

Title: What's in the box?

Author: Ali Mobbs

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Summary: When I first became aware of the Secrets of the High Woods project my imagination went into overdrive, I read about the archival aspect of the project and immediately felt my interest quicken. I had never been to the Records Office and had little idea of the wonders therein but I liked the idea of delving into the past through old documents and who knows, I might discover something long forgotten. I wasn't prepared for the sense of anticipation I would feel waiting for my first requested item from the archives to be handed to me.

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.



What's in the Box?

When I first became aware of the Secrets of the High Woods project my imagination went into overdrive. Perhaps I would go out in the field with the Lidar data and discover some ancient settlement never before noticed, or maybe I could interview a charming old inhabitant of one of the hamlets, and record for posterity their story. Then I read about the archival research aspect of the project and immediately felt my interest quicken. I had never been to the Records Office and had little idea of the wonders therein but I liked the idea of delving into the past through old documents and who knows I might discover something long forgotten.

Once I had registered as a user and received my free reader's ticket, I had a brief introduction to the workings and protocol of the Record Office. Then armed with no more than a pencil and paper - no coats, bags or other paraphernalia are allowed in the hallowed precincts - I entered the search room and so my initiation began. I have an interest in schools and education so chose to focus my research on late 19th century schooling. After some discussion with the archivist I decided to look at the Elementary Schools in the area, specifically looking for information about attendance. Schooling became compulsory for all children following a number of Education Acts. My question was." Could the children of the High Woods get to school"?

Never having done any archival research I think I saw myself as some latter day detective, about to reveal some long forgotten secret. Who knows? But where to start?

The lists of documents specifically relating to schools provided me with my first request. Under each school is a list of all the documents held in the archives, pertaining to that school and Headteacher Logbooks seemed the best place to start. The Logbook was kept by the Headteacher and they were required to make at least one entry per week. Sadly not many logbooks from the 19th century survive for the schools in the area, but one or two do and some of the entries provided a fascinating insight into the daily running of the school.

I wasn't prepared for the sense of anticipation I would feel waiting for my first requested item from the archives to be handed to me. As I looked at that leather bound book slightly tatty and bearing the marks of age, I felt a tingle of excitement and slightly apprehensively, and very carefully, I opened it up. The entries, written in copperplate hand over 140 years ago, in ink that has faded with age, described the day to day ups and downs of life in a small village school. Reading the entries so carefully penned drew me into another world. Later I requested sight of Letter books, Minute Books and collections of notes. Each time that tingle would recur.

Undoing a small, brown paper wrapped parcel of letters, tied up with a bow, was especially exciting even though the contents proved dull in the extreme. It is that "what if?" feeling that takes me back and back again, almost like a drug. Maybe this time I will discover something amazing.

Once having begun to form a picture of life in a village school I wanted to know more about the children. Where did they live and how far away from the school were they? This led me to the search room computers and the Internet. WOW. There are mind-blowing amounts of information out there! Access to Ancestry.com is available to all users of the search room, and I started by looking at the national census records, which listed names ages and occupations of everyone in an area. Parish records, also available on the Internet, gave more detail to the families, and slowly I became more familiar with my chosen area. I then went to the map section of the Records Office and, with help from their experts, began to create a mental picture of where these children lived. The old maps show pathways and track-ways, which they would have used to get to and from school. No neat tarmac roads for them. It's no wonder there were frequent references in the logbooks to low attendance due to inclement weather!

Researching in the archives is a bit like opening Pandora's Box. There is no knowing what is inside, but that is the fun. Will this be the day that you uncover that missing bit of the story? Until you start to ask and research you won't know what stories are waiting. The possibilities are literally endless. But is sure is fun finding out!