

# **A Tale of Two Schools**

by

Will Sheaff

One of two articles about St.Dennis Schools sent to  
George and Kath Miller  
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In the heart of the china clay country lies the village of St. Dennis. I was vaguely aware that the Cornish school where I was a pupil had its origin in conflict but only recently have I discovered the full story and realised the intensity of that conflict. The local press found plenty to write about in the summer of 1903 when it all began.

In the centre of the village is the Institute and on its wall a tablet inscribed to the memory of the Rev. Glynn Childs parish priest at St. Dennis church for fifty years.

He was much loved and respected. He and Mr. John Reed the headmaster of the Church of England school worked together so we are told "in complete harmony". The Rev. Glynn Childs was succeeded by a priest, the Rev. J. B. Monger. The new man soon found himself at loggerheads with Mr. Reed who had been headmaster for thirty years. It seems that the newcomer was very critical of the school and was shocked because the head did not insist that all the children (including many Methodist - then Wesleyans, Bible Christians or United Methodists) should learn the Anglican Catechism. My grandfather, a staunch Methodist and my grandmother who was organist at both the church and the Wesleyan chapel were happy to send their children to the Church of England school and in fact kept them there through the conflict that ensued.

The new incumbent somehow secured the support of the school managers and was able to take the unprecedented, drastic, and as it proved to be disastrous step of sacking the headmaster! Then the battle began and the village was divided into two factions.

Eight hundred people attended a meeting in a large marquee erected in a field in the centre of St. Dennis. Many came an hour before starting time and in true village tradition were entertained by a brass band. At last the people who were to occupy the platform arrived - two county councillors, five district councillors, seven parish councillors, the president of the National Union of Teachers and a member of the N.U.T. executive committee. One central figure however was conspicuous by his absence - the Rev. J. B. Monger! The chairman began by praising their "honoured and respected friend, Mr John Reed, (applause) - a good, honourable and Christian man". However, he then sought to explain why he,

the chairman, had not stood out against Mr. Reed's dismissal! He argued that he had been led into signing the relevant document while he was lying ill in bed and was troubled by other family illness. His conscience then made him feel very guilty and he was now sure that Mr. Reed's services should be maintained. The N.U.T. executive member supported the chairman and hoped that the Rev. Monger would recognise his false step and like the chairman "manfully acknowledge his mistake". He could find no valid charge against Mr. Reed. A resolution was then put to the meeting "that the inhabitants of St. Dennis in this meeting assembled hereby testify to their high esteem of Mr. Reed, and to their appreciation of his excellent personal character and his professional skill". One of the county councillors speaking in support of the resolution said that Mr. Reed had had the courage to stand up against the priest and refused at his dictation "to ram a Catechism down the throats of little children" (cheers and prolonged applause). The N.U.T. president (not to be left behind) said that he represented 50,000 teachers and was there to show that they appreciated Mr. Reed as much as the people of St. Dennis. He asked why was Rev. Monger not present to put his case. The motion was carried unanimously

and was followed by one expressing dissatisfaction with the managers in dismissing Mr. Reed.

One might have thought that the matter could then be settled through negotiation, but this was not to be. The chairman of the parish council together with a district councillor were sent as a deputation to the school managers to ask that the notice of

dismissal be withdrawn. Both men were prominent non-conformists. The only compromise Rev. Monger offered was that the non-conformists could appoint a teacher to take all the children whose parents asked them to have separate religious instruction. On the basic issue of Mr. Reed's dismissal, the managers stood firm and refused to reverse the decision.

A second mass meeting was held and this led to a sensational decision. The meeting pledged itself "to use every legitimate means to secure the erection of a provided school in the parish". In the meantime the feeling that many parents could no longer continue to send their children to the church school was increasing. It was so strong that it was unanimously agreed to open a temporary school the following week - surely a clear example not only of parent protest but of direct action! But a new school needs a head - who was available? Mr. John Reed of course! The Bible Christian chapel (now Carne Hill Methodist Church) placed their schoolroom at the disposal of the committee. The National Union of Teachers supported the proposal and



*The Church of England School, now closed.*

agreed to provide the money needed to run a temporary school. The only cost the committee had to face was for the cleaning of the schoolroom!

So, Mr. Reed, sacked on 26th June 1903 opened as headmaster the undenominational school on the chapel premises on 6th July, 1903 - his term of unemployment had ended within ten days! The first page of the new temporary school's log book records its opening. There was however, no schooling on 26th September due to Summercourt Fair! On 13th November the architect and builders were planning the site for a permanent new school.

How did all this affect the old Church of England school and the Rev. Monger? They were left with the rump! Two hundred and sixty two pupils packed the chapel premises leaving only seventy at the old school! The renowned St. Dennis band led a celebration march through the village and this was followed by an open air public meeting.

Salaries at the new school were paid by the N.U.T., certificated assistant teachers were appointed. The average daily attendance was 260. Extreme overcrowding was a serious problem. The trustees of another village chapel (United Methodist Free Church - later known as Providence Methodist) agreed to the use of their schoolroom for the infants. A committee was set up to provide a new purpose built school and this was supported by the minister, the Rev.

Walter Crow Hope. Steps were taken to obtain recognition by the Board of Education and then under Section 9 of the Education Act the school became the responsibility of the Cornwall County Council - it was the St. Dennis Elementary Council (all age) School - later becoming a County Primary School. The Church of England school developed into an infants' school.

Mr. Reed was headmaster until 1910 when Mr. J. Radcliffe took over the headship for ten years. He was followed by a Mr.A.W.Jenkin (1920 - 1931). I became a pupil at the school in 1927 and in 1932 Mr. W.S. Pelleymounter was appointed.

To bring the story up to date - an extensive new set of buildings has been added to the original school opened by Mr. Reed - it will now accommodate infants and juniors and the Church of England building is no longer required as a school.

Such is the history of educational development in a

village where an over zealous (maybe dogmatic) clergyman put into operation a series of events which showed that in 1903 local democracy and the spirit of the active protest were alive and well in the village of St. Dennis. Parent power and people's involvement had won the day!

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