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# THE VILLAGE SCHOOLMASTER

A Snapshot in Time:  
Laxton in Peace and War, 1900–1920



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Mr Willis is a good man  
He tries to teach us all he can  
Reading, writing, arithmetic  
He never forgets to give us the stick.  
When he does he makes us dance  
Out of England into France  
Out of France into Spain  
Over the hills and back again

*A children's rhyme taken from 'Life at Laxton'  
c1880–1903, by Edith Hickson*

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## WHO WAS FRANK WILLIS?

Frank Willis was the Head Teacher of Laxton Parochial School for 36 years; he took the post in 1886 and retired in 1922. He was respected by the whole village community and during his tenure as Head Teacher the school flourished. He appears to have been regarded as a cut above the villagers by the locals themselves, but he actually came from very humble roots.

Edith Hickson, who was born at Bar Farm, Laxton in 1893, appears to have regarded her former Head Teacher as a rather superior man, when speaking of him she said Frank Willis had “a refinement of feature, contrasting with the more course and rugged lineaments of the native breed of men.”

## WHERE WAS HE BORN?

He was born in his grandmother's cottage in Kensworth in Hertfordshire in 1857. Kensworth at that time was a quiet rural village, suffering like all such villages from the agricultural depression. The men of the village were almost all employed in agriculture, whilst the women earned a few pennies in the straw bonnet industry.

Small brick-built cottages huddled together along the unmade roads; inside they were dim and sparsely furnished with no utilities, no running water and no mains drainage.

Women often had to sit outside to get the best light for their straw plaiting and sewing. No doubt it also gave them the opportunity to sit together and gossip about village life! Horses and donkeys worked the land and were still used on treadmills to draw water from the very deep wells which were the only source of water in the village.

The little two-bedroomed cottage, at 51, Northside, must have been bursting at the seams when Frank was born. His parents, William and Betsy, were living with Betsy's widowed mother, Sarah Ward, her brother, James, and younger sister, Emma. All the family living together would have made sound economic sense, as money would have been very scarce in the household.

William and James were agricultural labourers and during the agricultural depression they would have earned only a pittance, the average farm labourers wage being 10 shillings and nine pence per week, about £30 spending power in today's money.

This had to cover everything for the family; food, clothes, fuel and rent.

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**Pictured**

*A Victorian straw bonnet*



# THE STRAW BONNET INDUSTRY

Betsy and Sarah helped to feed the family by working in the straw bonnet industry. They plaited and sewed straw braids to make bonnets, a thriving cottage industry at Kensworth in Victorian times. Women and children were employed at home making the long, thin plaits which were then sold to the hat makers in Luton and Dunstable.

Children as young as three were sent to ‘plaiting schools’, where they were crowded into small rooms and were made to plait for as long as eight hours a day. The Children’s’ Employment Commission of 1864 recorded one case of 41 children plaiting in a room only 10 feet square.

They were taught no other subjects in such schools. The main aim of the overseer was to get the work done, not to educate the children. These sweat shops continued until 1871, despite the 1867 Factory Act which had banned the employment of children under nine years old. The plaiting schools therefore existing throughout Frank Willis’s childhood but we cannot be certain that he was ever sent to one.

## HOW WAS EDUCATION REGARDED AT THE TIME?

Emma, Betsy’s younger sister, was only 10 when Frank was born and she was still at school. In the 1861 census she is recorded as a scholar at thirteen years old. This was unusual in those days, especially for the daughter of a farm labourer’s widow. Education was still on a voluntary basis and working class children often did not go to school at all.

There were some children however who were lucky enough to attend charity schools, but they frequently left school early to work in the fields, in



### Pictured

*Top:  
The back of a Victorian  
straw bonnet showing  
the plaited straw*

*Above:  
The illustration shows  
the fineness of the  
plaiting (measurements  
in millimetres)*

factories, or to become skivvies in more affluent homes. Childhood was short; families needed the money which the children could earn. There was at that time a real tension between the economic need for child labour by employers and the need to educate the workers in order for them to be able to work more efficiently in an increasingly mechanical age.

In 1838 James Kay-Shuttleworth, an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, had said that the state had the responsibility to “rear children in religion and industry as may fit them to discharge the duties of their station.” The aim was to enforce social discipline, keep the labouring classes in their place in society, and to instil a new work discipline that would suit the new mechanical age.

## HOW THE BRUGIS TRUST HELPED THE WILLIS FAMILY

The village of Kensworth had a charitable trust, the Brugis Trust, which had been set up to provide free education for poor children of the labouring classes, provided they came from ‘deserving families’. Such families were defined by the Trustees as those who were hard working church goers.

A charity school run by this Trust had existed in Kensworth since 1840 and in 1863 on a list of the charity children receiving free education, and a free meal each day, we find Frank Willis’s name. He was then five years old.

The Willis family must have been viewed by the Administrators of the Trust as ‘deserving poor’; hard working regular church-goers, who did their best to feed and clothe their family without resorting to asking for aid from the Parish. This says a great deal about Frank Willis’s background.

In fact Frank Willis had been at school since he was at least three years old, in the 1861 census he is already recorded as a scholar. When Clara, Frank's younger sister, was born Frank's mother, Betsy, may have needed to send Frank to school so that she could continue to work at sewing straw bonnets.

We cannot be certain that Frank began his education in Kensworth National School however as Betsy may have initially put him in a Dame School, (a small private school run usually by an older woman in the village), or even in a plaiting school. It was not at all unusual for village women to use such schools for child-minding purposes whilst they worked.

In the Kensworth National School records we find that Frank is still a pupil there in 1867. It is noticeable that the attendance of some of the charity children is very poor; possibly they

took time off to work on the land, or to help out at home. This was usual at the time, and in fact school attendance was also very poor in Laxton.

On the 1870 list of charity pupils Frank's name is missing, perhaps at 12 years old he had ceased to be a charity pupil of the school. He may already have set out on a very long training period for his future career; it is possible that he may have become a monitor, or pupil teacher at the school.

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OF SOME OF THE  
CHARITY CHILDREN  
IS VERY POOR;  
POSSIBLY THEY  
TOOK TIME OFF  
TO WORK ON THE  
LAND, OR TO HELP  
OUT AT HOME**

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## BECOMING A TEACHER

The following year in 1871, according to the census taken that year, Frank is living at home in Kensworth and is still a scholar at 13 years old. The family perhaps recognised the value of education for his future earning capacity, and they had sufficient support from the Brugis Charity and money he might have earned as a Pupil Teacher to keep him at school.

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## **WILLIS WAS HIGHLY LITERATE AND ALSO BECAME AN ACCOMPLISHED MUSICIAN; AN AMAZING ACHIEVEMENT FOR THE SON OF A POOR FARM LABOURER**

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Whatever he did to pursue his education and training Frank Willis proved to be an able and intelligent student and in the coming years he not only became highly literate but he also became an accomplished musician, an amazing achievement for the son of a poor farm labourer at that time.

He had chosen to enter a fast growing profession, indeed the fastest growing profession of the day. It was generally believed by those in power that if Britain was to prosper in the new industrial world the workers needed to be able to read and write.

The 1870 Elementary Education Act established the principle that all children should go to school and Government grants were made available for building schools. By 1874 over 5000 new schools had been built, including one at Laxton.

The Education Act of 1880 finally ensured that education was made compulsory for all children. Between 1870 and 1880 the numbers of certified teachers almost trebled, and there was an explosion in the numbers of uncertified teachers in schools.

## WORKING CLASS TEACHERS

Those who taught working class children in the elementary schools were themselves drawn from the working classes. The concern that the poor should not be educated above their station led to the belief that their teachers should also be kept in their place. This view affected teacher training throughout much of the nineteenth century.

The usual route into teaching at the time, and Frank Willis must have taken this, was by becoming a Pupil Teacher, usually at thirteen years old. It involved continuing to learn in school as well as teaching the other pupils over a five year period. At the end of each year the Pupil Teacher's work was inspected by government inspectors and if it was satisfactory both they and their teacher were given a grant.

At the end of their time as a Pupil Teacher they were allowed to take the Queen's Scholarship Examination for admittance to a training college to become Certified Teachers. Pupil Teachers who did not take the examination were still entitled to teach in elementary schools as Assistant Teachers. Those who had been unsuccessful in getting a training college place were, if their work was of a certain standard, awarded a Certificate of Merit.

It is difficult now to imagine the firm convictions of those first elementary schoolteachers instilled into them during their training. Despite teaching being a low status job at that time, their vocation as they saw it was in most cases linked to their firmly held

Christian faith and they believed they had a moral duty to educate and thus improve the lot of working class children. As they saw it they had not only taken on responsibility for their pupils' literacy but also for their physical and spiritual health. There is no doubt when we read the comments in Frank Willis's log book that he was not only trying to tutor his pupils in the three Rs, but he was also trying to inculcate Christian beliefs, train them in good behaviour, inspire patriotism in them and instil respect for their elders and betters.

## AN ASSISTANT TEACHER

From the 1881 census we know that Frank Willis had become an Assistant Teacher, so as yet he may not have taken the Queens Scholarship Examination.

The Willis family had left Kensworth and were living in Bulwell in Nottinghamshire. What a change that must have been for them! The family were part of the general drift away from rural villages to towns and cities in order to find employment. In the middle of an agricultural depression and with no straw plaiting available, due to cheap imports from China, the family income would have severely diminished.

Bulwell at the time was a thriving industrial township on the edge of Nottingham. It had its own bustling market place and a wide range of shops along a busy High Street. There were many opportunities for employment in Bulwell; a colliery, a brickworks, a bleach works and a quarry, as well as framework knitting which gave employment to most of the families in the town.

William, Frank's father, is still however recorded as an agricultural labourer, though in later years he worked at the pit head. Clara, Frank's younger sister, was still living with the family and working in the

hosiery industry. Frank, now 23 years old, was also living with his parents, he had by then established himself as a salaried, though not certified, Assistant Teacher in the Basford National School.

He lived next door to another schoolmaster, Henry Neate, who became a friend, and not too far away from a schoolmistress, a certain Miss Ruth Potter, who was to become very important in his life.

During his time at Bulwell we know that Frank Willis was active

in the Band of Hope and that he organised concerts for young people. On 17th May 1879 the Nottingham Evening Post reported that The Church Schools' Band of Hope held their annual spring festival in the National School and that one of the organisers and conductors was Mr Frank Willis.

He is again mentioned with Henry Neate, his next door neighbour, as one of the managers of Band of Hope events in 1880, 1881 and 1882. Miss Ruth Potter was also an active member of the Band of Hope, which was a temperance organisation dedicated to working with young people through Sunday Schools and promoting the non use of alcohol and tobacco.

## RUTH POTTER

Ruth Potter was 27 in 1881 and living with her parents, Samuel and Frances. Samuel, a joiner and builder, would have made a comfortable living; we know that in 1861 he employed 5 men and 2 boys.

Ruth's brother was an Assistant Teacher and

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# HE WAS ACTIVE IN THE BAND OF HOPE AND ORGANISED CONCERTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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Pictured

*This medal was worn by members of the Band of Hope at the beginning of the twentieth century*

one of her sisters, Fanny, at only 18 years old, was a schoolmistress. This would seem to be an ideal family for an ambitious young Assistant Teacher to marry into; they appear to be aspiring, interested in education and active in the church.

Ruth is recorded as Schoolmistress of St. Leodegarius' National School, Basford, and she may already have passed her examination for her teaching certificate, certainly later on the rumour in Laxton, according to Edith Hickson, was that Ruth was college trained and Frank was not:

*"Of Mr Willis, it must be said, he was an exceptional schoolmaster, village-wise though not, it was rumoured, college trained."*

Mrs Willis on the other hand, *"it was rumoured, was college trained (a matter of importance). She was a fully trained teacher."*

On the Laxton School Return of 1903, however, both Frank and Ruth Willis are declared as Certified Teachers, but neither of them claims to have been college trained, something which they would have almost certainly declared as it would have entitled them to more salary.

## ON BECOMING A HEAD TEACHER

Frank Willis and Ruth Potter married in May 1882 in Basford; Frank was 24 and Ruth 28. They settled there and the following year they had their first child, Frank Harold, known throughout his life as Harold.

As a young married man, just starting a family, Frank had to look ahead to his future career and by 1884 we know that he was no longer an Assistant Teacher in Basford and that he had managed to secure for himself a new post as Schoolmaster of Upton Church Aided National School, a small Nottinghamshire village school of 50 pupils.



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### Pictured

*Upton School, today a privately owned house, has retained many of its original features*

There he was respected by pupils and villagers, not least for his cricketing skills. Frank and Ruth's second child, their daughter, Barbara, was born in Upton in 1885. Frank, however, did not stay there for very long, he saw an opportunity at Laxton for a larger salary and a well built house for his growing family.

He applied for the post of schoolmaster of Laxton Parochial School, a school which had twice as many pupils as Upton and carried the salary of £140 a year, and he was appointed in 1886. After Egmonton School opened in 1899, however, the numbers in the school shrank, but Frank Willis was not to know that when he applied for the post.

This was a big step up the social ladder for someone who had been a charity pupil, the son of a poor agricultural labourer from Kensworth. In the following year Oscar, their third child, was born in Laxton. By 1900 the Willis family was firmly established in Laxton and the school was running smoothly under the firm leadership of a dedicated and hard working Head Teacher.

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## Pictured

*Laxton Infant  
School in 1925*



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“He was certainly a born teacher and administrator, and in the earlier days of his time he had all the spirit of enthusiasm which only time would subdue.”

– *Edith Hickson*

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# THE EARLY YEARS

## WHAT WAS THE VILLAGE OF LAXTON LIKE THEN?

The Laxton that Frank Willis moved to was in many ways much like the Kensworth where he had been born; a village where the majority of people worked in agriculture and which was in the midst of an agricultural depression, a village in decline with a shrinking population.

Laxton was still however self contained with two general stores, a public house, a cobblers shop, a smithy and a butcher who came to the village each week from Tuxford. Whilst the population of the village steadily declined, the life of the village still went on much as it always had. Some thirty years before the Willis family came to Laxton Lord Manvers, the main landowner, had rebuilt many of the dilapidated farm houses and cottages, partly rebuilt and refurbished the church and built the school and the school house.

He owned most of the village and on his behalf his agent, Mr R. W. Wordsworth, took an active interest in all that went on.

## THE SCHOOL HOUSE

The schoolhouse was built of local red brick, with a tiled roof, adjacent to the upper school (now the village hall). It still stands in a central position in the village, facing west along High Street. Originally it had two good sized rooms downstairs, with a scullery and out houses, and two good sized bedrooms.

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**“I AM BEGINNING TO THINK THAT SCHOOLMASTERS ARE QUITE THE MOST DIFFICULT PEOPLE TO SATISFY.”**

Mr. Wordsworth, Lord Manver’s Agent

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In later years Frank Willis wanted the house altered so that his wife, who suffered from ill health, would not have to face the cold of the outside scullery. Lord Manver’s Agent, Mr. Wordsworth, refused to accept the proposal to join the scullery to the main house, as it would spoil the pantry and cost far too much.

Eventually he agreed to join privy, tool house and scullery, add a sink and put an extra bedroom over. Mr Wordsworth was not used to dealing with highly literate schoolmasters who could argue their case and it gave him cause to comment in his letter:

*“I am beginning to think that schoolmasters are quite the most difficult people to satisfy.”*

Lord Manvers paid £483 for the building of the school and the Head Teacher’s house. The Infants’ School, now a ruin, was just across the road next to one of the village shops, and it had a small playground for the children.

It was built in 1870 by Lord Manvers who paid £88 in 1870 and £55 in 1871 for the building.



## GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS ABOUT SCHOOL BUILDINGS

The first government building regulations were issued in 1840 and they quoted the earlier words of the National Society “a barn furnishes no bad model, and a good one may easily be converted into a school.” The oblong shape was still advocated in the 1870/1 building regulations and tiered seating or galleries were recommended so that children could see their teacher.

The plans drawn up for Lord Manvers when he had the schools built in Laxton reflected the ideas of the day; the rectangular shape and the lack of a ceiling in the upper school and the likeness to a barn in the remains of the Infant school can still be seen today. The old fireplace and the chimneys still stand in the infant school showing the heating system of the day, and we can imagine the tiered seating of the gallery which enabled the pupils to see their teacher.

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### Pictured

*Laxton School house, which is now privately owned*



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## Pictured

*The likeness of the Infant School to a barn is apparent in this photograph taken after the school had fallen into disrepair*

In fact it was not until 1904, after an inspector's recommendation, that the tiered gallery was taken out of the infant classroom and desks were installed. Both the children and Lilly Bennett, the infant teacher, must have been delighted.

*“The tiers of the little school gallery resembled stairs – with no carpet or back support other than the step above, with small boot toes in close proximity.”*  
- Edith Hickson.

It could not have been very comfortable for little five and six year olds to spend the most part of their day sitting on what was in effect a shelf!

## WHAT WERE THE CLASSROOMS LIKE?

Whilst we cannot be sure of the details of the Laxton School classrooms, we do know that generally in schools at that time the large classrooms would have looked very bare compared with the

classrooms of today. They would have been painted in serviceable dark colours to withstand the wear and tear of numerous children.

The windows were set high in the bare walls to prevent the children from being distracted by anything going on outside. The teacher's desk would have dominated the room, perhaps with a cane leaning against it. A blackboard, the main teaching aid, would have been prominent at the front of the classroom and a dunce's cap may well have been kept in the corner ready to place on some poor miscreant's head.

The infants sat in a tiered gallery whilst the older pupils sat facing forward in iron framed desks which had hard wooden bench seats. The boys and the girls would have been separated in the classroom.

Slates in wooden frames and slate pencils were used by infants, rather than letting them waste pencils and paper when learning to write. The older children would have used dip ink pens and copying books.

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#### Pictured

*Laxton School in 1947, the iron-framed desks would have remained in the school from the time of Frank Willis*





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### Pictured

*These ink wells were found in the School House garden by the present owners*

In a large locked storage cupboard there would probably have been some very sparse teaching resources; perhaps a Bible or two, some cheap reading books, an atlas, a large world map showing the Empire, some exercise books, ink, pens and pencils, the school registers and whatever items Frank Willis wanted to keep secure.

In the Newark Herald in 1901 we read that a certain Tom Baker appeared in court accused of stealing the school keys, six dozen lead pencils and eight shillings worth of savings stamps from that very cupboard in Laxton School. Frank Willis, a witness in the case, said that every Monday morning the children brought pennies to school for Post Office saving stamps. He recognized the writing of Mary and Minnie Saxilby on their stamp forms and he also said that a tin of cocoa, which the police had taken from the accused, resembled one kept in the infants' school.

## WHEN DID THE SCHOOL BECOME A LOCAL AUTHORITY SCHOOL?

In the Return of the Managers to the Education Authority in 1903, the Managers complied with the Education Act of 1902, which required the management and funding of the school to be passed from the Parish and the School Board to the Local Authority, Nottinghamshire County Council.

The School Managers at that time were Rev.Collinson, Chairman of the Managers; Robert Wordsworth, Land Agent for Lord Manvers; John Cook, farmer; George Wetherall, farmer; John Bagshaw, farmer; George Bennett, farmer; and Joseph Merrills, farmer. There were at that time 33 juniors and 20 infants in the school.

This resulted in a reduction in the power of Lord Manvers and the Vicar to dictate how the school was run.

It also meant that in future the Local Authority would have to foot some of the maintenance bills for the buildings.

Perhaps more importantly it left the field open for more direct intervention by government, through the Local Authority, in both the running of the school and in the direction of what was taught.

**THERE WOULD BE MORE DIRECT INTERVENTION BY GOVERNMENT THROUGH THE LOCAL AUTHORITY, IN BOTH THE RUNNING OF THE SCHOOL AND IN THE DIRECTION OF WHAT WAS TAUGHT**



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**Pictured**

*The school for the older children, now Laxton Village Hall*

## **WHAT WAS IT LIKE WHEN FRANK WILLIS FIRST CAME TO LAXTON SCHOOL?**

We can imagine that Frank Willis at twenty eight when he first came to Laxton faced the task of establishing himself in the school and in the village with some enthusiasm. He understood very well both from his own school days in Kensworth village school, and from his time at Upton, that a village school is much more than a place where children learn to read and write.

For the children themselves it is the place where they spend most of their day, where they develop emotionally, making and breaking friendships, where they are educated socially as well as academically and where values and attitudes, which can last a lifetime,

are instilled into them. A village school becomes a centre for village life and when children are involved in social events, parents and grandparents are interested and come along too.

School buildings are an asset for any village and are frequently used for village events. Villages are proud of their schools and Head Teachers have a special place in the village social order.

Head Teachers, themselves, recognize that they have a duty to the village community as well as to their pupils. This was certainly true when Frank Willis was Head Teacher at Laxton, especially as he would have been one of the very few genuinely literate villagers and that in itself would carry certain responsibilities.

In the early years he threw himself into his task and the school reports between 1886 and 1900 show a greatly improved school from the one which Frank Willis had inherited. In 1888 for instance the Government Report awarded the excellent merit grant to the Mixed Juniors and the Infants. Twenty years before in 1866 the school inspectors had reported that under the Headship of Thomas Reynolds the school *“fell far below the low point reached last year.”* Subsequent Head Teachers struggled with unwilling pupils and unsupportive parents.

## SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN THE EARLY DAYS

In the Laxton and Moorhouse Almanac of 1877 Elizabeth Childs, Principal Teacher from 1873 – 1879, actually pleads with parents to send their children to school. This was only nine years before Frank Willis became Head Teacher.

The villagers had little time for education; they saw no need for it as life in the village and on the land had



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## Pictured

*Laxton almanacks  
of the time*

hardly changed since the eighteenth century. School attendance was very poor; children attended only spasmodically if at all, as most children were set to work at a very early age. She then reminded parents that the law now states that no child may work under the age of nine. The fact that she felt it necessary to give the parents this reminder tells us something about the age that children were expected to begin to work on the farm.

There was simply no tradition of education amongst the villagers especially as, despite being illiterate, some farmers had become quite wealthy. What was the point of reading and writing when life was tied into the labour of the farming year? Moreover children provided cheap labour on the farm, and it was not unusual to find children as young as seven labouring on the land.

Edith Hickson said that even when Frank Willis became Head Teacher attitudes had hardly changed:

*“Laxton born and bred (which Mr Willis was not) with little or no education and quite unashamed of being ‘no schollard’, they were intelligent enough in the shrewd idiomatic way which farming develops naturally... ‘Eddication’ was looked upon with some suspicion for it was highly improbable that the parents themselves had ever been to school at all, or only in spasmodic intervals when they were not required to work on the farm.”*

## THE GOVERNMENT TRIES TO GET CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

It was after all only six years before Frank Willis came to Laxton that the Elementary Education Act of 1880 had made elementary education compulsory for all pupils between five and ten. School Attendance Officers had been created to enforce the law and fines had been introduced for those parents who failed to send their children to school regularly.

There can be no doubt that some parents still resented having to send their older children to school with the loss of extra hands and earning capacity which this inevitably meant.

## WHY DID THE CHILDREN STILL NOT ATTEND SCHOOL?

We can see from Frank Willis’ log book that one of the first challenges he faced was absenteeism amongst his pupils, however he adopted a firm approach and achieved rather more success than his predecessors. Boys in the village were still expected to work on the land by their parents, taking their share of heavy labour; a ploughboy, who should have been

## School News from the Parish Almanack 1900

### The Schools.

On February 24th, J. H. Davies, Esq., H.M I., paid a surprise visit to the school. The following Government report was received on April 17th :—Mixed Schools.—The illness of Miss Bennett during the latter part of the year somewhat upset the organization of the school. The work however was all of a very creditable kind. Infants Class—The Infants Class is well taught and cared for.

E. Wilkinson is continued under Article 68 of the code.

E. Wilkinson left us in April to accept a situation at Walesby school where she is doing well.

Mr Bruce Webster, Assistant Inspector, visited the school on June 23rd.

The schools were closed from November 6th until the end of the year owing to an outbreak of scarlet fever.

The New School at Egmonton was opened on Sept. 18th.

During the year the school was opened 416 times, and the following is a list of those who attended best.

St.		St.	
VII.	Barbara Willis..... 416	III.	Emily Weatherall ... 416
	Fanny Moody .. ...415	II.	Ethel Rose ..... 416
VI.	Oscar Willis .....416		John Rose..... 413
	Violetta Rose .... 414	I	Annie Holloway .. ...416
V	Mary Cobb, D..... 404		Maggie Weatherall...414
IV.	Harriet Simpson.. 414		Geo. Small.....412
	Arthur Holloway 410		
	Infants. Ernest Holloway ..... 415		
	Nellie Bagshaw..... 412		
	Wm Small..... 412		
	Mary Saxelby..... 408		

The children had their usual Tea and Treat in the summer, and games at Christmas time

### Pictured

School news from the  
Parish Almanack, 1900

in school, was not an unusual sight. Girls were also expected to help on the farm, as well as to child-mind; sometimes they became skivvies for more affluent families before they left school.

Frank Moody, a pupil of Frank Willis says:

*“A lot of corn was cut by scythe and children were employed to make up bands to tie up the sheaves. After the sheaves had been gathered in it was a common sight to see women and children gleaning.”*

Though Frank Willis had come from a village where this was normal, through education he had himself escaped a life of hard labour on the land and we can imagine that he might have been keen for some of his pupils to do the same.

School attendance was the first step to becoming literate, and if it was necessary to change the culture of the village to achieve regular attendance at the school then, as his log book shows, Frank Willis was determined to do it.

## FRANK WILLIS BEGINS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By 1900 school attendance had improved somewhat and parents were now more accepting of the fact that their children had to attend school, especially as they were fined if their children did not attend regularly. Nevertheless on the 6th August that year we learn that;

*“The following boys are now illegally employed: Tom Cobb, R. Frow, Wm. Laughton and J.W. Kitchen.”*

Presumably, since Frank Willis notes their names in the log book, an official document, these particular parents were visited by the School Attendance Officer. Frank Willis showed no sympathy to the parents who kept their children off school to work, no matter how poor they were.

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## WILLIS SHOWED NO SYMPATHY TO THE PARENTS WHO KEPT THEIR CHILDREN OFF SCHOOL TO WORK, NO MATTER HOW POOR THEY WERE

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On 14th August we find why so many boys were off school:

“The hay harvest has been the cause of several boys’ absence this week.”

Possibly it was cheaper to pay the fine than to hire a labourer to do the boys’ job, and in those days of extreme poverty in the countryside every penny counted.

On 16h July in that year Frank Willis notes that Charles Whitworth attended school after being absent

for four months, presumably to help with the spring sowing and the hay harvest.

He was not alone in being absent for so long however, as R. Frow is also recorded in October of that year as returning to school after an absence of four months.

On the 9th August Frank Willis writes:

*“The weather has greatly improved  
consequently the older boys are all absent  
except two, as the harvest has now begun.”*

Could it possibly have been the two Willis boys who were the only ones not helping with the harvest?



Charles Whitworth's stay in school must have been a short one if he also helped with the harvest. On the 25th May 1901 Frank Willis notes that Charles Whitworth has been absent for a week despite his parents having been fined five shillings. This was quite a sum to be found out of the family budget in those days.

When on the 8th September Rev. Collinson checked the registers, as he was legally bound to do as Chairman of the Managers of the School, he found that six boys were illegally employed. Once again the parents would have been fined, but nevertheless they had chosen to use their children as cheap extra hands on the farm.

The boys were not alone in being kept off school for work; on September 24th 1900 two of Standard Three girls were absent, one helping a farmer to drive sheep to Tuxford and the other "minding baby". Again on the Feb 4th 1901 it is noted that four girls were illegally employed. On 16th October Frank Willis writes "*eleven children were absent today most of them potato picking*". Potato picking was usually carried out by women and children.

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#### Pictured

*A ploughboy at the beginning of the 20th century*

## ENCOURAGING PARENTS TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO SCHOOL

The attendance of the children would have been important to the smooth running of the school as grants were paid to the school depending both on attendance and the national examination results.

School Attendance Prizes were published in the Parish Almanac to encourage parents to send their children to school.

The school was open for 406 half days in 1907 and at the end of the year the following children were given prizes for attendance:

Kathleen Walker	406	Jane Birkitt	406
Maggie Holloway	406	Minnie Bennett	406
John Cree	406	Richard Beckett	406
Richard Cocking	406	Elizabeth Moody	404
Clifford Whitworth	404	Bertha Holloway	402
William Cobb	401	George Whitworth	401

## DID ATTENDANCE BEGIN TO IMPROVE?

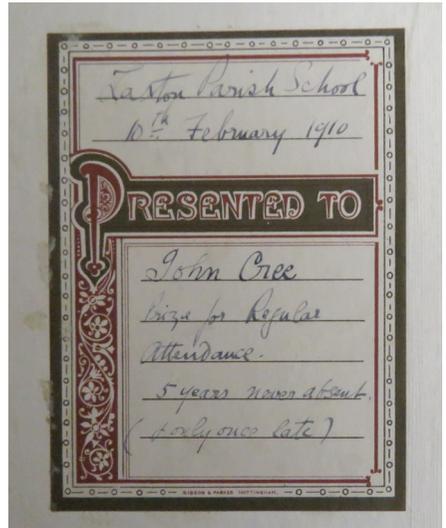
Things were not all black however, on 25th September 1908 there had only been one child absent for half a day for the whole week which caused Frank Willis to make a special note of the event.

On 23rd January 1912 Frank Willis notes with pride that the average attendance had been 60.1 and there were 61 pupils in the school. What a difference from the early days of Frank Willis's headship!

John Cree proved to be a star pupil as far as attendance was concerned. On 7th December 1911 he was granted a special Attendance Certificate:

*“He was admitted to this school in April 1902 and has never been absent during the whole of his school career.”*

This would have been an important event for the Cree Family, the award given in front of the whole school, parents and visitors would have made them very proud. It also shows a dramatic change in the attitudes of the parents towards school attendance and education.



#### Pictured

*The dedication written by Frank Willis in the actual prize given to John Cree*

## OTHER CAUSES OF POOR ATTENDANCE

But sadly again in 1913 we learn:

*“The attendance has been rather irregular during the week owing to heavy thunderstorms.”*

In the days of unmade roads and poor transport getting to school from outlying farms could be almost impossible and snow storms, floods and cold are all mentioned as reasons for the children not being at school. Sickness was another reason for poor attendance and in those days, when the government was just beginning to take an interest in the health of the nation, children were frequently sick.

Frank Willis was however steadily winning the battle and parents began to accept that their children had to attend school regularly.

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“IN THOSE DAYS  
THERE WASN'T  
MUCH WEALTH,  
AND NO-ONE HAD  
HEARD OF THE  
NATIONAL HEALTH.”

Frank Moody,  
writing of his childhood memories

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# SICKNESS TAKES ITS TOLL

## HOME CURES?

Children in those days had to be tough, resilient and hardened against the weather, as they were dressed in whatever clothes and cast offs their parents could provide, which naturally depended on their income. Poor and often damp housing, and sometimes poor nutrition, added to the risk of some children picking up any infection which came their way.

Most mothers would have home-made cures for minor ailments, handed down from mother to daughter over generations. Many women in the village would grow their own herbs and would be knowledgeable about their healing properties.

Joan Rayner, 1920-2004, in recalling her childhood remembered her grandmother, 'Granny Bagshaw', a pupil of Frank Willis, still growing healing herbs and making herbal drinks and poultices from traditional recipes. Druggists and herbalists in the market towns would give advice and dispense pills and powders

for any number of ailments, some efficacious, others merely placebos.

*Instead of doctors and local drug stores,  
They used various herbs for different sores,  
And for a troublesome tooth with no dentist at hand,  
They tied a loop on a long piece of band.*

– Frank Moody

Laxton was actually served by two doctors whose surgeries were at Tuxford, Doctor Whittington and Doctor Homestead, but they were very expensive and calling the doctor out was a rare occurrence and only done in extreme circumstances.

Before 1911 when the National Insurance Act was passed most people relied on paying a few pennies a week into the Laxton Friendly Society in order to pay their medical bills.

Rev. H.A. Martin, concerned for the mothers and children of the village and the high rates of infant and maternal mortality, installed a fully trained midwife in the village almshouses, Mrs Dolby. She no doubt gave advice to mothers about health matters and the care and nutrition of their children.

## GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

The government first began to take an interest in public health, after disease had broken out in the slums of the industrial towns and cities, and after the Boer War had revealed that half of the male population were unfit for military service, mainly due to malnutrition. The government felt obliged to pass laws to improve the health and nutrition of the poor, especially as they were needed to provide labour in an industrial age.

This had an impact on the health of children in school, for instance a programme of vaccinations was introduced.

In 1899 Mr. C.E. Whittington was appointed as Public Vaccinator for the Southwell Union District which included Laxton, and ten Laxton children were vaccinated against smallpox; this was not a great take-up from the villagers, but as the years went on and routine vaccinations were carried out in school more mothers took advantage of the programme.

The importance of cleanliness, hygiene, good food and exercise for good health were recognized for the first time and we find these attitudes reflected in the day to day life of school. Frank Willis, as Head Teacher, would have been required to work with the Medical Officers of Health to help to safeguard the health of the children of Laxton.

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**CLEANLINESS,  
HYGIENE, GOOD  
FOOD AND  
EXERCISE FOR  
GOOD HEALTH  
WERE REFLECTED  
IN THE DAY TO DAY  
LIFE OF SCHOOL**

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## **CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS**

Despite improved care and more understanding of how disease spread, sickness broke out in the village on a regular basis. The draughty, damp housing would not have helped in the 'flu and cold epidemics which were a regular occurrence at that time, or when childhood ailments such as measles and mumps broke out.

The children may not have been much warmer at school than they were at home; Frank Willis complained in 1911 that the new infant fireplace was far too small and it was impossible to get the room warm in the very cold weather of that year.

The children's colds and influenza always caused Ruth Willis distress and she was very frequently absent from school with sore throats, migraines, bronchitis, asthma and rheumatism. Frank Willis on the other hand appears to be robustly healthy and took almost no time off for sickness, even in the

influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 and the heavy snows which accompanied it.

The Education Act of 1907 laid on Local Education Authorities the duty to medically examine all school children and it empowered them to make arrangements for treatment when necessary.

The first medical inspection took place on Friday October 8th 1908 when Dr Handford, who had been appointed School Medical

Officer, spoke highly of the cleanliness of the children. School Medical Officers subsequently visited the school regularly to conduct medicals and to inspect the school premises for health and hygiene issues.

Whilst in 1910 Dr Handford still considered the scholars to be clean, in 1911 when a new medical officer, Dr Hudson, was appointed he said "*the cleanliness of the scholars was not all it should be.*" Perhaps he had higher standards!

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## FRANK WILLIS APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN ROBUSTLY HEALTHY AND TOOK ALMOST NO TIME OFF FOR SICKNESS

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#### Pictured

*Laxton Main Street  
at the beginning of  
the 20th century*

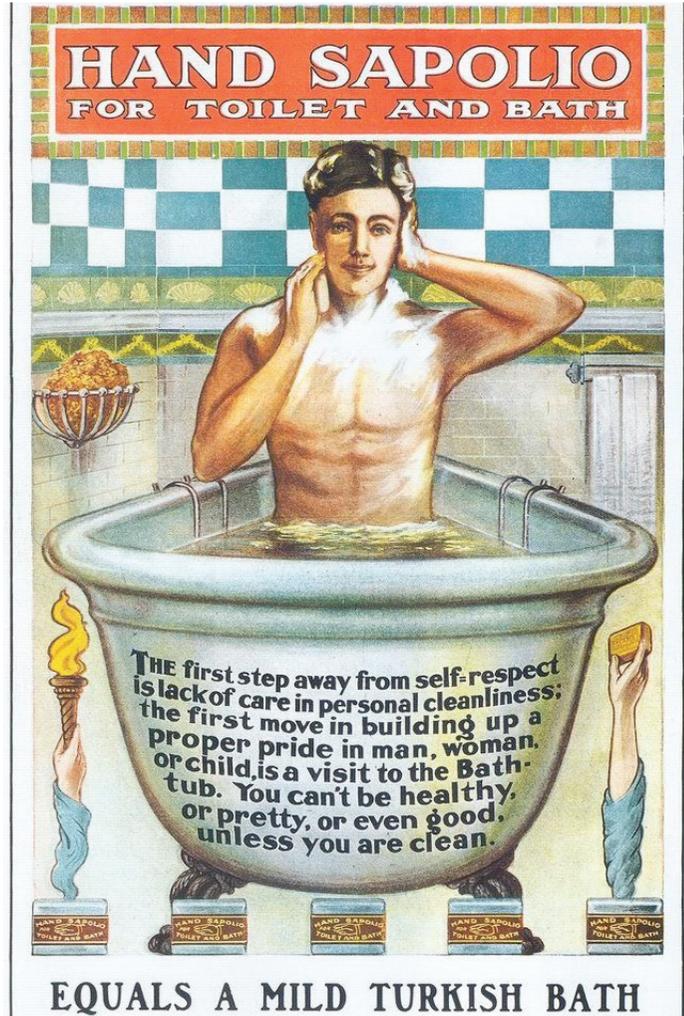
Cleanliness was a major concern of the day it was only a comparatively few years earlier in 1865 that Joseph Lister had demonstrated the link between cleanliness and disease. Frank Willis was obviously aware of Lister's work and on one notable occasion, when many of the children were coughing, he rushed from the room and returned with a bucket of diluted Izal, which he promptly splashed on everything in sight, including the children if they were unlucky!

It is doubtful whether it had much effect on the children's coughs but the classroom must have had a very distinctive smell that day!

Poor sanitation aggravated the problem of sickness in the village; unhygienic earth closets were still used in some homes and neither school building had proper drainage. In correspondence between Rev. Collinson, as Chairman of the Managers, and Mr Wordsworth, Thorsby Estate Manager, we learn that the sanitary tubs in the toilet block of the school were worn out and may well have been leaking.

## Pictured

Advertisement for soap, illustrating the attitudes of the day.



It would have made it almost impossible to satisfactorily clean the non-flush toilets and this must have been a real health hazard. It was not until 1910 that a source of soft, pure water was found at Kneesall and Lord Manvers agreed to have it piped to Laxton.

A school nurse, named as Nurse Barker in 1909, was appointed and she regularly checked the children for fleas, lice, scabies, ticks and worms, all of which

could have been picked up from the animals on the farm. The girls were especially troubled by head lice.

In October 1911 the school nurse found that only 27 of the 34 girls present had clean hair. In 1915 Frank Willis reported that the school nurse found that six of the twenty nine girls present were “*verminous, which amounts to twenty percent!*” he wrote in disgust.

In the Church Almanac of that year the managers of the school told the parents that they hoped to see an improvement in this matter when the next medical inspection took place.

It was not unusual for Dr. Wills, School Medical Officer, to exclude those children who had picked up ring worm on the farm. In 1909 one poor boy was excluded for ring worm and stayed off school for a month, when he returned Dr. Wills examined him again and declared that he had impetigo and immediately excluded him again. In 1918 two brothers in the infant class were excluded as one had ‘a skin disease’, this was possibly scabies or impetigo, both of which were regarded as highly contagious.

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## THE SCHOOL NURSE FOUND THAT SIX OF THE TWENTY NINE GIRLS PRESENT WERE “VERMINOUS”

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### DISEASES AMONGST THE CHILDREN

In May 1912 Dr. Whittington, one of the village doctors from Tuxford, reported to Frank Willis that the two Favill boys had scarlet fever. Frank Willis immediately reported this to Dr. Wills and to the Chairman of the School Managers, Rev. Collinson. The vicar wrote straightaway to the Director of Education.

Dr. Wills wrote to the County Medical Officer of Health and the school was closed at once.

In June, after the school had reopened, Dr. Wills visited to check that all was well; he also decreed that the Favills could not return to school until after the harvest holidays. In September however Dr. Whittington called once again with the news that the Favills now had measles and in fact they did not

return to school until October of that year. Apart from everything else the boys' illnesses must have cost their parents a small fortune in doctors' fees.

Five more children were excluded by Dr Wills after the harvest

holiday because of another case of scarlet fever which had broken out during the holidays. In 1918 three more children, the Quibells, were absent because of scarlet fever.

In 1913 Dr. Holmes held a medical inspection in school. Frank Willis was delighted that the parents had taken more interest than on previous occasions. In the same year Rev. Collinson mentioned in the Parish Almanac that there had been a series of well attended health lectures given in the village. Perhaps this reflects the villagers' anxiety about the scarlet fever epidemic, or perhaps the beginning of a change in attitude by the parents towards a more modern preventive approach to the health of their children.

Things do not improve however for on November 1st 1913 the County Medical Officer, Dr Hanford, closed the school for a month so severe was an outbreak of whooping cough in the village.

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## A SERIES OF WELL ATTENDED HEALTH LECTURES GIVEN IN THE VILLAGE

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In fact whooping cough broke out in the village fairly regularly much to the annoyance of Frank Willis who records:

*“The children have improved only slowly with whooping cough. There is a good deal of coughing in the school which makes the work rather trying.”*

He fails to mention that the children might have found their coughs ‘rather trying’ too. All of the children crowded together in one room, sitting in shared desks, with the big stove on full heat and the windows closed against draughts, it is no wonder that whooping cough spread so rapidly!

In 1919 two children were excluded owing to

a suspected case of diphtheria, a very serious and sometimes fatal disease in those days, which would have meant six weeks isolation for the poor sufferer.

Measles was a notifiable disease at that time and in the days before antibiotics and immunisation it could be a very dangerous disease indeed, highly infectious with terrible side effects.

In 1920 three children from Moorhouse were absent from school with measles which had to be reported to the County Medical Officer and as a consequence the school was once more closed.

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## **IN 1919 TWO CHILDREN WERE EXCLUDED OWING TO A SUSPECTED CASE OF DIPHTHERIA, A VERY SERIOUS AND SOMETIMES FATAL DISEASE**

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## ACCIDENTS IN SCHOOL

Just as today, teachers in those days had to have a working knowledge of first aid, because one thing is certain, put a large number of children together in a playground and accidents will happen despite the best supervision.

### PUT CHILDREN TOGETHER IN A PLAYGROUND AND ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

One boy trapped his hand in the gate and had to be bandaged by Ruth Willis and then sent home. A curtain rail fell on another boy and cut his head very badly, both Mr and Mrs Willis attended to him.

An accident was reported in the Worksop, Retford and Gainsborough Times in 1901; Sam Whitworth ran back to

catch a ball which had been thrown up at the end of a cricket match in school and he fell and broke his arm badly. Frank and Ruth Willis rendered first aid and his parents took him immediately Dr. Whittington at Tuxford. He and his assistant very soon had the bone set. The minor cuts and bruises that happen every day in school are unrecorded, but no doubt the Willises and the other staff would have tended to them on a regular basis.

There was one occasion when the schoolmaster had an accident and lost his dignity completely. He fell down on a very slippery floor when crossing the schoolroom. This happened in front of all of the children. He obviously felt this loss of his dignity keenly as well as giving himself a very nasty jolt.

The slippery floor he declared was a consequence of the church dance held the previous week, when the floor had been waxed with candle grease to enable the feet of the dancers to slide more easily over it.

It is easy to imagine the children stifling giggles at the sight of their master slipping and falling, but since several of them fell too it must have taken the edge off the joke.

*“Although the floor was washed and scrubbed, it has got quite slippery again during the week and it was impossible to get the grease off after the dance last week. Several of the children have fallen and it is impossible to keep the desks in their proper positions.”*

On another occasion Frank Willis was absent from school as he had fallen from Rev. Collinson’s cart, and had broken his collar bone and had concussion. It is worth reflecting that no one in those days claimed compensation for such accidents either in school or in the village street.

Rev. Collinson wrote to Mr Wordsworth:

*“Mr Willis had a bad fall from my cart on Sunday morning – concussion of the brain and a broken collar bone – he is I hope out of danger – but a very narrow escape. Mary Moody is helping in school – for which we are very grateful. I hear Willis has been sleeping a bit today and is going on as well as we can hope at present.”*

Despite the school closures, the outbreak of various diseases and the occasional accidents, there can be no doubt that the health of the children in Laxton School improved whilst Frank Willis was Head Teacher. The health of the nation itself was steadily improving, there had been a reduction in child mortality and there was a greater understanding of how disease could be prevented.

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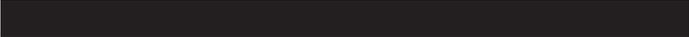
**Pictured**

*A cart passing by  
the churchyard  
entrance, a common  
sight at the time*



“Sorry to say the master had to punish several boys for ill using a chicken in the playground. The ringleader received six strokes on the lower part of the back.”

*Frank Willis on discipline, 1908*



# WHAT WERE THE CHILDREN TAUGHT?

At the start of Frank Willis’s career the government were encouraging schools to teach certain subjects by the payment of a series of grants which were awarded for passes in specified subjects in national examinations. Previously, unbelievably, schools had been free to teach whatever they chose, hence the plaiting schools and the Dame schools of Frank Willis’s childhood, some merely being a vehicle for child labour, whilst others were sometimes no more than child minding institutions.

With the establishment of elementary schools the government decreed that reading, writing, arithmetic and Religious Education should form the basis of the elementary school curriculum, with little else taught initially. Over the time that Frank Willis was Head Teacher in Laxton, however a more modern approach to education was steadily developing nationally, a wider range of subjects began to be taught and more thought began to be given to how children learn.

## THE SCHOOL STAFF

The schoolmaster was supported by an Assistant Teacher, Ruth Willis, and various Pupil Teachers and monitors. Pupil teachers served a four year apprenticeship; then sat a national examination, the Queens Scholarship, before they went to training college.

Frank Willis helped to train a number of Pupil Teachers at the school: Clara Kitchen; Gertrude Gale; Lily Johnson; Florence Bennett; and his own daughter, Barbara Willis.

In 1900 the school staff consisted of the Schoolmaster, Frank Willis; Assistant Teacher for the infants and sewing, Ruth Willis; uncertified teacher, Lily Johnson; Pupil Teacher, beginning her first year, Florence Bennet; monitoress, Barbara Willis, paid £5 a year.

The nearest training centres for teachers were at Lincoln and Sheffield but poor Clara Kitchen, who passed the Queens Scholarship Examination, was unable to attend Lincoln College.

She took charge of Ossington School in 1899 as a Certified Teacher, but in 1890 the vicar brought her temporarily back to Laxton:

*“The Attendance has been very low indeed this week owing to the influenza epidemic, Gertrude Gale has been absent all the week through illness and Lily Johnson has had charge of the infants for the past four days. Clara Kitchen is in the infant room today by order of the Vicar, who considers it illegal for Lily Johnson to have charge during Gertrude Gale’s absence as the third year Pupil Teacher is only seventeen years of age.”*



## WHAT WAS THE DISCIPLINE IN SCHOOL LIKE?

The school day began at nine in the morning and ended at four in the afternoon. Generally speaking one day must have been very much like another for the pupils, most of the time the children sat in silence and were subject to strict, almost military, discipline.

In 1908 Frank Willis wrote:

*“Sorry to say the master had to punish several boys for ill using a chicken in the playground. The ring leader received six strokes on the lower part of the back.” Presumably the lower back is a euphemism for the buttocks, a word which Frank Willis would have thought uncouth. A boy in the 5th Standard had a severe caning. After being frequently reprimanded for his language he was found writing disgraceful language on school material. This boy was sent here from Ossington School as an incorrigible”.*

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### Pictured

*Mr Willis and the older children standing in Main Street*

This happened in 1909 and it shows that Frank Willis was considered to be a strong disciplinarian. Ossington School obviously could not manage the boy, but they had confidence that Frank Willis at Laxton School would manage him despite the fact that he was ‘an incorrigible.’

Later in the year we learn:

*“The behaviour of the older boys has not been satisfactory this week – consequently the master caned the three biggest. All these three have been admitted from other schools.”*

One can only hope that “the three biggest” had been behaving badly, otherwise the punishment would seem to be rather unfair and almost bullying. At the time however corporal punishment was perfectly

acceptable at home and in school.

Frank Willis was merely carrying out the normal and acceptable punishments given in schools at that time. In fact there are rather fewer punishments recorded in Laxton School Log Book than one might expect to see. No doubt Frank Willis relied on the force of his personality to keep order in the classroom.

## FRANK WILLIS RELIED ON THE FORCE OF HIS PERSONALITY TO KEEP ORDER IN THE CLASSROOM

### A STRONG DISCIPLINARIAN

It was the usual practice to transfer children with behavioural problems to schools where it was known that there was someone who could control poor



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#### Pictured

*Laxton schoolboys  
with Mr Willis, 1920*

behaviour. These children it was believed could make a new start in a new environment; schools sometimes even exchanged miscreants, but there is no evidence that Frank Willis ever sent a child to another school. From the comments in his log book he seems much more concerned to keep children in the school, particularly as a great loss of numbers could affect his salary.

Caning was not confined only to the older boys in Laxton School the infant boys were also caned, such a severe punishment for children in their early years is inconceivable today.

There is no record of girls being caned by the master, nor is there any record of any of the female teachers caning children. Usually only the Head Teacher was empowered to use the cane and all such punishments had to be recorded.

Rev. Martin visited the school every week whilst he was vicar and continued to take an interest in it after he retired.

His visits were not always welcomed by the girls, Edith Hickson remembered him pinching their arms if they happened to have holes in the knees of their stockings or the elbows of their dress; an extraordinary punishment by today's standards but accepted by the girls and by their parents in those days.

The girls in Laxton School were not faultless however; on 6th August 1900 it was "a very wet afternoon. Most of the girls kept in for talking".

One girl in Standard 4 was even spoken of as 'troublesome'. Whoever she was her behaviour in school must have been very poor indeed to receive such a mention in the log book, as her actual misdeeds are not recorded it seems likely that she dared to 'answer back", or talked too much in lessons.

## WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN LESSONS?

# SILENCE WAS THE USUAL RULE IN THE CLASSROOM

Silence was the usual rule in the classroom, though whispered conversations no doubt often took place. Children were not encouraged to discuss their work, or ask each other questions and they were certainly forbidden to talk about anything except the lesson they were having.

On one occasion however Frank Willis actually spoke of an arithmetic lesson being noisy and said he had to reprimand the boys, this was after a visit by the vicar who had helped with the arithmetic lesson.

Whilst a great deal of emphasis was put upon Religious Education and learning one's letters and numbers, there would also be a little drawing, or tracing, chiefly of maps, and some geometry for the boys. The girls were taught sewing by Mrs Willis.

Geography and History would possibly have been given half an hour each day.

There was little thought given to continuity, lesson planning or how children learn and the timetable could be abandoned at any time to do a lesson on anything that had arisen during the day.

Rote learning was the basis of the whole teaching method; learning by constant repetition and chanting of sometimes little understood facts, poems or multiplication tables.

Poetry had to be learned by heart and Edith Hickson, in her eighties, could still remember the poems of Longfellow, Tennyson and Spencer as well as passages from Shakespeare which she had learned at school, recitation was

regarded as a great skill. How many hours must the children have spent chanting those poems over and over again!

The children spent a great deal of their time copying. It began in the infants' class copying their letters on to their slates.

The Upper school copied passages from text books into their copying books; these could be from literature, history, geography or biology. Generally in schools at this time little attention was paid to whether the children understood such passages, neat and tidy writing was the object of the exercise.

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# **ROTE LEARNING WAS THE BASIS OF THE WHOLE TEACHING METHOD; LEARNING BY CONSTANT REPETITION AND CHANTING OF SOMETIMES LITTLE UNDERSTOOD FACTS**

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## WERE THERE ANY INTERESTING LESSONS?

Certain lessons were possibly more interesting; Edith Hickson particularly remembered the singing lessons, which must have livened up an otherwise pretty dull day. She especially enjoyed the patriotic songs of the war years 'The Soldiers of the Queen' and 'When borne by the Red White and Blue' were

highly favoured in the Boer War (1899-1902).

The children also learned to harmonise the sentimental songs of the day which were found in the National Song Book. She comments that the same songs were repeated year after year.

There was obviously a touch of showmanship in Frank Willis's personality, not a bad attribute for a teacher who wants to generate interest and curiosity in pupils. No doubt when

he read to them, lectured them and played the piano to them he made good use of his dramatic ability.

Object lessons were also possibly more interesting for the children; an item would be brought into the classroom and would form the basis of a lesson usually in Science. The object would be touched and examined by the children and instruction would be given about its qualities, uses and relevance.

Unfortunately there seems to have been very little coherence or continuity in such lessons and the

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**“THE MASTER  
CONDUCTED WITH  
GENTLY WAVING  
ARMS, BATON IN  
HAND, IN A MANNER  
EQUAL TO THAT OF  
ANY PROFESSIONAL  
CONDUCTOR**

**EDITH HICKSON**

---

children would have been given little or no opportunity to question and develop their understanding.

Frank Willis records that on one occasion he took the children out into Hall Lane for an object lesson; no doubt the children were examining, identifying, drawing and labelling the wild plants which grew there.

In July 1901 the children had a competition for the best collection of wild flowers and Mrs Collinson, the vicars wife, gave prizes to the children who made the ten best bunches.

Nature Study seems to be the favoured branch of science which was taught.

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## CHILDREN HAD LITTLE OR NO OPPORTUNITY TO QUESTION AND DEVELOP THEIR UNDERSTANDING

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### SEWING LESSONS

We have a record of Mrs Willis's Sewing Syllabus for the year, the same syllabus was taught year after year with only minor variations. The families of the girls were no doubt grateful for the skills she taught the girls and for the garments which they made.

**Standard 2:** *Dolls' garments; aprons, knickers, dresses. The knitting of small articles such as dolls' scarves.*

**Standard 3:** *A garment, e.g. a Magyar dress. Knitting hot water bottle covers and slippers.*

**Standards 4 to 6:** *Garments; dresses, blouses, skirts, boys' tunics. Using a sewing machine to make a pinafore from old garments for the Red Cross Sale. The use of bias binding, pleating and gathering.*

At the end of the year she comments:

*“This subject has been held over when the children are taken to the garden for outdoor work. They have garments in hand and have also done work in renovation making decorative pinafores from old summer dresses for the Red Cross Sale.”*

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## MRS WILLIS WAS TRYING TO GIVE THE GIRLS THE SKILLS THEY WOULD NEED TO MAKE USEFUL, WEARABLE GARMENTS IN THE FUTURE

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Ruth Willis does not seem to approve of the girls needlework being left unfinished, even if gardening was a priority.

In 1913 a Needlework Inspector, Edith S. Hills, visited the school to inspect Mrs Willis’s lesson. She was not impressed with the miniature garments which the girls were making and Mrs Willis promised that in future the girls would learn to cut out and make full sized garments.

Edith Hills said however that the style of sewing was good and that the hemming deserved special praise.

Mrs Willis was trying to give the girls the skills they would need to make useful, wearable garments in the future, and to be frugal in their use of old clothes.

The making of miniature garments was the first step towards cutting out and sewing their own clothes, moreover the garments used less material and could possibly be used as dolls clothes and perhaps even sold as such at the Red Cross Sale.

## WHAT SORT OF LESSONS DID FRANK WILLIS GIVE?

We have some idea of the content of the children's lessons in 1900 from Frank Willis's summary of what has been taught during that year. Recitation pieces for the five and six year olds to learn by heart were chosen from Longfellow.

The seven and eight year olds had to struggle with 'Gelert' by Spencer, whilst the rest of the Upper School learned passages from 'The Merchant of Venice'.

In Geography Standards 1, 2 and 3 studied England, whilst Standards 4 to 6 studied Europe. There is no mention made of the rest of the world. The Class Subjects show an interesting distinction between what was considered suitable for girls and what was considered to be a boys' subject; they all did English and Arithmetic, but whilst the boys did Science and Geography the girls did needlework.

Drill, a physical exercise routine, took place once each week and the boys sometimes did dumbbell practice in the yard. This was part of the new awareness of healthy living. One wonders how much exercise the children of Laxton needed at that time as most of them were also working out in the fields.

The Religious Knowledge inspection of 1900 shows that the children had to know by heart passages of Scripture from the Old and the New Testaments, as well as the Catechism and the Prayer Book.

They were given written tests and inspected regularly by the Diocesan Inspector in Religious Knowledge, as it was considered to be such a very important subject, particularly as Laxton was a Church School.



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## Pictured

Laxton schoolgirls, 1920

The Inspector summarized by saying;

*“The school throughout appears to have been very well taught and the children answered generally very well, the First Division for such little ones very readily indeed. The tone of the school was reverently good and the singing nicely done.”*

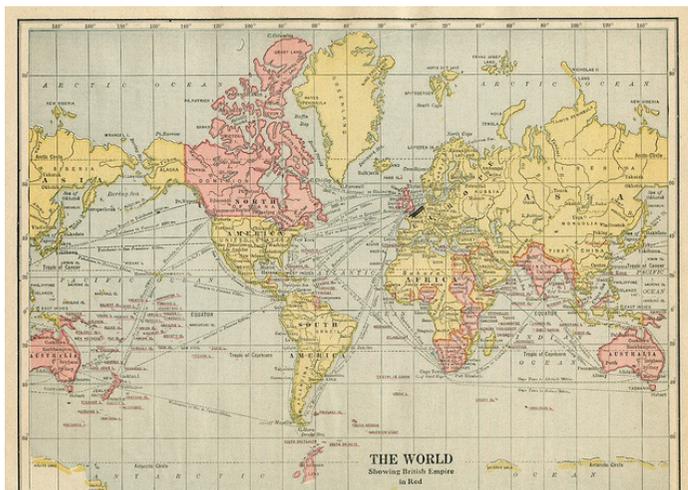
In fact throughout Frank Willis’ time at the school Religious Knowledge was given great emphasis. The Head Teacher and the vicar worked together to instruct the children in all aspects of Bible study and Church of England dogma.

The vicar, as Chairman of the Managers of the School, was closely involved in all aspects of school life. Rev. Martin and Rev. Collinson both visited the school frequently and on occasions taught the children themselves.

In 1909 Frank Willis records with great pride that “Muriel Moody and Winifred Moody have twice during the year gained quarterly prizes by answering the questions set in The Church Evangelist.”

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

Giving to others and working for community and country were always emphasised; the girls for instance were encouraged to use their sewing skills to support the soldiers fighting for Britain. On 23rd April 1901 an extra afternoon of knitting was granted to most of the girls as they were knitting caps and scarves for the soldiers in the Boer War in South Africa.



### Pictured

*A map of the British Empire, frequently used in schools at the time*

The children were often given instruction on important news items of the day, examples were the death of Queen Victoria and the Coronation of Edward VII in 1901; the 1901 census when Frank Willis was Enumerator for the village; the end of the Second Boer War in 1902, (when the children paraded around the village waving flags and singing songs); the beginning of the Great War in 1914; the death of

Earl Roberts in 1914, regarded by Frank Willis as one of the greatest military leaders of the day; and on the end of the Great War and the terms of the Armistice.

On the day the news came to the village that the Great War was over the children led by their teachers paraded around the village singing patriotic songs.

## WAS THERE ANY CHANCE OF CONTINUING YOUR EDUCATION AFTER YOU LEFT SCHOOL AT 13?

A night school for young men had been established by Frank Willis in 1900 in the Parish Reading Rooms, so that the young men of the village could continue learning after their school days were over; it met in Autumn and Spring to fit in with the farming year. The young men would attend after they finished their day's work. Sometimes they were taught basic skills and at other times they were given lectures and lantern slides which it was hoped would broaden their minds. It was not considered necessary for young women to be so well educated; their life would be bound by looking after their husband, their children and their home and all of that they could learn at their mother's knee.

In 1900 the vicar wrote *"there has been a most successful night school conducted by Mr Willis under the Education Board and the County Council."*

In the Retford and Gainsborough Times in January 1901 it was reported that the young men in Laxton Continuation Class gave an entertainment in the school room to raise money for the Prize Fund for the evening school. The vicar, Rev. Collinson, presided, Frank Willis conducted the choir and the glee singing and Harold Willis, Frank's elder son, played the piano. Rev. Martin, who had by then retired, gave a donation.

Bruce Webster, Assistant County Inspector, visited the night school on January 28th 1905, as a consequence of his visit the Director of Education wrote to the Managers of the school saying that *“The Committee were glad to notice that the class received interesting and useful instruction... the attendance was very good for the size of the village”*.

Quite how many young men attended is not known but on the 10th October that same year the Rev. Cyril Walker gave a slide show on Italy after which Rev. Collinson wrote in the Almanac:

*“It is hoped that members will be as punctual as possible and that attendance will not fall below eight on two consecutive nights otherwise the class will have to close by order of the County Council.”*

## THE ATTITUDES AND VALUES ENCOURAGED IN THE CHILDREN

In 1906 a government inspection carried out by Mr Bruce Willis HMI reported that Laxton Elementary School continued satisfactorily, *“The teaching is intelligent and successful and the children respond well and make good progress”*. It was noted that the new infants’ desks were a great improvement on the old gallery which had by then been removed.

The children were taught to respect their elders and those perceived as their betters; boys learned how to doff their caps and tug their forelocks; girls how to curtsy to their betters. They had to curtsy or touch their caps to the vicar of the day and naturally they were expected to do the same to the aristocracy. They stood in silence when visitors entered the



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## Pictured

*The marriage of  
Hubert Argles to Lady  
Sibell Pierrepoint*

classroom and they always called their schoolmaster 'sir'. The social order was rigid and set and no one questioned it, or questioned their place in that order.

The clergy had high social standing in the village; Rev. Martin was believed to be rich and Rev. Collinson to have connections with the aristocracy.

The schoolmaster, neither rich, nor with connections was respected for his intellectual ability, his leadership and his organisational powers. The village hierarchy also included the wealthier farmers who served on the various committees in the village.

*“Those of us who were born in the early years of the 20th century can remember our close understanding and respect for the 4th Earl Manvers , and his family.”*

*- Frank Moody  
Former pupil of the school*

Prizes were handed out by Lady Elinor Denison in 1907 and Lady Cicily Pierrepont, who took a particular interest in the school, in 1908. The children were taught to show due deference to the aristocracy. On the 5th February 1908 Frank Willis records that:

*“The Annual Prize Distribution took place this afternoon. The prizes were distributed by Lady Cicily Pierrepont. There was also a good attendance of parents and friends. The scholars gave a short entertainment which included an operetta entitled The ‘Gipsies Holiday’.”*

Frank Willis had certainly had an impact on the school and on the village. Education was obviously valued by some of the parents since they attended

the school prize day; attendance at the school had improved dramatically and what a stroke of genius to invite Lady Denison and Lady Pierrepont, daughter of the 4th Earl Mansfield and much respected by the villagers, to endorse all that Frank Willis had tried to do in the school by giving out school prizes for good work, punctuality and attendance.

According to the annual inspections the school continued satisfactorily in the coming years. At last in 1908 some much needed repairs were carried out on the school buildings and the drainage was sorted.

By 1913 Mr Payne, an Assistant County Inspector, was able to write about the school.

*“The children behave well and the relations between them and their teachers leaves little to be desired. The work proceeds earnestly, steadily on generally suitable lines and with generally creditable measure of success.*

*As was recently pointed out however there are various ways in which the efficiency of the school can be increased. The Infant teacher (Barbara Willis at that time) discharges her difficult task in a kindly and caring manner. If she is still to have Standard 1 in addition to the infants the children under 5 years of age should be excluded, as it is obviously impossible for one teacher to keep four distinct divisions of scholars constantly and usefully employed.*

*Some hopper windows should be fitted in both buildings and the cloakroom accommodation should be improved. In future no new scholars may be admitted under 5 according to instructions from H.M.S.”*

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**THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE WILLIS FAMILY HAD A GREAT IMPACT ON THE CHILDREN OF THE VILLAGE AND ON THE WAY EDUCATION IN FUTURE WAS VIEWED BY THE PARENTS.**

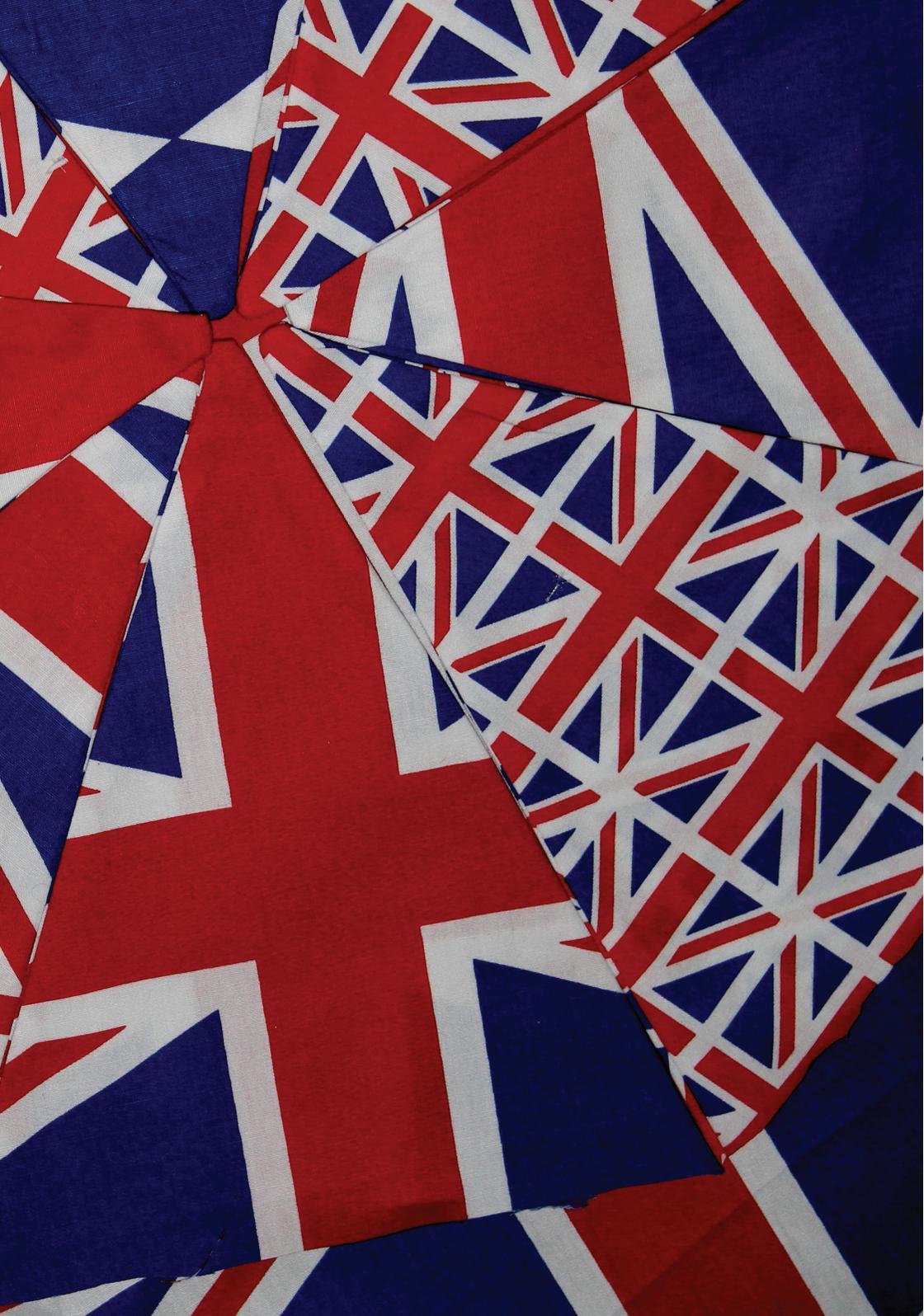
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## **RUTH WILLIS RETIRES**

At the end of January 1915 Ruth Willis, aged sixty one, resigned her post as Certified Assistant Teacher which she had held since October 1890. Her poor health had not prevented her from giving twenty five years service to Laxton School.

Many Laxton women were grateful in future years for the sewing and knitting skills which she had taught them. She had been a constant support to her husband in school and in all other aspects of his busy life, a dedicated member of the village community, she had brought up her three children in the school house and she left her daughter, Barbara, to follow in her footsteps in school.

It was during these years that the school was frequently awarded excellent merit grants, and inspectors referred to the good attendance of the pupils and their excellent achievements. There is no doubt that the Willis family had a great impact on the children of the village and on the way education in future was viewed by the parents.





# LESSONS AND ACTIVITIES IN THE GREAT WAR

## WHAT WAS THE GENERAL ATTITUDE IN SCHOOL TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR?

When reading the Head Teacher's Log book for these years it might seem that Frank Willis was almost obsessed with the glorification of war. The children were given lessons on the conduct of the war, they sang military songs, marched about and waved flags and they were encouraged to play a full part in the war effort. It must be remembered however that Britain had been involved in one conflict or another for the best part of Frank Willis's life.

War must have seemed a natural state for his generation who had after all played their part in building the British Empire and who were prepared to fight to both keep and defend it. Empire Day was marked by special lessons, half days off school and the raising of the flag above the church.

In 1915 the First Class, the infants, were given lessons on war whenever it was geography or history on the time table. Presumably they were taught about how the war progressed, where the front line was, the

names of the generals and where the battles took place.

On February 2nd 1916 Frank Willis gave the first class a lesson on the zeppelin raid which had taken place over the Midland Counties the night before.

All of which would be considered unsuitable content for the early years curriculum of today. It is difficult for us

to imagine how the whole country at that time was wrapped up in the idea of the righteousness and the glory of the Great War.

In October 1917 the children were taken out of school to watch an airship pass over Laxton and no doubt there was a following lesson in the classroom afterwards.

During the Great War the children were taught that they had an important part to play in the war effort. Indeed in March 1915 a letter was sent from Shire Hall Nottingham asking schools to facilitate children in helping with agriculture. Many farm workers were at the front so older children had to help with the work of the farm, though Frank Willis expected this to be done out of school hours!

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## DURING THE GREAT WAR THE CHILDREN WERE TAUGHT THAT THEY HAD AN IMPORTANT PART TO PLAY IN THE WAR EFFORT

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# HOW DID THE GOVERNMENT AND THE LOCAL AUTHORITY VIEW CHILDREN IN THE WAR?

In 1915 the school managers received a letter from County Hall, making it clear that rural schools were to encourage older children to help on the farm:

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*Shire Hall,  
Nottingham.  
March 2nd 1915*

## *Employment of Children in Agriculture*

*The Managers of the Schools in the County are doubtless aware that the Committee are being asked to facilitate the employment of children on the land during the present shortage of labour.*

*Children of 13 years of age upon the application of their parents may take up employment in agriculture. Certificates will be issued from this office to such children exempting them from further attendance at school.*

*In cases where farmers require labour in consequence of the War no objection will be taken by the Committee to children between 12 and 13 years of age leaving school temporarily to assist farmers. Such children may only be employed in work suitable to their age and physique and at a reasonable wage.*

## DID LAXTON CHILDREN HELP WITH AGRICULTURE IN THE WAR?

In April 1914 a Mr Wallace from Kingston Agricultural College visited school in regard to the boys gardening. He followed this with a further visit on the 7th July to inspect what the boys had done.

The boys worked hard in the school gardens, and other underused village gardens, growing potatoes and other vegetables to help to feed the village during the war. In 1917 Frank Willis records that *“an unoccupied garden has been taken over by the master and the boys have planted it with potatoes”*.

Then a few days later:

*“At the request of the Parish Council the master and the elder boys have planted Mrs Moody’s garden allotment with potatoes. Her husband is in the army and she is unable to get a man to do the work. This is the second plot the boys have planted with potatoes in addition to their ordinary school gardening.”*

Six boys even turned out with Frank Willis one weekend in 1918 to clear thistles from the moor. Mr Spink, Acting Agent in Mr. Argles absence, had written to Frank Willis asking if he would be prepared to supervise a group of boys clearing the thistles and offering to pay for the labour. On the 2nd November 1917 Frank Willis replied:

*“I am making arrangements to take a party of boys to attend to the thistles on the Moor next Saturday. I shall probably not be able to get a sufficient number to finish the work in one day, but will do the best I can.”*

The boys perhaps showed some enthusiasm when they learned that Mr Spink was prepared to pay for the labour.

Considering the need for extra help on the farms and the fact that the government encouraged older children to help with farming, it is hardly surprising that during the war years so many children were off school for hay making and harvest.

## **WHAT ELSE DID THE CHILDREN DO FOR THE WAR EFFORT?**

There was a National Blackberry Scheme in 1918 in which school children were given time out of the classroom to collect blackberries which were then sent to jam making factories as part of a government initiative to try to improve the nutrition of the nation.

On three separate occasions a hundred pounds, a hundred and seventy eight pounds and a hundred and fifty four pounds were sent from Laxton School to an agent at Tuxford who sent the fruit on to the jam factories. Children had three afternoons off to collect the fruit with their teachers and they were paid one penny for each pound of blackberries they collected.

In 1917 the government also encouraged school children to collect conkers for the war effort, ostensibly to be milled and mixed with grain for animal food. Children from all over the country became involved and were paid 7s and 6d for every hundredweight collected. Some of the children from Laxton School might have joined in this effort, especially as there was mixed woodland at Kneesall and Egmanton, though it is not recorded as a school effort.

Unfortunately there were more conkers collected than trains to transport them. This led to rotting piles of horse chestnuts being left at railway stations.

Letters of complaint in the Times feared that children would be discouraged by the lack of interest in their efforts. Three thousand tons did get through however to the Synthetic Products Company at Kings Lynn

and were used to replace the grain used in the production of acetone, a component of cordite which was a propellant for shells and bullets.

Perhaps the most successful of these initiatives was the National Egg Collection for wounded soldiers in France. Frank Willis records that on September 25th Mr Frank Bollwell, the local manager for the National Egg Collection, called at the school. The school would have been one of the

centres for the collection of eggs. In 1914 the children collected ten dozen eggs for wounded soldiers in France and they undertook to collect every fortnight whilst the war lasted.

The girls once more set off in their sewing lessons to knit caps, socks and scarves for soldiers and sailors. They also now added sewing sandbags for the men in the trenches to the collection of items they sent to the front.

All of the children were encouraged to write to the soldiers who were fighting for their country.

## THE CHILDREN'S SAVINGS HELP THE WAR EFFORT

On the 15th January 1915 a lesson was given to the children on saving to help the government.

# CHILDREN WERE ENCOURAGED TO WRITE TO THE SOLDIERS WHO WERE FIGHTING FOR THEIR COUNTRY

The lesson must have been a successful one because by 1918 Laxton children had collected £394 through the school in National Savings Certificates, not an inconsiderable sum in those days.

The children paid fifteen shillings and six pence for a pound certificate. They brought pennies to school to buy stamps which were then saved up on a card to buy savings certificates which were issued through the post office. Some of this money went towards Tank Week at Nottingham, when one of the latest war weapons, a tank, was on show.

The tank arrived in Nottingham on January 20th 1918 and was driven through the streets, escorted by the Nottingham Volunteers, to the front of the Corn Exchange where it stayed for a week. The public were encouraged to come to see it and to buy War Bonds and National Savings Certificates in Exchange Hall.

This was a government initiative to encourage folk to invest in tanks which they believed might eventually help to win the war for Britain. The children of Laxton would no doubt have been proud that their savings had gone towards building a tank.

## **WHO WERE THE BELGIAN REFUGEES?**

In December 1914 and September 1915 the school admitted two children who were refugees from Belgium; Herman van Battenburg aged six years and Harriet van Battenburg, aged five years. Their father, Herman, had been a lawyer in Ypres and presumably the family had fled because of the terrible fighting which had taken place in that area and the German occupation of their country.

Prior to their arrival both Frank and Ruth Willis had been busy on the Retford Belgian Refugee Committee organising housing, schools and jobs



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### Pictured

*Painting of Cross Hill,  
Laxton by Herman  
van Battenburg*

for these displaced people and the parishioners of Laxton pledged to provide a home for the family, which they promised to maintain for as long as the war should last. They provided a cottage in the village partly funded by village donations.

Frank Willis instructed the children on the role of Belgium in the war and on the bravery of the Belgian people. On 6th January 1915 Mr van Battenburg, who had by now settled with his family in Laxton, visited the school to thank the pupils for their kindness to his children at Christmas. The school children had provided Christmas presents for the Belgian children who had presumably arrived in this country without any toys or belongings at all.

How good a time the van Battenburgs had of it is difficult to judge. Herman van Battenburg could not practise law in England so he had to take casual labour on the estate and the family were forced to mainly live on charity. Rev. and Mrs. Collinson wrote to Mr. Argles, the Estate Manager, more than once asking if work could be found for him and also asking

for free firewood to heat the Belgian refugees' cottage.

In 1915 Mrs. Collinson wrote to Argles asking if work could be found in the woods for van Battenburg, who had been employed during the harvest by R. Wilkinson and S. Johnson, however that work would dry up when the harvest was over.

Subscriptions from the villagers towards the keep of the refugees were diminishing with people using any excuse to stop paying, including they are "too much with the Willises."

There were a number of newspaper articles claiming that the majority of Belgian refugees in Britain at this time did not try to fit in, or try to mix with their hosts, or try to adapt to the English way of life. It is certainly true that later on some of the Belgians, who were afraid of losing their own culture, established their own schools. It has to be said however that the van Battenburgs stayed faithful to Laxton School, possibly because of the friendship they had established with the Willises.

Rev. Collinson had cause to admonish the residents of Laxton in the Parish Almanac, pointing out that the Belgians were our guests and that we owed them a debt of honour for the way they had conducted themselves when their country was invaded by Germany.

Herman van Battenburg was not keen on working in the woods to fell trees as he feared it might be too much for him. Mrs Collinson was led to comment that he was "quite difficult to suit". Eventually, however, Argles found him the sort of light work which was more suited to him.

In 1918 the Belgian refugee family left Laxton to take a house in Tuxford, though the children continued to attend Laxton School until the family returned to Belgium after the war was over.

## OSCAR WILLIS GIVES A LESSON

Perhaps the saddest lesson which was given to the children, though they would not have realised it at the time, was given by Oscar Willis who in December 1915 gave a lesson on the war to the whole school.

Oscar was by now a teacher in Birmingham, having completed his Pupil Teacher training at the Mount School in Newark and then gone on to Saltley Training College, where he gained a distinction in Mathematics.

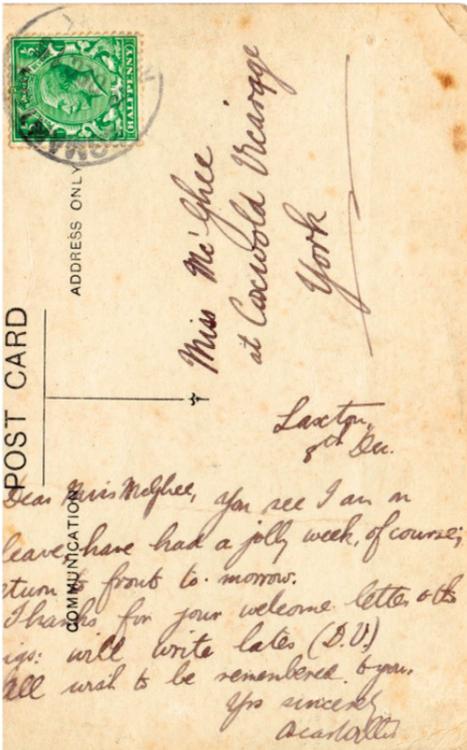
Even though teachers were exempt from military service, he had volunteered to fight for his country almost as soon as the war started. He went out to France at the beginning of March 1915 and came home on leave in the December.

Whilst he was visiting his parents before returning to the front, he spoke to the school. Oscar probably appeared in his uniform and gave a lesson on "The English Soldier's Equipment at the Front."

The children would have viewed him as a hero and his father must have been very proud of his brave son. The great tragedy was that only six months later Oscar Willis was killed on 1st July 1916 at the Battle of Albert in France, on the very first day of the first major thrust out of the trenches.

He was at the head of a party carrying ammunition for the machine guns and was wounded immediately on reaching the parapet; he probably fell into a shell hole and died there. We can only imagine the sorrow of his parents at the death of their youngest child who had been born and educated in Laxton.

Fortunately their elder son, Harold, who was a sergeant with the Leicester Regiment during the war, survived to return to his teaching post in Leicester.



**Pictured**

To Miss McGhee at  
Coxwold Vicarage,  
York, postmarked 8th  
December 1915.

Laxton

8th Dec

Dear Miss McGhee,

You see I am on leave have had a jolly week, of course; return to the front to-morrow.

Thanks for your welcome letter & the cig: will write later (D.V.). All wish to be remembered to you.

Yours sincerely  
Oscar Willis

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## Pictured

*Joe Moody, a village farmer, in full uniform. The children would have been used to seeing their relatives as soldiers*



## THE CHILDREN REMEMBER THE MEN WHO HAD DIED IN THE WAR

On July 2nd 1917 floral tributes were arranged in school in loving memory of the former scholars who had died in the Great War. Only one year after Oscar's death Frank Willis must have suffered great emotional pain as he added his son's name to the list of those who had fallen:

**Charles Whitworth:** *Died in Gallipoli.*

**George William Saxelby:** *Died in France.*

**Oscar Potter Willis:** *Died in France.*

**William Laughton:** *Died in France*

**George Bagshaw:** *Died a POW in Germany.*

**Thomas Cobb Dolby:** *Wounded and missing in Mesopotamia, (later reported dead).*

For the families concerned their loss would never be forgotten. The children in school would have known and possibly been related to the young men who died. This day of mourning in school would have had genuine relevance for the children as well as for their schoolmaster.

At last the war ended in 1918 and for two days the school time table was totally forgotten:

*"The Time Table has not been followed today – A considerable part of the time has been spent in singing patriotic songs and talking about the end of the Great War."*

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OUR SCHOOLDAYS WERE HAPPY  
BUT PASSED VERY QUICK  
THE ONLY SAD MEMORIES  
WHEN HAVING THE STICK  
WE PLAYED 'FOX AND HOUNDS'  
AND CLIMBED UP TREES  
KEPT MOTHERS BUSY  
PATCHING OUR KNEES.

A poem taken from 'Our Little World'  
by Frank Moody, former pupil of Frank Willis.

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# THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF OUR LIVES

## WAS SCHOOL ALWAYS SO DULL?

When reading about the darkly painted classroom, the somewhat limited curriculum and the severe punishments given to the children, it is easy to imagine that school life at that time might have been a very unhappy experience indeed. It is doubtful however that most of the children concerned would have agreed with that. School for some may have been a necessary evil, but for others it was a respite from the hard work expected from them at home.

In the early years of Frank Willis's headship child labour was still central to agriculture and parents may well have been harder task masters than Frank Willis. There would be little time in the home to let children sit and draw, read, sing songs, or recite poetry, the farm work had to be done!

Frank Willis's pupils were however acquiring skills that were unknown to most of their parents and we can imagine they took some delight in that.

They were learning new and exciting things about the world beyond the farm and beyond the village. From the turn of the century attitudes towards education began to change and slowly people began to regard education as more important than the jobs the children were required to do at home.

Their school treats, celebrations, prizes and trips out would be remembered for all of their lives. There were regular days holidays granted for ploughing matches, for Feast Week, for polling days, for Empire Day and for various celebrations. They trooped out of school to the Dovecote to see the Hunt, or to watch an airship pass over Laxton. There was the opportunity to join in communal singing or organized games and the boys enjoyed their cricket matches.

## CHILDREN GAIN PRIZES

Imagine the pride of those children who gained special prizes, for instance in 1900 for completing excellent arithmetic papers, Violetta Rose, Annie Pearson, Mabel Wetherall, Richard Frow, Ethel Rose and George Cobb.

Richard Frow managed this success despite his long absences from school when he was required to work on the land.

In an RSPCA essay competition in 1914 Maggie Johnson gained 1st prize, Wilfred Moody gained 2nd prize and John Walker gained a certificate of merit. Their parents would have been so proud and the children themselves would have been delighted.

Milly Price, daughter of the publican, passed a County Council Candidates written examination for a scholarship in 1905 and went to Newark Grammar School for the oral exam in July. This would be seen as a great achievement for Milly and for the school.

All of these individual successes plus the success of the school as a whole, frequently gaining a special merit grant after His Majesty's Inspector's visits, would have helped to boost the morale of the school creating an excellent atmosphere in which pupils could thrive and enjoy their school life.

## WHAT WERE THE SCHOOL CONCERTS LIKE?

Frank Willis was a gifted musician and when he led the children in song we can imagine the life and energy they put into singing such old classics as "The Jolly Miller" and "Soldiers of the Queen." How much enjoyment they actually got from singing "Begone Dull Sloth" is questionable, as Frank Willis taught it as a counter measure to Standard 2's poor results in the National Examination of 1900! This was a musical opportunity they would have missed had they been labouring in the fields.

The concerts which Frank Willis organised were well attended and popular. They took weeks to prepare and were important occasions for the children and in the life of the village.

A stage and a green room were erected in the schoolroom and chairs were set out for the parents and guests. Playbills and tickets were made and sold beforehand, a doorkeeper was chosen and Frank Willis acted as compere on the night.

The items on the programme were carefully chosen to suit the performers; we read of boys dressed up as performing bears; girls reciting amusing ditties; and the whole school harmonizing together sentimental and patriotic songs. One musical item which was very well received by the parents and by Lady Cecily Pierrepont was entitled "The Gipsies Holiday."

Lady Cecily, Lady Denison and Mrs. Wordsworth are all mentioned as attending prize days and concerts. In a concert given in 1901, which Lady Cecily attended, the programme was so successful that there were cheers given for Frank and Ruth Willis. The children's costumes may well have been made by Ruth Willis.

In 1914 Lady Cecily was warmly welcomed by the parents when she distributed the school prizes. The children gave a concert singing together in harmony, individuals sang solos and there were recitations by specially chosen pupils. Lady Cecily was impressed by the standard of the performance and she praised the children for their good behaviour and their good attendance. There was always a holiday granted for the the annual prize day as a reward for the children's hard work in school.

## WHAT WERE SCHOOL 'TREATS'?

The school treats, or parties, were anticipated with great excitement, they took place annually in the Parish Room, or the vicarage itself, at the end of August, just before the Harvest Holiday. There was always a Christmas party and the children were given parties for national and village celebrations.

Edith Hickson recalling the school treats remembered plum cake, seed cake, jelly, blancmange, tarts, cheesecakes and buns being served. She tells us that they played musical chairs, blind man's bluff, postman's knock and 'Here we come a gathering'. On such occasions Frank Willis was given help with the organisation and supervision of the parties by the village women. At the Christmas party a real Christmas tree was set up, decorated with Chinese lanterns and hung with presents for every child:

*“The Christmas Tree was held in the Parish Room on Tuesday evening. The Distant children and Infants went directly after school and the others at 6.30. Each child received two presents and a bag containing cake, ginger bread etc. The Vicar’s kindness was thoroughly appreciated.”*

## DID THE CHILDREN TAKE PART IN VILLAGE CELEBRATIONS?

The Coronation of Edward VII on June 26th 1901 had to be cancelled due to his illness, but there was no time to cancel all of the Laxton festivities:

*“The news of the postponement of the Coronation, owing to the king’s serious illness arrived too late to stop all the festivities. As the school room was used on Thursday and Friday the school was closed the whole week.”*

Edith Hickson says that a gloom settled on the village and there were fears that the king was *“that bad he might die”*.

In August tea and sports were once again organised for the actual Coronation which did take place and as darkness came a torchlight procession of men, youths and boys two abreast marched up and down the village streets. This would have been an amazing sight before the days of street lighting.

Empire Day May 24th was an annual celebration for the children to enjoy; in 1904 for instance the children had a holiday in the morning in order to assemble at the church for the raising of the flag. Afterwards they had games in Old Hall Grounds, near the church, then in the afternoon they had cricket.

The schoolmaster and mistress were at the centre of the village celebrations, providing tea in the schoolroom and organising games for the children afterwards. Patriotism and a firm belief in the rigid social order of the day were all exemplified by the celebrations. These are the values which Frank Willis strove so hard to instil into the children in his care.

One of the highlights of 1907 was the silver wedding anniversary of Frank and Ruth Willis. Rev. Collinson wrote:

*“Our popular schoolmaster and mistress celebrated their silver wedding anniversary in May, when parishioners and some old Laxton friends presented them with a solid silver teapot and cream jug; the scholars with an ink stand in recognition of their long and valuable service to the church, the parish and the school.”*

The scholars and their mothers were given a tea in the school room, but unfortunately poor weather interfered with the outdoor games, however an enjoyable concert was arranged in the school room. The service that Frank Willis had given to school and the community were acknowledged and appreciated on this occasion.

## WHAT WAS THE VILLAGE FEAST?

During the first week of October every year the children’s excitement reached fever pitch for this was the Feast week. The Feast, originally associated with Laxton Church of St. Michael the Archangel, was held as near as possible to the Sunday nearest to old Michaelmas Day, 25th September. The school children were always given two days holiday, usually the Monday and Thursday.

A fun fair came to the village and set up on the Dovecote Green and folk with any connection at all with Laxton flocked into the village to enjoy all the fun of the fair and to feast with their relatives on the traditional dish of stuffed chine of pork.

Frank Moody remembered as a child once seeing a dancing bear at the fair. Edith Hickson described the colourful stalls, the animals which belonged to the fairground folk, the sweets and the prizes to be won at the stalls.

The children would have been full of wonder and excitement, caught up in the holiday atmosphere, and agog at the entertainment provided by the Ball family who brought their traditional funfair all the way from Nottingham. During Feast Week in 1914 Frank Willis complained that attendance had been rather irregular. Perhaps the attractions on the Dovecote Green proved irresistible!



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#### Pictured

*The Village Feast week meant all the fun of the fair for the children*

## THE ANNUAL CHOIR OUTING

Before the war when the choir went on their annual outing usually to the seaside another day off school was granted. Since Frank Willis was the choirmaster and nearly all of the boys were in the choir naturally they all went on the trip, taking some other members of the village with them.

It is impossible to exaggerate the excitement of the villagers and children who participated in these outings. Skegness and Cleethorpes were very fashionable at that time as they had only comparatively recently been developed as resorts.



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### Pictured

*Frank Willis in the  
centre of the Laxton  
Church Choir*

They would have seemed affluent and exotic to the villagers. The more sedate villagers would have had the opportunity to walk along the promenades and enjoy the formal gardens. The more adventurous boys without doubt would have dipped their toes in the sea and enjoyed the entertainment on the pier and the fun of the fair.

In 1913 the party consisted of thirty four villagers. They travelled by train from Tuxford to Skegness, leaving at 6.00 am and returning at 10. 30 pm.

The journey itself would have been an exciting adventure as for some villagers it may well have been the furthest they had ever travelled.

They were served a four course lunch on arrival at Skegness and one member of the choir, who had been on these outings for the past 20 years, said that it was the best one yet.

## WERE THERE OTHER OCCASIONS WHEN THE CHILDREN HAD DAYS OFF SCHOOL?

In June 1911 the village and the school gave themselves over to festivities for the Coronation of George V and Queen Mary. The children were given two days holiday and a tea and outdoor games which took place in glorious sunshine.

Rev. Collinson wrote that the year would long be remembered as a year of exceptional warmth and sunshine and that he hoped this would be a good omen of sunshine and prosperity for the King and Queen and for the great Empire over which they ruled.

There was one school closure in 1916 however that almost cost the school dearly; the Secretary for Elementary Education at Shire Hall, Mr. J. Bramley, wrote to Rev Collinson and complained that one of His Majesty's Inspectors had called at Laxton School on Friday, June 30th, and found it closed. No notification had been given to Shire Hall either from the School Managers or the Head Teacher.

*“As you are aware, in the event of H.M. Inspector visiting a school and finding it closed without notice, he may advise the Board of Education to make a deduction from the grant payable to the Education Committee.*

*I shall be glad therefore to know why no notification of this closure was sent to the Office, and also how long the school was closed.”*

Rev. Collinson wrote an abject apology:

*“Sir,*

*I must first express my regret that we omitted to send notice of the closure of the school on Friday, 30th June last.*

*A large farmer came down to the school the end of the week before and said he was having a party for his 80th birthday and would like to entertain the school children but did not fix a day.*

*The Schoolmaster acquainted me and I gave my consent – intending to let you know when the day was fixed – however I was out of the way when Friday was decided on and we forgot to send the notice – I was under the impression that Saturday would have been fixed upon.*

*The school was only closed for half the day.”*

Mr Marrison is identified in the school log book as the generous ‘large’ farmer from Westwood Farm who invited the children to his 80th birthday party.

It apparently all ended happily, Mr Bramley presumably accepted Rev Collinson’s word that he had not known which day had been chosen for the party and that he fully intended to let them know of the closure. No doubt the children enjoyed the afternoon off school and had an excellent tea party at Westwood Farm. This demonstrates the close relationship which had developed between village and school, and the respect that the farming community now had for education and for Frank Willis.

## HOW DID THE SCHOOL CELEBRATE THE END OF THE WAR?

Peace Celebrations were organised in July 1918 at the end of the Great War. The village was decorated, Frank Willis put on a concert and teas were organised for the villagers and for the children.

*“July 18th: The children have not settled down to work very well, as they are rather excited about the Peace Celebrations tomorrow (Saturday). Tea is provided for them, after which there will be sports, fireworks and a bonfire.”*

The celebrations continued into the following week when the children had yet another tea in the Vicarage Room.

## HOW DID FRANK WILLIS GET ON WITH THE CHILDREN?

Frank Willis’s own personality would have had enormous impact on the happiness of the children in school. We know that he was a firm disciplinarian, an autocrat, a man of strong convictions, highly religious and of strict moral character, but he also enjoyed compering the school shows and he loved standing at the front and conducting the singers.

One inspector described him as “affable” and the Rev. Bleau described him as “popular and kindly”. The comic acts he chose for the children to perform show a certain sense of humour. At one social occasion in the village he went red in face with laughter at the antics of the boys.

There is no doubt that he had the combination of strong personality, ability to get on with people and the sense of humour which would have made him a very effective elementary school teacher.

The school successes, the sports days, the concerts and the parties all demonstrate that it is too simplistic to imagine that school at the beginning of the twentieth century only consisted of sitting in silence, chanting little understood facts and being severely punished for misdemeanours.

There was fun, excitement and laughter too. I doubt very much whether today school children would have quite so many occasional holidays or school treats!

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ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL TEACHER

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## Pictured

*Laxton Church Choir presented Frank Willis with a walking cane for his long service, a tribute to the esteem in which he was held. The cane is still in the village and is now in the possession of Janet Cooke, passed down through family and friends*

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Willis was infinitely the most influential character in the whole village.”

*Edith Hickson*



# THE HEAD TEACHER AND THE COMMUNITY

The impact that Frank Willis had on the school alone would have been enough for him to be remembered in the village as a very influential character, but his influence extended further into the wider community where he served on a number of committees and organised any number of events.

## FRANK WILLIS AND THE CHURCH AND VILLAGE AFFAIRS

Four vicars acted as Chairmen of the School Managers whilst he was Head Teacher, Rev. H.A. Martin, Rev. C.B. Collinson, Rev. J. Tunbridge and Rev. S. Bleau. In school and in church Frank Willis worked closely and amicably with all four, despite their very different characters.

He was the mainstay of the church administration, the church organist and the choirmaster.



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### Pictured

*Frank Willis (left)  
in bowler hat and  
smoking a cigar at  
a village wedding*

Alice Clarke, who moved to Top Farm from Ossington when she was thirteen in 1913, recalled that everyone was expected to go to Church every Sunday morning and evening. Whilst not everyone actually attended every service there would have been a large number of villagers who did attend regularly and even more who attended the special services at Christmas, Easter and Harvest.

In 1912 for instance there were 101 Easter communicants, though during the war there were fewer. The Church and the choir were very important to the life of the village and Frank Willis was central to the smooth running of both.

Naturally, as he was educated and literate, he acted as secretary to The Parochial Church Council, this would involve him in any correspondence about the day to day management of church affairs in the village and any correspondence related to the maintenance of the church buildings. It also involved

him in the collection of the Tithe and in 1903 Mr. Wordsworth wrote to him enclosing the last payment of the Tithe, having received assurance that it would no longer be charged.

He was elected as Assistant Overseer, an official who helped to administer the poor relief. This voluntary, unpaid position was granted to someone of standing in the community, usually a Church Warden, and it involved Frank Willis in the assessment and collection of the poor rate. Poor Relief remained the responsibility of the Parish until the late 1920s.

In 1908 Frank Willis wrote to Mr. Wordsworth asking for particulars of Commons and Gaits and requesting notice of any changes on farms as the overseers were preparing the supplementary valuation list. The annual audit always took place in Southwell Workhouse and the scholars were always given the day off whilst Frank Willis attended.

At the March meeting of the Parish Council in 1915, at which Frank Willis was also secretary, he reported that there was considerable difficulty in getting the rates in before the end of the half year as some of the rate payers still considered they were not bound to pay until the end of March and not the end of September.

*“The collector (Frank Willis) was instructed to take out summonses at once against all those who had outstanding debts.”*

---

**“THE COLLECTOR  
(FRANK WILLIS)  
WAS INSTRUCTED  
TO TAKE OUT  
SUMMONSES AT  
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---

In later years Frank Willis moved from being secretary to the Parish Council to being chairman.

It seems that he had some standing as correspondent for the farmers as he frequently wrote on their behalf to the Thoresby Estate. In the case of Mr. Merrills for instance, when he was foreman of the Jury, Frank Willis wrote to Mr Wordsworth about the Grass Sales, the payment of the foreman of the Jury and permission to chain harrow some land.

Whenever village celebrations took place he was at the forefront, serving on the committees and organizing activities. The church choir and the school choir would give concerts and he would organise sports and games afterwards. Ruth Willis helped to organise the village women who provided the food on such occasions.

## WARTIME COMMITTEES

In 1914 there was an influx of Belgian Refugees. 200,000 came to Britain to escape the German occupation of their own country. There was considerable sympathy for them throughout the country and the government set up a central Belgian Refugee Committee and local committees all over the country.

Their task it was to welcome, house and find work for the refugees. Both Frank and Ruth Willis served on the Retford branch of the Belgian Refugee Committee. They saw it as one way they could help with the war effort.

They also both served on the committee for the War Savings Association. Ruth collected the money from scholars and villagers for the savings certificates and tank bonds and Frank Willis chaired the Committee.

At the beginning of the war Frank Willis acted as ‘Recruiting Agent’ in Retford, working for the local Parliamentary Recruiting Committee.

These committees appointed men who were “tactful and influential” to canvas men eligible for service to join the army. The local Recruitment Committees were usually affiliated to political Associations and Frank Willis was a member of the local Conservative and Unionist Association.

In the 1910 General Election Frank Willis was active in the Association supporting the Unionist Candidate, W.E. Hume-Williams. Then at the annual meeting of the Parish Conservative and Unionist Association in 1914 he was elected secretary. He obviously took an interest in national politics as well as local politics. No doubt he was particularly interested in male suffrage.

## **DID FRANK WILLIS DO ANYTHING FOR TEACHERS?**

It is only to be expected that someone with such energy and commitment would devote some of his time to the wider interests of his profession and indeed in 1911 he was elected President of the Local

Teachers Association based at Retford. These local associations were affiliated to a National Association of Teachers and were set up to support members of the profession in such issues as pay and pensions and members problems. They also kept up to date with current educational thinking by providing speakers and a forum for discussion.

## **IN 1911, WILLIS WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE LOCAL TEACHERS ASSOCIATION**



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## Pictured

*Frank Willis (left) with  
the village cricket team*

## ACTING AS ENUMERATOR

In 1901, 1911 and 1921 Frank Willis acted as the Census Enumerator for Laxton and Moorhouse. He gave the children lessons about the census and they were given a day off whilst the information was collected. As Head Teacher and Assistant Overseer he was ideally placed to know the families in the village and to gather the necessary information for the census returns. He then filled in and signed the census returns.

## FRANK WILLIS AND CRICKET IN THE VILLAGE

Perhaps the committee which gave him most joy was the Laxton Cricket Club Committee where he served as both secretary and captain and occasionally

treasurer as well. He was able to arrange dances in the school room and choir concerts in order to raise money for the club.

*“The flannels he wore outshone immaculately all others on the field. He had white boots too, and a flat straw hat at an angle, or tipped eyewards, which completed an ensemble suited to one of authority – the man who was fully aware of his status, a leader, organiser and autocrat.”*

*– Edith Hickson*

## COMMITTEES WHICH WERE SET UP AT THE END OF THE WAR

The chairing of the committee which was set up to organise a welcome reception for the soldiers returning from the war was a brave act on Frank Willis's part, as his own son, Oscar, would not be amongst them.

He was also responsible for organising the erection of the war memorial. There exists correspondence between the monumental masons Sharpe and Hoggard, New Street, Retford, and Frank Willis about the payment for the work and the names on the stone.

*“The school was closed on Friday 12th December owing to the unveiling of the war memorial for those from this parish who fell in the Great War - a marble tablet has been placed in the Parish Church and a monument of grey granite in the churchyard- the memorials were unveiled by Earl Manvers.”*

*– The School Log Book.*



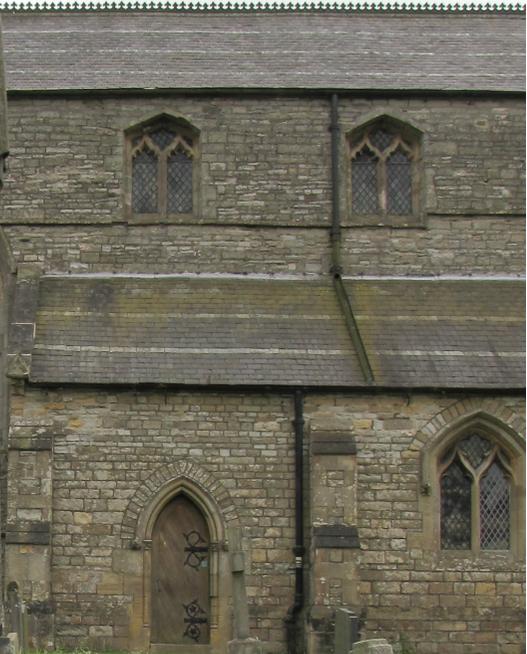
To  
 THE MEMORY OF GOD  
 AND HIS MERCIFUL  
 RECOMPENSE OF  
 THEIR FAITH THE  
 FOLLOWING HAVE BEEN  
 BURIED IN THIS  
 CHURCH-YARD  
 1810-1819

THE FOLLOWING HAVE  
 BEEN BURIED IN THIS  
 CHURCH-YARD  
 SINCE THE YEAR  
 1820



1810 G. C. THURIDGE  
 1811 D. WESTWORTH  
 1812 O. P. WELLS  
 1813 T. DOLEY

1814 A. BRADIS  
 1815 G. G. GERR  
 1816 W. W. WOOD  
 1817 H. HADDISON  
 1818 J. J. J. J.



## CHANGES AFTER THE WAR

By the end of the war Frank Willis was 57 years old and no longer the young enthusiast who had set out to change the villagers' view of education; that battle had been won. He continued teaching in exactly the same way as he had always done, he also continued to serve the Church in the same way, but things would never be the same again.

The war had brought about social change, though it may not have been immediately apparent in Laxton. The Representation of the People Act gave all men over 21 and women householders over 30 the vote. Women, who had taken over men's jobs in the war, could no longer be denied this. The Labour Party overtook the Liberal Party as a major political party.

The working classes had begun to organize themselves and strong unions were formed.

Officers and men had fought shoulder to shoulder in the trenches, depending for their lives on each other, social status was irrelevant then and this cross-class co-operation led to less deferential attitudes. These new ideas and attitudes would all be reflected in the education of the future.

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**NEW IDEAS  
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“HE HAD GIVEN  
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AND HE HAD  
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THE VILLAGE AND  
FOR THE WIDER  
COMMUNITY.”

---



# THE LAST YEARS

## WHAT DID THE GOVERNMENT DO ABOUT EDUCATION AFTER THE WAR?

After the war the government began to encourage more progressive methods of teaching. In the 1918 Education Act every County was required to provide for the progressive development of education, and they were bound to provide secondary education and education suitable for more intelligent pupils.

Parents were allowed from now on to withdraw their children from Religious Education should they wish to, not an option in Laxton School previously when Frank Willis had worked in partnership with the vicars to instil Religious Education into his pupils. More emphasis began to be put upon children's learning, making sure they understood the content of the instruction they were given; this meant allowing the children to question and discuss their work. Constantly sitting in silence merely listening to instruction, or copying from a text book was no longer acceptable.

The days of the autocratic pedagogue instructing the children on little understood facts and rote learning

were coming to an end. From now onwards education began to be seen as more than merely a preparation for adult work on the farm or in the factory. In 1921 the school leaving age was raised to 14.

## **FRANK WILLIS RETIRES**

On 22nd November 1922 Frank Willis reached retirement age and he gave in his notice at once, though he agreed to serve out his term to the end of the month. He did not even stay to give one last Christmas concert to the parents.

On his journey through life he had travelled a long way from the charity school at Kensworth where his own school days had begun. He had given over thirty years of his life to Laxton School and he had worked hard for the village and for the wider community. In his time he had seen a great deal of change in education and in society as a whole.

A great patriot he had firmly believed in the righteousness of the Great War and his son had paid the price of that war with his life. In view of the new Education Act and the change in social attitudes perhaps Frank Willis was in the end relieved to give up the reins of the school.

## **WHAT DID THE SCHOOL INSPECTORS THINK OF THE SCHOOL AT THE END OF FRANK WILLIS'S CAREER?**

In preparation for his retirement an H.M.I, Mr Payne, visited the school on the 28th June 1922, and a letter was submitted to the Department of Education in London enquiring about whether Frank Willis was entitled to a pension.

Mr Scott who wrote the subsequent report said that Frank Willis had given 36 years of faithful and efficient service to the school:

*“He displays his usual geniality and good temper and continues to be on the best terms with his scholars, who behave very well and work earnestly when left to themselves. Speaking personally, however, the school might be conducted on more modern lines, and in certain directions a higher level of attainment is possible.”*

The implication of the report is that Frank Willis’s old fashioned methods were not allowing the children to achieve all that they were capable of achieving. He was no longer a young enthusiast, his methods were dated but he still had a good relationship with his pupils.

The Department of Education replied that Frank Willis would be eligible for a pension, though he had not paid into the Teachers Superannuation Scheme. After all of those years of service, and in view of his hard work for the school and for the village, it would have been a pretty poor show if he had not been entitled to a pension, though in later years teachers were not given the right to opt out of the scheme.

## FRANK WILLIS’ LEGACY

Frank Willis died in 1927 and the pupils were given a half days holiday for his funeral. Ruth Willis died only three years later and her funeral is mentioned in the school log book.

Barbara Willis stopped teaching at the school, though she continued to live in the school house until her death in 1940.

This was a day remembered with great sadness by the village when a Second World War German bomber discharged six bombs over the village. One of the bombs directly hit the school house and killed Barbara Willis outside her front door.

The great tragedy of the Willis Family is that two of the three Willis children died in the World Wars. The Willis Family grave is in Laxton churchyard.

Harold Willis, the elder son, lived on until 1957, living out his days in Leicester where he had first started teaching in Charnwood Street Council School. Since Harold had no children, Frank and Ruth Willis have no direct descendents.

Frank Willis's legacy does not live on in his descendants, but it has been passed on through the pupils he taught and the memories, attitudes, values and aspirations they acquired at school and that they passed on to their children and grandchildren.

Whilst not everyone today will agree with all of his ideas, or methods of teaching, he was a man of his time and his life was spent in service to Laxton School, to the Church and to the wider community.



---

**Pictured**

*Harold Willis and  
Barbara Willis (seated)  
with Bunty on her knee,  
on one of Harold's  
visits to Laxton*

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