

## DEVON EARLY VICTORIAN SCHOOLS PROJECT – WESTLEIGH SCHOOL

Situated 3 miles north east of Bideford, and 7 south west of Barnstaple, (see figure 1 below), the small parish of Westleigh (sometimes known as Leigh West) in the hundred of Fremington originated in Saxon times, and once stood on the old turnpike road and railway line from Barnstaple to Bideford. In the late seventeenth century, women were employed in glove-making for the manufacturers of Torrington, and building stone was extensively quarried in the locality. Westleigh was a mainly rural community, although for many years small shipyards had existed on the Westleigh bank of the navigable River Torridge. There was also a working active anthracite mine, the Westwood Culm Mine, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which subsequently became part of Bideford Black Mine (1).



**Figure 1: Map showing the position of Westleigh (about 1950)**

The history of Westleigh has been closely linked with neighbouring Instow, and to some extent with the manor house of Tapeley Hall and its squire (of the Christie family). At one time, the village was almost entirely owned by the Tapeley Estate, with its Georgian mansion and large park, where many of the villagers worked in the past, and have continued to work (2).

During the nineteenth century the population remained steady, reaching 508 in 1851 (see figure 2 below):

Date	1801	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851	1881	1891	1901
Pop <sup>n</sup> .	408	391	452	484	526	508	496	483	401

**Figure 2: Population of Westleigh during the nineteenth century (3)**

In 1851, there were two blacksmiths, two millers, three boot and shoe makers, three masons, three carpenters, an innkeeper (for the inn which was called the New Inn), a tailor, a shopkeeper, two butchers and two teachers. There was also a Wesleyan chapel, now a private dwelling. By the 1850s, if not earlier, a National School was established in the church-house of St Peter's Church, which had been restored in 1820 by the Vicar, John Toms. This building with one large room and a

basement has remained in the south west corner of the churchyard beside the road (see figure 3 below). At the time there was a power struggle between the schoolmaster and the lady of the manor, Agnes Christie, who paid his salary and expected to be very involved and consulted on every small detail (4)



**Figure 3: The old church-house school building**

Then in 1872, a School Board was formed: a new two-room school costing £860 was built on land given by Tapeley Hall. The new school opened on 13 January 1873 with 15 infants and 38 older pupils, and replaced the old school (see figure 4 below).



**Figure 4: The former Board School, now a private residence.**

According to information from the school's log books, attendance was poor, especially at harvest time. Older children were likely to be absent each time there was a meet on the Tapeley Estate, or when asked to attend a shooting party in order to spend the day beating for the guns. Also, during severe cold weather they would often be absent manning or partaking from the soup kitchen at Tapeley Hall. It was reported that many children who did attend were too tired because they had a great deal of farm work to get through both before and after school. The local farmers viewed the children as cheap labour and children were kept from attending school for helping to clear the ground of stones, picking up the potato crop or assisting with the harvest. In 1873 an assessment by the schoolmaster revealed that many children were well below the expected standard for their ages in all subjects except reading, while the girls' understanding of mathematics was extremely limited (5).

### **Notes**

1. Source: [www.westleigh-devon.gov.uk/history](http://www.westleigh-devon.gov.uk/history) which quotes the National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland (1868). Accessed on 16 September 2015.
2. Source: [http://people.exeter.ac.uk/pfclaugh/mhinf/nd\\_list/nd\\_020.htm](http://people.exeter.ac.uk/pfclaugh/mhinf/nd_list/nd_020.htm). Accessed on 16 September 2015.
3. Source: [www.visionofbritain.org/uk/2400](http://www.visionofbritain.org/uk/2400) . Accessed on 16 September 2015.
4. It was said that on one occasion in the autumn of 1873, Mrs Agnes Christie called on the school to instruct the teaching assistant to make a list of girls so that they could receive a warm woollen cloak and be able to attend church on Sunday.
5. Westleigh School log books in North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple.