



CELEBRATING EMPIRE DAY AT DORMANS LAND SCHOOL

The Empire Day Movement was founded by the Earl of Meath to encourage children to feel devotion to the King and Empire. Queen Victoria's birthday, 24th May, was chosen as Empire Day and became an official holiday in Canada in 1901 and in Australia in 1905.

By 1907 many schools in England and Wales were celebrating Empire Day but the day was not officially recognised as an annual event in all countries in the British Empire until 1916. The aim was to increase knowledge and awareness of the British Empire. Emphasis was given to physical fitness, discipline and collective identity.

The first mention of Empire Day in Dormans Land School Log Book is May 24th 1912: "Miss Dibdin, Manageress, gave a short address. Empire Day songs were sung followed by the National Anthem and saluting the flag."

Celebrations for Empire Day in 1914 took the entire day. Special lessons were given and after recreation 'The Children's Song' was sung:

THE CHILDREN'S SONG by Rudyard Kipling 1906

Land of our Birth we pledge to thee
Our love and toil in the years to be;
When we are grown and take our place
As men and women with our race

Father in Heaven who lovest all,
Oh, help Thy children when they call;
That they may build from age to age
An undefiled heritage.

Teach us to bear the yoke in youth,
With steadfastness and careful truth;
That, in our time Thy Grace may give
The Truth whereby the Nations live.

Teach us to rule ourselves always,
Controlled and cleanly night and day;
That we may bring, if need arise,
No maimed or worthless sacrifice.

Teach us to look in all our ends
On Thee for judge, and not our friends;
That we, with Thee, may walk uncowed
By fear or favour of the crowd.

Teach us the Strength that cannot seek,
By deed or thought, to hurt the weak;
That, under Thee, we may possess
Man's strength to comfort man's distress.

Teach us Delight in simple things,
And Mirth that has no bitter springs;
Forgiveness free of evil done,
And Love to all men 'neath the sun!

Land of our Birth, our faith, our pride,
For whose dear sake our fathers died;
Oh, Motherland, we pledge to thee
Head, heart and hand through the years to be!

The song was followed by a short address from General Sir Edward Francis Chapman K.C.B., (local Churchwarden) who had had a distinguished military career; serving in Abyssinia, Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan, and India. The Address included the Importance of the flag as a symbol of the Empire.

After General Chapman's address the flag was saluted in the playground by each child. Proceedings terminated with the National Anthem and Cheers for the King and Royal Family.

Three months later Great Britain and Germany were at War. On Empire Day in 1915 the schoolchildren brought their pennies to school for 'The Overseas Club Fund for the provision of luxuries for our soldiers and sailors on active service'

May 24th 1916 there were special lessons upon 'The Brave Deeds of our Colonial Troops in the present War'. The children then sang the hymn 'For the Men at the Front', before Lady Chapman briefly addressed the children "upon their duties in these anxious times."

The Roll of Honour inscribed with names of Old Boys who have volunteered for service with the forces was presented framed, ready for hanging in the School.

The school then moved to the Playground where the National Anthem was sung and prayers were said for soldiers, sailors, the King and country. Half a day holiday was given in the afternoon. Several children were personally affected by the sentiments of the ceremony; fathers and brothers were serving with the Allied Expeditionary Force, some had been killed or injured.



An acknowledgement from the Overseas Club, from 1915 (courtesy of Frank Ferris)



A Christmas card from 1916 (courtesy of Frank Ferris)

On January 10th 1917 “Mrs Spender Clay kindly visited the school to break the flag” [that is to unfold the flag and hang it from a flagpole]. The flag was generously given by Major-General Michael Henry Seward, formerly Assistant Adjutant General of the Royal Artillery in Bengal.

Empire Day remained an essential part of the calendar for more than 50 years. In 1958 Empire Day became ‘British Commonwealth Day’. In 1966 the day was changed again to ‘Commonwealth Day’; the date was also changed to 10th June, the official birthday of Queen Elizabeth II. The date was again changed in 1977 to the second Monday in March, when each year the Queen still sends a special message to the youth of the Empire via a radio broadcast to all the various countries of the Commonwealth.

Canadians still celebrate ‘Victoria Day’ each year on the last Monday before 24th May.

An interesting note in Dormans Land School Log Book, June 30th 1919:

“A horse chestnut, originally one bought for making gas masks sprouted while in store during the winter and after being potted has been brought forward sufficiently to plant in the Boy’s playground to commemorate the signing of Peace. It is hoped that when more mature it may develop into a tree which will provide needed shade and shelter.”

[Enquiries to date have not discovered how horse chestnut trees were used in the manufacture of WWI gas masks.]

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Source Material: Dormans Land Primary School, Log Books