

Opening of a new Village School Building in Soulbury in 1863

The original endowed school in Soulbury was built in 1724, financed by Robert Lovatt Bt. Esq, of Liscombe Manor who was the major landowner in Soulbury, and the Reverend John Sambee, vicar of Soulbury. Its main purpose was to teach reading, writing and arithmetic as well as a sound awareness of the Christian faith. As an 1833 report of the Charity Commissioners put it, the 'prescribed instruction' was in 'reading, writing, accounts and the catechisms of the Church of England'. The governors of the school were the Lord of the Manor of Liscombe, the vicar of Soulbury and the vicars of three neighbouring parishes, who together appointed the schoolmaster. He was required to be 'neither a vicar nor curate of any parish'. This charity provided free education for twenty-four children (boys and girls) of the 'poor settled' inhabitants of the parish of Soulbury. The school attracted few girls which was the cause of concern in the mid eighteenth hundreds. By 1861 twenty-four children were regularly attending the school.

The original schoolhouse building still stands today on the corner of the High Road and Chapel Hill. It is an impressive three story brick built Georgian house. It not only contained the schoolrooms but also the living quarters for its boarders and the schoolmaster and his family. Perhaps too it was a lodging place for the vicars of Soulbury who, at that time, did not have a permanent vicarage in the village.



The original School House building built in 1724 which was known in the late nineteenth century as 'The Old School House', now called 'Lovatt House'

When a new school building, next to the original one, was opened on Saturday the 14th of November 1863, the Leighton Buzzard Observer described it in the following well-chosen words: -

“The old school house has recently been superseded by a new and ornamental one, built on land contiguous to the former. It is a building of considerable beauty, in the early English style, supported by buttresses; and is 40ft by 18ft. It is built with bright red brick worked into patterns, pointed blue, and covered with blue and brown Staffordshire tiles, and with ornamental carved barge boards. At the entrance to the school, over the lobby, is a square tower and octagonal bell-turret. The doorway is cusped with hood mouldings and carved termination. The beauty of the exterior has not been allowed to interfere with the commodiousness and comfort of the interior, as is sometimes the case with such buildings. The lower part of the walls are rendered in Portland cement; the upper portion in brickwork from patterns. The roof is opened and stained. The fittings are exceedingly good. The desks are Hammer’s patent, which will allow them to be turned perpendicularly, and used as backs to the benches or fixed horizontally for the purpose of tables. In addition the schoolroom is a classroom for the infants in the mornings, the girls while at needlework in the afternoon. It is 18ft by 18ft. The schoolroom is lighted by two 2-light mullion windows with trefoil window at each end. In the classroom, which abuts to the front, is a mullion 3-light window and trefoil ditto. The windows are a striking point in the building, and are carved in plate tracery. Attached to the school are separate play-grounds for boys and girls. The architect was Mr Durley Jun, of Bierton; the builders were Messrs’ Durley and son, Bierton.”

The new school was built almost opposite the gateway into All Saints Church yard and it had direct access to the former schoolhouse next to it. The new school building can be seen in the photograph above to the left of the main building. The picture is taken from the High Road and Chapel Hill is off to the right.



The new endowed school building opened in 1863 – now converted into a house

The opening ceremony drew a fair representation of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and of the great and the good of local society. Ordinary villagers, mainly poor agricultural labourers and their wives, were not invited. It began with a service in All Saints Church. The guest of honour was the Bishop of Oxford. At 3.00 pm prompt he entered the packed church, followed by the choirmaster, Mr Poynter and the choristers and his choir. Numerous clergy from neighbouring parishes and further afield in full ecclesiastical attire followed. Seated in the pews were local dignitaries and worthies. Amongst them were Colonel Hanmer KH, Lady Duncombe, Madam de la Greene, Major Alexander. There too were the local worthies including farmers such as Mr and Mrs Bowden and Mr Durrant.

The splendid sounds of full choral works by Tallis and others filled the church. The Reverend L Damer intoned copious prayers. Two lessons were shoe horned into the service and then the Lord Bishop of Oxford preached a sermon from Matthew xiii 36. Its text was "Let both grow together until the harvest".

Before addressing the text the Bishop thanked the Almighty for his blessing in bringing forth an abundant harvest that year. Swiftly changing tack he went on to remind those present that they were all there to celebrate the opening of the new school but critically he asked them to give generously in order to make good the deficiency in the subscriptions for the restoration of the parish church. Perhaps here is a clue as to why the local agricultural labourers, who formed the vast majority of the Parish, were not invited. Not only were they socially inferior and uneducated, but above all they were poor so they could have only contributed very small amounts to the inadequate restoration fund!

There followed a sermon in which the Bishop tortuously dissected his obscure chosen text word by word, dwelling much on the meaning of the word 'both' in the phrase 'Let both grow together until harvest'. Its meaning is debatable but he felt that in using these words Christ was meaning 'both' good and evil. There followed an erudite, if pointed, discussion of Christian tolerance to evil. Its relevance to the education of the 'settled poor' of the Parish allowed those who heard to impute their own meanings.

The sermon clearly impressed the congregation who gave £20 6s 10d or about £2,500 at 2020's values. At that time it would have taken an agricultural labourer about 40 weeks of paid work to earn what the congregation gave.

The Bishop and Congregation left the church to cross the road to the school. The new building was opened appropriately with a prayer from the Bishop.

With the formal ceremonies over the public (i.e. the families of the agricultural labourers of the parish and their families) were invited to a free concert of 'vocal music' held in the school in the evening. Apparently it was well received, which encouraged the performers to consider taking the event round the other parishes in the area.

In all this the school children were not forgotten. On Monday the 16th November, they were given a free tea, in the traditional manner. The tables were replete with bread and butter, plum cake, apples and oranges. Tea was served to those who wanted it. Several indoor games and amusements were subsequently enjoyed.

Over the door arch of the school evergreen was placed with the motto “Education is the Apprenticeship for Life”. This very pertinent expression of hope captured the wider view of enlightened Victorians that education was an investment in the personal and social improvement to the benefit of all. One small manifestation of this hope would emerge later in the life of Soulbury when the very active local temperance group promoted their belief that education was the means by which children would learn that taking alcohol was inconsistent with sound Christian personal development and fulfilment.

In the absence of a village hall in the second half of the nineteenth century the schoolroom was regularly used for meetings of various village societies, public performances and concerts, celebratory lunches and teas and the like. It not only nurtured the enquiring minds of the young in the day-time but was the social centre of the village on many an evening. On Sundays it served a higher purpose as the venue for the weekly Anglican Sunday School. It slightly irked the vicar of Soulbury that the Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School that squeezed into the small neighbouring Chapel had a larger attendance. Nonetheless the School Room was perhaps the most used building in Soulbury contributing most to the village life.