


## ☞ A Unique and Boldly Revolutionary School ☞

Villagers were unhappy with the loss of the school but there were no resources available to build new village schools. After the Second World War, the priority for the government was to rebuild and replace war-damaged schools in the cities. During the 1950s, the demand was for new schools to service mushrooming housing estates, burgeoning suburbs and the New Towns. These priorities led to rural schools being neglected.

### A New School

#### A School for Finmere House Paddock


A new school for Finmere had been in discussion since at least 1955, when the Parish Council sent a letter of protest about the proposed site to Oxfordshire Education Authority. The Council objected to building the school in Finmere House Paddock, because children played there and it was used for village events and fetes. These concerns were rejected and on 14 April 1958, Caroline Symes-Thompson of Finmere House sold the 1.25 acres of land in the Paddock for £800 2s 10p.



1958	2000
£800	£10,400

Funding for school building was held by central government at the Ministry of Education and, in 1958, the Ministry's Architects and Building Branch was asked to tackle the problem of rural schools. One solution considered was to promote refurbishment of schools but this option was rejected in favour of building new schools more suited to contemporary teaching needs. The idea was that once modern design principles were established, they could be extended to other schools or, where possible, to converting existing buildings.

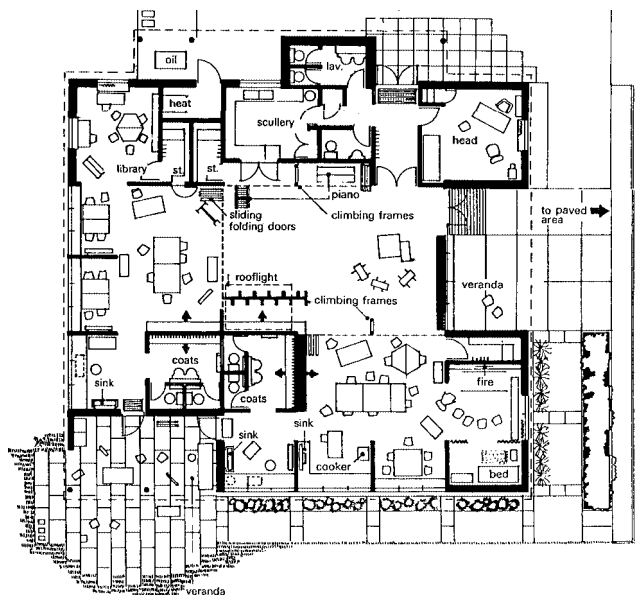
There were no spare funds available in the Ministry's annual building programme for major schools. Instead, funds were found for just two new schools from its Minor Works programme, in which the cost of projects were limited to £10,000. One school was built at Great Ponton, Lincolnshire, and the other here in Finmere.



1959	2000
£10,000	£130,000

#### Pioneering Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire was an ideal location to develop a groundbreaking school. Village school teachers had a high morale and were supported by a pioneering programme of visiting teachers and courses. Their enthusiasm inspired the architects to design a school that met teachers' and pupils' needs. This included rethinking the conventional classroom.



**The School in 1959**

### Hello Finmere

Eleven years after the school opened, BBC broadcaster John Simpson interviewed headmistress Olive Bates.

*[The school] doesn't really look [old], does it? Its kept very well and people think that it's still the latest thing ... It has many corners and bays where the children go off to work on various projects. We never shut ourselves off ... We all work together as one family, although it's getting a rather large family now. We should have a family of 50 children but it's got to 68, it's a bit of a job to find enough corners to put them in nowadays. (Hello Finmere, 13 June 1971)*

During the 1950s, classrooms in schools had become crowded with the furniture and equipment needed to teach the growing curriculum. The problem was at its worst in rural schools, like Finmere, where fifty pupils aged 5–11 had been taught in just two classrooms in the old school. Space was needed for small groups of pupils, as well as for the collective work of classes of twenty-five pupils.

The school design was the outcome of a close collaboration between the architects and Oxfordshire Education Authority. It was designed and furnished by architects in the Architects and Building Branch of the Ministry of Education—David and Mary Medd, with Pat Tindale.

### A Novel Design

The architects designed a school that reflected the small, closely knit community of its village setting. The new school was conceived as two independent classroom spaces with a third shared area for activities, including music, meals and physical education (PE). Traditional classrooms had been extended to become a linked series of learning areas. To aid PE, the columns in the shared area were designed as ladders for children to climb. The spaces could be separated or merged using sliding partitions. Other smaller areas included a library, workshop, study, kitchen, restroom and veranda. Children worked in small groups, regrouping according to age, ability and interests. The flexible internal partitions allowed different sized spaces to be created for teaching, group work or assembly. Outside the school, a pond was reconstructed as an educational feature.

### The Opening

The opening of the new school on 9 September 1959 was recorded by headmistress, Olive Bates, in the new school Log Book.

*September 9th 1959 first pupil on this present site.*

*Miss O. Bates headmistress.*

*Miss G. Broughton infant teacher.*

*Number of children on roll 46.*

She also noted the novel character of the school.

*The layout is of an experimental nature for the development of group work and study of a rural environment.*

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Education, Mr Kenneth Thompson, officially opened the school nearly a year later, on 25 June 1960. A marquee was erected for refreshments and programmes were printed. There were eighty visitors including the Archdeacon of Buckingham, the Rector of Finmere and the Director of Education for Oxfordshire.

## Critical Acclaim

The architectural and educational importance of the school was quickly recognised and it received a steady stream of visitors. In 1960/61, there were over eighty visiting school inspectors and architects, coming from as far away as America, Australia, and Zanzibar. 'Few schools can have received so many visitors in so short a life,' noted the Inspectors in 1962. But, far from the visitors being a distraction:

*It might almost be said that they have become a means through which the children learn. Boys and girls will discuss the pedigree of their guinea pigs, or the colour a particular plant will dye the wool they have spun, or the rate of motor traffic on the main road nearby, or the Georgian architecture of Finmere with an almost adult assurance and a frank search for knowledge.*

Through these visits, and admiring academic articles, the school had a notable influence on the design of village schools.

*The new school at Finmere set the whole trend of primary school design for the 1960s ... [providing] a greater measure of learning opportunity for fifty children than had ever been achieved before (Eric Pearson writing in Trends in School Design, 1972).*

## The Pleasure of School Life

### Her Majesty's Inspectors' Pleasure

On 25 and 26 June 1962, Her Majesty's Inspector descended on the school. In a refreshing contrast to the often terrifying inspections of the Victorian era, the Inspector could not be more pleased with what he observed. Declaring, 'it is a privilege to inspect education conceived in this way,' he warmly described the three year old school as a:

*Unique and boldly revolutionary building... designed with such a deep understanding of the nature and needs of young children and the ways in which they learn.*

He paid tribute to the headmistress Olive Bates and to infants teacher Grace Broughton.

*From the start, the headmistress and her colleague accepted their task of welding three very groups different of children [from Finmere, Mixbury and Newton Purcell] into a whole and of building up a new tradition ... with an admirable sense of adventure and with great calm and equanimity. Their tolerance, good sense and easy relationships, their belief in the potentialities of ordinary country children, and their vision of what rural education might become, are at the root of the great success of this enterprise.*



**Children shopping at the school on  
27 November 1959**

(left to right)

Nigel Horwood John Hancock Michael Groves (Mixbury)  
Josephine Deathe Barbara Beachy (Newton Purcell)

Jonathan Harris attended Finmere school between 1964 and 1996. Writing from San Jose, California, he remembers his schooldays.

Miss Bates and Miss Young had the place running like clock work, we didn't get away with much, especially as my Dad was the village Policeman. I thought that they had a direct line to my Dads office. Miss Bates always got upset with me for playing music by ear, rather than reading it from the sheet. We all had to learn to write in italic style. We had to write in the subjects then Miss Bates would fill it out.

Home	Jonathan	School	Colours
Age	8	Harris	New Term
Group	F		Sept 1
<u>English</u>			
Creative writing		Good	
Selfish Spelling		Fair	
Hand writing		Improving	
poetry & Reading		Good	
Literature		Good memory	
Arithmetic			
practical		Good	
Tables		Fair	
Every day problems		Fair	
Practical Work			
Finding information & bringing			Things in
Part and craft		Good	
Music		Good	
Be with Movement		Very good	
			Bates

Report Card for Jonathan Harris

The report continues its eulogy in a style long abandoned by inspectors and concludes.

*Life for these children is unusually rich. There can be no doubt that an environment as imaginatively planned as theirs, and used by teachers as creatively and fully, becomes a tremendous force in their whole development. Its influence is spent in every aspect of their growth. It is a privilege to inspect education conceived in this way.*

Nevertheless, like the Victorian Inspectors, the HMIs of 1962 seemed unfamiliar with rural life.

*There are children here with far greater experience [of animals] than is generally expected, and they understand and accept the knowledge and hazards of birth, life and death with unusual poise... With few exceptions they read well, though speech is earthy, and may even strike a visitor as rough.*

## School Life in 1962

Almost submerged in the Inspector's lavish praise is a description of daily life in the school. There were eighteen infants, taught by Grace Broughton, and twenty-seven juniors, taught by Olive Bates.

The infants worked in a series of bays: a life size kitchen, a sitting room, a display space for their work and an area for working with clay and nature studies. At the close of day, the children gathered round their teacher for a story.

The juniors had a library and three work bays. They spent the greater part of the day in individual assignments of study, in four groups arranged by age.

*At all times—except when the children gather as a class for discussion or a necessary piece of instruction, or for music, radio, talks, a story or physical education—there is work in progress in reading, writing, mathematics, local history, geography and nature study, art and craft.*

The children reared pets on the veranda. Movement and physical education were “enjoyed each day,” either in the communal space, where the climbing frames were built into the roof supports, or out of doors. At dinner time, there was a “delightful family atmosphere... with nicely laid tables and arrangements of flowers.”

## Grass

**F**inmere children retained easy access to the countryside. This essay is by a ten-year-old boy at Finmere School and is dated 1 July 1962. It so pleased the school inspectors that they submitted a copy to the Ministry of Education with their report on the school. The author is not known.

*In grass fields most of the grass is all mixed. I love it like that – not all of the same kind. When it is about two feet high and the wind blows over it like a kind of slippery silk, grey more green and sometimes only the colour and movement which I suppose you would say isn't any colour at all, it quivers and goes in straight slanting ripples; and even if the wind blows hard it won't hurt it. It only twists the blade. If you break the grass stem at the joint a tube-like pipe is running through it, and if you chew the end it is very hard. If you run your finger up the blade of a cocksfoot grass it cuts your finger, and I should think that's how the word "blade" for grass originated. If you cut it along the side and suck it is very juicy but bitter. Yet I keep doing it. It is silly, I suppose, but I still go on. I expect I shall always go on doing it, even when I am grown up.*

*There are kinds of grasses. The kind called "soft meadow" has so many hairs on the blade and is so dry the cows don't like it. A meadow full of "cut grass" looks like sea foam or even detergent, and nearly white too: well, a greeny-white. "Cocksfoot" has flattened shoots and dull green to real deep blue leaves. And that is the truth. And a head of spikelets arranged in one-sided clusters on little wiry branches. "Cocksfoot" belongs like all the others to the family Gramineae and its botanical name is *Dactylis glomerata*.*

*Oh, we have a wonderful mower. It goes along as smooth as the wind does, and leaves the grass flat and straight in rows, and in a line just like the parting in my dad's hair.*

## A Critical Inspection and Recovery

**T**he school was successful for its first thirty-five years but, during the 1990s, teaching quality declined. In 1995, a critical report by OFSTED (Office of Standards in Education) Inspectors led to the school being placed on 'special measures.' These were targeted at improving the school's management, the quality of teaching, children's attainment and behaviour, and their attitudes to learning. After much hard work by staff, governors, County Education Advisors, parents and—most of all, pupils—the school was given a clean bill of health. After an inspection in 1998, OFSTED applauded the progress and declared the school to be above national average. This was just in time, as pupil numbers had fallen and the County Council was suggesting that school should be closed. The school is now striving to expand numbers and to further improve standards.

### Expansion

The school was designed for a maximum of fifty pupils from Newton Purcell, Mixbury and Finmere but, by the early 1970s, it had become very crowded. In 1973, the school was extended to accommodate an additional twenty-five pupils.



School nanny goat, 1983



School Fayre, about 1990

The annual School Fayre is organised by the Friends of Finmere School Association (FOFSA).



School Fayre, 2000



School Fayre, 2000