
The Village School

I suppose that my memory really only began to function from the first days at School. In those days we mostly started at four and half years old, but of course it really depended on how your birth date related to the start of term.

This building was of a somewhat drab appearance, and situated in the centre of the Village. It consisted of a single storey, brick-built structure, divided by a wooden sliding partition to form two classrooms, or, when required for some function or other, it became one large room. These rooms had very large - but too high off the ground - windows for us to see out, other than to see some very large horse chestnut trees close by. This was very, very annoying when the sound of the odd aircraft passed over or, later, the more frequent road vehicles passed by and, of course, during the War as the volume of aircraft also increased.

There was a "lobby", running the full length of the building which had two rows of clothes pegs, and a wash basin, also an invisible division between Boys, and Girls, which could only be crossed to facilitate entrance to our respective classrooms. This area would be available for playtimes in wet or otherwise inclement weather but definitely no crossing the line. There was a playground at either end, with the usual "offices", for Boys, and Girls in each. This building couldn't have been very old as my father, along with others, had to walk some two miles or so to Wotton when he started school. The journey by road would add on possibly a further mile, and a half or so, and so it was common to walk alongside the railway track (the Brill Tramway), from Wotton station for the last part of the journey.

One story told by a much older resident, who also had to travel to the far school, was that he was allowed to leave when he was able to calculate the base of a hayrick whatever that may mean. It could of course refer to the setting out of the rectangle, and the squaring of the corners. This education had to be paid for by the parents, the sum of two pence per week (a fair sum in those days) springs to mind, but I can't be absolutely sure.

Our classrooms were heated by a coke burning stove surrounded by a metal fireguard in each room, which served their purpose quite well, particularly if you were "lucky" enough to sit at the front of the class. The coke and coal would sometimes have to be fetched in from the nearby bunker, a task only suitable for older boys, sexual inequality already rearing its ugly head even in those days.

One "spin-off" from these stoves was that on wet days it was the only way for those that had walked some distance (a mile or so across fields), from Watbridge Farm, or about the same from lower Pollicot (by road) for them to get their clothes dry. These would be hung on the fireguard, and in doing so of course the resulting small clouds of steam added interest to the otherwise dull proceedings. The wet coke or coal sometimes refused to burn cleanly and, as the room filled with smoke, you would be able cough at suitable intervals, just loud enough to disrupt the proceedings. I did say "lucky" about sitting by the stoves, but this of course was the area that no one really wanted to occupy due to its close proximity to the Teacher. Any lighting was by paraffin lamps, although due to the hours we spent there, (nine am to four or four thirty), not much artificial lighting was actually needed - also in this respect

those large windows played their part. There were two Teachers, one for the infants, and the Head Teacher for the older pupils, prior to the War, and I find it quite difficult to remember the numbers of children at any given time, as someone always seemed to be leaving, a state of affairs that rather "niggled" the younger ones as it was everyone's ambition to leave, and get that first pay packet, (Akeman Street Brickyard seemed favourite for most), and of course new children would join us. I think my first real recollections must have been those early days when we started writing letters of the alphabet in sand trays, before going on to a pencil or pen. Chalk and crayons were also extensively used in the infant room. It didn't half upset the Teacher should anyone be so bold or unlucky enough to spill the sand from their tray. During that first year or so the other children must have joined the class, so there would have been at least six of us, doesn't sound many when the large classes of today are considered, but there would be more joining as time went on, as that "population explosion" carried on for some while after. The noise of an approaching motor cycle would herald the imminent arrival of the Infant Teacher from Ludgershall each morning; this was something that those already assembled outside the school would watch with interest. Dressed like "Biggles" in a long leather coat, and wearing a leather helmet and goggles she would carefully park the motorcycle in a nearby shed. The departure in the afternoons could be even more interesting as it was not always so smooth, the machine sometimes had ideas of its own as to whether it would start or not, this usually brought forth reinforcements in the shape of a man who owned a similar type of bike, all would eventually end in success, with the machine, and rider disappearing in an "Unked", (this word will be explained later), cloud of smoke.

Pens would come when we got "promoted" to the "Big Room", as it was always known. These were of the scratchy separate nib variety, with the desks containing inkwells in the usual way, only one pupil being allowed to use a fountain-pen if my memory serves me correct. I suppose from that one action we learned that rules were made to be bent if not actually broken. Looking back, life was very easy going though at the time it appeared not to be so, discipline was upheld, or perhaps reinforced is more accurate, with the occasional use of the cane. This was looked on by most of the children as more of a "diversion" than as a punishment, and gave everyone something to talk about, but it was soon forgotten, the pain not being very great as I recall from my several sessions, and the "culprit" would become a "hero" for a short time anyway. There were the odd occasions when parents objected to this "brutal treatment", and would visit the school to make their feelings on the subject known, but again this was mostly a "nine days wonder".

Caning would always be carried out in front of the class, which probably had something to do with the parents' intervention, the humiliation of their "poor child", or some other such reason.

Looking back I believe the Teachers quite enjoyed using the cane, they certainly never seemed to hesitate for long, but really laid it on, and it was certainly not of much use to plead your case as they always appeared eager to get on with it.

A major crime seemed to be being caught in the wrong playground without a legitimate reason, though sometimes it seemed that anything would do. This was the time to have a good excuse, some good luck, and the ability to keep a straight face, but it seldom made much difference.

Of course if the worst happened it was sometimes possible to "angle" your hand down so that the strike had less effect, but mostly this only got you a second stroke, as did a miss which hit the wrist or your arm, even though this was out of your control. One lad (an evacuee) who was a regular "transgressor", had the occasional habit of pulling his hand away at the last moment, this did little to improve the Teacher's temper, particularly if she happened to catch the "follow through" on her leg. Either way a second, usually very severe stroke, was called for, and certainly delivered.

In the infants' room it was not unknown for children to get a sharp rap across the knuckles with a ruler, for any real or imagined transgression. It Hurt! I wonder now if that motorcycle ride on inclement days had anything to do with the severity or frequency of the use of the ruler. There was always a great tendency for the Teachers to issue threats, I don't really think that this worried us too much in the long term, although I suppose if it happened today, there would be a great outcry by some irate parents.

I would always be in mild trouble for using my proper name "Bob" - the infant teacher would never accept this, and on at least one occasion sent for my older sister to confirm that I was indeed "Robert". Some thirty or so years later this same teacher, on meeting my sister, asked, "And do they still call your brother Robert, 'Bob'?"

We would "chant" the multiplication tables in the time-honoured way, and get to grips with our poetry, and arithmetic. I still remember that "In 1492 Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue", but couldn't it just as easily be 1942 or indeed any other year ending with a figure two? The knowledge that the word "stationery" contains the letter "e" for envelopes, as opposed to "stationary", also still sticks in the mind, it's great to be Educated! One other thing that has stuck, is that there was always a "barometer" standing on the windowsill of the "Big Room", this was made up of two glass vessels, one inverted into the other which had water in the bottom one. To this, occasionally we would add a small quantity of red to improve the visibility of the levels. There was once a short-lived "craze", to make these devices at home using a sauce bottle as the top part; nearly every house had to have one.

With only a piano, a couple of blackboards, and of course, books to make up the teaching aids, there was not much to stimulate interest although there was a large roll of cane hanging on the wall, and the one currently in use would be displayed prominently on the Teacher's desk. Also on the wall was a very large World Atlas, in those days much of it was coloured red, I think because of this, maps, and geography is probably something that I was always interested in.

Attempts to form a Choir were made but the resulting noise was too much to bear, and so it failed, that's my story, but no one could blame me - I was never part of it, as I didn't pass the first audition. It was not too different with the Church Choir, that didn't last for long either.

There were attempts made to add interest, one such being a trip laid on for us, to see the Royal Train go through Ashendon Junction, on the Great Western line. I think this must have been sometime after the nineteen-thirty-six Coronation and because of our age we couldn't make the complete distance across the fields to the side of the track; the next best thing was to watch from some half a mile or so

distant. I seem to remember that in the event the train must have been travelling in the sixties, or faster, so even those close to would hardly have had time to shout one "Hip-hip", before it was a small speck in the distance.

One other attempt was the acquisition of a small handloom and this took our attention for a while, though not much cloth was ever produced, but no doubt we all learned something from the exercise.

Silkworms also took our interest for a time, and again not much silk was produced, but as before we all got involved for a short time.

All the class got involved in a painting of the view as seen through those high windows. It was done in watercolours, and no doubt we were quite proud of it, though I doubt that we would have admitted it at the time, as it would be considered to be "sissy". It eventually got finished, but I don't think that we discovered any "budding" Picassos or Constables in the process.

Other happenings to brighten our lives were the Silver Jubilee, and later the Coronation. For these there would be the obligatory sports, and the quite acceptable tea party, with most of the villagers joining in, in some form or other. Usually there would be bowling for a ham, the complete pig being just too much to contemplate, in later years bowling for the whole pig would come into being, with stepping the chain, and various other side shows. There would be a fancy dress competition, and races, run according to age, with small prizes for which there could be some fierce competition. Almost certainly there would have been a parents' race. In earlier times there would have been climbing the "Greasy Pole", but that for some reason or other had completely disappeared. Stepping the chain would almost certainly be won by a farmer who could well have been using this method of measurement all his life.

There was always Ashendon Feast which I seem to remember fell on the second Tuesday of May, a strange choice, as one would have thought a weekend would have been preferable. Not much in the way of a feast, again if my memory is to be relied on, but for some years there was once more the sports, and a Tea laid on, but the coming of the War put paid to this, and like so many other things it is difficult to restart them.

Empire Day, May 24th (I referred to "Pears Encyclopaedia" for the date) was celebrated, but not in any great depth.

At sometime along the way there must have been General Elections, but the only things I remember about them prior to nineteen-forty-five, was a single Conservative poster displayed on a cowshed wall, where it remained until the weather took its natural course. This again according to "Pears", must have been nineteen-thirty-five. Next would come the Polling Day, which meant those old enough to actually cast their vote having to travel to a nearby village (the school, that our parents had previously attended), as we had no Polling Station of our own. This journey could be accomplished in several ways; you could either walk, cycle, or ride in the car provided by a political (Conservative) party. This car would be shunned by most of those having opposing views, or on the other hand could well be used to "put one over on the other side". Rosettes or some form of badge (probably a red flower) would often be worn to indicate Party allegiance. All pretty "childish", I

seem to recall thinking at the time. At the nineteen-forty-five election and after, many meetings took place, all parties getting in on the act, and so I suppose our political education began, but although old enough to serve in the Armed Forces we were not as yet old enough to cast our vote - twenty-one was the age in those days.

Local Politics also started in earnest, and Parish Councils with political rivals came into being. There had of course been a form of Parish Council or "Parish Meeting" as it was more commonly known but this had been conducted in a "gentlemanly" fashion, now would come the political argument, which to my young mind kept the actual business of the meeting off the table, but did give anyone who had a particular point of view a chance to state it in public, assuming of course that they could either make themselves heard, or alternatively catch the eye of the chairman.

There was also a sudden increase in the number of posters. By the time I was old enough to vote we had our own Polling Station, so the issue of riding in the cars was resolved, we missed out on much of the "fun and games" by being just a bit too young.

On the rare occasion that the local foxhunt met in the Village we would be let out to see the "off". For the rest of the day of course, we would find it very difficult to settle down because of the knowledge that they would be somewhere close by. The periodic blowing of the hunting horn would confirm this fact, and much Behind hand (or desk lid) discussion would take place as to where they were next "putting in". In those days there were several regular spinneys and woods suitable for foxes to hide.

This is the day when some of the Farmers involved with this activity would insist that their workers take their half days off, this to ensure that there was no watching in the boss's time, and to be available to open gates or any other task required by the hunt. These Farmers would most probably have more barbed wire on their property than normal to ensure that the hunt didn't perform on their land.

Barbed wire in a hedge or a ditch close by was marked on the relevant hedges by a post with a red wooden "flag", to warn riders of the dangers when jumping over.

It was colourful scene if nothing else and there was always the slight chance of the odd "tanner", or so for holding a horse or opening a gate for them to pass through unhindered. All in all, I found these hunting types to be a miserable lot indeed. They never smiled, but always seemed to shout even at each other, I must say that I was never inclined to want to join them, not that there were any "working class" members in those days.

There were people from the Village employed to "stop" the fox and badger holes, on the night before the hunt was due to take place, and I have certainly seen a fox fished out of a pond still alive (just), and being disposed of by throwing it to the hounds. There were few places for the poor? fox to hide, but on the other side of the coin I have seen the damage done by a fox on the rampage, equally not a "pretty sight", as they seem to kill everything they can reach, not just for food.

Again on the plus side, hunting provided work for many people, both full, and part time, the horses, and dogs always appeared to be in first class condition, and I believe the riders mostly treated their horses with respect. In those days many of

the riders would have at least one groom following on with a spare horse, or even horses; these would be changed some time during the day, and so it is probable that most of the horses were never stretched in a physical sense.

I only remember seeing one horse having to be destroyed, (as a result of a broken back) in all the years that I watched, although I am sure there must have been others. There were of course injuries to many horses, and riders during that time.

It has also to be remembered that the rider took the same chance as the horse when jumping this particular hedge/ditch combination, but of course unlike the horse, she did have a choice. The problem in this case was that the ditch was several feet away from the hedge, and so the span was impossibly great, however it was marked with a red flag. In those days it was very unusual to see a lady rider riding other than side-saddle. One point I always found to be of interest was that bad weather didn't seem to put them off in any way. For the next few days after the hunt there would be two or three hounds wandering around, having forgotten to go home.

In later years would come the beagles, these were altogether easier to watch as the hares appear to go round in large circles, although in the process they cover a lot of ground, but if you picked your vantage point with care, you were able to watch the proceedings with the minimum of effort. The hunters of course are on foot, so it seemed to me to be a much fairer system giving both hunter and hunted a more even chance. If you had sufficient energy to spare you could always follow them but this was not easy because, and regardless of the age of those taking part, they covered enormous distances at considerable speed.

To make sure that all animals were not forgotten shooting parties were arranged, and I remember on one occasion acting as a beater. This entailed walking in front of the guns, and sending up or moving on anything in our path. As the afternoon progressed walking in front became more hazardous, as by now the amount of drink consumed by the "guns" clearly began to take its toll, and you would begin to get somewhat uneasy when any fast running "Jack Thistle" got shot while attempting to escape. I personally have yet to see one run, but by the same token have never carried a gun on that kind of party. At the end of it all we would probably get paid something like sixpence, or so, danger money ?

At the appropriate time of year there would also be rook shooting, this normally took place in the evening, and so we could go and investigate. Nothing much occurred to really interest us, but we could always find and collect the empty cartridge cases.

Back in School our time was spent just learning the basics, nothing too difficult was ever attempted, and things went their merry way until September Nineteen Thirty Nine.

There had of course been talk of War for some time, and just before the actual declaration this was emphasised by the sudden arrival of a Searchlight Unit which came, and set up their camp on the outskirts of the Village. It consisted of one searchlight and generator with a sound locator. The men lived in tents pitched round the outskirts of the field. This soon became a popular attraction, as they would allow us to look through their very powerful night binoculars, while sitting in the canvas

swivel chair used by the observers. An aircraft would sometimes fly over at night as a target, and we could "have a listen", in the earphones of the sound locator - no wonder children looked forward to a War, they didn't stay long, disappearing just as quickly as they arrived.

A second "Event", was that now someone came to show what actions were to be taken in the then considered unlikely attack by the enemy. Although it was for the benefit of the adults we learned how to use the stirrup pump to put out an incendiary bomb, how to cross a smoke filled room by crawling beneath the smoke, and the thing I remember most vividly, was how to coil the hose without causing kinks. Later would come first aid classes, and we would be used as "patients" for a small fee; I can't remember how much though. There was of course a chance for us to learn the basics, but there were no follow ups to these so we didn't keep up to date, something that really could have been useful.

A more realistic sign came for us on the arrival of some forty-three evacuees with teachers from the Ealing area on the third of September. They came on a double-decker bus - such a vehicle had never previously been seen in the Village, there must of course be something odd about them to use such peculiar transport.

In the long term it turned out that they were not too dissimilar to ourselves, but it took some time for them to integrate into our Village life, some never quite made it, and would return home, while a few came back for a second try when life again became too difficult in London.

At this time our schooling changed quite dramatically, as they brought their own teachers with them, complete with new (to us at least), methods. This also started a long period for many of us of half-day only attendance, due to lack of space, and looking back I truly believe that this was the end of my serious involvement with the Village School. We would alternate between morning, and afternoon attendance, which didn't further the cause much, as you just didn't come to "grips" with anything in particular.

I, as everyone else did, would later go back full time, but the continuity (for me at least), had been broken (an excuse perhaps)? and by now the War had got into its stride so that there was much more of interest outside of the classrooms to occupy our tiny minds.

One thing about those early war years that does stick in the mind, is the memory of being fitted with gas masks, and then after having to carry them to school, having to endure seemingly hours of sitting in them for practice; or was it a ploy by the Teachers to keep us quiet? The penalty for forgetting to bring it was to be sent home to collect it, plus some other form of punishment. One thing is certain we only carried them with us on that part of the day spent in School, the thought of being "gassed", not really looming very large in our lives.

The inevitability of "call up", into one of the Services at age eighteen, I believe also took its toll, what was the use of getting educated just to waste several years, whitewashing the coal, or indeed anything else that stood still long enough, this was the kind of tale that often filtered back from those already in the Services. Despite all those "horror" stories, I think now that most of us truly looked forward to the

great day, when we would swap our civilian clothes for a smart sharply pressed new uniform, complete with polished brass buttons, the question of how they were kept so smart and polished was not really addressed until the "fateful"? day arrived. But of course, as with most things in life, there would be exceptions and a way out for some; for instance, none of the farmers' sons or many of the farm workers, most of those working for the "War Agg", and some railwaymen, were to suffer such an indignity as being "Called up". After the War many others would get their "papers" prior to the age of twenty-six, after training, apprenticeships or whatever.

There was a scheme during the War for the older children to be issued with a card that enabled us to work for a number of days, or half days on local farms. I am not absolutely sure but I think you had to be twelve years old, and the time allowed was ten days or, preferably, twenty half days. A signature was required from the farmer concerned. I do remember once being called out in front of the entire school to explain why I steadfastly refused to go to work (potato or beet picking), probably for one particular farmer, the reasons were in my opinion very sound. First he didn't ordinarily encourage us to go on his land, (or more probably it was members of his staff), in fact I decide he was positively unfriendly in such matters, as we would soon get chased off if caught, and hadn't he just put an old lady out of one of his tied Houses?

After much "It is our/your duty, the War effort would suffer", type pressure being applied to persuade me to change my mind and to show me the error of my ways, I still wouldn't give in, as for me there was no other real answer to any of this. At the end of the day it didn't really matter who was right, but just the same I suppose my name went in the "big book" for such indiscipline. The upshot was that none of the other children would go either, I don't suppose I had ever heard the word "Strike" as applied to such action before, but would hear of it much later in life.

I would still dearly love to read that Big Book; it would almost certainly fill in some of the gaps in my memory.

Physical Training was carried out in the playgrounds, the tarmac, potholed surface not doing much for knees or elbows in the inevitable tumbles, if games were to be played we would go to a nearby field.

With the coming of the evacuees, we could now get complete teams for any sport we fancied, or could we? This, in it's own way, brought more problems than it solved.

They didn't want to play on our teams, preferring to stay with those they knew best, we for our part acting in much the same way, and as there were more of "them", than "us", it often made for some very uneven numbers in the resulting teams, but whatever the problems it always had to be "Us versus the Vaccies".

This state of affairs would last for some time to come, certainly until some more evacuees came, this time from Croydon, and we "grudgingly" allowed some of their biggest and best players to play on our side. Well! you don't want to be too "dog in the manger", do you! ? Some of these evacuees came to stay with relatives, and so didn't quite fit into the normal scheme of things, they would often alternate between being eligible for inclusion into the Village teams, or the "Vaccies", much depending

on the mood of everyone at that particular time, or on the necessity to reinforce a sometimes weak team.

Diplomacy of the kind when someone held onto the only bat or ball until they won the argument, may or may not come to the fore in such decisions.

There were occasions when we went to an adjacent field to play "Cricket", under close supervision, though in all truth no-one knew too much about the game, and I think in all truth we were not too happy to be taught such things by Women Teachers, it was then as now Men's work.

The school cricket gear was bought with money raised by a few pupils who ran the school allotments as a small business, and sold the produce, with proper books, and accounts being kept. This gear was not available to us out of school hours, a situation that did not find favour with those of us that had done the work to raise the necessary cash. I wonder why gardening on this plot never seemed to correspond with our half days off school.

The coming of the "Nit Nurse" was a break, and all heads would be diligently searched for possible unwanted lodgers, the method being a rake through the hair with an unsharpened pencil, no very great problems ever arose from these visits however.

The School Doctor and, "horror of horrors", the School Dentist would also make a periodic appearance.

An official photographer would also pay us a visit, but fortunately I don't seem to appear on any of his efforts.

Of course during those years we would catch most of the infectious illnesses/diseases that were in circulation at the time, and in those days you stayed off for three weeks or so for measles, and I think we managed to take the maximum time for most of the others.

Another break occasionally occurred on the arrival of the "Truancy Man", he would arrive on a bicycle, and didn't normally have much business to attend to as we were a law-abiding group, and it probably took him some time to get his breath back after that difficult cycle ride, I seem to recall he came from Quainton, some four to five miles away.

A visit from the "Schools Inspector" would have the chosen/capable ones called out to the front to recite their version of a well-rehearsed poem, or the "Brainy Ones", could well be called on to answer questions on other subjects. My own particular "party piece", was the poem "The Discovery", though I don't recall ever being asked to perform it before such an eminent person, and I most certainly would have great difficulty in reciting it now. My reserve effort, just in case someone did it before me was "The Burial of Sir John Moore", a bit "serious", when I think back

but the reason for this was that my sister, now having left school, had used this as her first choice, and so with family support I found it quite easy to learn.

There was the Bishop's Prize for those well versed in the scriptures, but I can't remember much about his visits, and I most certainly would not have been considered for such an honour as to be chosen as the winner of his prize, which was normally a prayer book. My sister had previously won it, small consolation to me though.

One duty that all of the older children wanted to volunteer for, was the twice a year collection of the stationery stock from the Wotton railway station. One of the necessary qualifications for this task was the ownership of a suitable truck or trolley, so for most it was a "non-starter".

On the days when funerals took place or some other good reason occurred for getting us out of the way, we would be sent out on nature walks. These trips consisted of the hopefully unsupervised collection of plants, leaves, etc. from the local woods and fields.

The price exacted for this "freedom", of course was the required essay to explain the happenings of the day, and the handing over of those plants, leaves, etc. which somehow, so often some of us had forgotten to collect.

A quick bout of "bartering" or "strong arm" tactics might be necessary with those that had conformed, to obtain the required "Booty", with not always a successful outcome if I recall correctly. Whether a teacher came or not depended on the reason for our "banishment", they could well be involved in the activity that we were banned from, or more likely it wasn't a very popular duty. It was not easy to supervise an unruly bunch of children in the thick woods, such as the quaintly named "Gypsy Bottom", or (The Cover), that we always made tracks for, so I don't think anyone volunteered for such duties without giving it some thought. I seem to recall some of the evacuee teachers trying to stay with us; they either didn't know the routine or more likely they couldn't find a good excuse to stay at the school or, of course, they may have had a genuine interest in the local flora and fauna.

To digress, Gypsy Bottom was a thickly wooded area on the outskirts of Ashendon. It consisted mostly of low bushes the valuable timber having been removed in the First World War, and not been replanted. I have no idea as to who owned it, but it had its uses as far as we were concerned. "The "Cover", an area that did have large trees, certainly until the War, and also thick ground cover was much closer to home, and so was mostly second favourite.

At the end of our schooling, and aged fourteen everyone could read. and write, some better than others, of course, but certainly not due to any "slackness" or failing on the teachers' part.

Most jobs available to us did not call for much education other than the basic three Rs, so most parents were reasonably satisfied with the result. The jobs that were available were mostly as mentioned before, working on the brick presses at the local brickyards, (Akeman Street being the nearest), or the farms, neither brought in a massive wage, but in those days you needed a job to maintain your self respect, nearly as much as to provide a living. There were occasionally other vacancies, as in my own case a temporary Lad Porter's job at Wotton Station, at the time I seem to

recall that I was not too happy at being separated from others of my own age, but it worked out ok in the long run.

I believe that more people smoked in those days but apart from that and getting fitted out with a bicycle, outgoings were not very heavy, we couldn't yet serve in the pub until we were old enough as the landlord new our ages. When we were considered to be old enough to travel alone on the buses of course it was easier to get to the cinema, so more money was required for seats and fares.

The few who were fortunate or skilful enough to pass for higher education would not be able to take advantage of their good fortune because of the distances involved to reach a suitable school, and the total lack of transport available to them.

This transport problem would haunt us for a large part of our lives, and had always to be considered when applying for jobs as it was a five mile cycle ride to get to the nearest suitable bus service at Waddesdon which only took you to Aylesbury, so the choice was rather limited.

Any thoughts of evening classes had to be shelved until we were older, much for the same reason, my own being stopped in the first term after age eighteen, due to the dreaded "call up" for Military Service. For some months prior to this I had left work at Westcott on two days a week at five-fifty, gone home, had a quick wash and some tea, then cycled the first five miles to catch the "ten to seven" bus at Waddesdon followed by a five mile bus ride, then walked/trotted a further mile or so to get to the classroom at Aylesbury Grammar School by seven thirty, I usually arrived a few minutes late. This of course always meant that I lost the first part of the lesson, not very helpful, for either side, but I was lucky in so far as a man who, for some reason, had decided to see what the modern evening classes taught, was able to fill in some of the missed lessons. Adult education didn't come easy for the residents of those remote villages. A further factor was that should you go on to Technical School as I did some years later, it was probable that you would have to give up any thought of further study, after you had passed the intermediate stage exams, only to find that the final part of the course was being run outside of your County.

This happened to me when the then Aylesbury Technical School lost the right to teach the final stages of certain City and Guilds subjects - quite a setback to many of us at the time. To overcome this you would then have to obtain an "Out of County Grant", not in itself always an easy task, but the added distance (some thirty-five miles), or so to get to either Oxford or Watford would almost certainly finish you off. High Wycombe was of course in the County, but altogether too difficult to get to.

I did the same cycle ride to Waddesdon to attend Air Training Corps parades, though this was as much a social activity as anything else, and without doubt the journey was shorter and easier when travelling for such activities.

The Village School was of course Church of England, which to be fair didn't really encroach very deeply into our lives. There was nothing much of note about the Church, other than the local Knight (The Knight of Pollicot), buried there, he had been on two Crusades the experts on the subject say. There was reputed to have been a window of very great age, but I didn't learn much about it, unfortunately (my

thoughts now I may add), local history was not a subject covered in any depth at School.

In later years the Villagers or rather those that could be persuaded to mow the churchyard would gather together at intervals, and do the necessary. This churchyard stands some eight feet or so above the road level at the front, and is surrounded by a stone wall, the top of which in turn is flush with the soil level, the paths through to the Church, are some eighteen inches or so below the ground level. Add to this the fact that the Church foundations are also lower, and at the front are separated from the soil by a kind of brick "bund wall" leads me to think that this part of the churchyard has previously been filled to capacity, and then covered over with a further layer of soil to allow a second tier of graves.

One aspect of our Church that I couldn't, and still can't understand was that certain pews were "owned" by members of the congregation, unsuspecting visitors would soon be asked to move out and find a new seat, not that there was ever a problem with space. There was only one comparatively small coke burning stove to heat what was to us at the time, a very large building, and so during the cold spells, you had either to be very keen or otherwise gently persuaded to attend on some winter Sunday mornings. A Sunday School was held in the Church, and later confirmation classes, so most of us were confirmed, but only after having left school proper.

This ceremony took place at Waddesdon, and as for everything else there was an almost complete lack of transport, some of the girls were lucky, and were taken by car, but for the others there was the trusty bicycle. This took place on one of the wettest Sundays I can ever remember, but I suppose there was no great harm done to anyone, as by now we were all at work so quite used to such problems.

It was a beautiful view from the Church roof which was reached by climbing a winding stone stairway, normally not available to us, but occasionally the belfry door would be unlocked, and we would, with permission, make the trip.

It was reckoned that from there, with the appropriate binoculars, you could see the Bristol Channel. I personally find this hard to believe as the distance must be approaching a hundred miles.

When the airfield at Westcott was being built, a Roman Catholic Church was provided at "Gypsy Bottom" for the use of the Irish labourers and, later, for the R.A.F. After the War it was transferred to Westcott Village, and is still there today.

For many years there had been the "Open air Service", laid on by the Methodist Chapel? They would also have a "Free Tea" once a year in the chapel at Aylesbury for children, with a coach laid on. So for many years your religious leanings were well catered for, even in such a remote spot. A tarmac footpath ran between the Top and Lower ends of the village, and later a steel barrier was built to prevent anyone stepping directly off the footpath onto the road. This worked well until we learned how to vault over it. The second point about it was that the wooden fence that had previously completely blocked the rest of the exit now disappeared, which by restoring the old outlet did little for the safety aspect, although the flow of motor traffic was not very heavy.

Further down this path was a wooden gate. On very dark nights we would often tie a cord to this, so that with a pull just as someone reached it, it would slowly open by itself, despite the darkness, I don't remember anyone ever being frightened by this trick, as the path was mostly used by men only at night, any women usually being escorted by a man or travelling in groups. We would also most probably be hiding behind a bunch of nettles, and so someone would shout out at the crucial time when they fell or were pushed deeper into the "hide", with dire consequences. The other ghost trick, that of attaching a button on a long piece of cotton and pinning it to the shop door, had just about the same success, or more properly lack of same.

In the Village there was almost a total lack of doorknockers, and so the use of cotton for this purpose was rather limited. As the Shop, the Pub, and the water pump were in this lower part the path was much used.

Some days, most probably weekends would see a "flurry" of unsupervised activity on the Cricket or Football field, which just happened to be any piece of ground that was flat enough or reasonably free from "cow pats", or it might depend on the whereabouts of the bull. Prior to the arrival of the evacuees one other problem to forming a team for any sport had been the lack of prospective players, there were seldom enough children including girls to form one side, let alone two. This left rather a lot of ground to cover for the fielding side at Cricket, which by now would consist of both teams less the two batsmen in play, - complicated to the watcher no doubt but well understood by the players. There might be accusations made as to the dilatory actions of some of those fielders who were actually members of the batting side when the ball crept over the boundary for four runs, or a catch was dropped which in the opinion of the fielding side should have been stopped or held. In such games the younger children might just be allowed to play, but this mainly meant that they would only get to fetching the loose balls back when someone had taken a particularly heavy "swipe", particularly if they happened to land in a neighbouring garden, and some delicate act of recovery was called for. It was not always a good move to let the owner of the garden know that there was a large groove cut into his carefully prepared onion bed, and the smaller the child's footprints the less likely that there would be any serious repercussions afterwards.

Often only rounders or some form of "home made" game was left, the teams for which would consist of a rather wide age range, playing to rules that were changed frequently as the "game or battle" progressed. Rounders would normally only be played in one particular place, this had the distinct disadvantage of lack of space, and meant that you could only hit the ball in one direction (to the left), due to the surrounding gardens and the road, good for the fielders but not good for left handers. Also there was the little matter of a footpath that inconveniently crossed the middle of the pitch, when passers-by caused many a possible good run to be curtailed.

After the arrival of the evacuees, as previously explained, this situation changed, but one other problem we would always have to consider was the lack of sports gear, that which belonged to the school still being mostly "out of bounds" to us.

The school had just had a delivery of new sports gear, including some rubber balls, about the size of tennis balls, but unfortunately they had a desire to leap the low fence, and land up on a neighbour's seedbed; "sidbed" to be more precise. Quite understandably he was never amused by this, and after protracted negotiations

regarding the return of the said balls, he agreed to do just that, we were all assembled in the playground one day when he reached over the fence with his digging fork, neatly skewered on each tine was one now very sad looking ball. He suddenly, and for some time to come became our least favourite neighbour.

The coming of the evacuees largely solved our shortage of players problem, and to some extent made it worse, as now we were often faced with too many. Each team would now consist of half the children available regardless of numbers. The reasoning behind this was that, if you only have one football or cricket ball, you can only have two teams.

To add to the confusion we often played "last man in" at cricket, as there could of course be odd or differing numbers in our teams, due to our bargaining of two small players for one older, and so on. This could also be a way of prolonging the innings, or it was sometimes dictated by the fact that we could only muster one bat, and so we would have three wickets at one end, and a single one at the other, with almost certainly no bails. This last aspect also led to many disputes when the player or fielder(!) disputed the decision of the now multiple umpires who in the shape of the rest of the teams freely gave of their decisions.

There was always the question of rules for any of the games we played, mostly because we had no one to teach us. In those days there wasn't the large number of books circulating, and of course only limited radio and no television to advise us, the newspapers not helping much, they tended to report on sport only and unlike now, they did not give forceful opinions.

We did have help in this respect for part of the war as a flight sergeant now living in the village, and based at Westcott airfield would often act as referee at football, a very stern one at that, which could only have been good for us, though I doubt if we appreciated it at the time.

On the first of May would come the "May garlanding". What this represented I never actually understood, but it was always carried out regardless of the weather (it nearly always seemed to drizzle).

Somewhere in its origins I feel that there must have been religious connections, as the first song to be sung at each call contained the words "so take the Bible in your hands, and read the scriptures through", but in spite of that there was never to my knowledge any input from the Church. One other line went something like "We wish you all both great, and small a merry, merry, month of May", totally ignoring the rest of the year.

The significance of the chair is also something of a mystery to me, and the doll that rode in it.

The other strange thing about our way of celebrating Mayday, was that no other Village in the vicinity seemed to have the same ceremony, some having Maypoles of course, but without doubt some form of celebration was carried out, the one aspect common to all seems to have been that a collection was an essential part of the proceedings.

The ceremony as practised by us went basically as follows: after much argument, or discussion, a May King and Queen would be chosen. Whatever this choice I don't ever remember it being popular with all concerned. It should have been "my daughter - her son" or something along those lines; or perhaps the children would have different ideas, particularly if they wanted to be chosen themselves.

Of course as the ceremony only took place annually the chance of any one child being chosen was not very great, you could be too "young" one year and too "old" the next. There was also the problem of the King not being "compatible" with the Queen or vice-versa. mainly because, at most of the older inhabitants' houses, there was the inevitable request that the King and Queen kiss, not very "macho" to some of our young minds, though that would hardly have been the word used in those days. There would then almost certainly be a request for a second song, which would have to be "In the Merry - Merry Month of May" as that was the only other one known to us.

It has to be remembered that as it only came round once a year, the words were very easily forgotten, no rehearsals were ever held, also it would be the first time that some would have taken part, add to that the need for us to get on, (home before dark), no-one actually conducting the singing, and we were also weary after a day at school, then this was often a very poor rendering indeed, but as it was an "event", everyone appeared happy to see and hear us.

There would often be much discussion, most possibly of the "whose old boy be you then?" variety as to which family a particular child or children came from, all made more difficult by the now rapidly failing daylight, and the questioner's failing eyesight, the close scrutiny often adding to the child's embarrassment.

I see now of course that this was the most people some of those older residents, perhaps with limited mobility, and living in isolated houses, (such as those at Lower Pollicot), would ever see in a year, and as a result would of course want to keep us there as long as possible. They might well only make the journey to the village on very important occasions, their pension, or whatever being collected on a weekly basis by relatives or friends. From our point of view it would probably be the only reason for us to pay them a call - you certainly see things from a different angle as you grow older.

Back to the ceremony -a small chair (owned by my family, and by courtesy of the now long defunct? Mazawattee tea Company coupons), would be decorated and then carried in front of the King and Queen, by now dressed in their Sunday best, and decked out with sashes.

Once again there must have been some strange history to the whole ceremony as oddly enough these sashes would be kept during the rest of the year by one family only, and, also as far as possible the chair would be decorated by the same people each year, and to the same pattern. The flowers were collected from residents' gardens, with such flowers as Crown Imperial lilies being fastened to the uprights of the chair back. People would always look out to see if their offerings were present as it was considered to be something of an honour should your flowers be used, therefore someone taking part in the walk would have to know the secret, as one flower looks very much like any other to most folks, but not necessarily to the grower.

The resulting effort would now be carried in turn by those not otherwise involved in the proceedings to as many houses in the entire village as could be covered in that one evening.

Several miles would often be travelled, including crossing fields, and footpaths, the chair getting heavier by the minute.

By the end of the trip there would often be less than in the original group as some of the younger ones in particular would drop out through sheer fatigue. This added much to the "fun" because as a collection was made, this often caused further friction as to how the "spoils" should finally be distributed.

On a wet day it was sometimes a rather dishevelled group that finally returned to "base", the chair and its floral decorations not always surviving the passing over fences, walls, and other obstacles encountered on the journey too well.

School outings to the seaside came and went but I was always too young to go on any of the annual coach trips (Wookey Hole in Somerset seemed to be favourite) and due to the war they had ceased by the time I was old enough.

One other outing that I missed was the annual trip to a nearby village (Bishopston)? to gather "Fraucups" (Fritillaries)? These are flowers only found in quantity in one field in the area, but the practice had died out by the time I was old enough to go, due to the field being "ploughed up" for food production during the War.

It was always reckoned that these flowers only grew where Blood had been spilt, this you would have thought gave them plenty of scope, as battles must have taken place over a wide area at some time or other, but be that as it may they were found in quantity in that one place only.

We would walk some considerable distances to find violets - these were quite common in certain places in those days under hedges or in the woods on the edge of the Village.

Bluebells also could be found in the same kind of place, and excursions would be organised to collect them, the nearest spot for picking was about three miles or so at Wood Siding, or probably better known as Wotton Woods so once again the younger ones were excluded.

Primroses could also be found in much the same areas, and excursions to find them were mounted in much the same way.

Conkers (horse chestnuts) came and went their merry way; this one was always a "short season". I think the collecting was more exciting than the playing of the actual game.

Marbles were introduced by the evacuees but didn't last long either, I have no idea why; probably being wartime there was a shortage of replacement marbles.

A spate of making windmills came, and went, there were many designs on the go at any one time, the most popular was probably made using two crushed tins, or just the lids mounted on a piece of wood to form the vanes, which pivoted on a nail. The hole for this would most likely be "drilled" with a steel knitting needle heated up in the fire, and held by a cork to prevent little hands being burned. The "tail" or rudder would also start life as a tin, or again could be a large lid. No thought of balancing them entered our heads, so they were not particularly efficient, but they served our purpose without a doubt when they revolved, turning the tin containing a few pebbles or the "clicker", or whatever else was provided to make a noise. There were more sophisticated versions which had propellers carved from solid wood. I seem to recall that willow was they easiest to carve, but not necessarily giving the longest life. They probably worked because there was very seldom a shortage of wind despite the lack of height of the post on which they were fixed. Holes for the body pivot would probably be drilled by trial and error that is until the whole device decided to rotate into the prevailing wind.