

## Education in Whetstone, 1902-1956

In 1954 the plan to rebuild Whetstone primary school was finalised surrounded by the walls of an archaic school building, one which had stood in the village since the early eighteenth century. Today the school is named St Peter's Church of England Voluntary-Aided Primary School, and not only provides teaching to the current children in Whetstone, but has facilitated education in the village for almost three centuries. Through the experience of two world wars and the encroachment of politics, the school has developed throughout the twentieth century. This is the story of one school, one village and their survival throughout a period of constant change.

World War I and its aftermath left a mark on the school of Whetstone as the headmaster was absent on military service for many years.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite this hindrance, attendance increased, exemplifying the community feeling that had been magnified by the war.<sup>2</sup> In the 1920s, many girls were withdrawn from education, one can infer that due to their mothers becoming absorbed in the workforce, the girls were needed for domestic duties. Furthermore, the onslaught of depression from relentless war debts meant that many children began to leave the school to enter employment.<sup>3</sup> To adapt to the changing conditions, the school encouraged children to attend vocational lessons, such as handicraft, at the local Community centre.<sup>4</sup>

World War II also greatly affected the school. Pupil numbers surged with an influx of so-called 'immigrant' children (who may have been evacuees from other parts of England, rather than children from overseas).<sup>5</sup> The school employed teachers from London to accommodate the growing register.<sup>6</sup> There was also the danger of air-raids; the school initially had no shelter, so children had to be sent home. The headmaster conducted weekly drills to ensure all children were safely home within ten minutes.<sup>7</sup> Fears became reality on 26 June 1940, when bombs were dropped four miles away from the school.<sup>8</sup> Later, an air raid shelter was built to eliminate fears that the children would be hurt in the rush to safety. As well as providing safety for children, the school became the centre piece of the community acting as a collection point for ration books and identity cards, as well as sending out pupils to collect useful materials to aid the war effort.<sup>9</sup>

Whetstone adapted well to the atmosphere of the World Wars as it was a strong community. The infant school (for those under seven years old) had been annexed in 1872 and comprised a single room attached to the senior school.<sup>10</sup> The majority of the infants continued through the school highlighting the community's hold. Children from Blaby, Aylestone and Enderby also attended the senior school, as Whetstone was one of the few villages to accommodate older children's education.<sup>11</sup> Upon leaving school some became assistant teachers and thus remained an integral part of the school.<sup>12</sup> Whetstone's population grew and the school came under pressure to accommodate a greater number of children. On 20 June 1925, a proposal for a new public elementary school for Blaby and Whetstone was advertised in the *Leicester Mercury*.<sup>13</sup> The Local Education Authority deferred the proposal due to financial restrictions.<sup>14</sup> It wasn't until 1937 that the necessary changes were authorised and the school was limited to Juniors.<sup>15</sup> Many children had begun to leave the school to attend grammar schools before this alteration, reflecting to the school's inability to provide a full range of educational opportunities to older children.<sup>16</sup> Senior children (over the age of 11)

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- 1 ROLLR, DE 3525/2, 1915
  - 2 ROLLR, DE 3525/2
  - 3 ROLLR, DE 3525/12, 1926
  - 4 ROLLR, DE 3525/2, 1923
  - 5 ROLLR, DE 3525/4, 1939
  - 6 ROLLR, DE 3525/4, 1939
  - 7 ROLLR, DE 3525/4, 1939
  - 8 ROLLR, DE 3525/4, 1940
  - 9 ROLLR, DE 3525/4, 1940
  - 10 ROLLR, DE 3225/5, 1872
  - 11 ROLLR, DE 3525/7
  - 12 ROLLR, DE 3525/3, 1894
  - 13 TNA, ED 21/33646
  - 14 TNA, ED 21/33646
  - 15 TNA, ED 21/56104, 1937
  - 16 ROLLR, DE 3525/4

were transferred to Enderby Church of England School and most juniors progressed into this school.<sup>17</sup>

In 1902 after the controversial Education Act was passed, which created Local Education Authorities, many villages fought to maintain control over their schools. However, Whetstone incorporated these changes harmoniously, adopting voluntary status and a board to oversee its future. The school had always been connected to the Church of England but this act gave parents an opportunity to remove their children from religious lessons: 29 were removed.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting the school's strong religious conviction, it was converted into an official Church of England school in 1907.<sup>19</sup> However, despite the school's enthusiasm, its religious education was perceived as inadequate and, while it did improve, it was frequently noted that the children had limited power of thought.<sup>20</sup>

The Second World War ushered in further upheaval. Some innovations were greeted with enthusiasm, such as the introduction of school dinners in 1943, while others were treated with greater caution.<sup>21</sup> Church schools were confronted with the option to become voluntary controlled or voluntary aided. The village experienced growing agitation over the idea of voluntary controlled-status as it would mean the state would have more power. In 1951 Whetstone Church of England School became a voluntary-aided school with a foundation contributing to the school's funding.<sup>22</sup> The village has maintained some autonomy over the school's proceeds, emphasising the community's consistent involvement in the school.

Since establishing a Sunday school in the 1700s, the Whetstone community has been involved in aiding the school, whether it be offering discounts on repairs, or providing money as a subscriber. The community has preserved its school through consistent support. This is epitomised in an appeal made to the village in 1949 for £1,000 to keep the Church School.<sup>23</sup> Many changes took place between 1902 and 1956, but Whetstone's only daily school remained attached to the Church of England, its founder and supporter. Therefore, since the 1800s to the present day, Whetstone and its church have maintained control over its school, and arguably their children's education.

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17 TNA, ED 21/56104, 1937

18 ROLLR, DE 3525/2, 1903

19 ROLLR, DE 3525/3, 1907

20 TNA, ED21/33645, 1926

21 ROLLR, DE 3525/4, 1943

22 ROLLR, DE 7512/26, 1950-1951

23 ROLLR, DE 7512/26, 1949