

Primary Education

Although change was happening in education in the 1960s, for most primary education remained on traditional lines. They were much the same as they had been in the 1940s and 1950s

School pupils in classroom 1960 Madeley Wesleyan School - Image ID: F7AHDM



This photograph of a 1960 classroom is quite typical. The teacher stood at the front with the children in rows facing him/her. The teaching was chalk and talk. The learning was by rote. The main subjects were reading writing and arithmetic. Neat handwriting was important. There were lessons in arts and crafts and the only Science was probably Nature Study. Times tables and poems were learned by heart. Exercise was usually by music and movement where the music and instructions were provided by the wireless.

The classes were large and with just one teacher discipline was strict. Teachers were allowed to use rulers to hit children on the hand and the cane was there for the worst offenders.

Here are Margaret, John, Pam, Julia, Barbara and Richard's memories of primary school. On the whole they paint an affectionate picture.

Various extracts from people's memories of schooldays in 1950's & 60's

Margaret Bower

I went to a little village school with two classrooms. Although I must have been at the school a short time, my memories of the school classroom, the school field which was bordered at the bottom by a small stream where we caught frog spawn are still vivid. Also hours of practice for the complicated dances around the maypole to create a pattern of plaited ribbons down the pole, are very strong. I must have enjoyed my time there particularly the outdoor freedom it offered me. The school had originally 76 pupils of infant age and eventually only 26 after the new school was built. There was every facility in the school an oven for warming school meals and good washing amenities. An important part of the school programme was nature study done mostly in the nearby woods. We had a fine field in which to play. Crumbs from school meals were left on a bird table and regular visitors included Magpies and Rooks. We also kept a pet rabbit. The school also had its own radio, gramophone and a maypole. Lessons were sometimes taken under a big tree on hot summer days.

John Sowery

I remember having 1/3 pint of milk they were left outside the classroom in a crate. Sometimes in winter the tops were often pushed off with frozen milk. We were in a hut in the school yard and there were outside toilets. We used stick and nib pens dipped in ink wells let into the desk top. There were ink monitors. The nib frequently got bent and a new nib needed to be slid into place and the sharp nib sucked to remove any grease on it to make ink flow freely - a bad job meant more sucking on an already inky nib. I also remember the coloured crayons we sometimes used, they had a lovely smell. Corporal punishment — for me anyway — a routine hazard, to be taken in your stride usually slaps or cuffs around the ear.

Pam Megson

I remember before the register was taken we had to recite the times tables two times up to twelve times. This was great for later life, when you need the sums now they automatically come to mind without any bother. I took my 11 plus but failed and went on to Jordanthorpe Secondary Modern School.

Julia Taylor (nee Barrett)

I remember my first day in the Junior's, all the children starting on that day were put into a classroom. The first question was 'How do you spell Jelly'. Although I

knew how to spell it, I was very shy. My friend shot her hand up and said 'j e l l y'. She was sent to the A class and I was put into the B stream. There were that many pupils I suppose this was the quickest way to assess them. We were the 'Baby Boomers'. I also remember the teacher asking me to read out loud from a Janet & John book. I was good at reading but not so good at arithmetic. The following year we had exams I still have my school report which mum saved for me although a bit worse for wear.

I stayed for school dinners it was one shilling a day in old money and I paid five shillings at the beginning of the week. The teacher collected this as well as taking the register and she also collected our savings for the bank.

Although I was good at reading and many other subjects my mental arithmetic let me down and because of this I was demoted the following year to the C class. I worked hard there and managed to get back up to the B class in my final junior year. They had a funny system of working in those days and it was to my detriment. All my other subjects were good but my mental arithmetic score was one out of 20 and it affected my overall mark.

I stayed for school dinners which I loved especially the puddings, chocolate sponge, treacle sponge, round biscuits all with custard. We also had semolina and tapioca which we called 'frog spawn' with a blob of jam in the middle.

If it was a nice day the teacher would take us on a nature walk, no consent was asked of parents in those days. I also remember doing a play in the school yard in J2. We made strawberries out of paper mache and we also had some real ones too. When my brother started school, he was 3 and half years younger than me; he was put in a classroom in the hall as there was a shortage of classrooms. I believe there were 52 children to a class at that time. Eventually a new school was built and he and I were transferred there.

Barbara Bell (nee Parks)

I remember walking in the deep snow to school in my wellies. I used to weigh the wellies on the big scale in the classroom which, of course, played havoc with pairs of wellies at home time. I knew it was home time when I could see all the children standing behind their chairs saying their prayers before they left. Not allowed now. I remember the May Day and the May Queen celebrations. I used to wait for my big sister, infants were let out earlier.

Here we have a memory from Sue which reveals quite starkly how special needs could be treated in the 1960s

I remember vividly my infant and junior school as I was partially/more than that deaf - no high or low pitches. My teacher, Miss Chambers, informed my mother that I was thick and would never amount to anything. I was not thick.

I could not hear my teacher. I went through my whole three years being told I was stupid.

When I entered junior school, I had one lifesaver teacher who realised that I could not hear. So, I was put on the front table (the naughty table- as I was always ragged for it) until I was diagnosed with adenoidal block. I spent hours every week in the medical room, wearing earphones and dropping marbles into a box to gauge my hearing range, before progressing to a diagnosis. Not being able to sing should have been a trigger but it was missed.

All the while I continued to learn and excel with a determination to prove Miss Chambers wrong. This soured my whole infant, and half my junior school experience.

Years later I was able to “play forward” when I worked at a playgroup. I recognised straightaway that a young boy who could not hold a tune was deaf and advised his mother to get him tested at three and a half. He was saved the humiliation I’d suffered at the teachers’ hands.

**Jo has written about the whole of her educational experience.
Here the extract on primary education reveals attitudes prevalent in the 1960s**

I attended a large primary school about 20 miles from London. I think it was a pretty good school, with a number of keen young teachers. The headteacher, though, had old fashioned views about pupils who didn’t fit into the norm. My aunt took my twin cousins away as they were treated as a bit of a joke. There were occasions when an ethnic minority pupil turned up because their father had been posted to a nearby RAF base. We all felt sorry for them. Having two brothers I was very aware of gender stereotyping. We had to do a painting of what we would do when we grew up. One girl got much praise from the headmaster for painting herself as a housewife. Mind you I was allowed to join the boys doing woodwork.

Changes

By the end of the 1960s new ideas were being put forward to change the approach to primary school teaching.

In 1967 the Plowden Report was published. This advocated child centred education and the expansion of nursery schools. It caused much debate between those who supported the concept of child-centred education and traditionalists. In fact, many schools changed little immediately after the Plowden Report. Even by 1978 only 5% schools were 'exploratory', and three quarters still used didactic methods (MMI Primary Survey – DES 1978). The debate about the purposes of education and the way in which it is delivered goes on but many of the ideas originating in Plowden have evolved and appeared in educational legislation in other ways.

During the 1960s primary schools were gradually released from the 11+.