

DOLTON SCHOOL (PART 2. Conditions)

Update: Thanks to someone lending me a Billings Directory of Devon dated 1857, I am now able to confirm that the schoolmaster was John Lyne at that time and so was almost certainly the head teacher from the time the school first opened. In this second part, we will look at the conditions found at our local school in the early years of the 20th century:

At the turn of the century there were 72 children on the books, and of course there were just the 2 classrooms then. It should be obvious to say that there was no electricity to provide lights, hence we find a comment in December 1906 saying “Dark days. Children have difficulty at times to see to do their work.” This would imply that there were no candles or lanterns either, but there were other challenges also. In 1904 the log book records “Traces of mice, so a cat was placed in the school overnight.” The following year they seem to have been plagued by wasps.

In 1909 a sanitary inspector remarked on the “thoroughly dirty condition of the school and windows”; in February 1913 it was declared so dirty that it was “unfit for use”. There are certain standards of hygiene and comfort which we take for granted these days, which were not always so. When I left Dolton school in the early 1970s the lavatories were pretty much as they had always been, and were for the most part outdoors, although, of course, we had running water. In 1913 the hand-pump failed and so the “lavatories have to be flushed with buckets of water”. It was almost a month before the pump was repaired but even then, it did not work properly and so “the cistern in the boys’ offices is still out of order”. A school medical officer visited 2 weeks later and still the “lavatory accommodation” was a problem. Nearly a month passes and still the toilets are not working properly. Late in 1914 and the state of the lavatories is still being discussed. The pump failed again in early 1915 “no water on the premises”. June 1915 and another visit from the sanitary inspector who says that the boys’ urinal should be flushed regularly and the “stoppage of a drain in the boys’ offices is causing considerable offense”. I’ve not visited the school for a while, but I hope things are better today.

There are regular mentions of sickness including measles, ringworm and ‘itch’. Diseases considered infectious required the child to stay away from school due to the lack of the kind of medicines we take for granted these days.

In late 1914 there was an outbreak of diphtheria, so they then start sprinkling the floors of both classrooms with disinfectant; the authorities are informed and 2 days later a ‘sanitary inspector’ arrives. In Feb 1915 Winifred Bater of Ivy Cottage died (age 4) of diphtheria and so the entire school has to be disinfected and sulphur burned in both rooms.

Discipline then was different to what we might expect today and in 1910 twelve-year-old Bessie Bealey was caned for disobedience and clearly she did not take this well; She and her sister left the school and sent back a message saying they would not be returning – she did eventually return, and later became a ‘pupil-teacher’, so that ended well. It seems that Alf Folland also fell foul of this disciplinary system during his time at the school, some others were not individually named.

24 May 1911 Thomas Martin (aged 9) from Eastlake was run over by a car outside the school and broke his leg; was this the first recorded ‘road traffic accident’ in Dolton involving these new-fangled automobiles?

In winter a fire had to be lit in each classroom. Sometimes there were arguments between the head teacher and the caretaker over whether fires were necessary and whose job it was to light them .

In April of 1913 the log book records the head teacher saying “I have been compelled to send [a boy] home this morning as he smells so badly” remembering that these were times when almost no-one in Dolton had a bathroom or running water, and the personal hygiene of most boys would have been a little less than fragrant, this statement leaves me wondering just how bad the boy had to be to get sent home!

[to be continued] RD—Research Editor