

# WORKING AMONGST GYPSIES

Iain Wakeford 2015



*Gipsies' Camp, Chobham Common.*

Last week we looked at the book 'Bisley Bits' published in 1892 by the Reverend Carter, but the Vicar of Bisley was not the only author in the village at that time as in 1893 Stanley Alder, a teacher at the Farm and Shaftesbury Schools in the village, published his 'Work Amongst the Gypsies; Being an Account of Twelve Years Mission Work Amongst the Gypsies'.

The account is fascinating (although perhaps no longer politically correct), as it is evident that Alder viewed some of the travellers he encountered at the camps at Chobham as 'heathen, corrupt and ignorant', with their children in a 'dirty and wretched condition' with games such as pitch and toss being played on Sundays!

Alder and other missionaries worked hard to 'civilise them', not just with their bible meetings and night schools at both Bisley and West End, but also by providing money and accommodation so that those families that wished to, could settle down to a 'normal' life.

His work was not without opposition, not just amongst the travellers themselves, but also some of the local inhabitants who saw his work as almost encouraging them into the area. David Mayall in his book 'Gypsy Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society' (Cambridge 2009) sums up.

'In 1891-2 this opposition was taken to its logical and inevitable conclusion. That winter saw an influx to the encampments of some twelve to fourteen vans and tents, eight or so more than usual composed allegedly of an unlawful group of travellers who broke up hedges and quarrelled and fought with the villagers. While legal steps were being taken to

remove them, a gang of youths decided to take the matter into their own hands and went in and broke up the camp and herded the tent-dwellers from the neighbourhood'.

It was possibly this event, more than any other, that prompted Alder to publish his 'report'. Of course the youths of 1892 were only partially





successful as the travellers moved on to some other local site inevitably to return or be replaced by others when it took their fancy. Harvest time, hop-picking at Farnham, and the races at Ascot or Epsom being just some of the reasons for gypsies to be found in these parts, but it is evident from Stanley Alder that in West End at least some were looking to settle down.

'Ten years ago' he wrote 'only three out of eighteen families could read even a little; no one cared to go to teach them God's message

of love; the encampments were indeed awful dens of vice and blasphemy; the nights were hideous with their quarrels; their habits degraded. Now we have four tents at the Folly, where ten years ago there were fourteen; and four at Lucas Green, where there were from four to eight ten years ago. Those families we placed in cottages eight years since never want to go back to tents. Some of the children who went to school have begun life for themselves, but prefer the cottage life to tent. We have five

families now in cottages in this parish, and the children going to schools'.

Of course there were still many gypsy families who preferred not to settle down, and whether Alder's missionary work succeeded from a spiritual point of view is debatable, but it is clear that the travellers played an important part in the history (if not the present) of this area – a history that should perhaps once more be looked at.

## BISLEY BOARD SCHOOL & THE WILLIAM'S MEMORIAL COTTAGES

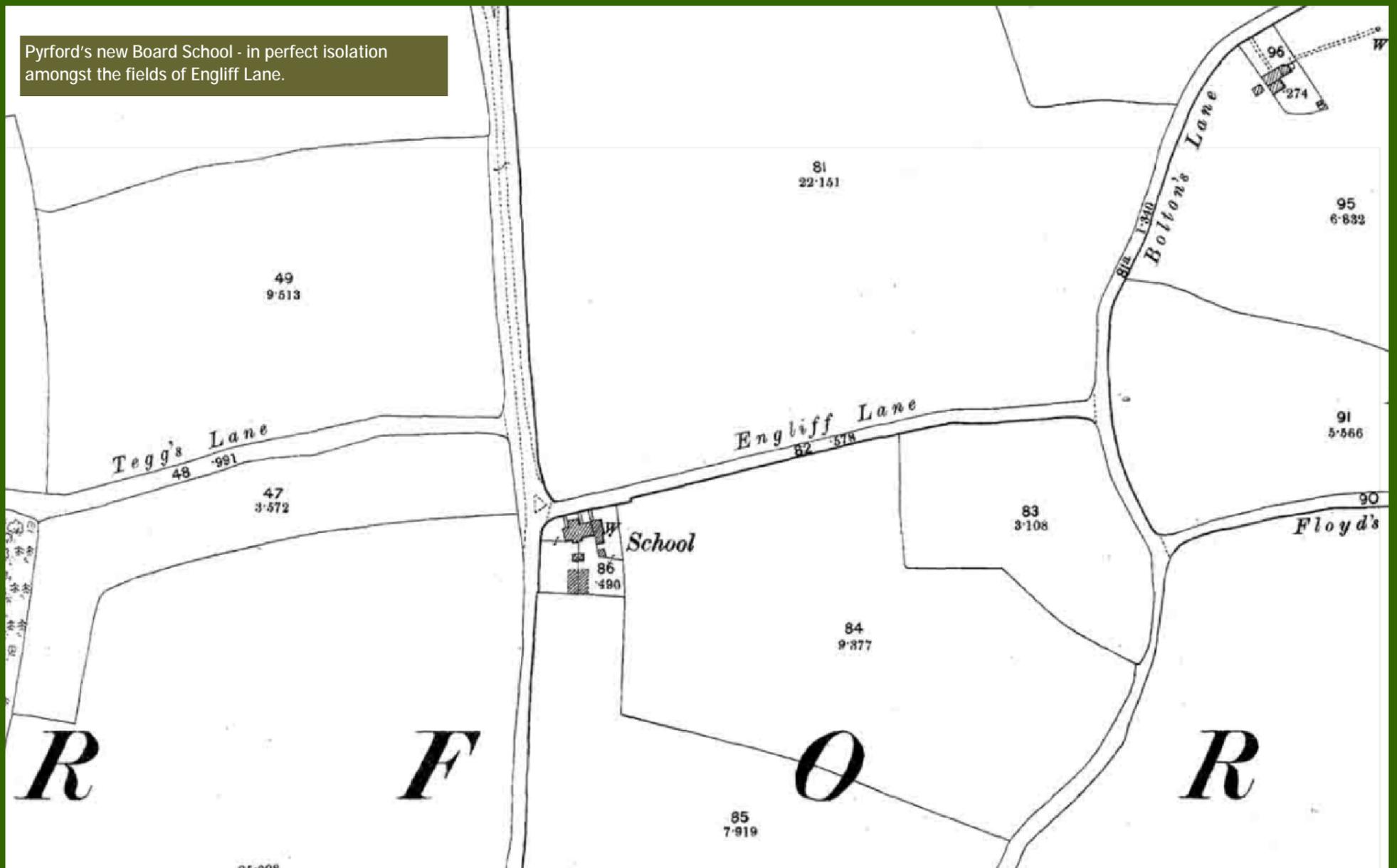
In 1893 the little 'National School' at Bisley, built in 1847 and extended in 1860, was taken over by a new 'School Board' run by six 'managers', although the Rector was still apparently the ex-officio chairman.

The school, of course, was for the children of the village - in contrast to the Shaftesbury and Farm Schools (where Stanley Alder worked) that catered for poor, destitute boys mainly from London. We have looked before at the founding of those schools in the village, but in 1893 more accommodation for some members of staff was provided by the erection of four cottages on Church Lane, facing what is now Bisley Green, but what was then just part of the common. They are named the 'Williams' Memorial Cottages' in memory of William Williams, the founder of the 'Ragged School' movement. It was Williams, a solicitor's clerk in London, who had first set up a school in the St Giles-in-the-Fields district fifty years previously and was instrumental in later establishing, with Lord Shaftesbury, the homes at Bisley.



# PYRFORD BOARD SCHOOL

Pyrford's new Board School - in perfect isolation amongst the fields of Engliff Lane.



**B**isley was not the only local school to find itself under the control of a new School Board. In 1889 the government were concerned with the poor standard of many schools, often run by churches, charities and other voluntary bodies. They passed the Local Government Act which allowed the new county councils to compulsory set up locally elected school boards to take over the failing schools

and on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1891 the new Pyrford School Board was established to take over the overcrowded school room that had been opened in the village in 1847.

Two years later, in the spring of 1893, the new Pyrford Board School was opened on the corner of Engliff Lane and Coldharbour Road, with places for sixty-two children.

