

Account of Purley on Thames

The Saga of Fred King

R200632 2/7/2019

An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article45 published in PPN August 1984

45 - THE SAGA OF FRED KING

Every school log book has its share of naughty boys whose activities disrupt the classroom and drive the often inadequate mistress to distraction. In the 19th century, parents and children alike were poorly motivated towards education which was considered by many to be of secondary importance to going out to work. Also many of the children were illnourished and unhealthy and therefore unable to concentrate on anything for long.

Most education then consisted of "learning by rote" the subjects to be examined by the Inspector on his annual visit. Upon the success or failure of the children to reach the desired standard in this examination depended the allowance made to the school and the teacher's wages for the following year. With hindsight, this method of teaching was boring although thorough - as those who are still able to use their tables to advantage today will testify - and it restricted the introduction of other subjects or of a more interesting approach to teaching the three Rs. Whilst the girls might be gainfully occupied with hours of needlework, there was little that relieved the tedium for the boys who soon became bored and played up. Despite frequent floggings, their behaviour showed little signs of improvement and both teachers and pupils alike must have felt relieved when such disruptive children left the school.

Such a child was 7 year old Fred King who lived in Purley for just over a year. He and his family moved into a cottage on the Oxford Road in the winter of 1892 and, with his older sister Mary, started at Purley School on 1st March. During his brief period in the school his behaviour attracted more than the usual number of entries in the log book and the following extracts tell their own story.

Within two months of his arrival the mistress wrote that "work has been steady except with 2 or 3 boys who have been idle and troublesome, particularly during needlework time". By the end of May she was driven to name him: "Fred King continues (author's underlining) to give a great amount of trouble, and is a great hindrance to work. His bad conduct and example affects the school badly". And a fortnight later on 3rd June his "conduct has been so persistently bad that I felt obliged to suspend him for a time, as he was doing so much harm by his vicious example". He was away for two weeks, and when he returned "on Tuesday morning (17th June) he promised better behaviour". Relative peace now reigned until the end of July when, although "the boys are much better behaved than they were, Fred King's temper gives frequent trouble".

The summer holidays did not start until mid-August that year and on the 5th she recorded that "Fred King has been exceedingly idle and troublesome all the week and has hindered the work greatly. Otherwise all has been well". The following week both Fred and his sister Mary "absented themselves because (they) were reprovved on Monday for very insolent behaviour".

After the holiday, school started again in late September and on the 30th "Fred King is very troublesome and idle" but "the other boys are working steadily". On the same day "corporal punishment (was inflicted) on five of the bigger boys for wilful disobedience and causing damage to the shrubs in the playground". During the next three months there are regular entries about Fred's behaviour: on 28th October he "is very troublesome and idle, the other boys are working

steadily". And on 18th November he "is still very inattentive and troublesome, he makes no progress himself and is a great hindrance to the other children". By 2nd December the mistress was desperate and "inflicted a flogging on Fred King for his persistent disobedience".

By this time, word of the disruptive behaviour of Fred and some of the other children in the school had reached the ears of the squire's wife, Mrs Storer. She visited the school on 13th December and asked for a report on each child's conduct. Fred, two other boys and a girl were reported as being a "constant trial, they are so persistently lazy and never can concentrate their thoughts on any subject for more than two minutes at a time". This seems to have had the desired effect for a time and on 20th January 1893 it was noted that "Fred King has greatly improved in his behaviour this last week or two".

The previous September, Miss Sophia E Capel, a "Certified Teacher of the First Class" had arrived to take charge of the school. Her stay did not last long and one gains the impression that her ability to maintain discipline was poor. In one of the last entries she made in the Log Book before she resigned in April 1893 she says that "Fred King has been exceedingly troublesome this week and absented himself one day because he was punished for rudeness and disobedience. His father sent a very insulting message to the teacher".

The King family seems to have left the village soon after this, no doubt to general sighs of relief all round.

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