

GREAT AMWELL

OLD SCHOOL

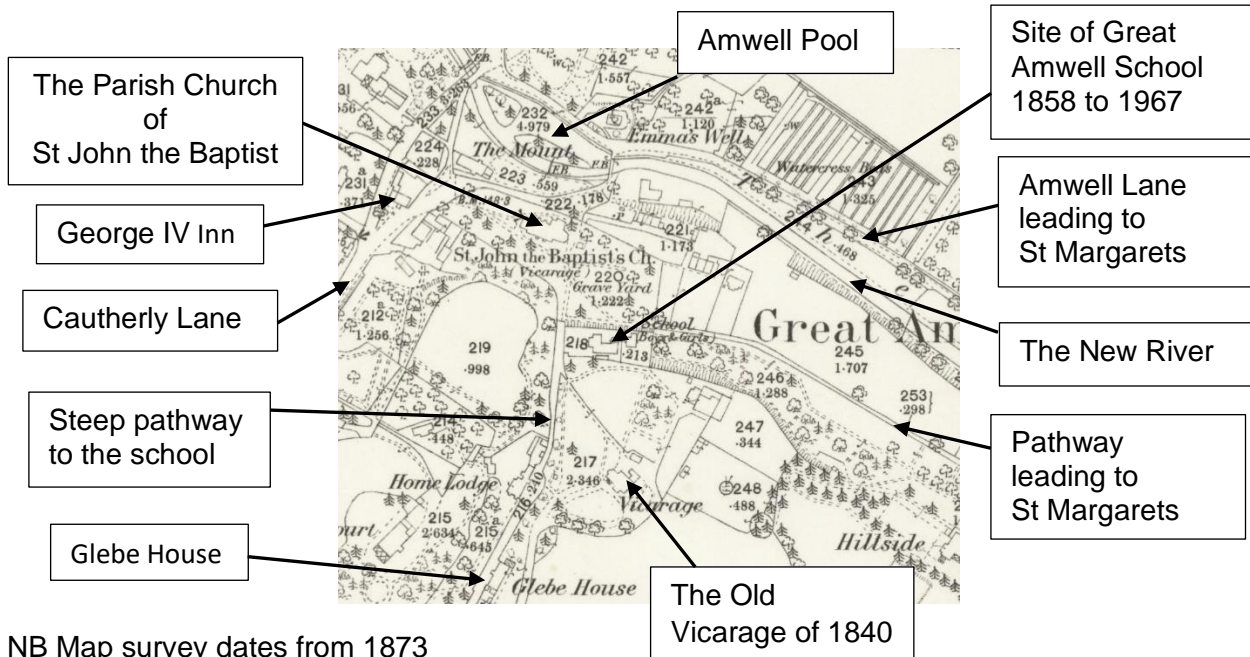
1858 TO 1967

By
Stuart Moye

At the start of the Victorian Period concerns were being raised about the lack of general education within the working population. This was seen as an increasing problem as industrialisation gathered pace over the following years. By the end of the 19th century various new laws had been introduced that ensured that all children were entitled to at least free schooling in the basics of literacy and numeracy. The Church of England played its part, along with other organisations, in the building and running of schools often ahead of the requirements of government legislation. These Church Schools were closely tied to Parish Churches and usually included the dedication of the church into their official titles. Thus, the school in Amwell is known as St. John The Baptist Church of England School in Great Amwell. In day-to-day conversations over the years, it has tended to be called Great Amwell School or locally just simply the Village School. Great Amwell School remained on its original site from 1858 to 1967 before moving to a brand-new building at a new location a short walk away.

Although the Church of England made a contribution to the setting up of village schools in the 19th century the bulk of the money was expected to come from local residents. The source of such funding therefore relied heavily on those with deep pockets residing in the parish. The Vicar at Great Amwell at the time was the Reverent Mordaunt Barnard and much would have relied on his ability to persuade those who could make a large subscription to the funds to do so. Although history has not been particularly kind to Rev. Barnard there is evidence that he was quite persuasive. Indeed in 1856 he had overseen the renovation of the chancel of the church which had included some controversial changes opposed by the great and the good of the parish. In addition to funding the Vicar was undoubtedly instrumental in ensuring a suitable site was made available. The site chosen was conveniently located between Rev Barnard's Vicarage that he had built in 1840 and the churchyard. The land was on a steep slope and had little or no agricultural value. It had been from time immemorial part of the Glebe lands of the Parish. Thus, it was made available for use as the site of a Church School with consent of the church authorities at no cost. In order to make the site suitable for the building of the school and a Head Teachers house a flat area was fashioned out of the steeply sloping valley side. An unusual feature of the location was that the new school was to be reached exclusively via an existing very steep and relatively narrow track leading uphill from the graveyard. One can imagine many workmen carrying large amounts of building material through the churchyard and then up the short steep lower part of the slope at the time the school was being built. It also meant that generations of pupils faced an even longer climb up to the top of the hill at the end of their school day. On completion, The St. John The Baptist Church of England School in Great Amwell was officially opened for lessons in 1856. We can be certain that Rev. Barnard made sure he was front and centre on the opening day.

OLD SCHOOL LOCATION



NB Map survey dates from 1873

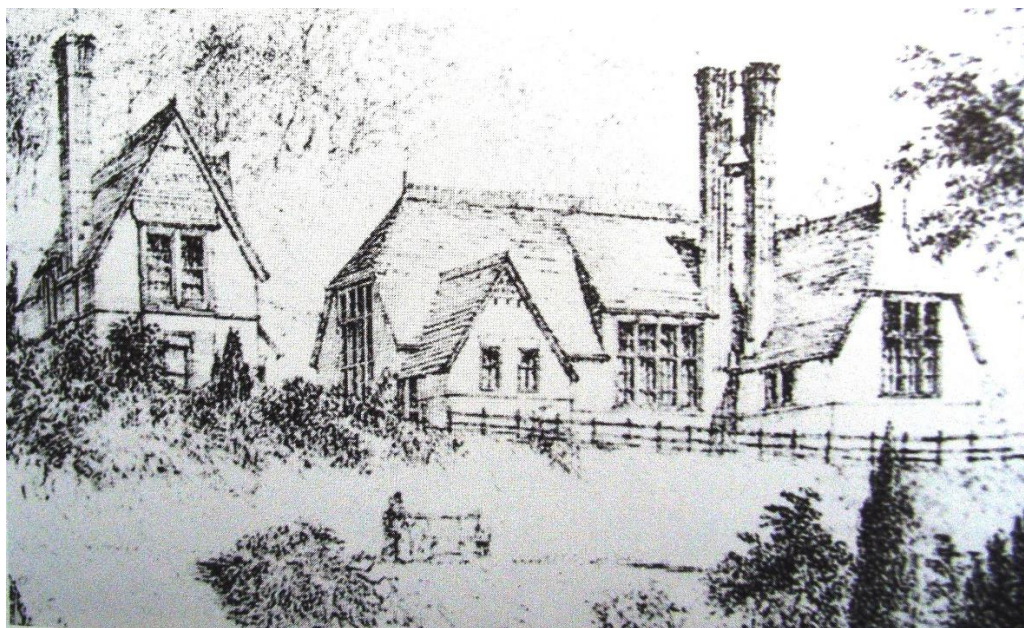
The school building was in the form of a long thin wooden building, built end on to the entrance from the steep path. The walls of the building were formed of horizontal planking under a fairly steeply inclined roof. The main entrance faced towards the steep school hill path with entrance to the building via a set of four steps to reach the raised floor level inside. Along the side facing the churchyard was an exterior veranda covered by part of the roof. On the roof end above the main entrance was a frame housing the school bell operated by rope from just inside the main entrance. It is believed that there was just one long classroom, as was very common in those days. The 1858 headmaster's house appears to have been on the same site as today's building and very similar in overall general appearance to as it was after the school was rebuilt in 1874. Some observers have however wondered if the house was rebuilt when the replacement school building was erected.



The original School building and Headmasters House as they were between 1858 & 1874

Six years after the school was built the Rev. Barnard's plans for the renovation of the nave of the church moved on to the practical step of exploring to what extent the basic structure of the building required attention. He had for some time been ably assisted by Richard Parrot his curate and son in law. It was in 1864 that Rev. Parrot became the vicar of the parish and it was he who oversaw the work carried out on the nave, some aspects of which were again strongly opposed by important persons in the parish which caused some delays. One problem that was relatively easy to solve for the new vicar was where to hold church services from mid-1864 when work on the nave of the church commenced. The school building was by agreement with the church authorities used for church services for just over two years. By September 1865 parts of the nave roof had been removed in order to access the strength of the roof timbers. A note made by Rev Parrott in the Parish records during January 1866 lamented that services continued to take place in the school with only slow progress on the work taking place in the church. It was not until the 8th August 1866 that the first service in the renovated church took place and the school no longer needed to serve as a substitute place of worship.

Eight years later, in 1874, a calamity was to occur when the wooden school building caught fire and was burnt to the ground. Within the parish there was not really a suitably sized room for the school to temporarily relocate to, so some lessons were taught in the recently renovated nave of the church. The parish moved very quickly to find the money and to employ a contractor to rebuild the village school. Subscriptions being sought from parishioners who in the end subscribed most of the funds required. While the money issue was being dealt with considerable discussions seemed to have taken place concerning the type of building that should be built. Not surprisingly a decision was made to build the replacement school in brick, being far less flammable than timber. It also appears that the original structure was considered by some to have been a rather poor-quality affair and well below the standard of village schools built elsewhere. This may explain why a much more prestigious and attractive building for the new school was rapidly agreed upon. With both funding and plans in place, in a remarkably short time after the fire, building commenced and the school was able to re-open for lessons later in 1874.



*A sketch of the second school building thought to date from the summer of 1875.
As viewed from the graveyard looking southwards*

The new school building comprised of a long single storey school room open inside up to the ridge line with a wing on the north side which housed a smaller room. A further smaller extension to the rear of the school and another of similar dimensions to the front were designed to be the girl's and boy's cloakrooms respectively. The building was constructed in attractive red brick with some red tile hangings on the walls all under a red tiled roof. Two large impressive chimneys built in close proximity were linked about two thirds of the way up to form a hanging point for the school bell. One notable feature was the large many pained windows which allowed plentiful light to enter the building. This was important as the main windows faced north, east and west with the rising slope to the south reducing the amount of direct sunlight reaching inside the school.

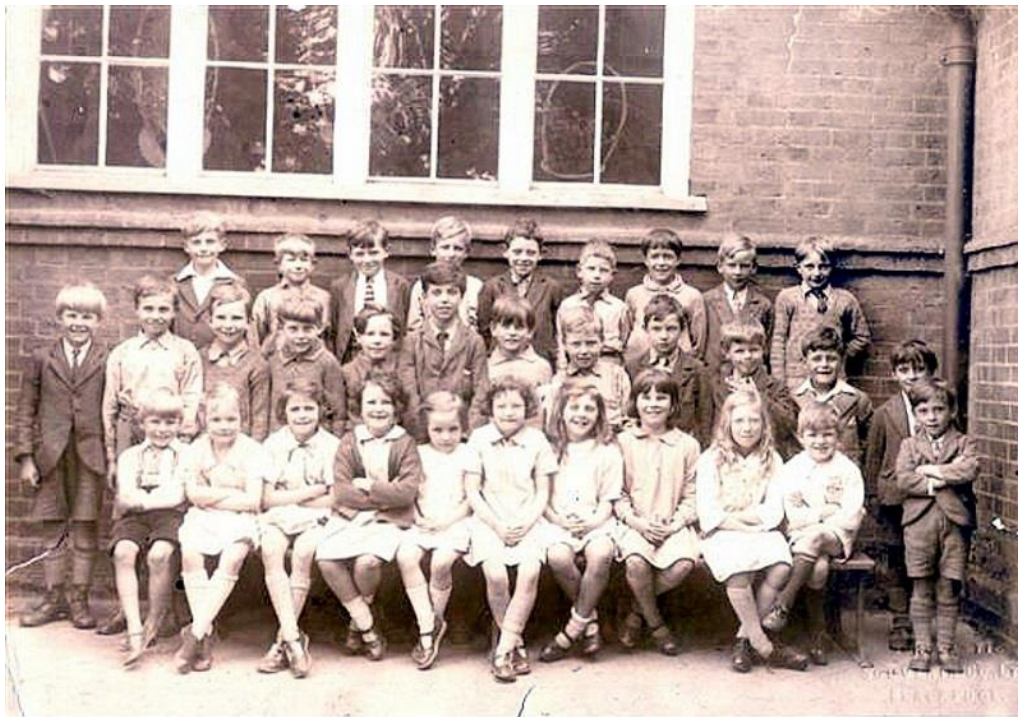
The headmaster's house appears to have undergone some added enhancements at the same time as the rebuilding of the school. It does however seem to have retained the same basic structure. This may reflect the continuing importance of good accommodation being offered for a Headteacher in attracting the right type of applicant. The Head Teacher of a church school at the time being very important in supporting the Vicar of a parish to encourage a Christian way of life to be followed by the parishioners. The detailed design of the new school appears to have been carefully chosen to be in a complimentary style to the original Headmaster's house. Although some writers [VCH 1912] have suggested the house was rebuilt in 1874 a foundation stone in the existing structure is dated 1857. This rather suggests that the house was improved rather than being rebuilt in 1874. Today the two buildings have been linked to form an attractive residence with grade two listed status.

NB [VCH = Victoria County History Vol 3 1912 William Page]

Given the increased size of the new school compared to the old it is likely that the flat area of land on the steep slope of the valley side was extended on the uphill side. Around the back of the school in the narrow gap between the windowless south wall of the school and the retaining wall holding back the slope is where the pupil's toilets were built. This long thin sunless and dank space had a tall wall built across it about half way along to divide the boys from the girls. The cubicles and urinal formed a thin continuous line backing onto the brick wall which retained the slope. Entrances to the respective set of toilets were at opposite ends of the school. In a similar way pupils entered the school by using their respective cloakroom outside doors, boys at the front and girls to the rear of the school. The main playground was to the front of the school which sloped gently up to a flint wall which held back the slope above. The only entrance to the school premises was via an ordinary width pedestrian gate which led out onto the steep pathway down the valley side. A further smaller playground area existed between the school and the steep slope to the north. A sturdy fence being provided to prevent pupils tumbling down the steep slope into the churchyard.

Sometime in the first half of the C20th various changes were made to the interior of the school. Most notable was the dividing up of the main school room with a thin and somewhat flimsy floor to roof partition. The classrooms were at some point provided with bogie stoves to replace the original open fires. Outside a sizeable prefabricated wooden hut was erected on the smaller playground between the school and the northern boundary fence. It has been suggested that this may well have been put in place during WWII to provide extra accommodation due to extra pupils arriving as evacuees. The hut was used as a storeroom with a small partitioned off end section used as the headmaster's office. This may be supportive evidence of the hut being erected to provide additional classroom accommodation temporarily in the early 1940s. Apart from some modern furniture being provided not much else of substance had changed inside or outside the school by the mid 1950's.

One periodic event that does seem to have occurred at the school from at least the 1920s was the taking of class photographs of pupils attending the school. At Amwell school the tradition of taking class photographs rather than whole school photographs was something that continued to be done into the 1960s. The following two picture were taken in the 1920s with pupils arranged beneath the north facing window of the main school room.



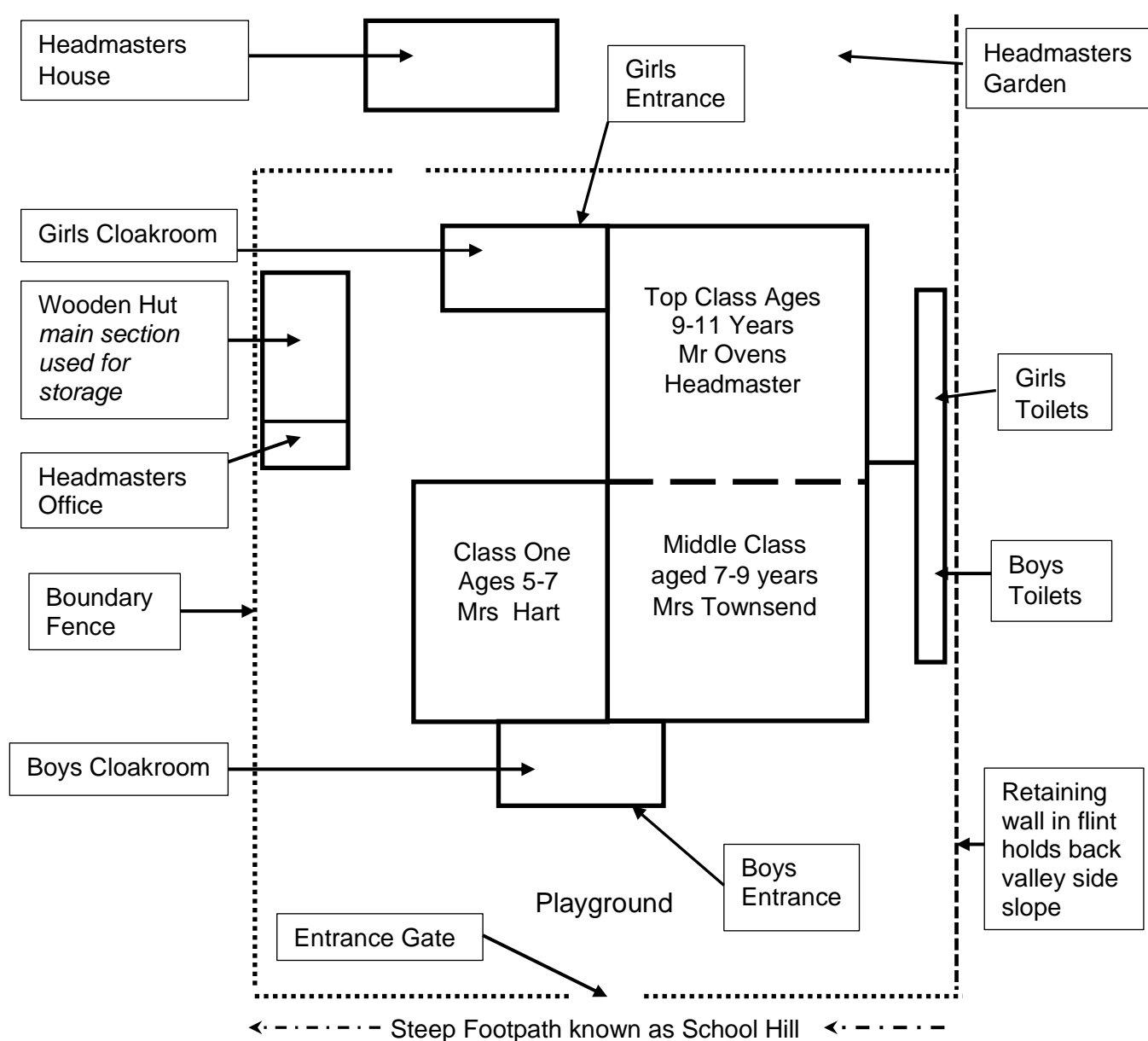
Both these pictures are thought to have been taken at Great Amwell School in the 1920s. The reflections seen in the window suggest they were taken on different seasons of the year. It was common then as it is today to have photographs taken every few years so that each pupil appears in at least one school photograph during their time at the school.



Great Amwell School 60 plus years ago

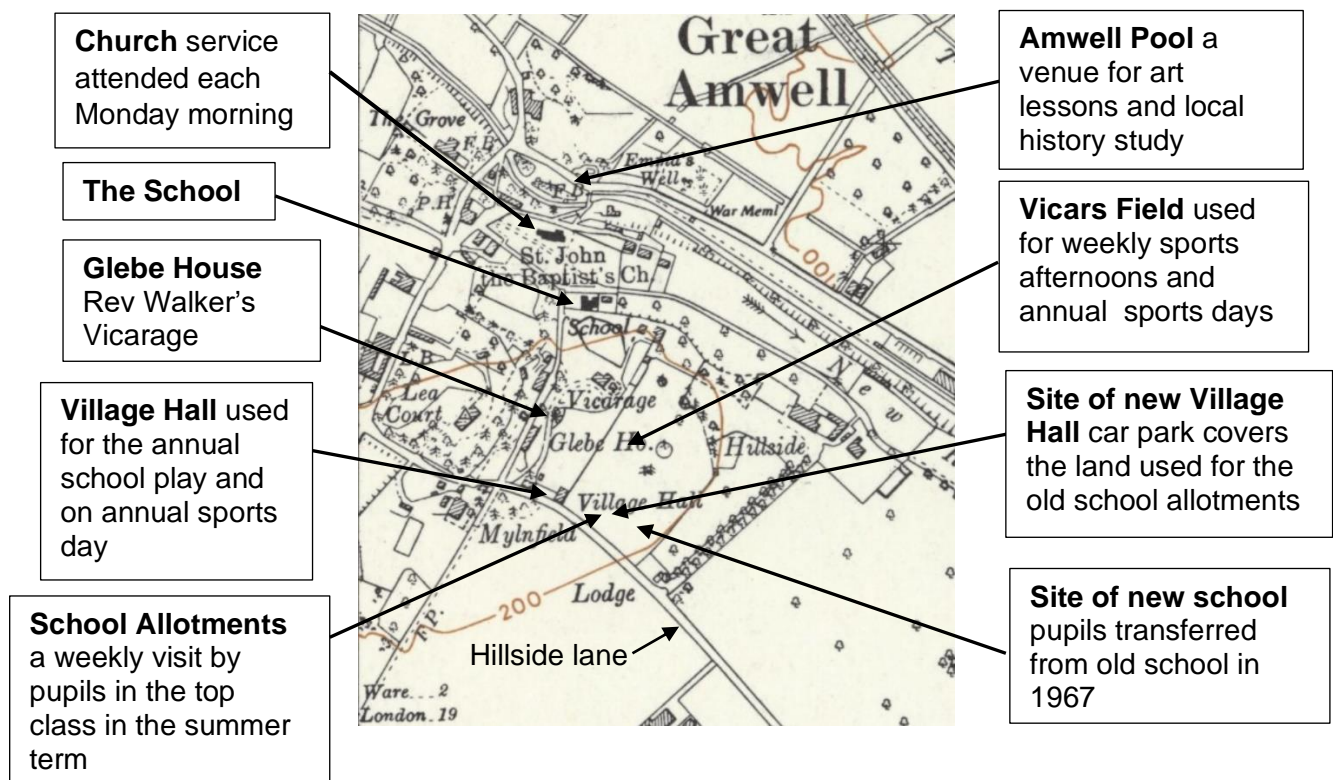
By the 1950s Great Amwell School was seeing between 12 and 15 new pupils join each year aged five, replacing those leaving to go on to the big school. There were just three classes the youngest pupils aged 5-7 being taught in the smallest classroom in the north wing by Miss Hart. The middle class was taught by Mrs Townsend in the front classroom of the main part of the school building. The Headmaster Mr Oven's class, with pupils aged 9-11 years occupied the rear of the main building. There was in total about 80 odd pupils attending the school in the mid-1950s. Pupils in general were moved up a class aged 7 and 9 years of age but some pupils who progressed well were moved up a class sometimes as much as a year earlier.

DIAGRAMMATIC MAP OF SCHOOL IN THE 1950s



On entering the school aged five pupils spent their early years with Miss Hart who created a rather homely atmosphere in the side classroom. The focus in these early years lessons was not surprisingly on the basics of reading writing and arithmetic. This included practicing writing neatly with the teaching of dexterity by scribing repeating patterns on lined paper. A particular emphasis was placed on the learning of the times tables. Up to the 12 times table was learnt at quite an early stage in a pupil's time in this class. Less demanding lessons included drawing and colouring in, along with a much looked forward to afternoon story telling time, just before going home. The move up to the middle class tended to occur for most at the end of a term when aged seven if for no other reason than to make room for the influx of five-year-olds at the beginning of each term. The classroom was not a particularly big room with much of it occupied with pupil's desks and few aisles. In the winter however the smaller size of the room meant that when the sizeable stove in the front right corner of the room was well filled with coal it created a cosily warm classroom. Mrs Townsends class was where pupils were moved on to more detailed work building on the basics learnt in the first two years. There was very much a sense that pupils were being prepared for the top class where the work was going to be much harder. That middle classroom was the engine house of the school preparing pupils for the more varied and challenging work that would come after moving up to the headmaster's class. For a small number of pupils in their final year in the school the important event was the eleven plus exam followed up by an interview in the headmaster's office with the visiting headteacher of the Grammar School that the pupils might be thinking of attending. For the three to five pupils each year who were successful the destination schools tended to be Herford Grammar School for boys and Ware Grammar Schools for girls. [*Now Richard Hale and Presdales respectively*] It was a much more varied curriculum in the top class for all pupils with trips out for a wide range of activities both locally and further afield.

Locations closely associated with the Old School in the 1950s



As a church school there was an emphasis on religion with the Vicar the Rev. Edward Walker making regular visits to the school. The whole school attended a special school service held first thing on Monday mornings. Mr Owens the Headmaster who was later to train to be a Vicar himself supported Rev Walker's work in the parish including running a Kings Messengers group on Sunday at the school after attending the Sunday church service, which led some members of the group to join the church choir. *[The Kings Messengers were a children's section of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.]* The church was also involved in providing a sports field for the weekly sports afternoons and annual sports days. These events took place on the Vicars Field located behind Glebe House the Rev Walker's Vicarage. Close by fronting onto Hillside Lane *[French's Lane used as alternate name in the 1950/60s]*, was the village hall, a corrugated and wooden affair which was used from time to time by the school to put on school plays. Down the field from the village hall close to the hedge lining Hillside Lane was located the school allotments. This consisted of two rows of eight rectangular child sized allotments separated by mown grass pathways. Pupils in the Headmasters class had a lesson one morning each week in the summer term to tend these allotments. Each plot was allocated two pupils who worked together to produce some vegetables and hopefully learn a little about growing their own food and pick up an interest in gardening along the way. All these activities actually took place on historical Glebe Land at that time not yet sold off by the church.



Less frequent adventures outside the school saw local history taught on a village walk around the village as well as visits to sheepcote farm *[just along Lower Road from the Pool]*. In the picture above, taken in the summer of 1960, Mr Owens instructs his class on the history of the church which was behind the camera and the building of the New River, *[Amwell Pool being just beyond the fence behind the group]*. Amwell Pool itself was sometimes used on hot summer days as a place for an art lesson. Pupils scattered around the pool each making their own unique piece of art.

On occasions Mr Owens would clear out his front room except for his television. His class would then be squeezed in, and sat on the floor to watch a suitably educational programme. In contrast trips further away for the older pupils included summer afternoon visits to Hoddesdon Swimming Pool. This involved a crocodile of pupils walking up the steep path of School Hill then along Vicars Lane [*now regarded as part of Hillside Lane*] then along the local roads to the main A10 road. The 310 bus being boarded at the bus stop near the Wagon and Horses Inn. After an afternoon of pupils being encouraged to improve their swimming ability and gaining certificates for their achievements it was back on the bus. For those living on the Folly Estate and the St Margarets end of Amwell Lane permission was granted to disembark at Amwell Crossroads and walk down the A414 road in an unsupervised group towards their homes. A yearly event for the top-class pupils was a week away at Cuffley Camp. This was a County Council run school camp site in the woods near Cuffley. Each visiting school had its own little village of tents with central facilities provided for most meals and washing facilities. One of the tasks on arrival was the preparation of bedding which meant being introduced to the word *palliasse* [*a sack for sleeping on*] which pupils were required to stuff with straw. Pupils lived in group tents each small group taking its turn at the jobs required to keep their little temporary community working. The fetching of water in a wheeled galvanised large water tub some distance along a track to their tented woodland village, was a much-preferred task for the boys. The latrine cleaning out chore, also reserved for the boys, was not regarded with the same enthusiasm. Many adventures into the Great North Wood were much enjoyed. Even more so a visit to the shops in Cuffley High Street where the utilitarian food of the camp could be supplemented at the sweet shop. Something much appreciated on the days pupils cooked a meal for themselves.



Amwell School pupils posed for a picture by their coach outside the George IV pub before setting off for Cuffley Camp during the summer term of 1960.

Pupils joining the school in the 1950s were all expected to wear the school uniform which included a blazer with a school badge on the left breast pocket. This was in the form of the interlocked capital letters of GAS standing of course for **G**reat **A**mwell **S**chool. The photograph to the right shows a pupil aged five in the mid 1950s all toggged up in his new school uniform at the end of August before starting school for the first time a few days later. Short trousers for boys were worn throughout their time at the school as was the cap. The striped school tie was also part of the school uniform requirements. Within the first few days at school pupils were introduced to the idea of school houses for competitive purposes within the school. The houses were denoted by four colours red, blue, green and yellow. Small round button badges were available in the appropriate colours for pinning to the left lapels of the school blazer. Parents were also asked to create rosettes of the appropriate colour for their child to wear on sports days.



A Green House button badge

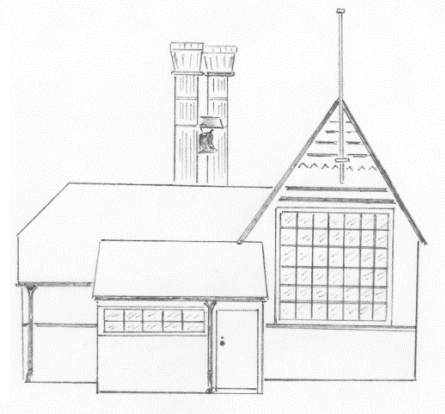
The green button badge is a genuine Great Amwell School green house badge. It was worn by a pupil while at the school from the mid 1950s to the early 1960s. Despite being kept safely in a box for the last 60 years the 70-year-old plastic has slowly deteriorated darkening in colour and beginning to crack.

A Kings Messengers Badge

This badge was awarded to pupils at the school who belonged to the Headmasters Kings Messengers group. The Kings Messengers was a children's section of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The society had been formed in 1701 and the Kings Messengers in 1891. The Kings Messengers was to come to an end in the first half of the 1960s. Great Amwell School was therefore involved with the organisation up to its demise.

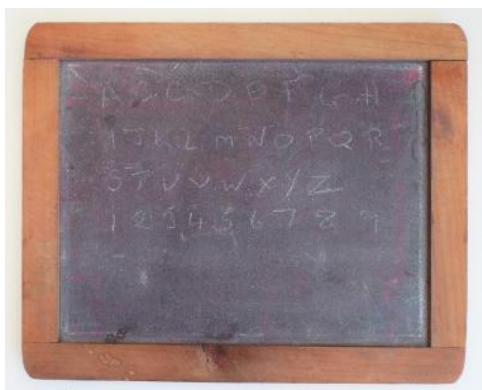
For the pupils in the school Tuesday 25th February 1958 is a memorable day as they had to struggle home through deep snow when the school was forced to send everyone home early. It had started snowing about 4am in the morning with pupils walking to school with a thin layer of snow on the pathways. The steep path down to the school had as usual had been cleared of snow, and salted due to the severity of its gradient. During the morning the snow began to fall with increasing intensity causing break time to be spent in the classrooms. By mid-day the headmaster noting the worrying built up of snow and reports of snow drifts forming decided to send everyone home early. The adults in the school were organised to each take charge of a group of pupils whose homes were relatively close together and near their own home and walk them home in the worsening conditions. Mrs "Dolly" Potton [*a dinner lady*] who lived in Folly View on the Folly Estate set off with her group along the path below the school that leads from the churchyard along a tree lined path towards the housing estate. During the first part of her journey the trees and bushes either side of the path had reduced the depth of snow but apart from one patch of deeper snow all was well until the party reached the open fields about half way into the journey. Here the wind had drifted the snow sufficiently deeply for the younger members of the group to get stuck in the snow relying on the one or two older pupils and Mrs Potton to pull them out. Fortunately, everyone arrived home safely after their very memorable journey home with the snow still coming down, quite an adventure.

The tradition of taking class photographs every few years was still in place when this picture was taken during the summer term of 1962. The group is the headmaster's class with Mr Ovens standing to the right. Mrs Dolly Potton's son Richard can be seen in the picture 2nd from the left in the back row of pupils. The photograph was taken in the playground at the front of the school with the window to Mrs Townsend's class behind the group. As pictures of the front of the school are hard to come by a sketch of the school as seen from the entrance to the playground from School Hill has been included.



Some of the pupils in the photograph had just a few short weeks at the school left before moving on to the big school. Many of them were to attend Hoddesdon Secondary School now John Warner. Mr Owens was to move to a similar Headmaster's post in Kent just three to four years after this picture was taken. This made it possible for him to attend college in Canterbury to train to become a Vicar. Five years after these pupils had their picture taken for posterity the school moved to new premises in Hillside Lane. The move became essential as the cramped site of the old school could not be expanded. The move to the new school took place on the 29th September 1967. The growing demand for places at the school was mainly due to more housing being built within the catchment area of the school. This trend continues to the present day with the new school buildings having to be extended in more recent years to accommodate growing pupil numbers.

The new school site on Hillside Lane, [aka *French's Lane*] was once again land owned by the church. This location was in fact next door to the old school's allotment site where pupils had been encouraged to grow vegetables. However, the use of the allotments had gone out of use when Mr Owens left the school. The site of the allotments today is under the car park serving the new village hall. Adequate space at the new site was provided for future expansion of the buildings as well as sufficient grassy areas for games and sports. This meant the Vicar's Field was no longer needed for school activities and was subsequently sold off by the church along with Glebe House, which had ceased to be the Vicarage in 1994. The old school itself was eventually sold and subsequently converted to residential use. The playground in front of the old school has become a well-stocked garden which means it is quite difficult today to catch even a glimpse of the front of the old school.



A hark back to early days of Victorian education with the use of slates for children to write on in school. It is made of good quality Welsh slate with a strong wooden surround. This is a genuine Victorian school slate which was in use during the 1870s to 1890s. Not a relic from Great Amwell School but one used at home by the children of a South Street family to practice their writing. This family's children did of course attend Stanstead Abbots village school.

A picture of the new school taken in the mid-1970s. Viewed looking from the road entrance. The wooden building from the old school playground was moved to the new school site. It was not long before the school acquired its own swimming pool. All a very much different experience for the pupils than for the pupils twenty years earlier attending the old school.



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