

'The case for Horseheath School'

**Part of the campaign to keep Horseheath
School open**

1983

By courtesy of Marion Corbett

1983

THE CASE FOR HORSEHEATH CHURCH OF ENGLAND

PRIMARY SCHOOL

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THE CASE FOR HORSEHEATH CHURCH OF ENGLAND
PRIMARY SCHOOL

A. Introduction

Horseheath School is an example of the very best of our small rural schools, offering an excellent education and a wide range of extra-curricular activities in a friendly intimate setting. We have a current roll of 28 happy well-adjusted, well-disciplined children, in the fortunate position of receiving their early education firmly based in their own community and closely linked with their local parish church. The school itself provides a vital focus for the village and is an invaluable asset to our community.

A local survey reveals that the school's numbers will increase steadily over the next few years. Taking into account predicted rolls in neighbouring schools, we believe absorption of our children into any alternative accommodation would be possible only in the short-term and would lead eventually to over-crowding.

The main consideration in the current wave of school closures in this country is economic, and we acknowledge this important factor, but there is no demonstrable financial reason for not continuing to maintain Horseheath School.

B. Cambridgeshire County Council's Proposal and Comments

1. The Proposal

The reasons which bring the Authority to consider closure have been quoted to us as follows:-

- a) Concern about the range of educational opportunity in a school with small numbers and few teachers.
- b) The availability of space in other schools.
- c) The need to maintain existing overall standards of provision at a time of scarce resources by making whatever financial savings can be achieved which do not result in educational disadvantage to those concerned.

2. Comments

a) Range of Educational Opportunity

We are anxious to impress upon the working party that parents and governors are very happy with the educational standards achieved at Horseheath School and we have gone to some pains elsewhere in our booklet (see section E) to demonstrate how the potential disadvantages of a small school (e.g. narrow curriculum, limited range of teaching skills, lack of peer group stimulus, etc.) have been satisfactorily overcome in our particular school.

The hitherto recognised stance that small numbers and few teachers necessarily constitute an educational disadvantage is now being critically re-examined. To the best of our knowledge, no research evidence has managed to demonstrate inferior achievement in small schools. Indeed, interesting data has emerged over the past few years to support the value of education they offer. In "Primary Education in England" HMSO, the results of a survey carried out in 1978 by HM Inspector of Schools, it states:

2. Comments (Continued)

a) Range of Educational Opportunity (Continued)

"It has also to be recognised, however, that the small advantages in the levels of resources of large schools did not appear to improve the performance of their pupils other than marginally in art and music." A study by the National Foundation for Educational Research into the teaching of French in primary schools (Claire Burstall 1974) showed that "the test performance of the pupils in small schools was consistently superior to that of the pupils in the large schools." Professor Richard D'Aeth in "A Positive Approach to Rural Primary Schools" (Cambridge 1981) declares that:

"The problem of having a mixture of ages as well as of abilities presents little difficulty for modern methods of primary teaching, which encourages teachers to arrange children in a class in groups. These can readily provide for different ages as well as abilities provided the number is relatively small and allow more time for each group and for individual children."

We contend therefore, that sufficient evidence and informed comment exist nowadays to demonstrate that there need not necessarily be concern over educational opportunities available in a small school setting.

b) Availability of Space Elsewhere

We do concede that numbers at all primary schools are currently at a very low level, and that there are indeed surplus places at the present time at Castle Camps, Balsham and Linton schools. However, it is recognised by the D.E.S. that this is a national trend and that primary school rolls will rise during this decade. Our figures in the section on "Future Rolls" (Section C) show that this is the case in our area.

2. Comments (Continued)

b) Availability of Space Elsewhere

With particular regard to the proposal that Horseheath children be absorbed into Castle Camps School, it must be pointed out the resulting roll would rise to over 100 by 1986; considerable new building at the school would be necessary to avoid over-crowding.

In Government Circular 2/81 on "Falling Rolls and Surplus Places" it is stated that a total of over one million places could be removed by 1986 in England and Wales, but "This figure allowed for 3 out of every 5 surplus places to be retained in recognition of the need to take account of the eventual upturn in births and of the difficulty in practice of separating some notionally surplus places from places for which there was still a continuing requirement." We believe our school falls into the latter category.

c) Financial Savings without Educational Disadvantage

The arguments about financial savings are made elsewhere. We contend that they are likely to be insignificant. It is required by the Secretary of State that any changes in provision resulting in financial savings should take place without educational detriment to the children involved.

We do not believe that facilities at Castle Camps are materially adequate to absorb our children, without at the very minimum one extra classroom being provided. That would yield a pupil-teacher ratio of 20-25:1 now, increasing steadily over the next few years. It is important to consider whether this would constitute an educational disadvantage to the children involved, since some of the classes in the school would, of course, contain two age groups. Circular 2/81 stresses the desirability of "eliminating or avoiding primary schools which entail classes of 25 pupils or more with

2. Comments (Continued)

c) Financial Savings without Educational Disadvantage (Continued)

substantial numbers from two or more age groups. Tests of reading and mathematics made in conjunction with HMI national primary school survey showed that, on average, children in such classes score significantly worse than children in single age classes". We would like to suggest to the working party that an amalgamation of Horseheath and Castle Camps Schools would result in just such an undesirable class structure.

d) Financial Aspects

Based upon information provided by the Cambridgeshire County Council to the Horseheath Working Party the annual operating costs of Horseheath School are approximately £26,000 (1981/82 costs). Any closure would result in an immediate saving of this expenditure but additional expenditures would be incurred as a result of transferring the children to Castle Camps School. The position can best be summarised as follows:

<u>Savings</u>		£
- Annual operating costs of Horseheath School	(1)	26 000
<u>Additional Expenditures</u>		
- Additional teaching staff (Note (i))	9 750	
- Capitation, equipment and material costs (Note (ii))	1 000	
- Transport (Note (iii))	8 000	
- Maintenance and heating costs of a mobile classroom (Note (iv))	1 000	
		<hr/>
	(2)	19 750
<u>Net Savings</u>		
(1) - (2)	(3)	£6 250
		<hr/>

2. (d)

Notes:

(i) Additional Teaching Staff

At the date of closure approximately 25 to 30 children would be transferred from Horseheath to Castle Camps. In order to absorb such an intake at least one additional teacher would have to be employed at Castle Camps School.

(ii) Capitation, Equipment and Material Costs

The above figures are in line with the present levels of expenditures incurred at Horseheath School and would continue to be incurred at Castle Camps.

(iii) Transport

A separate transport contract for the bussing of children from Horseheath to Castle Camps would have to be arranged. Whilst such a matter would have to be negotiated between the County Council and a transport firm, the cost is likely to be £40 per day which over a 40 week academic year works out at £8,000. This figure has been advised by a local transport firm and confirmed by an employee of the County Council's Finance Department (see Note 2(b)).

(iv) Maintenance and Heating Costs of a Mobile Classroom

Based upon the forecast numbers of children attending Castle Camps School as at the likely date of closing Horseheath School, it will not be physically possible to accommodate the additional children within the existing school premises. Therefore, it will be necessary to provide a mobile classroom and such buildings are very expensive in terms of maintenance and heating costs. It is very difficult to forecast precisely the level of these additional expenditures but information provided from other schools confirms that the above estimate is not unreasonable.

(v) Redundancy Costs

No account or estimate has been made of the cost of staff redundancies resulting from the closure of Horseheath School. The overall cost of redundancy is dependent upon the terms and conditions of employment for employees, special provisions which the County Council may wish to provide in such circumstances etc. However, as a result of the closure of Horseheath School a number of employees will become redundant, including a teacher. It is difficult to forecast precisely the cost of redundancy but it is likely to be between £5,000 and £15,000.

(vi) Buildings and Property

Horseheath School is owned by the Church of England and, therefore, any sale of the property resulting from a closure would not provide the County Council with any reduction of borrowings and debt charges.

2. (e) Transport

- (i) As already stated the County Council will have to arrange a separate transport contract in order to bus the 25 to 30 children from Horseheath to Castle Camps, the annual cost of which will be £8,000. It is not logistically practical to bus these children as part of another existing transport contract if they are to arrive at Castle Camps at a reasonable time to commence their academic work each day.
- (ii) The age range of these children is between 5 and 11 years and, therefore, there would have to be a number of pick-up points both in Horseheath and Cardinals Green to collect them en route to Castle Camps. Due to the uncertainties of the time of the bus arrival and the state of the weather it would not be practical or advisable for the children to be collected from a central point.

2. (e)

(iii) The journey from Horseheath to Castle Camps is approximately 4 to 4.5 miles and is along very narrow and winding country roads. In winter time there is the additional hazard of snow and ice which occasionally results in these roads being closed.

(iv) It is both unwise and impractical that children of such a young age should have to travel this proposed journey without proper supervision.

(v) There is no public transport service from Horseheath to Castle Camps and this will represent a major problem for the parents of children who do not have their own source of private transport.

f) Parental Choice of Education for their children

Recognition of parents' right to choose their children's education was written into the 1944 Education Act, but has been strengthened in sections 6 and 7 of the 1980 Education Act. It is a principle firmly upheld by the present government.

We are trying to bring to the attention of the working party the fact that Horseheath School enjoys an excellent reputation and that local parents and others from outside this immediate catchment area want to send their children here. We are asking for that right of parental choice to be retained. By closing Horseheath School, you would be seriously curtailing the freedom of choice for families in this area.

g) Timing of Closure

We wish to protest about the timing of the closure proposal for September 1983. Presumably it has been chosen to comply with the Secretary of State's timing requirements following publication of public notices (section 12, 1980 Act) as outlined in government circular 2/81. Clearly the usual July (i.e. end of academic year) closure pattern could not be followed for 1983 in our case, since

2. g) Timing of Closure (Continued)

insufficient time would have elapsed for implementation of the closure. As it is, September only just allows for the necessary time lapse, if all proceeds smoothly from the Council's point of view. It is an intolerable position for the parents. It is quite conceivable that the summer holidays could arrive without resolution of the situation, so that parents and children would remain unsure of what school provision there would be in 1983/84 and therefore, would be unable to consider their choices. We would like to ask what precedent there is for such a timing proposal?

C. Future Rolls

I There are number of important considerations in reaching an accurate prediction of the future roll of the school:-

1. A headcount of pre-school village children reveals that the infant entry numbers over the next four years will be at a steady annual rate of 5 or 6.
2. Losses at the top junior level are heavy at the end of this current academic year, but drop off to a trickle of between 1 and 3 over the following three years.
3. This village tends to import newcomers, who then settle permanently; it does not have a large transient population. Over the past 5 years 30 families with 61 primary school age children have moved into the village, and of these new arrivals, over two-thirds have stayed. It is likely that this trend will continue.
4. There is a great deal of interest in neighbouring villages among parents who wish to send their children to this school, but have not yet committed themselves to taking this step while the school's future remains uncertain and before a permanent headteacher is appointed. We know these people, and a conservative estimate of the annual intake from this source over the next few years is about 4 or 5.

5. These separate factors mean that the outlook for Horsheath School is good from the point of view of numbers; we should rise to a roll of about 40 over the next two or three years, and up to 50 or over in five years time.

II It is necessary to look at future rolls in other local schools which are:

1. Linton Infant School
2. Linton Junior School
3. Meadow School at Balsham
4. Castle Camps School

In common with the national trend their numbers are down slightly at the present time, but will almost certainly climb again as soon as the primary school age population begins to increase. The registered births of pre-school children in these areas reveal the following annual intakes at infant level over the next four years:

	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>1986</u>
1. Linton	94	98	86	105
2. Balsham	50	38	49	52
3. Castle Camps	13	10	13	15

The above figures have been discussed at length with officials of Cambridgeshire County Council and agreed as being correct. It is also noteworthy that these figures must be an under estimate of the actual intakes which will occur because no account is taken of further building under way in any of these areas. After Sawston, Linton and Balsham are the two fastest growth areas in the South Cambridgeshire district. We cannot believe that trying to accommodate our children in another local school would be an easy or profitable matter in the long term.

D. Financial Aspects

1. An examination of the financial situation of Horseheath School shows that the unit costs of the school have increased from £523 per pupil in 1979/80 to £1,057 per pupil in 1981/82. The probability is that these costs will reduce in real terms very substantially over the next three to four years.
2. Unit Costs etc.

On the basis of information provided by Cambridgeshire County Council the financial position of the school during the three years from 1979/80 to 1981/82 was as follows:-

	<u>1979/80</u>	<u>1980/81</u>	<u>1981/82</u>
Total Costs	£18,342	£21,569	£26,414
Numbers	35	32	25
Unit Costs	£523	£676	£1,057

The increase in unit costs between 1979/80 and 1981/82 of £534 (102%) is due to and should be analysed as follows:

	£
- increased expenditure, i.e. salary awards, inflation, school improvements etc.	232
- lower numbers attending the school	<u>302</u>
- total increase in unit costs (as above)	<u>£534</u>

A survey has been carried out and the forecast number of children attending the school on 1st September in each of the coming years will be as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>
1983	31
1984	39
1985	47
1986	54

Of the 54 children likely to be attending the school by 1st September 1986, 19 will be from the neighbouring villages of West Wickham, West Wratting and Weston Colville. This is based upon the expressed wishes of families living in those villages

D. Financial Aspects (Continued)

2. (Continued)

who have stated that they seriously intend to send their children to Horseheath. The nature of that information is obviously both personal and confidential to the families concerned. Our representative on the Cambridgeshire County Council, Brigadier A. N. Breitmeyer has details of the names of families and numbers of children involved.

The above forecasts are also based upon the following:-

- i) Department of Health and Social Security records of children living in both Horsheath and the neighbouring area of children who will reach school age during this period.
- ii) Children who will leave the school on reaching the age of 11.
- iii) No account has been taken of any children likely to move into the village or area during this period and who may be likely to attend the school. It is noteworthy that of the total number of children currently attending the school, 14 are from families who have lived in the area for less than 6 years.

Therefore, the above forecasts indicate that in real terms there will be a very substantial reduction in the present level of unit operating costs.

3. Repairs and Maintenance

During the three years from 1979/80 to 1981/82 expenditures in excess of £5,300 in respect of building and grounds repairs and maintenance have been incurred. Certain of these expenditures have resulted in an improvement to the school's facilities and fabric, e.g. re-roofing, redecorating, new toilets, new fencing, new central heating etc., etc. The result of closure would be to lose the benefit of these expenditures which is a waste of public money and resources. Another consequence of the high level of maintenance

3. Repairs & Maintenance (Continued)

expenditure during this period has been to inflate the school's true operating costs. It seems reasonable to assume that maintenance expenditure at the school will be substantially reduced in the immediate future.

4. Horseheath By-pass

One of the prime objectives of building the Horseheath By-pass was to improve the safety of children attending the school. If the school closes then in certain respects the expenditure incurred in building the by-pass will represent a considerable mis-judgement in being a waste of public expenditure and resources.

E. Educational Aspects

Current thinking in the D.E.S. about the viability of small schools was fashioned by the 1967 Plowden Report (also known as "Children and their Primary Schools"). It was suggested in this Report that establishments with less than three teachers were at an educational disadvantage, and since then it has been assumed that this is so, despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

Lady Plowden herself reversed her former stance in 1978 when she wrote in a letter to 'The Times', 7th September:-

"The Plowden Report was written 13 or so years ago. Was what we wrote then correct? At that stage I believe so. Since then however, there has been change and development and my reservations today are stronger. First, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of the community to those individuals who make it up. Indeed, steps are being taken to provide facilities to create a community where none exists, on housing estates for instance. Is it right to take the heart out of the community by taking away the children, Pied Piper like, thus losing the bond that is created within and between families through a common interest in the school, involving parents and even grandparents, which is both socially and educationally desirable?

There is no shortage of teachers today - sadly, the reverse. It is surely better to move the teachers to the children than vice versa. The growth of the minibus makes visits between schools possible. It can also be used to take the oldest primary children to the local secondary school, both for the use of facilities and make transfer less daunting. Play groups have made a new kind of pre-school experience available, giving the right professional, para-professional support. The growing acceptance of parents to help in school can provide a new strength to the small schools.

With all that we know today, the policy about village schools needs re-thinking. Cost is not everything. We need also to know more about those which are being kept open, especially those where with vision and conviction it is being shown that a small school has educational as well as social value."

The University of Aston, Birmingham, was responsible for a Study Document in September 1981, in which they made the following important points:-

1. They stated that secondary schools find children from small rural schools "not only as well prepared academically as pupils from other schools, but that they generally had a better attitude to work."
2. They reported that parent-teacher relationships suffered in satellite villages after closures.
3. Children were usually sent from smaller to larger classes after a closure, and therefore probably received less individual attention.
4. In their conclusion they argue that "priority should now be given to policies which seek to improve both the educational quality of the small schools (say fewer than about 60 pupils and 3 teachers) which remain, and their contribution to community life."

We believe our school at Horseheath possesses all the good qualities which can occur in a small school, and which are now gaining recognition as an important basis to a young child's education. The school is the nucleus of our community and the parents play an active role in its activities.

We are fortunate to have excellent teaching staff at the school. Our local vicar, the Rev V Ryder, gives weekly tuition in both Religious Instruction and Music. We have a relationship with neighbouring schools and the children have the opportunity to take part in joint sporting and musical activities.

The children have used many of the local resources for environmental studies i.e. pond dipping, fossil hunting in local chalk pits, nature walks on farmland and woods. There are also places of historical value nearby, e.g. the Roman Road, Bartlow Hill, etc.

Recreation and sports needs are well covered by a large sports field adjacent to the school, a small playfield at the school and a swimming pool which was provided and is maintained by 'The Friends of the School'. Crafts including woodwork, sewing and cookery are a feature for both girls and boys. There is a very good library service and school bookshop.

The children benefit enormously from the individual tuition and care they receive at the school. They are able to develop a self-reliance and maturity of attitude to their work which equips them well to deal with future demands at secondary school.

In conclusion we feel the standard of education received by our children here at Horseheath is excellent and to close the school would be a very detrimental step.

F. Value of School to Children and Parents

The teaching and ancillary staff at the present time and in the recent past have been enthusiastic committed people who work hard for the welfare of the school; a lively, friendly atmosphere exists in which the children learn well and where parents are made to feel very welcome.

Many parents (fathers as well as mothers) visit the school at the beginning and end of each day; they do not congregate at the gate as at many other schools, but come right into the playground and often into the classroom as well. There is an easy co-operative relationship between teachers and parents where it is possible for frequent exchange of information and views to take place. Parental participation in school life involves the running of the school library, voluntary help in listening to children reading, transporting children for out-of-school activities, and the offering of special skills such as drama tuition or training in a particular sport.

The children settle readily into the family-like surroundings of this school forming happy, fruitful relationships with staff and with each other. They are able to flourish as individuals and to take the fullest advantage of the educational opportunities offered.

Besides stressing the positive arguments in favour of our school, it is necessary to point out the harmful effects closure would have on the children and their families. There would be a loss of parental contact with the school, a loss of contact for the children with their community, less opportunity for after-school activities, and of course, all the hazards and disadvantages of bussing young children away from their home environment.

G. Community Involvement

The closure of the primary school in Horseheath would necessarily entail far more than simply the loss of somewhere to educate the young children of the village.

The village school has for many years past provided the focal point for numerous activities and meetings and this is no less the case today. To remove the school would be to cut out the heart of the village.

A number of clubs and societies regularly meet at the school. These include the Monday Club, the Brownies, the Old People, the School Governors and the Friends of the School. The Parish Council also hold their meetings at the school.

Providing as it does an ideal venue for meetings the school is the only place that serves this purpose in Horseheath. Without it there is no doubt that some societies would have nowhere else to go. The village has no village hall.

In addition to being a meeting place the school also serves as a venue for nearly all the most important events in the life of the village. Among those events traditionally and of necessity held either in the school building or grounds are the Annual Garden Show, various fetes, the Children's Summer Barbeque, the Children's Christmas Party, the Summer Sports day, the Carol Festival and Nativity Play. All these traditional events drawing together the people of the village in a spirit of friendship and common interest would be lost if the school closed.

G. Community Involvement (Continued)

There is a swimming pool at the school built and funded by the village. This provides not only swimming for the children during the summer term but also for those who are members of the Swimming Club during the holidays. The Friends of the School have recently provided the money for the cost of the new cover for the swimming pool. If the school closed this important recreational facility would be lost and the money spent wasted.

The school building situated in the centre of the village stands as a monument to the vitality of Horseheath. If no longer used as a school it would remain, no doubt, as a reminder of what life used to be like with its primary school and the many facets of it reflecting and serving the whole village community.

Financial Support from the Community

One important aspect of community support for the school is financial. The Friends of Horseheath School is a vigorous group to which not only parents but others in the community who are interested in the school can belong. The Friends and the Governors are two bodies concerned to support the school in every way possible, and one of the services they both perform is fund-raising. This past year has been a particularly successful one in that regard, since a total of over £1200 has been raised to help the school. The Governors have a responsibility to ensure that the exterior of the school building is maintained, and the Friends supply many items needed by the school, including in recent times, a music centre, television, swimming pool cover, minibus hire for regular and special outings, school books and maths equipment. Both the activities of the Governors and the Friends represent important financial contributions in

G. Community Involvement (Continued)

Financial Support from the Community (Continued)

addition to those provided by the County Council.

Over the past three years over £1,900 has been raised and over £1,350 has been donated for the purchase of items used in the school and £280 provided to the Governors for the maintenance and upkeep of buildings.

H. Conculsion

We offer these arguments to the Primary Education Working Party in the sincere hope that they will be persuaded to recommend that Horseheath Primary School remain open. The Governors, parents, children, staff and many users and supporters of the school join together in urging this course of action.