

Sevington School Newsletter



Autumn 2023

Dear Friends,

Well, the leaves are finally falling and it's that time of year when we welcome Friends old and new to another year at Sevington School. We very much appreciate the support you give our charity in its work. Our Annual General Meeting this year is scheduled for Saturday 18th November and we do hope you will be able to attend. As well as finding out more about our progress and projects, it is always a good opportunity to chat over coffee and for both us and you to be able to put faces to names. We look forward to seeing you there.

2024 will be a very special year for Sevington School, marking 175 years since the school was first opened on Sunday 15th April 1849. We are planning a series of events to commemorate the opening, the first of which will take place on Sunday 14th April 2024 and is a celebration to which you will all be invited. Unfortunately, we have no record of how that day went in 1849, but we can try and picture the scene. Present would certainly have been Joseph Neeld who organised and paid for the building of the school, Canon Jackson, the Rector of Leigh Delamare, and perhaps also Mrs Wilmot, the first of only two school mistresses to be in charge of the school during its lifetime.

Mrs Wilmot has always remained a shadowy figure in the school's history, and is usually described simply as the wife of "a labourer on the roads". She was born Mary Matthews on 16th June 1805 in the parish of Foxley to the west of Malmesbury. Sadly, nothing is known about her early life until on 12th October 1829, at the age of 24, she married John Wilmot in the church in Foxley. John was three years younger than Mary, born in February 1809 in Malmesbury.

At some point between their marriage and the opening of the school, Mary and John settled in Sevington. The couple had five children who in 1849 ranged in age from 13 to 3. The Wilmots would have been known to Canon Jackson, and it seems reasonable to assume that he played some part in her appointment at Sevington School. In the 1851 census, two years after the school's opening, Mary was described as schoolmistress and her two youngest children would have been attending the school. Despite his work as a labourer, John Wilmot does seem to have played some supportive role with the school, as in the *Wiltshire Gazette* in 1935 a Mr George Wicks remembered his early days at Sevington School, "the master being a Mr J Wilmot".

With the arrival of Elizabeth Squire in 1860, Mary Wilmot retired from teaching. In the 1861 census, no profession is listed for her. It seems that she lived out her days in Sevington until her death in 1875 at the age of 69. She was buried on Easter Sunday of that year in St. Margaret's Churchyard in Leigh Delamare. The ceremony was conducted by Canon Jackson.

We look forward to celebrating the school's 175th anniversary with you in 2024.

With best wishes from us all at Sevington,

Isobel

Isobel Moore

Summer Sundays 2023

We have had a very successful Summer Sundays programme this year with lots of visitors. The first event in May included a plant sale. Plants were donated by the trustees, teachers and Delfland Nurseries (based in the Fens near Peterborough, my relatives). Liz, Sevington School's wonderful gardener, also organised some plants to sell from Foxley Road Nurseries near Malmesbury. Lesley, our new trustee, also managed to secure some wild flower and seed donations from Thompson and Morgan. We were lucky with the weather, with just a little shower later in the afternoon.

The schoolroom was as popular as ever, back-to-back lessons at full capacity were delivered by 'Miss Squire' all afternoon to give visitors an authentic Victorian school experience. Teas were also in demand and we were busy in the kitchen all afternoon serving drinks and homemade cakes, most of which were enjoyed in the garden.



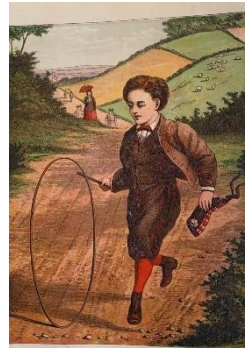
Our next open afternoon was in August and we finished off the summer openings in September as part of the Heritage Open Days. Again at both events we had lots of visitors experiencing the schoolroom lessons, looking at the authentic artefacts in 'Miss Squire's' house and garden and enjoying afternoon tea in the garden. We also welcomed Barry, demonstrating his penny-farthing bicycle.

This year, as well as advertising the events in various publications, we took more advantage of social media, posting the events on various What's On and village Facebook groups. Our Booking Secretary also emailed the schools who had visited and asked them to send our poster out to their families on parent mail. This really paid off as we had nearly 100 visitors at each event. Many parents told us that their children had really enjoyed the Victorian school experience trip with their school and so they wanted to come and see it too.

A big thank you to the trustees, teachers and helpers who made the Summer Open Days a success and for their continuing help and support with the Sevington Victorian School Charity.

Jenny Jones

Victorian Toys



“Play is the work of children,” often attributed to child psychologist Jean Piaget, is very much the philosophy adopted for the past fifty years for those involved in educating children. Needless to say, this was *not* Miss Squire’s philosophy. One of the reading books we use at Sevington School states that “children are fond of play. There is no harm in this but they ought also to remember that there is a time for work and learning their books as well as for play.”

Recreation for our twenty first century children at Sevington is an important part of their Victorian experience and they love to play with our selection of metal and wooden toys on the lawn at the front of the school. We have recently overhauled our toys and thanks to a local gentleman, Mr Phil Fisher, the boys are now enjoying mastering six new hoops and rods which he has made for us.



The boys also enjoy playing cricket, albeit with a sock ball, and despite their ignorance of toys such as spinners, spinning tops and cups and balls, they apply themselves and are usually adept in all of them very quickly.



The girls play separately from the boys and also have hoops (although theirs are made from bamboo). They have to be persuaded to drive them vertically in the Victorian manner and not to spin them around them as a hula hoop. A selection of skipping ropes is also popular with the girls and this is deemed an acceptable activity in our reading book. “This is a very agreeable amusement either for boys or girls, in cold, frosty weather, and is far better than standing before the fire, as it promotes health, vigour and good spirits.” They also play hopscotch, cat’s cradle and fishing.



The notion of toys during the latter part of the nineteenth century depended on the wealth and status of the family. While the children attending a small rural school such as ours enjoyed the selection of toys mentioned above, those from wealthy families would have a wider range to choose from. The children of William Henry Fox Talbot at Lacock Abbey were fortunate to have Firefoot, a delightful rocking horse which can still be seen today. They also had the space in the Great Hall to play battledore and shuttlecock. Other toys available to children from a privileged background included the zoetrope, a cylinder with slits and inside a series of sequenced pictures. By spinning the cylinder and peering through the slits, a child could glimpse a “moving picture.”



Queen Victoria herself spent a lonely childhood but created a set of around 100 wooden dolls with her governess. Most of these still exist today in the Royal Collection. She also painted paper dolls which were cut out and pasted into books and these can be found in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle.



Images: Royal Collections Trust; Sevington Victorian School

Nikki Wright

*Thank
You!*

Volunteers are the lifeblood of any charity and ours is certainly no exception. We would like to record our appreciation of the time and effort put in by the following people over the past few months:

Charlie Adams for renovating the beehive
Gordon Townsend for sorting out the coal
Neil Parker for helping to sort out new hoops and rods
Nick Wright for technical support with articles

And for our Summer Sunday openings:

Jim Anderson for putting up the signs
Carol Cradock for baking
Ewen Bird for help with entries
Nicky Howarth for serving teas
Nikki Wright and **Tessa Leatherland** for running the Victorian lessons
Liz Taylor and **Dinah Starkey** for support with the plant stall
Barry Cummings for displaying his penny-farthing bicycle
Roy and Sue McDine for sharing their photos of Sevington



The Penny Farthing comes to Sevington



One of the more unusual emails I have received at Sevington was from a gentleman who owns and rides a Penny Farthing bicycle dressed in full Victorian costume and wondered whether he might be able to offer his services to the school. I made contact with alacrity - what an exciting opportunity for Sevington!

Barry Cummings, a keen and experienced mountain biker, first saw a Penny Farthing in action at an annual vintage biking event in the Peak District. His family subsequently gifted him a three-hour lesson on a Penny Farthing and from then on he was hooked. After some deliberation but unable to resist the temptation, he bought his own Penny Farthing.

Learning to ride was not without the occasional tumble; as Barry said: "Riding a Penny Farthing is a real challenge, with its high centre of gravity, thin solid rubbers, no gears or suspension and its limited means of stopping." Soon, however, he became an expert rider, even taking part in a 30-mile ride through the Peak District to raise money for charity.

The Penny Farthing bicycle is a high wheeler, more correctly called an "ordinary" bicycle. It got its nickname from the two differently sized wheels, likened to the larger penny coin and the smaller farthing. It succeeded the early "boneshakers" that did not have pedals, with the large wheel of the Penny Farthing allowing for higher speeds and a smoother ride over the rough and often cobbled streets of the time. It became popular in the 1880s, particularly among wealthy young men, since the bicycles were expensive to purchase. Riding the Penny Farthing was not without its dangers: any sudden stop, caused for example by hitting a stone, would throw the rider forward head first on to the ground and there were some fatalities. By the early 1890s, with the development of gears and the pneumatic tyre, the Penny Farthings were replaced by "safety bicycles".

When Barry brought his Penny Farthing to our Summer Sundays this year, he was a huge draw for adults and children alike. In the summer heat and in Victorian costume he demonstrated mounting, riding and dismounting, sharing his knowledge and answering the many questions that were asked. We were extremely fortunate to have Barry there and very much hope he will return to Sevington in the future.



Isobel Moore

The Victorians and their Flowers

Love's language may be talked with these;
To work out choicest sentences,
No blossoms can be meeter;

from *A Flower in a Letter* by Elizabeth Barratt Browning

So much could not be spoken in Victorian society, bound as it was by strict rules of etiquette. But there was another language used by the Victorians to express their feelings and emotions - floriography or the language of flowers. Like a secret code flowers were used to pass messages, particularly to lovers and friends, though they could also be used as insults.

Floriography had existed through the ages, but learning the symbolism behind each flower became a very popular hobby amongst the Victorians. Understanding the language of flowers was considered an appropriate accomplishment for young ladies and many books were published on the subject. Miss Squire was not known to possess one, but among the books at Sevington is *Haunts of the Wild Flowers* by Anne Pratt, published in 1866.



To navigate the Victorian language of floriography required both knowledge and sensitivity. First there was the meaning of individual flowers, then the message of a combination of flowers in a bouquet. Flower colour was very important: a red carnation indicated fascination or admiration, a yellow carnation signified rejection. If flowers were given as a proposition, acceptance with the right hand indicated yes, but with the left hand no.

Queen Victoria's diaries attest to her love of flowers. On her fourteenth birthday she wrote that her mother had given her a china pen tray, the Minton tray, encrusted with coloured flowers (below left). The wreath of pansies at the centre symbolises 'loving thoughts'. For their betrothal, Albert sent Victoria a brooch in the form of a sprig of orange blossom, symbol of purity, and at their wedding she wore a simple wreath of orange blossom in her hair. At significant moments in their life, Albert continued to present Victoria with pieces of orange blossom jewellery (below right).



Violets were certainly among Queen Victoria's favourite flowers, since there are over 100 references to them in her diaries. Violets were regarded as a symbol of modesty and fidelity, due to the plant's habit of holding its flowers in a low, nodding, deferential manner. In a diary of 1882, after a visit to Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, Victoria wrote 'Many violets out, smelling so sweet' and she made many other mentions of the wild violets growing on the estate.

Queen Victoria also enjoyed the craft of flower pressing and a number of albums remain of flowers she preserved from the age of 15 to her final years. The pressed flowers



commemorate special occasions, some official and some private, such as walks she took with Albert. The album page in the photo contains pressed flowers taken from a bouquet presented to her on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee in 1897; today they are still recognisable as irises, lilies of the valley and ferns.

Isobel Moore

Refurbishment of the Sevington School Beehive

Charlie Adams, a Friend of Sevington School, kindly offered to refurbish the beehive kept in the garden and used by the teachers with school groups. This is his account of his work:



Inner frames: on the right completely new and on the left refurbished.



Interior and base coated with preservative and repaired where necessary.



All outside panels scraped, sanded and repainted with two coats of exterior grade paint. Galvanised iron taken off lid and preservative applied.



Charlie with the finished article!



The beehive in situ in the garden at Sevington.