

# Dorothy Speight's College Project in Pirton (1977)



## Introduction

Pirton village is situated thirty-four miles from London, on the north-western boundary of the County of Hertfordshire. Lying on chalk, most of the village is only two hundred feet above sea level. To the north-west the outskirts of the village meet the edge of a range of hills known as the Chilterns, where it rises to a height of 400ft above sea level. Pirton is a very old village and part of the southern boundary is formed by the Prehistoric route way known as Icknield Way. In 1835 and again in 1955, pieces of Roman pottery have been found in the village. Those discovered in 1955 have been dated back to the period between 90-90AD and this is further evidence to confirm the fact that the Romans were in possession of the area as early as the First Century.

In late Saxon times the manor belonged to Stigand, the Saxon Archbishop of Canterbury. During this period it appears that Pirton was a place of some importance, the population being in the region of 200 persons. After the Norman Conquest, Stigand was deprived of his seat and imprisoned by William the First.

At the time of the Domesday survey in 1086 Pirton was in the half hundred of Hitchin; it was assessed at ten hides, two of which were in the lord's demesne. The inhabitants of the manor were; an English Knight; 24 villeins; a priest; 29 bordars; a sokeman; 4 cottagers; and 10 serfs. There were 4 mills worth 73 shillings and 4 pence, and sufficient meadow for 10 plough teams. There was pasture for the cattle of the villains, and pannage for 500 hogs; the remaining pasture and woodland was estimated to be worth 10 shillings, making the total value of the manor £20.

By this time the village was part of the possessions of Ralph de Limesi, and it remained in his family until the end of the twelfth century.

During the reign of Stephen (1135-1154) a castle was built at Pirton. Unfortunately this castle has no history, all that is known is that the castle was of a motte and bailey type standing on a mound surrounded by a moat. There was an attached fortified village. The castle is thought to have been dismantled by Henry II (1154-1189). The site was eventually abandoned and is known locally as Toot Hill.

The village church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and although of Norman design it is built upon a religious foundation of a much earlier period. The first recorded vicar was Roger, who was instituted in 1218. Before the dissolution of the monasteries the living was under the patronage of the Prior and Convent of Hertford.

Interest in the villagers and their welfare began in 1641 when John Hammond, a local resident, directed in his will that £100 was to be invested in land. The interest from this investment was to be used to purchase apprenticeships in an honest trade for one or two poor children of Pirton. He also directed that two cottages should be purchased in the village and set aside for rent free occupation by poor families. In 1877 these cottages were demolished and rebuilt by the Hanscombes a local farming family, they can still be seen in the village today, where they continue to fulfil the purpose for which they were originally intended.

My personal interest in the village began last year, when I paid several visits to the present school before spending six weeks there sharing in its daily activities. I became fascinated by the old school building and all the additions which had been built on to them over the years. It was this, and the fact that the school is shortly to celebrate its centenary, which stimulated my interest to take a detailed look into the past.

My initial research revealed that this was not in fact the original village school. After making this discovery, I decided to widen the field of my investigation and look at all the educational provisions which had existed in the village during the Victorian era.

In making this survey I have found it necessary to use the term 'school' in the widest possible sense.

A great deal of the recorded evidence unfortunately appears to have been lost with the passage of time; I hope therefore that the information I have been able to find will be sufficient to show how education, backed up by government legislation, gradually succeeded in bringing about considerable improvements in the lives of the children of Pirton.

The historical facts given in this Introduction have been obtained from the Victoria County History of Hertfordshire Vol.3.

## Chapter One

### The village, its inhabitants and the plaiting schools

When the establishment of educational institutions was largely dependent on the benevolence of the local gentry, Pirton was a poor agricultural community. The main occupation open to the majority of its male inhabitants was that of ‘agricultural labourer’.

With the local population registered at 758 in 1831 a look at the figures below shows that there was a continual rise in the number of inhabitants in permanent residence, except for an unexplainable drop recorded in 1851.\*

### Total number of inhabitants in permanent residence

<u>Year</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Total</u>
1841	570	570	1140
1851	422	475	897
1861	482	538	1020
1871	499	582	1081

Unfortunately there is no evidence which points to any similar expansion in the labour force requirement. Indeed as the century progressed and farm mechanisation slowly began to take over, the agricultural labourer found himself facing the situation of too many people chasing too few jobs. Further examination of the census returns for this period shows that the regular employment available on farms in the parish was as follows:-

### Table showing number of “agricultural labourers” hired by yearly agreement

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of local farms Offering yearly employment</u>	<u>Number of men on yearly hiring</u>
1861	10	84
1871	9	73

Bearing in mind that agriculture was the main local industry and relating the regular requirements of the local farms to the village population then it is evident that the majority of those employed on the land would only be engaged on a casual basis during the busy periods of the farming calendar. The terms of employment for the casual worker covered, engagements only by the hour; week; or month, and in some instances for specific tasks.

The workers fortunate enough to secure regular employment by yearly hiring agreement were engaged for more specific duties which required a large degree of skill eg. Stockmen, ploughmen, shepherds etc. Although the work was physically hard, and the length of the average day was between eleven and twelve hours from Monday to Saturday, those workers employed on a regular basis considered themselves to be in a fortunate position compared with their fellow workers who were only able to obtain work on a casual basis as for them any chance of a reasonable period of full employment was mainly governed by the weather and the seasons. It

was at such times as hay making and harvest gathering, that their services were invaluable. But in the quiet seasons when the days were short, opportunities were limited to such tasks as hoeing, ditching or stone gathering. Due to the lack of alternative employment in the surrounding area, the wages of the “agricultural labourer” in Hertfordshire remained low. Set out overleaf is a table contrasting the earnings of the “regulars” with those being paid in the northern counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire (West Riding), areas in which industrialisation had taken place.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Herts</u>	<u>Lancs</u>	<u>Yorks (West Riding)</u>
Michelmas 1860	10s	13s - 18s	13s 6d - 16s
Christmas 1860	9s 6d – 10s	10s – 15s	10s 0d – 15s
Lady Day 1861	10s	10s – 15s	10s 0d – 15s
Michelmas 1869	11s 3d – 17s 11d*	15s	14s 0d – 24s**
Christmas 1869	10s 6d – 13s	12s – 15s	13s 6d – 16s 6d
Lady Day 1870	10s 9d – 13s	15s	13s 6d – 17s
Midsummer 1871	11s 6d – 13s	15s – 18s	15s 0d – 18s

\*Usually with an allowance of beer during haymaking and harvest.

\*\*Usually with bread, cheese and beer. (Bringing Literacy to Rural England 1972 –Hurt J S– The Hertfordshire Example p11)

We can calculate from these figures that the average weekly wage received by those in regular employment in Pirton during the 1860’s was ten shillings per week. The agricultural worker was in a poor bargaining position; the only possible opportunity of increasing income came at harvest time, when a special bonus known as the “harvest extra” was paid. This was a sum amounting to between £2 and £3; paid after the completion of harvesting. The arrangement for payment would be agreed upon at the time of the yearly hiring.

During harvest time there appears to have been several ways in which the casual workers were paid for their services, (exactly which method applied in Pirton I have been unable to discover) these were:

- a. An enhanced day rate
- b. Piecework
- c. Contract work

Because the casual workers did not work for a single employer all the year round, they would have been able to undertake piecework without hindrance of regular commitments. To the extent that employment was available then by working hard and completing the work quickly, they would have been able to move from one farm to another in order to boost their earnings.

Other extras which came the way of the agricultural worker during harvest time were a free beer allowance supplied by the farmer, and the granting of permission to glean the fields. This gleaning of the grain which had been left lying in the wheat fields was gladly undertaken by the workers and their families as the grain collected when milled often supplied sufficient flour to keep the family in bread during the winter months.

Despite the hardship which many families experienced due to the low wages and uncertainty of regular employment, the villagers of Pirton did not just sit back and

accept their lot; they looked for ways of supplementing their income and it was here that the women and children made their contribution. In order to supplement their income it was a custom of the district for some families to arrange the hiring out of their sons to local farmers. Where this was possible it was arranged on an annual basis, after the boys had reached the age of nine or ten. On taking up their employment they lived in at the farm and were only allowed to visit their families every third Sunday. The boys were employed mainly as horse keepers or plough boys and for these tasks they received 3s.6d. per week. The strange feature of this system was that no food was provided by the farmer, this had to be brought to the farms for them by their parents.

Situated to the south-west of Pirton are the towns of Luton and Dunstable, which in the late eighteenth century and for the greater part of the nineteenth century were centres of the straw hat making industry. Why this particular industry came to be so firmly established in this area is a debatable point. One theory put forward is that the soil in the area was particularly good for growing the varieties of wheat most favoured by the hat manufacturers. Whatever the reason, the growth of this industry in the area provided an alternative source of employment for the inhabitants of Pirton. The demands for plaited straw by the hat manufacturers resulted in a cottage industry being established in the rural areas around these towns, and in order to meet the demand local straw plaiting schools were established. These schools became a special feature of this area.

The standards to be found in these institutions varied considerably, some were basically nothing more than organisations for provision of child labour, cloaked under the guise of child education. Children began attending at an early age, usually when they were three years old and included the boys as well as the girls. The parents paid 2d. per week school fees, supplied their own straw, and sold the plait required when produced by their own children. In the worst kind of these institutions the function of the mistress amounted to nothing more than to see that the specified numbers of yards of plait were produced, even if the fingers of her young pupils became so sore they bled. Other straw plaiting schools were more humane, here the person in charge tried to teach the children how to read as they did the straw plaiting.

From evidence found in the census returns, there appears to have been in Pirton straw plaiting schools of both these types. A note appended to the census returns for 1871 confirms this, the text being as follow:-

‘There are in this village several cottages used in Plaiting Schools, where children are often at work till past 9 o’clock at night. Close and crowded places. Nurseries of moral and physical disease.’

No checks were ever made of the qualifications of the individuals who supervised the activities of these so called schools. [PRO Census Returns 1871 (RG10-1370)]

The main season for this ‘cottage industry’ was from December to May, and during this time the plaiting dominated family life. Children of six years of age could earn between 1s.6d. to 2s. per week, and when they had learned to use the straw splitter they could then increase their earnings to 1s. per day. The straw splitter is a small tool

which was used for splitting the straw into splints of varying thicknesses. The finer the splints used in the plaiting the higher the prices paid for the plait.

Once the girls had learned the craft of straw-plaiting they continued to use their skills throughout their life well into old age. This can be seen by looking at the picture of Sarah Pratt which is shown on the opposite page. Many women became so proficient that they could exceed the earnings of the agricultural workers. Often a Pirton housewife began her day at 4am. After plaiting for three to four hours, she would take her plait along to the local pawnbroker and leave it. The money she received was then used to purchase fuel for the family breakfast. [The Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Express 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1955]

## Chapter Two

### The establishment of St. Mary's National School

The deprivation experienced by the inhabitants of Pirton was not only limited to the question of work. There appears to have been no private benefactor available who was willing to provide the necessary funds so that a grant could be obtained from the National Society, to assist in the establishment of a school for them, 'Education of the Poor'. This may have been due to the fact that for nearly two hundred years Pirton had been without a resident Vicar. Most of the work involved in running the parish was undertaken by a curate and a few interested parishioners.\* The Vicar appointed to the living resided in the neighbouring parish of Ickleford, which is three miles distant. Although he rarely appears to have visited the village, the Rev'd. Thomas Thirlwall was not entirely divorced from the needs of his flock.

After being successful in establishing a 'daily school' at Ickleford in 1839, he turned his attention to the lack of any proper educational provision for the children of Pirton. In 1840 he wrote to the National Society stating that as 50 boys and 80 girls were attending regular education in the church on Sundays, he felt that the time had come when a building should be erected which could be used as both a 'daily' and a Sunday school.\*\*

After receiving assurances from the vicar that he would be able to find the necessary support required, the National Society supplied him with the documents which had to be completed before any grant could be considered.\*\* These were duly filled in and returned.

On hearing about the proposed school, some of the local farmers wrote to the National Society in protest. They stated that in their opinion the education being given on Sundays was sufficient for the children of the poor.\*\* Despite their attempts to get the project dropped, the Rev'd. Thirwell's application was accepted by the National Society on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 1840. Following acceptance 'Terms of Union' were drawn up and agreed upon, which stated:-

'Children should on Sundays and weekdays'

The children to be instructed in the Holy Scripture, and in the Liturgy and Catechism of the Established Church. The instruction to be superintended by the Parochial Clergyman.

The children to be regularly assembled for the purpose of attending Church.

The Master or Mistress to be a member of the Church of England.

Reports to be made annually to the Society and with the managers consent to be inspected.

Should any difference arise between the Clergy and the Managers of the School respecting religious instruction of the scholars an appeal is to be made to the Bishop of the Diocese whose decision is to be final.'\*\*

\*St. Mary's Church – Churchwardens Account Book.

\*\* National Society – Pirton File.

Having obtained support for his proposal from the National Society the Revd. Thirwell then went ahead with an application to obtain a government grant towards the erecting of the school. In 1833 Parliament had voted to set aside annually a grant of £20,000. for 'the erection of school houses.' In 1839 this grant was increased to £30,000. The payment of Government grants were made to aid private subscriptions and were channelled through the National Society or the British and Foreign School Society.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1840 a plan of the proposed National School to be erected at Pirton was submitted to the Council Offices at Whitehall by the Committee of Council on Education.\*

The school was to consist of one single room. The number of children for which it was intended was 133 boys and girls. The year 1841 must have been a very busy time for the Revd. Thirwell, for now he had to raise the local contribution which he had agreed to find in order that the National Society would support the idea of building a school. A private subscription list was opened, the details of which can be seen on the opposite page. These subscriptions amount to £94, and collections taken after sermons preached by visiting clergy amounted to a further £19.10s.1.5d.\*\* With no detailed estimates available as to the exact cost of the proposed school, it is difficult to assess how far these contributions went towards meeting the costs of providing the required school facilities. However the National Society agreed to the payment of a grant of £35. towards the costs, \* and bearing in mind that grants were only given where a school was to be opened free of debt, it can be assumed that the efforts which were made were acceptable. The enrolment of the Trust Deed on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1841 finally led to the foundation of the school.\*\*\* Mr. Delme Radcliffe of the Priory Hitchin donated a site on which the school was to be built. This was situated on the south side of Great Green, which lies close to St. Mary's Church. The foundations of the school were to be made of concrete and its walls had to be 9 inches thick. It was to have 8 windows, the size of each to be 4ft. x 2ft. and the window frames were to be made of wood, the building was to have a slate roof, and a brick floor. When the final plans were submitted to the Government for approval a suggestion was made that the site should be fenced round.\*\* This suggestion was accepted and the Vicar himself paid for the additional cost involved, which amounted to £42.12s.5.5d. When the Committee of Council Education were informed at their meeting on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1841 that the plans of the Pirton School house had been passed, they agreed to pay £74 towards the cost of its erection.\*\*\*\*

The construction of the school took place during 1842, but the actual date on which the school opened; how it was finished; and what provision was made concerning books or apparatus, is not clear. It was possible at that time to obtain a Parliamentary Grant for books,\*\*\*\*\* but whether this was applied for is by no means certain.

\* National Society – Pirton File.

\*\*St. Mary's Church – register of Baptisms, Burials and other Facts.

\*\*\* P.R.O. – Ref C54/12658

\*\*\*\* Treasury Building Grant Register – 103/53

\*\*\*\*\*Public records Office – Minutes & Reports of the Committee of Council on Education ED. 17/26

An entry in the Treasury Grant Building register shows that in 1854 Pirton was granted £15.13s.10d towards the cost of the cost of school furniture, and the replacement of the existing school floor by a wooden one. Whether the furniture referred to was the first to be provided in the school, or whether it was additional or replacement to that which was already there is not known.

The plans of the school before 1870 show no evidence of toilet facilities and one is left wondering exactly what the sanitation arrangements could have been. In a general report about Hertfordshire schools prepared during 1856 by the Rev'd. D.J. Stewart who was her Majesty's Inspector of Schools for Hertfordshire, concern was expressed about the condition of some 'school offices' in the county.\* Just how far these remarks could have been attributed to Pirton we are not sure, but judging from what some of the older inhabitants of Pirton remember of the sanitary arrangements existing in other property standing in the village at the time it is highly probable that they did.

\* Public Records Office – H.M.I. Report 1856 Ref Ed 17/20

Details of private subscriptions given towards the cost of the erection of St. Mary's National School

Original details to be found in the Register of Baptisms, Burials and other facts.

<u>Subscribers</u>	<u>Amount</u>		
	£.	s.	d.
Mr. Delme Radcliffe, the ground and subscription of	20.	0.	0.
Sir Edmund Filmer Bart M.P.	20.	0.	0.
The Vicar	20.	0.	0.
Rev'd. J. Peers (Patron)	10.	0.	0.
Mr Wilshere M.P.	5.	0.	0.
Mr J.M. Rerson	5.	0.	0.
Mr Bowyer	3.	0.	0.
Mr Throssell	3.	0.	0.
The Curate	2.	0.	0.
Mr. Joseph Lake	2.	0.	0.
Mr William Woolstone	2.	0.	0.
Mr J. Hawkins of Welbury	2.	0.	0.

Chapter Seven

## Conclusions

As we have seen there were various types of school in existence in Pirton during the period we have been looking at.

Although the situation which existed in the majority of the plaiting-schools is one to be deplored, it was in the better types of these institutions that the first seeds of education were sown. When in 1842 the Church took on the task of providing education for the children of the village, the reluctance by the parents to take advantage of what was being offered must be attributed to the hardship and poverty which surrounded their lives. On many occasions it was the meagre earnings of their children which prevented the family from having to face destitution.

This was not the only reason why the efforts of the clergy failed; the other important factor working against them was the unwillingness of the better off members of the community to support work which was being done at St. Mary's school.

We must not look upon these early attempts to bring education to the village as complete failures but rather as teething troubles in the early stages of a new way of life which was eventually to evolve.

In the late 1870s the village found itself having to abandon its isolated way of life. It began to have to take a look at what was happening in other places; at this time, and not before, was education able to make a real breakthrough.

The new Board School, because of its government backing, stood on a much firmer foundation than its predecessor. Slowly by taking short but firm steps, it was able to show the parents that by complying with the law and sending their children to school they would be helping them to be able to cope with the new pattern of life which was emerging throughout the country.

By the turn of the Century very few girls faced a life of continual straw-plaiting and the boys could choose whether they remained in the village to work on the land or went further afield to find an alternative means of employment; e.g. to Hitchin to work on the railway.

Many changes have taken place in Pirton since those early days. Children no longer faint in school for lack of adequate food. The village continues to be surrounded by open fields, but the inhabitants are no longer dependant on the land to provide them with their livelihood. At the present time, out of all the families who have children attending the village school, only three have any connections in farming. Much more integration has taken place between the inhabitants and outsiders. There is only one child out of the 98 children currently listed on the school register who has both parents who originate from Pirton. Children no longer receive the whole of their education in the village, now when they reach the age of eleven they are transferred to secondary schools in the surrounding area.

The coming of education to Pirton not only brought considerable improvements to the lives of its children, it also provided the inhabitants with a common interest. This interest which the village took in its school has continued to flourish and is extremely apparent to those who visit Pirton at the present time.