

The Development of Weston Point School from 1856

Based on a talk given to the Runcorn & District Historical Society

by Kate Cawley

on 1st September 2006

Before I start I'll give you a little bit of my background so that you know where I am coming from. I am a Runcornian and am proud to say it. I was brought up in York Street. We went to Camden chapel. My father was Charlie Millinger, who worked at ICI. He was a bit of a character, so much so that at the first governors' meeting I attended at Weston Point when I took over as head, it was mentioned that my father was Charlie Millinger. One governor, whom I won't name, sat back on his heels and said "Oh, I remember him - he taught me to swear". This is how you start your new job!

I've always been interested in history. I studied history at college and recently I've been particularly interested in Weston Point. The trouble with Weston Point is that it's always subsumed with everything relating to Runcorn. No extra mention is made of it; it's Weston **and** Weston Point - more often than not it's Weston primarily and Weston Point is an add-on. But Weston Point has a very complex history of its own. On taking over the headship of the school, the staff and I decided that the children should know about the rich history of the area in which they lived, and particularly about Weston Point. To this end, we spent a training day at the County Archive offices researching the school's history. We found maps going back from pre-1800 right the way through to about 1981. These show the development of the settlement, from nothing to a few farms and cottages, and right the way through up to the development of the big factory that became ICI. On the oldest map, right back in the beginning, it shows all the tithe land belonging to the Orreds and the Alcock brothers. Next is the map of the area of Runcorn Township. This is round about the early 1800s – 1811, I think. In Higher Runcorn there were fields and quarries and by the river there were basins and docks. Weston Point had a basin and nothing else apart from a few houses.

In 1670 they discovered rock salt in Cheshire and started to mine it, that was the basic raw material of the chemical industry. Runcorn was described at that time as 'a sleepy hamlet'. Weston Point was mostly agricultural land. From 1722 there were large stone quarries which gave some employment and the rest of the inhabitants were employed in agriculture.

In 1792 Runcorn was said to be a 'considerable town', but it can really be deemed little more than a village. In 1795 the average wage was £6.6s a year, and by 1815, the time of the Battle of Waterloo, the average wage was £9.9s. The people prospered because they grew potatoes here; the salt marshes were very good for potatoes. At the start of the industrial revolution, canal building began in the area, the Bridgewater Canal was built, the Weston Canal and the Weaver Navigation followed, and gradually more and more people moved into the area. I tell you this because I think the way the school developed reflected very much what happened in Runcorn, Weston Point and Weston. The school mirrors the highs and lows, if you like, of the area.

From 1811, the census shows that for Runcorn, Weston and Weston Point there was a population of 2,060. Some of those people living in Weston Point were employed in the manufacture of

'handicrafts'. Now, this intrigued me because I'm interested in handicrafts. Apparently, the cottage industry in Weston Point was the making of silk and mohair buttons in the home, selling them to local merchants.

By 1841 there were 550 people living in Weston, by 1851 it had increased to 650 people. These were quarry men and navvies, who were digging the 'cut'. All their households were expanding and they all had plenty of children. This in the days before compulsory education; you didn't have to be educated. The nearest schools were in Runcorn. There was a private Day School in Higher Runcorn. There were private schools in the old town, but there was no school at all in Weston Point; and the population was increasing.

The Weaver Navigation Company, who built and maintained the Weaver Canal linking Weston Point with Northwich, was quite paternalistic, they wanted to look after their workers. So what was the first thing they built? They built a church - never mind a school - they built the church first. That was Christ Church on the island, which is, thankfully, still there. The church on the island was built and paid for by the Trustees of the Weaver Navigation. They decided to build it there, "rather than purchase expensive land in Weston". It was a handsome Gothic structure. The Weaver Navigation Company was keen to improve its workforce, so they built three churches along the canal for the accommodation of watermen navigating the river. It didn't matter where you were 'up the cut', on a Sunday you could go to church. The company made sure of that. They paid for the incumbent, who was a Mr Samuel Bagnall, B.A. He resided in the parsonage, which was a neat little building next to the church. In 1841 the area had expanded, they had a church and a parsonage, and a B.A., no less, taking the services. When the church was officially opened on Christmas Eve by the Bishop of Chester, it became the only church in Britain to be built on an uninhabited island. Now, some will argue with this, but it is actually on an island between the river and the canal.

Weston Point was expanding because the canals were being built, the workers, the navvies and the boat people and their families were all arriving in Weston Point. So the Weaver Trustees, again being very paternalistic, decided that they would build a school. The first school opened in Weston Point in 1856. This was long before compulsory education, long before children had to go to school, and it was long before there was free education - you had to pay. The school was built on the dockside and was opened in 1856. The schoolmaster was a man called Mr Silas Worth. It was known as the Weaver Navigation School and both sexes were admitted to it. In fact if you look at the plans they have a room for 50 mixed and another for 38 mixed. Mixed, I assume, means mixed sexes. They still had different entrances for the girls and the boys. Fees were charged, if your Dad worked for the Weaver Navigation it was 1d. per week and if he didn't, it was 2d. a week. The original building had a schoolmaster's house next to it. There were three classrooms. There were girls' closets outside and there were boys' closets on the other side of the playground, that's why you had to have two separate entrances. There was a cloakroom and each room had a fireplace, an open fire. There was a coal monitor, a pupil, who would collect the coal and deliver it to the classroom - you wouldn't be allowed to do that today, would you? The three 'Rs' were taught - reading, writing and arithmetic, as was usual. The girls did needlework and the boys did craft. Then the population grew again. There was a growth of 80% in population between 1851 and 1881. The village started to expand, there were a lot more houses here; Weston Point was still growing. The area was going through a big burst in population size, reflecting the employment opportunities in the area.

In 1870, the Government in its wisdom decided to set up schools and the Board Schools came into being. The school was managed by a Board of Governors. The Board was elected; they were always men, the great and the good. The school was still fee paying. Again, the area grew and all these children were squashed into the school. We have one classroom, which looks to be about 8 feet square, accommodating 50 children, and there were two classes of 50 children and 'a 38 mixed'. 'A 38 mixed', I think, was the infants' school; that is the smaller room. So, the school was actually built to cater for 138 children, but the more that came, the more that were fitted in. The chemical industry was starting and the quarries were expanding. All that wonderful red sandstone quarried here went to Liverpool, Chester, to New York and it needed a large workforce to dig it all out. It was even used to build part of the Runcorn Railway Bridge. So, quarrying was very important, it needed a lot of manpower.

In 1882 there was another new development that accelerated the growth of the chemical industry. A pipeline was built from Marbury to Weston Point to bring brine, a basic raw material for chemical processing. Again there were more workers, more children and the school continued to flourish. With all the commercial development the school expanded again and in 1887, the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal began. More and more navvies were arriving, more and more builders, more and more children. Also, there were the children of the bargees, but this was a fluctuating population. They would arrive here on Monday, say, the barge would pull in, they would have a day or two's education here while the barge was loaded, then they would disappear, down to Stoke-on-Trent. Then about three weeks later they would re-appear again for another two days' education. There were the salt workers' children too, because the salt works was now established.

With the increase of the school population, conditions became very difficult. That's when Her Majesty's Inspectors arrived. They came to tell you what was wrong. In 1895 they said: "the school is in excellent order, the elementary work of the lower classes or standards – is excellent, arithmetic above the third standard, is too, especially problem work. The problem work of the fourth and fifth standards is weak. And it is without hesitation that the principal grant is allocated". If the inspectors came in and the school didn't reach the standard, then funds were not allocated to run the school, it's as simple as that. I don't know what they thought you would do if you didn't get the funding - put the children out on the streets? The inspectors were pleased. The English was good, and the needlework was good - it was all those mohair buttons they had been making!

It was noted that the Ship Canal children hadn't left the school. The thought was that when the canal had been built, all the navvies would move on, but they didn't. The room with accommodation of 8 feet square for 46 children was intolerable, but at this time it had 93 children in it. So how on earth did you teach? It was thought that discipline would become virtually impossible. It is much to the credit of the teachers that the instruction is still considered to be "fairly satisfactory". They are not gushing with the praise! It was understood that the school will soon be reduced to ordinary numbers - that's what the Board were hoping. They thought that when the navvies move on this will happen, otherwise enlargements will be needed. Her Majesty's Inspectors reported that the cloakroom accommodation was insufficient and that there was no cloakroom for the infants at all. These defects must be remedied at once, or else! The inspectors judged that the offices are conveniently placed for access, but the manager's office is inconveniently placed. The head teacher would have to teach in those days, so when he had time to go into the office with all these children to educate, I do not know. Special attention was needed to sort out all the buildings. 'My Lords have decided that this year they will pay the grant, but unless you do something about the accommodation the grant will not be paid next year.' So this is the position of the school again, it has to have new buildings, otherwise it's going to be in trouble, it's not going to get the money it requires. The managers were also asked to say when the Ship

Canal children would go and it was expected that when they left conditions would be a lot better, but many of the families didn't leave. It was also noted they had a pupil teacher, Mr E Gordon and he was asked to leave, perhaps it was because he had problems teaching 93 children!

Following this the Board decided something had to be done, so they sent out requests for tenders for the building works. It was realized that not only was it the Manchester Ship Canal that was the problem, but the chemical works was now being built and the Salt Works was expanding. The school was at full capacity. It became quite clear that the Weaver Navigation Company couldn't afford to do the improvements, so they decided to expand the school board, the board of elected governors. Castner Kellner's, the Salt Works, and the Church of England all nominated representatives. Quite ahead of its time, there was a parent of one pupil on the governing body too. Parent governors weren't elected until the 1980's for most schools. They were forward thinking in Weston Point! A governors' meeting was held. They didn't hold it at Weston Point, they held it at the Crewe Arms Hotel. Three members were present, Sir Joseph Bergin of Winsford, Edward Milner and the Reverend Canon Armistage, they discussed the school's position and made decisions on its future.

In 1896 there were 93 mixed pupils, plus 46 infants, which gave 162 on roll. In 1897 there were 179 on roll. In 1898, 191 on roll and by 1899 there were 214 on roll, in classes meant to hold 138 children. It was identified that 60 children were of Weaver Navigation employees, 65 of Castner Kellner workers and 40 of Salt Union workers. It was decided that they would have a new building and they sent out requests for tenders for the work. It's fascinating to see how much these things cost. A Mr Sefton of Runcorn got the job, quoting costs such as: paving brick 3 shillings, steel joists – one ton was £10.00, concrete 12s, gullies 5s 6d., terracotta work 5s and boarding to put on the floors was only 1s 9d. They were extravagant and paid for slates; these cost 2 guineas. The wages cost 10d for a mason, the labourers were 5d, the bricklayer was 10d (these are hourly wages, I assume), and the total contract price was going to be £835. Each classroom had to have an open fire and be beautifully plastered. The new rooms were built, but this was not without problems. The head teacher had written to the trustees to say he was not really very keen on the way Mr Sefton was carrying out his duties. He was holding things up, he wasn't turning up on time, jobs were not done properly. They were also having trouble with the furnishings that went inside. The Vicar sent a letter "You promised a cupboard some time ago, and I should be so glad if you could send it by the boat, next Friday" (so, this was being sent from the Weaver Navigation,) "please put the cupboard on the boat". These requests were from the Reverend Sanders-Brown, who was now the incumbent of the church on the island.

In August 1901 the headmaster sent a letter to the managers. The work was still not completed. They had problems with the dilatory way that Mr Sefton carried out his contract. The work should have taken six months and it had already taken ten. Portions of the work done were very far from satisfactory; the large windows to the infants were not weatherproof. The building is not weatherproof and the floor is badly planed and loose, and so are the lavatory bowls.

The Head, Mr Johnson, had identified a bright little lad, "I think he might win one of the County Scholarships. But, I cannot see how his mother could afford to keep him at school after his 14th birthday. She cannot do much charring owing to the young baby she has, he's a rather smart lad and he might do well". A bursary was requested from the board, it is not recorded whether this was granted.

When the new classroom was nearly ready, a second letter is sent to the Managers by Mr Robert Cookson, who was now the head teacher, saying "I am at a sort of a loss to know how to use the new classroom for the older scholars to the best advantage with the present staff because the accommodation is so small." New desks have been bought, - 8 foot long to seat two pupils! These 8 foot long desks were seating six pupils. The Chief Inspector visited again and he was very pleased with the 'new palace' he called it and he inquired as to the style of the desks. They had trouble with the desks, so he suggested they buy a different sort of desk called a 'dual desk'. I think these are the kind we have now. The new desks were brought, dual desks, and the school received a grant of £20 to buy them. They also had problems with the new toilets, sewage was flowing into the dock. That was probably the best place for it, but it caused a nuisance. There were always problems with funding. Weston Point School was a Board School, the Salt Union and Castner Kellner were supposed to contribute to its maintenance, but they weren't always as keen as they might have been. The schoolhouse was no longer occupied - it became the lock keeper's house. After the two new classrooms were completed, they were still short of space. The numbers were growing and the Government intervened.

In 1891 free education for all was introduced, so although Weston Point had had its school for more than 40 years, it was only now that free education was available. The school leaving age had been 11; it was now, in 1893 going up to 13. It didn't actually rise to 15 until 1944. Most boys and girls left school at 13 or 14. In 1902 the Balfour Education Act was passed, setting up local education authorities where the council was responsible for all schools. The Cheshire County Local Education Authority was set up in 1902.

Again expansion, expansion, expansion, and this is where we pick up our first bit of real eye -witness Weston Point history. How many of you have read Ralph Holloway's *Weston Point Remembered*? When I first took over at the school, one of our dinner ladies, Little Ann, said "Oh, I know about the book you've been looking at. Mr Holloway is still alive and he lives in North Wales in Penmenmawr. We suggested to the children "Why don't you write to him?". They all wrote letters to Mr Holloway; he was delighted, absolutely thrilled. I told earlier you about my dear father. I received a letter too from Mr Holloway to say how pleased he was that his colleague's daughter was now in charge of the school, because he'd worked with my father. He told quite a typical story of a pupil at Weston Point. He was born in Weston Point, but his father came from the Black Country and worked for Mr Castner. Alfred's grandparents were housekeepers for the Castners. Alfred could see the schooner masts through the school window. This is in 1911 - there were still schooners up and down the river. In fact he sent a whole sheaf of pen and ink sketches to the children to show what Weston Point looked like when he was a youngster, and the sort of games that children played. On every one of them, facing towards the river, there are schooner masts there, so they really made an impression.

The main cargo on narrow boats, using the canal, was china clay, it was brought in from Cornwall on its way to Stoke-on-Trent, the bargee children were travelling from school to school, up and down the canal, each having an individual register. When boat children came to the school, they were always paired with a younger child. Of course their education was so disjointed they missed out on a lot, so they were always put with one of the infants who would tell them how to work, show them how to behave. Weston Point children were always very helpful. The teacher, Miss White, travelled each day from Sefton Park in Liverpool. She used the railway, but she had to walk from Runcorn station, down Cock and Hen Lane, a two mile walk from the station to the school. Although many of the children were Wesleyans, most of them attended the Church of England school. The Wesleyan Chapel had been built with funds donated by Mr Hazlehurst, the local soap manufacturer, it expanded to have a Sunday

school room as well. However, as the school, they had to use the Sunday school room for classes, and the Conservative Club too, because more and more children were attending.

Children could be caned for bad behaviour. In fact the first thing I found in my office, in the bottom filing cupboard drawer, was the cane. It's the proper 'Will Hay' cane with the bent bamboo handle. And there was a punishment book, but there are no names in it. The playground was covered with cinders, that came from the classroom fires; the caretaker would just throw them onto the playground. In these days they are asking us to put rubber surfaces down on our playgrounds. Then you had to play on cinders, and nobody bothered whether they were hurt in falls or not. School was quite regimented, you were caned for bad behaviour and you didn't dare go home and tell your Mum; you'd be in more trouble, you'd get another smack. The boat children, the boatees, didn't like school. They worked on the boats usually helping with the horses, so when they got to Weston Point and it was turn-around time they had to go to school, and they always called the teachers Ma'am, even though they were Misses. There was a Miss Stott, she took Miss Dalloway's class on Friday afternoons for composition – writing stories, creative writing they call it now. Alfred Holloway liked that lesson best of all. The social life of the village revolved mostly around the Chapel, the Sunday School anniversary was always very important. Although the children went to a Church of England school, many of them attended the Wesleyan Chapel, There were Whit Walks, and the Whit Tuesday boat trip that went up to New Brighton and back.

In *Kelly's Directory* in 1914 the Weaver Navigation Company was still the chief landowner, but the community had expanded. It had its own Police Station at one time and a coaching inn, the Weaver Hotel was being rebuilt and the Castner Kellner works was expanding. There were engineering works here too, like Henry Branch's. Weston Point had a fried fish shop, a Co-op and a cab proprietor, until the outbreak of the First World War. Some of you may know Sylvia Littlemore. She was a Weston Point girl and was a friend of my Mum. She had been asked by her grandson to write her memories of Weston Point. Now, funnily enough, she doesn't record her schooldays, but she remembers all the social things that went on. Her first memory is of walking with her Dad along Cock and Hen Lane to the station to see him and his friends off when they were enlisting for the First World War. The memoirs are quite detailed, about how she went to dances and the social events that were sponsored by Castner's. The First World War was a time for expansion for Weston Point, mustard gas and other chemicals were produced at the factory, they were needed for the offensive.

In the map of Weston Point 1912-18, drawn by Alfred Holloway for his book, you can see Sandy Lane and the white gate. The white gate is where Castner Avenue now is, you walked down it to Castner's works. There was a pond, Walkers Pond, going right the way down to Eaton Hall, which was a little cottage. Sandy Lane went to the Salt Works. Down at the Castner's end you can see the Weaver Canal and Lydiate Lane. You can still see the abutment to the drum road bridge; that is where the little railway ran, that brought all the slabs of sandstone down to the river. Also you've got South Parade, Leonard Street and Sidney Street, Star Cottages and the labs and offices of Castner's. A lot of these things have disappeared. Here are Castner Kellner's gates, how many lads have rushed through that before it was shut? Once it was shut that was it, if you were late, you were not allowed through, so you lost a day's pay. It wasn't a bad time for Castner Kellner's, it expanded, it needed workers, and workers came from all over the country. After the war it expanded even further, houses being built right the way up Sandy Lane, going towards Weston. The factory and the houses went all the way to the Salt Works. The Alkali Works are still down here and eventually they were all joined up to the main factory, expanding even more.

In between the wars there was a time of consolidation, the community grew and then the Second World War began. We are lucky in that we found the school log book for that time. The head teacher had kept a detailed log book and it's very indicative of how they coped during the war. The first entry is on 1st September 1939, 61 years ago. It stated, "This school is closed from today until further notice. The teachers and the pupils are being evacuated to Blackpool. We travel from here at 2 o'clock.". The total number of pupils present on that last day was 65 children. So you can see, although the numbers expanded greatly round about the expansion of the factories, Castner's, the Salt Works and the canal, it was now decreasing; only 65 on roll. The next entry is 20th January 1940. "The school re-opened today, this morning, in extremely bad weather and under very bad conditions. Everything outside was frozen stiff, no water was available and the rooms were being cold through damp. Mrs. Dawson was absent; she is in bed with bronchitis. Seventeen children were present." And in February it said: "Attendance has been very low, with coughs and colds being very prevalent owing to severe winter weather." So, it wasn't good, the children had all gone to Blackpool, but didn't like it and wouldn't settle. In fact, there was notice of some children coming back before January, so much so that by the time January came, they said "Oh blow it, open the school again!". The school was expanding to some extent because children from other areas were being evacuated to Weston Point. How ridiculous is that? "Four new children over five were admitted today," this was in April, "making 84 on the registers", and on 16th April both sessions had a full attendance. There were no school dinners in these days. At 12 o'clock the school closed, home you go and it re-opened at 1.15 pm. Children used to go home and return in an hour and a quarter after their lunch. The trouble with this was, that if the children registered in the morning, and then if mother wanted to do something else in the afternoon, more often than not they did not return after lunch.

Then disaster struck! Frank Clear had to be sent home. At 3 o'clock a rash had appeared on his face; Frank Clear has German measles. The school dentist made his usual visit to examine the children's teeth on that day too. Eventually they had to shut the school because of the measles. Mrs. Brindley also arrived today; she was an HMI, Her Majesty's Inspector. She inquired about the evacuation and its effects on the evacuees. School closed on 10th May at 3.30 pm for the Whit holiday; they all were on holiday for a week.

From the log book we learn that on 4th September 1940, "The air raid warning sounded just before 10.00am this morning. We went to the shelter and remained there for over an hour. Registers were marked at 10 past 11 as there had also been an air raid lasting from 10 o'clock (pm) until 4.00 am in the morning. Only 17 attended on that morning. The air raid shelters were close by, the log book gives a list of the times in a day when the pupils and staff went back and to, to the air raid shelter. There must have been a shelter close by, but it's not marked on any maps. Some days in January they went into the shelter from 1.55 to 2.50, 1.35 to 2.05 and 9.25 to 10.05: they were in and out of the shelters all day. Really, I suppose, you wonder why. A German bombing map of Weston Point was found, I believe, in a German plane that was shot down in Kent. It shows you where they were going to drop the bombs, there's the target area. But the target area is not ICI; it's all along the waterfront. The Germans wanted to retain the ICI because they were going to use the superstructure, the industry, when they took over. The church and the school were also outside the target area, but they still had to go to the shelter; the bombing map shows it. I also have an aerial photograph of that area again from the German bombing raid.

The school still expanded. Before the Second World War, ICI had been doing well and they decided they wanted to do something for the area. They decided they were going to improve conditions, so they built houses. Before this time, a lot of workers had travelled from Runcorn or by train from further afield. The Company decided to build houses for the workers; we have plans of the houses. There's Cullen Road, Roscoe Crescent, Sandy Lane. They started to build them in the 1920s - houses with bathrooms, hot water systems. Although they had toilets in the back yard, yet they had bathrooms. Now this was well ahead of its time. Houses with bathrooms weren't in common use until after the Second World War when the new council houses were built. But here the ICI are putting in copper boilers, heating systems and bathrooms. They built 100 houses in 1924 and if you look at the aerial photograph you can see that the road plan is 'ICI'. Castner Avenue is one 'I', Roscoe Crescent is the 'C' and Mather Avenue is the other 'I'; it makes 'ICI'. The Company had its own fire brigade too, and their own doctor. Weston Point was a thriving community; they had their own recreation club and sports fields.

After the Second World War problems started because, again, the school was too small. The Inspectors came. The school was using the Sunday school and the Conservative Club for classrooms. The children were now having dinner in school; this was one of the other things that ICI did, just after the war. A trial school meals service was set up. The meals were cooked in the ICI canteen and then distributed to schools across the town. During the war many men had enlisted and ICI was short of workers, so women were employed in the factory. If Mum was at work someone needed to provide lunch for the children, so the school meals service started, meals were taken out to schools in big metal tins. The ICI were helping the school, but it was still overcrowded, there wasn't enough room and the Inspectors weren't pleased again. In their report they say "the small hall is used for a dining room, they have to go to the Conservative Club for lunch, they have to go into the Sunday school to be taught, and it's not good. There is no football pitch." There were plenty of fields, but you couldn't play football at school. "But above all the children develop a good attitude towards work, they are well mannered and they are friendly. The school has strength in the habits of industry that have been fostered. If a well balanced, stimulating curriculum is to be provided they must give way to much greater weight on the creative arts".

The school was too small, what were they to do? They needed a new school, but hadn't the funding for it. There was no way that the Church could provide a new school, so a little 'wheeze' was dreamt up. The actual school and the land belonged to the Weaver Navigation Company, so it was decided that the Weaver Navigation Company really did need that space for the work on the docks and that they were giving the school notice to quit. The school had to move, land had to be found and that's when land was designated off Castner Avenue, where the present school is. It was quite a 'fudge' really but the local authorities could then start to build a new school. The Inspectors noted that, not only did the school not have a football pitch, but they had all these wonderful fires that kept going out, the children were cold, and somebody had to collect the coal and tend to the fires. The Inspectors said that a new school should be built, which it duly was. It was opened by Dennis Vosper, the local MP, on 28th June 1963. A new school was built off Castner Avenue up on the field. This was before the expressway was built, and it had a football field. But what happened then? They put the new road in, so what has to go? The football field! The local authority decided that they would buy more land and put the football field above the school. There is a very high wall right around the playground and the school to retain the land. In fact the school has a perimeter fence of a mile, it's a heck of a large site. There is now a woodland area, lower down, near the expressway, but above it is the football pitch.

The new school was opened. It's interesting to note the costs. The wage of the caretaker, one full-time caretaker (there is only a part-time one now) was £10 18s 9d a week, plus 4s for overtime or call out. There was a school cleaner, a school meals service and central heating - no more fires! And it had a lively, hard working staff team.

In 1967 the New Town came to Runcorn. Gradually the ICI in Weston Point started to go into decline as production was moved to other countries. The chemical industry was not as important as it had been; its work was being done abroad, and when I took over as head in 1992 there were 110 children on the roll. There are seven classrooms in school, where there should have been room for 210 children. Already, in 1992 two of the classrooms were in mothballs, they weren't used anymore and the numbers were declining simply because people were moving away. The housing was not used for ICI workers as much anymore, the houses had been sold off. If people who lived in them wanted to buy them they did, but then there was an ageing population and the houses were administered by a management company who rented them out as 'social lets'. But it meant that the school profile was declining and it was difficult because in 1998 when direct funding for schools was introduced, it's 'bottoms on seats', funding for the number of children in school; it's really payment by results again. The numbers were declining and it was debatable whether the school should stay open or be amalgamated with another school. We had to fight to remain open, but breathed a sigh of relief when we were reprieved from closure.

When we thought we were flourishing again Project Pathway arrived, an initiative, prompted by the EEC and the Government, to discover where there might be underground stores of dangerous chemical waste. I remember very well the week before the Millennium Eve being called at home by the PR lady from ICI. The school used to do an awful lot of work with the ICI for the benefit of the children. The company wouldn't give us money, but the children could go to the factory and offices to use the microscopes, equipment and company expertise. The lady invited me to a special meeting, but I wasn't to say anything, or tell anyone. It was at that meeting that we were told that HCBD* was seeping right the way through some of the houses, from the old quarries where chemicals had been dumped, and it was going to be a big problem. The scientists were almost sure the school was not affected by the gas. Weston was more likely to be affected than us but the quarry where all the waste was stored was directly above our school. This caused an awful lot of anxiety and the ICI had to send air monitors into school to test for the gas. We had a year when the gas monitors were all round school. One particular time that the monitors were installed, the report said that the results were clear, but my office was a bit 'iffy'. I only had the first aid room for an office; it's like a broom cupboard. There was a very high reading on one particular machine. They asked if I felt alright - I felt fine. The cause of it was, there had been a whiteboard marker on my shelf, with chemical cleaning fluid oozing out of it. They thought I was going to keel over at any point. I contacted Halton Council during this time and said "Look we are having these monitors in. What happens if we get a positive reading?" "Your school shuts." It came as a blow really and I don't think half the neighbourhood realized this was a possibility, but we were told that if a gas monitor finds a positive reading the school is closed and will have to move. Thank goodness it was fine, all the readings were clear, we didn't have to close, but it did make a big difference to Weston Point. We found the pupil numbers still pretty low, because people couldn't sell their houses, building societies wouldn't lend money on the houses, there was no growth in population. It was a very difficult time, but it's getting better, a lot better. Houses are now starting to sell, new people and families are moving in.

* hexachlorobutadiene, a toxic chemical which was leaching out of the quarries in which it had been stored.

Although I retired a few years ago I can say it's a smashing little school, it still has high values, and it still gets good reports. I retired in 2003 when, for me, we had our final Ofsted and what did they say? It was a very effective school, pupils are very good and making very good progress. So, for all these years this has been the thread going right the way through the school. Children are well behaved, children are happy, children are reaching expected standards, they are a good staff and they are moving the children forward. Long may it remain so, and long may it remain open.

Thank you for listening.