

# THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WESTERN DOWNLAND SCHOOL



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In the early 1970's the Local Education Authority (LEA) announced that because the Martin School roll had fallen to less than 20 they proposed to close that school and send the children by bus to the new First School in Fordingbridge. At the same time they intimated that for similar reasons the same fate would soon befall the schools in Damerham and Rockbourne.

Thus it came as no surprise when in 1979 the LEA proposed the closure of both the Damerham and Rockbourne schools - where the rolls had fallen to 34 and 22 respectively. In the opinion of the LEA a school roll of at least 80 pupils was essential to give the pupils the standard of education which they deserved. Only a school of this size could justify a staff large enough to provide an adequate range of interests and abilities. It would also ensure acceptably small class sizes and a narrow age range within each class. In such a school children would benefit from the stimulus of being part of a larger peer group. The larger school also offered the prospect for economies in some overhead costs.

This closure proposal roused a storm of protest in both villages. Public meetings condemned the proposals and petitions organised in Rockbourne by Christine Emm and in Damerham by Cynthia Smith attracted widespread support. The local people objected to the closure for three main reasons. Firstly, they greatly valued the school as an element in village life. Secondly, they disliked the idea of children aged 4-5 years being taken out of their familiar small local community and being subjected to a lengthy bus journey into a larger and unfamiliar environment. Thirdly, they regretted the break between the school and the local Anglican Church.

The Managers of both schools fully supported these local objections but realised that there was a conflict between these sound social attitudes and the equally sound educational arguments put forward by the LEA. The Damerham board attempted to reconcile these two conflicting points of view.

By good fortune in the early 1970's the concept of Federation was being suggested as a way to meet the problems posed by small village schools. Under this concept the schools in two, or more, villages remained open but were run as one unit with one head and one group of teachers. It was accepted that both teachers and pupils could, if desired, move from site to site. A LEA in Lincolnshire announced at this time the establishment of a Federated school in the educational press and it was felt that Hampshire, as an authority in the vanguard of educational progress, should consider this approach in Damerham and Rockbourne. The close co-operation between Miss Harper and Miss Ayling - Heads of the Damerham and

Rockbourne schools - had already prepared the ground for this approach.

This concept was very sympathetically received by Mrs. Pam Clifford, the Area Education Officer, but identifying a suitable structure for a future school did not solve the problem of pupil numbers. The LEA had based their decision to close the schools on the historic trend of declining school numbers leading to the actual position in 1979. The authority was, quite reasonably, unaware that during the 1970's a significant number of young couples, some with children below school age, had moved into the villages. With their local knowledge the Managers were able to count these existing children and also make an assessment of the likely future breeding pattern of their parents. These factors suggested that far from continuing to fall the school rolls would increase in the future. The Managers also believed that a revitalised and successful village school would attract pupils from outside the normal catchment area and also some from the private sector. Putting these influences together the Managers were able to suggest to the LEA that a successful federated school could have a roll of 100 pupils within 7/8 years.

No one will ever know which argument influenced the LEA's final decision but in 1980 they, in conjunction with the Diocesan Education Board, decided to establish a federated school using both the Damerham and Rockbourne sites. A new Head Teacher - Mr Colin Williams - was appointed and the new school, now known as the Western Downland C of E Aided School began work in January 1981. The children from Martin joined the

new school in 19884. Initially, the school was managed by a Board consisting of all the Managers of the previous Damerham and Rockbourne schools. At that point the author, who had been chairman of the Damerham board during this very exciting and satisfying period, resigned so that the Rector of Rockbourne, the Rev Edward Keyes, was the first Chairman of the new board. Subsequently a new constitution was produced for the school and a new more representative board was appointed.

The Federated School has been an undoubted success with numbers rising dramatically. The 100 pupil mark was passed some years earlier than the managers had forecast and now, in 1999, 189 pupils attend the school of which c.50% come from outside the Western Downlands area. These roll numbers reflect the very high standard of education offered by the school. The 1999 Ofsted report describes the school as "...good with some very good features..." including strong community links, positive parents and skilled leadership. This is a report which reflects great credit on the Head, the teaching staff and all others involved in running the school.