

Title: Here Miss!

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Summary: In 1870 an Act of Parliament, The Forster Education Act, was passed recommending that all children should receive a basic education, regardless of class or gender. School Boards were set up to provide school places for all children within a prescribed area and Attendance Officers were employed to monitor the attendance of the children. This essay refers to original school attendance records, log books, to answer the question, and how would these children living in rural locations within the High Woods area of the South Downs fare? Would their location and parental employment impact upon their ability to attend the local school?

This report is the work and views of the author from research undertaken in the Record Offices by volunteers of the Secrets of the High Woods project. South Downs National Park Authority is very grateful to the volunteers for their work but these are not necessarily the views of the Authority.



# Here Miss!

These days all children up to the age of 16 are required to be educated, either in a recognised school or academy or by other means as regulated by the legislation. Parents can face prosecution if they fail to send their child to school, or remove them from school during term time.

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century schooling was much less common, particularly among the working classes where children were often needed as additional wage earners for the family purse.

In 1870 an Act of Parliament, The Forster Education Act, was passed. It is recognised as the first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain. Included within the Act was the recommendation that all children should receive a basic education, regardless of class or gender. School Boards were set up to provide school places for all children within a prescribed area, and Attendance Officers were employed to monitor the attendance of the children.

A subsequent Act (1880) made attending school compulsory and parents could be liable for a fine of £2.00 for failing to send their child to school. This at a time when average weekly wages for ordinary labourers in agriculture were less than 15/- constitutes a considerable amount of money.

Within the High Woods area of the South Downs were a number of village schools, serving a rural population. How would these children fare? Would their location and parental employment impact upon their ability to attend the local school?

Children could be expected to travel up to 2 miles to get to a school and entries in the log book of West Dean and Binderton village school reveal that many children lived further away than that. Local maps of the time reveal that the children would be using tracks and pathways rather than roads to get to school.

The school log book contains many references to the attendance levels at the school. There are numerous comments that attendance was low due to adverse weather conditions.

- January 1881 “The roads having become impassable from the very deep snow, the school was unavoidably closed for the remainder of the week”
- June 8<sup>th</sup> 1885 “Low attendance. Rain”
- January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1890 “Heavy storms of wind, rain and hail – the attendance low in consequence”

The legislation makes allowances for absence due to illness and for children living further than the 2 mile limit, however many children were still missing school because of employment, etc. The 1881 census for West Dean reveals a population heavily employed in rural and agricultural pursuits. The school record notes that the

children of the parish have been absent due to haymaking, potato picking, blackberrying, hopping (Hop Picking), gathering wood and getting mushrooms. August 4<sup>th</sup> 1882 saw the school closed for "The Harvest Holiday"- (this is the precursor to the long summer holidays schools currently adopt although few children nowadays are required to help out with the harvest!) The school also closed for Goodwood week!

For comparison, log books for the Chichester Central Boys and Chichester Central Girls school were examined. Did the children living in town have better attendance?

Surprisingly the weather impacted on the attendance levels in the city schools as well.

- 1885 Nov 27 Wet weather affected attendance
- 1887 April 6<sup>th</sup> Bad weather and Market Day, attendance low.
- 1889 Feb 14<sup>th</sup> Severe snow, attendance low.

The city schools were closed for municipal elections and the Sloe Fair, and there are several references to children being absent for Hop picking and May Poling.

Although parents risked heavy fines if their children didn't attend school one mother wrote:

"She would send him when she liked but not while he could earn 6d"

Schools received funding from government based on their attendance figures, so registers were carefully completed and checked. Parents faced hefty fines if they failed to send their children to school.....However it was noted that:

'The police do not collect the fines so parents do not fear being summoned.'

Nothing changes, does it?

## References

Record Office Archives

E65/12/1

School Log Book for West Dean and Binderton C of E School 1873-1890

E65/12/2

School Log Book for West Dean and Binderton C of E School

1890-1899

E35/A/1/2

Minute Book Chichester Central Boys School

E/8A/19/2

Notes on Elementary Education Act 1876

E35A1/12/2

Log book for Chichester Central Boys school 1863-1887

E35A1/12/1

Log book for Chichester Central Boys school 1887-1897

E35A/12/3

Log Book For Chichester Central Girls school

E65/13/1/1

School Register for West Dean and Binderton C of E School 1880

## Ancestry.com:

1881 Census West Dean Parish

1891 Census West Dean Parish

## Web pages:

Victorian web.org wages

parliament.uk/about/living heritage

History of Wages.blogspot.co.uk :

British Labour Statistics: historical abstract 1886-1968 (Department of Employment and Productivity 1971)

## Maps

Sheet 48 3 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1897

Sheet 35 15 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1897

Sheet 35 10 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1897

OS sheet XLVIII 1880 1<sup>st</sup> edition 6 inch

OS Sheet XXXIV 1880 1<sup>st</sup> edition 6 inch