

Intrigue Surrounding Colden School

The Family History Group often welcomes visitors from other parts of the country seeking help with identifying families that resided in the local area long ago. Towards the end of November last year, we learned of some descendants of Thomas Horsfield, an early headmaster at Colden Board School, who were keen to find out more about this man, who had been headmaster at the school from 1879 to 1896. They were already in contact with Tony Greenwood, the recently retired headmaster of the school and now welcomed the opportunity to come to Birchcliffe to meet up and explore what information might be available in our archives. Thomas had been the second headmaster at the school, following on from Alfred Crosland and, as was required, kept a logbook recording the notable events concerning the school. Tony brought a copy of this book covering most of the time of Thomas's headship. Our visitors, Thomas's great grandson and his two cousins, already knew a great deal about Thomas's family from their own researchs. Now, they were hoping to find out more of Thomas's character. The primary source for judging this would be the school's logbook as Thomas had made frequent and detailed entries, including details of his relationships with his assistants and school officials.

A couple of examples from this record are worth mentioning here: firstly, in June 1884, following a fire at Jack Bridge mill, many parents were out of work and couldn't afford school fees; when parents refused to pay, Mr Horsfield paid out of his own pocket. The second example regards the list of pupils with the most attendances in the 1891 school year; the top two places were taken by Percy and Frank Horsfield, Thomas's children.

Local newspapers also often give us some idea about a family. It seems Mr Horsfield conscientiously encouraged his children to strive for recognition; between August 1887 and April 1889 the older children, mainly Edith and Edward, submitted prose compositions on at least thirty occasions to the children's competitions run by the Burnley Express newspaper; prizes of 2 shillings and sixpence were on offer.

Census records show that Thomas and his wife Mary Elizabeth had eight children but were living apart by 1901. The probable cause for this breakup was that Thomas had been named as the father of a local girl's illegitimate child. This accusation, heard by the magistrates in June 1896 resulted in Thomas being found guilty.

The girl was a daughter of the school's caretaker, David Hollinrake, who had been appointed by the Todmorden School Board in 1889 at ten shillings per week. The school's logbook records in December 1891 that Thomas had complained to the caretaker about the work of his two daughters with regard to sweeping and dusting at the school. At the bastardy hearing, Thomas denied any impropriety with the girl and suggested the sisters, after he complained about their work, had declared they would "do for him if they could" and this claim of paternity was their way of doing it. However, the magistrates ruled against him and he was ordered to pay 3/6d a week for 14 years.

Thomas failed to pay any of the maintenance which resulted in him being brought before the Police Court six weeks later. When asked what he proposed to do, he replied that he had no work and that he couldn't work. It was pointed out that, if the prisoner had no reasonable prospect of being able to pay, he would be committed to prison. He was sent to Wakefield jail for a calendar month.

In trying to trace Thomas's background, the family hadn't managed to find any mention of him around the time of the 1861 and 1871 censuses. We had found a newspaper report from 1873 that told of a Thomas Horsfield of Habbergham Eaves National School passing the Queen's Scholarship Examination for pupil teachers and being put down for Battersea. At a later date, I was able to identify Thomas in the 1861 and 1871 censuses: the family had been wrongly listed as Horsfall rather than Horsfield; they were living in Habbergham Eaves. In 1871, Thomas's occupation is shown as "Pupil Teacher". In the same census Mary Elizabeth Millner is also shown as "Pupil Teacher". The two pupil teachers married five years later and soon moved into the schoolhouse at Colden.

The mother of the illegitimate child was identified in the court report as Betty Hollinrake and it was then easily deduced that the child was Wilfred Hollinrake. At this point, I realised that I had known Wilf Hollinrake in my youth; here are my recollections:

"I knew Wilf Hollinrake very well when I was living in Colden during the 1940s and 1950s. I didn't know at the time that he had long been associated with my family; in fact my great grandfather, James Stansfield, at the Rural District Tribunal in 1916 is recorded as appealing on Wilf's behalf, against being conscripted into WWI. The basis for the appeal was that he was required to help finish the haymaking on the farm".

"Wilf was still working for the family in 1927, helping my grandfather, Joe Stansfield with the carting business. Wilf married Alice Newbitt in 1940 but never had any children. Although Wilf's mother had married Greenwood Helliwell sometime after Wilf was born, she lost her husband and from that time on, she lived with Wilf for the rest of her life."

"When I was a youngster, my grandfather farmed at Lower Smithy keeping milking cows in the mistal at the end of the barn near the school gates. My parents would help Joe with getting the hay from the fields around the school and then Joe and Wilf would help my parents over at Lower Strines. Wilf was a very hard worker and liked to challenge us boys to try to keep up with him. Often Wilf would visit in the evening and we always enjoyed his stories; he was a jovial soul and enjoyed having us children around. We never knew of his illegitimacy but we were aware of his closeness to his mother even following his marriage. Wilf died in 1967; his mother, Betty, died a year later, aged 93 years"

Keith Stansfield