

Chitterne at the Turn of the 20th Century

The Misses Feltham talked to Mrs. Nixon Eckersall in 1975. Miss Beryl was aged 90 and Miss Nora 80 at the time¹.

There were two Parishes – All Saints and St Mary's. Between them they covered 6,000 acres in all. Chitterne was 90 miles from London on the old London to Exeter road, much used in olden days but practically deserted by 1893, except for light traffic. The lower road went through Codford to Salisbury and London.

By 1893 the number of inhabitants was 580, with 109 children on the school register. The average attendance was 80 – this was much affected by the weather and the seasons. For instance, haymaking was a particularly bad time, as were potato planting and harvesting. The road down to the school was steep and rough; the school itself had been built in 1840 of mud, by the villagers themselves. It was agreed that the building be used as a school during the day and a meeting place in the evening for the Village Benefit Club, the idea being to keep the men out of the pub!

While the water was rising the children's health suffered over a period of weeks. They had boots of a sort to walk to school – possibly father's old ones, which did not fit. Some walked bare-footed. They wore their father's cut-down trousers held up by binder twine which cut into their shirtless backs. Poverty in Chitterne was dreadful, and many children were infested with fleas from the farmyards.

There were no cows in Chitterne, except a couple a farmer would keep for his own family. The other children rarely saw milk, and mothers would breast feed their babies up to the age of two years. The farmers would sell skim milk 1d. a quart, and new milk for 1½d. There was no butcher's meat, except for a joint given by the farmer at Christmas, but many families kept a pig, and when it was killed they were bilious for a week through eating too much rich fare.

Dwellings: There were "Plain farms" where the farmland was extensive and the settlements here were known as "field barns", so called because the corn was stored here and up to 12 horses stabled, while there were up to 5 cottages and a bailiff's house – all 2½ miles from the village. People did not talk of houses but "housen", the old Anglo-Saxon plural of over 1,000 years ago. One such "field barn" stood across the fields behind the Army look-out by the old road to Imber, another existed behind Mr. Babey's Chitterne barn². These field barns were free.

There were farmworker's cottages, such as those in Shrewton Road, where the rents were one shilling a week. Some cost a shilling a week, to include a piece of land as well. Families living in the field barn settlements did so to save the men travelling time. The settlements were often protected from the wind from the north and east by clumps of trees, still to be seen, and they were approached by a soft road or track, with ruts in it up to 18 inches deep in places. On occasions these tracks were completely water-logged and the children could not get to school. Even in the village itself the roads were covered in water.

The children had to be collected in carts to attend the annual inspection by H.M.I. and it was a fine sight to see that gentleman alighting from his carriage to hold the inspection, and stepping into inches of mud before the school.

The farmworker had to be on the job at 6 a.m. and had a weekly wage of 8 shillings³, which went up to 9 shillings⁴ at the turn of the century. Later in the 1900s, before the First World War, it rose to 10 or 12⁵ shillings.

¹ Beryl Feltham (1885-1977) and Nora Feltham (1895-1984) were daughters of William J.C. Feltham and Alma C. Polden.

² Chitterne Barn was dismantled in 1983.

³ 40 pence

Women worked on the farms for 6d.⁶ a day, and the washerwoman at the big house had 1/- to 1/6d.⁷ a day, working from 6 a.m. to late in the evening.

Everyone went to Church or Chapel. There was a strong orchestra in the Church on Sundays. (Village conditions were much the same as described by Hardy in "Under the Greenwood Tree"). The Misses Feltham's great-grandfather and his two sons played the violin in Church and used to sneak out to the King's Head during the hour-long sermon!

There was an annual Sunday School treat at the Vicarage, and the Chapel treat was held in the field behind Chitterne House. There was also a Club Fete on Whit-Monday, with dinner in the School field, and a brass band. Members of the Club would march down the village street to fetch the Vicar, with the band playing and the villagers carrying posies on sticks. If they had not been to Church that day they had to pay a fine. The children were given 3d. to spend – 1d. entry to the field and 2d. to splash out. You could go on the swings for ½d. and water squirts (very popular) cost ½d. to buy.

It is interesting to note that the village orchestra would play in the school for concerts 100 years ago – cello, violins and bass viol.

People relied on the Church clock striking and the school bell ringing to know the time. Very few cottages had clocks, and these could be eagerly saved up for with coupons which you were given with your purchases. These clocks kept remarkably good time.

There was no library and no daily papers in the village. The Misses Feltham's father had his sent three times a week from London.

Coal was £1 a ton. Squire Long would have a ton brought from Radstock, hauled free by the farmers, and he would sell it to the villagers for 6d. a hundredweight.

Cottage floors were of mud and people picked up bricks which they found to make floors, starting round the fireplace and extending gradually to the whole room, and decorating with borders made of chalk and water criss-cross patterns.

The lavatories consisted of vaults – deep pits with a sheer drop. Some people had to cross the road from one parish to the other to spend a penny.

School began at 9 a.m. and finished at 4 p.m. The children got up early to trek there, the school bell ringing at 8.45 a.m. Most of them had breakfast of bread and lard – some had none. The isolation had a terribly cramping effect on the intelligence and work of the pupils and some of them had great difficulty in learning to read and write as their parents were illiterate, and through inbreeding many were retarded. The children "thee'd" and "thou'd" each other, and the upper end of the parish was always at loggerheads with the lower!

The parents attitude to the school was co-operative as they looked to it to get their children through the magic Fourth Standard when they could leave and start to earn. Many of the teachers of the period, alas, were awful. They did not explain things because they could not. They did not understand themselves.

There were three teachers for up to one hundred children. The subjects learned were the 3 R's, tables were chanted and a little history and geography was done – probably all from books which instructed the teachers

⁴ 45 pence

⁵ 50 or 60 pence

⁶ 2½ pence

⁷ 10 to 12½ pence

at the same time as their pupils. Religious Instruction was taken by the Vicar or supervised by him and the morning session began with "Our Father Jarge in Heaven". The children had no idea of what they said!

The school books and "readers" were tattered and many of the pupils knew the stories by heart, which they recited and so deceived the teachers into thinking they were reading.

Agriculture was a class subject and was the most popular of the week. Theory only was taught for there was no garden or experimental plot, but the boys could see the principles applied in the fields around them.

The girls learned needlework. They practised traditional stitches on strips of calico, and since they could not afford new material, when the strip was finished it had to be unpicked and started again. Naturally nobody hurried to finish and much dawdling resulted.

In Mr. Brown's day he took all the drawing up to Fourth Standard. He and his daughter, Mrs. Polden, had attended a weekly Art School held on Saturdays in Warminster, and had paid all their own expenses in this connection.

Mr. Brown was headmaster and his wife and daughter taught in the school. He took charge in 1867. He alone was "qualified" because when it was required by law he studied in the evenings and took lessons in Warminster on Saturdays to obtain his teaching diploma. There was no official school house, as was customary in most villages, and he lived where the Badleys now live⁸. In 1892 the total salaries of the three teachers amounted to £100 per annum. Mr. Brown augmented his salary by being Parish Clerk and doing the Churchwarden's clerical duties.

One day Miss Brown refused to work any longer for £15 per annum and she got a £3 rise. Incidentally, the school outgoings in 1892 were as follows:

Books	£3 18s. 8½d.	£3.94
Sunday expenses	3s. 8d.	18½p
Fuel and other minor items	£2 19s. 2d.	£2.96
School furniture	£4 11s. 7d.	£4.58

Mr. Brown of course took the Fourth Standard and his wife and daughter alternated morning and afternoon, taking the infants and lower standards. Some children achieved very good results under this set-up. The Bazell family, who lived where the Olivers now live⁹, had 13 children, highly intelligent but very poor and shabbily dressed. All the boys achieved scholarships to Dauntseys and one of them became Head of William Whiteleys – a famous London store in those days.

Mr. Brown must have been a dedicated teacher. He held a night school for Agriculture and Drawing five nights a week, until he could no longer bear the burden of extra work.

Of his boy pupils he remarked "No young fellow of energy will stay in Chitterne". Of course they didn't – there was nothing for them except farm work. For the girls there was domestic service.

The railway was 3½ miles away in Codford, though many of the bigger boys and girls had never seen a train. In some of the villages on the Plain boys could walk to better work in a neighbouring town, but Chitterne was too far out in the country. Most of the boys went away to the towns to become postmen, policemen or drivers.

⁸ Syringa Cottage, Back lane

⁹ Clump House

There was no water laid on at the school – no washing of hands for staff or pupils, and no drinks of water. For that they had to go to a neighbouring cottage, such as Woodbine Cottages, and the conditions there were not very hygienic.

School ended when a child reached the age of 14, but those who passed the Fourth Standard could leave at 12. Few could go on to further training since there was no opportunity for secondary education.

In 1893 the school had a piano of which it was extremely proud, having bought it cheaply. Having got this piano they provided monthly public teas followed by free entertainment.

At the end of the school girls curtsied to the Master and to visitors. It was not a “bob” but a full court curtsy. The boys did a sort of Nazi salute. The infant’s room (the inner room at the hall today) had gallery and four or five rows of tiered seats, with the older children sitting at the back. There were as many as forty children in that room, ranging in age from 4 to 9 years. In the larger room there were two box desks with seats attached, and children also sat at sloping desks with shelves underneath. In the Infants’ Room there was nothing to lean their slates on, except their knees. Pupils provided their own slates and pencils which came five in a box for 1d.

The schoolrooms were heated by coke – burning tortoise stoves. They gave out a good heat, and horrible fumes when the wind was in a certain direction. It was very necessary that the rooms should be warm because many children had walked through the rain to school and were soaked. There was no means of drying clothes.

Punishment was by standing in a corner, or occasionally, the cane. Little boys came to school in petticoats. Many children faked their ages to enable them to leave school earlier.