



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Alton House School (Part 1)

by Enid Denly

Alton House School used the first and second floors of the Victoria Cross Gallery in the Market Square for a number of years, although I cannot quote exact dates. No doubt there are still people in and around Wantage who could tell us the actual dates when Miss Sarah Adkin (headmistress) and her younger sister, Miss Eileen Adkin, had the school there, but it was certainly flourishing in the 1920s and 1930s.

Quite a large proportion of the pupils were children of various business families in the town who lived over their shops in the Market Place and adjoining streets. Some pupils came from farms and villages around the area, and owing to the lack of convenient transport in those days, some were weekly boarders accommodated in the house at the rear of the premises now occupied by Messrs Green & Co. in the Market Place. In those days the premises were owned by Messes Adkin, Belcher & Bowen - Mr Charles Adkin being the father of the two ladies who ran the school. Miss Williamson was Matron of the boarding house and, apart from all her other duties, took the boarders for a half-hour walk every day after school in all weathers.

The youngest children, both boys and girls, mostly started their school days at Miss Bayley's School in Alton House, 31 Wallingford Street, where they had an excellent grounding in the 'three R's', as mentioned in Kathleen Philip's book. 'Victorian Wantage'. At about 7 years of age they moved up to the 'big' school in the old V.C. building.

At the back of the Fire Station was a wooden staircase to the first floor, at the top of which, on the right, was the First Form room where the teacher was Miss Clement - almost the last member of a very old Wantage family. She continued the good work started by Miss Bayley, giving us an excellent grounding in the 'three R's', scripture, history and geography. Multiplication tables were chanted daily, also King Cards, whereby we almost sang through all the kings and queens of England and their dates, starting with 'William the First, 1066; Matilda of Flanders', and so on. I know I shall never forget the order of Henry VIII's wives, or the order in which they were despatched.

Miss Eileen Adkin taught the Second Form in a room on the same floor, with a window overlooking the glass roof of the V.C. yard below. On the walls of this room were large maps - one of the world, with each part of the British Empire coloured pink, and one of the British Isles on the wall facing us so that we almost unconsciously learned part of our geography lessons. We also learned, again by chanting, all the counties, county towns and rivers of England, starting from 'Northumberland, Newcastle-on-Tyne', right through the country down to Cornwall.

We also learned by the same method other countries, their capitals, and chief rivers such as 'France, Paris on the Seine . . .'. We also still continued with our multiplication tables and King Cards, so we must have been quite noisy at times. At the end of their time in this Form, most of the boys, probably about 10 or 11 years old, left to go on to the boys'

grammar school (King Alfred's). Miss Eileen also took us for 'drill' every day in the V.C. yard, where we also had playtime, another noisy session. In the summer, the bigger girls played tennis at The Priory, the Adkin home, again supervised by Miss Eileen.

The top Form, probably 11 or 12 upwards, was taught by Miss Sarah Adkin in the largest room which ran the whole width of the premises above the front entrance and Fire Station, overlooking the Market Place from the same four windows which can be seen today. Every morning started with scripture, followed by maths and then English, especially grammar. We seemed to be always analysing and parsing. The good groundwork of the 'three R's' went on, together with dictation (for our spelling), history, geography, French, singing, needlework and drawing - the latter being taught by Miss Viveash. During the summer we were sometimes able to have drawing lessons in the Priory garden. I also vaguely remember we sometimes had General Knowledge sessions.

On the second floor above the school were four rooms where Miss Lilian Gower Ellis lived and taught the piano and music theory, which, like elocution (taught by Miss Ferguson) were 'extras'. Miss Ellis also taught singing. In each of three of the rooms was a piano, one of them actually a pianola, and how we loved pretending we could play the classics brilliantly as we pedalled away. My favourites were the Chopin Polonaises which we 'played' at a spanking speed. There are many memories of how Miss Ellis taught beginners the piano by giving the notes the names of flowers and animals. I think middle C was always 'cowslip', with 'buttercup' and 'daisy' on either side. I also remember her tying a book under my chin to stop me looking at my hands and to make me look at the music instead.

By today's standards the methods of teaching would be considered oldfashioned but the good basic groundwork and excellent discipline stood us all in good stead as some of us moved on to either boarding school, the Girls' Grammar School at Faringdon, or St Katharine's. There were probably not more than 40 to 50 pupils in the whole school at one time, so we all had more or less individual attention, and not only in school subjects, but also moral and Christian training as well. Oddly enough, I cannot remember any punishment such as 'lines' or the cane, but we must have deserved some now and again. One thing we did know was that the teacher's word was LAW - no arguments allowed.

In the old school group photographs taken either in the garden of the boarders' house or in the Priory garden, we look a sober lot. That is probably because we had to keep still for a long time while the photographer, Mr Tom Revely, spent what seemed ages dodging under his black cloth while he focussed us in his camera. Like many others, I will always be grateful for the training and happy times we had at Alton House School under those very dedicated teachers.

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