

Wood Norton in WW2 : The School



The School continued to operate as normally as possible throughout the war years. It was a well-run School, under the charge of the Head Teacher, Miss Miriam Jane Hunt. Miriam was born on the 1st June 1884 in Wood Norton¹ and had been a pupil at the school, and by 1901 she was a Pupil Teacher, by 1905 an Assistant Teacher, and by 1910 she had become the Head Teacher.²

Miss Hunt maintained the School Logbook (1916-1952)³ until her retirement in May 1944. In the Logbook she meticulously recorded the day-to-day issues regarding the School and its pupils – attendance (or lack thereof), lateness, School exclusions and closures due to illness (especially measles and influenza), cleanliness of the children (or lack thereof, due to nits) the dates of the holidays, non-attendance of pupils as they were helping with the harvest, awards given to pupils, the weather (especially the cold snowy winters when pupils were unable to get to School), the routine health checks on the pupils by the school nurse, dentist and doctor (who usually came to immunise the children against diphtheria), and the regular inspections by the Diocesan Inspector.

That the School was well run is evidenced by the glowing report given by the Diocesan Inspector in the on the 2nd August 1938:

"Discipline and reverence in this school is excellent. Readiness to answer questions amongst the scholars most pleasing. Evidence of careful and conscientious preparation on the part of staff notable. The neatness of the written work and knowledge of their subject above the average"

¹ 1911 census, Wood Norton (Schedule 207) (www.ancestry.co.uk).

² 1901 census, Wood Norton (Page 8) (www.ancestry.co.uk); Memorandum of Agreement, Norfolk Education Committee, 1905 and 1910 (copies, authors own).

³ Wood Norton School Logbook, 1916-1952 (Norfolk Record Office, C/ED 2/84).

Over the war years there are interesting entries in the Logbook which give a particular taste of the everyday issues affecting the School, staff and pupils, starting in late 1938 with a visit on the 28th September from the wife of the Chairman of the Wood Norton Parish Council:

Mrs Hall has called today about the fitting of gas-masks!

They marked the anniversary of Armistice Day on the 11th November 1938, with this poignant entry:

We have today kept the Silence, which was followed by a talk on the horrors of War, and the beauty of Peace.

On the 11th August 1939 the School closed for the Harvest Holiday, and by the time it was due to reopen, War had been declared. Miriam made the following entry in the Logbook on the 15th September 1939:

School will reopen on Monday next, Sept 18th as usual, expect that there may be some visitors to admit, beside our own children.

This is the first indication that Wood Norton had welcomed some evacuees.

The following Spring, some of the older boys turned their attention to food production:

April 30th 1940: This afternoon the four oldest boys have begun breaking up the further corner of playground as a potato patch. They are finding their own tools and seed.

School assembled earlier than planned after the Whitsun break, which Miriam noted:

May 14th 1940: School has assembled again this morning following instruction received through the wireless, instead of on May 20th as was arranged.

The effect that the war was having on the School continued to be recorded in the Logbook, along with the more usual concerns about the health of the pupils:

July 26th 1940: Mr Dewing called on Wednesday with anti-splinter varnish. One coat was put on last night, and the other will be done this evening.

April 7th 1941: By order of Dr West, all children of 7 yrs and under, are excluded till after Easter. This follows the reporting of Raymond Barnes as having measles.

May 12th 1941: All very tired yet excited owing to very disturbed night with bombs on the village.

June 23rd 1941: Gas masks have been tested. One child had her mother's.

September 24th 1941: David Smith has cut his finger rather badly, while clearing grass around the School potato patch.

November 26th 1941: Today men have been making shelters. Usual routine interrupted while they are here. Infants in the main room for the present.

January 5th 1942: School has re-opened this morning. Both shelters are finished.

June 30th 1942: A very poor attendance following very disturbed night through enemy action in the distance, and prolonged thunderstorm and downpour of rain.

July 15th 1942: Men have come to fix blackout.

August 10th 1942: Term test this week with as little writing as possible. School closed for Harvest on Friday next, 14th, but we shall meet to distribute milk, at 10 a.m. each morning, for the first 4 weeks.

September 21st 1942: School has re-assembled this morning after 5 weeks. Children attended very well for their milk supply as arranged.

October 26th 1942: 5 boys in at 1.50pm. Been to see crashed plane.

April 21st 1943: News that Sergt. Philip Hayhow, a scholar of this School, has won the Croix de Guerre for "much courage and fearless action". He is a parachutist.

July 14th 1943: Children have again been warned not to touch strange objects they may find.

July 23rd 1943: The bigger girls have been employed most of the week potato picking and fruit picking.

February 1st 1944: The Rev. Rodgers, who is in charge called at 9.30am, took Prayers and Scripture Lesson. He hopes to come each Tuesday. Our Rector is now a Chaplain in R.A.F.

At this point Miriam Hunt retired as Head Teacher and the Logbook was maintained by Eleanor Thorne (who joined the School on the 5th June 1944) and then Mildred Ada Gibbs (the new Head Teacher).

March 8th 1945: Police visited School to instruct children not to touch anything which falls from air-craft.

June 12th 1945: Miss D. Burnett called to-day & gave permission for a Supplementary Requisition of Needlework to be ordered to the value of 15 coupons.

Throughout the war years the Logbook records much testing of gas masks and eye pieces. There were numerous warnings conveyed to the children not to touch strange and dangerous objects – difficult to stem their natural curiosity (witnessed by the boys going to look at a crashed plane) but vital in protecting children from picking up objects from aircraft that might pose a threat to life and limb. There were also fundraising endeavours, for *War Weapons Week* in 1941, with the Penny Bank (a savings group) raising £9, and for *Wings for Victory Week* in 1943, when the School hoped to exceed their target of £12. In 1941, the Cash Book records a small amount of income raised by Miriam Hunt for the School:

May 28th 1941: Miss M.J Hunt. Rent for use of School (for Troops). £2 10s

In April 1945, the Deputy Education Officer of the County Education Office⁴ had written to schools anticipating the arrangements to be made following the end of the War and with regard to a 'Cease fire' holiday:

"Cease fire" holiday.

No advice has been received from the Ministry of Education on this point and for the present it may be assumed that the Government announcement with respect to factories, etc. will also apply to schools. The remainder of any day after the public announcement of the end of the war in Europe, and the whole of the next following school day, will be regarded as school holidays. (Should the public announcement be made after school has ended for the day, this will mean one day's holiday).

If the end of the European war is announced before mid-day work may cease immediately the news reaches the Head Teacher, but where school meals are provided, children should be encouraged to stay for them. If the announcement is made on a Saturday or Sunday, the following Monday will be a holiday.

No additional holiday is envisaged at present if the end of the European war occurs during a normal school holiday (i.e. Whitsun or summer).

On the 11th October 1945, pupils at Wood Norton were finally allowed to celebrate the end of the War:

School closed today at noon for 1½ days occ. holiday + 2 V.J. Days.

The County Education Office also issued advice in April 1945 concerning the continued use of children to help with agriculture, which had happened throughout the war (and before, with children being marked as absent from School to help with the harvest):

Employment of School children in Agriculture.

The Ministry of Education have referred to the arrangements under which school children were enabled to render assistance in agricultural work of a seasonal nature during 1944.

The Ministry emphasise the need of this valuable help during the present year, and therefore the existing arrangements and conditions for granting exemption from school attendance will continue to operate where it is considered necessary that children of compulsory school age shall be employed during school hours.

The practice of adjusting school holidays at short notice to meet agricultural requirements will be continued. This matter and the length of the normal school holidays to be taken during the year ending 31st March, 1946 will be dealt with later in a separate circular.

The Logbook also indicates that some bomb damage may have occurred in 1942, and this seems to be borne out by the entry in the School Cash Book⁵ for 1942 which reads:

⁴ Copy of Letter 102 from the County Education Office, April 1945 (authors own).

⁵ Copy of Wood Norton School Cash Book, 1900-1950 (authors own).

Receipts: October 9th 1942

War Damage Commission - Damage to Buildings £11 5s

Payments: October 12th 1942

E. Hendry & Son – War Damage to School £11 5s

But by Spring 1945 thoughts were also beginning to turn to returning the School to normal. In May the Norfolk Education Committee wrote to Mrs Annie Norris (a member of the School Board) regarding the proposed internal renovation of the School, and noted that

With regard to the air raid shelters, as soon as final instructions are received from the Regional Commissioner to Committee will take steps for the removal of air raid precautions from school buildings.⁶

In August 1945, the County Education Office⁷ wrote further:

Now that the decoration work is in progress ... I must draw your attention to the bad state of repair to the large end window in Main Room (where air raid shelter stands), perhaps you will be good enough to have this attended to while the decorators are there. This probably has been overlooked due to the fact that a small blast wall was erected on the window board.

On the 15th June 1945 Mrs Annie Norris was informed by the Norfolk Education Officer of the appointment of a new Head Teacher, Mrs Mildred A Gibbs, who was appointed effective 1st June 1945, at an annual salary of £204 15s, plus £42 war bonus, pending adjustment to new Burnham Scales.⁸

Health issues continued to impinge upon the usual operation of the School, as evidenced by the School being closed from the 12th July to the 20th July 1945 on the advice of the School Medical Officer, due to a 'heavy incidence' of measles.⁹

The School closed its doors in 1952 and was converted subsequently to become a private house.

⁶ Copy of letter from Norfolk Education Committee to Mrs A. Norris, 12th May 1945 (*authors own*).

⁷ Copy of letter from Norfolk Education Committee to Mrs A. Norris, 30th August 1945 (*authors own*).

⁸ Copy of Consent to Appointment of Teacher, 15th June 1945 (*authors own*)

⁹ Copy of Medical inspection Department notice, 12th July 1945 (*authors own*)