

About our school

“An environment for learning.”

Since 1974 Leighton Middle School has occupied a beautiful site. Around 450 children attend the school from a wide area including the town and several villages, and may transfer to us from one of a number of Bedfordshire Lower Schools. In addition, pupils also come to us from across the border in Buckinghamshire.

The History of our Grounds by Sheila Meekums

Part One - Early History

Saxon beginnings

We believe the history of our School and its unique grounds can be traced back to Saxon times. By AD 571, Saxons had conquered the area. The origin of Leighton is two Saxon words - tun or ton meaning settlement or village, and Lei or Leah meaning clearing or cultivated area. Saxons liked to live on high ground near fresh water. The small stream, the Clipstone Brook, joins the River Ouzel to the south west of our school. The Saxons probably settled here on the south facing side of the valley, where our school field is now and by AD 600 numbered about 350 people.

By AD 625 when Christianity came to our area there may have been a small Saxon church built on or near the present site of All Saints. In 1932 Saxon jewellery was discovered in a burial ground found in a sand quarry - a clue to Saxon settlements. Saxons buried their dead about a mile from their villages.

Edward the Confessor's Time - The Royal Manor

According to the Domesday Book of 1086, by 1042 Leighton was a Royal Manor owned by the King for his personal use and pleasure. The Royal Manor consisted of 30 "hides."

Norman Times

The Domesday survey of 1086 names our town as Lestone and the Royal Manor by then consisted of 47 hides, which included some villages. The church held four of these hides. Our school grounds were not part of the Royal Manor. They were held by the Church by Bishop Wulfig.

The first prebendary or vicar gives us our name

By 1190 the town had become known as Leighton "Busard". The parish was transferred from the diocese of Oxford to Lincoln on 1189 and named after the parson here at the time, Theobald de Bosat. The extra name was needed - as there was another Leighton (Bromswold). The School grounds are part of the Prebendal Manor grounds given in 1189 by St Hugh, the Bishop at that time. His tomb can still be seen in Lincoln Cathedral and the names of the parishes in our diocese are painted on the choir stalls there.

1220 - 1288 Building of All Saints' Church

People at that time must have been very impressed by the huge church, which

was consecrated in 1277! The Chancel is the oldest part. The parsons were paid and given a house (a prebend).

The Prebendal House - Posh Property built for parsons!

Before 1342 a very fine house was built for the churchmen. It stood behind where our Gymnasium is. The access road from Judges Lane occasionally collapses into its former cellars! The River Ouzel and Clipstone Brook formed two of the boundaries of the grounds of this mansion.

1349 - 1350 The Black Death

Two vicars from the Prebendal House perhaps died of this. As according to Parish records we had three vicars in one year!

1534 the Reformation The vicars move out

After Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church the prebendaries of the Church stopped living here and the grounds were leased to laymen.

Part Two - The Early Modern Age

The Prebendal Manor was leased to the Johnson family until after 1602, but the hall with rooms and stabling for 10 horses had to be ready for the vicar to stay in at any time.

Sir Christopher Hoddesdon

This gentleman had leased the Manor and estate by 1602. He died in 1610. The lid of his coffin and that of his wife are set in the wall of the south transept of the Church. Their open coffins are outside!

1595 onwards - The Leighs of Stonleigh and days of the Civil War

The Leighs obtained the lease of the Manor when Sir John married Sir Christopher's daughter, Ursula. Her son, Sir Thomas, a Cavalier, leased it during the Civil War. Some musket balls have been found in the grounds, perhaps evidence of a skirmish or was it just target practice? As Sir Thomas was a supporter of the fated Charles 1, executed in 1649, the Parliamentarians took the estate away when they won. Sir Thomas got it back when Charles II became King in 1660.

Garden Temple



The finest building in our grounds, the 'Temple of Diana' was built for the Leigh family in about 1720. James Gibb, a famous architect, designed it to look like the temples of Ancient Greece. It was used as a music room. An avenue of cedar trees led from the Manor to the Temple. The last one fell in 1990, but the stumps are still there.

In 1797, a John Dickinson rented the Prebendal Manor. He was the last resident because around 1820 it was demolished. Traces of the Manor are still visible. You can work out where it stood by studying the old walls near the Gymnasium.

Assembly Hall c1660s



Built in the late 17th Century, our lovely brick and tiled hall has a "boat beam" roof over what were lofts and storerooms. There were stalls for horses underneath. The hall apparently held prisoners during World War I.

The site of the Old House

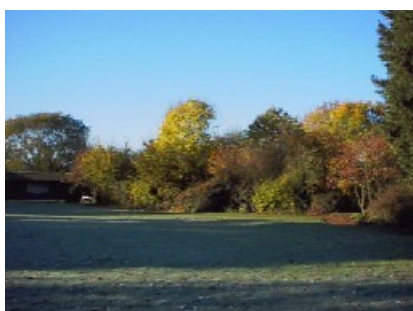
By 1810 John Grant, a grocer, lived on the site of our "Old House" (called "The Cedars"). He helped to set up a bank in Leighton in 1812. One of his partners was a very important man in the story of our buildings: John Dollin Bassett.

1855 The Cedars is built



Mr John Dollin Bassett, a banker, had a superb mansion, "The Cedars", built on the site of John Grant's house. It was designed by W C Read who designed the lovely terrace in Church Square. This house had some very large rooms such as the drawing room - probably our French room now. The other rooms included a dining room, library, bedrooms and a bathroom. There were servants' rooms, a servant's hall and a kitchen. The kitchen range was in the room which is now our medical room, situated where there is now a fitted bed. You can see the pantry too, with the special air-cooled door.

The trees in our School grounds



Mr Bassett had many of the beautiful trees that you can see in the grounds planted. He collected exotic species from all over the world. Near the tennis courts we have two weeping silver limes, a red horse chestnut, Italian and Norway Maples and the Wellingtonia (Redwood or Giant Sequoia). These trees are nearly 150 years old. In 1878, John Dollin Bassett died at the age of 92! There is a [trail around these trees and Woodland Walk](#) designed by David Alderman, the County Arboricultural Officer, in 1990.

Part Three - The 20th Century

Mary Norton

Perhaps our most famous resident was the author Mary Norton. The Cedars was lived in by the Norton family around 1918 - 1920. She later wrote "The Borrowers" and other books in that series. The books are about tiny people living under the floor of this house and feature scenes from the rooms she remembered using as a child.

The Cedars School

In 1920 the house was bought by the local authority and made into a Grammar School. There were only 106 pupils at first. The school was very successful so it had to be enlarged. The West Wing was opened in 1929 after problems with the slope of the land. The swimming pool was made in 1934 and in 1939 the Gymnasium and Domestic Science (now FFT!) room were added. During World War II part of the grounds were dug up to make a vegetable garden. In 1948 the dining hall was built. Later Science laboratories and a CDT block were added.

In 1974 [The Cedars School](#) became a comprehensive school. It was moved to Mentmore Road because these buildings were too small for the number of pupils.

Leighton Middle School



In 1974 our school opened. Since then we have gradually added to the collection of trees specialising in native English species to encourage native flora and fauna. Pupils use the grounds for many topics - making them aware of the rich history of their environment.

Sheila Meekums
Head of Humanities

The School Buildings and Facilities

"An up-to-date educational environment in an historical setting."



The end of the hall is in the centre (behind the tree); the former stables are on the left.



The West Wing buildings linking the Assembly Hall and Garden Temple



In the 1950s, more accommodation was built for Science and a Craft Room was added.

Tree Trail and Woodland Walk

"Children at Leighton Middle School work in an environment which is unequalled in Leighton Buzzard and Linslade."

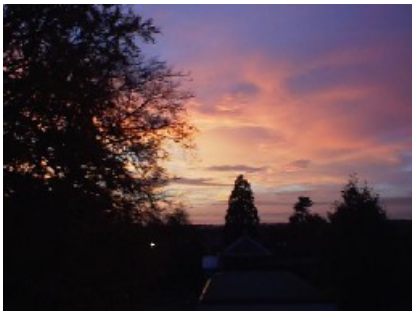
Our grounds contain a collection of trees and shrubs unique to Bedfordshire and remarkable for the premises of a school. Some of these trees are exceedingly rare; others are some of the most important of their species in the whole of Britain.

Following the hurricane in January 1990, which felled one of the last remaining of the great Cedars of Lebanon growing in the grounds, a full survey of the trees was undertaken. Consequently, the Tree Trail was created.



Some of the most interesting specimens are the Maidenhair Tree, the Silver Hedgehog Holly, the Wellingtonia, the Italian Maple, one of the oldest in Britain, and a really magnificent Hupeh Crab, planted here in 1926. You can find all these, and many more, by following the Tree Trail. The newest Cedar of Lebanon was planted near the Garden Temple in 1990.

The Woodland Walk is a development to enhance further the beautiful grounds of our school. It is planted as a band of woodland alongside the Clipstone Brook as it flows past our playing field to join the River Ouzel. Within this area a variety of native English, broad-leaved trees have been planted to create a haven for wildlife of all kinds.



There is a continuing programme of weeding, pruning and replanting in our school grounds, in order to maintain them to the highest possible standard, not only for the present pupils and the local community, but also for generations to come.