

Lenham Primary School: the old and the new

By Liz Porter and Amy Myers

Lenham's education system can be traced back to the 16th century, through the graffiti on the walls of the upper storey of the Corner House in Lenham Square. The current primary school, however, has its origins in the National School, now demolished and on the site of what is now Old School Close.

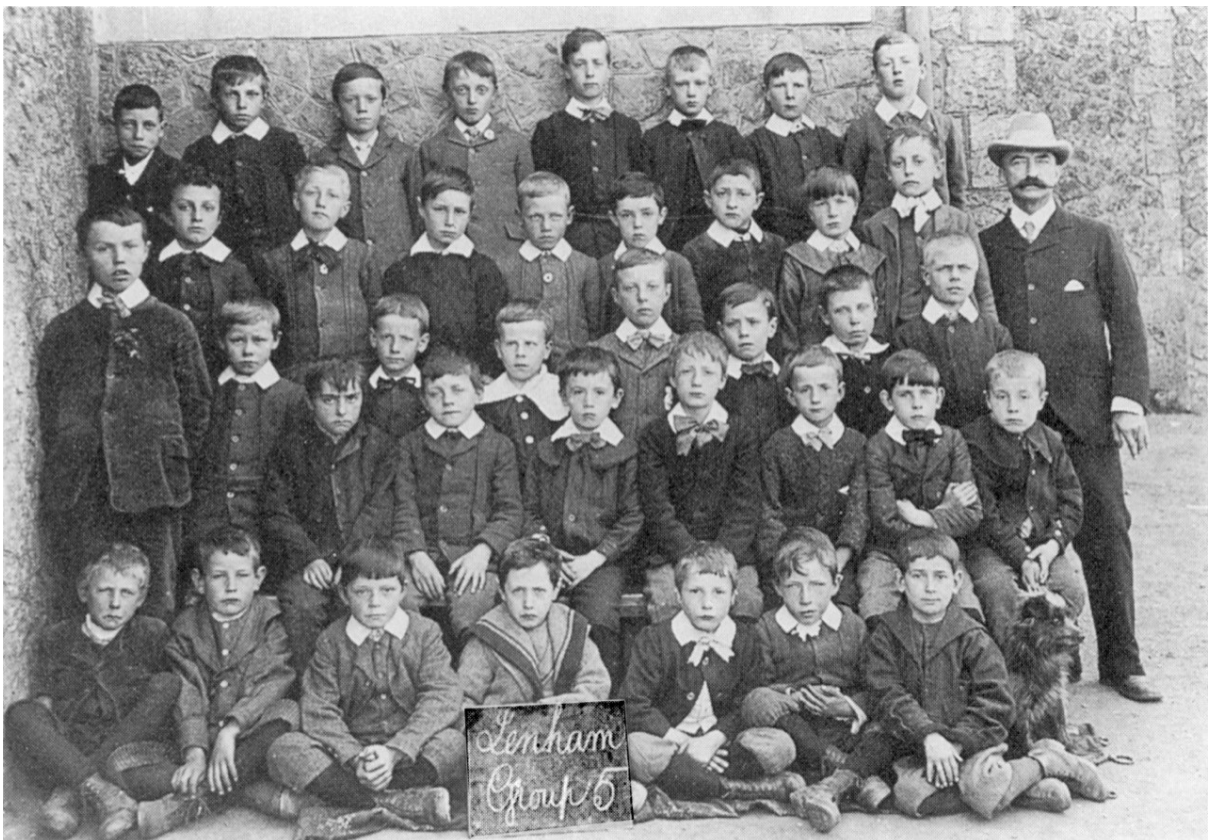


Lenham School seen from what was then Station Road early in the 20th century

Called Lenham School (as is Swadelands School today), it is remembered fondly by many current residents of Lenham. It was opened in 1851, as one of the National Schools for Promoting Religious Education, and was built on land donated by the owner of Chilston Park, James Stoddart Douglas and Edward Leigh Pemberton of Torry Hill. As the nineteenth century progressed, first the 1870 Elementary Education Act and then the 1902 Local Education Authorities Act were passed bringing the school under local authority control. When, after the Second World War, Otterden School closed, as had Boughton Malherbe's,

its children came to Lenham by school bus. There were also two private schools early in the twentieth century, one run by Miss Norah Maylam in the Square and the other at 31 Maidstone Road.

It seems that at first Lenham School was for boys only but by 1885 girls too had become pupils and about 150 children attended. There still seems to have been an atmosphere of 'never the twain shall meet' however as a photograph shows the headmaster at the beginning of the 20th century, Mr William James Underdown, with a class of boys only and another a girls' hockey team.



William Underdown with the boys at Lenham School in 1908

Mr Underdown was a stickler for discipline but a progressive headmaster, and he was followed by another enterprising head, Cecil Groom, who has given his name to Lenham's Groom Way and who was the inspiration behind the white cross on the downs in 1922.



Lenham School's hockey team in 1907

Cecil Groom took great care of the children.



The class of 1929

When his soon-to be-second wife, Norah, arrived as a teacher about 1930, there was no canteen for the children, something that Mr Groom rectified. Norah Groom, in a 1990 interview, remembered how she had heated milk in an old billy can to give hot milk to the children with their sandwiches. Nor was there any running water which caused problems with washing-up. The first cook at the new canteen which catered for about 100 children had been the nanny at Chilston Park. There was a complicated method of payment for the new school meals, with a sliding scale depending on how many children came from the same family; it began with 3d a week for five meals for the first child of the family and was adjusted if any child in the family had been absent. The school had still had open fires and oil lamps until electricity had come to the village in the late 1920s.

At that time children remained at school until the age of 14, but those who took the examination for the grammar schools had to travel to Maidstone to do so. When Cecil Groom discovered that one child had to walk from Warren Street to Lenham railway station and then find her own way to the grammar school, that changed, and henceforth children took the exam in their own schools.

Highlights of the school year included Sports Days, the maypole on May Day, and of course Christmas, for which a villager would climb up to the upper windows, the light in the schoolroom would be extinguished and just one light would shine on Father Christmas as he slipped his bag of presents through the window.

In 1948 the children were still all in the old school building in the High Street.

They moved to a different classroom each year and sat in rows of desks facing a blackboard. The desks were bigger than we were, one pupil said. It was a big room with a huge black stove in the centre with a guard round it, where wet coats were probably dried. The teacher was Miss Chesson. At the start and finish of each day the children had to stand by their desks. Miss Chesson would

say 'Good morning, children' and the children would say 'Good morning, Miss



At the old school circa 1953. On the left: Des Gee with Andrew Barr in front of him. Extreme right heading away: Barry Ifield and, standing upright nearest to him. Bernard Allen.

Chesson'. Some would say 'Miss Chestnut' and got truly told off. Any child who misbehaved was sent to the headmaster. If any boy was very naughty he would get the slipper. The girls did not.

School Dinners

They queued up at the kitchen counter and then went back to eat in the classroom. Afterwards they could go out to play. One child said they had to stay in if they didn't finish their food. These are some of the games they played: What's the time Mr Wolf, five stones, skipping, chainy, ouch, kiss chase.

In 1956 the new intake of children (5years old), had their first lessons in the village hall (in the Square) with Miss Epps because the new school building (present Primary School) in Ham Lane was not finished. Times move on and by

the 1950's the old school was no longer large enough to cater for Lenham's growing population, although it remained in use for several years. When the new one opened the infants (years 1,2,3,4) moved into the new school and the older children (years,5,6,7,) moved into the old school. The infants' teachers were Miss Epps, Mrs Wilson and Miss Buckland.

The Old School still had the large stove surrounded by railings. All the desks faced forward in front of the teacher and the blackboard.

There was a garden at the back of the school, between the boys' and girls' toilets, (which were deliberately separated). The garden was probably used for growing vegetables for the school. The children remember digging and if anything grew it was given to the cooks Mrs Gilbert or Mrs Holloway for the children's lunches.

At the front of the playground near the road was a quiet garden for those children who did not want to rush around but play quieter games. Teachers for the older children were Mrs Vaughan, Mrs Burrows and Mr Pearce. The children did mental arithmetic, spelling tests, writing stories and on the last lesson on a Friday afternoon, Mr Pearce would read to them from their current book, Gulliver's travels, was one remembered.

It was always good to be milk monitor because it meant the pupil missed a lesson to collect the crate of 1/3 pint bottles of milk. If they were frozen they would be put in front of the stove to melt. The cream used to rise at least an inch out of the bottle when it was really icy.

Mrs Vaughan played the piano and taught the recorder. She also taught the choir. She ran a Girls Club after school, where they did things such as knitting dish cloths and cross-stitching on a square. The children also did 'Music and Movement' in the classroom.

Sometimes Mr Hayes would come to their classrooms to teach the children French.

The children went over to the hall in the new school for Assembly and also for gym. The hall had a pull-out climbing ladder wall, ropes and a vaulting horse. The girls played netball and rounders and the boys played football and cricket in the playground. The wickets were on the school wall. One pupil mentioned that to bowl a fast ball they would start their run up in the middle of the road and for a very fast ball, the run up began on the other side of the road. The entrance to Boorman's farm was there.

As soon as all the children were in the present school they had the playing fields all the time.

Mr Lampard was the secretary before Mrs Barbara Jones who worked there from 1957-1984. She would work in both schools. 'She was the one who steadied the ship. She was the link between the teachers and parents understanding every situation in all its many sides. Every school needs a Mrs Jones'. (A quote from a teacher in the '70s.)

In 1972 Mr Hayes was still the headteacher and the school was expanding. It was necessary for Class 4 to move over to Swadelands School to a spare classroom unit with a shared entrance vestibule. The other room had secondary school pupils learning French. The classroom also had flies because it overlooked the rural science duck pond. Perhaps that is why it was spare! In the summer a lot of lessons could be outside.

It was not easy having small children in the midst of older children. Fortunately in the autumn term two mobile classrooms were parked in the playground of the Primary School, so all the children could be on site. As there was no running water in the mobile classrooms it meant the teachers had to fill buckets with water to take into the classroom, if there were art or craft lessons.

When Mr Hayes left Mr Beale became headteacher, followed by Mrs Hilary Parker. Over the last years there has been more building as the school grew: a new Year 6 classroom and IT suite; and a new staff room, which is also used for Breakfast Club and After School Club. Technology has also moved on so much, from blackboards and chalk, school's radio programmes, then cassettes, and on to white boards, computers, laptops, ipads and now chrome books.

Children are keeping up to date as things change and are learning what they will need to succeed in the future. But the basics have not changed; the need for reading, writing, spelling, times tables, mathematics and of course sport in its various forms.

Under its current headteacher Mrs McCluskey and the staff, the Primary School continues to evolve, helping children's educational development.

Our thanks to Barbara Jones, Meg Chapman, Barbara Anne Roach, John Jones, Sylvia Thorne(Nee Driscoll),Andrew Barr, Mike Cockett and for information from Lenham and Boughton Monchelsea in Old Photographs by Jean Cockett and Amy Myers