

CECIL EDUARDES GAY (1895 - 1962)

Norman Cox, a former teacher at King's Worthy Primary School, contributes a personal biographical sketch of a remarkable Headmaster.

Cecil Gay was the former Headmaster of King's Worthy Elementary School (later designated 'Mixed Primary and Infant School'), which stood in the Alresford Road, Abbot's Worthy, from 1923 until its closure in 1952, when he took over the headship of the new King's Worthy Primary School in Church Lane. He exemplified the educational orthodoxy of pre-war England and believed in the supremacy of the three R's in the curriculum. He expected children to work and respect authority. He was the archetypal, formal, old-fashioned schoolmaster; a disciplinarian, who set himself high standards and expected the same from children.

The son of a head gardener, Cecil Gay was born at Pottern near Devizes in Wiltshire. His scholarly attributes secured him a place at Devizes Grammar School, where he once won the School Divinity Prize. Afterwards, he attended what is now King Alfred's College, Winchester; in his day, the Diocesan Training College for Men Teachers.

The timing of his arrival at the Diocesan Training College in 1913 was unfortunate. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 cut short his teacher training. He joined B company of the 4th Territorial Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, a gesture expected of students in those days. In August 1914, B Company was enjoying its Annual Camp at Bulford, on Salisbury Plain. As Territorials, they were immediately mobilized and Cecil Gay was sent with his unit to India. He served as an infantry sergeant in India and Mesopotamia throughout the Great War, having no home leave until the Armistice in 1918. He had a flair for languages, indeed he had spoken Welsh from the cradle, learned from his Welsh mother. In Mesopotamia, ('Mespot' to the troops) he learned Arabic, a useful qualification when obtaining food for his unit behind enemy lines, in which activity he showed great resourcefulness.

'Tales of the War' were his main topic of conversation, a fact well known to his pupils, who enjoyed his colourful anecdotes of army life. At the new school he taught Religious Knowledge to most of the juniors, the rascally ones well knew how to exploit his nostalgia for the past. A seemingly innocent question about the War would be asked, often quite unrelated to the subject under discussion. This was sufficient, and Cecil Gay was instantly 'back in the trenches', to the delight of the children. He was a skilled raconteur. His

favourite and oft-repeated story concerned an attack by fanatical tribesmen on his tented unit. After fierce fighting, the situation began to look serious for the British, until the tribesmen suddenly rode off in triumph, bearing the yellow latrine flags, convinced that they had seized the enemy's standards!

Demobilised in 1919, he returned to complete his course at the Diocesan Training College. He was one of 72 students, 22 of whom had suffered interrupted training. In his final year, he was elected Head Student. In the now-redundant College Chapel, his name can be seen on a plaque commemorating students who served their country in war. This service would have been willingly undertaken, for he was an intensely patriotic man. On Empire Day, the pupils at King's Worthy were assembled outside to salute the flag, a practice that continued well into the 50's. The significance of this ceremony was perhaps lost on the children, but it was of great importance to their headmaster.

His first teaching post was at St Thomas's School, Winchester. Here he specialised in Woodwork, Craft and Religious Studies, all subject areas where he possessed skill and knowledge. Whilst at St Thomas's, he met and married Elsie Smith. In 1923, they took up the Headship and Assistant Teaching Posts at King's Worthy Church of England Elementary School. Cecil Gay taught the 11 - 14 age range, whilst his wife taught juniors. They were a formidable teaching team. Another teacher taught infants elsewhere. Teaching conditions were far from ideal; they worked in one room, divided by a wooden screen. He did not suffer fools gladly and recalcitrant pupils were soundly whacked!

Cecil Gay entered whole-heartedly into the life of King's Worthy. For some years he was an active Churchwarden of St Mary's Church, and on several occasions he was sequestrator during changes of the incumbent. He sang in the choir and possessed a good baritone voice. A villager, who was himself once a choir boy, remembers the quality of his voice and also recalled the occasion when Cecil Gay's twin daughters were baptised - each chorister was solemnly presented with a shilling. He was much in demand as a singer, singing madrigals, choral works and solos. He always sight-read in tonic sol-fa and was perhaps most 'at home' with tenor or bass parts. He further participated in village affairs as both a member and chairman of the Parish Council.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, he was genuinely disappointed to find himself too old for active service and he enthusiastically assisted retired regular officers to form a contingent of Local Defence Volunteers (LDV), later to become the Home Guard. He became Platoon

Commander and served as a Captain throughout the war. A contemporary photograph of 1942 taken in the grounds of 'Northleigh', London Road, shows him seated in the middle of the 58-strong platoon. Medal ribbons indicate at least a dozen First World War veterans, men with whom Cecil Gay could easily identify. His organizing skills also proved indispensable in dealing with the billeting of Portsmouth evacuees, the rationing of food and petrol and the enforcement of blackout regulations. His older pupils might well recall how he supervised and helped in the digging of two large air-raid shelters at the school. These tasks were, of course, in addition to teaching duties carried out under difficult wartime conditions.

He often talked to me about his Home Guard days. Immensely proud of his platoon, he was somewhat surprised to discover that I could evaluate the quality of their weaponry. He tended to have undue faith in their firepower - it is probably fortunate for the village that the wildly inaccurate Blacker Bombard and Spigot Mortar were not used locally in anger. Needless to say, the Home Guard era spawned its own anecdotes; one of which concerned the accidental ringing of the church bells, apparently signalling invasion. In the resulting nervousness, a villager was lucky not to have been fired on as a suspected parachutist.

On September 8th, 1952, the new school opened in Church Lane, King's Worthy, accommodating only juniors and infants. A total of 180 children were admitted, 115 from the old school, 46 from Headbourne Worthy School, 6 from various other schools, together with 13 new admissions. Cecil Gay still had a class to teach in addition to his increased headteacher's duties. He was not free of a class until May 1957. There were four other teachers: Mrs E Gay, Mr N Cox (this author), Mrs M Stephens and Mrs A Oliver. Mrs E Smith was the secretary and Mr K Clarke was the caretaker, replaced in February, 1953, by the long-serving (38 years) and highly efficient, Gerald Lawrence, himself an old pupil of the Gays.

Although facilities were infinitely better than in the old school, workmen were still in the building for some weeks and there were many 'teething troubles', especially with the boilers and the installation of kitchen equipment. At first, meals were delivered in containers. These were served by Mrs E Brown, Mrs E Knight and Mrs K Eldridge. Unfortunately, the school was too small from the beginning and early in April, 1953, one class had to be accommodated in the hall, where a second class joined it the next year. As a hard-pressed teaching head, overseeing the settling-in process, Cecil Gay even had to manage without a telephone. All calls had to be received and made in



Under the watchful eye of his wife Elsie, Cecil Gay receives his retirement gift in 1954 from Alan Duckworth.

the rectory, through the good offices of the late Rev Walter George. The school telephone was not installed until January, 1955. A shortage of supply teachers added to the difficulties. An absent teacher caused classes to be amalgamated.

In the classroom, his priorities were much as they had always been. The 'basics' were systematically taken to a high standard. Cecil Gay stood in front of the class and taught, writing on the blackboard in small, immaculate 'copper plate'. He firmly believed in Selective Education and supported the philosophy of the 11-plus, whilst not forgetting the needs of less able pupils. In his youth, he had been a keen sportsman, and games and sports for the children were not neglected. From 1956 to 1960, Aggregate Shields were brought back from the Winchester and District School Sports. Area League Football Cups were also won. The secret of this success was timely and disciplined practice - the necessary time was made available as a priority and on these occasions, the timetable was abandoned, a custom, it must be said, that did not please everyone.

Always supportive of students, he served for several years as Secretary of the King Alfred's Old Students' Association. He kept in regular contact with the College and was on very friendly terms with staff members and the post war

Principal, William Parker Dickinson. Under heavy professional pressure, Principal Dickinson took his own life on 15th October, 1958, an event which greatly distressed Cecil Gay.

My first meeting with him was in late July, 1952, prior to my appointment to the school. I called to see him at 'The Knap', the house in Alresford Road alongside the old school, once rented by the Gays and subsequently owned. Ever conventional, he welcomed me formally and indicated where I was to hang my hat. He could hardly believe that I didn't wear one!

Cecil and Elsie Gay's retirement ceremony took place on July 21st, 1960. They had each given 37 years' service to Hampshire. Mr Littlecot, Deputy Education Officer, and Mr Alan Duckworth, representing the School Managers, presented a handsome gift and thanked them for their services to education.

Unfortunately, Cecil Gay did not enjoy a long retirement and died two years later of pneumonia, on December 4th, 1962. It is possible that his privations in the First World War had weakened him physically, for he had several bouts of illness before his retirement. His last two years were spent tending his garden, which he had been unable to do thoroughly whilst teaching. His wife, Elsie, died in 1970. They are survived by twin daughters, Daphne and Mavis, who live in Spalding and Stamford, respectively.

Sources

- (1) Whilst much of this material is based upon diary-assisted personal recollection, the writer is indebted to Miss Daphne Gay and Mrs Mavis Burley, who kindly provided invaluable additional information.
- (2) Martial Rose, *A History of King Alfred's College, Winchester, 1840-1980*, Phillimore Press, 1981.