



*Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series*

## **Alton House School (Part 2)**

**by Enid Denley**

There were a few girls, daughters of farmers mostly, who lived in villages too far away to travel daily, who were weekly boarders of Alton House. They lived in the house at the back of Messrs Adkin, Belcher & Bowen in the Market Place. They stayed from Monday morning until Friday afternoon and had a housekeeper who took them for walks in the town after school, before their teatime. One of them until just recently has been my neighbour and often talks about those carefree (for us) days.

Continuing my recent report of Alton House School in Wallingford Street, Wantage, there was another Alton House School for older children in the 1920s and 1930s at roughly the same time. A few boys and more girls eventually “went up” to the Alton House that was situated in the Victoria Cross Gallery buildings in the Market Place between the Bear Hotel and Arbery’s old shop. The majority of the children came from the tradespeople’s homes in the town and the majority lived over or adjacent to the shops.

The V C Gallery had been donated to the town by Lord Wantage as a memorial and to hang paintings of all the men who had received the Victoria Cross in the Crimean War. In those days we had an excellent Urban District Council and they used the “VC”, as it was eventually called, for many occasions such as dinners. Parish parties, concerts, bazaars, “Sales of Work”, dances (it had a lovely sprung floor) and meetings of all kinds. Just outside the main door was a tarmac yard with a glass roof which was very convenient for our playtime and for our regular “drill” each morning. There was also a small office for the caretaker - who was Mr. Savory in my time. From near his “office” a staircase led up to the first floor of the building where the 1<sup>st</sup> Form room was and where Miss Clement, the last surviving member of an old Wantage family, taught us and we still carried on “learning by rote” as Miss Bailey had taught us. A good clear map of the British Isles hung on the wall behind Miss Clements and we could study it any time, either when listening or day dreaming but we soon learned all the counties, county towns and rivers and could chant them all off by heart.

In the next room along the passage was the second form where Miss Eileen Adkin, younger sister of Miss Sarah Adkin, the headmistress, taught. In spite of weighing about 20 stone, Miss Eileen was very active and supervised our “drill” every morning. She also taught us to play tennis in the summer when fine on the Adkin Family’s court at the Priory. Miss Eileen was a real “character”. Very keen on the Girl Guides association for which she worked hard. Miss Eileen also had a map on the wall behind her - this time of Europe, so we learned, again by rote, all the countries, capitals and rivers of Europe.

The third room for the third and top form was larger and had four good windows looking on to the Market Place and can still be seen today between “The Bear” and Arbery’s old shop. The local fire engine was always parked in the space below this room and always kept ready for any emergency.

By about 1930 (I think), there were only girls at the school. The boys had all drifted away to the C of E school for boys in Alfred Street or Newbury Street or to boarding school or to King Alfred's Grammar School for Boys in Portway.

Meanwhile, Miss Sarah Adkin carried on teaching us and her standards were very high and we had already been given lessons in trigonometry when I was about eleven. She was successful with pupils who passed exams to go on to the Berkshire County Council Secondary School for Girls at Faringdon and a number of the girls were successful in training as school teachers themselves. There was a "flat" three or four rooms above the school where Miss Lilian Ellis taught many of us to play the piano. She had three or four pianos and a pianola which she allowed us to play now and again. We only had to pedal away and the music on paper rolls played a good selection of music and imagined we were real pianists. I always remember it as a happy time and I also remember "Golden Rules" given to us: 'It is correct to say different from us NOT different to us' and 'I before E except after C'.

This article was donated by Mrs Enid Denley.

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