

DIARY OF A COUNTRY SCHOOLMASTER FOR 1864¹

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Alfred Hart, the writer of the diary, was born on 7th March, 1812, at Kirkby-on-Bain in Lincolnshire, the son of Thomas Hart, a joiner, and his wife, Elizabeth.² However, whilst still a young man, Alfred left Lincolnshire and by January, 1836, when he married, he had settled in Buckinghamshire. His bride, Rebecca Collyer, was the daughter of a tradesman from Pitstone and was a few months her husband's junior.³

Nothing further is known of the couple until in about 1850, Alfred set up as the proprietor of a boarding and day school at Providence Place in the small market town of Ivinghoe. At the time of the 1851 Census of Population there were thirteen resident pupils at the school—four girls and nine boys, ranging in age from 6 (for the youngest boy) to 14 for the oldest girl and 15 for the most senior boy. Apart from Hart himself, the staff comprised an eighteen-year-old assistant mistress from London and a fifteen-year-old maidservant. It is unlikely that Mrs. Hart was able to help with the teaching since when she married she was unable even to sign her name in the marriage register.

All except three of the pupils had been born in villages within a few miles radius of Ivinghoe and were the children of farmers or tradespeople. It seems likely that the school was too modest both in size and curriculum to attract very impressive support, while in any case, the school house itself was little more than a substantial villa. To the present-day visitor it does not even appear large enough to accommodate the seventeen inhabitants who are recorded as living there in 1851. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, by 1861 the boarding side of the enterprise had virtually collapsed, there being only one nine-year-old boy in residence at that date, and by 1864 he, too, had left.

In the diary no mention is made of the day-to-day organization of the school. By this time Mr. Hart seems to have regarded teaching purely as a means of earning a living rather than as anything more inspiring. Nevertheless, upon the number of day pupils he secured, the major part of his livelihood depended. He was fortunate in that until 1875 (i.e. until the implementation of reforms following the 1870 Education Act) the ordinary elementary school at Ivinghoe was of too low a standard to offer much competition, in the scholastic field at least. Ivinghoe was a major centre for the production of straw-plait for the Luton and Dunstable hat and bonnet trade, and labouring children of school age spent much of their time engaged upon this rather than in following more academic pursuits. Even in the village school itself plaiting was regularly allowed prior to 1875.⁴ It is against this background, therefore, that the diary has to be seen.

One of the major concerns of a private schoolmaster was the securing of

pupils—and their fees. In Mr. Hart's case these latter were paid quarterly and seem to have amounted to about 6d. per pupil per week. Anything which interfered with attendance was thus a serious threat to what was at best a very modest standard of living. Hart's difficulties when a smallpox epidemic struck Ivinghoe in the spring and summer of 1864 are immediately apparent from his diary entries:

11th January: 'Commenced school today 51 scholars in morn. . . . Employed this eve. getting schl. books ready for the new year . . .'

29th January: Teaching . . . J. Deeley one of our neighbours ill with the small pox.'

1st February: 'No school this week on account of J. Deeley having the small pox.'

The school remained closed for two weeks. Then on 15th February a new start was attempted—although with 30 children only in attendance. 'But it being rumoured that Mrs. T. North had the small pox . . . it had the effect of again closing the school.' During the year at least four people died of the disease and whilst it was in the area, parents were reluctant to send their children to school.⁵ Not until 4th April did the situation return to something like normal, with 'more than 30 scholars' in attendance. Earlier, on 18th March, Hart had noted: 'Calculated loss through small pox up to the end of this week £6.'

Yet, if the fees of his pupils were the major source of income of any country school teacher, they were certainly not his only recourse. Even in the eighteenth century Goldsmith had appreciated the importance of other activities when he wrote of the schoolmaster in his *Deserted Village*:

*'Land he could measure, terms and tides presage,
And even the story ran that he could gauge';*

Similarly, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Lincoln Diocesan Board of Education had recognised the significance of the agricultural tasks carried out, when it noted the difficulty of holding summer conferences for schoolmasters. In 1859, for example, it reported 'that School-masters cannot so easily attend during the Season of Harvest, in consequence of the demands made upon their time for land-measuring . . .' And it followed this up in 1861 by observing of another summer conference that 'some Teachers were unavoidably absent, as Harvest had not, at the time of Assembling, become general in their neighbourhood'.⁶ Alfred Hart certainly fitted into this general pattern. Indeed, not only was he active during the harvest season in measuring land, fencing, etc. but also at other periods of the year, if opportunity offered itself. The following extracts illustrate the point:

2nd February: 'At home this morn. measuring land chain, ranging lines &c.' (For this he was paid 6d.)

14th May: 'Afternoon went over to measure . . . piece (of land) for Mr. Groom.' (A note at the side of the entry shows he was paid 2s. 6d. for this by John Groom, a Pitstone farmer and carrier.)

20th May: 'At noon measured Bean Hoeing, Mr. Tompkins, Outer Naps . . .'

25th June: In the afternoon went to Pitstone to measure Mr. Groom's mowing 10 a(cres) + r(oo)d 2/6d.'

Nevertheless, it was during August and September, when the corn harvest was in full swing and when many farm labourers were working at piece rates, that the greatest demands were made upon Hart's time. It is significant that on 1st September his school broke up for a fortnight's 'harvest' holiday, so that he could devote all his energies to the calls now being made upon him. Indeed, on the evening of the 1st itself he went to 'measure some land' on the farm of John Simmons, of Seabrook. Specimen entries for the week beginning 5th September indicate the scope and nature of his activities:

5th September: 'Went to Mr. Tompkins' this morning to settle with his men. Mr. Jno. Buckmaster came to me to go & measure his land at Horton Farm. Went in the afternoon & measured it.'

6th September: 'Went this morn. to Measure Mr. G. Archer's ricks, dined there. Then went to Mr. J. Buckmaster's with Accts., . . . Rec'd note fr. Mr. Ashby in reference to his land. . . . 8s. 6d. Mr. J. Buckmaster.'

8th September: '. . . went & measured some thatching for Mr. Tompkins. Afternoon went to North field to measure land for Mr. T. Ashby.'

9th September: 'Went this morn. to Crafton to measure draining.'

10th September: 'Went this morn. to Crafton, finished there & went to Horton Field—finished drains. Went up town when I came home for paint for strip, also measured Mr. Tompkins' 4 Wheatcocks.'

It is hardly surprising that after these exertions the entry for Sunday, 11th September, reads: 'At home to day resting my feet.' The second week of the holiday passed in much the same fashion, and it was no doubt with great satisfaction that Hart was able to record on the 18th that he had 'Earned £6 3s. 5d. during the holidays.'

But in those days of limited literacy, a country schoolmaster could expect to earn extra cash in other ways as well. Many of his fellow villagers would require letters written, bills drawn up, wills prepared and even signboards painted. In all of these tasks, Hart was involved. Below is but a tiny sample of the many jobs he performed; where possible the sum he received for the work has also been noted in brackets. Unfortunately not all payments were recorded in the diary:

5th February: 'Copyg. Land documents this morn. & writing Notice Board for Mr. Hawkins in the afternoon.' (John Hawkins was a Pitstone farmer.)

16th February: 'Writing C(offin) plate for Mrs. Hedges this afternoon.' (The writing of coffin plates was a task which he regularly performed for Mr. Uff, the Pitstone wheelwright and undertaker.)

25th February: 'Writing "Peppermint" on Mrs. Norris's bottle.'

28th March (Easter Monday): 'Went in the afternoon to letter Mrs. Norris's doors.' (For this he was paid 1s.)

25th April: 'Went over to Mr. Groom's to write his name on his new cart this eve.'

27th April: 'Mr. H. Turner came for receipt this morn.' (Hart was paid 6d. for writing the receipt.)

28th April: '. . . commenced hand post'. (For painting and lettering the hand post, i.e. a signpost, the payment was 12s.; however, the task was a lengthy one,

occupying Hart for six evenings in all.)

30th June: 'Went over to (Ivinghoe) Aston this eve. to assist in signing the agreements to Mr. F. Horn's cottages.'⁸ (He was paid 3s. for this.)

30th August: 'Went up town twice to paint Ann Hawkins's grave stone . . .'

2nd September: 'Went up town this morn. thinking to write A. Hawkins's grave stone but found the sheep had been on it, so obliged to clean it & paint it over afresh, and put some hurdles round it. . . . In the afternoon wrote a name for Js. Weatherhead (cart tin) . . . Afterwards went to see Mr. T. Green about his Will.' (Hart was paid 1s. 8d. for writing Weatherhead's name on the cart nameplate.)

14th September: 'Wrote Mr. Boarder's cart name and took it home. Afterwards went & finished . . . Ann Hawkins's grave stone, and wrote a letter for Mrs. Norris. . . .' (For writing the grave stone inscription Hart was paid 4s.)

2nd December: '. . . Mr. Green and Mr. H. Dimmock called and signed his Will.' (For preparing the Will for Thomas Green, the Ivinghoe wheelwright, Hart was paid 5s.)

In fact, as the entries make clear, Mr. Hart was prepared to tackle almost any task likely to bring him a small profit. It is not surprising to find him, for example, acting as enumerator for the 1871 Census of Population for Ivinghoe—a duty which carried with it a payment of about £2 13s. 6d. for a parish with Ivinghoe's population of around 1,700 (i.e. a fixed fee of £1 1s. and '2s. 6d. for every 100 persons enumerated . . . over the first four hundred.') And, as diary entries show, he also acted as an agent for the Refuge Assurance Company.⁹

Finally, the diary gives an idea of life in an agricultural community in the middle of the last century. Like many of his fellows, Mr. Hart spent a good deal of time cultivating his garden and gathering fruit from his orchard, which was over one-quarter of an acre in extent. Some of the fruit was later sold—the diary records sales of apples at 6d. a bushel, for example. But few modern observers would approve of his methods of fertilization and cultivation: 'T. Simons came & wheeled & spread the privy dung in the orchard today' reads the entry for 9th February!

Most of the notes, however, describe the simple day-to-day occurrences which must have been shared by country people everywhere in the mid-Victorian period:

21st March: 'Planted the dahlia roots this eve. and tidied up the flower garden. Set a hen down.'

12th April: '. . . Hen came off with 12 chicks.'

12th June: 'Went to Church this afternoon. Then went to Mr. Price's (Surgeon) and had a tooth drawn which had given me a deal of trouble.' ('Tooth drawg.' cost 1s.)

9th July: '. . . Kill'd the old cock.'

13th July: 'Three nights this week rough music up town J. Cook.' ('Rough music' was the name given to noisy demonstrations made by villagers to indicate disapproval of 'gross misbehaviour', such as the 'over chastisement of a wife by her husband'. Very often a straw-filled effigy of the offender would also be burnt outside his house and a large group of men and boys would mark

the occasion by 'beating pots and pans', in order 'to disgrace the offender'.¹⁰
20th July: 'Ivinghoe Club Feast. School this morn., holiday afternoon. I went & dined with the Members in the booth.'

26th July: '... Went to the Duck feast to night at Mr. Groom's.'

29th July: '... A sad accident occurred in London in connection with Mr. Groom's van. T. Archer riding a new horse was thrown & his leg broke, taken to the hospital. The horse obliged to be killed.'

2nd September: '... In the eve. went to see the ruins of Mr. Beesley's boiler house, the boiler having burst in the afternoon, and blowing over 2 horses and a cart, standing by the mill into the middle of the front yard, the tall chimney also blown down but most providentially no one hurt. . . .'¹¹

9th December: 'Teaching. E. Ellingham & Saml. Hawkins came to bid us farewell previous to their going to New Zealand.' For Mr. Hart this was perhaps a poignant occasion, for Samuel Hawkins had been one of his resident pupils in the 1850s.¹²

¹ The diary is in the possession of Mr. J. Hawkins of Pitstone, to whom I am indebted for permission to use it.

² I am indebted to the Lincolnshire Archives Committee for this information.

³ Pitstone Marriage Register, PR.166/1/4, at Buckinghamshire County Record Office. The marriage took place on 25th January, 1836. Rebecca Hart died on 21st June, 1877, aged 65, but, according to a report in the *Bucks Herald*, 23rd June, 1877, she had been in poor health for some time before this, 'having been paralysed for the last three years'.

⁴ When educational provision in Ivinghoe was investigated following the passage of the 1870 Education Act, it was stated that a certificated teacher must be appointed at the elementary school, so as to bring it up to an 'efficient' standard. The reorganization was not completed until 1875. See Clergy Visitation Return, Oxford Diocese, Bucks. Archdeaconry, 1875, MS. Oxf. Dioc. Pp. c.340 at Bodleian Library, and Log Book of Ivinghoe School at Buckinghamshire County Record Office, E/LB/116/1. For an account of straw plaiting in Ivinghoe, see Pamela L. R. Horn, 'The Buckinghamshire Straw Plait Trade in Victorian England' in *Records of Bucks*, Vol. XIX, Part 1, 1971.

⁵ Ivinghoe Burial Register for 1864 shows that as late as September, 1864, Charles Harrison, aged 46, had died of small-pox. However, by the late spring the disease seems to have lost some of its virulence.

⁶ Rex C. Russell—*A History of Schools & Education in Lindsey, Lincolnshire 1800-1902*, Part 3 (Lindsey County Council Education Committee, 1966), p. 41.

⁷ Mrs. Eleanor Norris lived at the King's Head Inn, Ivinghoe. See Dutton, Allen & Co.'s *Directory and Gazetteer of Buckinghamshire*, 1863.

⁸ Francis Horn was a grazier from Ivinghoe Aston. See *ibid.*

⁹ For instance, on 16th November came the entry: '... To G. Cook's, Mr. Hamilton's with Refuge papers, he gave me £1.' And on 21st December, 'Recd. Receipt from Mr. Williams "Refuge" for £1 13s.' There were other notes of a similar type.

¹⁰ See Walter Rose—*Good Neighbours* (Cambridge, 1942), p. 98.

¹¹ Francis Beesley was a miller and corn merchant of Pitstone.

¹² 1851 Census Return for Ivinghoe at Public Record Office, H.O. 107, 1756.