

## EDUCATION IN SHILLINGFORD ST GEORGE 1830-1870

Shillingford St. George was a small parish of only 890 acres, lying in the Kenn Valley about 3½ miles south-west of Exeter. It was also commonly known as Higher Shillingford. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had a population of about 70 people, living in 14 or 15 households – these included two farmhouses, the rectory, about 11 cottages, mostly built close to the main road through the village.<sup>1</sup> The village was close to the beginning of the old road which led south to Plymouth, across Haldon, and sat below Haldon Hill, reportedly the steepest hill on the road from London to the west. Until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the new turnpike over Haldon was opened in 1822, and Shillingford St. George was bypassed, the village boasted a coaching inn called *The Anchor*, where teams of horses were changed, but which by 1841 had been converted into cottages.<sup>2</sup>

The parish was almost completely surrounded by the western extension of the much larger parish of Exminster, which meant that the hamlet of Lower Shillingford, or Shillingford Abbot, and the farms at Bowhay and Barton (all in Exminster) were in walking distance of Shillingford St. George village. The south-west boundary of the parish adjoined an outlying part of Kenn parish, where the small hamlet of Clapham was situated, also in easy walking distance of the village.

No detailed history of the parish has been written; short histories of the church memorials and Shillingford farms have been written and produced by the local history society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and “*Opening The Door*” – a booklet covering some aspects of parish history – was published by the local history society in 2001. It includes some information on education in Lower and Higher Shillingford, and mentions the location of a ‘dame school’ in Shillingford St. George, which by tradition has been believed to have been the only existing schoolhouse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century parish. Robert Bovett’s *Historical Notes of Devon Schools* gives a small amount of information about the school.<sup>3</sup>

In 1771 Sir Robert Palk of Haldon House in Kenn had purchased the manors of Shillingford Saint George and Abbots (Lower) Shillingford, together with estates in Exminster parish, and the Rectory of Shillingford.<sup>4</sup> In 1830, Sir Robert’s grandson Sir Lawrence Vaughan Palk still owned all of the land in the parish of Shillingford Saint George and most of that in Lower Shillingford, and his nephew was the Rector, living in the Georgian rectory next to the church. The earliest known map of Shillingford St. George is a glebe exchange map surveyed in 1806. This is a rare survival, as very few maps and plans of the Palk estates in Devon appear to exist. In 1791 Dunchideock and Shillingford St. George parishes had been united under one Rector, and Sir Robert Palk had decided to exchange the glebe lands in Dunchideock for the equivalent in Shillingford St. George. The map drawn up in 1806 thus shows only part of the parish – but fortunately, along with the fields belonging to the newly created glebe in Shillingford St. George, it shows the buildings associated with the village, the two farms and the Rectory, although they are not named. On this map can be seen a building identified later on the 19<sup>th</sup> century tithe map as the school, and also a separate building, commonly believed to have been used as a ‘dame school’, and later known as Rectory Cottage. The school building was a rectangular structure close to the corner of the lane leading from the village to the two farms and the church. It stood right on the lane, behind the blacksmith’s premises and opposite a pair of farm labourer’s cottages, and appeared to have a triangular plot of land adjoining – possibly a garden.<sup>5</sup> Of course, there is no proof that the building was used as a school at that time, as its function is not indicated on the plan, and in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century it could have been a cottage, or even a small barn.

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<sup>1</sup> *Whites Directory*, 1850, page 413; 1841, 1851 censuses, Devon, Shillingford St. George parish.

<sup>2</sup> *Opening The Door*, Shillingford Local History Society, July 2001, page 11.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bovett, *Historical Notes on Devon Schools*, Devon County Council, 1989, pages 272-273.

<sup>4</sup> Z10/9/2, dated 1771 (Devon Heritage Centre/DHC)

<sup>5</sup> 58/9/Box 122/26, dated 1806, March 18. Plan, particular and valuation of lands in Shillingford St George in exchange for Dunchideock Glebe. Extracted 15 September 1837 (Devon Heritage Centre/DHC).

By 1831, however, Shillingford St. George did have a school. According to the results of the Church School Enquiry, held among the records of the National Society, 15 boys and 15 girls were attending a parish school in Shillingford St. George. The school was run on National Society lines, and using Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge schoolbooks. The parish population was only 70,<sup>6</sup> so if these pupil figures are correct, a number of children from the surrounding hamlets and farms at Clapham and Shillingford Abbot must have been attending as well.

Two years later, in 1833, a Parliamentary Return (as quoted by Bovett) suggested that 40 pupils attended the school, which was supported by subscriptions and payments by the parents.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the school was not mentioned at all by the Reverend Robert Palk Welland, Rector of Dunchideock with Shillingford, in his Reply to Queries, completed in the same year prior to the visitation by the new Bishop of Exeter.<sup>8</sup> However, the Church School Enquiry of 1837 confirmed that the school did exist – the enquiry recorded that 15 boys and 16 girls attended the school – though on this occasion it was stated that it was not run on National Society lines, and was not using Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge schoolbooks.<sup>9</sup>

The school must have been occupying the building close to the corner of the lane leading from the village to the two farms during these years, as Shillingford St George parish tithe map and apportionment of 1838 identified it as the schoolhouse, plot 47.<sup>10</sup> The tithe apportionment of 1838 recorded the proprietor of the schoolhouse as the Reverend Robert Palk Welland, as it was part of the glebe, and the occupier as Sarah 'Wright'.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, Sarah 'Wright' was the schoolmistress. The tithe map, which is far more accurately surveyed than the map of 1806, shows the schoolhouse standing alone, with no surrounding land, jutting out into the middle of the lane, so it must have posed a hindrance to passing traffic.<sup>12</sup>

Shillingford St. George tithe apportionment listed the dwelling commonly believed to have been the village school, and later known as Rectory Cottage, as plot 84, and described it as a 'House in Lawn with Stables &c'. It stood on the lane leading from the village to Shillingford Farm [now named Place Farm], just opposite the turnoff to Harris's farmhouse [now renamed Glebe Farm]. In 1838 the owner/occupier of plot 84 was the Reverend Robert Palk Welland; so at that time the cottage may have been occupied by Rectory servants – perhaps a groom. The census of June 1841 reveals that the schoolmistress was Sarah Bright, aged 55, who was living in a "cottage" with 2 young girls - 12 year old Tryphena Hooker, and 5 year old Elizabeth Davies; the younger girl had been born outside the county.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that she had also been the schoolmistress in 1838, and that the surname 'Wright' was a misspelling of 'Bright'.

The two girls do not seem to have been close relatives of Sarah Bright, so were probably boarding with her to be raised and educated. By 1841, Sarah was a widow. Her late husband Samuel Bright had been born in 1773 in Tiverton and had moved to Exminster. In 1797, Samuel had married Sarah Hooper, also of Exminster. Both Samuel and his witness Solomon Bright (also born in Tiverton and married in Exminster in 1797) had made their marks on their respective entries in the parish register, whereas Sarah had been able to sign her name – a fact relevant to her occupation later in life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> NS/7/7/1/1. Register: Church School Enquiry Vol. 1. (Church of England Record Centre/CERC).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bovett, Historical Notes on Devon Schools, Devon County Council, 1989, page 272.

<sup>8</sup> Chanter 367: Diocese of Exeter Visitation Records, 1833 - Dunchideock with Shillingford St George (DHC).

<sup>9</sup> NS/7/7/2/1 Register: Church School Enquiry Vol. 1, 1837 (CERC).

<sup>10</sup> Tithe map and apportionment, Shillingford St. George, 1838 (DHC).

<sup>11</sup> Tithe apportionment, Shillingford St George, 1838 (DHC).

<sup>12</sup> Tithe map, Shillingford St. George, 1838 (DHC).

<sup>13</sup> 1841 census, Devon, Shillingford St George parish.

<sup>14</sup> Tiverton St. Peter parish register of baptisms, 2960A/PR/1/6; Exminster parish register of marriages & banns, 1754-1812, 3114A/PR/1/6 (DHC).

It is not known when and why Samuel and Sarah, who appear to have been childless, had moved to Shillingford St. George. Samuel Bright had died in 1840, aged 66, and had been buried in Shillingford St. George churchyard.<sup>15</sup>

The return of the General Enquiry made by the National Society into the state of schools in 1846-1847 recorded a combined result for the consolidated parishes of Shillingford and Dunchideock. The total population was given as 250, with only 28 children attending school in the two parishes. Shillingford still had a day school, but with only 4 boys and 4 girls recorded as attending.<sup>16</sup>

In 1851, the census showed that Sarah Bright, by now aged 74, was still the schoolmistress. She appeared to be living next to or very close to the Rectory in an unnamed dwelling which was divided into three separate households. Sarah occupied one household, while Tryphena Hooker, who married later that year, and Francis Hooker, an agricultural labourer aged 24, occupied the other two. Tryphena, who had lived with Sarah for at least a decade, had supposedly been born in Ide, and in 1852, when she married in Shillingford parish church, she gave her father's name as 'William Stanfield Esquire'<sup>17</sup> – so if this was true, she must have been the illegitimate daughter of a gentleman, boarded out with the village schoolmistress.

It is not possible to be sure which dwelling Sarah and the two Hookers were living in. Oral tradition maintains that the cottage on the lane leading from the village to Shillingford Farm (Rectory Cottage) did in fact serve as the local school for Shillingford in the mid-nineteenth century, so whether Sarah Bright was living or teaching in the old schoolhouse building at the top of the lane, or was now occupying and perhaps teaching in, the cottage close to the Rectory, is not clear.

Sarah Bright outlived her husband by 15 years. She died in 1855 aged 80, with the Rector, the Reverend Henry Palk, presiding at her funeral. A plaque commemorating Samuel Bright and his wife Sarah is mounted on the west wall of the north transept of the parish church:

*In memory of Samuel Bright, who died August 13th, 1840  
And of Sarah his wife who died August 20th 1855 aged 80 years*

In 1861 when the census was next taken, widow Mrs. Salome Lear was recorded as schoolmistress, living in a dwelling named as "The School." It was listed on the census immediately after the two farms, so it could have been the cottage on the lane leading from the village to Shillingford Farm, close to the Rectory, as this does not seem to have been listed otherwise, but without knowing when the old schoolhouse building was demolished, there remains doubt. Unfortunately, there are no existing maps between the tithe map of 1838 and the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map of 1889 to refer to.

Salome, who was from a farming family, had been born as Salome Pratt in Kenton parish in about 1805, and had married Charles Lear at Kenton parish church on 8 December 1828.<sup>18</sup> Charles had been born in 1798 at Shillingford Farm to John and Grace Lear, who were tenants of the Palks.<sup>19</sup> With her husband, who began by farming himself, but later took employment as a farm bailiff, a victualler, an innkeeper and a grocer, Salome Lear had lived in various places around Devon, but after he died in 1859 and was buried in Shillingford St George churchyard,<sup>20</sup> she seems to have settled back in his home parish, close to Shillingford Farm, which her late husband's brother still occupied.

The 1866 *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire* rather confusingly listed a Mrs. Charlotte Lear as schoolmistress at Shillingford St George. Mrs. Charlotte Lear was Salome's older sister, and

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<sup>15</sup> Shillingford St George parish register of burials, 1813-2006, 1214A/PR/1/14 (DHC).

<sup>16</sup> NS/7/7/3/1 Return of the General Enquiry made by the National Society into the State of Schools, 1846-1847 (CERC).

<sup>17</sup> Shillingford St George parish register of marriages, 1214A/PR/1/7 (DHC).

<sup>18</sup> Kenton parish register of marriages, 1813-1837, 70A/PR/1/9 (DHC).

<sup>19</sup> Shillingford St George parish register of baptisms, 1214A/PR/1/3 (DHC).

<sup>20</sup> Shillingford St George parish register of burials, 1813-2006. 1214A/PR/1/14 (DHC)

this is the only indication that she may have also acted as schoolmistress in Shillingford. Born as Charlotte Pratt in Kenton, she had married Thomas Lear, the brother of Salome's husband, in 1820.<sup>21</sup> Thomas and Charlotte Lear did not live in Shillingford St. George after marriage either; he was a butcher in Exminster when he married, but later moved to Alphington, Crediton and St Thomas, where he had butcher's shops.

Thomas Lear of Alphington Street, St. Thomas died in August 1861, and was buried in St Thomas the Apostle churchyard on the 11<sup>th</sup> of that month, aged 65 years.<sup>22</sup> In 1866 according to a listing in *Kelly's Directory*, his widow Mrs Charlotte LEAR was not only listed as the Shillingford St. George schoolmistress, but was still keeping a shop at 25 Alphington Street, St. Thomas, Exeter; she was also listed there in the *Kelly's Directory* of 1870, and in the census of 1871.<sup>23</sup> It is likely that the 1866 *Kelly's Directory* recorded the schoolteacher's first name incorrectly, and that Salome Lear was still teaching in Shillingford St. George.

There was no schoolteacher listed as living in Shillingford in the *Kelly's Directory* of 1870, and in 1871 when the census was taken, Salome Lear was no longer living in Shillingford St. George; instead she was recorded living alone in the adjoining parish of Alphington, though still working as a schoolmistress. There was no school teacher listed in Shillingford St George in that census, and the fate of the little school there is not clear. It is not possible to identify the cottage on the lane leading from the village to Shillingford Farm, from any of the other cottages close to the Rectory and the farms, but none had a schoolmistress in residence.<sup>24</sup> It is possible that Salome Lear, who was 64 years old by then, could have driven by pony trap to Shillingford each day to teach there. Some children living at Shillingford Abbot were probably already attending the small church school at Alphington,<sup>25</sup> and those at Clapham could also walk over the fields to the private school at Dunchideock, so numbers at the little school at Shillingford St. George may have fallen. By this time the passing of the Elementary Education Act of 1870 was leading to the closure of small, poorly appointed schools with low pupil numbers.

Nevertheless, the school seems to have survived a little longer, and the old school building in the middle of the lane may still have been in use. The last evidence of its existence found so far was in a newspaper article in *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* in January 1873, when the clerk to the St. Thomas Board of Guardians was '*...instructed to write to the school authorities at Shillingford as to the disgraceful state of the lavatories attached to the school*'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kenton parish register of marriages, 1813-1837, 70A/PR/1/9 (DHC).

<sup>22</sup> Exeter St Thomas register of burials, 1850 – 1869, 4781A/PR/1/56 (DHC).

<sup>23</sup> *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire*, 1866, 1870; 1871 census, Devon, Exeter St. Thomas parish.

<sup>24</sup> 1871 census, Devon, Shillingford St. George parish.

<sup>25</sup> A school was built on land in front of the north doorway of Alphington parish church in 1812, and was still occupied until the early 1870s.

<sup>26</sup> *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 29 January 1873, digitised on British Newspaper Archive website.