

# History of Guthrie School, Calne



***Calne - Guthrie School & Pupils c1907***

“Every exertion has been made by the managers to render this school really efficient, and all promises well”. The Inspector was clearly impressed by ‘Mrs Guthrie’s Mixed School’ in 1858, four years after its opening. The school was one of several Calne institutions encouraged and promoted by Rev. John Guthrie (vicar of Calne from 1835 to 1865) and his wife, Caroline. Mrs Guthrie and her husband (who was twenty years older) shared an interest in education and ‘good works’. Rev. Guthrie promoted parish schools, the Friendly Society and the Literary Institution, while Mrs Guthrie established a children’s hospital in Calne and an institution for the training of female servants (1849), as well as being a frequent visitor to Bristol General Hospital, where people noticed “her practical kindness and cheering encouragement” for the patients. Perhaps her most lasting achievement was in setting up and overseeing the school that took her name in Calne.

The school was built off Wood Street in 1854 and was affiliated to the National Society. It was described in 1858 as “recently erected, on the best principles, and amply supplied with every requisite”. There were 80 to 90 boys and girls, taught in two class rooms by a trained mistress, assisted by two pupil teachers. About half of the children were under, and half over, six years of age. In the early decades of the school’s existence, the infants were taught in the gallery of the main classroom. In January 1890, following a school inspector’s report that was very critical of the infants’ class, great alterations were made to the premises, and the Mistress declared the reopened school “perfect for the instruction of the infants”.

The first Mistress mentioned in the earliest school log book was Miss Mary Northeast, who carried on until 1868. Three Mistresses followed fairly quickly, and then two Head Mistresses, Miss Elizabeth Ballson and Miss Emma Beauchamp, between them served the school for nearly fifty years, until 1924. In the Victorian period, there were usually two pupil teachers assisting in the school, and in 1879 it was recorded that they received their instruction from the Head Mistress between 6.45 and 8.00 in the morning, before the main school day began.

School lessons in the 1860s included reading, dictation, writing from copy-books, arithmetic, geography, spelling, singing, scripture and needlework. From the beginning, Scripture lessons assumed a high importance. In 1868, the higher classes repeated the Parables and other parts of Scripture (like the church catechism) which they had learned by heart. The Vicar or his Curate sometimes took the Scripture lesson and heard the children sing hymns, and the older pupils occasionally attended church services – usually on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and Ascension Day in the 1880s.

The infants' class received "object lessons", which were approved annually by the School Inspector. By the 1880s, these fell into three categories: 'natural history' (beaver, dog, tiger, camel, bear); 'natural phenomena' (rain, snow, the sun, a river); and 'common objects' (needle, chair, paper, wool, glass). As a break from object lessons, the infants were sometimes given activities described as 'kindergarten exercises', such as paper-plaiting or bead-threading.

Singing also provided some variety for the pupils. Most of the songs they sang sound morally uplifting, if not exactly memorable: "Lazy sheep pray tell me why?" (1874); "Do no sinful action" (1866); and "I hear thee speak of the better land" (1863). Hopefully, there were a few more light-hearted ones, too, like "Rosalie the prairie flower" (1866). Mr Pullen, the church organist, was employed to teach singing, from 1887.

Poetry recitation was an important part of the school curriculum. In 1886, pupils were required to learn by heart "The Star" (standard one), "The Sale of the Pet Lamb" (standards two and three) and "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (standards four and five). The following year, the titles were "The Boy who told a Lie", "The Beggar Man", "The Lost Child", "The Village Blacksmith" and "The Burial of Sir John Moore".

Several half-day holidays punctuated the routine of school life. In the 1860s these were given for significant local events, like the opening of the railway (Nov 1863), the reopening of the parish church (Nov 1864) and the Oddfellows' fête (July 1869). Twenty years later, holidays were given for a wild beast show in town (Oct 1888), Lord Lansdowne's visit to Calne on his return from Canada (June 1888), an agricultural show (Sept 1881), the Foresters' fête (July 1882), and the opening of the new post office (Oct 1890). Sometimes, attendance was so low that the Mistress was obliged to give an unexpected half-day holiday, as in December 1870 when the circus was in Calne. Travelling menageries or 'wild beast shows' visited Calne at least once a year, dramatically reducing school attendances.

Attendance fluctuated for other reasons, too. A measles outbreak over Christmas and New Year 1888/9 closed the school for five weeks, very much longer than the normal two weeks' holiday at that time of year. (The only other substantial holiday was the summer break, usually a month's closure during August and known as "Harvest Holidays".) Only ten children appeared at school on one day in March 1891, when there was very deep snow on the ground for several days. Weather or family circumstances could significantly affect school attendance. Many children were absent each spring for potato planting and each autumn for potato picking, and in July 1863, the Mistress noted "several little ones absent, on account of the very cold winds". The following month, several of the bigger children stayed away to go out in the fields to work.

In the mid-1860s, many children were absent during the May fair in the town, their parents being afraid to send them unaccompanied through the herds of cows thronging the streets. In November 1893, floods in Calne affected several houses, including the Head Mistress' home, and the school was not opened. In March 1865, Edwin, Tom and George Goss were all absent with bad feet, due to broken chilblains. Some pupils' schooling was interrupted for other reasons; in October 1865 Joseph Duck had been absent for three weeks "to mind the baby", and in March 1866, Sarah Brewer was away on account of having no shoes fit to wear.

When children did attend school, their behaviour was generally good. Successive School Inspectors commented on the good discipline within the school, and one noted approvingly in 1889 that "the tone and manner of the children are good and the Religious instruction is given and received reverently". Comments in the log books mention the kind of minor misdemeanours familiar to generations of schoolchildren: breaking windows during the dinner hour; using bad language; throwing stones on the roof; and chalking the walls during play-time (all noted in the mid-1860s). Only occasionally was behaviour so bad as to worry those who ran the school. Impertinence to the Mistress was not tolerated, and in March 1874 the Vicar reprimanded the children for destroying and injuring the school shed. Punishments were rarely specified but did not always involve the use of the cane. In 1867, Charles Pontin was kept from play all day and given fifty lines to copy for "calling Ellen (the pupil teacher) names in the street".

School life was not all learning and discipline. Breaks in routine were fairly plentiful and greatly anticipated. Heavy snowfalls often meant that school was closed; Miss Ballson noted in February 1892 that she "allowed the children to remain by the fire and amuse themselves for a while and then sent them home". In September 1870 the Mistress took the older children into the fields to pick blackberries. Ten years later, the presence of a school photographer "interfered a little with the ordinary routine". There were also occasional school outings. Forty older children who belonged to the 'Band of Hope' were taken to hear a Temperance lecture in 1865, while two years earlier older children had gone to hear an address given to a missionary meeting in the town. Rather more unusual was the occasion in 1868 when the children attended "an exhibition of models of castles etc. on the Green". By the end of the century, one of Calne's major industries also touched the life of the school; in June 1896 the Mistress gave a day's holiday, as many children were going on the "annual Harris' trip"(a seaside excursion to Bournemouth). In 1897, the school children were given three whole days holiday to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

There were also a lot of visitors to the school. In the early years of the school's history, many were women from Calne who came to inspect the girls' needlework and hand out more material for them to work on. Garments like shirts, stockings and pinafores were made in school and sold to the children at half price. The school's founder, Mrs Guthrie, was a frequent and welcome visitor. The early years of the first school log book abound with mention of her visits, which generally involved 'treats' for the children – tea and cakes, 'gingerbread nuts', sweets and nuts, or granting a half-holiday for her birthday and wedding anniversary. She seems to have been a lively, considerate woman, who showed interest and affection for the children. On one occasion she "delighted the children by sending up two bottles of caterpillars". In April 1866 the school received news of her death, and it closed on the afternoon of her funeral, as a mark of respect. Aged 51, she

had died of bronchitis following an accident to her foot. The local newspaper spoke of an “excellent lady”, who had used her wealth and leisure for many worthy local causes – “a woman of large means, with a conscientious determination to use them for the benefit of others”.

Only four months before, Mrs Guthrie had proudly watched when a stone was erected over the school door bearing the name ‘Guthrie Juvenile’, by which the school was subsequently known. As the decades passed, it was necessary to find more space for teaching. The new infants’ classroom in 1890 was a great improvement, but by 1903 further expansion was needed. The final outcome was a three room school: the girls’ school room, 31 feet long and 18 feet wide; the infants’ room, 22 feet by 18 feet; and the class room, 20 feet by 18 feet. All three rooms were fifteen feet high. The school holidays were extended to six weeks in 1903 so that the alterations could be finished, but men were still at work in September on the new class room and offices. The improvements meant that school work was now carried on more effectively, and an average of 49 girls and 61 infants were taught in 1904.

The school log book in the years following the improvements show entries not very different from those of forty years earlier. However, pupils in 1905 had more time off than usual. In addition to the official school holidays – which now consisted of Christmas (2½ weeks), Summer (the whole of August), Easter (10 days) and a half-holiday on Shrove Tuesday – the school was closed for ten weeks, including the whole of May and June, due to an outbreak of measles followed by a whooping cough epidemic. The younger children still received their object lessons, Wombwell’s Menagerie still paid an annual visit to the town and “all sorts of paltry excuses” were still given to explain absences from school. Nature study walks had by now become a regular, and enjoyable, part of school life.

With the formation of Calne Junior School in 1930, the Guthrie School became the infants’ school for the town. The new school opened with 92 children, taught by the Head Mistress and three other teachers. Log book entries from the 1930s have a more modern feel about them; there were now regular medical, dental and hearing inspections for the children and lists were kept of children who had been vaccinated. Father Christmas now visited the children before the school broke up for Christmas and the pupils joined in the May Day festivities at the Recreation Ground. As more children were taught, more accommodation was needed. In 1959, with 154 children on the roll, additional class rooms were built in Bryan’s Close Road. The whole school moved to a new building in William Street, in the north of the town, in February 1964, by which time over 260 children were taught. It merged with the infants’ department of the adjacent St Dunstan’s School in 2002, and current attendance stands at 228 juniors and 124 infants, as well as 38 in the ‘nursery’ year of four to five year olds.