewed his responsibilities seriously and every aspect in the school came under his careful scrutiny.

Funding and Performance Pay

From the accounts for 1874, we learn that the school spent £43 1s that year, mostly on salaries for the teacher, Miss Stephen, and her successor, Ann Berry. Other costs included £4 6s 9p for two-and-a-half tons of coal, 3s for a new broom and 2s for a bottle of ink. This expenditure was covered by donations of £46 8s from villagers and the Rector, who paid £11 15s, nearly a quarter of the total. Parents also paid 'school pence,' a few pence a week for each child.

Not all parents could afford to pay for their children's education, or were willing to do so. Initially, these children were excluded for a short period. From about 1884, the Relieving Officer acting for the Brackley Board of Guardians, which managed poor relief for the area, paid the fees for poorer families. A typical entry in the log book reads:

17 January 1887. The Brackley Relieving Officer called this morning and paid the School Fees for the Paxtons, W. Knibbs and Edwin Windsor.

In 1875, the school was awarded a government grant of £11 15s for the second half of the year. A full year's grant of £33 11s was paid in 1876 and thereafter the government paid about half the school's budget. Half of this grant was added as performance pay to the teacher's basic annual salary of £10. The annual grant depended upon the number of children, their regular attendance and their performance at the annual inspections by Her Majesty's Inspector. In 1877, the Inspector described the children's mathematical work as 'very defective' and fined the school.

My Lords are compelled to deduct one tenth of the Grant for faults of instruction in arithmetic.



The infants' classroom in 1906

1874	2000
£43	£2,600
£4 6s 9d	£260
2s	£6
1d	24p



The school exterior viewed from near the Cross Tree in 1906

1891	2000
1d	27p

The government grant was cut from £85 15s 10d to £77 6s 7½ d the following year. School pence were not popular with parents or the teachers who had to collect them. In 1891, they were finally abolished and Annie Hubbard celebrated the occasion in the log book.

16 October 1891. Commencement of 'Free Education' this week.

The Rector in School

Seymour Ashwell worked hard to maintain standards. Ashwell took classes when the teacher was ill and examined the children to prepare them for the Inspector's annual visit.

1 January 1876. The Reverend Seymour Ashwell examined classes 3 and 4 in the Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. The Reading and Writing was very fair but the Arithmetic was not so satisfactory.

8 February 1876. The Reverend Seymour Ashwell examined Classes 1 and 2 the results of which showed Arithmetic to be the weak point.

6 March 1876. Arithmetic much better.

6 April 1876. Arithmetic better throughout.

His wife and daughters helped with needlework and singing.

3 February 1875. Mrs and Misses Ashwell visited this afternoon and heard the children sing, examined needlework and were pleased with both. Oranges were distributed among the children by Misses Ashwell.

Some teachers may have resented Seymour Ashwell's close involvement in school affairs but Miss King became dependent on his support. His death in 1902 had a serious impact on the school.

The death of the late Rector and manager, who took a personal interest in the school, has been severely felt. Arithmetic is a very weak subject. Writing is only fair & Reading is barely good. The Head Teacher is most hardworking, earnest and capable & will no doubt effect improvement in the coming year. (Report of His Majesty's Inspector, 11 July 1902)

After Ashwell, Finmere Rectors took a more limited role in the school. In 1902, the school was placed under the jurisdiction of Oxfordshire County Council, and thereafter secular school managers were appointed, the first being Corbett Barrett, then living at Warren Farm.

The Battle for Attendance

Whether or not children enjoyed attending school, there were many distractions. Helping their parents on the land, particularly during the harvest, always took precedence, as did the variety of feasts and clubs throughout the year. Absenteeism troubled the school managers but they could not compel children to attend. This changed in 1876, when the Education Act laid down that children aged five to ten must attend school. Older children were obliged to attend for a minimum of 250 half-days a year until they were twelve and for 150 half-days until they were fourteen. They could leave earlier if they passed the 'labour certificate'—an examination in the three Rs. This was a desired option for many Finmere children but many were not successful.

9 July 1888. Joseph Paxton and Edwin Windsor [both aged 10] went to an Examination held at Westbury on June 28th to try and pass for a Labour Certificate. Received notice today of their failure in Arithmetic.

20 June 1889. Four boys went to Shalstone to be examined for a labour certificate and were refused.

A major cause of absence was illness, which was aggravated by a low resistance to infection resulting from poor housing conditions and a meagre diet. Perennial colds were compounded by outbreaks of chicken pox, influenza, measles, scarlet fever and whooping cough.

The other major distraction from schoolwork was the need to work in the fields. Before the harvest holidays, haymaking kept many of the children from school and, if the harvest was late, attendance after the holidays was often poor. Annie Hubbard recorded the difficulties.

24 August 1888. School closes.

2 October 1888. Reopened the school after the Harvest Vacation.

5 October 1888. A great many children absent from school this week, the harvest not being quite over. School was closed yesterday and again today (afternoon) on that account... School fees were returned to the children on account of the school being open only half the week.

The government was unhappy with the sporadic attendance in rural schools. Attendance Committees were introduced in 1876 and these appointed part-time Attendance Officers to enforce attendance. The first mentioned in Finmere is Mr Heath who visited on 16 January 1880. Thereafter, there were visits whenever attendance was bad.

School treats organised by landowners became commonplace in Oxfordshire during the nineteenth century. They were a way of rewarding the children and their teachers, of alleviating some of the tedium of day-to-day instruction, and of improving nutrition. The landowners of Finmere lived at Stowe and did not host school treats but many were organised by Rector Seymour Ashwell and his wife.

23 May 1878. Mrs Ashwell visited the school this morning and kindly proposed giving the children a tea on the lawn the following day.

24 May 1878. The children assembled at 1 o'clock and were dismissed shortly after 3. Reassembling in the School room at 3.50, the children proceeded thence to the Glebe barn, where tea had been nicely arranged, the heavy thunder showers which fell during the afternoon rendering the grass too damp to hold it out of doors. After tea, the weather clearing up, the children were taken to a field adjoining the Rectory Grounds; where amusement had been provided for them, such as cricket balls &c. with which together with different games suggested by some young ladies present who joined in them—they seemed greatly to enjoy themselves.

Minimum school leaving age, years

1893	11
1899	12
1918	14
1947	15
1971	16

Another popular distraction was the fox hunt. In 1889, Annie Hubbard found that the hounds were a greater attraction than the first day of school after the Christmas break.

1 January 1889. A great many children stayed away from school today expecting to see the hounds.

She recognised that the school could not compete with this attraction and holidays were given for subsequent hunts.

22 January 1889. Children assembled at a few minutes before 9 and dismissed at 10.55 to allow them to go and see the hounds which met in the village at 11.

Nine years later, the hunt came closer to the school.

28 November 1898. Fox was killed outside the classroom consequently [afternoon] work was not begun until 1.50 pm.

12 October 1891. Reopened school after Harvest Holidays. 39 children present, several absent.

13 October 1891. School Attendance Officer called this afternoon and strictly ordered the children to attend school regularly.

Attendance improved but the Attendance Officer remained a regular feature of school life until the end of the nineteenth century.

The Struggle for Standards

The government introduced school inspection in 1839 but it was twenty years before there were enough inspectors to regularly visit schools. Many were not popular. From 1864, the inspector for Finmere was a clergyman, Reverend H. A. Pickard, aged thirty-two. He was the son of an army officer and educated at Rugby school and Christ Church, Oxford. In common with many inspectors, he had little knowledge of life in poor, rural villages. Pickard inspected Finmere school just six months after teacher Barbara Stephen arrived. On 30 July 1874, she dutifully copied his Inspector's damning report into the school log book.

The infants can read and spell fairly, but their writing and arithmetic is very moderate. Among the elder children reading and writing is tolerable; spelling is bad, and arithmetic very bad. I am directed to inform you that their Lordships have considerable hesitation in allowing Miss Stephen to sit for [her teacher's] examination after Her Majesty's Inspector's report.

Teachers received little formal training and were awarded their teaching certificate after a year or so in the classroom—if the Inspector was satisfied. He was not satisfied with Miss Stephen and she resigned or was dismissed after his condemnation of her teaching.

Until 1897, the government grant depended upon the results of the Inspection. The examinations for children over six were arranged in Standards and children were expected to move up a Standard each year. Payment by results ensured that all children received attention in class, not just the brightest. While reading and writing were often good, poor arithmetic was always a problem at Finmere. From 1874 to 1890, the pass rates of the 7–13 year old children were:

reading: 93%
writing: 82%
arithmetic: 60%.

The children were taught religious knowledge, poetry and songs alongside reading, writing, grammar and arithmetic. Needlework was compulsory for

the girls. Geography is first mentioned in the log book in 1880 and history in 1890. Drawing became compulsory for boys in 1890, and from 1892 to 1897 the school received a supplementary grant from the Department of Science and Art to teach it. This was at first 16s 6d and rose to £1 5s; as usual, payment depended on the children's success in an annual examination.

1897	2000
£1 5s	£87

From 1886, the Infants were taught 'Object Lessons,' each of which focused on a single subject. The intention was, in an age before television and films, to stimulate the children's powers of observation and expression with basic science. Sometimes, the objects were brought into the classroom but more often pictures were used.

13 May 1887. The following is a list of 'Object Lessons' which have been given during the year. Tea. Sugar. Coal. Dog. Sheep. Cow. Elephant.



The main classroom in 1906

These pictures show how pictures and maps were used to support lessons.

Poetry and songs taught in 1885

From the school log book.

1885. Poetry for Standard Class
Standard IV. Scott's 'Lady of the Lake.' Canto fifth.
Stanzas XXI XXII XXIII
Standard III. 'The May Queen.' First and Second
part. By Tennyson.
Standard II. 'The Beggar-man.' (Aitken)
Standard I. 'The child and the bird.'

Songs for 1885

[Older children]

'O happy English children'
'I'm a merry little fellow'
'O Christmas Bells'
'Won't you buy my pretty flowers'
'Cherry Ripe. Cherry Ripe.'
'Come follow - follow &c. (Round)'
'The Skater's song'
'Stitch, Stitch, Stitch'

Infants

'Mary's little lamb'
'I will not hurt my little dog'
'Let us go to and fro'
'Little daisy frail and fair'

In 1891, Inspector Pickard was not satisfied with the number of Object Lessons taught. He wrote a list of fifteen lessons to be taught in the next year in blue pencil in the log book.

1891. Object Lessons for Infants

Horse	Camel	Elephant	Ostrich	
Coal	Wheat	Tiger	Leopard	
Bees	Cow	Rice	Sugar	Sheep
A Bed	Cocoa	Nut		

No allowance seems to have been made for children living in the countryside and many will have had a better understanding of farm animals and crops than the Government Inspectors.

After the Armistice, King George V conferred a treat.

2 July 1919. Mr Ladley has just brought in the letter stating that by the King's wish, the schools are to have summer holidays extended. It has been decided to give a week extra [at the end of the Harvest Holidays.]

Through Two Wars to Closure

The school became the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council in 1902 at a time when the population of Finmere was shrinking. There were few new families with children and the government Inspector saw advantages for the school.

8 February 1912. *The rapid decline of the school population in the village is a disquieting feature, but it has enabled greater individual attention to be paid to the children who remain with gratifying results.*

The 1914–18 War initially had little effect on Finmere school days, although the fathers of many pupils would have enlisted to fight in France. On 4 August 1914, the Germans invaded Belgium where they organised massacres of the civilian population. Many civilians fled and refugees began to arrive in Britain. Three families were housed in Hethe and others in Finmere. A few months later, the first of two Belgians arrived at Finmere school.

11 January 1915. *School re-opened [after Christmas]. Admitted a little Belgian refugee. Elodie Struff 8 years old.*

Elodie may have arrived with her family or have been an orphan, and would have been sheltered by the Rector or one of the wealthier families in the village. She had left the school by 15 March. In the autumn, a second refugee was taken in from October 1915 to October 1916. Later in the war, supply and economic difficulties led to problems in obtaining stationery.

26 January 1916. *Notice has been received about economy in school material—oral lessons to take the place of some of the written work.*

Bomb raids in London also had their effect. The first Zeppelin bomb raid on London took place on 31st May 1915 and raids continued until June 1917. The Howell family moved to Finmere to escape the destruction.

22 October 1917. *Admitted Kathleen and George Howell who have come to live in Finmere, the family having moved from London owing to the air raids.*

The Side family also moved here, though we do not know when they arrived or from where.

25 November 1918. *Lillian and Dora Side have left the village owing to their Father having been discharged from duty.*

During the Second World War, evacuees doubled the school roll. An 'evacuee teacher' supported the teacher, Bethel Hardy. This was initially Miss Ventura, succeeded by Miss Cudmore in 1940. Food was scarce and the children were often ill; measles and impetigo were frequent afflictions. Blackouts were put in place over the windows in October 1942 and Miss Logan visited to inspect the children's gas masks from March 1943. Nevertheless, school business continued much as usual, including the inspections.

The Closure of the School

In February 1926, pupils over eleven years old were transferred to Fringford school. After the temporary increase during the Second World War, the school roll had fallen to around twenty children. It proved very difficult to recruit and retain teachers and there were seven teachers during the three years following the war, none lasting longer than six months.

On 23 July 1948, the school closed for the summer holidays. Due to the problems in recruiting teachers, it did not reopen in the autumn. The juniors were transferred to Fringford and the infants to Mixbury. In 1950, Oxfordshire Education Committee declared that the school would be permanently closed.

16 July 1941. Ron Wakelin, infants, commended by the Diocesan Inspector.

Although the Rectors played a smaller role in school affairs than in Victorian times, they remained involved in religious education.

17 June 1934. It is with great regret that I have to record the death of Rev. Dangerfield, Rector of this Parish. He will be sadly missed by the children and also in connection with the Scripture Teaching of the school. He came for 15 years to help with scripture.

George Dangerfield is buried in Mixbury churchyard, where Fred Tew dug his grave.



Top row (left to right)

Mrs Catley Garth Catley Doug Bull Ted Horwood Jim Bartholemew Charlie Beale Reg Judd

Second row (left to right)

David Hancock Betty Radford Joy Cumnady Janet Beale Esther Horwood John Bartholemew

First Row (left to right)

Ray Davis Jim Smith Barbara Hitchcock Roy Barnes Kathleen Newman T Jordan

Bottom row (left to right)

Unknown Jeff Hancock John Horwood Jim Judd

The children of Finnere School in 1936



Top row (left to right)

Donald White Jim Smith John Horwood Ray Davis Fred Barnes

Middle row (left to right)

Frank Hitchcock Barabara Hitchcock Joan Haynes June Horwood Jean Hitchcock Lawrence Radford Ron Moncreffe

Bottom row (left to right)

Terry Aris Dennis Horwood Majorie White Ron Wakelin Neville Aris

The children of Finnere School in 1938