

## 'SAMUEL PHILLIPS MAY "A BELOVED MASTER AND FRIEND"?

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Samuel May was appointed to the mastership of Swannington school in 1885 in what was, like today, a period of great ferment in education. Compulsory school attendance for children from the ages 5 to 10 had been introduced five years earlier but universal free education was still six years away. While there is no doubt that there was a real hunger for education there must still have been a sizeable minority who, looking back to their own childhood, took the view that a lack of education had done them no harm and that taking the children from useful work was an unjustifiable imposition.

Swannington school had opened in 1862 with accommodation for 114 pupils and after a shaky start had settled down to provide an acceptable quality of education. Though the quality of the teaching may have improved the facilities remained sadly inadequate. As early as the 1870s the government inspector of schools was writing that, "... The earth system should be applied to the offices which are very offensive and a

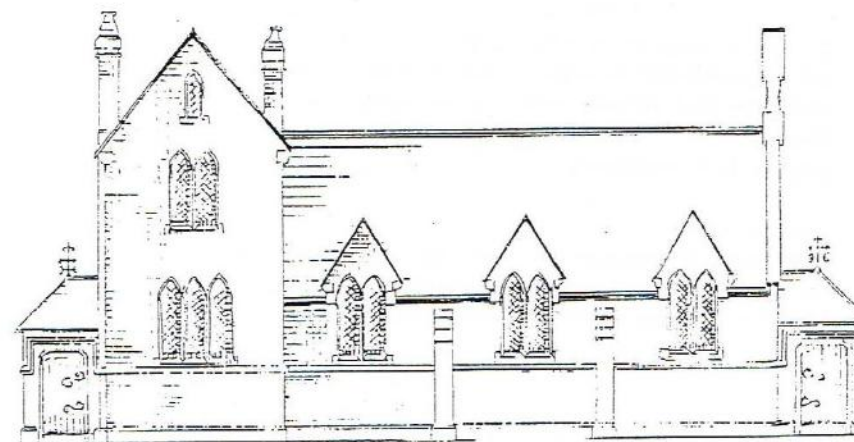
stove substituted for the incurably smoking grate." There was no water supply to the school; this had to be fetched from the pump across the road. It took twenty years to provide a stove, even longer to improve the toilets which were "so filthy and unpleasant that the headmaster would not approach near them" and, of course, mains water was not laid on until after the Second World War.

This then was the school to which Samuel Phillips May came from Netherseal to be its head in 1885 at the age of 29. Like Henry Bastard, headmaster of Whitwick Church School, Mr May was a Cornishman, who spent his working life in this district. He and his wife Jane moved into the school house and it was there that their two younger sons were born.

Managers of church schools at this period were always hoping to find a suitable person to be appointed as head, who could also play the church organ competently. In this respect S P May was ideal. Not only did he play at Swannington but for a period also at Whitwick church and at various times was choirmaster at both.

The head would have received training but Mrs May, who also taught in the school, was not qualified. In most small schools the head had to rely very much on unqualified staff, on pupil teachers and indeed on senior pupils who might be called upon to teach the infants the alphabet.

Though in its external aspect the school may have appeared similar to what we still see today, the layout inside and the method of teaching were vastly different. In the main class room, which was 40 feet long by 18 feet wide, the older children were taught, probably those of the top three standards, a total of 92 boys and girls in all. What a challenge to any teacher to cope with three classes of children of different ages and very different abilities in this one room. This was the time when children sat all the time in formal rows looking at the blackboard. Possibly there would also be a young pupil teacher or monitor as assistant. There were two other class rooms, one for 28 pupils and the other for 56, making a total of 176 places in the school.



Swannington School 1862

There would probably be somewhere between 150 and 170 children on the register. There is no list of the teachers working at Swannington during Mr May's period as headmaster though there are plenty of references to individual teachers. In the year immediately following his resignation there is a list relating to the Mixed School. Two unqualified women took Standard I and Standard II and a male pupil teacher in his third year took Standard III. The Head Master took Standards IV, V and VI.

Arrangements would have been similar in Mr May's time except that, until the Mission Hall was built in 1894, there was only the main room, the rear classroom which was occupied by the infants and one other room. The problems that faced him were similar to those in other local schools which had awkward premises, and where there was a great deal of absenteeism and much unruly behaviour. There was a lot of truancy, often at the behest of the parents. But in winter bad weather kept many children away and worst of all were the illnesses from which so many suffered and which on several occasions caused the school to be closed, sometimes for as much as four weeks at a time.



It's easy to imagine the effect on the school of so many absences and the near impossibility in large classes of helping children to catch up on what they had missed. Mr May himself wrote in the school log in October 1894 "Find difficulty in doing justice to work owing to irregularity in attendance."

Take the weather early in 1895:

"Jan 7th Re-opened School - Snow-fall - Poor Attendance = 112

Jan 21st Very severe weather. Many children absent in consequence.

Jan 25th No improvement in attendance. Sickness and the weather are the chief causes of the great irregularity.

Jan 28th Heavy fall of snow. Poor attendance this morning. Only 63 here.

Jan 31st Weather severe - poor attendance - much sickness as well.

Feb 1st Stormy day. no schooling in consequence.

Feb 8th Friday - Sharp Frost - poor attendance. Present = 93.

Feb 19th Poor attendance - Several children cannot attend owing to feet being "frost bitten". Some children have suffered in the same way with their hands. A few bad cases."<sup>1</sup>

Then there were the children's illnesses. When a child had an illness such as scarlet fever his brothers and sisters would have to stay away.

The worst period was in 1898.

"March 11th The spread of measles has caused a falling off in attendance as under:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Morning	140	125	122	114	106
Afternoon	141	123	111	113	101

March 18th Owing to the outbreak of measles the average this week has fallen to 103, with 148 names on the register.

March 25th Measles still prevalent. Average for the week 103.

March 28th The Managers have closed the schools for a fortnight."

<sup>1</sup> Mr May had only to contend with winter weather but there was a time after he left when it was the heat which kept children at home. On July 10th 1903 74 children were absent due to fierce heat and the weather was tropical.

This outbreak of measles affected many schools in the district.

These relate to a period after Mr May had left but he had had plenty of difficult times. In 1894 children were away with scarlet fever, often called scarlatina, and measles and on April 6th the Medical Officer of Health and the Sanitary Inspector gave notice of closure of the school for three weeks, subsequently extended by a further week.

Problems were not only caused by the absences of pupils, staff, too, were subject to illness. It was almost impossible to run the school if any of the staff were away and when Mr May himself was ill it had to be closed for a fortnight.

Absences caused by weather or illness may be unavoidable but there were other reasons for children to be missing and the situation on a Friday afternoon was much worse than at any other time.

Mr May's successor wrote in 1898

"The attendance is remarkably poor. There have never been 139 children present since the beginning of October, although there are 154 names on the books, and the weather has been favourable. The result of inquiry shows that the following are the chief causes: late rising; going errands; Coalville Market. (On three Friday afternoons the attendance has only reached 99, mainly through scholars being away at Coalville); potato getting, the weakness of parents in granting a child's request for a holiday; and in Sts V and VI the low percentage, 71, is brought about by children being kept at home to help their parents either indoors or outside. In the first five cases I have remonstrated with the parents, and also in the sixth, except where sickness would have rendered it a hardship for the mother to dispense with the child's services."

There were other occasions when parents kept children from school one such is found in the log for

July 5th 1895 "Many children absent. Hay-making and fruit gathering keep numbers at home".

And again on October 1st "The attendance this week is bad - so many children are at home "Blackberrying" and Potato getting."





There were plenty of other reasons for occasional absences. There were the occasions when children went to the circus, the Menageries or the Wakes. Then there were times when the school was closed for polling day or to prepare for some event such as an evening concert. It would be interesting to see an attendance register for this period but the only detailed list is that for the week of the measles outbreak set out earlier.

From time to time there are notes of children being admitted who had had no previous schooling such as Sam J Finch who came at the age of 11 knowing nothing having never attended school. The same seems to have applied to a boy identified as SC who was to present a problem to successive headmasters because of his behaviour and his truancy. This is what Mr May wrote about him in May 1896: "The boy SC has not been at school since Tuesday afternoon. He was, however, brought by his mother this afternoon, but made such a noise and kicked about so much that he was allowed to follow his mother home. He is quite beyond the management of his parents." At one point SC had made 2 attendances in 5 months. In June SC's name is taken off the Registers by order of the Managers for bad attendance and disobedience. Later he is allowed back but still continues to play truant.

Mr May's successor, Mr Woodward fared no better. On November 12th 1897 there is more trouble with SC. "On Wednesday morning SC was expelled by the Managers. On two occasions this boy after being punished for insubordination used impertinent and abusive language to the master, standing up at his desk and shouting across the school room. His parents were appealed to but encouraged him in his breaches of discipline... The attitude assumed by the former master towards the Managers and his continued residence in the village have doubtless helped to bring about this state of things". On November 19th SC was again readmitted with the consent of the Managers.

These incidents have been set out because of the odd reference to "the former master". It is almost incredible to think that Mr May who had had difficulties with the same boy would choose to do anything to hamper the efforts of his successor.

These then are the problems the teacher had to face, unsuitable premises with large classes, absences of children and staff, and bad behaviour. How then were the children taught and what were the results?

There was a lot of learning by heart, multiplication tables, long poems and the catechism. We have to thank Mr Woodward who wrote so much more in the log book than Mr May for information about what was learnt in Swannington School in the year following Mr May's departure. The recitations for the younger children were poems by Mrs Hemans and Longfellow and for the three senior Standards there was a long piece from Shakespeare's King John.

The use of object lessons was very popular at this time. The idea was that children can learn efficiently through their senses and so objects were selected for them to touch, taste or smell. They would be taught about the various properties of the chosen item. This system properly used was an excellent tool and particularly for teaching science, but it was rarely used correctly, and often degenerated into boring rote learning.. Look at the list for Standards I and II in Swannington in 1898 and it will easily be seen that the method would not be practicable for such subjects as Railway Engines, House building and the Post Office, but that a very interesting lesson which children would enjoy could made about chalk, coal, flax or a pocket knife.

There were regular visits and examinations by an Inspector of Schools and a note of his findings was entered in the log book. In addition there were scripture and drawing exams and the girls were judged for their needlework.

The Inspector's reports for the years 1890 to 1897 can be described as average, usually referring to the work being fairly or creditably done but there are some comments about discipline which in 1897 is described as having improved, and to the children not showing enough intelligence particularly with regard to reading

Where Mr May was sparing in his comments on the subjects being taught and the attainments of the children, Mr Woodward goes on at great length about the backwardness of the children. He started at the school at the beginning of October 1897 and by the 8th he is writing that





"Reading in the upper standards is unintelligent, and the articulation is indistinct. The poetry which the pupils have learned is repeated in parrot-like fashion, and with false expression." He adds that singing has been neglected.

In the following year he has an interesting comment that in the reading the prevailing faults are lack of intelligence and indistinct utterance but that the latter may partly be due to the peculiarities of the dialect. He adds that there are also an unusually large number of children whose organs of speech are defective. But he can't refrain from adding "Still it is so widespread as to point to indifference on the part of teachers in the past."

These are only some examples of his comments: he was very scathing about the children's competence in arithmetic and grammar and also in music. This latter is surprising as one of the few things that seems clear about Mr May is that he was a competent musician and, very probably, a gifted one.

By July 1898 Mr Woodward has gone and Mr Coy has arrived. This is one of his early comments

July 15th "Very fair progress has been made this week but the work is much handicapped by wretched attendance. The order has much improved this week although there still exists a great tendency to talk &c. There is a great lack of tone throughout the school & good discipline can only be maintained with much effort. The children are most inattentive & it is most difficult to get them to interest themselves or to display any enthusiasm about their work."

Does this, if true, reflect on Mr Woodward's, or his predecessor's, competence or is he just exaggerating the poor situation at the start of his tenure in order that any improvement would appear rather greater than might be justified. The truth is that the children would often be poorly clad and coming to the school in bad weather would be sitting in a cold room, sometimes in wet clothes. Children would often be hungry. It is little wonder that teachers found difficulty in rousing enthusiasm among them.

Mr May made his final entry in the school log in these laconic terms –  
"Sep. 29th 1897 Closed school to-day until Monday next. Ot. 4th.  
Mrs May (Art. 68) resigns to-day.  
Resigned to-day, the mastership of the Swannington N.S.

Signed

Sam. Phillips May"

This entry is unlike those of his successors, who were anxious to say where they were going so that future readers would realise how much they had bettered themselves.

Two photographs survive from S P May's period as headmaster with the same teacher shown on both, a man in his early to mid-thirties. There would not be two masters of that seniority in a school the size of Swannington at that time and it is reasonable to identify the man in the picture as S P May. He looks as though he would have no difficulty in being firm where necessary but also as though there was a gentler side to him, a man who could give support to an unhappy child.

On leaving the school Mr and Mrs May also had to leave the school house and they went to live temporarily in The Grove only a couple of hundred yards from the school.

While Mr and Mrs May were at the Grove a presentation was made to them. Probably it would be the custom to make a presentation to a man who had served as head for so long but the nature of the gifts and the praise with accompanied them seem to indicate genuine feeling. The Vice-Chairman of the Parish Council, Levi Lovett, the future Miners' Agent, took the Chair as the Chairman of the Council, George Choyce, was ill. Mr Lovett referred to the excellent work done by Mr and Mrs May, and the uniform kindness shown to parents and children, and their willingness to help in any good cause. He then called upon Mr Atkins to make the presentation. On behalf of the inhabitants of Swannington Mr Atkins had pleasure in making the presentation of a gold watch and silver tea service to Mr and Mrs May respectively, as a small token of regard and appreciation of their faithful services. Mr May who was evidently touched by the warm feelings shown, thanked all who had worked so whole-heartedly in getting together such a beautiful present. He could safely say that when he commenced work at Swannington





School nearly 12 years ago, his watchword was "Be just and fear not" and in that spirit he had endeavoured to carry out his duties. The members of the collecting committee stated that they had met with hearty receptions, the inhabitants contributing spontaneously. Mr James Glover then addressed the meeting and stated that as a parent he could testify to the excellent manner in which his children had been taught and cared for by Mr and Mrs May.

Had there been serious fault to find with his teaching or any reflection on his character the event would surely have been in a much lower key, if it had taken place at all. During twelve years at Swannington he must have been well known in Thringstone and in Whitwick. His next appointment was as headmaster of the Thringstone Church School and it is difficult to imagine that he would have secured that job if he had not been thought highly of in the district.

Why did he leave Swannington and take a position at a nearby school that could not be seen as a significant advancement? Possibly he had difficulty in working with the vicars who came here after the death in 1893 of Frederic Thorpe Pearson. There is nothing in the report of the village presentation to Mr and Mrs May to show that the Vicar of Swannington attended even though he was the chairman of the Managers of the school. Nor was he shown as being present at Mr May's funeral a few years later although several well known Swannington residents were there and there were flowers from past members of Swannington choir and from Mr Pearson's widow and family who were then living at Leamington.

Of course the early twentieth century was not an age of enthusiastic ecumenism particularly among the members of the established church. The sight of the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his own cathedral, embracing the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster would have provoked the most awful ructions throughout the land. This could well have been a factor in any problems between dominie and cleric since, as we shall see, Sam May maintained friendly relations with several of the district's leading Roman Catholics.

Another possibility is that Mr May might have had doubts about his health. He might have worried about his family's situation if he was not fit to work and to vacate the school house. He would be trying to find a way of protecting his wife and his sons, who were still young. Mrs May was not herself a properly qualified teacher and in the Inspector's reports there is an annual reference to her being "continued under Rule 68"

This aim of providing for his family if he became unable to work or died young seems likely to have been at least a factor in his decision. Be that as it may Sam May was appointed to the headmastership of Thringstone school while his wife became the licensee of the Railway Hotel at Whitwick where the family took up residence

No log book has been found for Thringstone School but in the Coalville Times there are descriptions of children's parties and concerts to indicate a happy time spent in charge at Thringstone. In February 1900 there was a concert at which Mr May sang "Wonderful Scholar" and "What an Englishman is made of" as well as acting as accompanist. That concert was in aid of the school extension fund, but a year later he organised one in connection with the Gracedieu Park Cricket Club. Charles Booth of Gracedieu Manor presided and his daughter Imogen and S P May himself were among the accompanists. The evening opened with the playing of a piano solo "Versailles Gavotte" by Mr May's eldest son Oliver. This particular concert took place only a week after a treat given by Mr and Mrs Booth to 250 children in the school. Charles Booth's daughters and one of his sons in law were among the helpers. Thringstone still owes a great deal to the family and it is good to note the amount of time which they gave so generously to Thringstone events in addition to their financial aid. There was a splendid tea followed by an equally splendid entertainment, a Christmas Tree and presents. Mr May was master of ceremonies and the entertainment consisted of "a professor of legerdemain who delighted his audience with the most astounding tricks."

In 1905, at the early age of 49 Samuel May died, after being ill for some months. In the eight years since he had left Swannington five men had succeeded him as head there, a position he had kept for 12 years. The of him and of his funeral show a popular man who had worked





harmoniously with Catholics as well as members of his own denomination. Those at the funeral included R Carter, headmaster at Holy Cross School, there were wreaths from Father O'Reilly and the teachers at Holy Cross School and also a separate one from the children at Holy Cross. Charles Booth of Gracedieu and Father O'Reilly did not attend but sent their carriages, a custom at the time to show respect.

Mrs May seems to have quickly established a good reputation as an excellent hostess as the Railway Hotel was chosen in December 1898 as the venue for a complimentary dinner to William Melling, Manager of South Leicestershire Colliery, when he left the district.<sup>2</sup> She continued there for some time after her husband's death but by the time she died in 1924 she was living in Birmingham. Her body was brought back to Thringstone to be buried beside her husband's in Thringstone Churchyard.

S P May left an estate of almost £4,000, a lot of money in those days for a village schoolmaster. Although he was the owner of various properties they would not individually have been of great value. In 1901 he had bought three cottages in Talbot Lane Whitwick and he also owned Nos 1 to 5 Mammoth Street, a street which had some of the worst housing in Coalville. Mrs May must have kept some properties as there was a wreath from Whitwick and Coalville Tenants at her funeral.

What was Sam May really like? There is so little on which to base a judgement, just brief entries in a school's log book and a few references in the Coalville Times. Do we see him as an inefficient teacher who interfered with the work of his successor and was possibly a slum landlord? Or do we see the man who was described at the time of his death as being to the children of Thringstone "a beloved master and friend". He was clearly widely popular and one cannot think that after such a long stint in charge at Swannington he would have been appointed to the headship at Thringstone were not his professional

<sup>2</sup> William Melling was one of those who formed part of the exploring party who went down Whitwick Pit to bring up the bodies of those killed in the disaster of 19th April 1898. Dr Burkitt was in the chair and Father O'Reilly and J J Sharp were present. Quite a big event with all the Whitwick notables.

competence also respected. Surely the criticisms by his successor, who was in post for less than a year, should be discounted.

Notes.

Since the centenary celebrations for the Mission Room at the School, a log book has been found which starts in 1889. This is the main source used for information about the school in the 1890s

Background information particularly about object lessons is from The Victorian Schoolroom by Trevor May published by Shire Books

I am grateful to Mr Ron Goacher of Thringstone who gave me details of a number of references to the family in the Coalville Times, and to Mr John Colledge, who also supplied information.

## SNIPPETS

A trawl through the Coalville Times provides many interesting snippets that may be of interest to our readers. Over the years there have been a number of enterprises in Swannington, now long gone and almost forgotten. The business of Titley and Page selling war surplus Nissen huts, which cannot have lasted very long, was one of many occupations of Stan Page who now lives in retirement in Ibstock. Stan was born in the Tan Yard in 1920, he left Swannington school at the age of 14 and went to work for Robinsons in Piano Row as a joiner and undertaker's assistant. He joined the Hampshire Regiment in 1941 and saw service in North Africa, where he was wounded, and then in Sicily and Italy. On demobilisation as a colour sergeant he is described as a man of considerable resourcefulness who can be relied on to produce results. He returned to Swannington and took on jobs dismantling Nissen huts and then set up in business selling surplus huts to farmers who bought them for poultry and pigs. In the 1950s he bought two acres of land in Church Lane and for a time made sectional sheds and garages. He also farmed the surplus land and, with Bert Stacey, built the bungalow now owned by Joan Walker. Thereafter he had a number