

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - October 2005

### Decades of Discipline

At the October meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Margaret Houlbrooke was the guest speaker.

Children have been conscientiously beaten throughout the Christian centuries - in church, family, school and the workplace, with strikes and blows or other reprimands. Gradually those who believed the child should be punished - the hard liners believed that "he that spareth his rod hateth his son but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" were overtaken by those with a calmer approach, and - apart from public schools and public institutions - their views generally predominated by 1914.

Discipline was seen as to punish the sins and shortcomings of the individual, to correct the nefarious habits of working classes that were a peril to society, and as an instrument to apply to the health and efficiency of the nation as a whole. The more conservative Christian Evangelical tradition thought punishment was a moral duty.

The workhouses (which existed from 1834 - 1948) were designed, under the Poor Law, to create sense of 'less eligibility' to the inmates. Nobody would ever be turned away, but the workhouse did its best to make sure you did not want to go there - they were the hardest taskmaster and poorest paymaster in the area - ie the workhouse was a deterrent, and the last place the idle and feckless would want to apply to. In working class families, children's discipline was a matter of 'survival - if the child misbehaved, and broke items, damaged clothes etc, there would be no funds available for replacing them. In schools, discipline enabled a teacher to control a class of 60 or 80 pupils, who would live 'in fear of the consequences' of not 'conforming'.

Those entering the workhouse would have such conformity imposed upon them - a kind of prison like regulation. The hair would be cropped, their clothes taken away and fumigated, and they would be dressed in workhouse uniform. Families would be separated and - once medically checked - children might stay in the workhouse or be sent to a 'District School'. Some such institutions would have over 1000 inmates - and would be given training for work, rather than 'education'. Above all, they would be made to realise the deepest shame of their poverty.

A report into workhouse conditions in 1895 noted that some children were clothed in old garments that had belonged to adults, and were fed with the remnants of older paupers meals. The children were occupied in cleaning the workhouse, sewing or mending things, doing the laundry, cleaning the boots etc. Conditions improved, and by 1906 nearly 9000 children were fostered to individual homes, and 14500 were housed in 'cottage homes'. They still had discipline, but were at least in less forbidding surroundings. There had even been an order in 1891 to allow toys - like skipping ropes - to be bought. To many Guardians, however, such were a move away from moral discipline.

Margaret then spoke about particular workhouses in Essex and Berkshire. The widening of the franchise meant that those elected were more likely to be lower middle class than the squirearchy - and also more compassionate. At Maldon, for example, boys were allowed to join the Boys Brigade locally. The Guardians took more care in the selection of staff, and the food was still poor - although in some cases inmates would be allowed jam instead of butter in sandwiches - on alternate days.

At Wargrave, the District School founded in 1851 served the Reading and Wokingham Unions. A tailor employed there was paid £15 a year, the schoolmaster 5/- per week, inclusive of beer and washing. Later a shoemaker was employed, also for 5/- per week - for which he was also expected to teach the craft. By comparison, James Pike, the clerk, was paid £30 - later raised to £40 - per year.

At Windsor, the punishment book for 1867-9 records routine non-corporal punishment for assault, insubordination, misbehaving in divine service etc - more serious offences being dealt with by the local magistrates. The worst punishment mentioned was 6 strokes of the birch on 10 year old James Birch. However, at Wallingford, some of the children complained about their treatment - not (as often) of the food, but the behaviour of the Matron. As a result, rules were set for punishments - the nature of which had to be clearly defined; they all had to be recorded in a punishment book; and should never be given 'in a moment of irritation', but some time later.

Eventually, 6 weeks became the maximum a child could be kept in the workhouse before being boarded out or sent to a cottage home. The Guardians, however, still saw the child's parents as 'the enemy', to be kept as far from the child as possible. .

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