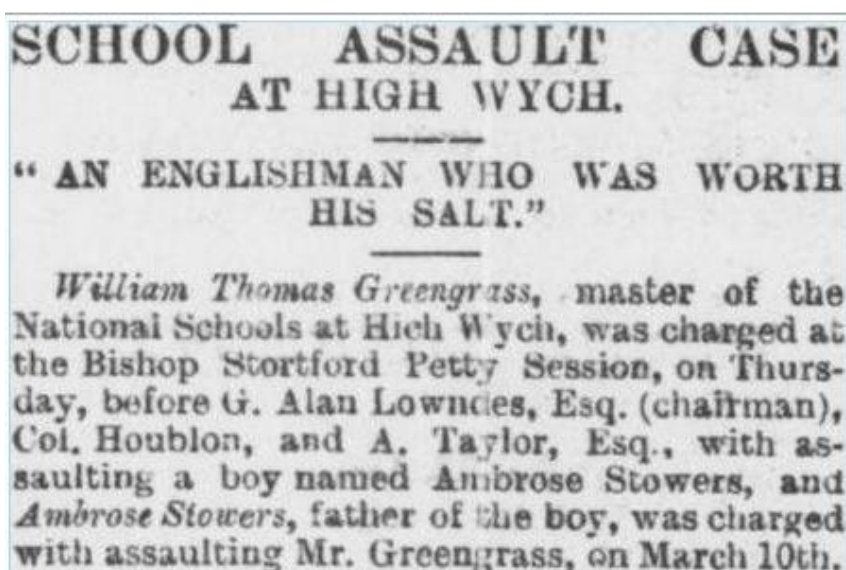


## An assault at High Wych School – HWH 62

Theo van de Bilt

Old newspapers are often a source of inspiration. Luckily the High Wych historian has access to the British Library Newspaper Archive with literally millions of pages from newspapers, some of them dating back hundreds of years. The article I'd like to discuss this time was printed in the Chelmsford Chronicle of 18<sup>th</sup> May 1898 and concerned an assault case at High Wych School. See below.



The article continues:

*“Mr. B. Auckland for Mr. Stowers, said the boy Stowers attended the National School at High Wych. On March 8<sup>th</sup> he was reported for talking during the absence of the schoolmaster from the room. In consequence of this the headmaster seized hold of the boy, caned him on the hand and also about the body. He then took the boy into a classroom and continued to beat him. The boy’s father finding what had occurred, examined the boy and found upon him marks showing he had been hit at least a dozen times, and at once took him to the schoolmaster and asked him why he had been thrashing his boy as he had. The schoolmaster said he was sorry. He also took him the next day to Dr. Collins, who remarked that if the boy were his he should serve the master the same. The father afterward went to the Headmaster again. Some words took place between them, and the father boxed the schoolmaster’s ears soundly several times. Although the father was guilty of an assault, it was one any Englishman and parent who was worth his salt would probably have committed under similar circumstances. He (Mr. Ackroyd) urged that the provocation his client received was more than any ordinary man could stand. The boy Ambrose bore out the solicitor’s statement.*”

*Mr. E. Collins, surgeon of Sawbridgeworth, stated that he found on the boy three distinct bruises, three inches long, and as thick as one's little finger, and also seven or eight red marks. The reverend H.F. Rackham also gave evidence. Ambrose Stowers, father of the boy, said that on the afternoon of the assault he received a letter from the master, stating that he had been obliged to punish the boy for being cheeky and impudent to him.*

*Mr. Thorneycroft in addressing the magistrates for Mr Greengrass, said that for the talking the boy received the moderate punishment of one cut across the hand and had his conduct stopped there he would have received no more punishment. What took place afterwards was entirely brought about by the boy's own misconduct. He cheeked the master. Mr. Greengrass said the father went to him and abused him the same day calling him a beast and a brute. The man struck him with his fist a severe blow on the left ear, knocking him against the wall. He hit him two or three times on the left side and twice on the right. The magistrates having retired to consider their decision, the Chairman said they had come to the conclusion that Mr. Greengrass did use unnecessary severity with the boy. They thought the justice of the case would be met by his being fined 1s and costs. They thought that the assault on Mr. Greengrass two days afterwards was very unprovoked, and Stowers would be fined 10s and costs. The costs were 14s 6d against Mr. Greengrass and 9s 6d against Stowers."*

Reading this article some 125 years later you realise how much times have changed. Nowadays teachers are not allowed to inflict corporal punishment on the children in their care. Assault on children is probably also regarded more seriously. In this particular case we note that Greengrass ended up paying 10s 6d including costs and Stowers Sr. paying 19s 6d, just under a pound, nearly twice as much therefore. Would magistrates nowadays reach similar verdicts? Well, to be honest, there's no way of knowing.

Another source to be considered in this case is Greengrass's own, slightly different version of events as recorded in the school logbook. Mandy West, a later head teacher at High Wych wrote about it in her 2011 memorial book:

*"One entry shows that in March 1898 he (Greengrass) was assaulted by a parent and several severe blows were received all because he had punished a child for being cheeky. The family were expelled. Later the father apologised which Mr. Greengrass accepted so the children were readmitted"*



**The photograph on the left shows Mr. Greengrass and High Wych schoolchildren around the time of the assault. Ambrose Stowers jr. might well be in this picture! - The one on the left shows Greengrass and his family at the schoolhouse**

Let us now present some background on the main characters in this saga. Ambrose Stowers sr. 38 at the time, his son Ambrose Stowers jr. then a boy of 12 and Mr. Greengrass, the schoolmaster, then 35. Stowers sr. a farm worker was born in Coggeshall in 1860 and probably came here around 1880s when he married his wife Elizabeth, born Holden, a High Wych girl. By 1891 the couple had 5 children, by 1901 there were 8 amongst which was Doris (the later Doris Smith who lived amongst us until age 101). Stowers sr. passed away in 1933, his wife Elizabeth in 1949, both are buried in St. James's churchyard. Young Ambrose lived with his parents in 1911 and was then described as "woodman on an estate". In the first world war he volunteered and ended up in the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Bedford Regiment. He died at the Somme on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1916. Schoolmaster William Greengrass hailed from Great Yarmouth and served as headmaster at High Wych School from 1891 until 1925 when he was succeeded by Alfred Mabey. With his wife Lucy Ann he lived at the school house. Upon retirement from the school he moved to Sawbridgeworth where he died in 1943.

Information for this article was drawn from the Chelmsford Chronicle, from the 2011 HW School celebratory book, from Antony Giles's HW burial registry, from Ancestry.co.uk and from HALS, Hertfordshire Archives and Library Services.