

# The Story behind the New Classroom

Following the opening of the new extension and the final removal of the Portakabin, I thought some parents – especially those who have just joined the school – might be interested in knowing a little about the history of how the building project came about.

Going back to 2004, when I first became a governor, the school consisted of just the main school building. All fifty-four pupils worked in the three-roomed section with a private Pre-School occupying the space where the office and art room now are. The children were organised into just three classes.

Class 1: Reception and Year 1

Class 2: Years 2 and 3

Class 3: Years 4, 5 and 6

To be frank, the arrangement wasn't very popular. The grouping made teaching difficult because it did not marry with the way the national curriculum has to be taught and many parents really disliked that top class where a huge age range had to be accommodated.

The school's popularity increased after the opening of our fantastic Ana Johnston building in 2007 and after our 2008 Ofsted Outstanding judgement. With increased popularity came a higher pupil roll and, with that, came our ability to realise our dream of organising in four, rather than three classes. It might seem a small difference but actually it's fundamental to the success of the school.

By taking in fifteen children a year we can provide a brilliant small starter class for the reception children, and we then combine just two age groups to give no more than thirty in each class. This way we get an economically viable school with a structure that allows children to be in age units which match the syllabuses we have to teach. Educationally the four classes are exactly what is required, but fitting them into the space we had was a severe challenge.

By 2009 we were faced with needing to use the middle room of the main school to house a full class of children. This meant that each of the three classes had to keep to their own rooms with no space for any

group withdrawal and no room to spread out for large-scale work – art and science, for instance.

The children in the middle room were so cramped that it was hard for all of them to even see the board because some were so close up against it. Any idea of active learning was almost impossible – each child basically had the desk-space in front of them and teacher had to think hard before introducing even outsized sheets of paper, never mind large-scale science experiments or design & technology equipment, for example.

Added to this, all movement in and out of the Year 5/6 class had to pass through that middle room – disturbing the class every time someone wanted to leave or enter the neighbouring room. Soundproofing was also a major issue. Given that there are only wooden partitions separating the three rooms, it's jolly hard to be the children in the middle, perhaps expected to quietly concentrate on a piece of writing while on one side another class might be singing out number facts and, on the other, a teacher might be telling an exciting history tale. – I won't even begin to tell you the problems caused if one class was doing their violin lesson!

Given that most days we had the added problem of accommodating the whole school for assembly - which involved the children in the middle class emptying their room of furniture – you can no doubt appreciate we had an unworkable system.

Governors decided we urgently needed a temporary classroom and would then to work towards a permanent solution of building an extension. We appealed to the county council for help with funding these plans and got mixed results. Happily, we were told we could have a £45,000 grant to hire a temporary classroom for just three years. (In a sensitive conservation area the planners would not countenance having it here for any longer.) The county council informed us, however, that they were very unlikely to fund a permanent extension. Their long-term solution to our overcrowding was to suggest we simply reduce our pupil numbers – so we

would have been back to the same problem of a three class structure.

By March 2010 we had the new Portakabin in place. It was an ugly monstrosity compared to the splendour of the rest of Great Tew's architecture but, as a classroom, it served us well. Unfortunately, despite the county council awarding the £45,000 grant for its hire, they later reneged on their word once they discovered that they had awarded the money from their capital funds (whereas rental costs should properly be met from revenue). Matters have come to a head on this score with budget discussions this spring and the dispute continues over a near £29,000 shortfall. The school is arguing strongly that the council has to honour its word (given that we took out a contract with Portakabin on the basis of their grant.) If they made a mistake giving us money from the wrong pot, they – not us – have to correct it. In the meantime, as a result of their grant claw-back, we had to delay some expenditure until this financial year – and the charity associated with the school, the Great Tew School Trust, has offered to bail us out and act as a party to a complaint against the council – which might prove useful.

After the Portakabin was installed, work then started in earnest to design the new permanent classroom. Initial grandiose plans had to be toned down in the light of the County Council's lack of support, the global economic crisis which hit at that time and the fear that a large extension would be too dominant in the local landscape. Our in-house architect at the time, Kaye Roberts, who had brilliantly designed and project managed the Ana Johnston building, then designed us a superb, half buried classroom that would have minimal visual impact on the village and maximum educational potential. Those of you who are still in touch with Kaye might like to let her know how well her designs have worked out.

Initial indications were that construction would cost around £300,000 and we set about raising the money. To be fair, some of us were willing to give it our best shot but thought it was a monumental task – but there were others (of a much more determined stamp) who decided that this was possible and then they just struck out – sometimes taking no prisoners – and made the goal realisable. We owe a huge thanks

to the can-doers amongst our parents – what a wonderful spirit you have!

We didn't take no from the county council to our requests for funding and went back and back – eventually appealing over the heads of the officers to secure £100,000 from the votes of the councillors themselves. The school had managed to save a little of its own capital money over the years which was put towards the new build and we received a number of grants for the classroom from charitable bodies. The two largest were £20,000 from the Fleming Trust (which is a charity with local roots) and £10,000 from Garfield Weston but there have been other generous donations too and substantial, absolutely crucial, help from Nicholas Johnston of the Great Tew Estate in digging out the land and donating the very valuable stone.

The parent fundraising group, christened NBAT (New Build Appeal Team) came up trumps. Their activities have been led by three stalwarts: Sharn Woodgate, Michelle Adams and Wendy Sandford who have been absolutely fundamental to the success of this project.



*Sharn, Wendy and Michelle*

Other parents and local people, some with no direct connection to the school, have been brilliant too and through the auctions, dinners, Make £5 Grow, cricket matches and all the other activities plus the extremely generous donations and the grant applications, we raised even more than the target of £130,000 which we had set. (Luckily – because it turned out we needed more!) In all, including the money received in grants specifically for the extension and the fundraising and excellent match funding NBAT have brought in, they will have raised more than £145,000 for the new build. I've commented before on how

amazing this is. Many schools ten times the size of ours are proud to raise, say, £8,000 in a good year. We are a tiny school and yet have raised £145,000 in little over three years.

One other aspect of the project that had always been something we hoped to be able to add, even if not immediately, was a small all-weather sports pitch on the roof of the classroom and surrounding land. We have been phenomenally fortunate with grant applications for this. The National Lottery have awarded us £10,000. West Oxfordshire District Council has offered £9500 and we've had £5000 from the County Council Chill-Out Fund, which supports positive leisure activities for children. In addition, we have received £2000 from our county councillors' grant scheme. All grants have been on the basis that the pitch is open for community use too so we will be providing somewhere for children to play and do sport outside school hours as well.

Final prices for the pitch are still being confirmed but we are confident that it will be built – hopefully in the next few weeks.

Despite all the fundraising success we are still short of our total by around £36,000 but the Great Tew School Trust has very kindly agreed to help fund this shortfall. The Trust is a charity set up in 1998 by parents who were concerned at the time that the school might be under threat of closure. A nest egg was put by for such an eventuality. Trustees have seen that the school of 2013 is an entirely different beast to that of 1998 and that investment in the new build is itself an investment in securing the on-going strength of the

school long into the future. The school should be enormously grateful to those parents who worked hard in 1998 to put that nest egg by and it is only with great reluctance that we are emptying the fund.

It would be impossible to name everyone who has had a role in the success of this project but those of you who have worked so hard and/or donated so generously know who you are and know that the real reward is obviously what we have, together, achieved: a fantastic classroom plus other learning spaces that will benefit all the children in the school because it means we do not have to return to the intolerable overcrowding of 2009.

A special thanks, however, ought to go to Peter Collins, the vice-chair of governors who has project managed the construction for us. His professional approach, hours of hard work and commitment to get things right have been a real boon and have saved the school thousands of pounds in project management fees.

Because we all pulled together and between us, had the vision and the talents to achieve our goal, the long-term standing of our very special village school and the educational prospects we can offer generations of school children to come are immeasurably brighter. I hope everyone involved feels very proud to have been a part of this achievement.

*Viv Bennett*  
*Chair of Governors*  
*3<sup>rd</sup> May 2013*