

to Pupils

Room 263



England's First Open Air School

1907-1957

Foreword

The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society's committee report in July 1907 told of the establishment by the London County Council of an experimental Open-Air Recovery School in a clearing in the woods belonging to the Society.

“It is worth noting,” continues the report, “that this school is the first of its kind established in England and in the widespread attention the experiment is receiving, the Society has received great credit from many sources for its initiative in taking steps that made the experiment possible.”

Fifty years have passed but the Society’s early interest has not waned. While we recall with pleasure their initiative in 1907, we applaud most heartily their ready help in the arrangements for the Golden Jubilee celebrations.

We tender our sincere thanks to the Committee for their generous offer of assistance and to all those members of the Society’s staff who, in their several ways, have so ably and so willingly come to our aid. This booklet is but one of the fruits of their co-operation and was so well received that this second edition has been issued with the addition of the chapter on the Golden Jubilee Celebrations. The Society magnanimously undertook the printing and production, but the contents are my responsibility alone. Neither they nor the London County Council can be called to account for fact stated or opinion expressed.

E. F. E. JEFFERSON

Chapter 1

1907—AT BOSTALL WOODS

In 1870 Mr. Forster introduced a bill into Parliament, the purpose of which was to ensure that every child in the Kingdom should receive education of at least elementary standard. As passed into law the Act initiated the most important educational advance in our history and formed the basis upon which much of our country's social development has proceeded. It was, however, soon realised that there were large numbers of children who were not reaping the benefits which the Act intended and for whom the ordinary school could not cater efficiently. The blind and the deaf were obviously among the number for whom other provision had to be made, and in the closing years of the century the educationally sub-normal and the physically handicapped also received due attention in the larger centres of population. But still there were found boys and girls who did not make even average progress. It was obvious to their teachers that poor health was the root cause of their backwardness but, there being no medical inspections in the schools, doctors had no means of ascertaining the extent of the problem.

In 1904, the County Councils assumed the responsibilities of the former School Boards, and the London County Council took early action to set up a School Medical Service. The question of the delicate child soon received earnest consideration and it was suggested that special provision might be made as had already been done for the mentally and physically handicapped.

Such a school was already functioning in Charlottenburg, a suburb of Berlin. Medical inspection of German school children had started in 1893 and as a result of medical and educational co-operation, an "open-air school of recovery" was set up in the summer of 1904. The experiment was so successful that the fame of the school spread rapidly abroad. A team of experts from London paid a visit and reported most favourably. It was decided that a similar school should be set up forthwith in the county.

The L.C.C. had no legal power to spend money on such a project, but the enthusiastic promoters of the scheme could not wait for Acts of Parliament. The Education Authority was all in favour of putting the plan into execution, but had to rely on the offer of a site and of funds from outside the ratepayers' coffers. In May 1907 one of the enthusiasts, Mrs. M. Bridges Adams, thought of asking the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society if they would assist by offering the use of their grounds at Bostall Woods. This the General Committee readily agreed to do. Dr. Kerr and Dr. Rose of the L.C.C. then interviewed the Society's Secretary and later Dr. Rose and Mr. Ernest Gray of the L.C.C. Education Department visited the site and declared it eminently suitable. Then, in June, Mr. Blair, L.C.C. Education Officer and the local L.C.C. members met on the site and talked to the Head Teachers of Woolwich, Greenwich and Lewisham about the project. Next, the approval of the Board of Education having been obtained, temporary buildings were erected, children nominated by Head-teachers were examined by the doctors and all was ready for opening the school on 22nd July.

From all sides the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society received congratulations, as was their just due, for their public spirited benevolence in offering free use of their grounds. The Board of Education, the London County Council, educationalists, doctors and bodies representative of what were then known as "working class" organisations all showered praise upon the Society; and we do well to remember to-day their public spirited initiative.

So it was then, that on 22nd July, 1907, the first Open Air School in England was established in part of the woods surrounding Lesness Abbey, founded by Richard de Luci in 1178 in expiation of his sin in helping to encompass the death of Thomas a Beckett at Canterbury.

The school opened with a roll of 108 children with Miss Gibbs as Headmistress, Miss A. M. Beer, Miss A. Hutchinson, Mr. H. Turner and Mr. A. J. Sweeney—all especially chosen.

In addition, there was a nurse, an attendant and a caretaker. It will be noticed that the ratio of children to teachers was less than thirty at a time when classes in ordinary schools commonly exceeded sixty. This provision was in itself of great value; and since the teachers were all keenly interested in the work they were interested also in the children who could now feel that they were really being taken notice of and were ready with eager response.

As the school was to be an "Open Air School of Recovery," serious attention had to be paid to the provision of outdoor facilities for work and play, for adequate feeding and a generous period of rest and quiet. Hours were from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on five days, with morning attendance on Saturdays. Substantial breakfast, dinner and tea were provided as against the Charlottenburg custom of frequent light meals. Cook had two helpers and, indeed, she needed them, for the food was cooked some quarter-of-a-mile away and served al-fresco in the woods. A large number of the children being under-nourished, especial care was taken to provide wholesome fare. There were also anaemic children, some suffering from mild forms of heart disease, those with tuberculosis glands or joints or even slight pulmonary affection, the adenoidal, bronchial or asthmatic and a few with nervous disorders. For them all a long midday rest was ordered from one to three p.m. It was taken in the open in deck chairs, after a hearty meal; the siesta and the fresh air laden with health-giving emanations from the surrounding woods adding the final touch for perfect well-being.

The school ran for three months and many children gained weight in the order of 1 lb a week. While one actually put on a stone, the average increase was 6½ lbs.; although some showed a slight decrease. It could not be claimed that in the first short session all the children reached a state of permanent good health, but the experiment was pronounced a great success. Elsie Lumley was one of the first admissions and fifty years later she writes to say that she has just completed forty years as a state-registered nurse—no mean accomplishment for any lady and certainly a splendid advertisement for the school. Miss Lumley confesses that she remembers but little of those early days, but she retains a clear recollection of a horrid little boy letting a deck-chair down one afternoon. Since the picture remains vivid still, I presume that it was her chair and that she was in it at the time ! The friends who helped to open the school did not then forsake it, for we are told that, among other gifts, they provided a donkey and cart which the children used in both work and play. I wonder if the cook's helpers used it too, for transporting the meals on their long journey!

At the end of October 1907, the school closed, the experiment had been justified and search was made for a suitable spot where a school could be established capable of functioning, eventually, all the year round and where permanent buildings could be erected. The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society's gesture had admirably served its admirable purpose; the principle of the Open Air School had been convincingly vindicated.

CHAPTER 2

1908—TO SHREWSBURY PARK

After casting around, a new site for the school was chosen near the top of Shooters Hill in the park of Shrewsbury House, where the Earls of Shrewsbury had lived in the 18th century, where Princess Charlotte had spent some of her childhood in the early 19th, where Mr. Winser made his experiments in gas lighting in 1810 and which was then occupied by the Crole-Wyndham Convalescent Home. A twenty-one year lease of part of the park was obtained and in June 1908 the school re-opened in its new surroundings, with seventy-five boys and girls, Mr. Turner as Headmaster and three volunteer teachers: Mrs. Austen, Miss Hutchinson and Mr. H. Broughton, who thenceforward made the School his life's work. From his retirement he had this to say of the days at Shrewsbury Park: "Shortly before the school re-opened, applicants for staff vacancies were interviewed at the old Education Offices on Victoria Embankment. Two middle-aged ladies and myself (then a very shy, very young man) were chosen as assistants to Mr. H. E. Turner. The ladies were gleefully exultant over their appointment and each grabbed me by an arm and danced me round the office to my embarrassment but to the delight of the clerks who watched and applauded. I record this because it indicates so well the enthusiasm which marked the new school. Naturally I caught the infection and Mr. Turner was a genius for organisation.

We had a fine site—a ridge about 350 feet up Shooters Hill with 3 acres of woodland on one side and 2 acres meadow on the other, commanding grand views over London, Essex and Kent.

There was fine scope for learning from Nature all the usual subjects of the elementary curriculum though, of course, we did need a stock of books and paper and did not use the morning dew for ink. The neighbourhood is rich in historical interest, while there was a wealth of geography to be learned on the Site and in much that could be seen without leaving it. Practical arithmetic was the rule. A multiplication table had no terrors when associated with gathering sticks in the woods while older scholars used a simple form of home-made theodolite in mapping out the site, including the contours. Nature Study with its attendant sketching could not fail to be enthralling when we could find such things as a litter of rabbits in their burrow, a stoat in the hedge, a kestrel hovering in the sky, and birds' nests of various kinds in the hedgerow and trees. There was a robin's nest low down in the bank, easy of access by children and to which it was a great privilege to take a tiny red worm to feed the young. Among the very large number of kinds of plants we found patches of two rather uncommon species—the adder's tongue fern (*ophioglossum vulgatum*) and the centaury (*erythraea centaurium*) a member of the gentian family.

We had a number of pets and manual work had to provide homes for them. One was a crow, so tame that it had its freedom each day and liked to amuse itself by darting down from a tree to snatch up anything bright such as the keys on teacher's desk or the girls' thimbles. A boy named Percy Dyson was given the responsibility of caring for the bird and he put all his heart into the job. The bird responded in like fashion and I well remember one after noon as the children rested in deck chairs in the meadow, that the bird walked up and down the rows until he came to the sleeping Percy Dyson. He jumped on to Percy's knee and snuggled under the blanket and I presume he went to sleep also.

'We were a happy family and, being the youngest teacher, the scholars seemed to regard me as big brother rather than master. Finding out where I lived, some of them would call at my home in the morning to accompany me to school. I did not mind two or even three, but when I became a sort of Pied Piper then it was necessary to put a stop to the practice.

The staff addressed each other by appropriate nicknames and as a rule were in no hurry to leave school even though the time tables extended to 6 p.m. each day. During the summer evenings

we would remain, sometimes making preparation for lessons, but more often just chatting with visiting friends until a neighbouring fishmonger sent us fried filleted plaice and chips for a tasty supper.

It was really a school in the open air for only when it was actually raining did we use the simple buildings. In cool weather we loved the sunshine while in high summer we moved under the trees. The children had so much activity in most of the lessons that they kept warm when the air was chilly. At the height the atmosphere was always bracing and that, together with the physical activities, prompted good appetites so that the children's condition improved rapidly as their ailments disappeared.

Happy days! May it be that always the school will provide happy memories for all who have a share in it".

Happy memories, indeed, there are for Margaret Dawson, now Mrs. Warren, who joined the school in 1909 and spent two summers there—it was not yet open all the year round. Forty-seven years later she still prizes the Medal she won for Nature Study.

"I remember," she says, "a beech wood with a large meadow sloping down from it. At the top and sheltered from the wind, were two large wooden huts and two smaller ones. The larger huts were classrooms, the sides being left open, unless it was raining or cold. One smaller hut was used by the headmaster, another by Nurse Newell. My teacher was Mr. Broughton. We were all very happy. Most of our time, including lessons, was spent in the open air and we were interested in everything to do with nature. My own day started by going by train from my home at Greenwich to Woolwich Arsenal Station. We were given tokens for our fare, several of us going together. We would walk from the station to Plum Lane School (over a mile uphill!) getting there at 8.30 to have breakfast in one of the shelters in the playground, sitting on forms at trestle tables. After breakfast we would march in line across some waste ground, through the woods to our classrooms on the top of the hill. When it was dinner time we would go back to Plum Lane School for our meal and then back again to rest or sleep in the open, deck chairs and blankets being provided. We had to rest—no playing about, as a teacher sat out in the front all the time." (Lessons again and back to Plum Lane for tea; up again to the park and then home or stay to play if you wished). "This was only during the summer months and the winter was spent in our local schools, which wasn't nearly so nice. I remember Lady St. Helier who used to take a great interest in us and we were told that she did a lot for us, including having our teeth seen to by a dentist in Woolwich (Mr. Pollard) which, I am afraid, we weren't very grateful for. What happy days they were: lessons in the morning and most of the time spent in the open air. We all had our patch of garden to grow either flowers or vegetables. It all came to an end too quickly and I for one cried when I knew that next year I would have to leave; my mother telling me that I could not play at school for ever."

Lady St. Helier, mentioned by Margaret, was indeed a good friend of the school for some years. She provided money for clothes and got books at half price through the "Ragged School Union" (Shaftesbury Society). She called at the school frequently and was always a welcome visitor as was Mr. Hastings Jay, chairman of the Managing Committee.

The school soon attracted more than local attention. By the kindness of Mr. L. A. S. Baker of the Greenwich Antiquarian Society I have been able to read what a Daily News reporter had to say in his paper on 23rd September, 1910.

"SUCCESS OF L.C.C. EXPERIMENT ON SHOOTERS HILL—REMARKABLE RESULTS

How London Children have played at Ancient Britons

To-morrow will be Show Day at the L.C.C. Open Air School for delicate children on the summit of Shooters Hill: all the material outcome of the summers' work— from the children themselves to the glorified mud pies they have made and the flowers they have grown.

I climbed Shooters Hill, passed through a little wicket gate and found myself among the young oak trees which shelter the school from the north wind. The school premises (i.e. the woods and four or five shanties) were looking their best.

I had been there five months before. The five months have worked wonders. In April, the sickly appearance of the children, about 110 in number, and the languid air with which they listened or played were so noticeable that any stranger must have known without being told that he was among invalids. Since then they have lived in the open air, on top of a hill, from 9 till 6 for six days a week (not quite accurate!). This morning it would have taken a clever stranger to perceive that the physique of the children, as a body, was below normal and no amount of cleverness would have discovered a fault in their spirits. They are, to all appearances, just ordinary, lively London children looking as though they had recently returned from a country holiday."

He then goes on to tell of increased weight, bright eyes and the testimony of teachers about increased alertness and interest. Although, he says, health is the aim of the school, it is a school after all. In the grounds were evidence of work done:

Mounds and moats of Old Sarum;

A lordly Norman Castle made from egg boxes;

An early British hut large enough to play in;

A Roman bath;

Miniature Anglo-Saxon Village;

Memorial Cross of Ebbsfleet where Augustine landed;

Geological maps in clay;

An eight-foot map of England carved upon a slope, with coal on the coalfields, slate in North Wales, etc.

County of Kent in high relief;

A garden of 110 plots blooming gloriously, with rustic archway;

A home-made 'pettery' with rabbits, hedgehog, guinea-pig, pigeon, dove and tame crow.

Charles Dickens was the founder and first editor of the Daily News and it would have rejoiced his heart, I am sure, had he been able to use such copy himself.

This happy description does not, however, tell the whole story; for the way was not entirely a primrose path leading to a bed of roses. Rainy days caused so much mud that school was held under the arches in Plum Lane School; the horse and its foal from Shrewsbury House trampled the garden and ate all the vegetables. To reduce the gas bill, porridge was provided at breakfast only three times a week and as the days drew in, school had to close at five instead of six o'clock. Midsummer storms are reported, one so bad that the children were marooned in their shelters and their dinner had to be brought to them in a barrow. The water arrangements were criticised by Dr. Ralph Crowley, from the Board of Education and he wasn't too happy about the proximity of the boys' and girls' lavatories. The weather could be too hot (plagues of flies), too cold (nowhere to get thawed out) or too wet (mud and moisture everywhere); and, as the duration of the school season increased, fog and early sunset tended to queer the pitch. And there was another matter. To the caretaker fell tasks unusual. There was no water on the site, sanitation was primitive. Water had to be carted from Plum Lane School, sewage disposed of in bucketsful down a more or less convenient manhole in the roadway skirting the park. Mr.

Jenkins, the first caretaker, soon gave up his job and Mr. Gooch carried on until his 70th birthday, but we have no word from them or their successors until we come to Mr. Atkins, who is still with us. He tells us how he would nip out with his buckets when the road was deserted, not liking that any body should see him engaged in his insalubrious task. If, in spite of his caution, a lady should chance along he would turn back; or, if the proceedings were already too far advanced, he would hastily replace the cover, pick up the buckets and walk away, out of the innocent intruder's smell range.

All these trivia could not, however, detract from the success of the open air school. A famous L.C.C. Report of 1908 gave it unqualified approval and three more such schools were opened in that year. Before the outbreak of the first world war the movement had spread to the provinces: Bradford, Sheffield, Halifax, Birmingham, Bristol, Barnsley, Norwich, Manchester and Liverpool each had its own open air school. There were schools too in America and throughout Europe, some of them residential.

CHAPTER 3

HUGH BROUGHTON'S GUIDING HAND

Mr. Ernest Tracey, another old scholar who has written to me, spent seven years, 1914-21, at the school and recalls the names of many of the staff. Mr. Turner, he tells us, was succeeded as headmaster by Mr. Broughton (1920). Really there was no other choice when Mr. Turner retired, for Mr. Broughton had made himself pre-eminent in the world of Open-Air Schools. His book: *The Open-Air School*, published in 1915 had become a standard work, referred to by all interested in the subject; while those who contemplated setting up an open air school in their locality, first paid a visit to Shrewsbury Park. Nurse Williams, who had followed Nurse Newell in 1912, had herself been replaced by Nurse Makepeace. Mr. Tracey also mentions Mrs. Needs, who, I am pleased to say, still resides in Plumstead and from whom I learned some of the history of those days. Good food and plenty of it was provided and it is interesting to read the menus of the period. Porridge, bread and milk, dripping, raw fruit, soup, all appear on the breakfast menu. For dinner we find roast beef, meat pudding and pie, fish, shepherd's pie, more soup, beef stew, mutton broth, roast mutton, macaroni, tomatoes, onions boiled in milk and water, potatoes. Only very rarely do we find cabbage included in the diet, and there is no mention at all of salad dishes or eggs, while milk was not made much of as it is to-day. "To follow" came rice, custard, stewed fruit, jam, rolypoly, currant pudding, suet pudding with golden syrup. Tea included "weak tea or cocoa," white, brown and currant bread, butter, jam, bananas, cake, fruit. The cost? Five full days with breakfast and dinner on Saturdays— 2s. 6d., of which parents were expected to pay all, part or none according to their means.

Mrs. Dorothy Whelan, who now lives in Colchester, tells of the school in 1916

"I enjoyed so much Mr. Broughton's gardening after noon. We each had a tiny plot roped off and our name on a piece of wood stuck in the ground. Then there was Nurse Makepeace to whom we went with our little minor ailments—a comfortably built, kindly woman. Then there was a teacher (Miss Taylor?). Even now I feel a glow at her sweetness to me, a little scraggy kid. She called me Dorothea. We were well taken care of. We learned basketry and needlework on certain days. I didn't take kindly to the rest period, being full of nervous energy, but playtime was most exciting. We used to divide into our own little crowds and disappear into the woods where we built what were to us the most wonderful camps. Sweeping the leaves into large squares, we would make a complete flat, two, three or four rooms. By careful sweeping and building, our walls could become quite high. The boys, of course, worked very hard to see that our camps did not outshine theirs."

Since 1913, the school had remained open the whole year through, with closures of only a day or so at Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and August Bank Holiday. It was a decision made solely in the interest of the children, but was not without drawbacks both to them and to the staff.

In the first place, attendance was naturally liable to fall with the onset of cold weather and parents were circularised with the intention of persuading them to send their children regularly. During normal school holidays, also, there was a tendency to absenteeism and a more informal curriculum had to be introduced to encourage attendance. Teacher's holidays had to be arranged on a rota system throughout the year, so that children had to suffer the educationally unsound practice of continuously changing their teacher. In cold or wet weather work was difficult. Sometimes, as has been mentioned, lessons were taken under the arches in Plum Lane School playground; at other times, the children were sent home after dinner, for even health, let alone education, was in jeopardy. Canvas screens were provided to keep the damp out of the classrooms, clogs, macintoshes and capes supplemented blankets and duck-boards were laid on the bare earth of the outdoor class sites. The ultimate refinement was the introduction of oil lamps to illuminate and possibly warm the huts. But all the disadvantages could not detract from the joys of open air school in fine weather when the brain was kept alert by the gentle

breezes and the grass and the trees all around spread a tranquilising influence over the minds of all.

Mrs. Hilda Jefford to-day has a nursery at Belvedere, but in 1921 she was a delicate girl at the Open Air School. There she lived the spartan life, even through the cold winter, when circulation had to be restored by tobogganing in the snow—a pleasant relief after blanket-shrouded rest on a stretcher bed in the open.

So far, the children did not attend laundry or cookery classes—that did not come until 1938—but those who wished could learn to play the violin. Hilda too, remembered Nurse Makepeace who cured her warts and treated her successfully when a cut turned septic. With pride she recalls that in her last months she acted as head prefect and with gratitude she acknowledges the good, both physical and intellectual, that came from her attendance at the school.

Our next correspondent, Edith Granville, attended for five years, leaving in 1927. She recalls her teachers with affection and describes the daily routine, not forgetting how she wrapped herself in all the clothing she possessed, with blankets additional, for the midday rest in winter. Although Saturday school ended after dinner, children often stayed behind for the sheer joy of it or because mother was at work; nurse or one of the teachers remaining voluntarily to supervise. There were four classes now and all the usual school subjects were taught, including Geometry and Music and the children were allowed to take home what they grew in the garden. Edith concludes:

“I would like to say how much I enjoyed every minute there while I was still at School. People very often do not appreciate it until after they have left, but I for one was very sorry to leave. One last word of appreciation to all the staff for making lessons so enjoyable and interesting.” Enjoyable and interesting they must have been indeed. There was the annual concert to be prepared for, the training in nursing given to the girls, the Scout troop for the boys, the lantern hour by Mr. Green, held in Plum Lee School for those who attended regularly, the trees planted by the best boy and girl annually chosen by the children themselves, the fireworks in November, the educational visits; all these in addition to the interesting and novel ways in which ordinary lessons were conducted.

By the way, we learn that relations between the staff of Plum Lane and the open air school were always most cordial and the headmaster frequently referred to this happy situation. In his report of 1925 Mr. Broughton set out to judge the permanent value of the school as shown in the adult lives of former scholars, many of whom, in the 1920's were married, with children of their own. He concluded that, in the early years, character training and physical culture had been satisfactorily catered for, but that enough attention had not been paid to mental equipment and development. Such weakness had been regarded as inevitable, but he was of the conviction that it could be overcome and, during his headship, had sought ways and means of developing healthy minds in healthy bodies. In this endeavour he had the hearty co-operation of Dr. Wiley, the School Medical Officer, the value of which he gratefully acknowledged. It had to be remembered that most of the entrants to the school were educationally backward, frequently three or four years behind normal healthy children, and special individual methods were being adopted to deal with the special problems involved. Specialisation had been introduced, for, where a teacher takes the subject in which he is most interested, he enjoys it; the children follow suit and find fun in learning.

Thus did Miss Say foster a love of literature and a desire for self-expression in Art, while Mr. Greenshields made Geography a live subject in and out of doors and Singing a joyous entertainment. Choral Singing became quite a feature, with Mrs. Needs accompanying whenever the piano was playable (a reference, I think, to cold hands and water on the wire). Mr. Greenshields had also taught Woodwork and Workshop Drawing. During 1924 he had undertaken the erection of a new manual training room, but progress was arrested by the urgent

need of building a shed for four tons of coal, Of course, the whole thing was properly done, from the drawing board to the stamp on the receipt for £10 to settle the account.

Mr. Jones was the gardening expert with Arithmetic incidental thereto a sack of potatoes at 7 lb. for 6d., a bushel of peas at so much a sack and 40 rods, poles or perches to the acre. In addition to the individual gardens, there were demonstration plots, flower borders, rock garden, a bush fruit plantation and a miniature cornfield of wheat, oats, barley and maize. The income from vegetables used in the kitchen was £7 13s. 2d., showing a profit of £4. 15s.7d. The garden activities led inevitably to Nature Study and for this also Mr. Jones was responsible, although the bee-keeping was, I believe, Mr. Broughton's especial pride and joy. Mrs. Needs made needlework and the teaching of reading her main subjects, employing individual methods to good advantage. The Woolwich Public Library loaned boxes of books, which provided variety and incentive.

The needlework was of the utilitarian order, all the garments were for sale and periodically "alter and mend" sessions were held.

What else the Headmaster had to tell, I cannot say, as the later pages of his report have disappeared. We can see, however, that he was at pains to justify the open air school as an educational establishment as well as a therapeutic centre; and we feel that he had made good his claim. It is not surprising, therefore, to read in Mrs. B. Smith's most interesting letter that, after five years in the school, she won a scholarship for the Woolwich Polytechnic in 1934. She first attended at Shrewsbury Park, but in 1929 the lease was running out, with no prospect of renewal and after careful casting around an admirable site was obtained in a corner of Charlton Park, formerly the seat of the Maryon Wilson family. On 2nd December, 1929, Mr. Broughton and his team :Mr. Greenshields, Mr. Whelan, Miss Say and Miss Lofthouse, with Schoolkeeper Atkins and his wife moved into a building of comparative luxury, with the prospect of turning a virgin plot of 2 acres into a garden of cultivated loveliness.

CHAPTER 4

AT CHARLTON PARK

On 5th December, all the parents were invited to see the new school but, owing to bad weather, only nine arrived. It was a dismal December day, cold and with driving rain. All the classrooms were unusable, the children and visitors had to be herded into the drier half of the hall. It was an inauspicious commencement and rather damped the ardour of all concerned. But every body struggled on manfully to make the new home worthy of the old. In May 1930 Priscilla Worsthorpe, L.C.C., affectionately remembered for her keen interest in London's Special Schools, attended the official opening ceremony and the dark winter of discontent was forgotten under the halcyon sky of early summer and the encouraging words of the gracious lady.

In November of the same year, Dr. Lynn, who lived in Herbert Road, Plumstead, and had been a school manager since 1916 was honoured at a function presided over by the Mayor of Greenwich, Col. Matthews. At the ceremony, the Mayoress planted a walnut tree to commemorate the doctor's long and meritorious service and to-day the tree in its maturity stands as a living testimony to a friend no longer with us, but not forgotten.

Dorothy Doyle, 1927-1934, reminds us that hot baths were provided as well as cold rest periods when blankets were allowed but hot-water bottles confiscated. In very bad, foggy weather, the children were sent home early after a hot cup of cocoa, but in summer the hours were still 9 till 6 and 9 till 1 on Saturdays. Dorothy is now Mrs. Bigwood, with three schoolchildren of her own. Mrs. B. Smith (née Creed), in continuing her letter, tells us that the school at Shrewsbury Park had been divided into two Houses:

Oak and Beech; and the practice was continued at Charlton Park, where the tables on either side each accommodated the children of one 'House'. She recalls the clog shed and the bowls of hot water, Out of doors, for hand-washing at Shooters Hill. Hot water indoors at Charlton must have come as a shock of luxurious living. Children coming from a distance were provided, as before, with bus or tram tickets; in which, we are given to understand, there developed a black market among those of limited pocket money allowance. Educational visits were a feature and the choir festival at Woolwich Tabernacle, with all the boys and girls dressed in white, was an annual excitement. The House system included prefects who held a monthly 'court,' with power of severe reprimand, the award of 100 lines or, in really heinous cases, reporting the offenders to a teacher. Mrs. Smith cherishes happy memories of Christmas dinner with sixpenny pieces in the pudding, the squirrel in the big tree near the staff hut; and to jog her memory she still has photographs of her school days, some of her prizes and her last report.

Mrs. Lawton, who knew not Shrewsbury Park, but spent five years at Charlton, mentions that Miss Lofthouse left to get married and that Miss Newing took her place. She tells us that cleanliness was greatly emphasised. Each child had one bath a week, medicines and general health were attended to by Sister "whom I remember as a very motherly person" (note that Nursing Sisters were now engaged). The school motto was "Courage and Perseverance."

In 1932 was celebrated the semi-jubilee of English Open Air Schools; and again the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society came forward in active participation. The Committee loaned the Bostall Woods site for the occasion and also put "Shornell's," its guest house nearby, at the disposal of representatives from distant schools, providing hospitality for the evening before to the morning after the celebrations. Forty-seven headteachers and others from the Tees to the Tamar were accommodated in fine style and, with those who came from nearer schools, there were present over 100 teachers, nurses and others from the 143 open air schools in the country. The morning of 15th July was spent in a motor tour of S. London open air schools, while the afternoon was devoted to a public meeting at Bostall Woods. There were demonstrations by children from seven London schools, with speeches to follow.

Dr. R. H. Crowley, senior medical officer of the Board of Education emphasised the fact that the institution of the open air school was the direct result of the consideration given to the child as an individual and for that reason had inaugurated a new era in education. The first consideration of the school must be correct feeding in congenial surroundings; rest and cleanliness coming next.

In the evening came a conference led by Capt. Edward Cobb, Chairman of the L.C.C., who caused general laughter by commenting on the robust appearance of the teachers present. Mr. Waite (the popular L.C.C. Inspector of Special Schools who retired only two years ago) introduced the topic: "The future development of the Open Air School." He referred to the problem of cost: £32 per child, annually, as against £16 in the ordinary elementary school; and to the problem of giving the fullest possible education to the delicate child while ensuring his physical well-being. His concluding words were of unstinted praise of the enthusiasm and devotion of the teachers.

Mr. Gater, Education Officer, gave it as his opinion that education was in for a very lean time and said that every thing must be done to cheapen the cost of school building.

In the open discussion which followed, the questions of suitable buildings, the size of classes and school hours were raised. Although there were many differences of opinion, it was generally agreed that more adequate shelter should be provided against inclement weather, with some kind of heating, if only to remove the risk arising from sitting on damp seats. The size of classes had tended to increase and it was felt that 40 was too many for an open air school class. Long hours, it was allowed, were justifiable in the interests of the children, but ways should be found to ease the burden borne by the teachers.

The celebration concluded in an atmosphere of wonderful enthusiasm, with almost overwhelming congratulations and thanks to the organisers.

Meanwhile, the school at Charlton Park pursued the even tenor of its way. We hear of Old Scholars' Reunions, of the annual Hobbies Exhibition at the Greenwich Town Hall, the Inter-Schools Sports at the Duke of York's Headquarters, Chelsea, Educational Visits; and of a reassuring statement by Mrs. Hill, Cook-Matron, that during the whole of 1933 there were only 83 breakages of crockery (plates, 60, miscellaneous 23). This was a new low record and reflected credit on children and kitchen staff alike. Prizegivings were a function greatly esteemed and we have an account of the 1933 ceremony attended by Mr. E. M. Dence, L.C.C. and Mr. R. J. Campbell, chairman of managers. There was a good attendance of parents and managers who were entertained by the children with a dramatic extract from "Cranford." Mr. Campbell welcomed the visitors and delighted the children with a talk full of humour. Head master gave his annual report, referring especially to the interest shown by old scholars and to the means adopted to meet the needs of as many as possible of those seeking admission to the school. Mr. Dence himself spoke on the text: "Nature never did deny the heart that loved her" (Wordsworth), and then distributed the awards. After hearty votes of thanks the company adjourned to the lawn for a short programme of Morris Dancing by the boys and Country Dancing by the girls. Before the visitors left, they made a tour of the children's gardens and admired the trees and shrubs, the flowers, fruit and vegetables cultivated during the gardening lessons. So ended a ceremony, the like of which lives in all our hearts, varied only according to the school to which we belonged. There are some, of course, who never win a prize; but theirs is the privilege of clapping the winner and bearing themselves with due humility.

A letter from Mrs. P. M. Anderson carries on the story, for she attended 1933-8:

"I spent the best days of my life at the school. I got on very well and received every attention they could give me, with the help of my dear teachers, including Miss Newing." She refers to those indispensable folk—the kitchen staff—and the excellent food which they provided. We may say that the kitchen at Charlton Park made amends for earlier shortcomings and its staff have always been noted for their full and successful use of the facilities provided. There was, of

course, no Londoners' Meal Service until the second world war; feeding arrangements were made "on the spot" by headmaster and cook. The diets were always under consideration and in the course of years great improvements had taken place, particularly in the ever widening variety of foods and the form in which they were served. By 1938, we find that milk had assumed great importance and was often taken instead of tea. Quickly served cereals became common alternatives to porridge, ham and chicken roll, kippers, bacon, eggs and fruit all appeared on the breakfast menu. For dinner we read of fish, fried or baked, toad-in-the-hole, sausages, liver, boiled bacon in addition to the ordinary dishes, while greens of some kind (including salads) were served every day. There was plenty of variety, too, in the second course and at tea, fruit, cheese, lettuce, jam, watercress, doughnuts, mince pies and hot cross buns in season all took their turn, with dripping occasionally to preserve tradition.

Cost? 3s. 4d. a week.

Mrs. Anderson continues: "We had great fun on Sports Days against the other Open Air Schools. We brought the shield away in 1935, took it back in 1936, brought it away again in 1937. It was a great honour to the school and we all felt quite proud."

Miss Say, apparently, was not so hard hearted as some of the staff, for we are told

I used to enjoy the way we had lessons outside in the open air, well wrapped in blankets in the winter. Miss Say used to pass her hot water bottle around the class." And the letter concludes: "I must say that I always wished that I did not have to leave. I am always telling my two children, ages nine and twelve, what a wonderful school it was."

Miss Say's hot water bottle activities are ominous. This pandering to the children (and to herself) seems to indicate that things are not what they were, that the older generation of spartan pioneers is giving place to feather-bedded weaklings. Fortunate it was, therefore, that Dr. Allen Daly, Principal Medical Officer of the L.C.C. was invited to speak at the 1936 meeting of the London Open Air Schools Association. It was almost as if he had heard of Miss Say's hot water bottle, for in the course of his address he laid it down in unequivocal terms that, summer or winter, sun or snow, drought or tempest, the fresh air routine should be unfalteringly followed; that no room should ever be closed in on all sides, that no form of artificial heat should ever be supplied. "Potential all-round shelter is not to be conceded; no form of heating is desirable in class shelters and even on wet days when air, clothes, beds and probably blankets are all damp, the midday rest should still be carried out."

CHAPTER 5

WARTIME

And so, for three more years, they had to freeze and like it—at any rate when Dr. Daly was near. The controversy was not settled, when war came to put an end to speculation and argument. In September, 1939 the school was evacuated to Bidborough, in Kent, with Mr. Broughton in charge. Mr. Atkins, schoolkeeper, was recalled to the Navy and the school was taken over for a short time by the Fire Service and afterwards by the Londoners' Meal Service as a communal restaurant. On the staff were Miss Kuhn and Mrs. Matthews who both remained in the service after the war and are with us still, the former as cook, the latter as her principal assistant. They and their helpers have served the children and staff excellently and we look forward in delightful anticipation to our meals. Our school enjoys a facility not generally offered: a choice of dishes in both courses at dinner. Our only trouble is that we cannot easily make a choice between such attractive alternatives. The children now pay 5s. 5d. a week. They have as much as they like, within reasonable limits, and the waste is negligible. The teachers dine with the children who are waited upon by the elder girls, while Sister perambulates to see that all is well.

But back to 1939. The children and staff settled in at Bidborough and continued their open air life in new surroundings. Gradually, as was the case generally, a large proportion of evacuees drifted home and arrangements had to be made for those who returned and also for those who had remained at home all the time.

In October, 1942, therefore, the school was reopened with Mrs. Gardiner as Headmistress, Mrs. Atkins acting as Schoolkeeper. The Meals Service was still in operation, so that the school had to share the premises and make the best of the situation. School opened with nineteen children, but, with the assistance of Miss Walton, Children's Care Officer, others were soon found, examined by doctor and enrolled. Sister Wood was appointed in December and Mrs. Gardiner had the temporary help of various teachers as they became available. Hours were fixed from 8.50 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., but air raids, bad weather, staff shortages, transport difficulties and the work of the meals service all militated against a regular routine. Everybody, or nearly everybody, tried to make the best of things and when we look back we must wonder how so much was accomplished in the circumstances.

By the summer of 1943 there were nearly eighty children on the roll and steady progress had been made in organising the school in some semblance of its former efficiency. At the end of the year, Mr. Broughton, still at Bidborough, retired, quietly giving up the work that he had loved and in which he had spent himself so tirelessly for close on forty years. In the welter of the war his going was all but unnoticed and one suspects that he felt very keenly the fact that he could not say a becoming farewell at the school. But he is not forgotten by his past pupils, nor by the present staff at Charlton Park who know how much open air schools in general and our own in particular owe to him.

In January, 1944, Mr. Greenshields returned from evacuation and at the end of the year, Mr. Atkins resumed duty as schoolkeeper. Air raids and V-bombs, however, prevented normal school life, although the teachers and kitchen staff somehow managed to put on the usual Christmas tea-party. The weather at the beginning of the following year was so bad that Dr. Kidner, the Divisional Medical Officer, advised the closing of the school for a week and this was done, in spite of all that Dr. Daly had said in 1936. On reopening in February, only two teachers were available. But VE day came at last and soon a permanent staff was appointed. Mr. Henderson and Mr. Hardy, both, happily, still with us, were appointed and Mr. Morris, Mrs. Reid (nee Newing) and Miss Wright, with Miss Gooderich, as visiting Needlework teacher and Sister Woods completed the team under the continued guidance of Mrs. Gardiner. The 1944 Education Act was now the law of the land and envisaged many far-reaching changes, some

taking immediate effect and others of long term development. The official name of a school no longer gave indication that it might be a special school; ours became simply, Charlton Park School, with primary and secondary departments, the age of admission being reduced from seven to five years. Clerical assistance, which had long been allowed in some types of school, was now permitted in all. Part-time secretaries were appointed and Mrs. Greenaway, one of the first and also one of the best, came here in 1945 and is still with us.

Another innovation was the Youth Employment Bureau. Special Schools for many years benefited from the services of a splendid voluntary association whose members helped to place school leavers in suitable occupations. Now their work was taken over by professional officers, who interview children and parents and then try to find the right kind of work for each child.

As to the long term projects, for which plans were now laid, changes were envisaged which, in the eyes of the older generation of enthusiasts, seemed almost like treason to the cause. But we would ask them to remember that times and circumstances alter. In the first place, expert opinion was no longer in favour of the ultra-spartan regime of former days and if the school was to remain open all the year round as an educational establishment as well as a remedial centre, then provision must be made for reason able working conditions whatever the weather. This meant that classrooms would have to be supplied with all- weather protection and also with heating facilities. Next came consideration of the rest period and it was decided that two hours was unnecessarily long in the majority of cases. Then arose the question of the difficulties encountered by children trying to get home during the rush hour period or the winter darkness. Finally, it had to be admitted that, among teachers, fifty hours duty per week no longer possessed the charm which it had for the crusading pioneers, especially when hours of work generally were being steadily reduced. Everything, therefore, conspired towards a less vigorous regime and a shortening of the school day with no Saturday attendance. But we believe that these changes, while in no way retarding the physical amelioration of the children, have greatly assisted in advancing their educational opportunities throughout the year. No longer do we see them wet and miserable with not a dry chair to sit on, they do not have to be sent home betimes, the ink is always above freezing point and a planned curriculum is not upset by the vagaries of the weather.

CHAPTER 6

NOW FOR THE FUTURE

Mrs. Gardiner retired in 1947 and Mr. Voyle was appointed her successor and he carried on the work of consolidation while preparing for changes that were portending. We read of educational expeditions to London, Greenwich, and elsewhere, of visits to concerts and plays, the installation of school radio, Sports Day and Prizegivings; and of a new venture, the summer camp. Mr. Voyle took charge annually of the large camps held at Marchant's Hill or Sayer's Croft and a contingent of Charlton Park children joined the throng in August each year, accompanied by members of the staff.

A remarkable number of visitors came to see the school and learn of its work, for these were the post-war years of reconstruction and many folk from many lands were busy making plans for the brave new world. In 1949 officials from the Ministry of Education came to see about the proposed improvements: the closing in of hall and class rooms, the provision of heaters, hot water supply and like matters. But, meanwhile, double sessions had to be resorted to in very bad weather and the medical officer advised that children under seven should not commence attendance until the summer term. As numbers in school continued to grow and the waiting list gradually lengthened, an extra classroom was added to ensure adequate accommodation for 130 children in classes not exceeding 30. It is strange but true that in most categories of handicapped children there are always more boys than girls—and at Charlton Park School this preponderance of males made it difficult to organise the school in classes of boys and girls separately. In any case such a procedure resulted in a large age range and in 1950 it was decided that mixed classes should be formed. The experiment was quite successful and continues to this day. What effect this purely administrative expedient has on the development of the characters of the children it is not easy to gauge and we must leave speculation to those who have time for it.

Sister Woods had retired early in 1947 and Sister Meadows took her place. She serves us yet and we all hope that she is in no hurry to go. By 1951, with the appointment of Miss Dansie, Mrs. Fleming and Mrs. Rogerson, there was a settled teaching staff, a condition which fostered a feeling of stability and ordered progress which is so important in a child's life at school. A gap was made, however, in June 1952 when Mr. Morris, who had done so much for the school during the post-war years, was unfortunately killed in a motor cycle accident on his way home. Mr. Gittins came in September to fill the vacancy. It is not in the Staff that we now see frequent changes; the trend is rather in the opposite direction, it is the children who leave us. For it is our task to carry on with the good work, striving always to get rid of them by fitting them for return to ordinary school. Some, of course, must do all their schooling with us, but a goodly proportion pass out earlier. Joy in the knowledge that they have found health is frequently overshadowed by sorrow on leaving our corn inanity; but the mixture of joy and sorrow is common medicine in this world and it does no harm to get used to the taste early. Meanwhile, there is other physic for them, wrapped up in the old tag: *mens sana in corpore sano*. Still remains the need for courage and perseverance, with diligence and faith that those things which seem impossible may in the end come to pass, to the lasting benefit of the recipients and the continual joy and satisfaction of all the staff who live but to serve.

So the days go by, the destined changes come to pass. School buses come into service for carrying the junior children to and from school, and prove a great boon in ensuring more regular attendance and in avoiding the difficulties of rush hour travel. By 1954 all the buildings have adequate protection against rough weather by the installation of hinged windows and electric heaters. There is hot water to wash with and soon every child has his own hand towel.

Mr. Voyle was very keen on creating a photographic record and we have a series of excellent photographs taken during the years 1949-55. Mr. Gittins, also, has left us a memory of 1953 in his beautiful painting which hangs in the Headmaster's room.

It was a great pity that Mr. Voyle's health broke down during his last term as Headmaster. He had not been well for some time, but he tried hard to keep on to the end of the road. He had to give up, however, at the end of February, 1955, and Mr. Henderson was called upon to carry on until the end of term. After a period in hospital, Mr. Voyle went to his new home in Margate and was well enough to attend the Prizegiving in the following July. We wish him well; he will always be remembered affectionately by children and staff alike.

And here must come the end.

We have written much of teachers, who are the front line troops, but we do not forget those further back who make the attack possible, from the Minister of Education forward. To begin to thank them individually would be to end by leaving somebody out. It must suffice, therefore, to say that we are very conscious of the debt we owe to so many. We freely acknowledge it and try to repay by seeing that what they provide is used to best purpose.

We have looked back fifty years, but our daily work bids us think of the fifty years to come, during which those who go forth from our school will be the better or the worse through what we accomplish in them. So you will not be surprised if my concluding words are for God's blessing on our school and for all, be they children or grown-ups, who labour therein.

CHAPTER 7

THE GOLDEN JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS

With the approach of the year 1957 our thoughts turned to ways and means of celebrating the Golden Jubilee of our school. We decided that, as the occasion constituted an important milestone on the road of progress in special education, we must do things in a big way.

The past and the present must be brought into the picture and the widest possible publicity given to the consequent exhibition. Obviously, there would have to be a festal day at school where opportunity could be given for the mass meeting of past and present to recall earlier days and to see what the latest generation had accomplished.

To portray the days gone by, it was decided to compile a history of the school; and a letter to the local newspapers invited those with knowledge to write and tell us their recollections. Their information enabled us to write the story you have just read, complementing, with human interest, such facts and figures as we were able to find in official documents and records of past activities. So far, so good; but how to get the history published? Our thoughts turned to 1907, the beginning of the story when the Royal Arsenal (a-operative Society made possible the opening of the school. Could we once again enlist the interest of the society?

Timorously we approached Mr. Morton, the Secretary. But we need not have trembled, for the General Committee entered wholeheartedly into the project and asked us what we wanted them to do. With this auspicious and encouraging start we went ahead with our plans. Thursday, 27th lane, was decided upon as the great day, with a preliminary Folk Dance Festival on the previous evening.

As the weeks went by, preparations went forward with ordered enthusiasm, until all was ready. The Society bore the cost of the School History, 750 copies, beautifully produced, programmes were drafted and printed by the boys of Plum Lane School, widespread publicity was given to the event; and at last everything was ready.

The School hall was filled with work done by the children and each of our five classes was prepared to put on its act in the grounds where already a huge marquee had been erected by the Society, who had undertaken the catering for the occasion. On the Wednesday afternoon a huge grass area was marked out for the dancing which commenced at 6 p.m. The English Folk Dance Society provided the band and over two hundred children from schools in Greenwich and Woolwich enjoyed themselves until 7.30 in lovely surroundings and perfect weather. Opportunity was given to those present to visit the garden and the exhibition which included all the historical data that we had been able to collect. A highly successful evening, but a prelude only to the great day, when we flung wide our gates to all comers at 2 p.m.

In the afternoon the Infants had the time of their lives. Watched by adoring mums and their friends, they sailed the Mayflower across uncharted ocean to fraternise with Red Indians in their wigwams and to smoke the pipe of peace. Chairman John Corina and other representatives of the R.A.C.S. saw Mayflower nearly come to grief as it swayed in the breeze and bumped on the concrete of the quad and they started with apprehension as the Indians appeared, all bows and arrows and war paint. But all was well, pilgrims and redskins sat together to watch the Juniors do their physical exercises and then to hear the school choir sing soft and sweet.

It was now the turn of Mr. Corina to take the stage, to make an apposite speech and then to cut a huge birthday cake, present of the Society to the children. That was a moment of mouth watering enthusiasm but it brought difficulties in its train; for when the official party moved off to view the children's work in the hall, we had to set a guard over the cake to warn off prospective samplers and a guard over the guard lest they fall into temptation. Before leaving for another engagement, Mr. Corina was invited to plant a magnolia tree on the headmaster's

lawn and a commemorative plaque stands with it today to tell future generations of the important occasion.

Long before 6 o'clock in the evening crowds began to arrive for the further festivities. But there was plenty to see in hall and grounds while we awaited the arrival of the Mayors of Greenwich and Woolwich, Mr. Houghton, Education Officer, and that galaxy of representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Medical Profession, the School Managers and of other bodies whose activities make our work possible. Under a perfect sky there was music, song and dance, ice-cream, pop and cakes; old friends meeting again after all these years, new ones being introduced to a branch of the educational service which opened their eyes enormously. Press reporters, including one from the Co—operative News, covered the occasion, photographers made permanent the fleeting scene. 'Added attractions,' as the showmen say, included a film made at Galleon's Mount School and a mannequin parade done by the elder girls modelling clothes which they themselves had made. Two more trees were planted, one by the Education Officer, the other by Mr. Broughton to whom the school owed so much for so long.

Then came the Grand Finale. The assembled throng, having been requested to sit down around the stage on the lawn and there to await developments, were soon surprised to see a gorgeously caparisoned horse drawing a wagon-load of Dickensian characters, all authentically attired. It was a party of Pickwickians going to the wedding at Dingly Dell. The Dickens Fellowship had kindly provided all the costumes, R.A.C.S. the transport; and the participants were our older boys and girls. It was a good wedding, especially the breakfast with real food and none left over. It is not known whether actors or spectators enjoyed themselves the more, but certainly a good time was had by all.

When the short play is done, there is a mingling of Pickwickians and mannequins and parents and visitors, while the last ice-creams are consumed, the final cups of tea sipped down. Just showing off are the actors and the models, mum and dad seeing in son and daughter more than they ever imagined was there. In the glow of the setting sun, in the cool and peace of the evening after a hot and hectic day, the scene was sublime in its benignity.

We forget that these are delicate children; they forget it themselves. We are spellbound by the beauty of the rustic landscape, the happy faces, and the atmosphere of joy and friendship throughout the assembled throng. Mr. Pickwick, Sam Weller, the Fat Boy, Isabella, Mrs. Wardle, the Spinster Aunt and the rest of the wedding party fit precisely into the scene; for here, indeed, the spirit of Dickens is abroad. It is the appropriate moment to remember Him from Whom all blessings flow; and as a final act we all join in hymn and prayer.

And so to bed, our hearts full of pride in achievement and thankful that, through the glad help of many people, we have been able to mark worthily the Golden Jubilee of the founding of our school.

