

COUNTRY SCHOOLS for TOWN CHILDREN

Do the majority of children in England, even in so-called country towns, see as much of the country as they ought to? England is years behind the best Continental practice in this respect, although our need is, perhaps, greater, owing to the lack of planning in our towns. In this article Colonel ffennell describes what has been done at Wytham Abbey for the school children of Oxford.

By RAYMOND FFENNELL



CHILDREN OF THE COWLEY GIRLS' SCHOOL AMONG THE BLUEBELLS IN MARLEY WOOD, WITHIN TWO MILES OF THE CITY OF OXFORD.

DURING the summer term of this year normal classes from nine of the elementary schools of the City of Oxford, comprising 1,200 children, were paying a visit once a week with their teachers to the country schools on the Wytham estate, which adjoins the City boundaries on the west side. The following is the story of these country schools.

Some years ago the owner of the land, after having studied the subject carefully in England and in parts of the Continent, notably in Germany, came to the conclusion:

(A) That, with the goodwill of the school authorities, it would not be very difficult or very expensive to take children of a town or city, and preferably, of course, the children from the poorer quarters, and transport them into the country to receive a portion of their education there under ideal conditions in summer, and probably also in winter.

(B) That the question of transport, which had been a grave obstacle in earlier years, had become so simple under modern conditions and so inexpensive that it no longer presented any serious difficulty.

In June, 1930, the owner approached the Education Committee of the Oxford City Council and offered facilities to enable normal classes of about forty children, drawn from any of the elementary schools of Oxford, to come in turn and stay for a fortnight with their teachers on one of the farms on the Wytham estate, where certain buildings could be placed at their disposal for a period of years. The Secretary for Education of the City of Oxford, Mr. A. C. Cameron, was favourably impressed, and the Education Committee recommended, though by no means unanimously, that the City Council should accept the offer. The Council, however, after much delay, refused to do so. Considerable sums had just been spent by them in improving old school buildings at Oxford and in erecting excellent new ones; a small and successful experimental open-air school had recently been started for delicate children, and although financial conditions then were by no means so difficult as they are to-day, there was a strong feeling that a further experiment such as this one was deemed to be should not be undertaken. The objection was also raised that the City was not prepared to spend money on land belonging to another party. To meet this point, the owner offered to present the City with a vacant site consisting of approximately twenty acres on the southern slope of a hill overlooking the Thames and situated only four miles or so from Oxford, on condition that it was used for the benefit of the children. This offer was in effect refused by the City Council, as it was not proposed to start work until such time as might possibly suit it in the remote future.

Private action was thus made difficult and, worst of all, the valuable assistance normally given by the Board of Education in London was virtually excluded by the attitude of the Oxford City Council.

The owner of the land, who was apparently not prepared to abandon his plan altogether, then decided, with the approval and friendly support of the Oxford Secretary for Education and the Chairman and majority of the members of the Education Committee of the Council, to proceed unaided with a modified and simpler scheme whereby the children from some of the Oxford elementary schools would pay daily visits to the Wytham estate, arriving in the morning by motor 'bus and leaving again in the afternoon. It was arranged to start the work, not timidly with one school only, as contemplated in the original scheme, but, fortified by the knowledge of results achieved elsewhere and by the opinion of various leading medical authorities that had been consulted, to proceed boldly and enable three of the elementary schools to commence their visits at the same time, and to provide accommodation for altogether 200 children a day instead of only forty.

The work at Wytham now ceased to be intended as an experiment: it became rather a demonstration of what could be done without great difficulty, and with considerable benefit, by the education authorities in many of our English towns. It will be realised that in the circumstances the buildings to be erected had to be attractive. They are, in fact, nearly all permanent in character, and as good as any of those of the most modern schools.

There was an immediate and enthusiastic response from the three headmistresses who were approached and asked if they would take the responsibility of sending classes to the Wytham estate. The additional time and labour involved weighed lightly in the minds of these ladies and their assistants, as compared with the benefit to the children which they, even at that time, fully believed would be obtained, and it is to them above all others, and to those who have since followed their example, that the fullest credit must be given for the striking results that have been obtained.

The Oxford Motor 'Bus Company also responded generously to an appeal, and arranged to charge cost price only for transport. Cost price amounted to 9d. per mile run by the 'buses, which were capable of carrying seventy children. The portions of the Wytham estate visited were all less than three miles from the centre of the city, but the 'bus terminus was five miles from Wytham, and two full journeys and two empty ones had to be made by the 'buses each day. Twenty miles had thus to be covered by each 'bus, for which a charge of only 15s. was made, or, say, 3d. per child per day. Most people to whom these figures have been quoted have been astounded. They had no idea they could



AT THE ENTRANCE TO HOLY TRINITY SCHOOL,
OXFORD
A typical setting of town children's education



A CLASSROOM ON THE WYTHAM UPLANDS
Note the two large windows that fold and slide right back.
This type of classroom, 42ft. by 20ft., cost £525



BOYS AND GIRLS TAKING A MIDDAY REST
ON THEIR WOODEN RECLINING BOARDS
In the background is another classroom, which cost,
including kitchen and cloakroom, £500



"TAKE UP YOUR BOARDS"
Children taking their reclining boards to an attractive spot 100yds.
or so from their upland classroom in order to lay them on the
grass and use them as seats



RECLINING BOARDS USED AS TABLE-TOPS
The boards give the children great mobility in the selection
of the locality of their classes



ANOTHER USE FOR THE BOARDS
Children of the Cowley St. John's School about to
commence their lesson



LA SOURCE
Children from West Oxford School drawing water from
the spring at the Follies (only two miles from their town
school)



A SEWING CLASS
The City of Oxford lies just above the line of trees. It was
from about this spot that William Turner, of Oxford, painted
several views of the city

be so low. It was thought well that the parents of the children should make every effort themselves to pay the small cost of transport for their children, and the local members of the Rotary Club, whose co-operation was invited, did not hesitate to guarantee whatever payment might be necessary in order to cover the transport expenses of children whose parents were too poor to bear the cost. Some of the members of the Rotary Club, it should be added, were members of the Oxford City Council.

During 1931, no effort was made to attract the largest possible number of children. The Secretary for Education very wisely wished to advance slowly and step by step and, above all, to avoid mistakes. It was found most convenient to let each child pay only one visit in the week, and there was little deviation from the ordinary school programme.

The permanent buildings at Hill End Farm were all fitted with fireplaces in which wood or coal could be burnt, so that the schools could visit them during the winter as well as the summer. In this respect, as in others, the best Continental practice was followed. One school continued its visits into the month of December, 1931, before it stopped for the season. The children in all cases brought their mid-day meal—the mothers playing up splendidly.

The official report issued by Dr. A. L. Ormerod, the Medical Officer for Schools at Oxford, last autumn expressed evident satisfaction with the results of the school visits both on his own part, on that of the teachers, and on that of the parents of the children. Many very grateful communications from parents had also been received, and the children themselves were all delighted.

During the following winter, 1931–32, preparations were made to carry on the work on a larger scale owing to fresh applications that were received from Oxford schools anxious to join the movement. There are now seven schools visiting the permanent brick buildings at Hill End Farm; while two schools (West Oxford) delight in their secluded summer camp on the eastern slopes of Wytham Hill. There is accommodation altogether for 300 children per day in the summer, and a somewhat smaller number in the winter, and, as already stated, 1,200 Oxford children have been paying at least one visit to these schools during the five days that constitute the school week.

There has been no startling innovation in connection with this work on the Wytham estate, and no exciting experiments.

The best work done elsewhere has merely been copied or improved upon. The classrooms are used mainly in wet or cold weather. When the weather is fine, the children are kept as far as possible in the open air, and they are at liberty to roam within an area consisting of several hundred acres of uplands and woods. The children have been brought into close touch with country life, and it is thought by their mistresses that their general outlook has, in consequence, undergone a remarkable change in many cases. There has been an awakening of something that had hitherto lain dormant. What had been dreams before had suddenly come true. Some of us do not realise, perhaps, that even in small towns many of the younger children never get far from the streets in which they live.

It is well to add that, in order that the maximum number of children should benefit, arrangements are being made to attach a Scout troop to each set of school buildings so that they may use them during week-ends in term time, and all the buildings and surrounding land as well as the open-air swimming bath have been placed at the disposal of London Girl Guides during the holidays, of whom several hundred have arrived this month.

Altogether, over £4,500 has been spent at the Wytham estate, including the reconstruction of two barns, the provision of good drinking water from natural springs, a water-borne sanitary system for two of the four sets of school buildings, and equipment. It is interesting to note that two large wooden, and very useful, classrooms, 35ft. by 20ft., with a veranda attached, were erected at a cost of only £125 each, that is, less than a third of the cost of a permanent brick building. The value of the land is not included in the figure of £4,500. It will be seen that on the basis of accommodation for 300 children daily, the expenditure has been in the neighbourhood of £15 per child. This amount would naturally vary considerably at different places according to the natural conditions and facilities afforded. It is probable that many of the buildings could have been erected on a less expensive scale at Wytham, but, as has been indicated in these notes, it was essential in the early stages that mistakes and adverse criticism should be avoided. In any case, it can be stated definitely that the money spent has already achieved excellent results, and it is hoped that these results, when more widely known, will be helpful to others who may be doing similar or better work in various parts of the kingdom.