

William Stephens Tregear, Headmaster, East Meon National School, 1876 – 1902

From the Tregear family history

William Stephens Tregear trained as a teacher at St Mark's Training College, graduating about December 1857. After his marriage to Mary Taylor on 23rd May 1861 he taught for 9 years at Aveston Gifford, a little village 8 miles east of Pewsey, Wilts. Life there was difficult – country tradition at that time was that the schoolmaster was servant of the vicar. There were clashes between a quiet but independent man and a domineering parson.

The culmination came in 1876 when William applied for the post of master at East Meon. His private correspondence was intercepted and opened by the vicar, who did all he could to foil his plans.

The terms of his appointment as Headmaster of East Meon village school are stated in a letter from William Tregear to W. Brodie (7.9.1876). "I understand my engagement to be for wife to take needlework, two daughters to teach and satisfy as PT the Government requirement – the salary to be from £120 – 130 with the house and that assistance to be given in Sunday School." HE expressed misgivings for his family of 6 children, doubts which proved to have real foundation since the school house was 'two up, two down – a parlour (16' x10'3") over which was a bedroom divided by a partition into two rooms, a kitchen (12' x 12') with a room over. It is said that Mary sat down and wept when she arrived and saw the house, but she soon perked up. Luckily, it was holiday time and beds were put up in the schoolroom, to the delight of the elder children. Later, the two elder boys, William and John, were boarded out happily in the village. In spite of its smallness, this was to be their hospitable and happy home for the next 25 years.

On their arrival, they were visited by the village blacksmith, whose family had been blacksmiths there for over 200 years. He brought a large basket of cakes and tea for these new villagers and an offer of help. "None else had thought of such a thing and my family never forgot." (EMT) This had its social repercussions. "Many years later I learned that our continued friendship with this family delayed our acceptance into the ranks of the gentry, or near-gentry, i.e. the Lady of the Manor, parson, doctor, the farmers and millers, who still had large comfortable houses with maids and went to the hunt, but whose fortunes were fading in those – for them – difficult days of cheaper bread due to the repeal of the Corn Laws. One member said to my sister once: 'Your friendship with the village blacksmith's family kept us from knowing you for some time.'" (EMT)

These were the early days of compulsory elementary education under the Act of 1870. Opposition to education, especially in the country, was very strong, and even stronger was the opposition to paying it. People paid 1d, 2d or 6d a week, according to their social standing. "One tradesman paid 6d for his eldest child

and then the price went down for the second and third. I remember when a man who had a small oil and colour business – a rag and bone man – was assessed as a tradesman, objected, but had to pay the 6d. So he sent the sixpence in farthings, but my sister (Katie) decided that at least he should learn to count by them. He soon learned to count, and prevailed on his father to use more acceptable coinage.

The former headmaster had been a kindly and gentle soul. Any discipline that there had been was maintained by his wife, who was of sterner stuff. It was said of her – probably apocryphally – that she suspended an unruly boy in a bucket over the well to bring him to heel. Many of the parents were poor and ignorant and their children hostile and sometimes violent. William Tregear, though tougher than his predecessor, was also a quiet man and it is clear that he had a hard life so far as discipline was concerned, until the village was gradually won over. Evidently it was his daughter Katie, in her capacity of pupil teacher, who had a big hand in keeping the peace, as this story shows:

“One of the most vivid recollections as a small child were the visits of a lady, whom we called the village virago. Her children were completely undisciplined and their attempts to do bodily harm, especially kicking, to my father, were numerous. Any possible threat or action for discipline on the part of the schoolmaster brought the lady post-haste, straight from her washtub. She would enter and march straight up to the ‘master’ and shout her threats at him. As a small child I was terrified that she really would knock him down, but she never did. Usually, however, someone more law-abiding would run in with a warning of her advent and my sister would be prepared to bar the way. From Mrs S. we learned to proclaim, with arms akimbo – “I’ll have my rights and justifications if I dies for it.” (I never heard her used bad language, nor do I remember hearing it in the village.) There is a sequel.

As time went on, people became more accustomed to the idea of school and children came to like the atmosphere and the fun of school life. Mrs Sawyer matured as the years went by but in our hearts we wondered if she would break out again. Sure enough, one day she came up post-haste. “I want to see the Master”. My sister fended her off with “You can’t see him now, he’s busy.” “I only want to speak to him civil. I have something special to tell him.” So my sister led her into the presence and she told her story.

A new family had come into the village, bringing a different sort of objection to discipline. Her boy was unruly and had been caned. On his arriving home, his mother, unable to find any marks on his body, had thrashed him severely and then taken him to the nearest member of the School Committee, and showed him the weals, saying that he had received them at school. Thanks to Mrs S, and also probably to the incredulity of the Committee member, no more was heard of the incident.

As time went on, the family was accepted in the village and played a very full part of its corporate life – in games, tennis, music and amateur dramatics. The school came to be the acknowledged centre of so many village activities.

Elizabeth (Lizzie) and Katherine (Katie) continued as assistant teachers at the school. As the others grew up, they left the village to pursue their various callings. Of the three older boys, William (Will) went to college, took a degree and became a teacher. For many years he was headmaster of Sandown Secondary School on the Isle of Wight, and eventually became HM Inspector of Schools. John (Jack) and Thomas (Tom) both went into business and both became master grocers ... The three younger children, Ethel, Evelyn (Evie) and Herbert were all born at East Meon and left home later.

Family life at East Meon ended abruptly with the sudden death of William Tregear in 1902. He collapsed while teaching and died almost immediately. The respect and affection in which he had come to be held was evinced by the tributes in the local papers, but more by the gatherings at the church and churchyard at his funeral. Mary and her two daughters moved to nearby Petersfield where the two 'girls' found teaching posts at the primary school. They lived at and looked after the Petersfield Institute.

Notes from Freddie Standfield's book ...

Organised education was provided by the church for nearly 1,000 years from St Augustine's arrival until the Reformation. After the Reformation, many grammar schools were re-endowed by lay benefactors and by 1740 there were nearly 2,000 charity schools. Prior to 1800 only one in every 30 children received organised schooling and the state neither aided nor controlled education.

It was the Sunday school movement which led towards universal education. The date when schooling began in East Meon is unknown, but an article dated 1816, in the Gentleman's Magazine, described how, in East Meon:

"The north transept is now used as a Sunday and day-school for the neighbourhood. I was much gratified to learn that on Sundays no less than 160 children are collected in this room for religious education – a considerable number, when it is recollected that the neighbouring tithings or hamlets, from which many of the children come, are some of them at least three or four miles from the church."

The number of weekday attendants is uncertain ... the Church Rate Book refers to a meeting of the Vestry in 1794 when 'William Vinn, Schoolmaster' ... was appointed parish clerk, and the Burial Register records his burial in 1806.

In 1833, parliament allocated £20,000 for the erection of schoolhouses for the whole of England and Wales. East Meon's first purpose-built school was constructed in 1845 at a cost of £696 following the gift of the site from the Bishop of Winchester in 1844. The conveyance transferred a strip of roadside waste of the manor plus an even narrower strip of Church Hill Field to 'the Minister Church Wardens and Overseers of the Parish of East Meon' upon trust for 'a School for the education of Poor Children and as a residence for the schoolmaster. The deed adds that the 'school shall always be conducted upon the principles of the Incorporated National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Principles of the Established Church and shall be under the general

management and control of the Committee for the time being of the Subscribers of the said School’.

The combined school and master’s house was constructed mainly of knapped flints with a slate roof ‘in the Elizabethan style’. In the school’s early days, the pupils taught by schoolmaster John Hones totalled about 60 – 70 boys and 50 girls, a tiny minority paying 3d a week and the rest 1d. Income from ‘children’s pence’ was augmented by annual payments from benevolent subscribers who included the bishop (£2), Magdalen College (£2 2s), Lord Gage (£2), Sir William Joliffe (£2), John Bonham Carter (£4), G.T.Nicholson (£1) and the vicar (£1).

In 1848, John Forder and his wife Sarah were appointed master and mistress at a stipend of £50 together with four tons of coals and the use of the house and garden.

At national level, pupil teachers originated in 1846, being apprenticed from the age of 13 – 18.

After 28 years, the Forders retired at Michaelmas 1876, to be succeeded by William Tregear.

1878 entries include:

Jan 31st Holiday, the Master having lost the Infant of the family – buried in East Meon Churchyard

June 24th – The heat in the room excessive. The closets are far from sweet.

June 15th – Master out of the school much of Wednesday his youngest child being very ill – also Thursday when she died.

July 15th – The Master obliged to call in the Doctor for another daughter – The Doctor ascribes the ailment to the Water and Closets – the Closets being too close to house and school.

It is strange that these deaths do not appear on the Tregear family log. According to FS, The master recorded 1878 as ‘an eventful year for my family’ which, as Freddie notes is strange when his infant, little Edith, died aged 6 months and his youngest child, Margaret, died aged 3, probably both of typhoid fever.