

Dame Schools were an early form of a private school in England, where a woman taught children, usually young and from a working class background, often in her own home. They were not schools as we know them today where teachers taught classes of children in a school building. They became established, probably from about the 16th C, and continued until 1870 when England set up a free compulsory state education system with its Educational

Reform Act. After that, they gradually ceased to exist. Standards varied greatly. Some functioned as child minders overseen by illiterate women, while others provided a good foundation in reading, writing and arithmetic. Fees were low, something, like 3 pence/week.

In 1861, according to Kelly's Directory, Brompton Regis had a dame school, supported by Lady Carnarvon, an infant school supported by the vicar and another school "in the village conducted by Mr William Webber Sub Postmaster". It also records a dame school in 1875.

It is a sad fact that Dame schools were set up in competition with the village school. Schooling was not completely free and children paid "school pennies".

In 1873, Miss Holmes notes a few more scholars starting "but most of them are terribly backward only having been to the Dame school in the village". She left in the spring of 1875 but her successor, Miss Woodward, notes Miss Holmes returning on August 20th 1876. "My predecessor opens a private school, a smaller one certainly in a room about 10ft by 12ft and trys (sic) her utmost to get away my scholars" Average attendance in the village school noted that day was 57.

On November 8th, Miss Woodward notes that "three girls left this week to go to my predecessor's school "to learn fancy work and to write genteely. I feel it my duty to add that these small schools would do little harm if their Principals would abstain from sowing strife and dissension broadcast." In 1876, Mr Webber is recorded as having set up a school "in the parish". Miss Woodward left the next year. In April 1883, a master is appointed to replace Mrs Purchase (who lasted six years). However, Mrs Purchase sets up a private school in the village in June.

No evidence of the numbers in the dame schools is available. However, the attendance rates at the village school rose to 93 under Mr Webber (Sept 7th 1883) - as a result of the active involvement of the attendance officer!