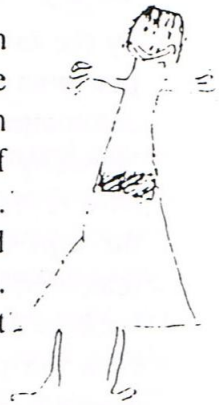
SCHOOLDAYS IN THE THIRTIES

Eric Bullen



The majority of the children attending Swannington school in the 1930s, naturally lived in the village but a few, whose families had earlier connections with the school came from surrounding areas such as Limby Hall and the Swannington side of Coleorton. Among the latter were my brother, sisters and I. Although we lived in what is now Moor Lane, we attended Swannington School because our mother had been a pupil there. The distance of our daily walk was not so very much more than that of children living near Hoo Ash or the top of St George's Hill.

The appearance of the school buildings in the 1930s differed little from the present day except for the recent addition of the flat roofed entrance hall. An area of tarmac in front of the school was the only smooth part of the playground. Between it and the wall of the adjacent Co-op stores was a strip of ground of uneven surface which ran from the entrance gates, past the infants classrooms and the boys' lavatories, up to the top playground. The school playing field also had a neglected look with infrequently mown grass and a strip of bare earth, which served as a cricket pitch, in the middle.

There were four classrooms, the 5-7 year old infants were taught in the North end of the school and the Juniors in the South end. Between these two teaching areas was the school hall. The two junior classrooms were created by dividing the large chapel-like South wing with a sliding wood and glass partition which was permanently closed. The hall could also be partitioned but this was invariably open. All the classrooms had adjacent cloakrooms which were essential in days when pupils walked to school in all weathers.

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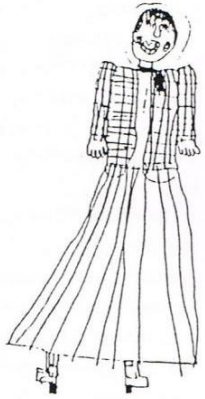
Miss Wright, the youngest teacher, was in charge of the reception class and Mrs. Hammond, the eldest, taught the upper infants. The 7-9 year olds were taught by Miss Robinson, and the headmaster, Mr Smith, took the 'top' class. Pupils in the reception class sat in small chairs at low tables but in the other classes seating was usually of the double-desk pattern i.e. two pupils sitting side-by-side at a desk about four feet wide.

Each classroom had at least one blackboard, essential for the 'chalk and talk' teaching method adopted at that time. Slates were used by children when they first entered the school and when they had learned to form their characters they progressed to pencil and then pen and ink. Pupils ability to cope with writing with pen and ink varied considerably and was measured by the inverse of the number of blots on the pages of their exercise books. If a pen was dropped a crossed nib often resulted but a replacement was not automatic and attempts would be made to straighten out the nib to a useable if 'scratchy' state. Blotting paper was an essential if excessive 'smudging' of the slow drying ink was to be avoided. Ink was contained in porcelain wells let into the tops of the desks and a common prank was to place a small granule of (calcium) carbide into these wells which would then emit pungent blue tinged bubbles of acetylene gas. Naturally a boy would never 'doctor' his own well in case the prank was detected by the teacher - he would be blamed even if innocent. Carbide was readily available as acetylene lamps were still in use on bicycles and of course by miners.

Mrs Hammond was the longest serving member of staff having taught the parents of some of the pupils of the late thirties. She is remembered particularly for her daily hair-combing ritual. Having set the class a task which would keep them occupied for a while - either sums or writing - she would comb her hair prior to tying it in a bun and one of the girls of the class would be required to assist her and remove any grey hairs from the shoulders of her cardigan or dress. During the Winter months the classrooms were heated by coal-burning open fires and in the case of the Junior classroom adjacent to the road also by a coke burning stove. In very cold weather pupils would take their turn in sitting near the stove in order to "warm up".



Appropriate guards were of course provided round these heat sources. Fires were only lit in the hall for special occasions such as the visit of the "head-nurse" or school dentist. The school caretaker had to have these fires "up and glowing" by the time school began at 9 o'clock and at the end of the day was responsible for clearing the ashes.

Mornings usually began with prayers followed by calling the Register but on Monday mornings there was also the collection of the 'milk money' when most children handed over tuppence ha'penny (approximately 1p in today's currency) to pay for five daily bottles of milk which were drunk at morning playtime. The bottles, of a third of a pint, were sealed by a circular waxed cardboard disc whose centre could be pushed out to allow the milk to be drunk through a straw. On frosty Winter mornings the crates of milk would be placed by the fire to warm up a little in time for the break. Girls found the cardboard bottle tops useful as 'formers' when making pom-poms and when bound with raffia several tops could be sewn together to form place mats. No school dinners were provided and consequently most pupils went home during the lunch break. Working mothers were the exception then and children were glad of the opportunity to escape for a while. Those pupils living some distance from the school took sandwiches for lunch and were supervised by one of the teachers. This was usually Miss Wright, who cycled in from Gelsmoor, as the other teachers lived nearer to the school and could get home and back more readily.

Mothers meeting children at the school gates was not the common sight it is today; the younger children were usually escorted to and from school by brothers and sisters or by the older children living near them. Today' perceived dangers were not present then; traffic in the mid-thirties was light by today's standards and few parents were worried about the possible abduction of their children. Lollipop ladies had not been invented!

The school curriculum was designed to prepare pupils for 'the Scholarship' which was the precursor of the 11+ examination. Under the existing education system the grades attained in this examination determined the secondary school

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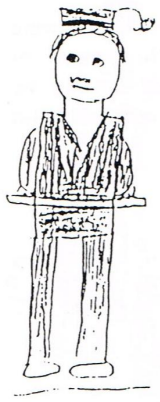

education for each pupil. The curriculum concentrated on the 3 R's but there were also lessons in which basic history and geography were taught

The school did not have a library of children's books but each class would have books of the appropriate standard which were used for class readings. The correct spelling of words was insisted on, spelling tests and dictation tests featured frequently on the class timetables.

An important part of the 'rithmetic curriculum was the learning of multiplication tables by heart and it would not be unusual for a passer-by to hear the rhythmical chanting of a class as it went line by line through one of the tables. Pupils had to learn up to the twelve-times table in order to carry out calculations in pounds, shillings and pence, or in yards, feet and inches.

School reports were not issued but any parent wishing to know the progress of a child could, of course, arrange to talk to the teacher(s). There were no "parents evenings" as such. Parental involvement with the school in the form of a PTA did not exist either.

In addition to more formal subjects there were periods of scripture, art and craft and PT. At appropriate times of the year classes might go on Nature walks, usually along the paths behind the school. Any 'musical' activities took place in the school hall which housed a harmonium as well as the school piano. Other instruments in the school were a few tambourines, triangles, bells and drums. Most children enjoyed the singing periods if only because it got them away from more taxing lessons in the classroom. Through these lessons children were introduced to simple musical notation as well as a varied range of songs. Mr. Smith was the organist and choir master at St. George's and several school pupils, both boys and girls were choristers. Choir practice was often held in the school hall on a mid-week evening.

Although a Church of England school there were probably more children from chapel-going families. There was a strong non-conformist tradition among the many mining families of

the village. The Vicar of St. George's paid regular visits to the school and would briefly visit each class room where he would ask a few questions to satisfy himself that the children's spiritual education was not being neglected. Until late 1939, when he was called to be an Army Chaplain, the vicar was Mr Wray.

Playtime activities usually involved taking part in the currently fashionable children's game. For the girls this might be hopscotch, skipping ropes, spinning top and snobs (the local name for fivestones) while for the boys it might be marbles, spinning tops, snobs and of course, in the Autumn, conkers. The collecting of cigarette cards was a common pastime in the thirties and school was a good place to swap cards from one's collection of footballers, cars, aeroplanes, film stars etc.

On frosty Winter mornings the playground provided an excellent surface for slide making, an activity entered into with enthusiasm by the boys and some of the girls. The slides would be made before school started and if the day remained cold sliding would continue at playtime. Incidentally all the boys wore short trousers, Summer and Winter, throughout their elementary school days and it was customary to start wearing long trousers at about 12-13 years of age.

PT could take place in the hall but more frequently in the playground. The boys would remove their shirts and jerseys and the girls would tuck their dresses or skirts into their knickers while they went through their exercises. The field was used most during the Summer months when the girls would play rounders and the boys cricket. The latter never appeared to be supervised; two 'captains' would be nominated who would then, in turn, select players from the available bank of 'talent'.

Behind the Co-operative stores and reached through the top playground was the school garden. In the late Spring and Summer terms the older boys and girls would have an opportunity for some practical gardening. Supervised by the headmaster they grew vegetables that would mature before the end of the Summer term. These included early potatoes and peas which were then sold to parents, the boys and girls weighing them out and collecting the money, an activity which today would be classed as 'practical number work'. There was not a large market for these vegetables as most parents grew their own even before

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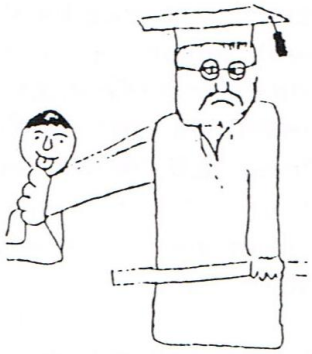
the Dig for Victory campaign introduced soon after the outbreak of war in 1939.

Corporal punishment was permitted and varied from the smack for the younger pupils to the cane for the older pupils guilty of a serious misdemeanour. Both girls and boys were recipients of this latter punishment which was usually administered across the palm of the hand. It was not unknown for pupils who felt a sense of injustice after caning to run home. A boy in the top class, whose head had been likened to concrete by the headmaster, chose, on a later occasion when the headmaster again talked of "concrete quantities", to call out "Like your head, Sir!" After receiving '3 of the best' he felt most upset at the non-reciprocal nature of this banter and ran home at morning playtime. He did not reappear until the following morning.



When war was declared in September 1939 there was a general fear of gas attacks and everyone was issued with a gas mask which had to be carried wherever one went. They were contained in cardboard boxes about 8"x6"x5", and could be suspended from the shoulder by a length of tape like a small satchel. Gas mask drills were held in the classrooms. The masks were suffocating to wear and a nuisance to carry and we were only too pleased when the regulations were eventually relaxed. As on many public buildings, the school windows were covered by a fabric mesh which was intended to reduce glass splinters resulting from bomb blast. Fortunately the effectiveness was never tested. At the beginning of the war there was the threat of bombing to cities and the village became host to evacuees from Birmingham. Those of elementary school age were easily accommodated by the school for the very short time they stayed.

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