

Learning from the Log Books: Reflections on School Life, 1899-1960

Our historical school log books, spanning 1899 to 1960, offer a fascinating glimpse into the daily life, priorities, and challenges of education during this period. They reveal much about the social, cultural, and educational environment of the time. Here are some key themes and insights:

Attendance: A Constant Concern

Attendance was a major focus for both teachers and authorities. Records frequently note low attendance due to illness, poor weather, and the practical difficulties of early 20th-century clothing. Heavy wool garments offered little protection when wet, and classrooms lacked central heating, relying at best on a small coke stove. On a single January day in 1912, for example, only 60 out of 93 pupils were present due to severe winter weather.

The school worked closely with an attendance officer, who monitored pupil attendance and investigated absences. Log entries also show the headteacher proactively sending children home at the first sign of sickness to prevent outbreaks.

Patriotism and Civic Values

Patriotism played an important role in the school curriculum. Children regularly sang the national anthem, performed patriotic songs, and celebrated historical events such as Empire Day. These activities reinforced civic pride and awareness of national history.

Scholarships and Social Mobility

Scholarships were a vital pathway for academically able children from working-class families. Secondary schools, including grammar schools, often charged fees beyond many families' means. Scholarships—usually awarded around age 11 or 12—allowed these students to access further education. Log books detail extra support from the headteacher to prepare pupils for scholarship exams, highlighting the importance of educational opportunities in shaping future prospects.

Flexible School Days

School hours were often adjusted to accommodate community events, weather conditions, or staff needs. In 1912, for instance, the infant teacher was allowed to finish early to return home for the weekend. With no modern communication tools like ParentMail, children often walked home, regardless of the circumstances.

Church, Medicine, and Community Links

The school maintained close connections with the local church and medical professionals. Regular visits, reports, and medical examinations were common, with

parents often present. Doctors assessed both physical and learning abilities, though terminology from the time—such as “mentally defective” or “backward”—reflects outdated attitudes toward children with learning differences. Today, we recognise these pupils as having special educational needs, deserving of understanding and support.

The church calendar shaped much of school life, with feast days and community events—including concerts, fairs, and Sunday school outings—often affecting attendance. Evening events, such as the Band of Hope Tea, further highlight the school’s role within the wider community.

Proximity Matters

Living close to the school was a practical necessity, as travel difficulties and weather often delayed children’s attendance. Log books from 1912 note that some Standard I pupils required additional support in reading because they had only begun attending school at age six due to distance.

Nature and Hands-On Learning

Lessons often focused on individual topics, frequently with a strong connection to the natural world. Subjects like “The Rabbit,” “The Dairy,” and “Newts” encouraged observation and practical learning rather than rote memorization. This approach helped pupils understand their rural environment and develop skills relevant to daily life and local agriculture.

Gardening and cookery were also introduced early, such as Mr. Mabbott’s gardening class in 1913, which engaged sixteen pupils and was described as a source of great interest. These activities fostered curiosity, practical skills, and appreciation for God’s creation, reflecting the school’s church-influenced ethos.

Learning Beyond Books

Without the internet or modern reference materials, knowledge was often shared through the experiences of teachers, the vicar, or visiting experts. In 1912, for example, the vicar shared stories and artifacts from the Philippines, enriching pupils’ understanding of the wider world. Children also explored their local environment directly, such as visiting the church to examine the bells.

In summary:

The log books reveal a school deeply connected to its community, balancing education, moral instruction, and practical skills. They show a world where attendance, hands-on learning, church influence, and civic values shaped childhood in ways that are both familiar and strikingly different from today.