
Tree, Birds and More

Part of the allotments down the "Lower End" suddenly got fenced off as a building firm from Waddesdon arrived and set up their watchman's hut. After cutting down part of the hedge and the tree fellers arrived to cut down several elm trees, the builders started to dig holes and trenches for the footings for six Council Houses. At last something to get our teeth into. We could now learn the art of building, or at least get in the way, but the workmen tolerated us with good humour. We were allowed to lay bricks, mix concrete, dig holes or more or less anything that took our fancies. The houses were finally finished, with our help, the height of modern design, and the new tenants moved in. There probably hadn't been such a mass move in living memory now the houses vacated would also have new residents, so no-one knew where anyone lived anymore. It took ages for everyone to come to terms with it.

Tree climbing was favourite at certain times and looking back I again fail to understand why there were no serious accidents, particularly taking into account the fact that this activity usually corresponded with the trees being heavily weighed down with leaves. It was not unknown and was in fact quite a regular happening for elm trees to shed a branch or fall down completely at this time, even though the weather was fine and still.

Such a happening would soon bring the "Mob" out in full force and much later it would disappear in a spree of "Wooding".

"Wooding" was the name given to the business of collecting wood, a job that was always on the go. It took several forms and a flurry could be set off by several happenings. The tree mentioned above, though this would only normally contain a small amount of dried rotten wood suitable for quick use. A rotten tree would almost certainly be "devoured" in hours.

The coming of the "Tree Fellers" who might chop down just the one or several at a time. In any event there would soon be a convoy of old prams, pushchairs, and handcarts hurrying to the scene. Having loaded up the journey home might not be so fast, as perhaps due to overloading, axles broke, wheels came off or the load just decided to shed itself all over the road.

Tears, cussing, threats and promises would all be shouted as those who didn't suffer any problems deserted those who did in the rush to get a second load before dark, or just to get home in daylight.

The wood could well be chips cut off by the fellers axes, small branches broken off by hand, or for the more ambitious/better organised, it might be large branches having been cut by saws, that they just happened to have with them. Having got your wood home the next job would be to cut it into manageable pieces before finally splitting it with a heavy splitting axe. The one we had at home for this purpose didn't have a sharp edge in the accepted sense, but just needed to be lifted well above head height and gravity would complete the job.

A second and much more interesting way to split the wood, before it had been taken from the field, was to "Blow" it with gunpowder. This could be "tricky" partly due to the operator's lack of knowledge and partly because of the condition of the wood. The first thing was to bore a hole at right angles to the grain with a large auger, the depth was sometimes governed by how hard the wood was, the softer the deeper. Then a quantity of the powder would be poured in, a fuse fitted and a bit more powder added. Next a wad of paper to seal in the powder and now brick dust smashed to a fine powder would be rammed in to form a pressure seal.

Now light the fuse taking care to use a "Match Fuzee" and retire to a safe place. For the uninitiated a fuzee is a match that doesn't break out in a flame but merely smoulders brightly, this is to prevent a spark prematurely lighting the fuse. We would up till now have been allowed to swarm all over the job, but now they would resort to all the safety rules, hence the match.

What could go wrong? First after the loud bang the wood is still intact, on looking closer the pressure has sped down a hitherto unseen crack, which is now black and all too obvious. Not enough brick dust or not rammed in tight enough, equally not enough powder. The tree disappeared, now only matchwood, too much of the black stuff used. It was seldom a good way of doing the job, but it did amuse "us" children.

The "Tree Fellers" always gave good value to "Us Watchers"; first they would cut a ring round the bottom of the tree, then cut a deep wedge out of the side that the tree is to fall. They next cut through the tree using a crosscut saw until it begins to shake and crack, then speed up with the saw to prevent splitting, step back, and another tree has "Bit the Dust". They might just attach the tractor winch to the trunk to force it to fall in the right direction if working in a confined space or during high winds. This would normally require the use of a ladder to attach the cable high enough to give sufficient purchase.

The tractor and trailer would now come and collect it; this was the interesting bit for me personally, as these tractors were very advanced for their time. The ones made by Latil in France had four wheel drive, four wheel steering which could be altered to two wheel steering for on the road use, built in "Grousers", the aforementioned winch and a winch anchor. The regular ones that came were originally fitted with petrol engines, had charcoal burners fitted during the War and later after the War had diesels fitted. These vehicles were about as far removed from the traction engine as it was possible to get, but although now working side by side as it were, they were completely from a different age. They would winch the timber on to the trailer, before setting off up those steep fields back to the public road. At sometime during the journey back onto the public road, they would most likely use their winch, this in turn would mean the road being crossed by the cable for some considerable time and so a sharp lookout would have to be kept for approaching vehicles.

I remember once that a motorcycle could be heard in the distance and the cable being lowered to the ground in double quick time, certainly before the machine came over the brow of the hill.

Could the failure to complete this in time be the reason that all of our local apparitions are headless, particularly those on horseback, although it is unlikely that the Roman Centurion met his end in this fashion. He reputedly walks the path from

the Bicester direction across the airfield at Westcott towards Ashendon bathed in a bright light. I have heard of several people being more than a little worried by his presence, sightings seem to have increased since the War, but the fact that there are now many more people in the area at night could account for this.

Other Ghosts rolled barrels down the hills "Lynch Hill and Cuckoo Pen" in particular, on the road between Westcott and Ashendon according to the locals. But I have travelled those roads at all hours of the day and night, on foot, bicycle and motorcycle but was never privileged to meet anyone in that state. "Legless" might be a different question as I used to travel past the camp set up for Irish workers and was often threatened. Though looking back I don't think seriously by them. "Fetch that Galoot off his bike Paddy" or some such friendly call could well be the shout. It was something of a problem when coming up behind six or so spread out across the path, the old Brill tramway between Raghall and Westcott, with a high hedge either side, whether to ring my bell or not. I think on balance I was more frightened of them at the age of sixteen/seventeen, than any ghosts I might encounter later along the same road. Although they used to fight amongst themselves I don't ever recall them attacking anyone else. By using this path as a "Short Cut" you saved some two miles or so and as a consequence it was much used by the travellers, I don't think it ever occurred to anyone to take the longer route. The only exception to using this route for me was to watch the aircraft taking off or landing much depending on the time of day.

I have been told by some dog owners that their dogs have great difficulty in passing certain points on the Westcott to Ashendon road. Particularly at the top of Lynch hill even in daylight, apparently their hair literally stands on end, but I can find no real explanation for this. When it has been discussed the former site of a gallows has been suggested but I find this unlikely, as my understanding is that such devices tended to be placed at cross-roads, though being at the top of a hill and some miles from the nearest cross-roads. Chearsley, Winchendon, Ashendon, Cuddington at the top of "Ogleys Lane" might just make this idea feasible. Perhaps our forefathers were not so law abiding as we would like to believe? A point against this is that here the road has left the route of the old Roman road but perhaps there were "Felons" in the intervening years. The roads catch up with each other at the top of "Cuckoo Pen hill".

A local farmhouse, Muskhill farm at Winchendon, was unoccupied, it also had the windows boarded up and so gained the reputation of being haunted, we usually gave it quite a wide berth when moorhens nesting or blackberrying. A further story attached to this house was the sighting of a man bathed in white light appearing at night in a gateway close by, he was reputed to have been a former occupant.

The lamps used on bicycles in those days were very poor, probably worse than the previously used carbide ones and it could be quite unnerving if someone suddenly loomed out of the fog or darkness walking late at night, particularly if they didn't speak, which always in my experience seemed to be the case.

It can be surprising when you are travelling alone and on stopping for whatever reason someone turns up at the scene.

I remember one night quite late when returning from Aylesbury on the motorbike I came off at some speed when rounding the corner at Fleet Marston farm. I travelled

along the tarmac road, which ground its way through my heavy riding "Mac" jacket and trousers, I finally ended up crashing into the milk-churn stand, which was close to the side of the road. The bike chose a softer passage and travelled on the soft bank, of course after first grinding away much of one footrest and the end of one handlebar in a very bright shower of sparks.

The point of this is that although I wouldn't normally see anyone on that stretch of road, a man came running up just as I decided I was still in the land of the living, he didn't seem to be so sure though and certainly he didn't expect me to be.

On one other occasion I went over the handlebars of the bicycle at some speed after finding a "Pothole " near to the side of the road on "Cuckoo Pen" hill, it being very dark. I was just sat there in a daze trying to find out what was running down my face in torrents when a friend on a motor bike appeared, as if by magic, and by his headlight we were able to see that it was only water from the inevitable puddle. It would appear you may not be alone even when you think you are.

I always felt that fog, when on both the motorbike or the bicycle, was a strange experience, heavy falling snow could also give a strange effect. First it is deafeningly quiet and secondly distances seem to change from minute to minute. I remember not being able to find the turn to Ashendon on the A41 at Westcott despite being totally sober and on the motor bike, finally I had to get off and walk along the side of the road before getting back on course.

Back to Ghosts

There is a reputed ghost who walks alone, he follows the Oxford to Aylesbury footpath and is dressed in olden day farmers clothes. So I decided that he would hardly be walking on modern day roads, though the old and the new do coincide at the bottom of Lynch hill and this was the place that I would normally pass him. I often wondered if this was him and would always speak on such meetings, but as at other times I don't recall getting any reply, it was always much too dark to decide on his standard of dress.

I have still got an open mind on this subject, not being sure that there is not a rational explanation for all of these happenings. Probably the nearest I came to being convinced that ghosts do exist was during my Army Service at Chilwell in Nottinghamshire. I spent a short time on security there, the strange thing being that during the hours of daylight we would patrol in pairs but during the night we would go solo. As you might expect there were many ghost stories circulating and one road in particular, Hoare road, was the focal point for most of them. This was the time of the "Spiv" and as there was plenty of valuable and attractive items in the depot which at night, apart from our single patrolman, was totally deserted. We were told never to allow anyone to get too close and so bearing this in mind and only armed with a "Hellison lamp" I usually walked, "Should I have marched?", down the centre of the road between the buildings.

As the "Boots Ammunition" made plenty of noise on the hard road, I would stop suddenly at intervals to hear if there was anyone about, the footsteps after a couple of echoes in the walls of the metal clad buildings would normally die away.

At about four-thirty a.m. on this particular night/morning and in the road previously mentioned I stopped, the footsteps definitely did not, but just carried on in a measured tread, I sometimes think I can still hear them. I later made enquiries as to who could have been in the area, but was assured that it was not a place that people chose to go at night, unless pressured into it for official reasons. There were Police patrols operating in other parts of the Camp, these consisted of two armed constables and if the footsteps belonged to them, then they were certainly near enough to have heard me and almost certainly would have come looking, unless they too didn't relish entering Hoare road at night. The Camp Cinema only seemed to show "Dracula" films which added to the fear perhaps.

The one thing that at that time I particularly hated was when a door that had previously been locked for the last few weeks and was not being used, suddenly opened to my touch and you feel duty bound to go in and check. Also one night when locked in the N.A.A.F.I. canteen in total darkness we would arrive after dark and be ushered in through the back door then with no talking allowed would stay until released in the morning. This action was designed to catch cigarette thieves. We would hear the Military Police and the Police patrols walk by trying the doors usually talking to each other and I am sure they would have been more than a little upset, had they have become aware that there was someone inside. But on this night, probably between three and four o'clock, I am suddenly confronted by a white face looking in. He (it?) obviously couldn't see me sat in my dark corner and as he went round the outside I went round the inside. This "Tom and Jerry type" chase carried on for a while until there was a loud knocking on a window and I was confronted by somewhat irate and very keen Major (Ours), who had somehow quietly crossed the loose gravel surround in a vain attempt to catch us both asleep. No chance! It is a saying in my family "You don't catch old birds with Chaff".

I have had strange experiences while riding the bicycle, one was a human sounding cough just at the point where I usually ran out of "Puff", halfway up Cuckoo Pen Hill, and would normally dismount due to the steepness of the hill and in those days I might just stop to light a cigarette. After several nights of this I plucked up enough courage to investigate, eventually I decided it was a sheep, whether live or an apparition I never actually discovered.

One other strange incident while cycling was an enormous and beautiful owl, he would travel with me for some considerable distance, usually from the old Gashouse at Westcott to Gypsy Bottom, flying to the next post and waiting for me. He would do this until, I decided, he must have reached the limits of his territory.

When on the motorcycle he would sometimes and only sometimes, without any hesitation attack me with some force, just flying straight in like a missile, when reverting to the bicycle again he would escort me as before. On some nights he was missing and I felt quite sad to think that he had probably met his end, nights or even weeks later he would re-appear just as if nothing had happened, he would be waiting for me and would go through the same motions as before.

I suppose it could be argued that he was the soul or spirit of someone who passed on before the age of the motorcycle.

A happening that can give you a nasty shock is sometimes, particularly on a bend, when you pick up in your headlights seemingly dozens of small bright lights, dancing in the air, they will almost certainly turn out to be cows eyes.

Many animals of course have the same effect, though apart from rabbits are usually seen on their own, but those such as foxes don't wait about for long. Of course coming through the woods at Wotton, Wood Sidings, you could well meet a deer head on and when it has happened to me I never knew who was the most surprised as such animals tend to stand their ground.

Flying Saucers were quite common on my travels and it took some time and effort to track them down, they sometimes appeared as several very bright and shiny discs in the sky. Often being in perfect formation and almost perfectly round in shape, at other times there would only be a single one, always apparently stationary and always in my experience on cloudy nights only.

Sometimes after what could seem ages they would move off, changing shape as they went, this movement could sometimes be quite fast. After much sitting and thinking, cycling is a good place for doing both, I came to the conclusion that they were the result of the moon shining through holes in a top layer of cloud and projecting onto a lower layer. The speed and change of shape being due to the layers of clouds moving in slightly different directions or speeds. No doubt there are as many explanations for this occurrence as there are numbers of sightings.

I have seen red and green lights flash across the windscreen or the motorcycle, really travelling at high speed and diving at the same time. So vivid and quick was this on the first occasion that I stopped at the top of the next hill and looked back to see if there were any signs of a plane crash, there not being any I travelled on. On later occasions I considered it more deeply and eventually put it down to the reflected lights of an aircraft travelling high above and behind me, the dive and speed being accounted for by the curvature of the screen. The roof of a car would prevent any such reflections happening in the same way. It is perhaps just possible for spectacle wearers to get the same effect.

In the Village there were many superstitions over and above the normal ones, such as walking under a ladder. One was that should you see a magpie you must always speak to it, saying something like "Good Morning Magpie", your good luck would then remain intact or be enhanced.

To see one crow or magpie is bad luck anyway, two being the opposite, according to the old rhyme, you could of course always find a crows feather, spit on it and stick it in the ground, this in itself was supposed to bring good luck.

The rhyme covering such things goes on to say that "seven is a secret never told", but what that actually meant I was not to find out, that secret certainly remains intact.

Three lights in one room, this was sometimes interpreted as being three candles or flames, were not allowed. Red and white flowers were not put together in the same room, knives were never left crossed, a family row being the outcome of this. Presents of knives or any cutting tool required a small payment, a halfpenny would

do, to be made to the giver, the failure to do so having the same result as crossed knives.

Artificial flowers were not very popular in some houses, nor were the mixing of children's Christian names that had fruit or flower connections in any one family. Rose, Lily or May being the only ones coming to mind at the moment, but different families had totally different ideas on this kind of thing.

One death would always mean that there would be three, but of course this must always be so, as where or when do you start your count from.

To take a third light from a single match when lighting cigarettes was just too unlucky to contemplate, this almost certainly came from the first World War, when it was reckoned that an enemy sniper had time to line his sights in that short amount

The Gypsies would at some time pay us a visit, usually an elderly lady attended by several small children and carrying a wicker basket, selling clothes pegs and I seem to remember "Lucky Heather", door to door. I can't remember how they travelled to and from the village. I feel that they must have walked from the bottom of the hill, it perhaps being too steep for a horse and caravan. It was certain that her palm was unlikely to be crossed with silver too often.

One story always told to us as children was that sheet or summer lightning had the affect of ripening the corn, not as most people think that the sun is responsible.

The sound of a screech owl was a sure sign of impending death and as they were quite common near my home we heard them nightly, but the total population didn't markedly decrease as a result.

I am not sure if weather forecasting as practised in the village counts as superstition or what, but I do remember that the farmers tended to set great store by their barometers.

The workers had much more technical methods, these could range from a joint that ached, to the behaviour of birds and animals, through changing wind directions, to cloud formations, sunsets and sunrises, all no doubt having sound reasons for their use. My own favourite weather forecaster was that on bright sunny days if the distant hills, the Wendover hills to us, looked close and clear, then it would rain within a day or so, normally in hot weather they would be shrouded in a covering of haze.

One guaranteed item for keeping Rheumatism at bay was the wearing of a Nutmeg close to the skin, this would most likely be carried in a vest pocket.

Thermogene wadding was another favourite cure for bad backs, of which there were many.

One thing that used to amaze us as children, was the sight of a "Whirlygig", almost certainly a thermal, these would travel across hayfields at considerable speed, picking up the hay as they passed and lifting it into the air in a spiral. We would

often give chase and when very young would avoid actually standing in their path for fear of being picked up by this strange force. They seemed to occur in some fields more than others and so many people explained them away as being caused by the way the trees stood in a given field, the wind passing between them causing an "Eddy". Are they the cause of the modern phenomenon of the corn circles? and, if so, now why not then, except of course that we now have holes in the ozone layer and there are many more magnetic fields. One further point to consider might be that the types of corn have changed to give shorter weaker straw, plus the fact that many of the fields have been enlarged by the simple process of cutting down hedges, which must make some areas more open to the winds. Plus of course the fact that most of the trees will have gone anyway.

One other happening that caused some of the older inhabitants to forecast that the "End of the World was upon us", was the appearance of the Northern Lights, "Aurora Borealis", more properly, this was when I was quite small but I can remember everyone standing in the "Close" by the Church to get the best view.

There was reputed to be a tunnel between the pub and the church, but we never found any evidence of this. If this is in fact true then it must be very deep, as when they dug the trenches for the water pipes they ought to have exposed them, particularly as the road at the point crossed, known to us as Short lane, runs in a deep channel.

Before moving on I had better mention the "Wart Charmer". He would be a shepherd and even the local doctors have been known to advise people so afflicted to seek such a person out. My Grandfather was one, but unfortunately did not pass the secret on and so I am unable to advise on that branch of alternative medicine.

A last happening and one that I have never seen, but am assured that they do occur, is the "Will of the Wisp", or marsh gas igniting spontaneously in wet or very damp areas, the blue flame travelling parallel to the ground, similar to lightning. I have certainly looked out for them in the area of the brooks at the bottom of the hills.

I will just go back to trees.

When the airfield was being built many trees were felled to give a better approach to one of the runways; in fact anything showing above the skyline got cut down. The Telephone cables were put underground as well. This felling spree later extended to any sufficiently large tree to be of use for timber, so the main spinneys and woods largely disappeared.

This action brought a new group of "Fellers", who were "twelve or so years old experts", considered were no where as near professional in their approach to the job as the old stagers had always been. Not now the speeding up of the sawing at the end of the cut to prevent splitting, it just didn't seem to matter as long as the tree came down, the direction in which it fell was no longer important, some even coming back over the saw.

But for us it provided more entertainment and wood for collection, this work went on for many months.

Further entertainment was provided when an approach lighting system was installed, these lights all mounted on posts decreasing in height as they got closer to the runway.

The cables were mostly pulled through by a winch mounted on a very large traction engine, a former ploughing engine, and mole plough, these cables being fed from a trailer towed in turn by the plough, a further technique for us to come to terms with. Soon all this activity would end and we would have to revert to making our own entertainment again.

Certain games were declared too dangerous and as a result were banned by the teachers and parents; this seldom stopped them being played, but just made us more wary as to where or when.

Sometime along the way a new searchlight unit moved in, with two lights, one very large and a small one, they had huts with concreted bases etc, as though they intended to stay, which they did. As time progressed a new canvas building was erected, this having "horns", and it was soon decided that this was "radar", and although they would allow us to visit the rest of the site and perform much as we had done on the previous site, this building remained firmly "Out of Bounds".

As the War progressed the large searchlight also grew "horns" and our thoughts on the subject were thus confirmed.

We were once invited to a children's party held on the site and I clearly remember having my first lesson on the .303 Lee Enfield Rifle at this. It was there that I also gained a taste for having condensed milk in tea.

It is probable that they had the first fatal road, motor, accident inside the village boundaries when two vehicles crashed head on at night, and on the narrow track, formerly the Brill tramway, which lead to the post.

To defend themselves they only had rifles and a "Lewis" gun on a post surrounded by sandbags, but no heavy anti-aircraft guns, or as far as I am aware were there any in the immediate vicinity. During the raids on

Coventry these units would sometimes search for the enemy aircraft passing over, and in this case it was not unusual to see one picked up momentarily in the beam, but of course without guns no action could be taken against them.

The logic of having searchlights, of which there were many in the local area, without having any big guns escapes me now, just as it did then. Later in the War these lights would form cones in the sky, I believe the purpose of this was to guide returning friendly aircraft home.

An all black Defiant nightfighter was in residence at the nearby Westcott airfield, but I never heard anything of it being used at night, however it did occasionally fly during the day.

Early in the War members of the Canadian First Division came in large

numbers to the neighbouring village of Wotton Underwood, this of course soon claimed our attention.

They set up their tents all over the village and hid their vehicles under trees and camouflage nets; they didn't seem to mind us joining in the War with them.

I have a vivid memory of many of them spreading blankets on the tarmac path across the village green and with large "wads" of paper money on show played cards.

The aspect that probably surprised me the most was that, should anyone be walking on the path, officers in particular, then they had to go round the card players.

I felt that those Officers must have had a hard, if not impossible job to control them.

The men themselves were very courteous towards the local people and friendly towards us, they would if allowed borrow our bicycles to have a short ride round the green. Like some of their strange, to us, language, we couldn't understand their baseball, which seemed to be not unlike our "rounders". They played amid the tents, which must have somewhat curtailed their game, many threats were thrown out when a loose ball made heavy contact with a tent, one of the passing soldiers, or indeed on the card players blanket. Never the less, they always seemed to be in a good humour.

They eventually moved on and later a more permanent camp was built, this became a training camp, the assault course apparently became notorious among those who came to use it.

As the War progressed many different units would arrive including Americans, who stayed for some considerable time. I remember that one of their "trucks", lorries to us, tried in vain to climb a chestnut tree that stood on a triangular island where three roads met, it apparently was being driven by a fugitive from the American Service Police at the time. The driver escaped from the scene into the nearby wood and later "borrowed" a local bread van, without the owner's permission I may add. The tree was very badly damaged and gradually its condition deteriorated until it had to be removed.

By now I was fourteen and employed full time at the local, Wotton, railway station and so the contact with these Americans was on a working level, I like many others had certainly hurriedly come to terms with the American way of speaking.

The last Troops to use the camp that I remember were a Mountain Assault Unit who spent many hours climbing the wings of the railway bridges, twenty feet approximately, they carried massive shoulder packs, which were reputed to weigh a hundredweight.

Their technique for this climbing was to stand on each others shoulders until one made it to the top, and then with the aid of their rifle slings pull the last ones and all their equipment up.

Probably the last people to use the camp were Italian Prisoners of War who seemed able to come and go as they pleased, a bit more on that subject later.

To return to School Days.

The chasing of rabbits and the setting of snares was considered to be a suitable pastime, but like most of our other attempts to catch animals or birds, mostly doomed to failure, although much time and energy was spent pursuing these activities.

At the right time of year there would be expeditions to look for birds nests, in particular to try and find a moorhens nest and steal the eggs, which would then have to be placed into water to see if they floated.

If they sank it was reckoned that they were suitable for eating, the only remaining problem was to retrieve them, as often the water chosen was deep enough to swallow up the eggs forever.

It was not very clever to wear a school cap on such trips, no cap no risk, as by wrapping the cap round a stick and tying it on with a handkerchief or a piece of string it made an almost perfect scoop. The problems usually arose when you tried to get it back along the bough that moorhens seem to favour for building their nests. By now you should have an egg or hopefully several nestling in the peak/scoop and your focus will probably be on the egg, not the small side branch on which the cap is now most likely caught, causing the loss of both.

A rescue operation would be attempted as that cap had to be recovered at all costs, but I have to say, only mixed success regarding the eggs. It would normally require someone trying to crawl along the aforementioned bough, most likely the owner would volunteer?

There were many varieties of implements for reaching the eggs in the nests, ranging from a spoon on a long thin stick, to bent wire mounted in the same way. The failure of these "specialist" tools often had the same effect as above, meaning that the eggs were lost long before they got to the shore thus saving us the bother of doing the "fitness" test, but never the less still depriving the poor bird of its eggs.

Most birds' nests were considered "fair game", one egg only, except moorhens, being taken from a nest, so that the bird didn't miss it, at least that was the theory. Back home if any arrived intact, they would be pierced with a needle at both ends before an attempt was made to remove its contents by blowing. This was not always a successful operation, but if so, then it would join others of a different kind on a string and be shown as trophies. A return trip would often be made to see if the bird had returned, or had totally forsaken the nest, in the event I feel that the latter was the most likely, the benefit of hindsight.

A further superstition was that if you took a robin's egg you would end up with a crushed finger. I can assure you that not many robins' eggs were taken, too risky!

Swans and their offspring were usually treated with more respect, possibly because they could fight back, you always knew if you were unwelcome because they would "attack" anyone going too close to the nest.

This mention of eggs reminds me of why I don't trust eggs that are called "free range"

Often as children we would collect eggs that had been laid on the farms that were in favour at that particular time and it was not unknown to discover a clutch of twenty plus, all neatly laid in the straw. These eggs would mostly find their way into the collecting basket, but I would doubt that all of them would qualify as fresh. Most probably, or hopefully, before they reached the consumer, the eggler or someone would have discarded the bad ones.

In the early part of the summer there would be swarms of bees, these we treated with respect and apart from standing well back and throwing small stones at them to get them moving, the only activity left was to call the local bee keeper and watch him do his work from a much greater distance.

At about four-thirty in the afternoon there would be a procession of people going to "fetch the milk" from the farm of their choice. This would almost certainly provoke a contest as to who could swing their "can" the fastest, or the most times, or with the lid on or lid off. Not that this aspect made the slightest difference to the outcome, it just looks more dangerous. This "game" would often result in an accident and as they say "It's no good crying over spilt milk". I remember one of the younger evacuees trying to score points off us, by saying how backward the villages were, as in Ealing the milk came in bottles and was left on your doorstep. Before he went back home he would learn the "facts of life" regarding milk and milking.

Let us look at Milking.

I believe that this was possibly the dirtiest job I ever got involved with on the farm, having got recruited to take over some of the cows normally milked by my father. He by now had become deeply involved with the Home Guard and the only way he could attend the weekend parades was for me to act as substitute.

I would only be called on to do the more docile ones, but would have to take over some of those from the person who now took over the "wild ones".

The cows know when it is time to come in, except for the odd contrary one, and then the dog came into his own. It may be raining, in which case they are dripping wet; they may have come through mud up to their stomachs, so there is an even chance that they will be very dirty.

They will normally go into their correct stall, woe betide the one that doesn't, the regulars will soon push it into line, they are then locked in with a wooden bar. This bar will hold the head in the manner of a "Toggle", there will be a quantity of food in the manger, so for a time they will be happy. The next thing was to wash the udders and the serious business can now begin.

This consists of sitting on a three legged wooden stool while holding a bucket between your knees, it was considered "sloppy" to allow this bucket to touch the floor during the proceedings, although on some farms it was considered to be the normal way. The legs of the stool would probably protrude through the seat and if not adding much to the "comfort" it must have prevented anyone sliding off. These like many things on a farm had been produced generations before and had been subjected to much "make do and mend".

Next you would take up your position under the cow and force it to place its legs where you wanted them to be, often a pious hope.

This position it's left leg forward and it's right leg back allowed you to keep your right knee between them in a kind of locking mode, this was designed to stop the animal getting into a "kicking" position. You would keep your head pressed firmly into it's side, not forgetting the weather, or that the cow had just previously been laying in something unpleasant, then the milking proper could begin.

Setting off with great "gusto" the cow may or may not agree to co-operate, if not, then you could whistle or hum the latest "Bing Crosby" number.

Cows were not fussy about the standard of the performance or the actual tune, but did without doubt respond favourably to some music. Years after, of course, would come the actual playing of records to the cows, although altogether too late for my participation. This "noise" may please the one you were milking but the one behind may have other ideas and it was not unknown for them to kick the stool from under you. You would first learn about this when the said stool hit the nearby wall, this then left you sitting on a cushion of fresh air, some twelve inches from the ground until gravity took it's natural course.

You would then find yourself sprawled in a somewhat undignified way under the offending animal and in anything that happened to be on the ground at that point. The real crime in this was if you actually spilt the milk. Milk would penetrate overalls or any piece of clothing worn, leaving a thick film of grease. That plus the previously mentioned wet and dirty cows sometimes added up to a very pleasant Sunday afternoon.

Having got the milk safely into the bucket it would next be poured through paper filters into a large hopper, from there it would travel down a cooler, in practise like a radiator in reverse, it having cold water passed through it, then finally into a churn. Next morning the milk lorry would come and collect the churns and take them to London, presumably to be bottled and possibly find its way onto the doorstep of our young friend from Ealing.