



## Education in Abinger Hammer

From the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive 2000

The Inspector who visited Abinger Hammer after the 1870 Education Act was puzzled. The area was large and the population sparse. The only existing school could accommodate 81 children. This left an estimated 68, some almost in Sussex, without places. Further, the school at Abinger Common was not close to the hamlet of Abinger Hammer "where the bulk of the population resides". These last children were prevented from attending the more convenient school in Shere by the Rector of Abinger, and so "go nowhere".

The HMI who had to make a recommendation confessed he had great difficulty in making up his mind, and (naturally) his proposals met with objections. In the event Mr V J Evelyn enlarged Abinger Common and Wotton Schools, and built a large school in the south of the parish (Oakwood School). Meanwhile T H Farrer, who had arrived in Abinger in 1868, decided to go it alone, and himself built a school for the smallest children in the overcrowded cottages at the Hammer. This opened with 8 children in the autumn of 1873. In 1878 Mr & Mrs Farrer "placed their Infant School under the management of the Committee of the Parish School". The ratepayers had then just "resolved to carry on the Schools of Abinger Parish on the voluntary system", that is to say supported by donations and a voluntary contribution based on the parish rating assessment. In 1900 this was raised from 6d to 7d in the pound.



Some of the pupils of Abinger Hammer School in 1934, when most of them spent all their years of education in the village school.

Despite periodic threats from various quarters to replace it with a School Board, the schools were run on this system until 1909. Both schools underwent regular government inspection, and received grant. In 1881, on request from parents, the Hammer school was enlarged to take children up to thirteen. Throughout its first fifty years it usually had more pupils than the Upper School.

The management committee of the two schools consisted of a small group recruited from all walks of life in both villages. T H Farrer was Chairman from 1878 to 1891, his son T C Farrer

from 1900 to 1909. Most of the work was done by the Secretary or Correspondent. In 1878 this was the Rector, the Rev T P Hill. From 1880 to 1895 it was the builder William King, who was followed by George Payne, head gardener at Abinger and the Rector's churchwarden. Mr Payne had to handle a crisis in 1900 involving Rector, National Society and the Bishop of Winchester, at a time when according to the Bishop "the Rector ... has allowed the (Church) School to become virtually an undenominational School ... no church teaching being given in either". (This had always been the case in the Hammer, home to several nonconformist families).

Sometimes people found the wrangles too much. Colonel Lewin of Parkhurst resigned as Chairman in 1900 saying "it

is a thankless business and I should welcome a Board School to the present jangling discord". Further difficulties as to the status of the Upper Abinger School held up the hand-over of both schools to Surrey County Council under the 1902 Education Act. After the deeds were finally signed in 1909 the management of both schools continued in the hands of one committee. They followed very similar paths, of enlargement, and gradual reduction in numbers, until the County set about closing some of these ever-smaller village schools. In 1970 both were threatened with closure, and both were reprieved. When Holmbury and Wotton had been abolished, Abinger Hammer again came under attack, and despite support from some of the Governors (of both schools) failed to convince Sir Keith Joseph that it should continue.

Before the Appeal against closure was rejected application had been made to establish a charitable trust, and the school, which had closed its doors in July 1982 as Abinger Hammer County First School, opened them again in September in a new guise: a non-fee-paying school run by Abinger Hammer Village School Trust. Under its wing, and in the same building was, and is, a Nursery. It flies banners for small schools and Human Scale Education, and for the continuance of all village schools.

That it was too far for small children to walk to Abinger Common had been appreciated by the Inspector in 1870. This had not ceased to apply. New arguments - as well as speeding traffic in narrow lanes - were to hand. Small children benefit from starting school very close to home. They learn essential skills quickly in a small group. Confidence and self-knowledge gained at this age carry you on through later years of education. Such beliefs, and a strong feeling of community, have sustained the school, its teachers and its many and generous supporters ever since 1982. It is hard work for all, but its value shines out.

The school in Abinger Hammer was started by the Farrer family, and five generations and their friends have now been involved in cherishing its educational functions. In Evangeline Farrer's time prizes were won in the Leith Hill Musical Festival; E M Forster attended performances where his aunt had taught sewing and heard poems; Frances Farrer, like her father, could fight the school's corner against the County Council. Today the school has a thoughtful and sympathetic landlord. Help in kind is very valuable. The long term aim of security through an endowment is no longer a dream; a very generous donation has joined Lady Richardson's legacy. Fund-raising continues with redoubled vigour.

Vivid details illustrating the history of Abinger Hammer School are to be found in a pamphlet "Abinger Hammer School; Some Glimpses from the Past", 25p at Kingfisher Farm Shop (in aid of School funds).

Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News November 2000, by Shirley Corke

