

# Stoneleigh School

## - a very short history

*An abbreviated, text-only version of the book*

**Back to School, by Sheila Woolf, 2019**



This booklet was written as a result of the demand for the book *Back to School*, which sold out quickly and is now out of print.

It does not aim to replicate the book, which is fully illustrated.

For a flavour of the illustrations please follow the link to our Exhibitions page and scroll to the year 2020-2021.

Stoneleigh's school existed from the eighteenth to the late twentieth century. To what extent, though, was the population of Stoneleigh educated *before* this time? In the four centuries during which Stoneleigh Abbey existed as a monastery, did local people receive some learning from the monks? We do not know how much communication there was between Abbey and village; many schools of the early monastic period would have had some connection with a cathedral or a monastery. In Stoneleigh's case, we do not know.

It was only in the eighteenth century that the Leigh family of Stoneleigh Abbey decided, via Thomas, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Leigh, to set up a school.

Thomas died in 1710, and had made a will on October 26. He stated that £800 was assigned in trust to five trustees, to purchase "lands...in or as near Stoneleigh as might be, for the payment of £20 per annum for the maintenance of a schoolmaster and for the repairs of a school and schoolhouse forever". The trustees should fit up a "certain building in Stoneleigh called the Court House" and make it into a "convenient school", and a "convenient habitation for the schoolmaster to dwell in" was to be built nearby.

The school, Thomas said, should be for

teaching, instructing and educating the children of such parents who should from time to time inhabit and dwell within the parishes territories precincts and hamlets of Stoneleigh Stareton (Leek) Wootton and Ashow.

No action was taken to fulfil Thomas's wish, however, and it was not until 1732 that a further bequest for a school was made.

This time it was in the Will of Thomas' daughter, Anne Leigh. In her Will, made on August 12 1732 Anne left £1000 to three trustees "in the education of youth, both boys and girls, sons and daughters of the town and parish of Stoneleigh, to be taught and instructed at some school in or near Stoneleigh Town". Anne died in 1734, and had asked in her Will that her wishes be carried out within one year of her decease. Once again, this did not happen: her brother Edward, 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Leigh, failed to act before his death in 1737, and so it fell to *his* son Thomas, 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Leigh, to carry out a plan which had first been put forward thirty years before, by his grandfather the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Leigh and more recently by his aunt, Anne.

And so it was that by a deed dated December 24 1740 Thomas, 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Leigh gave, via a token payment of five shillings to his brother Charles,

the ground on which the school was to be built. At last, and in the spirit of the age, Stoneleigh was to have a proper school building.

Where was this ground? It would seem that the idea of using the land on which the Courthouse stood (which is believed to be where the Club now stands) had actually been rejected in favour of building afresh on land near the churchyard. We still do not know for sure when the building was first erected, but we know from another comment of Mortimer's that in 1749 "a Mr Denham it seems was then Master of the school". This confirms that a school was begun and completed by the end of the decade, and before Thomas 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Leigh died.

### **Teachers.**

The first was Robert Denham, who was appointed vicar in February 1753. He had matriculated in 1747, at which time his father, William Denham, was vicar of Stoneleigh. Perhaps Robert had lived in Stoneleigh with his father and, following university, had taken charge of the new school until he succeeded his father as vicar in early 1753.

A Deed dated May 22 1753 later nominates John Gardner (or Gardiner) “to be schoolmaster in the room of Mr Denham.” He is the first person to be recorded in the parish registers as a schoolmaster. The parish record of his burial on March 30 1782 states “schoolmaster 30 years”.

His successor was Richard Perks. In 1815 Perks wrote a letter stating that he had taught at Stoneleigh for 33 years – that is, since 1782; like his predecessor he spent almost a lifetime at Stoneleigh. His salary was £17 10s per quarter. He died in 1823 aged 69, and the burial register of December 28 that year notes him as “Master of the Free School”.

The earliest reference found to a woman teacher by name - possibly a pupil teacher - is from 1788, given in a beautiful sampler worked by Lucy Hall aged eleven. It proclaims that Mrs S Soden is the teacher at “Stoneleigh Free School”. This was probably Sarah Soden, who was just 17 at the time.

Richard Perks’ son Richard took over for a while after his father’s death, resigning in 1836. He had an assistant master, Robert Baker, who stayed until 1842.

By the time of the 1841 census Thomas and Mary Welton, schoolmaster and mistress, were living in

the house provided for the schoolmaster, next door to the curate, Archibald Morrison, at the vicarage (now the Old Parsonage), but by the time Thomas died in September 1847 (he and his wife are buried in the churchyard, the earliest school teachers with a discernible headstone) the new schoolmaster and mistress were Frederick and Sarah Paas, who had been in post since 1842.

Next was Charles Gray: when Charles had first arrived at Stoneleigh in Spring 1848, his daughter Jane Anne was his school assistant; their appointment was a joint one, with a combined salary of £90 a year, which was £70 for the Day School and £20 for the Evening School. This is the first time that mention is made of there being an evening school at Stoneleigh.

Then came Edwin Ison. Edwin is first recorded as Stoneleigh schoolmaster on December 29 1858, when only 21. Edwin had left the school by 1863 and married two years later; by 1870 he had founded and become first headmaster of the Leeds Middle Class School, where he stayed, very successfully, until retirement in 1893. Edwin is the first Stoneleigh head-teacher of whom we have a photograph.

Nathaniel Tompkins was his successor, and from his comments in the school logbook at Stoneleigh

we get a clear picture of Tompkins' character as well as his teaching methods: a conscientious but rather severe man, he frequently remarks upon how his own teaching methods might be improved, as well as those of the pupil teachers. He stayed for two years, until succeeded by Joseph Day Cornock, who was appointed on December 15 1865, when still only 27. His wife Jeanetta took charge of the girls' school at the same time. A highly musical man, Joseph was also organist at the church (several later headmasters occupied this dual role, too.) However, in December 1872 the school was closed for three weeks over Christmas and New Year, owing to Mr Cornock's being ill. On January 15 1873 another head-teacher was appointed as Joseph was "seriously ill". He died, aged 34, of consumption on January 17. His wife was pregnant with their fourth child, the eldest of whom was only six years old. Jeanetta left Stoneleigh in May 1873 and continued to teach elsewhere.

Three temporary appointments followed, including George Holbeche, whose baby son died while the family were in Stoneleigh. Then at last, in 1877, stability arrived in the person of Frank Henry Wright and his wife Alice, who were to be in post for the next ten years.



Again, several short-lived appointments were made, until 1893 when there arrived William Henry Wells, who was to become one of the most influential of Stoneleigh's teachers. He remained for 40 years. Together with his teaching responsibilities Mr Wells became church organist and started a choral society. For 30 years he was secretary of the Village Club, and also became secretary of the Victory Hall, as well as a trustee of the Thomas Sotherne's charity. His headship included the years of the Great War and, along with the vicar, the Reverend Cooke, he supervised much of the village's war work.

After William Wells left in 1933, two headmasters, James Smith and Frederick Cattell, took the school forward; Mr Cattell's time at the school included the difficult years of the Second World War.

Then came Frank Grant, in 1949. An excellent teacher who also inspired affection, Mr Grant's former pupils still remember him with great admiration. In addition to being schoolmaster he was also captain of the bell-chamber at the church, a parish councillor, a member of the parochial church council and secretary and treasurer of the village hall. It is sad, then, that a man who gave so much to the village should die on November 22

1966, a month before he was due to retire. The final ten years of the school were overseen by Douglas Black.

Many women teachers played their part in the story of Stoneleigh School. One greatly-loved and long-serving woman teacher was Selina Walton née Loveland who had begun in late 1903 and whose contract dates from 1905, when her annual salary was fixed at £72-4s-0d. In later years she recalled that she had intended to stay for just a few weeks, but spent the rest of her teaching career at Stoneleigh, with breaks only when her children were born, in 1908 and 1909. She retired in 1943. Other women who taught at this time were Lilian Hefford and the two Knight sisters, Ada and Edith (who later became Mrs Bottrill).

Among other women teachers who served at Stoneleigh after this time are Mrs Thraves and Mrs Antrobus, who both began in 1931 and retired in 1962 (Mrs Thraves died in the same year), and Mrs Clarke.

## **The building**

Sadly there is no existing plan for the original mid-eighteenth century building. A picture can be constructed from an inventory of fixtures, taken in

the first half of the nineteenth century, which notes a front parlour, a boys' schoolroom, a kitchen, a brew-house, a scullery and a pantry. Also listed are a sitting room, a bedroom, a best bedroom, and a girls' schoolroom, together with a lumber room and a cellar. The building is essentially a domestic one with two rooms to be used for the school. The kitchen is fitted up with a cooking grate "with rings and trivets", a fender, crane and hooks, and the brew-house seems to be what might usually be called a wash-house, as it contains an iron furnace and copper-hole. The schoolrooms both contain writing desks, benches, slates and rails for hats and bonnets.

By January 1880, however, the school Inspector noted with dissatisfaction the cramped conditions of the "big" school. The school logbook has the following entry, by the Inspector himself:

The present buildings fail to do justice to the importance and efficiency of the School and I earnestly hope that before long the Managers will take steps to provide more suitable and better buildings for Boys & Girls.

There was in fact a separate "dame school" in Birmingham Road, which catered for "infants". In Lord Leigh's estate notebook of 1882 he wrote that the Infant School building was being turned

into a cottage, and the Infant School carried on in a room “at the large School”. In 1883 this had been completed; the main school itself was greatly improved in 1882, about £400 having been spent on it. The teachers, Mr and Mrs Wright, were living in a cottage near the Reading Room.

Evidently what had formerly been domestic accommodation for the head and his wife was now being used as classrooms.

By the 1930s and '40s we are able to benefit from the memories of those who attended the school, and a much clearer picture of it can be revealed.

The cellar (opened up as an air-raid shelter during the Second World War) was entered from a west side porch, and continued underneath the wash-rooms on the north side. On the northeast corner of the ground floor, facing The Square, there was a small spare room for storage. Mrs Antrobus taught in a very large classroom used for the youngest children in Reception. Her classroom had an open fireplace with a large fender surround.

Lavatories were primitive even at this time, as there was no piped water in the village until 1953. They were situated outside, at the rear of the building.

Upstairs, at the front of the building, was the headmaster's office and a woodwork or craft room. A

lumber room was situated down a small flight of stairs near the office. The entire south side of the building was made up of two classrooms, divided by a sliding partition which could be removed to provide a large space for performances. An iron outer staircase (this had initially been wooden) on the west side led down from the upper classroom. Following anxieties in the early 1950s about the school's inadequate accommodation for the post-war era some modernisations were made: the large "Reception" classroom on the east side of the ground floor was converted into separate boys' and girls' lavatories in 1958, as the village had been connected to the mains water supply in 1953. The school's shape remained, therefore, much as it had for about a hundred years, until its closure in 1976 and its conversion in the late 1980s into apartments.

## **Learning**

What were the children learning? An examination of the logbooks shows that reading, dictation, transcribing and arithmetic feature strongly in the mid-nineteenth-century curriculum at Stoneleigh, as well as Scripture. Boys' lessons had more emphasis on mental arithmetic. They also had to

write up “abstracts” at the end of lessons to show what knowledge they had retained. Both boys and girls had writing lessons which involved copying out passages, writing from dictation, and spelling tests. The content of their reading lessons was often of a religious nature. Arithmetic for both consisted of long division, multiplication, weights and measures.

From the earliest times there is evidence that the girls were spending a good deal of time sewing. Beautiful samplers reveal not only the intricate sewing skills of their makers, but also give a sense of the moral and spiritual lessons being imbued. An important feature of girls’ education was how they conducted themselves. They were expected to behave in a “feminine” way. The curriculum which was offered them concentrated particularly on domestic skills, along with knowledge of the Bible and the three Rs.

School attendance nationally was not compulsory until 1880, and so the Stoneleigh logbooks reveal the frequently exasperated comments of head-teachers who struggled against parents who might want to keep their children away from school to help with seasonal farm work such as potato

planting in April, haymaking in June, harvesting and fruit picking in August, “gleaning and picking” in September and potato picking - and acorn gathering - in October. Interestingly the annual summer break seems to have been a moveable feast, depending on the harvest. In August 1883, for example, the master wrote in the logbook: “In consequence of the continued rain several weeks since the corn is still green, and, as a consequence, we cannot yet commence the Holidays.”

Boys helped in winter months with beating for shooting parties and picking stones and bird scaring for farmers. Fathers were guilty of keeping boys at home “to assist” in their work. One logbook entry notes that several boys were kept at home to look after their family’s beehives. It was much more often the case, however, that girls had to mind the babies at home while their mothers were working in the hayfields; similarly they were kept at home in times of sickness or childbirth, presumably to look after smaller siblings.

The weather was also a factor affecting continuity in all children’s attendance at school. Floods prevented many from getting to school in January

1872, for example. Deep snow and the state of the roads sometimes meant that children could not get to school. In early 1895 it took two months for the roads to become sufficiently passable after heavy snowstorms and floods afterwards, making travel impossible for children from Stareton, the Abbey and the Kennels.

Similarly, on March 28 1916 the logbook entry said: “A tremendous storm raged the whole of last night and today. Many trees were uprooted, blocking the roads to vehicular traffic. The snow which fell incessantly for nearly twenty hours made walking difficult and only fourteen older children and seven Infants came to school.”

There were outbreaks of serious disease: “fever” and “sickness” are often mentioned as well as the usual heavy colds, and contagious diseases spread very quickly in crowded households. Scarlatina, whooping cough, ringworm and scarlet fever spread quickly. In 1864 the Whitsun holiday was extended to three weeks because of scarlet fever; 30 children were away ill with mumps in June 1872. In January 1880 the school closed for ten days because of an outbreak of measles; a similar outbreak in 1887 meant that at one point only 23



pupils were marked present, and the school was closed for six weeks and three days. At the end of 1896 the school was closed because teachers were suffering with measles. The epidemic spread through the village and it was mid-January 1897 before the school could re-open. Another outbreak in 1904 caused the school to be closed for eight weeks, during which time it was thoroughly fumigated.

## **The Leighs and the school**

Throughout the Victorian era in particular, the Leigh family took an active interest in the school. Not only did they present clothing to the children – the girls were given fabric known as “pinks” which were made up into new dresses or pinafores – but there were regular tea parties and sports at the Abbey, invitations to see the hounds meet and other treats. For example in September 1871 the local magazine reported that

being the birthday of the Hon. G.H.C Leigh the annual treat was given to the schoolchildren of the parishes of Stoneleigh, Westwood and Ashow. About 250 sat down to an excellent dinner of roast beef and plum pudding, whilst the Stoneleigh drum and fife band played some

lively tunes...the usual games took place, and prizes were distributed amongst the children.

Lady Caroline Amelia Leigh was a frequent visitor who also took classes. William Henry Lord Leigh inspected the school and brought visitors to see it, and his youngest brother the Reverend James Wentworth Leigh, whilst vicar of Stoneleigh, took not only Bible classes as one might expect, but also arithmetic and reading. Lady Leigh also held sway over discipline and reward, particularly with the girls. There are frequent logbook remarks about girls being “seen by Lady Leigh”, who chastised them about their idleness. She had the power, too, to exclude children from school if they were too often absent or troublesome. On a more positive note, children were often found employment in service when they left school, or were found apprenticeships. The survey of households kept by the Reverend James Wentworth Leigh records many examples of this. He also lists all the school prize-winners and those who went on to train to be teachers themselves.

In the early twentieth century, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Leigh’s two sisters Agnes and Cordelia Leigh took an increasingly practical role: Cordelia lent 100 books to form the nucleus of a school library, gave bulbs

for the school garden, showed photographic Nature Study slides, gave an American organ for the music lessons, and set up a pen-friend system with an Australian school. In July 1910, 20 boys from a school in Peckham came for a fortnight's visit to Stoneleigh, supervised by Cordelia. She is often recorded as taking children round the Abbey and its museum, and actually took school lessons especially in Religious Instruction. A regular Sunday School teacher in both Stoneleigh and Ashow, she became a Diocesan adviser for the teaching of Religious Education.

School book prizes were awarded for good work but also for regular attendance at Sunday school, and these were usually signed by Lord Leigh. "Never absent, never late" is inscribed in many of the bookplates.

The Reading Room, which had been set up by the Leighs in 1856 to act as a kind of extension to the education of the workers, had been furnished with over 750 books and newspapers. It was also the venue for evening classes and for regular lectures, many of which were given by members of the Leigh family themselves. Extremely popular in the 1870s was the Honourable Gilbert H. C. Leigh, the

heir, who entertained large audiences with tales of his extensive travels abroad. The famous Shakespearean actress Fanny Kemble, mother-in-law of the Reverend James Wentworth Leigh, gave recitations. Other dignitaries were invited by the Leighs to speak, including Sir Henry Parkes, the school's most famous former pupil, who went on to become five-times Premier of New South Wales and "grand old man" of Australian political life. In this way the Leighs were instrumental in continuing the education of the workers on their estate well beyond their earlier schooling.

## **The School in the Great War**

The first mention of war in the school log-books reveals that the school was already playing its part in the war effort – in late September 1914, the boys were "making bed cradles for the hospitals for wounded soldiers and sailors." Girls and the smaller children were employed in garment making, such as "3 Sleeping Suits 4 Shirts 18 Bags 18 Washers 4 pairs Mittens 3 pairs Socks" sent to the Red Cross on one occasion in 1915. The children were rewarded with badges and certificates for their efforts.

In mid-1915 the school proposed to send regular parcels of food to the hospitals. Many dozens of eggs were sent, as well as lettuces and cabbages, and in early October 1916

The Gardening Class sent 60 lbs. of Potatoes and 20 lbs. Kidney Beans, 1 Vegetable Marrow to Kenilworth Red Cross Hospital.

In November 1914 three Belgian children were admitted, who could speak only Flemish. Their family were refugees, and in January 1915 another Belgian family, with three boys, arrived and were to stay in Stoneleigh for some time.

Accommodation was found for them; equipment and furnishings were provided by the villagers themselves. One little girl, Elisabeth Mary de Groote, was born and baptised in Stoneleigh in 1916, one of her godparents being Cordelia Leigh.

The war caused shortages. Children were often absent from school because they were helping in the fields. Rationing was introduced, too, and in February 1918: "A number of children were away this morning on account of buyers of meat at the Co-operative Stores having to attend and wait at a particular time." Coal was in short supply, and one winter the school "borrowed coal from the

Vicar, Head Teacher and The Club. We have burned the last piece and have had to close this afternoon.”

The Armistice being signed in November 1918, celebrations and commemorations were begun the following year. In August 1919 an extra week's holiday was added to the normal summer break, for the Peace celebrations. Lord Leigh entertained the children and their families at a garden fete at Stoneleigh Abbey on August 12.

### **The inter-war years**

Nationally, many changes in the educational system were proposed in the first quarter of the twentieth century. One of those which affected Stoneleigh was the introduction of Central School status. Their aim was to prepare girls and boys for employment with a more scientific or technical bias in the curriculum. Clearly Stoneleigh School's managers were aware that the post-war period meant changes in the future lives of the school's pupils, and they should be prepared to meet the challenge.

The experiment does not appear to have been a great success, as in 1923 the school became

“Stoneleigh C of E Mixed and Infants School, official accommodation 160.” The school’s status had changed again. This was probably due to pupil numbers: although the school could accommodate 160 children, in an Inspection Report of June 1923, only 70 children were actually on the roll.

## **The Second World War and after**

On September 4 1939, the day after war was declared, older boys opened up the school cellar as an air-raid shelter, and the Infants’ room was taken as an Air Raid Warden HQ. Sandbags were put in place, and the 122 children had practices on a daily basis in case of air-raids. By July 1940 the shelter was equipped with battery torches, sanitary buckets, seats and first aid equipment. Gas masks were regularly inspected. Obviously these preparations were sensible, since between September and mid-November that year there are frequent records of air-raids: on September 30 “air-raids during both morning and afternoon caused the whole school to adjourn to the shelter” and this continued on many subsequent days until November 12. Then, on November 15, is the entry “During the night an extremely heavy air-raid was made on Coventry.” Voluntary evacuees were

admitted. The second blitz on Coventry, on April 9 1941, was also noted, but little about the war after this until May 8 1945, when the school was closed in celebration of Victory in Europe, and the flag was raised.

After the war had ended, change was in the air. The Minute Book of September 12 1945 recorded the desirability of the school becoming a primary school. The managers hoped that this would enable it to become a first-rate example of its kind. Just a few months later, in December 1945, with 71 children on the school roll, the logbook recorded “from today the senior children will be transferred to Kenilworth School and the school will become a primary school”.

Alongside this, there were implications for the school as a Church of England School. It could become a Controlled School, meaning that the LEA would take majority charge of its governance and appointment of staff, and that religious teaching would be non-denominational. The alternative would be Aided Status, which would give much greater autonomy and which would “include the teaching of the Church of England”. The Minister for Education had emphasised the



need for church schools to keep pace with state schools, and the diocesan director felt that Stoneleigh “might stand a chance of survival on its present site.”

Survival depended on certain conditions being met, regarding the building; all of these were expensive requirements, but numbers were reducing. During the following decade it became increasingly obvious that the school was diminishing in size and that adding further buildings and modernising the facilities would not be cost-effective. As the 1960s began, local education authorities across the country needed to grapple with the problem of small rural schools and their often dilapidated buildings. There were moves afoot to build new schools which would accommodate children from a variety of local villages, who would have to travel some distance rather than walking to their local school. Warwickshire was no exception.

By the early 1970s, the County Education Authority’s policy was to close schools “where numbers are low and do not justify staffing.” In January 1975 it was announced that the school would close at the end of the summer term, 1976.

Despite total opposition to the plan from parents and residents, an Education Committee meeting had heard that there were only 29 children at the school and that it was therefore uneconomic.

On July 13 1976 a final Open Day was held, with performances by the children and an exhibition of photographs. The whole village had been invited, and presentations to staff were made. July 23 1976 became the last day of the school. It had been nearly 266 years since, in 1710, the Will of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Leigh suggested that Stoneleigh should have a school, and about 230 years since the building had existed.

Village meetings and events were sometimes held in the building in the years which followed, but eventually the building was put up for auction, for conversion into apartments. Plans were drawn to build houses on what had been the school playground, and the building was finally sold in 1986.

The logo for the Stoneleigh History Society is a horizontal, slightly curved rectangular box with a light beige background and a thin brown border. The text "Stoneleigh History Society" is written in a dark red, serif font, centered within the box.

Stoneleigh History Society