Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Toward School With Heavy Looks

by Lis Garnish

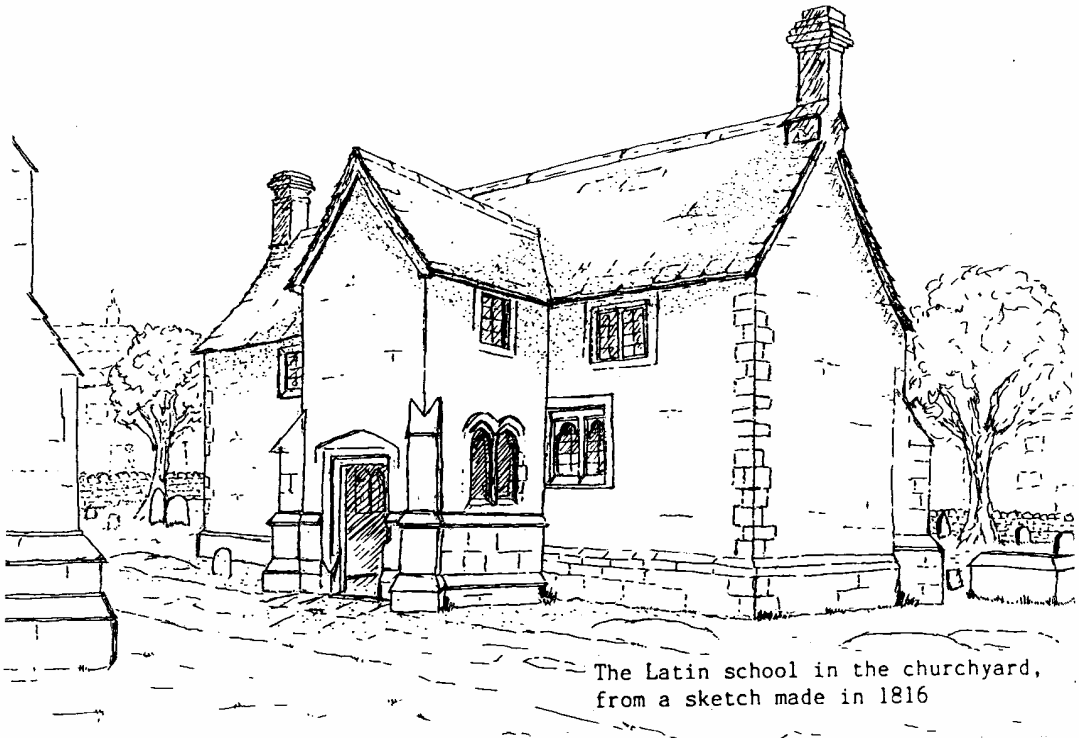
Prior to the appointment of the Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage in 1597/8 we have no specific evidence of the identity of any school-masters in Wantage. It was common for the 'Latin school' in other parishes to be in the care of the curate. A curate's stipend was meagre and it was sensible to augment it by teaching and by acting as 'scrivener' when wills and other documents were needed. Apart from the vicar the curate might be the only other person in a parish who had a university education. However, Thomas Aldworth, who died in 1563, was described as "Bachelor of Arts", Thomas Charleton, who was curate in 1581, appeared again in 1598 teaching at the Grammar School and the Parish Register for 1584 records the burial of Nicholas Whittye, "scholler of Exeter College, Oxford". So it is possible that any of these three, or some of the thirteen curates and clerks traceable during the previous fifty years, acted as schoolmasters.

When the Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage took charge in the spring of 1598 the schoolmaster was Mr John Wirdnam, brother of William Wirdnam. He continued to teach the school for that year but, as he was then in his mid-fifties, he may have found the demands of the new managers too much for he retired in September. The Governors then appointed Mr Thomas Charlton, who stayed for two years, but they had to increase the schoolmaster's salary from the £10 which they had paid Mr Wirdnam to £13 6s 8d, at which sum it stayed fixed for the next few years.

After Mr Charlton they tried Mr Harford, who stayed for three years but who cost them dear, as he demanded "benevolences" in addition to his salary. The school year 1603/4 seems to have been an unsettled one as they paid £13 6s 8d for "the schoolemasters", which would suggest more than one change. The cause of the dissatisfaction may have been the "petties", the younger children, whom the schoolmaster had to prepare to join the older boys. The problem was solved by asking Thomas Otes, the scrivener, to teach a second class of younger children, the group who were to become the English School. He took up his duties in January 1604 and taught the youngest boys for the next twenty-six years. Mr Hugh Floyd was appointed to teach the Grammar School and he and Thomas Otes worked together for the next ten years. When Hugh Floyd retired his son William. Floyd took over briefly, to be followed by Mr Lloyd, the curate, for a year and then Mr Hill. The Grammar School settled down again in 1622 when Thomas Keepe was appointed to teach Latin. He stayed for the next ten years.

The Master at Wantage received £13 6s 8d per annum for his salary, and had to be a B.A., but he could also receive "benevolences" of a pound or two for good work, and in 1618

the salary started to be increased, to £14 at first, then to £16 and finally to £18. In contrast, Thomas Otes, the 'usher' or teacher in the English School, received only £5 per annum throughout his career. When he died in June 1630, after teaching the "petties" for more than quarter of a century, he was still owed "...a quarters wadges due to him for his teaching scollers - 25s", so he must have had to live on credit. Also, he was still described as "scrivener" not schoolmaster, as he had no degree.



The Latin school in the churchyard, from a sketch made in 1816

Amongst their other properties and land, the Governors received the Latin School, standing to the south of the church. This may originally have been the chapel and living accommodation of the chantry priest and, from 1548, it had probably housed the schoolmaster as well as the school. Certainly Mr John Heron was living there in the mid-1600s, and his inventory shows that it had been divided up into at least six rooms, only one of which was the schoolroom. The drawing which we have of it shows a building which could be mistaken for an ordinary house. What distinguishes it is that it was built of stone which marks it out as an unusual and important structure in this town of timber-framed houses. Buildings of a religious character did not have to have an overtly ecclesiastical form. For example the White Hart at Fyfield looks externally like many other timber-framed houses of the area but it is believed to be the original Hospital and Chantry of St John, founded in 1444.

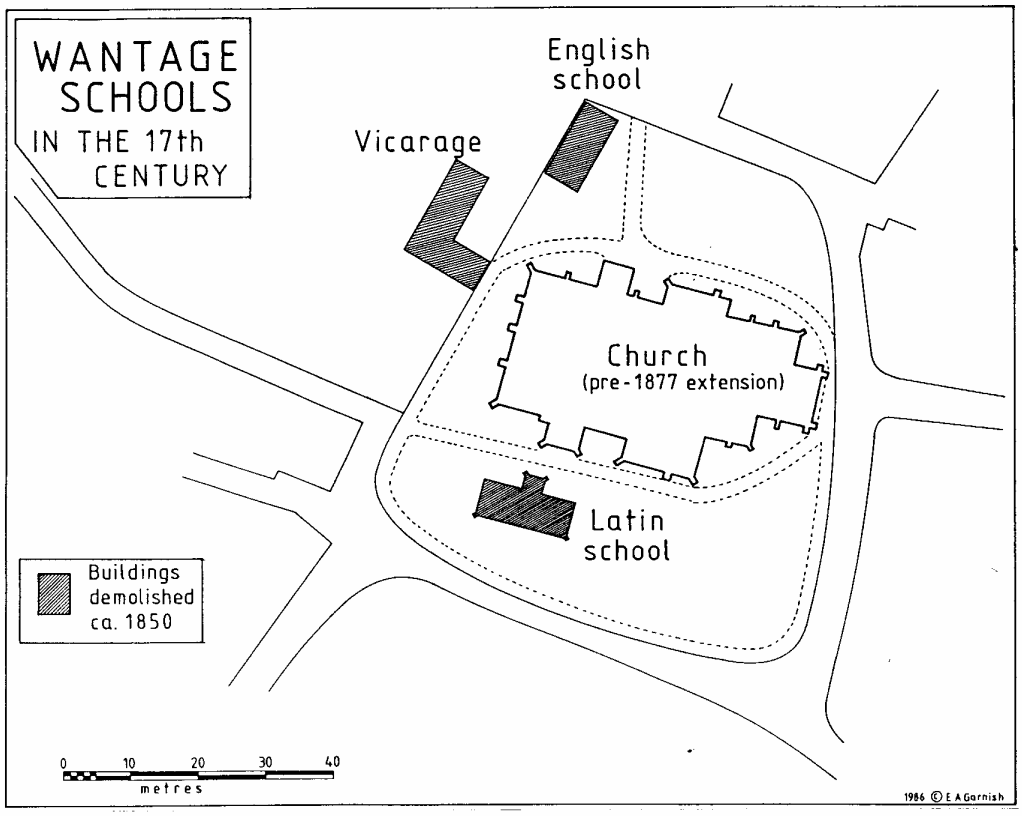
The Latin School required some immediate repair, and the Governors spent £5, about £1,000 in present buying power, to put it back in order. From then on it seems to have cost about £1 a year to keep it in repair, about 10s of which was spent on glass! At a number of schools it was the custom to smash the schoolroom windows to celebrate the end of the school year, and it possible that the boys at Wantage celebrated enthusiastically!

The furnishings of the schoolroom were probably very spartan. There must have been benches for the scholars to sit on but the other furniture mentioned is fairly sparse. A desk and seat were made for the Master, and a "bord", which may have been a blackboard for teaching. There was a table board and frame, probably a big one for several pupils to sit at, which cost 23s. They also supplied "…a frame to hang Hattes on..." which reminds us

that even children commonly wore hats in the 1600s. The only suggestion that there were any books or materials provided occurred when Hugh Floyd retired. He was paid £1 for "goods" which he left behind, perhaps some books and a globe? Also, four years later Mr Hill was allowed to spend £5 on materials for the school, which must have provided quite a lot of books.

It seems that the Governors did not furnish the English school at all for when Thomas Otes died his widow was paid 8s "...for Formes benches & shelves which shee had att the Scholehowse". No other furniture or materials seem to have been provided for the younger children so their schooldays must have been drab and boring.

Very few references to the school are found in wills. Perhaps by the time people came to die school days seemed far behind them. One of the few to mention it was Elizabeth Aldworth, who died in July 1638, and who asked to be buried "...in the Churchyeard of Wanting at the East end of the Free Schoole there neere the place where my Husband was buryed". Incidentally this helps to fix the position of the school. Families were buried in groups and even when only one plot can be traced it is fairly certain that the others were nearby. An Aldworth grave can be found south-east from the south transept, about mid-way to the road. Tracing west from here to the war memorial one finds only post-1850 graves, made after the demolition of the school, except for one of 1826 which must mark the southern wall of the school.



We have no idea of the names of any of the pupils until the 1650s. Mr John Heron, who died in 1676, had been teaching at the school for more than twenty years, despite some ups and downs with the Governors. He asked that six of his former pupils be his bearers at his funeral. Thomas Aldworth, John Hunsdon, Thomas Willis, William Grove and Thomas and Richard Brooke were chosen. They had been born in successive years so it may be that each in turn had been 'head boy'.

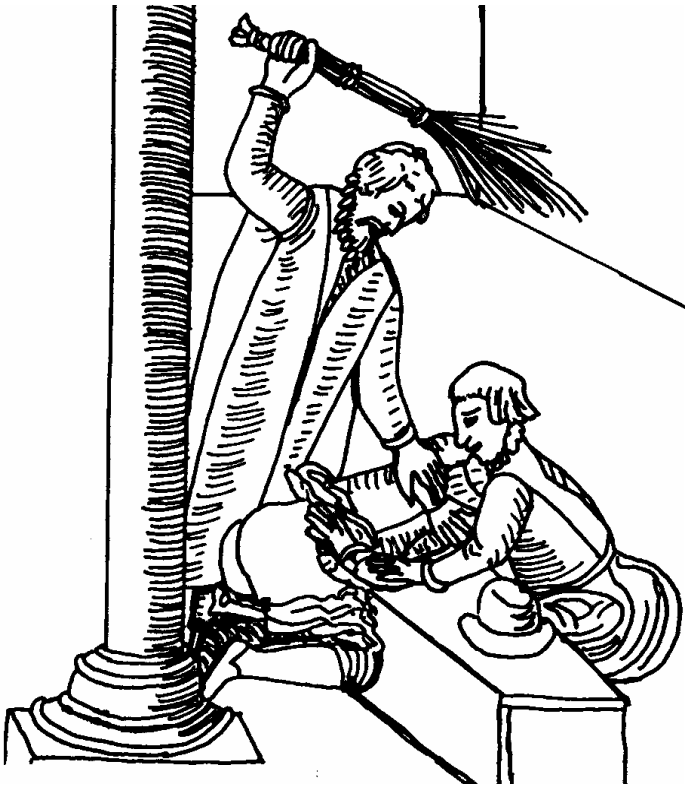
Entry to an Elizabethan Grammar Schools was limited to boys, who had to have some elementary education already. Small children were taught their letters from the 'criss-cross row' of a horn book, by a parent or at a Dame school. They would then move on to little story books of moral tales such as Aesop's 'Fables', and the Bible. Dame schools taught reading and writing and Scripture but we have no evidence for one in Wantage. The average age of entry to Elizabethan Grammar Schools was six or seven, but a certain standard of literacy was required. Children would need to be able to read and write, to know their Catechism and the Lord's Prayer, and possibly also the Ten Commandments and the Creed in English. The assistant master would teach these basic essentials, and for nearly thirty years in Wantage this task fell to Thomas Otes who, according to the Governors, taught "Englishe, reading and writinge to the petice". When a boy could satisfy the Master that he knew sufficient he would be admitted to the 'Latin' school.

The pupils who attended Grammar Schools were usually the sons of tradesmen, skilled craftsmen, yeoman farmers, merchants, gentlemen and landowners. Poor families could not afford to send their sons because, although there were no fees, materials such as candles, stationery and fuel for the fire had to be paid for and their labour was lost to the family economy. If a boy came from an out-lying village his parents might pay for him to 'live-in' with the Master. A sound knowledge of Latin, both written and spoken, was needed for the Church, law, government or medicine and was the only route into the professional world. In the senior class the boys would learn grammar, logic and rhetoric - all in Latin. Letter writing was taught, and Latin authors were studied, particularly Cicero.

If the Master were sufficiently well educated he might also teach some Greek and a little Hebrew. No science, mathematics, history or modern languages were taught, although some schools taught geography as an 'extra' from the 1620s. Some schools also taught a little music, but we have no evidence for this at Wantage. Pupils had to supply their own paper or parchment and would wear a belt with an inkhorn and carry a satchel for their penknives, books, pens of goose quills and food. Whilst they were at school they were to speak only Latin and had to sit on backless benches. Typically the day began with prayers and they might be expected to attend church with the Master on Sundays and Holy Days and to repeat the main points of the sermon the next day. To ensure the Master's religious orthodoxy he would have to be certified by the Bishop. He might be gowned and bearded to make him more impressive and authoritative but his task was still a hard one.

School began early, at six in the morning in summer, and seven in winter and the first period would be used to repeat the parts of Latin grammar, with the boys being called out to stand in a semi-circle before the Master. From eight to nine there was a break for breakfast, for which the boys would bring bread, meat and cheese from home, although the Master might send to the alehouse for 'small-beer' for the pupils whose parents had paid for it. From nine until eleven the children would go over the exercises set the night before, one day a prose practice and the next in verse. Those who had done badly were marked down for punishment and the ones who had worked well were 'proposed to imitation'. This was followed by dictamina, where boys were called out to translate a sentence into Latin, an older boy perhaps having to translate the Latin into Greek, and another having to translate back into English.

The midday break would be from eleven till one, when most boys would go home to eat, although the schoolmaster might provide food, to be paid for by the parents, for the boys who lodged with him. Afternoons were used to read Cicero, Ovid, Virgil and Horace and to produce Latin prose and verse in imitation. The Master would go over some part of a Latin or Greek author which they were to learn and be tested on, or they might perform Greek or Latin plays. After another break, from three till three fifteen, the final period would be used for more dictamina or turning Latin and Greek verse into English verse. For light relief the Master might dictate rhetorical phrases, proverbs and sentences collected by him in a book. A theme would be set for homework upon which Latin or Greek prose or verse was to be made. The day would finish, at four in winter and five in summer, with the reading of a part of a chapter from the Bible, singing two staves of a psalm and a prayer by the Master.



The discipline was strict, with the boys expected to sit still for two hours at a stretch. They could leave for the lavatory, permission having been given by the Master or usher, but they had to return quickly. To keep control the rod was used frequently. Roger Ascham deplored the use of frequent beatings in English schools, but other punishments were available. Firstly the Master could reprove the pupil, admonishing 'calmly and authoritatively, not angrily or threateningly'. Failing that, they might lose a place or two in the seating order, which was graded by achievement.

Bad work would earn a note in the 'black bill', as would faults of behaviour. The 'bill' would be reviewed by the Master and usher at the end of the week and writing exercises set as punishment, to be done under supervision before release. A large number of entries in the 'bill' would mean a message to the parents, and the defaulter would be held up to shame in front of his fellow pupils.

For greater faults three or four strokes would be administered with a birch rod, or small red willow rod, with half a dozen for serious faults. Three or four fellow pupils would hold the miscreant against a post and the strokes were to be on the back, with no striking of the head with hand or rod. The Master was not to restrain any boy himself but to use older pupils. Masters were recommended to vary the times and days of punishment to avoid truanting, but Friday afternoons must often have had low attendance rates. Finally, an intractable pupil could be removed from the school, or the parents could be asked 'to obtain other employment for him', which meant becoming an apprentice as schools were too few and far between for the modern solution of enrolling elsewhere. Pupils normally left for apprenticeships or for university at about age 15.

Some 'recreation' was allowed at school, Thursday afternoon being the usual custom.

Recreations were to be 'meet for gentlemen' which meant no football, but archery, wrestling, stave play, bowls and hand ball or stool ball were acceptable. The 'boarders' or those whose parents paid for 'extras' might do some arithmetic and handwriting on Saturdays and half-holidays, and geography instruction could be given. This involved finding and describing cities and countries on a map or globe.

For the first six years under the Governors' administration, all the children attending the school were taught by the Master. When Mr Thomas Otes started to teach the 'petties' he may have used one of the other rooms in the schoolhouse, or even the room over the south porch of the church. However, in 1617 the Governors set plans in hand to build a second school for the younger children. The following payments appear in the Governors Accounts for the years 1617 - 1619:

Paid during 1617:-

Item	to William Warner Carpenter	£3		
Item	to William Forty saier		5s	10d
Item	to John Harding for carrying Tymber & earth		3s	6d
Item	for digging sixe Loades of earth & stone		2s	0d
Item	to William Talbott for Carrying of a Load of stone		ls	2d
Item	to two workmen		2s	6d

Paid during 1618:-

Item	to Thomas Aldworth for tymber and carryage	£1	6s	8d
Item	to Richard weadon for bordes		5s	3d

Item	to Brand for slattes	£4	6s	4d
Item	to Barnes and Towsey for work	£2	12s	8d
Item	to Symes for Stones		6s	4d
Item	to Symes for earthe		2s	2d
Item	for tymber & bordes		9s	8d
Item	to Ewstys the Carpenter for worke		8s	
Item	to Akers for nayles one locke & staple		9s	2d
Item	to Richard weadon for lathes		9s	4d
Item	more to Bartholomew Yate	£1	6s	
Item	to Richard Paty for worke		3s	
Item	for hearelyme roddes & sand		6s	9d
Item	for vij loades of earth & dounge		7s	
Item	for a Letice lathe & nayles		5s	

Paid during 1619:-

Item	for bordes & planckes for the Schoolehowse windowes		7s	8d
Item	to Thomas Greene for worke		6s	
Item	for glassing the new Scholehowse windowes & for nailes & hearlime		9s	10d
Item	for slattes for the Scholehowse		14s	3d
Item	to John Barnes for Two daies worke & a halfe		2s	6d

The names and trades of most of the people involved are known from other sources, and suggest the following account. The new schoolroom was to be a timber framed building with wattle and daub infilling and a stone slate roof. William Warner prepared the frames in his carpenters yard, with William Forty working at the saw-pit to split up the large timbers. Two workmen were set to work to clear an area in the north west corner of the churchyard, whilst John Harding carted in earth and timbers to level and firm the site. William Talbott brought in a cart-load of stone and the footings were laid ready for the timber ground-sills to rest on. During the winter the site was left to settle, but in the spring work started again. Once the main frames were reared and the box framing complete John Barnes & William Towsey with their men set to work to lay the stone slate roof. Bartholomew Yate built one of his famous chimneys to provide heating at the teacher's end of the schoolroom and Ewstys made a door stout enough to withstand the boots and fists of several generations of schoolboys.

Meanwhile the wattle was woven into place in each box panel and, with a stout roof above to protect the new work, the daub could be applied. A hairlime wash inside and out made the walls waterproof and the window lattices could be inserted. Shutters with iron catches were provided for the windows and glazing was put in some. John Barnes returned to make one or two finishing touches, repairing a bit of damaged wall and finishing off the

slates which had to meld the roof to the chimney stack. By September 1619 Thomas Otes and the petties had settled into the new schoolroom and Mr Hill and the older boys were left in peace on the other side of the churchyard.

Conjectural reconstruction of the English school, based on the above accounts

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