

Wokingham Remembers

Exploring our heritage with wokinghamremembers.com

In association with

TradeMark
WINDOWS • DOORS • CONSERVATORIES

OUR PAST

Education, education, education

This week we look to research from local historians JOAN DILS and JIM BELL, who provide a fascinating insight to the world of Victorian society and its influence on the rise of Wokingham's culture of education

THE Wokingham area of the 21st Century has a reputation for offering some of the best education in the country, but is this due to motivated parents (who are also among the country's most educated), or is it the magic of our teachers and their methodologies?

Admittedly it is an age-old question of which came first and no doubt the answer lies in good teachers and supportive parents together producing a virtuous circle.

While it cannot be said that our history is caked in intellectual alumni, we have never been accused of standing in the corner of the classroom either.

Wokingham has a tradition of good education and by understanding this part of our heritage, we also receive a glimpse of how our society operated and interacted in the 1800s.

To provide some context, we need to draw an outline of Wokingham society in the early Victorian period.

The land of Middle Berkshire was squeezed between the forest in the east towards Windsor and the fertile farming lands in the west; both of which can still be recognised today.

The land around Wokingham was never going to be described as lush (travel writer William Cobbett even described

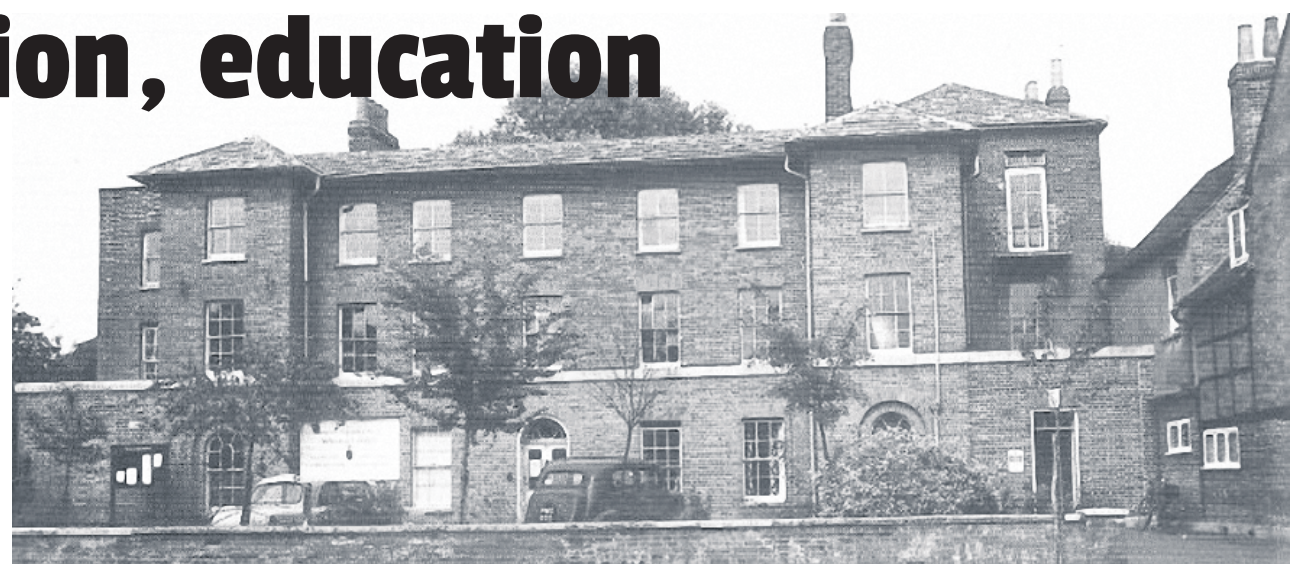
it as barren and villainous) but it did provide a good commercial centre and a range of manor houses for both the 'nouveaux riche' and the established gentry.

This mixture of population from artisans and traders to highly educated families of 'independent means', was to provide the foundations of a number of our early educational establishments.

Snares Directory published in 1842 said of Wokingham that 'excellent schools have been richly endowed to instruct the youthful mind in all that is necessary to render their industry available to their own and the general good'.

No wonder the reputation was so fine; funds left by Martha Palmer provided for the purchase of 31 Rose Street in 1795 and the establishment of the Maiden School. In 1825 the National School (for the poor) was established at 21 Rose Street and by the 1840s it was registering attendances of up to 100 boys and girls.

Funding was provided by local contributions; i.e. the wealthier residents and by the penny a week subscription from the families themselves. Although in largely mechanised form, the few teachers available were already developing skills in successfully teaching large numbers of pupils.



Wokingham's history of educational excellence has been heavily influenced by the Victorians. Pictured left is Montague House in Broad Street, which has been a school several times. Below, Grosvenor School House in Broad Street in 1893. It is now known as Tudor House.



Whilst such schools were being established by contributions from the wealthy, the other great benefactor was the church. However, the National School was for members of the Church of England only and there was no room for the children of the dissenting local worshippers.

Non conformism was becoming quite well established in Wokingham and in 1841 the British School was opened opposite the Baptist church in Milton Road and, by the early 1850s, was accommodating more than 100 children.

These large public schools were supplemented by at least seven other private schools in the area and their names reflect a growing demand for specialist requirements.

Rose Street had 'The Academy for Young Gentlemen' and there was the 'Wokingham French and English Classical, Mathematical and Commercial School'. Day schools for girls were established in the town and the reputation of the area was growing at such a point that boarding facilities were being offered by the 1850s.

By the end of the century, Wokingham was becoming an area renowned for offering a great range of subjects to people from all walks of life and prided itself in a complete lack of sex discrimination; boys and girls were attending in virtually equal numbers.

Education was not just the preserve of children; adults were receiving regular lessons in reading and writing and this led to the establishment of the first lending libraries.

Acts of Parliament during the 1850s encouraged local councils to set up libraries and Emmbrook, Forest Hill and Wokingham did not waste time in establishing themselves as early contributors to the education of its adults.

However, Wokingham's reason for developing reading as a healthy pastime was in reaction to a more popular activity - alcohol. The temperance movement and the churches of the area were determined to offer an alternative to the heinous activities brought on by the devilment of

drink and the first parochial library was opened in the Town Hall in 1865.

Although Wokingham did not possess its own literary greats, there were a number who made the area their home.

The Walter family, probably our greatest local benefactors, were the proprietors of the tub thumping London Times; the poet Alexander Pope lived in Binfield; George Bernard Shaw was a regular visitor to Finchampstead, as was HG Wells to Wokingham and author Charles Kingsley, was a long-time resident of Eversley.

From an unpromising patch of ground set between fields and forest, Wokingham in the 20th century was to go on to lose its local industry and also the great benefactors which surrounded it.

What it did hold on to however, was its reputation as a centre for commerce and professional services and these skills were born from the local demands for a good education. It is a principle which still holds strong today.

Local book of the month

A MULTITUDE of stories about Wokingham's past has been put together in local historian Jim Bell's latest book *Miss Baker's School And Other Wokingham Memories*.

Jim's centrepiece focuses on the rise of education in the area and how one particular school, The Grosvenor House School, moved into a number of

different residences as it grew in popularity.

There is also a fascinating photograph of the famous Tudor House in Broad Street before it was covered in plaster and exposed timber work. Education was not just limited to the growth of schools for children; Jim also tells of the rise of local library and its contribution to the education of adults.

Surprisingly the libraries were conceived by the church to use reading as a preferable alternative to the attendance of the many 'drinking dens' which existed in Wokingham at the time!

There are 56 pages of stories of Wokingham's past which can be purchased for just £3.50 at the Information Centre in Wokingham Town Hall in the Market Place and Wokingham Library, in Denmark Street.



Discover the Wokingham Whale

■ Jim Bell has this week launched a new book on a range of stories titled *Miss Baker's School And Other Wokingham Memories* and includes more information on our schools and library.

There are other stories Jim tells in great detail including local adverts and also the mysterious 'Wokingham Whale'.

If you would like a copy, call into the Wokingham

Town Hall Information Centre or the library and take along the sum of just £3.50.

■ The Wokingham Society produces a leaflet which describes the places which have been awarded their famous 'Blue Plaque'. Pick up the leaflet from the Town Hall Information Centre and take a look at the buildings which were once schools and have now morphed into

some of Wokingham's excellent restaurants and landmarks.

■ Peter Shilham's series of books on Emmbrook also provide some fascinating details on local schools including some of the miscreant activities of their pupils.

The books are available in the Emmbrook Post Office on the Reading Road (by the Rifle Volunteer pub).

TradeMark
WINDOWS • DOORS • CONSERVATORIES

Windows doors and conservatories that last a lifetime and beyond

www.trademarkwindows.co.uk

Unit 20, Headley Park 10 (next to Screwfix), Woodley RG5 4SW 0118 9699322

