

School's history records struggle for education

What was it like to attend school in Saltford just over 100 years ago?

Mrs Elizabeth White, secretary of Keynsham and Saltford Local History Society gave some idea in a talk to members of the Methodist Ladies Group at Queens Road last week.

It was very, very different from today, with classes of sometimes more than 70 children taught by one teacher, assisted by young pupil-teachers.

Children started school at three and most finished at ten or eleven. Materials were in short supply and only the older children used pens and paper, younger children had slates.

The system of "payment by results" applied and grants were given to schools dependent on standards achieved and class numbers. This led to malpractice in the keeping of registers and absent children were marked as present to boost numbers and overcome a continual shortage of funds.

Mrs White said that lessons must have been very boring with the emphasis on rote learning, writing from dictation and very elementary arithmetic.

'Real Tartar'

In 1880 an inspector reported that an improvement was needed in spelling and this was a condition of a grant.

A teacher with the splen-

by **Bunty Dunford**

did name of Aggie Gabb seemed to have been, in Mrs White's words - "a real Tartar." She had to cope with 78 children in one room and kept a wonderful log book. It should have been purely factual but she used it as a confessional.

She noted on one occasion how she kept the children in until five o'clock on a day in December. Mrs White pointed out that it would have been dark and the streets were unlit.

Aggie despaired of her pupil-teacher Ada Hancock, whom she taught in the evenings. Ada who was about 13, taught the infants, Aggie herself was only 26.

At one time a twelve year old boy, Charles Cooper, taught small children for three hours a day.

Punishment

In spite of the Victorian adage of "spare the rod and spoil the child," Saltford parents objected to children receiving corporal punishment. In 1881 Fanny Smith refused to hold out her hand to be caned for not doing her homework and later a Mr Ollis, who kept the Bird in Hand Inn, objected when his daughter Jane was given four stokes of the cane. The rector supported the teacher and the parent had to apologise and withdraw his complaint.

Mrs White drew the con-

clusion that Saltford School could not have been very hygienic because there were continual problems with drains and the school often closed because of the illness of teachers.

Mr and Mrs Mahoney took over in 1882 and made a tremendous effort to improve the situation. By this time numbers had risen to 86 children, still in just one classroom. They reported that the children knew no geography and Saltford was well below the national standard. The children had very poor vocabularies and new books - Royal Road Readers were purchased.

Illness

When William and Charlotte Simpson took over, the average number of children was 70, they seemed to have been a very kind couple. There were problems with the school drains and in 1895 the school was only open on 193 days in the year because of illness among the staff. Mains water was connected in 1901.

The school received frequent visits from "ladies of the village" who inspected the children's needlework. A great benefactress was Mrs Juliana Kelly, of Saltford House. She had provided the original school building — the Kelly schoolroom — and this was extended twice at the end of the 1800s. The main part of the village school, now the parish church hall, was built

in the 1900s. One winter Mrs Kelly donated sufficient woollen cloth for every girl to have a warm cloak.

In 1904 teacher Mr Griffiths found standards 'low in the extreme'. Mrs White said she suspected he was Welsh because he complained that the children could not sing. There were no maps or pictures in the school. By this time conditions were improving however, there were four teachers, two of whom were certificated and the County Council Education Committee had been set up.

National prizes

During Mr R W Quick's incumbency the school really took off. In World War I the school garden produced excellent brassicas and children walked to Corston for lessons, girls in cookery, boys in woodwork. Pupils started to win national prizes for music, art and essay writing.

School uniforms were introduced in 1928 and school milk in 1930. At this time ring-worm, whooping cough, diphtheria and headlice were reported.

Mrs White gave examples of what was expected by children in Standards I to VI which made no provision for creativity or imagination.

Mrs White is editor of a soon-to-be-published history of Keynsham and Saltford.