

Raymond ffennell

Raymond William Moritz Schumacher changed his name, along with brother Walter, to ffennell in 1917. This was his mother's maiden name.

Having returned from South Africa, he bought the entire Wytham estate from the Earl of Abingdon in 1920.

By the end of 1925, use of large marquees by the ffennell family ended and Raymond decided to encourage Open-Air education, a relatively new concept in England. The idea may have come from meeting or reading about the concept of Open-Air schools pioneered by Kurt Hahn, who was Head of the Schule Schloss Salem School in Germany, between 1920 and 1933 and who also later founded Gordonstoun School. Another possibility is that he was told about the Open-Air school organised by London County Council, in Bostall Wood, Plumstead, for a one-year trial in 1908. Either way, he was particularly interested in helping poor or "Delicate" children visit and enjoy the English countryside.

He hoped outdoor education would help to prevent and combat the widespread rise in TB in the period running up to WW 2. In 1913 there were 117, 000 reported cases and things did not drastically improve until antibiotics started to be used from 1944 onwards. Also, Raymond often went to specialist medical meetings, to keep up to date with new initiatives.

In 1926, the year after the marquees stopped being used, the Headteacher of West Oxford Infant School accepted an invitation for her school to visit Hill End, so they could "walk and play and have a picnic". Nature walks seem to have been extended to other schools in this period. Although Raymond had the best of intentions, there were some initial reservations from some teachers, who found that many questions asked by the children, could not be answered immediately, as they were learning about flora, fauna and insects at the same time as the children and felt a little uncomfortable!

One of the regular activities throughout the 1930s was an hour's sleep at lunchtime, which was compulsory. Children carried their "boards" up the hill for the rest, the teachers joined in too.

However, weather can be inclement sometimes in England and Raymond decided to convert some agricultural buildings. The first was "The Green Dragon" in 1931 and whilst the "Blue Dragon" was being converted in the same year, "The Willows" was used. Raymond followed this by converting "The Barn" in 1932 and all three buildings were used regularly.

He started a second site that was used throughout the 1930s and beyond, called "The Follies". It was sited in a large field near Botley Lodge and was mainly used by schools in west Oxford and Girl Guide groups as it was more easily accessible, for them.

The North dormitory was built around 1932 and was re-built in 1963. It enabled groups to stay overnight or longer. It was not uncommon in those days, for schools to stay two weeks. This was followed in 1934 by the “Four Winds” that was initially called “The Baronial Hall”, then The Middle dormitory and the “fairy ring”.

In 1935, the High dormitory was built, as Raymond’s initiatives were working so well. In the early 1930s many schools came from the London area, followed quickly by schools from St. Ebbe’s, St. Giles and St Thomas’s, which were some of the poorer parts of Oxford.

Dr Ormerod, the Oxford Clinical Schools Medical Officer, reported in 1932 that “the committee received a report on the survey of the Wytham School Scheme, which was made possible by the facilities offered by Colonel ffennell ... the results were so encouraging that not only did the four schools originally concerned sent their children again last summer, but five new schools joined the scheme ... among the headteachers there is a general consensus of opinion that the new surroundings have awakened an active interest and opened the door to a world which will provide the children with enjoyment and instruction all their lives”.

The London schools reported in 1936 that, “the healthy outdoor life, the abundance of good plain food and the absolute freedom in such a lovely environment, all combined to produce the increase of weight, the healthy glow and the bright clear eye which so delighted the parents”.

Not only were the organisers thrilled with Hill End, but children were too. One young girl from East London sent a postcard that said “This must be a very holy place”. A young boy also commented that “what I like best about Wytham is having my dinner in peace”.

In 1937 Raymond built four more classrooms, eleven in all, some of them on the Wytham estate, and in 1938 brought in some Berkshire schools too.

Between 1940–2 he allowed a group of Special Needs boys and their teachers stay in the High dormitory (although lights were on one night and the fields at the top of the site were hit by two bombs dropped by Dorniers that had just bombed Stanton Harcourt aerodrome!).

Besides schools, Raymond allowed CCPR holidays (Sport & Recreation holidays) throughout the war, where women who worked in munitions factories could come for a safe holiday.

In 1939 (at least) Hill End was a “clearing station” for evacuees, they stayed the night in dormitories before being allocated a home to go to).

Week-end use was allowed as well, run by Allied soldiers, for local youngsters. The Oxford & Cambridge Universities Scout Group hiked and camped at Hill End in 1943/4 and the Oxfordshire Guides were allowed to camp in Bean Wood. In 1944 alone, there were 34 camps there!

In 1944 Raymond died, having already gifted Hill End to Oxford University, as part of the Wytham estate.

The ffennell legacy continues.....

Ellen Hope ffennell

Ellen Hope ffennell was born in 1877 and lived until 1956.

Hope was a Weigall and was the youngest child of the family and was born in Hendon, although the eldest three of the family were born in Rio de Janeiro.

Hope went to Somerville College, Oxford, probably at the turn of the century and then married Raymond in 1903.

Hazel, their only child was born in South Africa in 1905 and the family returned to the UK in 1915. Before they returned to the UK, the family home in South Africa became the “Hope School” for children. It is still open.

Like Raymond, Hope had a fairly critical view of some of the aspects of a formal English education. She said she remembered “weary, useless hours spent on Arithmetic, Algebra and Euclid”. I feel it is possible that that whilst Raymond was particularly interested in medical advances to cure TB, Hope was particularly interested in enabling “poor” children to have the opportunity to visit and enjoy Hill End.

With the creation of Hill End, she fully supported and helped her husband. She thought all young people should have the opportunity to experience an outdoor-education. She said “those who live in view and midst scenes of great beauty from their early years, must absorb at least something of the loveliness and a peace in their hearts that perhaps the highest type of education would find itself unable to bestow”.

As Hill End grew and developed, Hope and Raymond planned together and were often to be seen in and around Wytham, including Hill End.

When the war came, Hope organised things at Hill End so that some young evacuees could use Hill End as a collecting point. As it was close to the railway-station in Oxford, she also arranged for children to stay overnight loaning clogs or wellingtons, as the grass was very wet early in the mornings.

Hope is fondly remembered in Wytham village, but also at Hill End. Without her organising abilities and energy, Raymond would not have been able to achieve so much.

Hazel ffennell

Hazel Vera Hope ffennell was born in the Transvaal, South Africa in 1905 and sadly died very young in 1939.

Hazel moved with her parents to England in 1915 and lived in London, before the ffennell family moved into Wytham Abbey. Hazel was an exceptionally talented person, who was lively, fun-loving, generous and artistic. She had an outstanding talent for understanding and handling birds and animals. This included pigeons, doves, a miniature horse, a goat, bullock (that she rode), Flick and Floss the dogs and a meerkat called Rikki that met King George V. Amongst her menagerie was a chameleon called Marmaduke. She kept him for eighteen months in this country, before taking him back to South Africa and releasing him back into the wild.

Hazel made the wonderful metal foot-scrapers for Hill End, remembering her chameleons: one is at the “Green Dragon” the other at the “Blue Dragon”.

She had many interests, the “Wytham Mouth-Organ Band, the “Wytham Players” and producing a number of films (some of which were filmed in and around Wytham Abbey and parts of Hill End) including “Days of Chivalry” which still exists and has been shown a number of times. Also, the Women’s Institute, All Saints church, unemployed people were helped in Kennington, London, and she was also on the Advisory Committee of Oxford Zoo.

Despite all those interests, Hazel was able to come to Hill End, often with her parents and was sometimes seen riding one of her horses around the Hill End area.

She is still greatly missed by everyone and I know even now, the memory of her is very much alive in Wytham village and here with the wonderful foot-scrapers.

Mervyn Hughes