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Gerald Hunt visits Downs Secondary School

WHERE THE BOYS BAKE CAKES AND THE GIRLS DO WOODWORK

IN the housecraft room, 14-year-old Raymond Fox enthusiastically whipped a cake mix into submission. In the carpentry shop, 15-year-old Linda Rockall demonstrated her skill with a saw and plane.

Unusual? Not at Downs Secondary School, Compton, where this novel "switch" system has been in operation for years.

"The idea really stems from our environment," said Mr. Philip Bowden, headmaster. "Living in a rural area, the boys may well have to set to and cook a meal if the women of the house are away on a shopping expedition. Similarly, the girls won't want to ring through to Newbury every time a fuse needs changing or some simple household job has to be done."

The boys' kitchen course starts with elementary tea-making and graduates to the cooking of a complete meal. "They really seem to enjoy it," said Miss Janet Box, housecraft teacher. "I often find they are better at cake-making than the girls. I think they put a little more effort into the mixing."

DARN THEIR OWN SOCKS

The boys also wash their own football kit, darn their own socks and press their own trousers.

The girls are taught that electricity is something of which they need not be frightened, provided certain safety rules are kept in mind. They are taught to handle a hammer and to carry out simple carpentry.

Pictured top is the headmaster, Mr. Philip Bowden, who says idea of the school's "switch" system stems from its environment. rt washing is something most men have to tackle at some time

"I don't think girls are quite as helpless as their menfolk sometimes pretend," said Mr. Bowden. Mr. Gwilym Evans, who teaches practical subjects, agreed. "One or two of them are as good with their hands as the boys," he said.

COUNTRY INTERESTS

Also stemming from its environment is the school's bias towards agriculture and horticulture. "There is nothing worse than a country child who doesn't know what crop is growing in the next field," said Mr. Bowden. "This is in no way to be considered a pre-vocational course. We are not trying to produce a lot of farmers, but obviously a lot of their interests and possibly their employment will have a country emphasis."

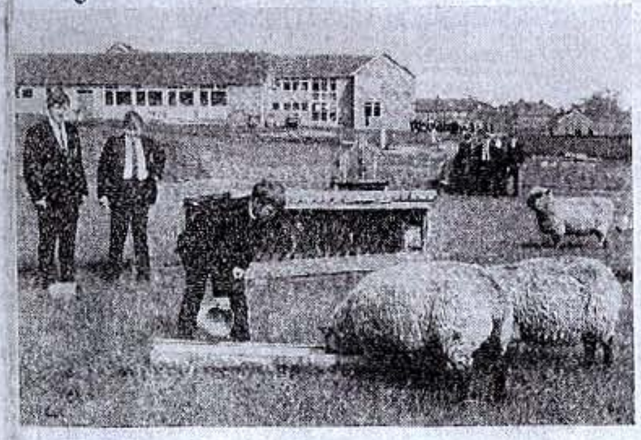
Children are taught the economics of poultry keeping and gardening. They learn how to pluck poultry and prepare the birds for market. The school bought three New Zealand albino doe rabbits—and now looks after about 40. Less co-operative are five ewes, who have not yet been persuaded to give birth. But they do keep the grass down and provide the needle-work department with some useful raw material.

Raymond Fox tries out his cooking prowess.

PRIZE-WINNERS

The school's many poultry include Marans prize-winning bantams, which produce an extremely dark brown egg. There are duck eggs in an incubator, and it is hoped later to keep turkeys.

A small tractor and a dutch barn are future projects. Equally thriving is the horticultural section, which



When a school has Downs' strong agricultural bias livestock is as important as laboratory equipment. Pictured top planting brussel sprouts in the school's extensive gardens are Dennis Lay (14), of Harwell, and Brian Newman (14), of Chaddleworth. Feeding ewes in the bottom picture are Raymond Fox (14), of Beedon, Robert Lynch (15), of Chieveley, and Martin Cox (14), also of Chieveley.

Meanwhile, normal school work is by no means neglected. Downs' agricultural bias has not been achieved at the expense of academic subjects. Children take the new CSE examinations. There were 240 youngsters at the school when it opened in September, 1960. Now there are 350, taken from a catchment area of 50 square miles. Boys and girls come from as far afield as Ashampstead, Chaddleworth, East Ilsley and Hermitage.

Every child in the school is required to take a first-aid course, because living in a rural community could mean an inevitable delay in reaching a doctor. Out-of-school activities range from tennis to the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme.

Under construction now is a swimming pool, measuring 60 feet by 25 feet, which will cost about £3,500. We have had a lot of co-operation from parents with this," said Mr. Bowden. "Money-raising has been particularly impressive when you realise that we are only about half the size of other secondary schools in the Newbury area. And a pool really is a necessity. Because there are no facilities around here, over 85 per cent. of our pupils are unable to swim!"

Down School girls are so keen on gardening that they volunteer to tend the greenhouse plants during the week-ends and holidays. Pictured at work in our top picture are two 13-year-olds, Carol Eddowes and Joan Heath. Ironing and sewing come easily now to Jimmy Drake (15), pictured here sewing buttons on his shirt.