

The Avenue School progress in education

Now housed in a modern building in Tilehurst, the school began life in 1901 as a special class for “physically and mentally defective children” at Reading’s Oxford Road School on September 2, 1901.

Ten pupils were admitted to the class that day but within a few years the school was struggling to meet demand and it was decided to provide new purpose-built premises at Whitley, able to accommodate six classes.

This building, which opened in July 1909, is widely recognised to have been the first purpose-built special school in the country and was used until 2008, when the school moved across the town to its present home in Conwy Close. The current headteacher, Sue Bourne, was appointed a Dame in the 2013 Queen’s Birthday Honours for services to education.

From the school’s opening day until the present, the headteachers have kept log books, detailing daily events in its life.

Entries include descriptions of how it was too cold for the pupils to work, as they couldn’t pick up their pencils.

At first the pupils were admitted mainly due to physical impairments, but reading through the records it appears that many of the children were also autistic.

Like Fair Mile Hospital, the calm, structured environment suited them well, with activities such as planting and tending gardens and other acts of service to the local community forming a core feature of the curriculum.

Headteacher Dame Sue Bourne says there have been profound changes in the approach of the school to autism in the 12 years since she took up the post: *“We teach children with autism in a very individualised way. We use structured teaching techniques and we really focus on what each child needs to learn in order to become as independent as possible, to help them with their real life skills for the future.”*

“When I first became the headteacher there was only one child diagnosed with autism in the school. Clearly there was a huge emerging need for their autism to be recognised and then we could look at what their real needs were. Rather than teaching collectively the whole class, we could focus on the individual needs of that child.”

“It was round the time when inclusion was becoming quite a major issue in schools and clearly the autism agenda was emerging, not just in Reading but in the whole of the UK.”



Visit: <http://prt.cm/1f20a40> or scan the code from your phone to watch an interview with Dame Sue Bourne.

