

# **THE HISTORY OF CHESHAM**

## **BOIS SCHOOL**

Every school's history is different and in the case of Chesham Bois, this history can be traced in remarkable detail, thanks to the careful preservation over many years, of a huge amount of documentation. This display presents a few of these documents and provides an insight into the life of the school and some of those who were connected with it.

Between the years of 1767 and 1773, the Revd Thomas Clarke taught pupils in the Old Parsonage, the forerunner to the Old Rectory. John Rumsey wrote, that at the school 'a few gratuitous scholars from the surrounding cottages occupied some humble forms, and some boys scarcely to be distinguished from these, from the farm houses, learning to read and write, with a little arithmetic: a considerable number of boarders and day boys from the neighbouring towns made up the bulk'. There were also usually some older Oxford and Cambridge students.

Later rectors continued to teach a few pupils but in 1846, a new school for the village children was opened on an acre of common land on the corner of Chestnut Lane ( then called Red Lion Road) and Bios Lane, given by the Duke of Bedford. In 1919, Mrs Dell, daughter of John Birch the parish clerk, remembered that the old school had been a dame school, where Mrs Wilkinson taught infants their first lessons and straw plaiting, then the chief industry of woman and girls in the neighbourhood. After the Education Act of 1870, the school gradually attempted to raise its standards.

At first, attendance was not free. Pupils had to pay three pence a week and some money was returned to them, if they attended regularly and punctually. In 1882, the agricultural distress having caused much suffering in these parts meant that great difficulty was experienced in paying so high a school fee, even though two pence was returned from time to time. The fee was then lowered to two pence, of which one penny was returned continually. (Provided that the attendance was punctual). One local resident remembers that his father attended this school, where he used a slate and slate pencil to write with and had to pay a penny each week to attend.

In 1889, a new corrugated iron infant school was built, but the local Education Authority rejected it as being inadequate for the purpose. Then in 1890, the rector, churchwardens and about 20 others, met to discuss a new brick built school. By the 1890's the rapid growth in the population and building on the Moor in particular, meant that the 'Old' school was no longer suitable for the needs of the parish. It was sold in 1894 and the proceeds were added to the money raised by public appeal. This in turn, financed the building of the 'New' school. This was located further down Bois Lane. One problem then, as now, was the fundraising. The local newspaper reported the meeting in great detail. One speaker commented 'Our good rector, with his usual and characteristic energy, has up to the present time, able by obtaining voluntary subscriptions to keep the school going and stave off the Government influence, but the time has come when something must be done to comply with the requisition. That we must have a School Board appears to be inevitable and in that case, the cost would fall upon the parish generally. I consider this perfectly fair and right, instead of voluntary aid heretofore, when, with few honourable exceptions, large owners and occupiers in the parish, refused to subscribe anything.'

The new school was built in 1894 on land in Bois Lane donated by Lord Chesham. The old school became a private house. The new school was originally called St Leonard's Day Schools, referring to the fact that it took both infants and juniors. The school records show, that during the First World War, orphaned children from London came to live with foster parents in the village. Several Belgian refugees were also pupils.

Since 1894 the school has continued to expand, while still retaining its distinctive character. The most obvious developments to the structure of the school are those of 1968 and 1975. Of all the changes made Victorian children might have been most impressed by the 'convenience' of indoor flushing toilets, especially in the winter months.

Chesham Bois School, is not however, merely a collection of buildings. It is and remains an expression of confidence, trust, hope and love. As you share this display with us, think about not only of what you see, but about everyone over the passing years, who helped to make this school what it is today. These include not only the children but the parents, teachers, governors and all those whose role may not have been recorded, but who together have formed this school and will continue to form it in the future.

We hope you will find this small display of some interest to you as you share, with us, the history of Chesham Bois School. Some of the quotes in this text have been taken from Chesham Bois. A Celebration of the Village and its History.

An Appeal on behalf of a schoolroom to be erected in the Parish of Chesham Bois.

The Parish of Chesham Bois is situate between the Towns of Chesham and Amersham but too distant for the children to attend the Parochial schools of either of those townships.

The population consists entirely of agricultural labourers excepting three Farmers and two other families of respectability. The population is small, at the last census it amounted to 218. But in immediate neighbourhood of the proposed school, there are many poor families living on the borders of the extensive adjoining Parish, who are more than a mile away from their own Parish schools and to these the school will be open.

The existing school consisting of thirty children is held in the room of the cottage which is much too small for the purpose; for besides the children, a man and his wife, the parents of the schoolmistress make use of it for domestic purposes, it being the only sitting room of the cottage.

A room is also much required for the weekly lecture for an evening adult school and for other parochial purposes.

Under these circumstances the Minister of the Parish is anxious to raise a sum of money sufficient to erect a schoolroom with two small rooms for the mistress, but owing to the poverty of most of the inhabitants, he has no hope of accomplishing this object by the help of his parishioners only and is therefore constrained to appeal to those who are interested in the scriptural education of the poor.



The Rector's copy of his letter to the Duke of Bedford,  
November 1844, asking for help in setting up a school in  
Chesham Bois.

Rectory, Chesham Bois.

Nov. 1844

To His Grace

The Duke of Bedford

Woburn

My Lord Duke,

I most humbly leave to submit to your Grace's kind consideration the desire I have for some time past, felt to obtain the power of building a schoolhouse for the use of the poor children of my Parish of Chesham Bois, in the earnest hope that your Grace may be approve the same and by the kind permission to erect it on the common land, or the charitable grant of materials, or any other aid to enable me to obtain this great benefit for my people.

There is no such building in the Parish, nor any capable of being employed and I feel the need for it to be very great for the Christian education of the poor children and the help and also the good of many of the parents. But I have no means, or prospect of means of building such a schoolhouse, unless they can be raised from without as I am encouraged by some donations already received, in reply to representations of the case to hope may be accomplished.

An edifice of the plainest description, with two rooms for a schoolmistress and a small enclosure at the end of the Common, near the Rectory house would afford an invaluable, as it would also be a permanent advantage to all poor families of the Parish. This would enable me to superintend the instruction of the children with convenience and very great comfort and thankfulness.

Your Grace's condescension on the matter, I have thus believed it to be my duty to lay before your Grace will ever be gratefully acknowledged by my Lord Duke,

Your Grace's most obliged and respectful  
humble servant, C.B.

Letter from Rev. Woodroffe to Mr Rumsey, 4<sup>th</sup> Nov 1844,  
donating a guinea to the appeal for the school at Chesham Bois.

My dear Sir,

The only objection to your letter and its valuable enclosures is your apology for both.

There is a spell and a charm in the name of dear, dear Mr Clarke of Bois that I shall readily enclose to you my mite for the school, with every good and Christian wish for the Rector of Bois. I would send more but my means since you last wrote, are a little diminished. As to that dear admirable man Bishop Chase, I have long since seen references to him and to his various and uncommon efforts for the spread of the Gospel and am glad to be in the way of the communication, with those who have already so kindly lent an aid to his Christian efforts by striving with others to help in the good cause in which, your dear Mrs R. is so conspicuous and so successful by that help and fails not to send by way of encouragement in such a labour of love.

The weak state of my eyes forbids me to say more, than that I am glad that you wrote to Mr Capper my dear old Bois friend with whom I generally dine, when I go to Cheltenham though I have been unable to pay my annual visit to the place this year. I hope to write again about the Bishop Chase if you are making up a collection for him. I will add then a guinea, such as I now said to the School for which you request the help so needed.

If you have not heard of the Revd Dr Warneford's charities, I hope I may not unsafely direct you to him. His address is Bourton on the Marsh near Moreton in Marsh. He gives to Schools, Chapels, Churches, Endowments and Parsonage Houses. You must not for reasons I need not detail, tell my name or subscription, though you may mention the others.

With kind regards to you both and to your family at Gloucester, who married a Langston and whom I also regard. I have not been to Gloucester as to stop, in some years or I should have asked the good couple there whom I wished to see and of whom Capper told me, they were at Gloucester.

Copy of the Rectors' letter to the Duke of Bedford June 1846,  
thanking him for the gift of £50 for the new school at Chesham  
Bois.

My Lord Duke,

I most gratefully beg to be permitted to offer my most  
unfeigned thanks to your Grace, for the very valuable gift of  
Fifty Pounds in aid of the Chesham Bois School, with which the  
Revd. The Lord Wrismere (?) Russell has obligingly  
acquainted me.

I am truly grateful to your Grace for this important  
benefaction; and for the very considerate promise of some  
additional assistance should it be required. The building I am  
happy to say is nearly completed; but I am unable to ascertain  
what the total cost with its fittings will be. But I feel it to be  
much my duty to be careful not to encroach further on your  
Graces bounty. Unless it prove that the great object your Grace  
has thus, in your benevolence so materially contributed to and  
for which I see more and more reason to be solicitous, cannot, in  
my difficulties as to any resources, be otherwise accomplished .  
(The above paragraph was cancelled.)

In earnest hope of the Divine blessing on this much needed  
endeavour, after usefulness in this humble field of your Grace's  
wide and beneficent influence,

I have the honour to be,

My Lord Duke,

Your Grace's thankful

And most humble servant.

C. (harles) B. (lackman)

The Rectory  
Chesham Bois  
June 1845.