

# Schools

It might be thought that not much education would have been available in earlier times. Knowing also that Mortimer's population was significantly smaller than now, it is interesting to note the large number and range of schools that have flourished here in the past.

## Early Schools

The Reverend Heycock, who came to Mortimer in 1671, took pupils at the Vicarage, now the house called Saddlers. Little is known except that the pupils were boys. Goodwins, a house in Lockram Lane occupied by Philip Chandler, was described as a school in 1775.

By 1809 Daniel Sweetzer announced in the Reading Mercury that he was opening a school in "*a newly-erected house on that salubrious and healthy place MORTIMER COMMON*". This was almost certainly West End House. It was to be for both sexes as he goes on to say "*His sister will attend to teach needlework*".



*Reverend Heycock*

Mortimer did not have a resident squire, so free education by the daughters from the big house was not provided as it had been in several neighbouring villages. However, the Misses Allfrey from Wokefield Park started a school at Wokefield Green, but did not undertake all the instruction themselves as the 1851 census gives Sophia Cook, the wife of a carpenter, as schoolmistress.

The 19th century saw the opening of a number of private schools. The Misses Crapp had a school for girls at East End House, which is on the corner of Kiln Lane and The Street. The proprietresses were very young, and possibly orphans who had to support themselves, for the Vicar, the Reverend Harper, later Bishop of New Zealand, advised them on establishing the seminary in about 1850. The 1851 census said there were ten scholar boarders aged from three to fifteen, and that Miss Crapp was 24 and Miss Marianne 20. They were still running the school in 1869.

At about the same time Mrs Jane Brain and her daughter, Sarah Anne, ran a school at nearby Lime Tree Cottage on the corner of Mortimer Lane and The Street. Mrs Brain is described as a widow who was a dressmaker and milliner who also took in a lodger. Directories in 1868 call it a preparatory school, but later it was known as a boarding school. After Mrs Brain died her daughter continued with the school until nearly the end of the century.

Mr Charles Pinnell, son of the Minister of Mortimer West End Congregational Chapel, and himself a deacon, had a school for boys in a house near the chapel. He ran this school for many years throughout the middle and later years of the 19th century. It was known as a classical academy; the boys received a good education, reflected in their later careers. Some became notable missionaries. Both day pupils and boarders were taken.

The same house was used later as a girls' school called Minton House. The principal was Miss Bertha Knipe, and the school continued into the early twentieth century. Miss Knipe's parents lived with her, but her father, the Reverend Knipe, was not connected with the Congregational chapel.

### St. Mary's School

The site of St. Mary's School was purchased in 1771 for a nominal sum from Powlett Wright, Lord of the Manor, for the purpose of erecting a poor house, which was paid for by Clarke's Charity. It became redundant when the Union Workhouse at Bradfield was built, and on the appointment of the Reverend H. C. Harper as vicar, plans were made to provide "*education for the labouring classes*". Within a year or two a Parochial School was established in the old poor house under the control of the vicar, with Mr and Mrs Nickless as master and mistress. £78 was spent by Clarke's Charity: "*I will have an estimate prepared of the cost of these repairs and alterations*" runs part of a letter about them "*allowing a plentiful whitewashing to destroy the vermin of the late inhabitants and make the premises more wholesome and comfortable*".



The Charity undertook to be responsible for repairs and maintenance. By 1863 this building was inadequate and in 1869 the new St. Mary's Schools were completed. They consisted of a mixed school and an infants' school, separate playgrounds for girls and boys and houses for the master and infants' mistress. The cost was £1,700, paid by Richard Benyon who also paid for another classroom in 1892. The Schools Inspector reported regularly and the standard was excellent. By December 31st 1901 there were 202 children at the school. Attendance was of prime importance as a government grant of £1 2s 0d for juniors and 17s for infant pupils was payable. Children were provided with penny dinners at the Working Men's Club. The

school was used for the distribution of bread on St. Thomas's Day, Sunday School and village entertainments. In January 1899 the Duchess of Wellington participated and sang comic songs.

Under the 1918 Education Act continuation classes for older children had to be provided and by 1919 more space was desperately needed, so the school managers asked Richard Benyon if the school could use the Men's Club for handicrafts, cookery, needlework, carpentry and drill.

In the 1950s, two new classrooms were added, and in 1969-1970 the school's modernisation programme was completed. The playing field was given by the Lord of the Manor in the 1960s.

### **St. John's School**

In the later years of the nineteenth century the number of houses on The Common increased, with more children at that end of the village. The long walk down to and up from St. Mary's School must have been tiring for little ones, so in 1889 an Infants' School called St. John's was started on the common. In 1892 Richard Benyon provided the present buildings, now extended. Children living below the junction of The Street and Kiln Lane continued to go down to St. Mary's. There was capacity for 110 children between the ages of five and eight, after which they were to go to St. Mary's. In the early days attendance was about fifty-one, rising to seventy-nine by 1899. By 1939 numbers had dropped to thirty and there was only one teacher. Then came the evacuee children from London, accompanied by their teachers. The visiting teachers decided to go back to London, so an extra teacher was engaged to help who then stayed at the school for the next forty-four years. In 1969 it was decided to close the infants' classes at St. Mary's and transport was provided to bring those children up to St. John's. Numbers rose to about two hundred. Today it is a flourishing school, with more than a hundred children who enliven the village with their bright red jumpers. The Principal has always been a woman, and there was a teacher's house in the grounds, but this is now the headquarters of the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes .

### **Mortimer West End Village School**

Almost opposite St. Saviour's Church stands the Church School, with the teacher's residence attached. They were given in 1860 by Richard Benyon and built by Messrs F. Cane of Monk Sherborne. In 1863 the school was provided with a certificated teacher and placed under government inspection. Unfortunately it had to be closed in 1929 because there were not enough children in the village to warrant its further use, and since then the children have attended the Church of England school in Silchester. During the Second World War the school was used as a store-house and for chicken rearing. In 1958 the school and house were renovated and became a private residence.

## Other Recent Schools

The Reverend Lovett-Cameron (later Canon), Vicar of Mortimer 1880-1913, had a school at Abbeycroft, which was then the Vicarage. He started with six pupils and a tutor, and the school expanded until a new dormitory floor, now removed, was added to the house. The young clergymen employed as masters were also curates in the village, and joined in the local cricket. The pupils were boarders, and were prepared for Eton and other public schools.



*Reverend Lovett-Cameron*

An important school to start at the end of the 19th century was the 'Misses Johnsons'. Miss Pither began this at Maisemore in St. Mary's Road, but it was soon taken over by Miss Helen and Miss Maud Johnson, two of the five Miss Johnsons involved in the school at various times. They moved to Thornhill in West End Road, now the Thornhill Pharmacy. A group picture shows about 26 pupils. At the turn of the century they moved again, this time to Crossways in Victoria Road by the Fairground. The school was called Chichester House. Boarders were taken as well as day scholars; a good education was provided for girls up to school-leaving age, and small boys. A photograph taken about 1914 included 40 children. Some time after the First World War the school transferred to Chichester Bungalow in King Street, with an adjoining hut for classrooms. A navy blue uniform with red trim was introduced; no boarders were taken. The Misses Johnson retired in 1931, but the school continued until about 1950, run by Miss Bailey and other teachers, finally moving to The Poplars, Victoria Road, adjoining the old Crossways and Chichester House, all of which were demolished to make way for Badgers Croft.

At the start of this century there was a boys' school in King Street called Hillcroft; a 1908 photograph shows 26 boys of various ages and 5 masters.

**Hillcroft School** **FOR BOYS,**  
**MORTIMER COMMON, MORTIMER.**

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When the Palmer family sold Wokefield Park in 1936 the property was taken over by by the order of the De La Salle Catholic Brothers, an Approved School for about 100 boys and youths sent there by the courts. They received a general education plus training in farming and horticulture; discipline was strict. During the war the boys went out to work on local farms. After about forty years the school closed. The London Borough of Brent then ran Wokefield Park as a community home for boys, but agriculture and gardening were no longer on the curriculum. It closed in 1985.

In 1946 Mrs Blewden, a qualified teacher, opened a small preparatory school in Mortimer. Premises were variously in Victoria Road, West End Road and then at the Garth Club. The school ran for about eleven years, but after the trained teacher left, it became a nursery school.