



Swannington School, 150 years old

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In 2012 I was asked by Michelle King, Head of the village school, to suggest how the Trust might help in providing an input into a Victorian event celebrating the founding of the school. I offered to provide a display of photos of the school over the years, gathered by Bill and Lesley Hale and myself, and of the building alterations carried out over the years.

Subsequently I was asked to teach “object lessons” to a group of children and Trust members Maureen Partridge and Norma Sargent offered to do their Victorian housework demonstration for the children during the School Open day.

Michelle and myself worked together with a class to explore the background leading to the building of the school and the opportunities for children to learn in those times.

By 1800, schooling in Grammar schools, Charity schools, or Dame schools was only available for the rich. The only instruction in the three Rs poorer children could gain was at Sunday schools, run by the chapels using the Bible as text. These began to be organized by the British and Foreign Schools Society and the National Society for Education.

One of the first National schools locally was the Whitwick Free School, providing education for 80 boys and 70 girls and paid for by better off members of the Church of England.

In 1833 the Factory Act stopped children aged up to 9 years working in factories and ordered that children above 9 years should have 2hrs schooling each day. Grown-ups had little time available in their 14 hour long working days to make use

of the few booklets available for the working person to study to help their children but in 1847 hours of work were reduced for their 9-12 year-olds to 6.5 hours.

When the government began to organise education, managed by inspectors, it is not surprising



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that in 1841 only about half the women folk and a third of men had to “make their mark” rather than sign their names in the Marriage register. Children from Swannington often had a daily walk to Coalville and back to attend school until 1856 when Swannington Parish applied to provide a school for 88 children and a house for the master.

For a time delays meant that its 114 pupils had to meet in a barn until the school buildings were opened in 1862

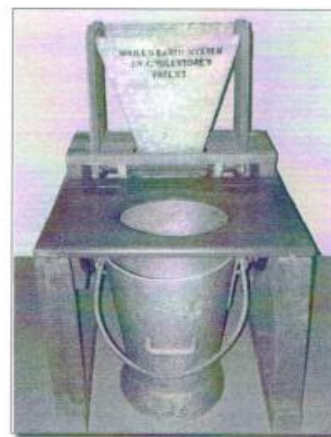
They appointed Eliza Beasley as Head who led the school for about 10 years before being replaced by a man. Things went well during that period but as the school roll increased problems arose.

Despite the conditions being found to be insanitary by 1872, with earth closets not working well and stoves leaking smoke when lit, the school continued to grow and soon required a new extension classroom for infants at the rear.

Compulsory education for 5-10s was introduced in 1880 with introduction of a common code into the curriculum for grant supported schools.

On 28 August 1894, the Mission room was added both to provide more space and also to make available a room to be used for services for villagers who were unwilling to take the long walk to the Parish Church on Sundays.

As numbers continued to increase to 317, the earth closets were moved further away from the teaching areas into the back room area. Even then there were threats to build another school in the district if the building was not brought up to standard so, when the school and mission room were connected, the toilets were moved outside.



Patent Earth closets were used until 1947 when mains water was installed in the village; before then monitors were required to visit the tap house in the village and carry the buckets back using a yoke.

When I visited the school the teachers already had the children excitedly working on the topic as evidenced by the colourful displays adorning the walls. I was impressed by the way they had learned and displayed the code of behaviour expected of Victorian children by sitting up, arms folded and not speaking until spoken to.

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Examples of the work produced as classroom displays are shown here.-



The study programme was came to a climax in an Open day to which villagers were invited.

The children, staff and some parents arrived dressed in period costume. With the ringing of the hand bell the children orderly marched into the Yard and were drilled through orders for the day by the Head through a series of exercises, after having had their hair and fingernails checked for cleanliness.



They then took part in a number of activities in classes or small groups to gain first hand contact with the sort of lessons their ancestors would have experienced such as writing with slate and stylus, copper plate lettering, tables, handicrafts and object lessons. Maureen and Norma, both Trust members, gave the children opportunity to witness and take part in washdays and housework.

The School's press release summed up the highly successful event -

To mark this special anniversary, the school hosted a Victorian 'Open Morning' on 6th November. Members of the community and parents were invited into school, they were given tours by members of the School Council and witnessed the many exciting activities such as the 'scullery maid experience', discussing and drawing Victorian artefacts, cooking, sewing and much more.

Comments from visitors included 'fantastic!', 'friendly and welcoming', 'informative' and 'very interesting - loved it!' The activities continued throughout the day with Victorian workshops run by Snibston Museum.