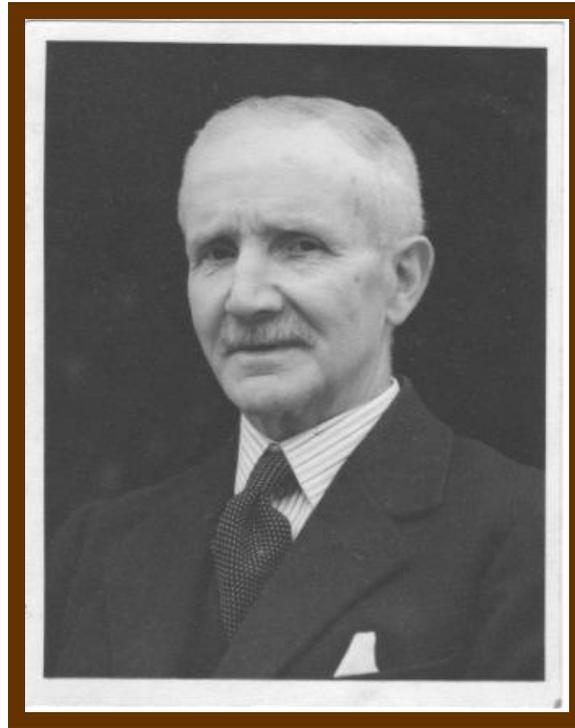


Robert Newall (1873-1955)



Teacher and Headmaster at Levens School from 1895 to 1932

Robert Newall was born in Gosforth in Cumberland, where his father was a police officer. Sometime before the 1881 census the family moved to Egremont: By 1891 he was lodging in the home of a farmer in Plumpton Wall near Penrith and his occupation was given as "Elementary School Teacher". He was later a student at Bede College, Durham, where he studied botany and gained his Teaching Certificate. It will have been during his time at Plumpton Wall that he met Annie, the daughter of Thomas Lowthian, a farmer and builder. Annie was 19 in 1891. He came to Levens in 1895 as assistant teacher at the boys school, which was then at The Bungalow (now Church Close). The Bungalow was a cold and damp building with poor light, as it was surrounded by trees.

Until his arrival the Headmaster, Mr George Stabler, had been teaching the whole school single-handed while training pupil teachers in his own time. He was a keen and well-known botanist. However, he was struggling with his eyesight. After operations and finally an accident to one of his eyes, he retired in 1900 and Mr Newall became headmaster.

Robert Newall married Annie Lowthian in the Christmas holidays of 1898-1899. They spent their honeymoon at Lockerbie in Scotland. The school log reveals that on December 23rd 1898 the headmaster in the names of the girls and infants mistresses and of the boys of the school presented Mr Newall with a marble timepiece and a plated sugar-basin on his approaching marriage.

Mr and Mrs Newall subsequently had three daughters, Doris, Elsie and Mary. When he

became headmaster there were 72 boys in school with ages ranging from 3 to 15 (later a boy of 19 came to the school). He had one pupil teacher, James Prickett, who stayed until 1904, when he had to start training another one. (Agnes Viley for a few months, then Margaret Fell).



Robert Newall with pupils

The Newall family moved into the schoolhouse which they rented from Levens Hall. At the time it had no water in the house, only cold water to the wash-house across the yard. There was an earth closet down the garden. It did, however, have a large garden which suited Mr Newall's need to grow things, particularly vegetables. The old house was very cold and Mrs Newall would never ask for any improvements in case the rent went up.

As a teacher he was known as a disciplinarian (partly out of necessity with such a large age and ability range). He was, however, thoughtful, and cared for the children's health and wellbeing, looking over all the pupils daily for signs of the dreaded scarlet fever and other complaints. One of his problems was attendance, due mainly to the needs of agriculture keeping many boys away from school, and also the many infectious diseases including repeated bouts of measles, mumps, whooping cough and 'flu. Money for school maintenance, books and equipment was always short, and many times had to be made up by gifts from the Managers, and most notably Lady Bagot. A school library was started in October 1906 for the upper divisions in conjunction with the Kendal Public Library.

Until 1932 the dates of the summer holidays were fixed by the Managers to suit the needs of the farmers for haytime and harvest. This helped with the attendance figures, and ensured that the sons of farmers were not disadvantaged in their education. There were tests for all age groups weekly, and exams every term. The Diocesan Inspectors carried out Religious Knowledge examinations and the HMIs examined in all other

subjects including singing. (It is amusing to note how people complain about children being over-tested nowadays).

In Autumn 1907 came the move to the new school (the present school), when infants, girls and boys all came together for the first time, making a total of 127 pupils, rising to 138 by Christmas. At the time there were just 3 teachers, later rising to 4.

True to his interests in 1908, Mr Newall made a large school garden (where there are now 2 bungalows on the corner of Church Road). This enabled the boys to learn more about growing vegetables and fruit, and selling the produce from their plots. (The garden balance-sheet was never in the red). With the same aim botany was added to the timetable, including practical experiments in the lessons.

Economies were always necessary. In April 1920 it is noted in the log book: "As a result of selling waste paper I have been able to place in the school library 32 new books, mostly for the younger children. I have also received a valuable gift of 17 books from Mrs Bush. They are splendid books and suitable for the older children".

Annual inspections of the pupil's health were carried out by a doctor checking general health and eyes. The school dentist inspected and treated their teeth. The district nurse visited at least once a term. Arrangements were made whereby disabled children who lived a great walking distance from the school could be boarded with other families in the village from Monday-Friday, going home at week-ends. By May 1913 the school was bursting at the seams when there were so many new infants that the classrooms further up the school had to double up as two rooms in one.

In very cold and wet weather it was impossible to keep the school warm enough, and in winter 1929 the water was frozen for a month and the temperature in the school could barely be kept over 40 degrees. The children were provided with dry stockings and soup or hot milk at lunchtime. There was, however, a great spirit amongst the older pupils. An entry in the log reads: "Today the bigger boys, the gardening boys and some of the older girls made a start with the girl's and infant's playground. The object is to remove all the soil, as this makes it wet and dirty. Mrs Gandy has promised to pay for the material locally known as scamel to cover the yard. The boys did their own playground a year ago and thought it would be nice to improve the girls yard." They later planted roses in the girls' playground and trained them to the walls. All this work was fitted into a very full timetable with the usual emphasis on the 3Rs plus history, geography, religious knowledge, art, science, needlework, woodwork, botany and cookery. Amazing. At the same time the girls were busy knitting mittens for the soldiers in WWI.

Staff problems were always there, partly from sickness, also from staff living a long way from the school and using bicycles, and also because higher wages were paid in Lancashire tempting them into jobs in the Grange area. In 1920 two teachers left at the same time for that reason, and no replacements could be found for several months.

During his time at the school Mr Newall organised the first school trip which was to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in June 1924. He supervised the penny dinners when they were introduced (for wintertime only), and with the help of the managers and Lady Bagot found work for several school leavers. The managers helped in many ways, including giving lessons when teachers were away, providing material for dressmaking, holding cookery classes in their own homes, giving gifts to the school, and paying for

improvements which otherwise would never have happened.

Day or half day holidays were sometimes give for events of national importance e.g. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the end of the First World War and Empire Day. They were also given for local events e.g. the whole school was invited to Levens Hall when Miss Bagot married Mr James Cropper in September 1910.

Robert Newall played a considerable part in the village apart from the school. The Institute (initially called the Coronation Institute) was built to celebrate the coronation of Edward VII. It was opened in December 1903 at a total cost of £349.19.7d. It was designed as a Reading and Recreation room, with a small committee room. Mr Newall was a member of the first elected committee. He became the Hon. Sec. of the New Institute having previously been Hon. Sec. of the earlier one at Lane Foot Cottages, and continued in the job for 50 years. He later became Chairman of the Parish Council. He was a regular churchgoer and member of the choir, helping those who did not read music by using the tonic sol fa system as he did in the school.

His great love apart from gardens and plants was fishing, which he pursued to a great age. He had a rod in the Park due to the kindness of the Bagot family.

When he retired in September 1932 he was presented with a silver cake dish by Lady Bagot. The number on the registers was 110. He had a bungalow built on Church Road called Lockerbie (still there), where he made a large garden with an enclosed vegetable garden, building the dry stone walls himself. Annie Newall died in 1946, and Robert Newall survived her by 9 years. During this time he was looked after at Lockerbie by his daughter Mary and her family.

**Eileen Steward (granddaughter)
December 2008.**