

STRATHMARTINE PRIMARY SCHOOL 1913 – 1985

In the early hours of the morning of 7th October, Strathmartine Primary School was destroyed by fire.

The community's reaction was one of horror; the school has been the centre of village life for many years, also being used by the Women's Rural Institute, the local Youth Club, the Sunday school, for meetings and social gatherings and for elections.

The earliest records of the school – which was originally part of Angus – appear to be lost; Mr S Mather, Headmaster until his retriial through ill health last year, told my father that the oldest records had been burned, and my father who attended the school from 1911 until he was fourteen, always said that the older school had suffered a fire.

There are two log books in existence, fortunately saved from the fire; the older one begins: "5th August 1907. School re-opened to-day after the summer vacation of 5 weeks with an attendance of 199 pupils." The Angus summer holiday was only five weeks because the county had a four week holiday in October for the potato harvest, although on several occasions the potato holiday was extended to five weeks because rain had delayed the harvesting. The headmaster at the time was James McAsh.

Mr McAsh, who had been headmaster for 'a long period of years retired in August of 1908 and was replaced by Mr David Dorward, who held the post until 1932. It was at this time that the start of the lunch hour was altered from 12.15 to 12.30 to suit a timetable change; the school still takes its lunch hour at 12.30.

Today's children would undoubtedly would have been unhappy about the arrangements for Christmas holidays, in 1907 the New Year's holiday began on December 27th, and in 1908 the log reports "Dec 25th ... Afternoon of 25th given as half holiday." The practice of giving Christmas Day as a holiday was not common until 1913, although it has been customary for the school to get several days holiday at the New Year. In 1912 the log entry for Christmas Day made by a visiting member of the School Board, was "...found all the school and teachers as bright as if they had been on holiday." In 1913 the holiday was one day at Christmas and two (plus the weekend) at the New Year. The week between Christmas and New Year was worked. It was not until after the war that Christmas/New Year holiday included the days between the two. The Spring (Easter) holiday, was only for one week. From about 1933, however, the holidays at Christmas and Easter were slightly longer, and the potato holidays were shorter – three weeks in some years instead of four.

December of 1908 also mentions low attendances because of snowstorms, on the 29th only 13 pupils out of 141 managed to reach the school. March of 1909 sees a continuation of "roads almost impassable because of snow"; indeed, snowstorms and bad roads during the winter are a regular feature of the log, reminding us that although today in Strathmartine we take road clearance for granted and assume that the snowploughs will

be round by mid-morning; this was not always the case. During some of these periods of bad weather, Mr Dorwards assistant teachers were off ill, leaving him to contend with as many of the 144 pupils then on the roll who could reach the school. No supply teachers in those days! Although by the 1920s supply teachers were beginning to make an appearance in cases of lengthy illness. By then, too, assistant teachers were not being moved as regularly as they had been earlier in the century.

Mrs Dorward began cookery classes for the older girls in 1909, and these became an established part of the time table for many years.

The boys were not to be out done. March 1910 saw the boys provided with a garden, “measured off this week from Mr Grant’s ground to the east of the playground.” Mr Grant was John Grant of Craigmills, a local meal mill. There were actually tow mills, - the big mill, burned down several years ago, which is now owned by Grant (Craigmills) Caravans, and the smaller barley mill which stood in the field beside the graveyard. The laide which powered it ran from the dam beside the bridge at Bridgefoot, along the south side of the graveyard, and rejoined the Dighty at the point where it is nearest the road just before it runs past the caravan site. The two rows of houses close to the school were tied to the mill.

Work on the garden began in April, although in 1913 the lessons were moved to “part of the schoolhouse garden because the regular school garden will be interfered with in constructing drains of the new school.” Gardening remained on the timetable for many years, with inspectors coming from Edinburgh and East of Scotland Agricultural College, although by the 1930’s regular mention of it disappears from the log. It was finally removed from the timetable when the school became primary only.

There were frequent changes in the school roll in May and December because it was ‘term time’ when farm workers changed their jobs, some families leaving the district and others moving in.

In 1910, pupils aged from 5 to 14 were being taught by three teachers in two rooms, the two assistant working in the same room. The difficulties of working under these conditions were recognised, but it took another three years before a new, enlarged, building was provided, the new building, however, contained four classrooms, a hall, and two small upstairs rooms for staff room and office. This was the building that was destroyed in 1985.

The new school was opened in August of 1913, although since it was “still in the hands of tradesman only the senior division and infants could find accommodation in it, the junior occupying the part of the old school still left standing”. Some things never change. However, the juniors were able to move in the next day, although the workmen were still busy.

Mr Dorward was soon to have three assistants, not two. This allowed him to devote more time to the Supplementary Classes – the children of secondary age who had not gone to

Morgan or Harris Academies (mostly Morgan). Secondary teachers today would be horrified at the suggestion that they take all subjects, including gardening! In addition, he took the oldest class of the Primary children. Woodwork was first mentioned in 1915 – yet another subject taught by the Dominie.

As already mentioned, there was considerable change among the assistant teachers as their contracts with the School Board terminated; especially in the early years of the century, instead of their contracts being renewed new assistants were frequently employed. This gave a broken nature to the schooling and between this and seasonal absences caused by weather and the demands of the local farms (as well as the potato harvest, on several occasions it is also mentioned that pupils had been absent planting potatoes or at the grain harvest – many of the older pupils obviously considering farm work more important than schooling) it is hardly surprising that from time to time the log comments – “Monthly examinations ... results ... only fair. Reading of the boys not nearly satisfactory. Spelling all over weak.” Throughout the school, poor spelling is frequently mentioned!

Illness, too, took its toll; scarlet fever is mentioned several times, together with measles, mumps, whooping cough and diphtheria. One consequence of certain illnesses was that all children from the affected family were excluded from school, with a resultant drop in attendances. Scarlet fever seemed particularly prevalent in 1915; it is mentioned several times over a period of some months. The school got an extended holiday in November 1918 because of the flu epidemic; due to reopen after the potato holidays on November 4th, it remained closed until the 18th. In spite of the extended closure, absences caused by the epidemic were as high as 50%, and it was re-closed on December 4th until the 23rd. there was no holiday on Christmas Day that year.

Vandalism (seven panes of glass broken) was first reported in February 1921; “young lads from Downfield suspected.”

An interesting entry for me is that of September 3rd 1923 – “Mr Allan B Clark B.Sc a student in training started for three weeks teaching. Supplementary class put in his charge, under direction of headmaster.” This was my uncle, who had been a pupil at Strathmartine School before going on to the Morgan. The student who spent three weeks at the school in 1924 was Mr David G Dorward – the dominie’s son, and in 1925 it was the turn of Mr Thomas P Dorward, another son. (A third son went on to become a doctor.) In 1928 the student in training was Miss Agnes M Dorward...

There was a fire in the cookery room on September 8th 1925, fortunately during the dinner interval. Mr Dorward and his son were able to put it out with Minimax Extinguishers. Damage was confined to the woodwork surrounding the hot water cistern and a cupboard underneath it. Another small fire occurred on September 25th 1928 in the cookery room when the boiler overheated.

Mr Dorward, who retired at the end of October 1931, maintained a firm discipline, both inside and outside the school, though not all parents agreed that he was responsible for

the children's behaviour after school. My father told me of one occasion when either he or one of his brothers had been in mischief after school and Mr Dorward had taken action. My grandfather had objected quite forcibly to this, saying "Inside the school they're your responsibility, after school they're mine. If you catch them misbehaving then, tell me and I'll deal with it!"

Mr Dorward was followed by Mr Alex Campbell.

The first years of Mr Campbell's tenure seem to have been uneventful. In May 1935 each pupil received a Jubilee Mug and a casket of chocolate and the school given a holiday (May 10th) for the Silver Jubilee of George V. The oldest pupils received a book, "The King's Grace". The children received another mug and a box of chocolates, presented by the Education Committee on the Coronation of George VI in 1937.

The school was visited by Inspectors and the Director of Education for Angus with almost monotonous regularity (to say nothing of regular testing carried out by the Headmaster) as well as monthly by members of the School Board. The Inspectorate Report for July 1936 shows for the first time an understanding that low achievement might be caused by lack of ability rather than poor teaching, "There is a backward group of pupils in Senior I, but these appear to making progress in proportion to their ability". The report, however, does criticise "the finish, both of preliminary drawings and of models" in woodwork – possibly Mr Campbell was not gifted in that subject?

In February 1939 the school was closed early for three successive days to allow teachers to take a census of houses in connection with the Government Evacuation Scheme.

The Inspectorate Report for March 1939 recommended that "a new coal range or an oil stove should be supplied in order to enable the practical work in cookery to be carried out successfully". Today's domestic science teacher would shudder!

On 31st August 1939, notice was received to prepare for the arrival of evacuees. The school was closed for a fortnight and re-opened with sixty nine evacuees from Dundee added to the normal roll and three extra teachers.

A week later the local children went off for the potato holidays while the evacuees remained at school.

Two more teachers arrived at the beginning of October, and one more a week after that. More evacuees from Downfield arrived.

When the local pupils returned to school two of the extra teachers were retained to teach the extra pupils. Several of the evacuees returned home, but instead of returning to their own schools – some of which were possibly still closed – a large number of children continued to attend Strathmartine School, travelling out every day from Downfield.

During November and December the school had several secondary teachers travelling out from Dundee, a sewing teacher every afternoon and two Science teachers two half days each.

When Christmas came the children travelling from Downfield went on holiday on 22nd December, the evacuees continued until the Friday, and the local children appear to have stayed on at school until December 29th.

By April 1st, the secondary evacuees were returned to their own schools in Dundee and when Strathmartine School reopened after the summer holidays, many of the primary evacuees had also returned to their own schools.

The entry for 21st February 1940 comments that the school Doctor has “immunised for the first time those children whose parents wished immunisation”. This is the first time that school immunisation has been mentioned. A further entry on 28th March records “Second injection in Diphtheria immunisation scheme given on Wednesday and Friday afternoons.” Children were given a further opportunity to receive immunisation in January 1942.

Although the occasional mention was made over the years of pupils being absent planting potatoes, the entry for April 18th of 1941 states “School closed today for three weeks for potato planting”. However, the following day (Saturday) nine pupils – seven from Dundee and two from Angus were presented for a Bursary Examination. Possibly because of the longer break in April, the summer holiday for that year lasted only a month – from 18th July until 18th August.

Mr Campbell moved to Brechin in December of 1942, he was replaced by a teacher who had previously been on the staff of Carmyllie East School, who did not enter his name in the log. His name finally appears on the Inspectorate Report for 1954 – Mr J.G. Dewar. His entries tend to be very terse, he frequently entered nothing but the roll for the week and the average attendance. However, he does note that on July 6th 1943 the school was closed for the day so that the building could be used for the issuing of new ration books. It was closed again for the same reason on 29th June 1945.

On January 24th 1944, school dinners were served for the first time .

Although evacuees had not been specifically mentioned since 1940, the entry for the opening day of 1944-45 session specifies that there were still 2 evacuees on the roll.

When the school reopened in August 1947, it was as a primary school only, the secondary age pupils having been transferred to either Muirhead or Murroes, “the new Junior Secondary Schools in the area”. As a result the roll was reduced by approximately 20 and the number of teachers reduced to three. The cookery equipment was sent to Muirhead.

The roll dropped from 78 – 66 in 1950 – the first sign of the fluctuating change in numbers that was to lead to the threatened closure in 1983, although the numbers in the school were rarely the same for two consecutive weeks. It was not unknown for the numbers to change from one day to the next, with some pupils enrolling one day and other leaving the next.

The school was broken into on 2nd April 1951; the drawers of the headmaster's desk were forced and £11 was taken.

The Assistant director of Education visited the school on 4th January 1951 “in connection with the installation of electricity”. There is no entry to indicate when it was actually installed.

February 1952 saw one of the teachers being transferred to Muirhead because of the falling roll. At this point the roll stood at 50. By October, however, the roll had risen again to 58.

Miss Cochrane, the assistant teacher, went off on sick leave on September 11th 1952, early in October she disappeared – the entry for October 13th is “Miss Cochrane has been missing from her home for more than a week.” Two days later her body was found “in a gorge at Blairgowrie”.

Mr Dewar left Strathmartine some time in the autumn of 1955, the entry in August announcing the reopening of the school was in his writing, then there were no entries until November, when Miss Marianne Jeffrey took over from Mrs Wright. (Mrs Wright was a regular supply teacher.) She comments that P7 “have not covered anything like the work for the session”, that “cupboards were so dirty that ... permission for Miss Jeffrey's class to go over all cupboards and clear away all rubbish.” A plumber had to be sent for immediately to repair faults and seats were to be cleared out of two unused rooms. In addition, there were no school funds available.

There is a sudden change of writing early in 1956 – presumably indicating the change of writing style taught in schools, for cursive to some form of script.

More plumbing was needed in February of 1958, when “the Water Inspector said that the school had lost 80,000 gallons of water”.

There was a big drop in numbers in August 1958. Thirteen pupils had left and only one enrolled, leaving the school with 35 pupils. However, by December it was up to 40 and by the end of the session it had risen to 47.

The boiler was changed from coal burning to oil burning in October 1959, “with great success”. The ‘success’ proved to be only temporary.

There was a further break-in at the school over the summer holidays of 1960; “all books were out of order, and papers scattered and torn”. In addition, the register for the younger class had been destroyed.

In May 1961, the doorway between the playground and the playing field was constructed. The swings and roundabout in the field were erected in March 1962, and the children were allowed the use of them at playtimes and dinner interval.

A Dundee boy broke into the school at the end of May 1962, but no damage or theft was recorded in the log.

In September 1962 contractors arrived to plan the start of the new dining room in the NW room of the school.

In January 1963 it was decided to open the school at 9.10 instead of 9.00 to suit the children who arrived by bus, since the alternative bus arrived at 8.20. The lost 10 minutes were to be made up at lunchtime. By then the new dining room was in operation, although it was not fully equipped, it proved its value in the first week of the year, “as the children had not to go through six inches of snow for lunch”. In 1978 the starting time was returned to 9am because the official school transport was getting children to school before 8.30.

Miss Jeffrey left in 1963 and Mr Stewart Mather took over in August.

There was yet another break-in in March 1964, windows were broken and three doors forced. “Children’s writing materials and sundry small articles” were stolen, and the thieves helped themselves to coffee and biscuits in the staffroom. Three weeks later the door at the girl’s entrance was damaged in another break-in.

The next break-in was in Mid February 1972, with entry gained through the girls’ toilet. There was some glass broken but nothing was stolen.

In October 1972 there was some talk of putting gates at the entrance to the playground, to combat vandalism, but nothing was done, despite paint sprayed over the woodwork and glass in mid March 1973. By April 1974, Mr Mather was recording increased cases of vandalism – broken bottles in playground and playing field, grass set on fire, swings damaged. The vandalism was recognised as being caused by teenagers from Dundee, and the gate at the foot of the drive was locked, but this had no effect on the “occupancy of the school playground in the evenings”.

In mid March 1975 the school was broken into yet again. Once again nothing was stolen and damage was confined to one door which was forced. Four years later saw the next break-in, in March 1979. Once again the only damage was broken glass and nothing stolen.

November 1964 sees the first mention of a Sunday school being held in the school at 11am each Sunday. Approximately 20 children under 8 had been attending for the previous six weeks. In the same entry Mr Mather commented that the toilet facilities were completely inadequate. The boys' outside toilet had been demolished over four months previously. Work began on alterations to inside toilets in February of 1965. While this work was done, the girls used their original outside toilets while the boys used temporary chemical toilets. Perhaps it is not surprising that Mr Mather, in the same entry, reported the confirmation of two cases of dysentery (one family). The new toilets were in operation when the school re-opened after the Easter holidays, although there was still no hot water supply to the cloakrooms.

May of 1965 sees a visit to Strathmartine by Tealing School for football and netball matches. This is the first mention of any contact between the schools, but it is far from being the last. For some years thereafter mention is made regularly of the 'Sidlaw Youth Panel', the schools of Auchterhouse, Tealing and Strathmartine all being involved.

Although the oil fired heating system had seemed to be excellent when it was installed, it gave trouble most winters, and on 30th December 1965, although the heating had been left on over the holidays, it had not prevented a burst pipe which caused flooding in the senior room staffroom and girls' cloakroom, part of the ceiling in the senior room collapsed, and a week or so later the ceiling of the girls' toilet also fell as a result of the burst. Further repairs to the heating system were needed in February, and more in April. Heating faults continued to be mentioned regularly in the log. Eventually, in March 1974 Mr Mather recorded that a new engine was to be installed in the system.

In the winter of 1976-77 Mr Mather once again complained about the heating system breaking down – "system is very old and replacement is necessary but highly unlikely in present economic climate". However, a new boiler was eventually installed in August of 1978. Despite this, the boiler broke down again in May 1982. In November 1983 – yes, it broke down yet again. This time leaking fumes from the boiler were making staff and pupils sick.

A Daffodil Tea and Sale of Work in April 1966 raised £118 which was used towards buying a new TV set for the school – a Baird 23 inch set, plus aerial, was bought for £100 at the beginning of May. This was a black and white set – the school did not get a colour set until March 1979.

In March of 1967, Mr Ramsay of the College of Education visited the school in connection with the compilation of Statistical Account of the parish. (Third Statistical Account for Angus has now been printed.)

As far back as 1968, while it was still in Angus, Strathmartine was classified (provisionally) as a Category B school – that is, one whose future was doubtful – despite the fact that the numbers in the school had been holding fairly steady in the upper forties. However, some five months later the Depute Director of Education visited the school

about improvements to furniture and property to be carried out over the following two years.

In 1968 swimming lessons for P4-7 were held in Dundee between 4 and 6pm, taken by Mr Mather and Mrs Grant – a big change from today, when the children are taken to the baths during school hours and an instructor is provided by the Leisure Centre.

Also in 1968, the Education Committee stopped giving primary schools a grant for school prizes, although Mr Mather was told that prizes could continue to be given provided the cost was met by the school.

By 1971, Strathmartine children were going to Kirkton High School instead of Newtyle or Forfar.

In 1973 the school's roll was high enough for a third teacher to be appointed, alas, this was only for one year, and in session 1974-75 saw the staff reduced to two again.

In 1974 an attempt was made to provide a Nursery Group in the school, however, it was decided that for financial reasons, plus lack of trained staff, this was not possible.

From August 1975 the school began coming under the control of Tayside Region, with repairs being done from Dundee instead of Forfar. The official transfer of the school to Dundee Division came on 1st April 1976.

Strathmartine School won the Road Safety Competition organised by Tayside Police in December 1975, having defeated Muirhead, Hawkhill and Charleston to reach the final. In 1976 the Strathmartine team beat Liff School, Hawkhill, Tealing and Muirhead, Ancrum Road and Barnhill to win the Road Safety Competition for a second year.

In 1977, the Road Safety Team beat Longforan SSPeter and Paul, Fowlis Easter and St Ninian's but was beaten in the final by Craigiebarns.

The next mention of the Road Safety Competition comes in 1980, when the school once again reached the final, but was beaten by Ancrum Road, 65 points to 62.

However, Strathmartine met Ancrum Road again in 1981 and this time won. The school was successful again in 1982, beating Dundee High School 41 points to 33. In 1983 and 1984 they were narrowly beaten in earlier rounds (by half a point and a point). This year (1985) the school was again narrowly beaten (by half a point) in the quarter finals.

In 1978 a third teacher was appointed once more. However, this teacher was transferred away at Christmas 1989 because of financial cut backs.

The school remained closed for an extra week in January 1979 because following rewiring of the school in November, the frost protection system built into the heating failed to function, resulting in burst pipes and damage to three radiators. In November Mr

Mather once more complained “that the system has been a constant source of trouble since it was installed”.

By session 1980-81 the roll was below 40 pupils.

In 1983, Mr Robertson took over temporarily during the lengthy illness that finally forced Mr Mather to retire. During this time Strathmartine was listed as one of the schools threatened with closure. It was reprieved because of its importance to the community.

Despite its small size, Strathmartine has had its share of success. As well as its successes in the Road Safety Campaign, a Strathmartine pupil, John Mallinder (P5) won a second prize of 5000 Scottish entries for a drawing on “Modern Farming”, in a competition run by N.F.U.S. in 1961.

Mrs Black took up her position as Head Teacher in February 1985. Since then the school has continued to do well, winning the Leng Medal for Rural schools and competing for the Dronley Cup for Rural schools sports, held between Auchterhouse, Tealing and Strathmartine. In June the school received 20 awards from Scottish swimmers – a very high number for a school of this size. In September they won 21 out of a possible 27 prizes at the Dundee Flower Show.

They have been active in school work too. They took part in the Tayside Litter Campaign and the Domesday Project.

What happens now? As of writing this, the school is operating as a unit inside Macalpine School, but obviously everyone in the village would like to see the school rebuilt in some form. There is a tendency for officialdom to regard ‘bigger as better’ and to consider that town living and education gives a sophistication that rural living does not. But rural children have different needs from town children. It would be a pity if those needs were overlooked for purely economic reasons.

We can only wait and see what is finally decided.

The above brief outline of Strathmartine School has been compiled from the school log books, my thanks to Mrs Black for lending them to me.

S Clark