On Parallel Lines

A girl's life in Wheatley

1939 – 1956

Christine Jackson

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CHAPTERS

Preface

Christine Jackson , was the eldest daughter of William Frederick Tombs and his wife Ellen Rose, who lived at their newly built house, now 19 London Road, adjacent to which her parents ran a shop, opened by grandmother Keziah Tombs in the mid-1930s and run until the early-1950s. Christine wrote her memories of Wheatley and her schooling in the mid-1950s and has agreed for these to be published in the current form as they are a fascinating insight into this period in the village.

The three daughters, from left June Rose, Christine, and Rachel outside the shop to the left of their house

Chapter 1: The start of war, a spy story!

One way or another, that last week of August 1939 made quite an impact on the family. I had had one or two fleeting memories before that time - of laughter, of sitting in a pram in the garden and by the railings at the back door of Coombe House, Ladder Hill, Wheatley. I was getting on for two years of age - one year 8 months to be exact - and memories of things that happened during that week I have been able to pinpoint precisely.

I suppose a train journey would make an impression on any young child. I remember my father lifting me out of a pushchair at a station. I am uncertain where it was, although in view of our ultimate destination - Kings Lynn, Norfolk - I strongly suspect that this was Liverpool Street in London. I have a definite picture of a crowded place and a man in black, wheeling my pushchair away and helping with the cases. I do remember being worried by all this but was assured by my mother that everything was "all right". It was going to be looked after by 'the guard', a mysterious man who seemed to hold the key to the success of our journey. My parents seemed happy enough about all this - but I was less so. The noise of the train frightened me and I sat tightly holding my father's hand. Much to my surprise, the pushchair did turn up again when the train stopped and we eventually arrived, presumably in Kings Lynn although I did not know it as such but rather as the place where my mother's parents lived. I knew we were going to see them. What, of course, I did not realize at the time was that my parents were concerned to think that my grandparents would never see their granddaughter in her formative years if hostilities, already predicted by the radio, actually broke out and the East Coast became marked as a possible invasion area. Family visits would then become a thing of the past. Only my mother would have been allowed to visit this already restricted area. To take a young child there would have been quite impossible. This particular week was therefore an important one for everyone in the family. It was coincidental, of course, that in my very young mind, memories were beginning to gel and be retained.

I do not remember all the details of that week although my first trip to the seaside at Hunstanton is still as clear as if it had happened only yesterday. I do remember being dressed in a little blue rubberized beach suit and screaming with terror at the sound of the sea, much to my parents' surprise and annoyance. This was meant to be a treat, for heaven's sake!

I remember lying on a settee in front of a large coal fire and feeling rather unwell from some sort of upset. Yes, I was upset. I hated the sea: it was vast, it was frightening and being forced to paddle and "enjoy it" was a fear that I never overcame.

In the last week of August 1939, we went to Kings Lynn where my mother was detained on the grounds of suspected espionage in a side room at Boots the Chemist there. Our Brownie camera was hot with overuse. Mother took photos of her parents, of me and of places that interested her, always with me somewhere in the picture. I remember a picnic at some place called 'The Point' in Kings Lynn. I can see myself now sitting on a rug and eating a biscuit whilst my parents 'snapped' away. They used up the film by taking pictures of the docks, the fishing fleet and of a German ship in harbour called The Dusseldorf. No-one told them to stop, no-one took any notice, no-one appeared even slightly interested: it was just a way of using up the film before our return home. Apparently, I featured in most of the

film. These photos were to be reminders of happier times if and when further visits to my grandparents were to be prevented by wartime restrictions.

It was just a few days later when my mother went to Boots to collect her pictures that problems began in earnest. Two gentlemen in plain clothes guided her to a side room and began to ask questions:

"Why did you take these photos? What interest do you have in The Dusseldorf?"

The questioning went on for ages. But Mother was no Mata Hari and she was eventually allowed to return to her parents' home - minus her photos. They had all been confiscated. So, no photographic reminders of that week remained and as for The Dusseldorf - a short time later it apparently scuttled itself in the Atlantic. My mother's photographs were the last pictures to be taken of that vessel.

Somewhere, maybe, deep inside the deepest MI5 archives, there lie photos of me in my pram with The Dusseldorf in the background. My connection with government matters obviously started considerably earlier than my other Civil Service records would indicate! This episode made a particularly unforgettable imprint on the family.

Chapter 2: Early war years

The garden and its produce seemed to me to be the most important thing in the early war years. My parents placed great emphasis on it, as did, of course, all the neighbours. We had a half-acre of garden at Milne Cottage and my father took his wartime responsibilities as far as food production was concerned very seriously indeed.

"They taters 'a chitted," he said, "if the rain holds off, I might get a few in this aftern'un."

Nodding to me in the corner, he added, "If you want to make yerself useful, get a chair and help me dip 'em."

A small zinc bowl was extricated from the clutter in the shed, banged onto the potting bench and then dipped into a disintegrating hessian sack which had stood in the same place all winter. A tell-tale ring of white powder lay around it by the door where it had successfully cushioned the lawnmower's winter storage and the rough splintered edge of the yard broom.

"Lime burns," I had been told.

But it did not: each time I crossed the yard and entered the shed, I used to kick the sack - only to see a small white cloud of dust rise from it, depositing in the course more powder around the door and white dust on the tops of my slippers, which was then walked across the yard. It was usually diluted or gone completely by the time I reached the back door. Perhaps disappointingly, the sack did not burst into flames: nothing happened.

The bowl of lime was put on the bench. Father then cut the sprouting potatoes in two or sometimes three parts and only then was I allowed to dip the cut side of the potato into it.

"Don't pull out the 'eyes' or they won't grow and don't put lime near your eyes or you'll go blind. And if you just want to fool around, you'd best stay indoors."

Such was my introduction to the intricacies of potato planting. I must have been all of three years of age.

His Aran Pilots, Majesties and King 'Teddies' were the focal point of the

spring months: little else seemed to matter. Father saw to the vegetables and my mother 'did' the flowers. He did the first cut of the year to get the lawn into trim and Mother 'kept the lawns down' after this initial massacre. He insisted on setting the blades low on the mower whilst she maintained a higher setting was better. It was an argument that was never resolved. In spite of everything, the grass grew, the daisies sprouted, the plantains flourished and the moss spread uncontrollably.

The most heinous crime in their book was to 'ox' on the newly-dug earth and should I have been stupid enough to lose my ball amongst the cabbages and, worst of all, leave a tell-tale footprint behind, an enquiry of Scarman-like proportions was immediately launched and the offending ball confiscated. Later, the hook end of an old walking stick was used to retrieve it and cover tracks - but such guile only develops slowly. 'Rules' had to be obeyed and the garden rules were very strict indeed.

News of war casualties filtered through the village and had an effect on the children in a diluted sort of way. I saw my parents' reaction and their sadness when yet another war casualty was rumoured and later confirmed.

"Do you know of anyone called Billy Lowe?" asked Mr Earle, one of the sales reps, to my father one morning, "... only I have just heard from my last call that he had been killed." My father looked very shocked and saddened.

"Are you sure?" my father queried. "It's just that I was at school with him."

"Well, that's what I heard. I could have made a mistake but I don't think so. Tell you what, don't say anything and I will make some more enquiries. I usually get some news when I am on my calls and I will call back and let you know for sure if I can."

After that bit of news, the atmosphere in the house became quieter and when Mr Earle called back later and confirmed the rumour, it cast a gloom over the house for the rest of the day.

"Billy's got four kids, I think, about your age," he sighed, looking at us. "It's a bloody shame. He was a nice chap."

I was puzzled by death. I knew the Lowe family from school and wondered how they would react and cope with their loss.

"Kids don't usually notice these things and if they do, well, they soon get over it," I was told.

I found that difficult to believe. I could not imagine that I would ever have got over anything like that. I had visions and fears of children being moved amongst relatives or even worse amongst step-parents of the sort one read about in story books. I was sure that I could not have coped.

The villagers were saddened by such news. These were the youth of the locality and many compared such news, especially the older ones, with "them lost in the last war".

Train journeys seem to have made quite an impression on me and one which comes to mind must have been in 1941. This time, my destination was to be Rochdale. We were to spend some months with my grandmother's sister, Aunt May. We walked along the platform at Oxford station - my grandmother, Granny Tombs and I - and this time I had no fears about trains or travelling. My father came to the station to see us both off. Oxford, in those days, had two stations and I was never sure from which one we had to leave. The grown-ups had it all sorted but to me, it was all a bit of a mystery.

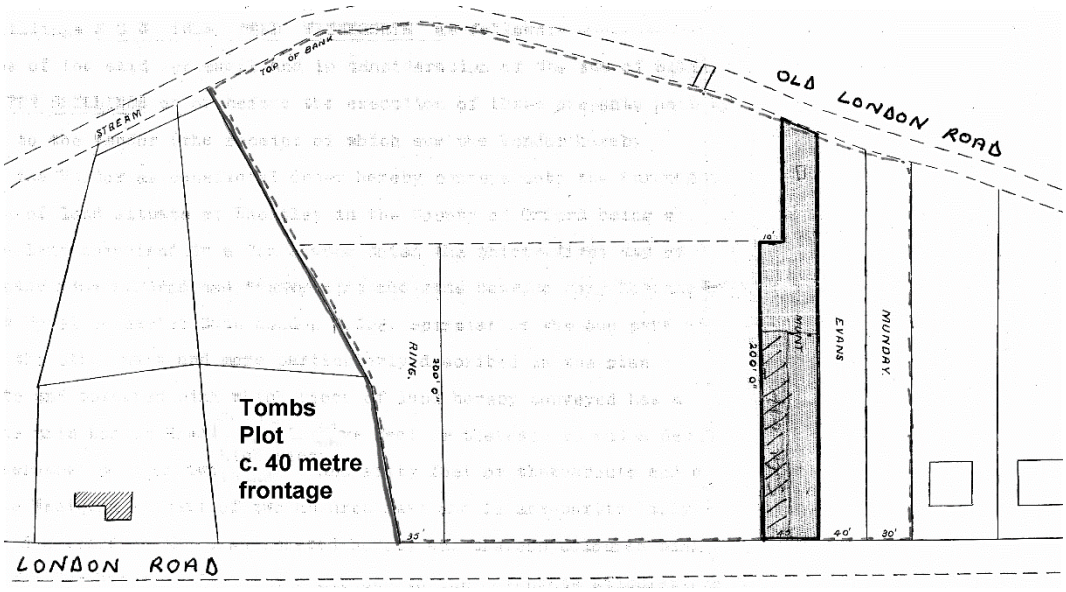
The various stops en route were noteworthy for the dirty stations in

varying stages of decay – tended by pinafored and industrially-trousered ladies with turbaned headscarves, purposefully wielding large yard brooms and sucking at their cigarettes. It made for a dismal and depressing journey. Waiting rooms were poorly lit and bare; low-wattage light bulbs were shielded from the outside by grimy brown paper. 'Hades' might have been an apt description of most of them. From these stepped an abundance of porters in their smoky black waistcoats and trousers, with peaked caps pushed firmly down with purposeful and single-minded intent as they made their way back to meet the next train due at the platform.

Travelling in wartime was an experience. Carriages were packed and servicemen occupied every space with kitbags spilling out over luggage racks and into the corridor of our 3rd class carriage. Cigarette smoke choked and carriage windows were covered with nicotine grime on the inside and soot from the engine on the outside. It was stuffy and unpleasant and anyone foolish enough to try to open the window was severely frowned upon because it guaranteed that soot then penetrated all corners of the carriage. Cigarette butts ground down by heavy boots littered the floor. No one expected to travel and still stay clean, although these were the days when ladies usually wore hats, securely fixed with hatpins and gentlemen dressed in suits and ties for a journey. Casual wear for lengthy journeys was not the norm as clothing rationing restricted choice. The only diversion was a series of pre-war photographs of various seaside resorts, placed on the opposite side of the carriage from where one sat. These pictures were long since out-of-date but romanticized by the passage of time. Most of these beaches were now covered by massive bales of barbed wire as anti-invasion devices. The monotony of the journey was broken only by the occasional appearance in the carriage of the ticket inspector.

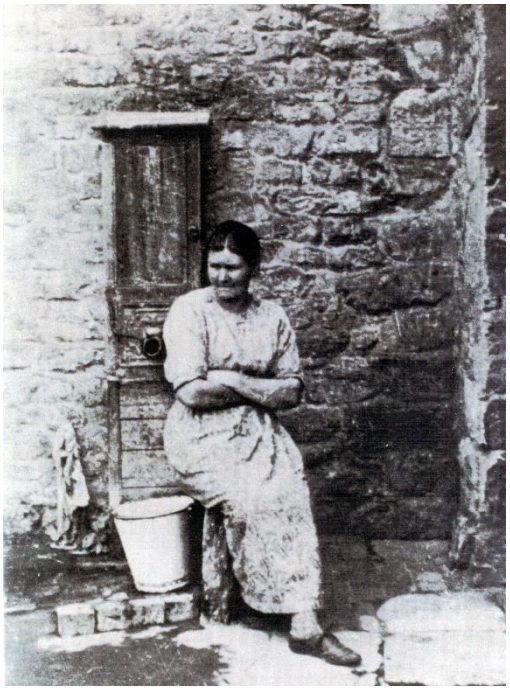
Chapter 3: Shop in London Road

The plot on which the Tombs built their house and the adjacent shop. It was about half an acre and now has three dwellings on it.



Family group outside the shop with parents William Frederick and Ellen Rose and, on the left, Blanche Sprackland, who worked for the three Miss Briggs sisters, where they all went to tea from time to time. The sisters are, left to right, Christine, June Rose and Rachel.

During the week, my parents ran the small shop which adjoined Milne Cottage. It was a modest concern, previously run by my grandmother, Keziah Tombs (shown by the pump at the back door of the Manor House), long since retired to her bungalow 'Rosie Lee' two doors away. A shaggy old mongrel dog called Snooker was my confidante and permanent companion and he and I were constantly waved at by the gentle stream of folk who passed along the path to the shop. They were a chatty lot - decent, honest and "good payers". My parents were lucky: these were days when cheques from customers were rare and then only taken from



someone known to them over a number of years; credit cards were not even a glint in the eye of the moguls of big business. Indeed, when a few years later the family decided to quit the grocery business for good, there was only one debt - a grocery bill unpaid to the grand sum of £5.00! This was a record that many of the larger stores would have surely envied. In accordance with the wartime regulations most of them were 'registered' customers: the women in their clean cotton, cross-over pinafores with always just the 'last' toffee invariably produced from the fluff at the bottom of their pocket; the men en route to their homes after a busy day at Morris' or the 'Press' just calling in for their Digger Mixture, Rizla papers, Black Beauty Shag, Woodbines or Goldflake. Some of the older men, with time on their hands and ousted from fireside armchairs temporarily by bustling spouses, would linger longer, offering advice on anything you care to mention. Many could remember the last war and some bore the scars. My parents listened to them all, agreed with them all and then shut up shop at 6pm or as near after as possible without actually pushing the lingerers down the steps outside!

The shop sold grocery, stamps, stationery and haberdashery and was conveniently situated on the main London Road away from the rest of the village shops. Together with Mr George at the Triangle, my parents shared out the main council estate on that stretch of road and between them supplied the weekly rations of most of the families in the immediate vicinity. They were busy but happy days on the whole. There were always the few scroungers who had registered with grocery shops in the village but who happened to drop in occasionally in the vain hope of getting "just a bit extra, maybe a bit of bacon" or something "off the ration". They were the ones who had registered at the Co-op "just for the divi, you know", or at some other larger establishment and who imagined that because of their wider involvement might have access to goods that the smaller shopkeeper would be unable to match - by keeping in with both sides and in touch on a personal basis, when the Germans had starved the rest of the neighbours into submission. They were the ones who came banging on the door on Tuesdays, the closing day but who expected to be served with the odd pair of shoe-laces when the Co-op was more firmly closed: they then would fail to put in any further appearance at the shop till the next village closing day. These types were well-known and were treated with caution and reserve.

"Just playing two ends against the centre," my mother would say.

Most of the customers had lived in the village for years and had families with tentacles stretching back to Domesday. They were trusted and their foibles and funny ways were tolerated and accepted.

"Mr Tombs, how much is your lemonade powder?" was an oft- repeated query by one child who would come into the store, sometimes as frequently as three times a day, for just two ounces of this particular commodity! Smiles were suppressed and giggles stillborn as the anticipated question was uttered.

"Mr Tombs, Mum says can she have some salvation flour?" met with similar response. Good customer relations were regarded by my parents as almost sacrosanct and any such unintentional humour that could cause embarrassment passed without comment. It was a caring community.

Most bills were settled weekly in cash and few exceeded five pounds. At Christmas when a large thin crinkly £5 note was tendered, it was a moment for comment and discussion. Such a note was big money.

Our shop had no cold storage facilities. Legally, we were under no

obligation to install these and in any case, no one was particularly bothered. Such niceties belonged to a future time. The hot summers did occasionally bring problems with the butter and margarine packs but we usually coped. The stone floor of the storage area helped in some way, although the large cheeses did have a tendency to "sweat". But no problems were insurmountable and my parents got by. The only difficulty that I could see was when the vinegar barrel which Father had 'tapped' leaked and the store's floor was awash with the stuff: the aroma pervaded every room and lingered for days. Occasionally, the Weights and Measures Man would call to check that all the measuring jugs used for vinegar sales and cans for paraffin sales, were correctly marked with the 'crown'. His visits were few and always unnotified but they caused no problems. Most customers brought in their own jugs and bottles for refills. Labelled bottled vinegar in small domestic measured amounts was not available. All glass containers were assiduously collected, scoured and stored "for emergencies". Nothing was ever thrown away.

Our little shop in London Road was always busy. Sundays were particularly important as this was the day when we "did the coupons". The food coupons had to be counted and sorted into numbered, separate piles. There were 'A's 'B's 'C's and 'D's. I think that there were also 'E's - only occasionally used - but on that point, I cannot be certain. The 'A's took up most of the time, closely followed by the 'B's. My job was to do the counting. As far as I could remember, the 'A's and 'B's were connected with basic grocery essentials and were cut out in strips from the ration books. They counted as so many points towards various commodities. The C and D coupons were squarer and there were fewer of them. Once sorted and wrapped into brown gum-covered bands, they were forwarded to the Food Office in Oxford. It was a time-consuming job and it took up most of Sunday evening after chapel. Van deliveries were frequent. We dealt mostly with Grimley Hughes which had premises in Oxford and with Twinings. Their reps called fortnightly and were a source of much information.

As a young child, together with my father, we often had to deliver grocery orders to houses along the London Road, long after shopping hours. My job was to carry the packets of washing powder that accompanied the orders but which could not be packed with the usual groceries. Weighed down with boxes of Oxydol, Persil, Rinso and Lux, we would spend most of the evenings delivering the orders on foot to various homes in the vicinity. The registered customers' needs were treated very seriously indeed. Most of the council houses in London Road were visited by us.

Chapter 4: A child's life in the early 1940s

Good manners were considered by my parents to be absolutely essential as far as customer relations were concerned and from the beginning I was told:

"Don't just say 'Hello', say 'Good day' and always give people their proper name. It is very important!" or: "Don't stand and listen to other people's conversations. Walk away if necessary. Never interrupt."

The trouble was that other people had such interesting things to say. There was a big wide world outside that front gate but just like the garden ... there were rules:

"Better not go near the gate or out into the road ... stay round the back ... more room to play there ... don't talk to people you don't know ... you hear such

awful stories."

I did not know these stories - no-one ever expanded on them but I supposed that they must have been important or my parents would never have stressed them. There was someone they knew who had lost their boy - in hospital, of all places - or so they said and to me it seemed odd that no- one had gone on looking for him. Still, no-one appeared very bothered now about him and I found it hard to understand why my otherwise caring parents should be so unconcerned. What about his parents? What about his friends? Surely, they had looked for him. But no further explanations were offered and when I asked my mother's friend what had happened to Mrs S's lost son, I was told:

"Little girls should be seen and not heard!"

Even so, life here was happy for a child: gentle, slow and caring. Neighbours were involved but not intrusive: the village was a country one but not too isolated.

About this time someone, unseen by the grown-ups became my friend. I called her Janet and I poured out all my worries to her. Janet helped push the doll's pram round the garden. She shared the rocking-horse and she lived in the coal shed. Janet was around for a year or more until I suppose she just got lost - like Mrs S's son. There were no tears or anything like that. Janet just faded away.

The summers always seemed hot then: aeroplanes droned all afternoon across the sky and some of the planes appeared to swoop very low, so much so that it was often possible to see the letters on the fuselage. I enjoyed the Summer. My mother's clothes-horse and a borrowed table cloth, secured at each corner by hair-ribbon, made a marvellous tent. Snooker, our dog, would come and sit in it but he took up so much room, was hot to lean on and reluctant to leave. Lectures on being a spoil-sport always fell deaf on canine ears although I was sure he understood. On wet days, an equally good tent could be made of the dining room table, the long table cloths providing marvellous screening but all this came to an abrupt halt when my cardigan caught on the lace-edged cloth and brought some of the china prepared for tea, crashing to the floor. Snooker took the blame on this occasion and I salved my conscience by thinking of the times when he had taken over my tent and refused to move out. Serve him right! He was getting old now, I was told, and he grunted frequently and did a lot of sleeping. Father said he had arthritis in his hind legs. Snooker must be old then, so I supposed that Father was right.

On the one occasion that I did have to go into the Radcliffe, for tonsil removal, I found it all rather a daunting experience. My stay was for two days only and I was in a large ward with boys on one side of a long dividing screen and girls on the other. There were no visitors and many tears were shed in their absence. The place was huge and in spite of reassurances from the nurses, I felt very lonely and frightened. There seemed to be so many injections for this and for that. I knew that I had been vaccinated against scarlet fever and diphtheria but did not think there could be many other diseases not already catered for! It was all very confusing and everybody was so busy.

Where did that mysterious concoction called 'mouthwash' come from? There were hot taps and cold water taps but where were the mouthwash taps? When I did eventually tell the nurse what was worrying me, she laughed - and that made me feel even worse. Child-friendly ideas had still to percolate through these lofty portals and seemed not be of major importance in the 1940s.

Nursing was still regarded by most people in the village as an occupation of the 'bettermus classes.' Few in my parents' circle would have considered it as a career. Careers as such played no part in the lives of the majority of the women in the village. Nursing was a profession for 'gentlemen's' daughters and to have considered entering the nursing profession would have been thought of as 'stepping out of your class'! Most still thought only of marriage and family commitments and to have thought otherwise would have been quickly frowned upon and most certainly crushed. It was not that the village was harsh in its judgements but there was still a certain acceptance about one's individual role in the community. Barriers of class existed but did not usually frustrate: apart from one or two exceptions, life in Wheatley had not changed a great deal in the last 25 years or so.

For any aspiring Doctor Spock, Wheatley must have seemed like an outpost of apathy in a desert of disinterest as far as child psychology was concerned. Indeed, it is questionable as to whether some of our modern ideas would have had any impact at all. It was not that people were uncaring but they distrusted change and new ideas in areas of such delicacy would have been dismissed as "going soft".

"Spare the rod and spoil the child!" was the maxim that held sway there. They were practical people.

Worse still was the weekend 'purge' deemed necessary by most families in the village for the continued good health and 'regularity' of their offspring. This took the form of Syrup of Figs or Steedman's Powders, both of which my father's shop stored in copious amounts! They were a regular feature of the village shopping lists. Both products had devastating effects and ensured that most weekends were spent at home. 'Physick' was deemed a necessity in most households in the village whether medically necessary or not and many were the stories that abounded around the 'Friday Night Purge' when young brothers and sisters would be lined up and given their medicine. Its effects could still be evidenced on the following Monday morning when a line of children would hand in notes from home to teacher, requesting 'to be excused' should the need arise. 'Miss' would read each without comment and one by one consigned each epistle to the flames of the smoky fire at the front of the classroom, causing a little hiss and a spark as the note touched the black-leaded bars - until the last piece of charred paper floated away up the chimney bringing a glow to the strings of red hot soot particles that clung obstinately to the back of the grate. It was a ritual that never changed.

Our interests at this stage in retrospect seemed simple enough. We listened to the wireless; we enjoyed *Children's Hour; we* also loved the countryside. We made crinoline ladies from the flower and calyx of the convolvulus plant that covered the wall opposite the Kings Arms in Church Road and from the mass that covered the banks opposite the Triangle Cafe in London Road. From time to time we raided our mothers' workboxes for bits of wool to make cats' cradles at playtime and we used our knuckle skills for playing Five Stones. We picked the softer leafed sweet nettle plant and sucked the honey from the back of the flower. We pressed leaves and flowers - to what purpose I am uncertain - but it was fun to do and an easy pastime in what was then a less stressful and more innocent age.

At home, although aware of the war, we were to a certain extent sheltered from the everyday realities of the situation. My parents and grandmother spoke of previous engagements. Granny Tombs talked of the Boer War in which one of her brothers had died and she made it seem all very recent.

My parents spoke of the "last war" by which they meant that of 1914-18. That, too, sounded recent and we were aware of various villagers who had sustained injuries during that time. Our neighbour, Archie Harding, was an old soldier and, when he was not looking, we very unkindly copied his arthritic walk.

I hated Saturdays: Saturday was bath day ... hair-washing day ... windows-dripping-with-steam day; and in the Winter ... icy day ... with windows and doors left ajar to allow the steam to escape. Saturdays were a misery. Baths took time and much preparation. During the week 'all-over' washes were permitted but on Saturdays, a real effort was made. The copper, a large brick-built boiler with a wood fire underneath, was heated up for the baths with additional bowls and saucepans heated up on the stove or kitchen range. It really was a wretched business causing spills, scalds, short tempers and peeling paintwork as windows and doors ran with water. I disliked the baths procedures. A long-handled pump over the sink in the scullery connected to a well outside in the garden did not help. The pumps struggled to supply water but pressure was unreliable and more often than not, little water was produced which in turn fuelled tempers already on a short fuse. I tried to keep out of the way as much as possible at these times. Like most of the other houses in the road, our house was not connected to the main 'city' water.

Even at my tender age, I was aware how dangerous it was to carry boiling water upstairs in open saucepans. For reasons which I never fully understood, the plumbing in the bathroom had never been connected! It seemed that in the dim and distant past when my grandmother lived at Milne Cottage, a concessionary discount on the rates was awarded to householders who installed a bath on their premises and she, always alive to such opportunities, immediately had a bath installed in what would have been the third bedroom. The bath was connected to the outside drainage pipe only and that was all. It could not be filled from taps as none had ever been fitted - hence my father's weekly risk of life and limb! The luxury of the big bath upstairs was to come later. In the early years a bath in front of the kitchen range was the alternative for young children.

The rainwater butt outside the coal shed was in constant use both for the garden and for some of the needs indoors. Here rain water ran off the roof and was piped into this huge metal ribbed container. The butt was cavernous and smelt of grass and moss. It was a constant delight. There were misty cobwebs around its edge and leaves from autumn snaked across the surface. Spiders lurked under the ridges and sometimes left their legs behind in the sticky cobwebs that hung there from last season. The water butt was forbidden territory but even so I found it exciting to peer over the edge. The water rippled tantalizingly and I used to watch my reflection gently lap the side, distort, discolour and dismember as I reached over and deliberately dragged a twig across the surface. Sometimes I would drop the twig and then watch it spiral to the sludge at the bottom of the tank.

On Saturday nights the zinc bath, which hung on a hook outside the toilet in the garden, was brought into the main room and placed in front of the fire and the saucepans of rainwater heated on the kitchen range filled the bath. Water from the butt was deemed "Better for you than they chemicals" as it "makes your hair shine".

Bathing in front of the kitchen range was the best part of the evening followed by the worst part, hair washing, 'ragging' and bed.

My hair was straight and unbelievably fine without a kink in it. How I longed for curly hair!

"You should eat up y'r crusts. That'll make your hair curl," I was informed. So, I did. It did not. Many times when sitting at the table with my hair pulled over my eyes so that, as I chewed my bread, I could watch more easily any movement upwards, any kinking at all of my fine, fluffy hair - I secretly prayed. But it was no good: my hair never moved. Instead it hung limply on either side of my forehead and resisted all attempts to do otherwise. The selected and carefully observed strands stayed absolutely motionless, utterly unaffected by crusts or anything else. It was all very disappointing, I decided.

"For God's sake, leave her hair alone," Father said, as my mother tried for the umpteenth time to persuade my reluctant locks to resist the forces of nature. "As long as she has all her senses, who cares about her hair?"

But I did care, desperately.

Strips of clean linen were applied to my hair and the hair wound around each piece. Ragging the hair was a regular weekend feature in the household. It was a painful procedure: impossible to sleep in and the frizzy result was quite dreadful - in retrospect - but I thought the effect at the time quite delightful until, that is, my mother tried to comb out the resulting knots. Protests resulted in a tap from the hard back of the brush and, in my innocence, I decided that future dissent should be restricted to the silent- mouthed and whispered variety that only I knew about and which prudence dictated should remain quietly in my brain.

"Pride is painful" I was told. "You'll have to put up with worse than this."

But for one day at least, I could vie with the other children for really curly hair. The curls did not last long. My head was tender where the rags pulled as I tried to put my head on the pillow. My head ached through lack of sleep. All that, however, was soon forgotten by the next weekend when the 'ragging' ritual started all over again. If anything, the hair-washing was worse than the ragging as, clad in liberty bodice and knickers, I stood by the shallow yellow stone sink with shoulders and neck pressed hard against the cold unyielding ceramic whilst hot water from the saucepan on the range, usually too hot, or freezing cold as the result of the addition of too much water from the enamel jug nearby, was poured over my excessively lathered Icilma shampoo efforts. Occasionally, this was followed by a rinse of vinegar "for the shine". The shampoo stung my eyes and the water poured into my ears, deafening and frightening me at the same time as I tried to shake it off thus deflecting it onto my already damp vest and knickers. It was an uncomfortable business and I feared that I would drown or be scalded as the water from the jug was emptied over my head. It was a time for hiding as hair-washing time approached.

For my parents, heating up the copper for the baths was a messy business as well as being a time-consuming chore but was accepted as one of the necessities of life in a village community in the 1940s. The brick- built copper had to be whitened during the week and placed on top was a heavy wooden lid. Underneath, the kindling wood, kept dry beneath the range, enabled the heating up to start quickly. It was a messy business with ash and clinkers contained within a box below, shielded from view by the black-leaded screen in front.

As the ash can was removed, there was a comforting instant warmth, soon to be replaced by a hiss as condensation from the copper steam hit the cold window-panes. The smell of the sulphur in the ash can used to make me cough. The hot ash shovelled out to the dustbin in the yard and left to cool, would be collected by the dustman later. My eyes pricked and smarted: I would cough again

almost tasting its acrid fumes. It irritated my nostrils and my tongue and then disappeared as the windows of the scullery were opened wider letting in the cold air and replacing the cosy warmth from the grate. The coals in the can glowed again for a moment in the sudden draught and then died.

On Mondays the same thing happened: the copper was once again heated up for the weekly washday. The clamminess of the work surfaces, drips from the ceiling and walls and puddles from the mangle made walking hazardous. I always felt cold and shivery on Mondays. It was worse on wet days as sheets and clothing had to be hoisted onto overhead lines to dry. The wash-day ritual was the same everywhere except that some of the neighbours had very modern galvanized coppers on legs. I felt that perhaps my parents might one day aspire to this luxury as well but they never did: they seemed happy with the old one. I only felt comfortable again when the final bowl of hot water from the copper was scooped out and poured into the bucket for washing the floor, the copper stick put to dry and the heavy wooden lid replaced on the copper's now warmed-through and whitened surface. Then my mother in a state of exhaustion would 'put her feet up'. Tempers were short on Mondays and I would go and 'make myself scarce'! Things would be better later - they always were.

Monday meals never varied: bubble and squeak and vegetable soup mopped up with hunks of bread. I loved the soup. It had a special smell as it mingled with the odour of the washing drying overhead. Somehow it made the dampness of the surroundings more bearable. Mondays did have their better side. Monday afternoons were distinctly better than Monday mornings, the house-warming up as the dying copper fire began the process of drawing out the heat in the brickwork. Kindling wood that had been stored under the kitchen range during the week was brought out, 'caught' for the first time as the range was lit in preparation for the evening meal. On the debit side, my chilblained toes and fingers also began to warm up and itch. Then, as the warmth began to spread around the room, I would gradually move back from the grate to somewhere in the room where I could stamp on my swollen and broken-skinned toes, less conspicuously. The cat would ease himself into my recently vacated chair and purr the next couple of hours away in comfort. My chilblains were the bane of my life in the winter and made walking a misery first thing in the morning as my swollen toes fought against the constrictions of my leather Startrites.

"The old folk used to have a cure for chilblains," my mother commented. "They used to swear by dipping their feet in the jerry."

As I rubbed my toes once more against the shoe seaming, I was sure that I had not reached this stage of desperation.

Come early autumn, the steaming coppers assumed even greater importance. Friends and neighbours then began to prepare and cook their Christmas puddings in them. I was always happy when this stage of the year was reached. It meant that Christmas was not too far off and sticky pinafores, arms and wet and sticky fingers were permitted as I climbed onto a stool and licked the wooden spoon and pudding basin: there was no taste quite like it as the warm smell of the pudding spice invaded the kitchen. The smell of the puddings out-smelt even the trays of the pickling onions: they stood salted and ready for packing in scalded jars in the corner. When the vinegar was added, I would not have changed places with anyone. There was nothing really to beat the cooking smells of autumn. One by one the Christmas puddings were lowered into the steaming copper, each basin

covered and knotted in a clean cloth to rock and bubble for hours in the steam. Four or five could be cooked in one go and when finished would be lifted out and left to cool on the heavy wooden cover. I listened as Granny Tombs told me how the "old folk" had always done their puddings this way.

"They had big families in them days," she said, "no-one had it easy."

And then, as if talking to no-one in particular, she added: "Still we always had bread and plenty of potatoes to fill, the corners. There was the garden and the allotment and the pig. We got by."

Over the past months, my mother had carefully saved the precious ingredients so that Christmas and the pudding could be as traditional as was possible in spite of the rationing restrictions. Prudent hoarding and careful preparation were essential if the precious ingredients were not to be wasted. I longed to poke my fingers into the currants but I knew that this was not allowed.

"One currant chewed and swallowed is one less in the pudding," I was warned.

I knew the rules. However, once the puddings were done, sniffed and inspected, the tension in the house eased. If all else failed, at least we could be assured of at least one traditional offering on the Christmas menu.

Horses from outlying farms trekked to the village for shoeing at Willie Sheldon's smithy. Keen gardeners eagerly followed them on foot with bucket and shovel. The forge itself always had an audience but I had to wait for some kind soul to lift me up as I was too small to peer over the half-door. Yet I was never too concerned: the acrid smells from the forge made me cough - the singed-hair smell of the hooves, as Mr Sheldon peeled away the surplus horny material over his leather-aproned knee, fascinated me - but all the delights of equine chiropody were immediately extinguished when the animal in question peed over the cobbled floor of the smithy, causing the onlookers to scatter hastily. The ensuing smell, heightened by the smithy fire, made me heave.

"You going already?" Mr Seymour, who also worked at the forge would say.

"It's the smell," I would reply.

Having a certain fear of horses, I usually kept my distance. I had had a near fatal contact with one as a very young child in a pushchair that I could still remember. A young girl from the village had kindly offered to take me for a ride in my pram one afternoon and my mother gratefully accepted the offer. Ivy took me to see my father who, at the time, was working for his uncle on the 'The Bishops' on Ladder Hill. They were dealing with large working horses in the field there. Ivy pushed me too close: the horse reared up and its hoof came down on the wheel of the pushchair and then rearing up once more, several hundredweights of horseflesh crashed down on the step of the pushchair, missing me by a fraction. The horse, by now thoroughly frightened, squealed. Ivy screamed - as did I, as my father and the other men working in the field rushed and unstrapped me. I was taken home and recovered but the pushchair did not!

The memory of that day lingered still and so taking Granny's hand, we would hurry away until our next visit to the village. Willie Sheldon, peering over the top of his spectacles, with his thatch of grey hair and George Seymour, a close neighbour who lived in London Road, clad in their leather aprons had an easy informality of manner. They were characters, who remained central to the village society for many years.

My fear of horses and their attendant behaviour however, was partly diminished when the Hassall's pony, complete with panniers, passed by. They lived in the Manor House and could often be seen walking the pony with their children along the High Street. My excitement knew no bounds when one morning, the pony stopped alongside me and Mrs Hassall senior offered me a ride in one of the panniers. What bliss! What absolute bliss! The animal rocked slowly along, gently swaying me from side to side. It seemed oblivious to its new incumbent as it gently ambled along slowly towards Green's shop at the corner of Friday Lane. For me it was a glimpse into another aspect of the horse world. The ride finished all too quickly but its memory never faded.

Birthdays were the highlight of the year. There was the glorious anticipation of what presents to expect. Birthdays were fun. I was given a pink-ridged china doll's tea set and this would have been the delight of any would-be social climber. The longed-for umbrella, neatly compressed into a seemingly impossibly small parcel was eagerly opened - but part of it was surely missing? It was an umbrella but where was its tiled roof and its chimney? For months I had described to Auntie Blanche the 'exact' umbrella I wanted and I thought she had understood. But she had obviously never listened! Nor could she have seen the umbrella advertisement in the newspapers (the umbrella/roof advertisement for the Abbey National Building Society, complete with chimney!). I was bitterly disappointed. Grown-ups could be surprisingly difficult on occasion. It was a long time before I understood that the Abbey National Building Society did not actually sell umbrellas!

I sat in front of the kitchen range on the rag rug leaning against the brass-top fireguard whilst my parents listened to the 8 o'clock news on the wireless: "Japan ... America ... Japan ..." droned the wireless. Both countries seemed a long, long way away.

My parents looked grim but birthdays were much more interesting even if well-intentioned aunts did sometimes misunderstand. I continued to lean against the fireguard enjoying the warmth until my Father yelled:

"For God's sake move child! You'll burn y'self and you'll have trellis scorch marks all down the back of yer cardigan."

My mother moved back the fireguard in order to make up the range as a spark from the fire buried itself and died malodorously in the mixed fibre of the rag rug.

"There you are," my father said, "that could have easily been you! You don't need to sit that close."

The cat stretched and was huckled from its warmed and sheltered place underneath the kitchen range whilst the removal of the ash-can added a special zest to the flames in the stove above. A roar from the chimney indicated that the fire had 'drawn'. I could now move back to the rug in front of the fireguard. The large kettle on the hob sizzled and rocked gently and then boiled over onto the 'silvo'd' fender beneath. Early morning breakfast rituals seemed to make my parents irritable: toast dangled on the end of a fork in front of the range took ages to brown, and the coal in the range hissed and smoked before bursting into flame and almost immediately dying in a popping puff of red-hot soot balls down the chimney into the main body of the fire. Smoke billowed out into the room, indicating the end of all social chit-chat for the time being. Breakfast was over. The chimney needed sweeping - and soon.

Later observations

Wheatley still had green fields along the London Road. One could stand by Gibbard's field, opposite the Kings Arms and glance down to the council houses on the London Road and still see the line of the brook that passed under the main A40. It was clearly outlined by a row of willows across a field now covered with bungalows. The culvert under the road was a Mecca for all youngsters on their way home from school each day. The idea was to climb down the bank at the side of the London Road and bestraddle the small stream of water that trickled through without getting your socks wet! The more worldly-wise among our schoolmates would remove their shoes and socks first. Sadly, most never thought of doing that until it was too late! Unfortunately, those of us falling into the latter category usually ended up frantically rushing round the garden trying to dry our socks before bedtime! It all seemed a satisfactory ending to our school day. Fortunately, for me, my parents never seemed aware of the attraction of the culvert under the road.

Wheatley remained essentially a country village with quite a lot of open land and fields. Pettigroves Fair was an annual sight in the field by the railway line off Roman Road (Muddy Lane) soon after the war was over. The field behind the council houses bordering London Road was the site of our Bonfire Night celebrations. Jakeman's Close was an area where one could still fill a basket with blackberries in the late Summer. Earlier in the year the same area was a riot of colour with dog roses and we were told at school that we were to collect as many rosehips as possible and we would be paid by the pound for them. These were taken to school and some of the children made quite a lot of money as a result. The hips were to be converted to rosehip syrup through some official organization. In September, we were allowed to take time off school to partake in picking potatoes for a week. Many of the children would go for a day or so with their mothers to the field at the back of the police station at Holton Turn. It was back-breaking work. I did not take part in potato-picking

Growing up brought other difficulties: clothing coupons. These were contained in little pink booklets with black printing, slightly smaller in size than the usual ration books for food. Clothing above all else was a constant difficulty for the growing family and there was a great deal of 'making do and mending'. As the eldest of the family I wore the dresses first and then they were passed on to my two younger sisters although they were not always new when I first wore them. They came from a mysterious source in Hampshire, I learnt. Mary (Coates) was about a year older than me and we had a mutual friend who acted as a 'clothes broker'. Her clothes were handed down to me and then would pass on to the others. They were usually slightly longer than I wore which enabled hems to be made, always clean and of excellent quality. The next consignment was always eagerly awaited and all that was ever asked was a few clothing coupons which were willingly exchanged because of their calibre. I wore my second-hand outer clothes up to the age of about ten years of age. Then Mary either grew up or disappeared. I never knew which.

Shoes were the real problem in wartime and my parents hoped that I would not grow out of them too quickly although usually these were not of the second-hand variety. We wore sturdy brown lace-ups. Hopefully, these would last the Winter until the day in late Spring when all three of us were taken into Oxford to buy sandals which never varied in style and invariably were purchased at

Milwards. Most children wore Clark's or Startrite sandals with a cutaway 'v' on the crepe heel. Sandals were accepted at school but plimsolls were officially frowned upon. Even at the tender age of eight, it always struck me as ridiculous for teachers to lecture us on the potential hazards of wearing plimsolls to school. We never had any say in the matter anyway. We wore what we were told!

Chapter 5: Shops and services in the village

Dr Barnes had been the medical guru of the village apparently for decades, and although long since departed his name was still uttered in tones of hallowed reverence! He had always sworn by Epsom Salts and said that if they were a pound a tin, then everyone would be clamouring for them," claimed my father.

My parents did not bother the doctor much. He seemed aloof and distant and someone to be treated with caution. Father said that we were lucky. When he was a lad, no-one in the village could afford to be ill! Gilbert Harris' father used to deal with most of the medical needs, he said. Mr Harris was the chemist and dealt with many ailments effectively - even toothache - and Father used to say that his father could remember Gilbert's father extracting teeth - his teeth!

"My God," he said, "you really held tight to the chair and it weren't no good shoutin'!"

Although Joshua Harris had long since gone, Harris' shop was a source of much interest still - full of high wooden shelves and drawers with wonderful polished, wooden boxes with highly-decorated gothic lettering with Latin words imprinted on the front of each drawer but empty now of all the ingredients that once kept the body and soul of the villagers together. Harris' continued as a friendly shop and most spoke of Gilbert's father with affection.

Harris' was the main grocery and drapery store in the High Street. On the one side was the grocery section served by Mr Gilbert Harris and Miss Avery. I knew Mr Harris from Chapel where he played the organ. On the drapery side was Miss White and Mrs Churchill Harris, a tall lady, bespectacled and with iron-grey curly hair. It was a busy place. Grocery deliveries were regularly made by Mr Churchill Harris, Gilbert's brother, in his little box-like car. This was a car once seen never forgotten. It could have come straight from Beaulieu Motor Museum. It was old, square and had what seemed like an upper speed limit often miles an hour. It chugged sedately from one house to the next. It had large mudguards, a running board and windows that almost defy description. The glass in them had yellowed and resembled golden cumulus clouds set in frames. As a student with a holiday job, back in the 1950s, I found the visibility as a passenger 'grocery deliverer', almost nil. Mr Harris drove by means of a small area of clear glass just above the steering wheel. It was indeed the motoring experience of a lifetime! Mr Churchill Harris' sturdy roadster was still in use long after my student days were finished. Sadly, or perhaps, fortunately, they don't make them like that anymore!

Another Christmas hovered on the horizon and as children we would be put in happy mood by the appearance of the usual model Father Christmas that always appeared in Harris' shop in the High Street. We would crowd around the window day-dreaming hopefully of bulging pillowcases on Christmas morning. We pushed and shoved each other and breathed heavily over the window featuring the display. Sticky fingers and heavy condensation on the glass outside made name-writing on the window pane easy. Occasionally, a genuine shopper would try to

peer inside.

"Come on, you kids, move along and let's see what they're giving away today," was the usual comment.

Mr Green's shop at the corner of Friday Lane never made quite the same impact as Harris', possibly because it was situated on a dangerous corner of the road and one of its main windows was sunk halfway below the level of the road making it difficult to linger too long in spite of some colourful sweet jars that used to occupy that particular ledge.

Father used to make us laugh as he recalled his own experiences of window gazing when he was a youth. He used to talk about Bob Curry who I think was the Vicar of Wheatley. Whenever he saw the children peering in Harris' window, he would look at them and say:

"Well, come on, what are you looking at?"

Most of us went home at lunchtime and on our return to the school playground we would pool any sweets that we had been given and Bob Dungey's shop on the Green, opposite the Manor House, would usually supply something to make up the shortfall. I knew Bob Dungey from Sunday School days. He was an ardent chapel-goer with balding head and horn-rimmed spectacles on the end of his thin aquiline nose. He would always sit on the opposite back pew, hand out the hymnbooks as one entered and always took round the double-handled collection box during the service. I, too, used to sit on the back pew by the radiator, next to my Father and my Grandmother. She knew Bob Dungey from her days at the Manor House and had been a frequent customer at his shop at that time.

Arkle's was one of two places where one could buy ice-cream. The other was Walde's across the street. But ice-cream was a luxury and we did not have it often. Cornets were 3d and wafers were 6d and Mr Arkle, a moustached gentleman of indeterminate age, frightened us all a bit. Even in the hottest weather he used to wear a three-length jacket and cap. He never went anywhere without his Alsatian dog which used to stretch out at the side of the ice-cream container.

Berry's in the village along Church Road, continued to sell vegetables and a delicious alternative to fish to go with their chips. It was a savoury mixture encased in batter which was on sale at the weekend. They continued to display pictures of bananas on their windows - bunches of them - a source of some interest to me as I had never seen the real thing in any shop. They were just pictures. Georgie Hyde continued to bake bread and it was worth a walk to the end of the village just to take a sniff of his product from outside the shop: hot, crusty and delicious.

By the time I had reached Miss Wren's class, it was considered that I was sufficiently sensible to be allowed to come home on my own although my father still used to keep an eye open for me from the shop window and would then come and see me across the road. The walk from the Infants school entailed a long dawdle from one shop window in the High Street to the next. Walde's, at the top of the High Street, was a tea shop and quite often we would see Mrs Forty from the Chapel school en route to Walde's especially if she had just missed her bus to Oxford and would have had to wait an hour or more for the next. She always waved.

Gostick's, another grocery and general store, was opposite Sam the butcher. I was kept informed of events there by my friend Margaret Wheeler, whose Father managed the store. According to my father, Gostick's had played a

very important part in the village life over the years particularly during the days of the Depression when work was difficult to find and money was scarce. Apparently, people would walk from one workhouse (Headington) to the next, and Gostick used to feed them. It seems that they would walk from Thame to Wheatley and then on to Headington. These men were easily recognized by the workhouse uniform of black jackets and white cord trousers. Gostick's used to make a special bread pudding which they fed to these men as a change from the usual workhouse diet of bread and cheese. Life must have been hell for many of them. My grandmother used to talk even in the 1940s of the 'Headington Union' that she remembered as a child from stories she had picked up from her contemporaries. Her own father, my great-grandfather, died in the 'Headington Union' when it became too difficult to nurse him at home.

Later observations

Local shops continued to be a focal point in the village. Harris' was the largest, with Mr Churchill Harris continuing to make the grocery deliveries in his little box car. The last shop in the High Street at the corner of Friday Lane was Mr Green's. He had been at one time the Misses Briggs' chauffeur and was well-known even before his shop work. He sold most things and always had a marvellous array of sweets. The shop was strangely situated, entered by means of three steps downwards. It was semi-basement and its windows were level with the road in Friday Lane. On wet days the rain dribbled past the shop windows from the drain outside. Mr Green, a stocky bespectacled man with shiny, bald head was nearing retirement when I first became aware of him. He had endless patience and fully understood the complexities and anxieties one encountered in making decisions of such importance as choosing the right coloured gobstopper. His successors, the Bowens, never made quite the same impact.

Stevie Putt, the shoe mender, played a very important part in village life. His shop near Barclays Bank in Station Road seemed always full of customers. He was crippled and moved around by means of a hand- propelled wheelchair. Its mechanism was strange - seemingly manoeuvred by a winding mechanism high in front of him. Father spoke happily of when Stevie and he had been lads together. His wheelchair was a useful 'tool' when apple gathering - usually from other people's gardens. On one occasion, eyeing a particularly tempting display of fruit, it was decided that the best way to reach it was to fix the wheelchair's front wheel (it was a three-wheeler) - with Stevie still inside - over the high gate, directly under the tree and then to climb on to the wheel to reach the fruit. Sadly for Stevie, the wheel was noticed from the other side of the gate. When the fruit tree owner appeared, poor Stevie was left in situ to face the wrath of a very irate neighbour whilst his mates all ran away!

Reggie Nash's cycle shop was also a source of great interest to small boys of the village. From the outside it looked dark and dingy with a bare electric bulb suspended from the ceiling within whatever the brightness of the daylight without. He mended bicycles and always seemed to find just the right nut or bolt for the repair from a seemingly chaotic heap of objects that apparently lay discarded at some time or other, deep in the Stygian gloom at the back of the shop. His workshop was a treasure house indeed!

West's and 'Sam's' (Samuel's) the butchers, kept many villagers supplied

with meat but we had registered with Butcher White who had a small shop opposite the Merry Bells in the High Street and regularly I joined the queue there with Mrs Powell, my mother's friend, for our weekly meat ration. Butcher White was a dour sort of character - never said a great deal but always wore a floppy tweed 'Farmer Giles'-type hat. Mrs White, I knew from Chapel. She was a short, plump lady with warm, rosy cheeks - rather like Alf Proysen's loveable character, Mrs Pepperpot. I cannot remember seeing her outside without a felt, off-the-face hat securely fixed with hat pin and invariably wearing a fox-head fur collar worn with button shoes and a fairly long coat. She and Granny Tombs were great friends whose Chapel contact remained firm until the end of their lives. She was also a stalwart 'Women's Bright Hour' supporter and as such one of the suppliers of the after-service 'goodies', mentioned previously; as a recipient of such largesse I can vouch for their acceptability and taste.

One of the bright spots of the morning at 'Big School' was the daily trek across the road to Dodd's, the bakers at 10.50am to collect our bun at Ida time. We were lined up and seen across the road where we waited in an orderly queue. There were two kinds of bun: Cream and Chelsea. The boys would have Cream on the first day and Chelsea on the second and then it would be the turn of the girls. The Dodds had this very well organized and they would have us make our purchase and be back at school very quickly. There were no food coupons involved. It was only much later when the bread units or BUs came into force that poor Miss Dodd's temper would become a little frayed and she would rant and rave even with a shop full of customers about 'Old Strachey' (the Minister for Food). At the time it seemed rather unprofessional and rude especially as one dealt with all types from all backgrounds and persuasions. But maybe times were changing and one no longer looked to the immediate neighbourhood for one's custom as my father with his grocery business had had to do.

Chapter 6: Church, Chapel and Roman Catholicism

A distinct schism worthy of the Middle Ages split the village into 'Church' and 'Chapel'. The few left outside the ecclesiastical divide were not bothered anyway, some occasionally going to either one - or the Granary Hall, whose allegiance, so I was told, tended to be towards Chapel.

Thus, life ambled along fairly easily for most of the year: the vicar did not bother non-conformist households apart from the occasional letter requesting funds for some church repair or other. These were read and then quietly disposed of. The days of progressive ecumenicalism had not arrived here yet. Christmas usually brought things to a head when 'Church' and 'Chapel' organized the carol-singing for their own particular sect of the community. There was an understanding that Chapel did not knock at the doors of the local 'church' stalwarts and vice versa. To me, as a young child, it all seemed very simple: the 'posh' villagers went to Church and the rest went to Chapel. The churchgoers sang psalms and the chapelgoers sang hymns. I did so wonder which of the two God preferred.

Sometimes at Christmas, someone from the Chapel clan would inadvisably - or perhaps carried away by the spirit of the season - knock at a 'church' door and the whole choir would be sent away with the words, "We do not give to you," echoing through the frosty Christmas air. No, indeed, Christian charity and understanding still had a long way to go! On the whole, though, the community

was a happy one with indiscretions of that kind soon forgotten - that was ... until the next year!

As Wheatley School was a Church of England school, the vicar called weekly and prepared us for confirmation classes. However, as a nonconformist I could, had I known it, have been exempted from these classes but my parents saw no reason for my non-attendance until one afternoon on reaching home, I was asked what I had learned that day, whereupon I repeated slowly:

"I do promise and vow three things in thy name: first, that I should renounce the devil and all his works, the pomp and vanity of this wicked world and all the sinful lusts of the flesh."

My parents were horrified. If this was what the Anglican Church was all about, then they wanted no part of it! My mother felt that she should have followed her own instincts and sent me to Sandhills School where no such thoughts would cloud my horizons. She felt that such ideas were on a par with allowing a seven-year-old to read and digest the *News of the World*. She sought an interview with Mrs Chapman, my teacher, who assured her that there was no need to worry.

"Christine is a bright little girl", she apparently said, "but I am certain that the sinful lusts of the flesh meant nothing to her."

She was right. The sinful lusts of the flesh meant absolutely nothing to me. These were not days of early enlightenment. The family breathed again! I was allowed to stay.

The ecclesiastical divisions in Wheatley became more complicated when Aunt Annie (Cooper), my grandmother's sister-in-law, used to arrive with Uncle Frank (Cooper), Granny's brother for holidays. I loved having visitors and assumed that all Granny's visitors were mine as well. I used to listen to their conversation until told to go out and play in the garden - and always just as the conversation was becoming interesting. I liked Uncle Frank and Aunt Annie, although the rest of the family seemed to treat her with some reserve. She seemed kindly and always provided the longed-for sweet from the depths of a large and lavender-scented handbag. Aunt Annie spoke quietly but infrequently, crocheted endlessly and always seemed sad and lonely. I could never understand why she visited at all. It did seem strange to me to come on holiday and seem so unhappy.

"Our Annie never changes," Granny said.

"What is the matter with her?" I ventured to ask one day, perhaps rather indiscreetly. "Nothing that I know of" Granny replied. "She is always the same. Our Frank met her when they were in service. She was a lady's maid and travelled a lot," she continued. "Our Frank was the butler. Annie is Irish."

I remember walking away and being none the wiser. I was unable to understand why being a lady's maid should make anyone sad.

"Annie's a Catholic," Granny said almost as an afterthought.

"Does being a Catholic make you sad?" I asked her.

"How should I know?" Granny replied. "Don't worry about it."

But I did worry. I had no idea what a Catholic was but it sounded quite serious.

Our Sunday evenings at Chapel never varied. Mr and Mrs Fred Shepherd and Uncle Teddy and Aunt Flo Tombs from Crown Road, usually sat in front of us and I struggled to contain my mirth as those brave souls who usually sat in front of them, Ethel and Richard Davies from London Road, heaved their bulk into the pews with a resounding 'crack' that echoed all around the walls. Mrs and Miss Dodd

from the bakery, in Church Road, usually sat alongside Granny Tombs whilst her friends, Mrs Bax senior and her daughters together with Mrs Bessie Knight from Holton, usually ensured a cheery service with plenty of rousing hymns...

Mrs Bessie Knight was a particular favourite. She lived in a delightful and unusual round thatched cottage in Holton. Gran used to say it was 15th century although I am not sure that this was correct. The place was completely circular inside but sadly has now been pulled down. This old cottage was the usual destination of our walks around Holton. Bessie Knight and Granny had been friends for years. Mrs Knight's brother, Frank Cooper was also a stalwart chapel-goer. He was a character who took his life - and ours - in his hands whenever he ventured outside Holton. He was blind but always insisted on riding his bicycle everywhere! Fortunately, car owners were few and far between both in Holton and in Wheatley, and everyone who knew him usually gave him a wide berth as he wobbled and drifted all over the road! He wore thick pebble-type glasses and a black cap on the back of his head, but he would always be known more for his frequent brushes with death than for his singing prowess!

"Who is on the Lord's side, who will serve the King?" would echo round the chapel walls as the congregation would, as one, pull out of its stupor of sermon time and gallantly strive to outboom the organist as they rose for the final hymn.

"Gilbert's in fine fettle tonight," commented Father, as Mr Harris would pull out all the stops as they went into the final crescendo with the organ giving its all.

The collection usually heralded the final part of the service.

"Tis better to give than to receive" intoned the Minister, followed by: "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver" - a comment which a child found difficult to understand. Evening services were hearty affairs with hymns in plenty: prayers were spoken and psalms never, never chanted. The delicate balance of combining traditional ways with new trends was a gradual progression and at this time, nothing too controversial would have been tolerated. Sankey and Moody reigned supreme.

Mrs Gooding, who always sat at the very front pew, would usually bid us all a "Goodnight" and Mrs Pratt, who always sat at the back, would quietly make her way back up the High Street. I would usually collect up the hymn books from the pews and hand the pile to Mr Dungey to put back on the rack at the rear of the Chapel. Smiling, he likewise usually wished us all a "Goodnight" and would then make some comment to my father or grandmother. A further handshake followed with the Minister at the door and then I would grab the torch, shaded by brown paper - this was wartime with no outside lighting permitted - and we would quickly pass into the cold night air.

Chapter 7: Evacuees and other incomers

Most of the children in my class were evacuees from London. We - the local children - hated them. They spoke differently from us and they were far more venturesome. They tested the rules and usually got away with it. Yes, we hated them and their mothers who, as far as we could see, tried to rule the roost. I used to sit next to Margaret Wheeler, whose father had a grocery shop in the village: Gostick's stores. Margaret and I were great friends. We both hated the evacuees! As far as we knew 'they' took over the spare rooms at home after a strange person called 'the billeting officer' had called. Both Margaret and I were unaware that our homes had

been passed over for billeting purposes because, for some strange reason, we dealt with food and were involved in some sort of commercial enterprise and such premises were considered unsuitable for billeting purposes. The fact that Milne Cottage had only two bedrooms for five of us and that there was insufficient room to house extra people never entered my head. All that we were aware of was that 'their' mothers argued a lot! The source of our knowledge was the conversations we had with children whose homes had been inflicted with them. Their mothers were always dressed up in their best clothes - or so it appeared: they always seemed to use more make-up than our mothers and they always seemed to wear earrings! Most decadent! They were always able to go out for walks whilst our mothers never had the time.

Looking back and judging by the comments of ex-evacuees years later, it was in many cases a real relief to get away from the house and all the hassle that two families living in close proximity seemed to cause. It must have been sheer hell for some to have to put up with arrogant and overbearing house-owners who had never known what it was like to lose everything in the bombing and then to have to adapt to having your family split up with just the occasional visit from a husband at the weekend. To have one's worth judged by the size and smartness of one's pram and the value of the few possessions that one was able to bring must have been quite dreadful. My husband, who was himself evacuated to Dewsbury in Yorkshire, likened it to being in a market place where the would-be hosts 'selected' those that they felt they could be happy with and could accommodate. He felt particularly vulnerable because he was waiting together with his mother and young sister of a few weeks and was amongst the last to be chosen. Apparently, some of the would-be hosts took it upon themselves to walk round them and make rough and unnecessary comments whilst the billeting officer with his clipboard and pen would agree or disagree to a particular pairing of families. It was particularly difficult where brothers and sisters travelling alone were then split up and sent to different households. Even to a nine-year-old, the selection experience was humiliating and degrading. It made a dreadful impression on him and he has hated all things 'Yorkshire' ever since. His experience may just have been unfortunate but, sadly, that particular set of circumstances was not dissimilar to elsewhere in the country. Maybe the situation in Wheatley was better handled but common sense gives me reason to doubt that, given the feeling in the village generally.

We in the village were generally lucky. But we did have in-built prejudices which we obviously failed to recognize at the time. At school, many of the evacuees spoke with loud London accents which meant that, rightly or wrongly, they were all marked down as 'cockneys'! They were sitting targets for mimicry and criticism. Many were at least a year ahead of us in reading and writing which did not go down well with the local children. They certainly had more confidence - which was often misconstrued. The women who came down with the evacuees seemed to dress more stylishly which some of the locals labelled as "common"!

Yet it was the cluttering up of the few buses into and from Oxford which really set the locals' backs up! Obviously, in order to get out of the house of someone with whom you had little in common, was the wisest thing to do to save one's sanity but again bus riding was considered to be wasteful unless one had a definite reason for using it.

There were faults and often misunderstandings on both sides. Some of my Father's customers told tales of young evacuees traumatized by the bombing in

London who refused to lie in their beds and insisted on sleeping under them. I had friends at school who, when billeted on a farm at Waterperry, had no idea that live cows produced milk! They found it difficult to understand why Waterperry had no double-decker buses or other things to which they could easily relate. There was no hustle and bustle in Holton or Waterperry and the tranquillity of the place, even in wartime, was something they found genuinely difficult to accept. Another customer related to my father that 'her' two children from London's East End were 'alive' on arrival at her home and that she and her husband had spent hours de-lousing them. Certainly, there were culture shocks all round.

My grandmother let her bungalow again after the Preedys left. This time it accommodated the Marshall family who had a young son of about my age. They were a Jewish family but Granny was horrified when Mrs Marshall said to her:

"Tell me, Mrs Tombs, where can I find Kosher traders?"

To my grandmother, 'Kosher' sounded foreign and she wanted no part of it! To her it was unpatriotic. As far as she was concerned - and I suspect most of the villagers would have felt the same - there were two perfectly good butchers in the village: 'Old Sam's' and 'West's' on the corner of Station Road, with Butcher White's shop further down the High Street, opposite the Merry Bells. She was not an unkind person but to her, it was ludicrous again to "clutter up" the buses to go into Oxford for something that could be bought locally. The Marshalls were good tenants and as Mr Marshall was the chauffeur of Jack Hylton, the bandleader and impresario of the time, he was 'someone' in the village. But even so, being Jewish, in the eyes of the village did set them a little apart. Wheatley was not uncaring but possibly at this time, found changes in attitudes difficult to assimilate. Another Jewish family in London Road but at the other end of the social scale was a source of amusement. They, under the guidance of a very shrewd and street-wise grandmother, shocked the locals at the end of the War. She decided that no way were they going back to London by train as most of the other evacuees did. She went out on to the main A40 and hitched a lift together with the family and all their belongings on a lorry. The last view that anyone had of her and the family was of her spreading herself out with her cases on the back of an open lorry! We laughed but there were those among us who did not admire her enterprise and shrewdness. Again, some saw it as "common"! But the last laugh must have been with her. She saved herself pounds.

Since the war, the billeting of the evacuees has assumed an aura over the years of a certain character-building quality but there were many lifelong friendships forged. Some returned to Wheatley for the summer holidays to visit their once wartime host family and did so for many years afterwards.

Life in Wheatley seemed to amble on aimlessly from one season to the next. In many ways, the villagers had been fortunate. Up until now they had been cushioned from too many changes. The 'old' families remained. But now newcomers or evacuees arrived in greater numbers. They billeted with customers and some came to register at the shop and initially the main concern of most village traders was the credit worthiness of the new arrivals.

"Are they good payers? Will they pay on time?"

That notice at the newsagents came to mind: 'Please do not ask for credit as refusal may give offence." It had a certain ring about it! The radio shop had similar 'rules'.

"If you get called up and get killed - who's going to pay my bill?" was the

usual response to requests for delayed payments. My parents thought that there might have been less harsh ways of letting newcomers know how local folk felt but agreed that it was no good beating about the bush. Many more children than I had ever seen before passed through the shop. I continued to be fascinated by their accents, different intonations of even very ordinary words and their odd pronunciations. Villagers continued to call them all "cockneys", whether this was regionally accurate or not. I was not sure whether I liked them that much; village opinion was divided: some of the newcomers in their turn mimicked the accents of their host families which again could cause problems and hurt. Some villagers regarded the evacuees almost as intruders and feared ridicule and changes to a way of life that basically had altered little over the years. Some came to school in Wheatley by the coach which had been laid on to bring others from outlying villages but apart from the school bus, the only means of getting to the larger shops was to walk.

Wheatley was a melting pot for several nationalities. At one stage the Canadians were at Shotover Park. They, on the whole, seemed less boisterous than their American allies - with one notable exception. I remember one Sunday afternoon being met from Sunday School by an aunt and promised that I would be taken for a walk. We began to walk up the High Street when we were met by someone who told us:

"Go home. The Canadians are 'on manoeuvres' and are behaving stupidly towards the local population. Go home and stay home."

I did not properly understand its full implication and went home rather sullenly, feeling a little let down. News of the Canadian Army manoeuvres spread like wildfire. No-one at that stage was certain what had actually gone wrong but it seemed that some of the soldiers, pent up emotionally and restrained from months, had 'cracked'. The manoeuvres got completely out of hand and some of the people living in the Forest Hill area and nearby were terrorized as tanks, driven utterly without care through the village, ploughed up gardens, ruined hedges and flattened walls and carefully cultivated valuable vegetable plots. Concrete pavements were smashed to smithereens and local roads were chewed up like ploughed fields. One woman out for a walk with her children was terrorized by a madman in a tank and had her pram damaged. Stories of the causes of this irresponsibility abounded and the memory of that awful Sunday lived on for years. The Canadians had the dubious distinction of having inflicted more damage and fear on the civilian population than the Germans! Villagers who queried these events were told to "forget it ever happened"! Vague stories of large sums of compensation being paid by the Canadian government were commonplace, but whether this was so or to what extent, I was never sure. Whether the incident was 'officially' recorded I do not know but it must have been one of the least savoury aspects of allied 'help'!

The Rumanians and the Italians also came to the village - as prisoners of war - and they appeared to come and go as they pleased. As far as I can recall, the Rumanians seemed to live in Holton or in that area. Some of them even acquired bicycles. I suppose there must have been restrictions but they were never evident.

When the Germans first came, it was obvious even to a child, that they had considerably less freedom. Most evenings we saw them being exercised in the village. They would come down from Shotover and walk along London Road towards The Avenue. They were dressed in dark brown uniforms with 'POW' emblazoned on their backs and wore grey-green forage caps, walking in pairs at

about twenty at a time. Behind them came a British soldier, armed with a rifle. This was quite a regular ritual ... although at first they kept strictly away from the village, towards the end of the war and beyond that time, they were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Again, some of them acquired bicycles and others were sent out to neighbouring farms to work on the land. It seemed all very relaxed. The Germans were deemed "good at making things". Their skills were especially welcomed at Christmas when toys and children's presents were very much in short supply. Where they got their raw materials from was a bit of a mystery - but maybe not! - yet as most people were pleased to get a few extras when everything else was limited, few questions were asked. They seemed to demand little in exchange and were happy so long as they had enough money for cigarettes. A favourite purchase by the locals were plaited slippers made, it was suspected, from farm sacks from their place of work. The hessian sacks were unwound and the threads painstakingly plaited together in much the same way as French knitting. We, together with most of the other villagers, all sported these magnificent items of footwear and indeed were glad to have them. They were "off the ration" and extremely useful. The prisoners also made some very fine children's toys. I was given one such toy for Christmas - a Mickey Mouse with enormous flat feet who used to walk and clatter his way down a wooden bridge. This toy gave me endless hours of pleasure. There were all sorts of variations on this theme. Some friends acquired a magnificent wooden fort with a drawbridge for their family one Christmas. Some of these toys were works of art and eagerly sought after. Most families in the village took advantage of whatever handiwork was on offer. The quality was really excellent.

"Not bad workers" was the usual village comment when asked about the newest bunch of farm labourers.

The village seemed more mixed than ever. It was no longer possible to walk from one village to another - for example, from Wheatley to Horspath - and know everyone that you passed. Some nodded and waved as usual, but a lot were strangers to the area and therefore treated with reserve by the villagers.

Towards the end of the war and just before the Germans were sent back to Germany, they would come and go in the village as they wished and several would enter our small shop and spend their 'cigarette' money. We were always amazed by the amount of cocoa powder that one young soldier used to purchase. He bought packets of the stuff. He showed my father a photograph of his wife and family, roughly about our age. He spoke no English at all and would laugh and point at us (my two sisters and myself) if he saw us when in the 'cigarette' queue at the shop. His friend who used to accompany him on his shopping expedition told my father that his wife and family were ill with TB. Apparently, the cocoa powder would be sent to them. But we were all a little intrigued as to what one could do with raw cocoa powder because we assumed that there would also be a shortage of milk products in Germany as well! Some of the Germans actually declined to be repatriated. They stayed on to work on local farms, married local girls and eventually settled down to have their own property.

Forty years on, the past forgotten, many became solid members of the community. Memories of the 'cocoa powder man' stuck in our minds for years afterwards. We often wondered what happened to his family. Tuberculosis was still spoken about with fear and most families could remember the devastation that it had caused in village families. As children, however, we were usually assured that "your generation will be O.K." Sad though our 'cocoa man's situation was, we were

always amused by his and his friend's blind assumption that "Cocoa is good for this!"

With the prospect of a return to Germany in the near future, relations between villagers and the German camp still remained cool and rather formal in spite of the entrepreneurial marketing that went on. Some of the soldiers from the camp used to come down to Chapel on Sunday evenings but as far as I remember, used to sit near the back of the congregation and then leave before the rest of the congregation did, easy familiarity still being far into the future.

In spite of that, I do have one amusing memory that comes to mind whenever I hear Rossini's Figaro Factotum song from *The Barber of Seville.* Our main living room opened into the shop at Milne Cottage and occasionally when parents were not being quite as vigilant as usual, the wireless would be heard in there. On this particular occasion, there was the usual German cigarette queue which, upon hearing this music, burst into a spontaneous rendition of *Figaro,* causing some mirth and reluctant applause from otherwise cool and unresponsive shoppers that were awaiting their turn in the line.

As the weeks passed, things in the village became more clearly defined and settled: the evacuees that came into the shop seemed happier; the local nursery school run by Mrs Forty, established itself as an acceptable institution although a few of the older villagers still regarded such innovations as an unnecessary sop to those mothers who were "evading their maternal duties" by going out to work. In spite of the war, the old idea that 'a woman's place was in the home' still held strong, not least among the older women of the village ... and dire forecasts abounded as to the evils of the nursery school system! By and large the necessity for such places was obvious with so many youngsters of nursery school age and the enforced 'togetherness' of, in some cases, ill-assorted families. The evacuee teachers from London seemed to settle amicably into village ways. Maybe Mr Knowles and Miss Richards in her grey coat and turbaned navy hat, had not taught the old village stalwarts nor were likely in these troubled times to teach two generations of the same family as my father had remembered, but at least the simmering conflicts of the previous months were cooling down. Small local disagreements tended to surface from time to time: it was accepted, for example, that outsiders may not completely conform to acceptable village standards but it was the wearing of slacks and earrings for some of the older residents that marked a lowering of acceptable standards of dress! Slacks were still regarded as rather 'common' for some for 'decent' women to wear and, well, earrings showed a certain decadence which took some time to be accepted by some local worthies. A few of the men showed a marked resistance to such fashion and said it was quite unbecoming!

"I wouldn't let my wife wear trousers especially with men's being rationed. 'Taint right! They can always wear a skirt and let the trouser material be used for the men."

So went the general feeling of those who felt it behoved them to retain the old standards against all the odds. There was a place for everyone and everything but trousers on women - quite definitely not! The women on munitions at Morris' were unmoved and happily broke the hitherto accepted rules of dress - obviously with official approval. Opposition did crumble but difficulties, however, in the form of earrings whilst at work or otherwise, took a little longer. Again, some of the villagers thought they looked 'common'! Working women, nevertheless flourished as they set off for work in their slacks and turbaned hair-dos for Morris'

or the Press (Pressed Steel Company) whilst others, equally emancipated, set off in the opposite direction for Holton Mill and the 'Melrose' (a small company making handcream). The skill of the nation had to be preserved and it was easy for a child to distinguish between the two sets of workers. The 'Melrose' never lost its distinctive odour and even in the packed shop without any other indication, the smell of it lingered in the clothes of its employees, even months afterwards.

Chapter 8: Bombs on Wheatley

Wheatley, on the whole, seemed a very safe place to live. But there was the occasional hiccough. I have strong recollections of being taken out of my bed one night by my mother to spend the night in a cleaned-out pig-sty that our neighbour, Archie Harding, had wisely prepared in case of a real emergency. The Hardings, the Shorters and my parents were all neighbours living in London Road and they all kept their insurance papers behind the pig-sty door for safety but other personal books, such as Post Office and bank books were usually kept in a small handcase that could easily be picked up in an emergency. A coat was hastily put over my night clothes whilst my six-week-old sister, Rachel, was carried in a Moses basket. I carried our elderly and arthritic cat, Tinker, in my arms whilst for the first time in my life we were actually allowed to walk across the dug garden to the rolled back fence next door (garden rules did not apply on this occasion!). I scrambled through the gap whilst my sister was handed over the fence, still asleep in her cradle. It was a clear night, some time in 1940 - later confirmed to be 18 October of that year. I do not remember being afraid but I was worried lest the cat should run off although my father reassured me by saying:

"Cats have a good sense of direction. Tinker will probably be waiting for us on the step when we get back, even if he does run away now. Don't worry about him."

In the event, the cat stayed with us until we received the 'All Clear'. He seemed completely at ease throughout our nocturnal outing. Later on that night, we were joined by the Hardings and the Shorters, all carrying their small cases of personal documents. It was a novelty for me to be up in the middle of the night, sitting and chatting to the neighbours. The Rings, on the other side of Milne Cottage, who lived at the 'Crest', had their own shelter which edged the other side of the garden. This had steps down to it and had been fitted out with a bench just as in the Hardings' pig-sty. The seriousness of the situation, I suppose, did not really strike me till I heard one almighty bang. Father declared:

"That's the council houses that have been hit!"

A few hours later, we all ventured back to bed - the mystery was that the council houses were still intact. So, what was it that had been hit? The next morning the mystery was solved. A large bomb had fallen into the Bridge Hotel garden and had failed to explode. There was an enormous crater and together with hundreds of other people on that Sunday morning, my Father took me along with him to inspect the damage. If the enemy had been successful, the main A40 and direct link by road with London and the main railway line would have been destroyed. Someone had done their geography homework very well indeed!

The memory of that night has stayed with me ever since. We could hear the pigs snorting on the other side of the dividing wall but our part of the sty was

clean and had a bench inside. None of us slept although they all urged me to do so. All we could hear was the drone of aeroplanes outside. I suppose that everyone had taken shelter just like us. But once the 'All Clear' siren went, an eerie silence seemed to take over in the surrounding gardens. It was a clear night and my feeling was that dawn might be breaking, but in that I could have been mistaken. It could have been the searchlights. I am not sure. It certainly was not completely dark.

Chapter 9: The Misses Briggs

On fine days, our walks continued in which we would be paired up and taken out in an orderly crocodile. It was at this time that the ministrations of the three Misses Briggs came into focus. They had been my mother's employers for some years before her marriage and had known me from the year dot but, kind though they undoubtedly were, they simply had no idea about the mental workings of a four-year-old. They were of the 'old school': charming, slightly out-of-touch with the times, exceedingly kind to their staff but having the kind of gentility which was already going out of fashion - even in the 1940s! Whenever they saw Mrs Forty's small charges meekly walking along the road, they would descend upon the crocodile and say in very loud voices:

"Now, where is Christine today?"

I would immediately feel very conspicuous and embarrassed and the rest of the children in the line would dissolve into giggles. Their approach never varied. Poor Mrs Forty! How she must have hated such interruptions and wondered how I had managed to have become involved with three such charming eccentrics. They had no idea of 'state' nursery disciplines and even if they had, would never have been deterred by it!

The Misses Briggs were a local institution. They lived at Coombe House at the top of Ladder Hill, with a small staff. When my mother first came to Wheatley, she heard that they needed a cook and immediately applied for the post. She was invited to call for an interview but when they saw her, they decided that she was too young for the job and turned her down. On the way back from the interview, Mother decided to do some shopping and arrived home later than intended only to find on her arrival that the Misses Briggs were waiting for her on the doorstep - they had changed their minds! When could she start?

She accepted their offer of a job and spent several very happy years in their service. Miss Lillie Ricketts had been their housekeeper for many years both at Coombe House and before that when they lived at Holton Park House. When my mother eventually left Coombe House to get married, her childhood friend, Blanche Sprackland, took her job and she too spent many happy years in their service. They never lost touch with my mother and continued their interest in my sisters and I: indeed, they always retained an interest in the children of all their staff. I previously alluded to my memory of sitting in my pram by the back door of Coombe House and seeing a huge expanse of meadow beyond the railings. The area by the back door was the only light part of that drive because the rest of it was almost entirely overshadowed by huge fir trees. There were fir trees along its length from the tall wooden gates by the road right up to the back door. At Christmas we used to have the most wonderful selection of fir cones for painting and decoration. Auntie Blanche (Miss Sprackland) used to collect them for us by the basket load. Even when we were older, we continued to call at Coombe House to see Auntie

Lillie and Auntie Blanche when we would be given a slice of delicious cake which was Auntie Lillie's speciality. Sometimes we were invited into the drawing room to see the Misses Briggs. They were always charming. After a few minutes' chat, we would go back into the kitchen to finish our lumps of cake which we ate at an enormous scrubbed white wooden table of gigantic proportions. At one time, Mr Green was their chauffeur but as the war progressed the staff was further reduced until, at the end of their lives, Auntie Blanche and Auntie Lillie were the only staff left and if they needed a car, they would hire one from Walde's Garage in the village. But at this stage in the 1940s, they still maintained a glorious island of privilege and the highest standards of an era long since gone.

Miss Ella Briggs, the eldest, always wore red-and-pink suits. All were well cut and tailored from a selection in Elliston & Cavell's in Oxford. They lasted for years and even when no longer used by Miss Ella, would be then passed on to staff if they could make any use of them. This was never done in a patronising way. My mother had several 'cast-off' suits over the years and I enjoyed looking at the label in the back of the jacket because it represented for us the unobtainable. Maybe, on reflection, they were a bit frumpy, but good quality outweighed all other considerations.

Miss Edie Briggs was the second sister of this illustrious trio. She always dressed in blue and she was my mother's favourite. In fact, when Mother announced that she was getting married, Miss Edie sorted out an almost new dress from her collection and gave it to her. Mother wore it for her wedding. It was a velvet dress in mid-blue with couture-type draping across the bodice. She kept it for years. Their wedding present also was generous. They gave her a superb eiderdown of quite extraordinary quality.

Miss Linda Briggs, the youngest of the sisters, always dressed in brown. All three of them wore flat-heeled shoes of the lace-up variety and they all did exquisite lacy knitting - again in colours to match their suits. All had short grey hair and all sported walking sticks. They were great walkers; had their little peculiarities but were generally greatly respected. They treated their staff kindly and well. One little phobia they all shared and which caused amusement to the staff was their overwhelming fear of appendicitis! Every year when the raspberries had been picked for preserving, they were put aside and cooked as if for jam and then the pulp had to be re-strained and made into raspberry jelly. Raspberry jam was banned! The pips presented a hazard of unacceptable proportions!

In the early days, they were apparently regular church-goers. But it was something of a joke amongst the villagers that they always insisted on occupying the front pew at Wheatley Church because according to the villagers, they disliked taking communion and drinking from the cup after everyone else! There was always a query about their exact ages and once they were known to have ordered the Census Officer out of the house because he dared to query the blank space left in their census forms which could indicate their years. Such matters were absolutely of no importance to anyone, they said.

When the older sisters died, Miss Linda continued to live at Coombe House with Auntie Blanche and Auntie Lillie. Of the three, I knew her best. Apart from owning Coombe House, she had once been the owner of Holton Park House where I eventually went to school. She used to produce some lovely pictures of her 'Hunt Meets' at Holton Park. The three sisters were all accomplished riders and had enjoyed the sport immensely when younger.

In later years, Miss Linda spent many an afternoon watching racing on television. She enjoyed a bet and once when I called one afternoon to see Auntie Blanche, I was summoned to the sitting room and asked what I thought of horse-racing. I knew absolutely nothing about the turf and with the brashness of youth volunteered the opinion that it was a "mug's game". Eyebrows were raised all round but she just laughed and said that for once in her life someone had tried to redeem her! She loved to bet and did so right up to the end. She later suffered dreadfully from arthritis and became difficult, refusing to move from her chair. She denied herself a fire and would sit in this vast mausoleum of a room and freeze. We had to keep our coats on when we visited her in the winter. Such visits were purposely kept short and required the same degree of preparation as an Arctic expedition! She also became rather cynical about church-going although, of course, she was by this time physically restricted.

One amusing incident sticks in my mind: although never mean towards her staff, a thin vein of cynicism ran through her. One of the Miss Savilles from Wheatley Church used to visit her with a 'Moral Welfare' collecting tin. She apparently always refused to donate because, to use her words,

"They only go and do it again!"

Miss Saville never gave up.

I liked Coombe House although as a child I was always more familiar with the 'below stairs' section than 'above stairs'. To a child, the dining room was enormous with a vast mahogany table which must have seated thirty or forty people when fully extended - or so it seemed then - although by the time that I began to know the Misses Briggs, they did very little entertaining. The high mantle-piece in that room housed some of the most beautiful pieces of china that I have ever seen and in their younger days, the sisters used to do all the cleaning of their vast collection themselves. There was one small piece of porcelain that I was particularly fond of: a ball of mice of all sizes. Whenever we visited her, it would be taken down and we would be asked to count the number of mice enveloped in the porcelain. Apparently, the answer lay in counting the individual mouse tails but no matter how many times one counted, the numbers were never the same. Many years later while a student, as part of my holiday job staying overnight at Coombe House as company for either Auntie Blanche or Lillie when the other was on holiday, I never tired of looking at the china although I was too terrified to dust it.

The Briggs' sisters were certainly characters of the village. They spoke with high-pitched slightly nasal voices and with north-country accents which I was told derived from Westmoreland. Towards the end of Miss Linda's life, her interest centred on her arthritic collie, Bess, whose room I liked most of all. This was a beautiful, high-ceilinged light and airy room with French windows which looked out over the fields. This room was kept knee-deep in straw for the dog!

It seems a pity that such characters nowadays are few and far between. However, with the breaking down of small village communities and increasing costs making it impossible to maintain large houses with a commensurate number of staff, it would seem inevitable.

Chapter 10: Wash days in the 1940s and Christmas puddings!

Most houses had a back kitchen which housed a brick-built copper in which laundry was done. When this was taking place, there would be streaming windows with frames awash with steam. A huge wooden cover, about 18 inches in diameter covered the circular top of the copper in which the washing hissed and gurgled! The copper lid had a sturdy bar across the top to which was affixed a wooden handle. Clothes were lifted out for the rinsing process by means of a thick stick and we sold vast quantities of Rinso, Persil and Oxydol for this purpose. Numerous boxes of cubes of Reckitt's Blue were also important ingredients for this wash-day/night marathon.

The discomfort of dealing with such vast amounts of washing must have been quite marked apart from the obvious danger of scalding one's foot as one hoisted boiling, dripping washing from the copper to the sink for rinsing. This was followed by hours of winding the handle of the mangle to get rid of the excess water before the clothing was finally ready to be hoisted on to the drying lines overhead. Father and I knew as we knocked on the door whether it was wash-night or not by the sound of the mangle within! These enormous 7-inch mangle rollers made the distinctive rumble and almost before the door opened to our knock, we prepared to duck under the dripping washing as we were directed with grocery box in hand, to the kitchen table in the living room. The huge wooden rollers on the mangle were well constructed but with the tremendous amounts of washing that had to be done, they tended to rot and if one was not particularly careful, wood pulp impressed deeply into the final laundered article. The rollers encased a thick black-oiled spindle and occasionally, if bed linen were allowed to spread along the full width of the roller, the edge could become indelibly marked with oil. Since items of this sort could only be obtained with great difficulty, even if one had sufficient ration coupons, such an occurrence was a major disaster.

Replacement of the rollers themselves presented considerable difficulty and as far as I remember, Cooper's store in St Ebbe's or a firm called Stephenson's, whose address I cannot remember but who had premises in the back streets of Oxford, were the only source of supply. An accident with the mangle rollers could mean the loss of a valuable source of income. They were not rationed but they had to be sought out if the Americans were to be kept sweet.

It was the memory of winter evenings particularly which come sharpest to mind when thinking of grocery delivery and wash nights combined. The kindling wood underneath the copper crackled and roared under the load of washing and the lead lining of the copper and the brick surround would be too hot to touch. The heat of the metal fire door under the copper radiated towards the door where those engaged in lifting the wet laundry stood.

"For Christ's sake, come in: don't dither there. You're letting all the cold air in!" someone in the steam would utter as they floundered around in the sudsy mist, looking for a hand towel. Occasionally, the load would be overfull and a fountain of boiling suds would pour onto the floor. The laundress then had to be nippy on her feet, if she were to remain unscathed at the end of it all. The whole business of lifting the dripping lathered clothing from the copper to the sink for rinsing was fraught with difficulties.

"You be lucky these days," my Father said, "When we were kids, we used to have to collect the washing from the Bridge Hotel for Mam and then take it back afterwards. The carrier used to bring in that from north Oxford, from the big houses there. It was hard work and after it was washed, Mam 'ud spend hours ironing and goffering the caps and aprons belonging to the servants. It weren't no good grumblin'."

Father would tell the tale of how he never went to school on Fridays. The whole day was spent delivering clean laundry. He had an old bicycle with a large basket on a wooden carrier at the rear. Dirty items for washing the following week were then picked up and the whole process would start again.

"When I was a kid," Father would continue, "our Frank (Cooper) had a pair of Tom Ray's riding breeches. They were cut down to size for Frank and then passed on to me. Now, they *wuz* strong. Our Frank went out on his bike all day, trying to wear out the seat of them. All he got was a sore arse. Then they were passed on to me and I had to wear them to school. They were sizes too big for me, even after Mam took them in. Tom Ray was a man grown and I was like a hurdle spear. Our Frank used to gather up the spare material from just one side of 'em. Even the teachers used to laugh at me! You kids don't know the half of it."

And so, he would muse together with the customer to whom the grocery was being delivered. They all had their own tales to tell of how things were and how much things generally had improved in the village since they were children.

Apart from the loads of washing that were done, the brick-built coppers had another function which all those who still possessed them utilized: making Christmas puddings - and what a ritual that was! Over the months, ingredients for the puddings were collected - which in wartime was no easy task - and then in August/September the puddings were made, put in china basins, covered with white cloths and lowered into the bubbling water in the copper. One could make five or six puddings at any one time which would then be stored until Christmas. Charles Dickens' wonderful description of the Christmas pudding ritual in *The Christmas Carol* could so easily have been applied in the 1940s!

"I'm a bit cold, Dad," I would say as we made our way out from those steamy London Road kitchens.

"Should've worn yer coat," he would reply.

"But it is so hot in those kitchens," I would answer.

"All the more reason for wearing one," Father would say. "You can catch your death out 'ere after those steam baths."

And so, it would go on.

Chapter 11: Americans at Holton Park

The coming of the Americans to Holton Park was very much welcomed by the villagers. Occupying the grounds of it in a sort of hutted camp in which a vast hospital was built, their arrival was regarded as a stroke of good fortune because it meant that there were plenty of jobs as cleaners, laundry workers and seamstresses to be had.

"A bit of luck, they coming" was the general consensus of opinion. "They pay better rates than most" indicating the optimism at possible fortunes to be made.

As customers came into my father's shop, stories abounded as to the generosity of "people up at the Park". Most of the women had some sort of work

there - if not at the hospital itself, then they had work they could do at home. Many of the local women took in laundry and worked all hours, some late into the night.

Not all the Americans in the area were stationed at the hospital: many were to be found in the tented camp at Sandy Piece, Wheatley, by the old London Road which ran parallel with the new London Road. Their jeeps and vehicles were parked permanently in the former or Back Road and the area was officially out of bounds - or seemed to be - to the civilian population. The roads were marked out in parking bays with names like 'Alice', 'Omaha' etc. From the upstairs bathroom at Milne Cottage as children, we used to watch the comings and goings of the camp. A chestnut tree in our neighbours' (the Rings) garden, tended to obscure our view in the summer when it was in full leaf. When the Americans eventually moved on, we used to play hop-scotch in the parking bays until the marking paint became too faint to distinguish properly.

To certain people in Wheatley, the coming of the Americans was a mixed blessing, not least to some of the girls of the area - although I was only a child and not 'officially' supposed to know about such things - as the rate of illegitimate births in the village soared! Such scandal was discussed and enjoyed behind cupped hands by the adults, and the details, although not completely understood, were certainly talked about by us in the playground before school each morning! The depth of knowledge of some of my contemporaries would have shattered the illusions of most parents!

Village life was undergoing changes and for the first time, I saw black soldiers in American uniforms. Up until then I laboured under the illusion that all black people came from Africa. They seemed ordinary enough and pleasant but it was the colour aspect that was a source of endless fascination for a young child. I wondered if the colour went right through but no-one else queried this and I pondered this particular point for a long time.

The morning that the Americans moved out was one I well remember. The tented camp on Sandy Piece was like a fairground. Everyone in the village who had a cart or some means of carrying goods was there. The move was supposed to be a secret but everyone knew of it and was prepared to move in as soon as the military moved out! The Americans left everything behind in the way of furniture and sheds. Stories abounded: some said that they had dug a pit for all the tinned stuff that they did not want to take with them. Certainly, many people acquired all sorts of tinned food that was "off the ration". New garden sheds sprouted up in their dozens. Hardly a family in the village was now without a wooden tool shed. These items were literally uprooted, planks of wood seized, put on lorries and driven away. Wheatley was the best equipped village for garden sheds or any other articles that could easily be transported, for miles around! The United States Treasury obviously allowed a wide margin in their financial calculations for 'losses'.

As for the children, the departure of the American soldiers meant an immediate loss of our supply of chewing gum! It had always been given unsparingly. Many of my contemporaries, on catching sight of an American uniform, would very ill-manneredly yell out "Any gum chum?" - at least the braver ones did! Very often they were lucky.

I never indulged in this particular practice because I was always worried that someone would tell my parents and this would most certainly have been frowned upon at home.

"If I ever catch you doing that", my Mother threatened, "I'll brain you!" Nevertheless, many schoolmates had no such qualms and happily shared out their chewing gum at break times between friends. Our newly acquired American 'friends' gave us packets of the stuff. To some families, however, the departure of the Americans meant quite a serious loss of income. It was when we were at the Infant School in Bell Lane that the Americans at the Holton Park camp invited us along to a Christmas party there. Most of the children my age went. The American Army were very good as far as the village children were concerned and took a great interest in us and what we did. For me, it really was a memorable occasion. I had never seen so much food in all my life and some chocolate biscuits on a tray on the table already creaking under the weight of the food and other goodies, was of special interest. A soldier took my hand and asked me if I would like to try one. I remember taking it from his hand and looking at it carefully; I did not eat it but took it home with me. We were then shepherded into a huge hall where we were given boxes of sweets wrapped attractively in cellophane.

In one corner stood a huge Christmas tree and every child was given a present by Father Christmas. I remember mine clearly: a carved wooden toy painted black and white. I was particularly fascinated because Cedric Reeves, one of my classmates in Miss Wren's year, told me confidentially that his mother who worked at the hospital had been chosen to be 'Father Christmas'. This was indeed privileged information but it did make sense that Santa could not be expected to make two journeys to Wheatley within a couple of weeks, although it was also about this time that another classmate informed me that there was no Father Christmas anyway. I was devastated. I was beginning to grow up.

Chapter 12: Hospital trains and the station

It was during our year in Miss Wren's class that the hospital trains became more frequent. Whenever these special trains carrying the war- wounded arrived at Wheatley station en route for the military hospital, we were sent home early with strict instructions not to go near the station, Holloway Road or Vicarage Hill. But some of the parents actually took their children to the station just to view the lines of ambulances drawn up in the yard for casualties. There was a small footpath leading from Farm Close to a stile at the back of the station yard and many would gather there apparently in spite of official pleas not to do so. Later, after initial treatment, some of the patients used to come down to the village for walks and sometimes the more able, would push in wheelchairs others who were unable to walk. The patients from the military hospital were easily recognized by their often ill-fitting hospital garb of royal blue. Over the years they were to become a familiar sight.

As pupils at Holton Park, we had a great deal to do with the hospital when later taken over by the British military authorities. They allowed us to use their football pitch for hockey and were very generous with gifts of sports equipment. At Christmas the choir from school and a few others used to visit the hospital and sing to the patients. I remember being included in a group that sang to a lady who was completely paralyzed, lying in what looked like a large box with a mirror. She looked at us by means of the mirror. I later learnt that this was in fact an iron lung. But this was way into the future.

Back in 1943, the station and the hospital trains were an important part of

village life. The large square brown ambulances with a large red cross on the side were a constant sight in the village. Steam trains hissed and shunted in and out of Wheatley station all day long.

I loved the hiss of steam and the sooty smell that surrounded the engine. Sometimes, Mr Goodlake would push the station handcart round the platform and across the line. We would then wave to him from the bridge on Ladder Hill. His shiny bald head could easily be seen from the bridge and his ministrations to the station plant beds were always admired.

He kept the fires stoked up in the station waiting room in the Winter and made sure that the coal scuttles were filled and ready for use. Whenever I was taken anywhere by train, it was from Mr Goodlake that the tickets were purchased and I never remembered not seeing his stained tea mug through the ticket hatch and the kettle on the hob inside always sizzling and ready for refills. The long bench in the waiting-room was continuously dusted on top by the coats of the passengers as they slid along it each day although the rung underneath was scuffed and bared of varnish. Most of the locals using the station were known personally to Billy Goodlake: there was a happy rapport. The regular passengers were usually on time whilst others just as well-known to him, would only just make the London train in the morning. Dr Hassall, a delightful character and well-liked in the village, was usually one of the latter. With the train standing in the station, he would puff up Ladder Hill with breakfast in one hand and tie held aloft in the other as Billy Goodlake, looking purposefully at his watch, would 'hold' the train as he clambered aboard. The daily ritual over, Billy would once again slouch back to the ticket office and presumably to another cup of his special brew. Mr Clarke, the station master, who lived a short distance away on the other side of the bridge did not possess quite the same charisma.

The coal heaps at the back of the station resounded to the scrape of coal shovels whatever the height of the coal heaps following the unloading of the coal trains from the Midlands. My father, who at this time was working for his uncle's coal business, could often be seen standing precariously on the newly deposited load of coal and I did wonder when I saw them how they managed to keep their balance. The coal heaps and the coke deposits made standing difficult when the sacks were being weighed up and bruised feet and legs were a natural hazard of the job. My father's feet bore witness to the knocks and bumps of the task. He always referred to his feet as left-handed ones! It was a dirty job and I always felt sorry, even at that early age, for the men who had to do it because they always looked so grimy and uncomfortable. They always wore heavy leather jerkins which must have afforded them some protection from the sharp edges of the coal chunks. He kept this job going for some time whilst my mother managed the shop in London Road.

Chapter 13: Avery's sawmill, builders, coffins and funerals

On the other side of the station, on the first steep gradient of Ladder Hill there was another sound - that of the huge saw of the sawmill at Avery's. There were rasping crescendos: sizzling and scything and swishing sounds as the logs were sliced up. The 'zizzing' and hissing continued throughout the day rather like the noise of a droning aircraft on a hot summer afternoon. There was something comforting

about the sounds of the sawmill. At the end of the day, an eerie silence would hang over the village as the saw shut down for the night. This was a silence that I felt I could actually hear! This vacuum seemed to last just a very short time as my ears adjusted and new sounds from the village crept in and took over the stillness of the evening.

Unsliced logs, some of them enormous, littered the back of the station behind the dividing fence for years and I assumed that they were just waiting there.

"No," Father corrected, "wood has to lie like that. It has to season."

Season? ... Season? I did not understand the word but assumed that the adults must know what they were talking about although I could not understand how leaving a log outside in all weathers could possibly be an advantage when furniture had to be made from it.

"It's not all for furniture," my father retorted. "Some of its old Bob Holifield will use for coffins."

I knew where Bob Holifield's workshop was, just near the little School on the comer of Bell Lane but this was the first time that I realized that he actually made coffins: he seemed such a nice man too! From now on, I remembered to hurry past his shop.

My earliest encounter with funerals was as a very young child on an unaccompanied walk home from nursery school. (Mrs Forty would put me across the road at the junction with Friday Lane and I would keep to the pavement along Church Road and so down to London Road where my parents would keep an eye open for me and take me across the main London Road). On that occasion, I witnessed a long, slow-walking black- clothed procession snaking its way up Friday Lane en route to the church and churchyard. It fascinated me. Sadly, I did not possess the sensitivity to realize that one did not stand and stare, and I took in all the details. I found myself a grandstand viewing place at the edge of the opposite pavement and settled myself to watch!

"No, dear, standing here is not a good idea" uttered the lady who found me - still in my viewing place. "It is not very polite."

She told me that the funeral was that of a Mr Joe Shepherd. Apparently, Chapman's, who had premises in the High Street opposite Harris' Stores, were the undertakers.

I was fascinated by the spectacle and watched as the village bier with the coffin atop was pushed up Friday Lane. I suppose I watched in a rather detached way and was not unduly bothered by the event, at least not as concerned as my 'rescuer' had been when she found me. At that stage, I still tended to think that funerals were for old people! Black clothing was 'de rigeur' in those days and outward appearances still seemed to take precedence over everything else. My mother, who a few years later attended the funeral of her mother wearing a grey coat, was severely reprimanded by her sister for doing so. What would the neighbours say? For heaven's sake!

Local builders, Chapmans and another firm, Culhams, worked as village undertakers for years. In fact, my father used to earn extra cash sometimes as a stand-in 'bearer' for Culhams. He did so for many years. The wage for these tasks was not great and I understood from Father that 7/6d per funeral was the going rate!

Chapter 14: Drinking, the ‘pledge’ and the workhouse

Joseph Cooper, my grandmother’s father, was involved with Headington quarry, and not the Wheatley brickworks., He had survived an attack of smallpox way back in the 1860s when the rest of the village were dropping like flies. He was also an inveterate drinker. My father said that there was a family meeting to discuss what to do with his belongings after his death (which was considered inevitable in view of the other village fatalities). Apparently, he suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs, very annoyed with what he had heard and shouted at them:

"I'm not bloody dead yet!"

He was a character - a delightful man when sober but a religious tyrant when he had been out on a drinking binge. He had caught smallpox from a tramp he found in a barn along Roman Road. The barn was thereafter known as 'Poxy Cowhouse' by the rest of the village.

His drinking binges were well known within the family and Father used to tell us that, when he was really inebriated, he would force all the children, Father included, to repeat individually the Lord's Prayer. He lived with the family at the Manor House, Wheatley, where my Grandmother had a flat. Apparently, the youngsters were given a large jug to take along to the backdoor of The Sun, where the landlord would fill it up and take it back to the Manor House along Frampton's Alley en route to home. The situation was complicated when Joseph Shirley, my Grandfather's brother-in-law, came to call. He was a Chapel lay-preacher who taught and preached locally and was infamous for his 'fire and damnation' sermons. They were lengthy and bigoted and he frequently pleaded with the family to 'sign the pledge'. The children were always on the alert when he came visiting and made sure that their visits to the back door of The Sun remained a secret! Usually, they succeeded in carrying their jug of ale back to the house although there were occasions when he caught them red-handed by waiting in the Alley and stepping out of the shadow when they came into view, giving them no time to vary their route.

'Signing the Pledge' was something that was taken very seriously by some villagers. My father told us that he did in fact sign it when they went to 'Band of Hope' meetings. I understand that he had very little idea what it was all about apart from having to sing a song in praise of water! My mother also was a member of the group in her home village in Dorset. I gather that the Dorset members took the whole matter more seriously than their Wheatley counterparts. Band of Hope meetings seemed to consist of tea and a variety of separately bagged cake - fruit, seed and plain sponge. There were hymns and prayers - and of course, the song in praise of water. Sadly, my mother's Band of Hope days were ruined by the action of her brother, Harry, who contrived to bring the proceedings to a conclusion with a resounding 'bang'. He had pre-arranged for the boys of the neighbourhood to blow up all the paper bags in which the cake was packed, by a previously rehearsed signal. Band of Hope was never quite the same again, with Harry receiving a lifetime ban. From then on, all paper bags were slightly perforated.

But to return to great-grandfather Joseph Cooper. In spite of his lapses, he remained at the Manor House, Wheatley, with Gran's extended family, until his admission to the Union just prior to his death.

The word 'workhouse' was emotive. It made quite an impression on village folk who still spoke of relatives even in the 1940s, who had been there. Gran continued to speak of it with a sense of shame and bitterness. I found this difficult to understand. The Laurels, at Headington, which followed the Union, looked quite large and grand to a young child. Its grim history made little impact on a six-year old.

Chapter 15: End of the war

At first, the end of the war seemed to make little difference. School customs and limitations of the past six years remained as before. We had become conditioned to restrictions, just as our parents had continued to accept them. The phrase: "Don't you know there's a war on?" and all that that had implied, remained. Rationing still certainly was a force to be reckoned with and to have questioned an authority - and here again we are back to the man with a clipboard and a 'received' English accent - would have elicited the same responses as before. There were still shortages in food, fuel and clothing. To have rocked the boat by querying decisions and any other action, would have been construed as being on a par with a certain lack of patriotism. Dramatic events abroad were still accepted as "all right over there" but nothing too dramatic must be allowed to upset the status quo here. The general election results of 1945 did bring the populace here up with something of a jolt. But apart from that, things generally went on as before.

For us at home, perhaps the first noticeable thing to change was the almost ceremonial burning of the blackout. For as long as I could remember, our front door was festooned with brown wrapping paper, several thicknesses deep, announcing to all and sundry as they descended the stairs, 'W. F. Tombs, Wheatley'. It would be so nice to have a change of decor! A grey air-raid warden tin hat was hooked on the other side of the stairs next to the electricity meters. My mother desperately wanted to throw it out but queried whether one ought to or whether 'they' would want it back! The point was debated and eventually it was generally agreed that it would be quite safe to get rid of the brown paper light excluder and the air-raid warden hat could definitely go. No way would the Germans make a return visit! However, we did cling to our gas masks a little longer. Moderation in all things!

We did not go to school the next day - in fact, we had several days off school and some of us wandered around in a bit of a daze. It was all rather an anti-climax: the pressure on parents had suddenly been relieved and I suppose, unconsciously, the effects had rubbed off on us. There was the other side of the situation as well: flags suddenly appeared overnight. All sorts of flags - not just the Union Jacks which predominated. Neighbours seem to have rediscovered flags in their cellars and attics. Several European flags from the French tricolour to the Russian hammer and sickle were to be seen. I was amused to see that the house opposite Milne Cottage, that of the Titcheners, sported a painted one in red immediately under their upstairs window. Family pets had their collars decorated with red, white and blue ribbon and the metal arch which used to be over the steps at the Big School entrance also sported a red, white and blue decoration. Peace celebrations went on and eventually something called a 'Wings for Victory' parade was announced. I was a little uncertain as to how this was going to affect me and rather nervous too. Grown-ups were always rather unforthcoming about such

matters. Eventually, a fancy-dress parade was suggested and Mrs McKay, a friend of a customer at the shop, suggested to me that perhaps I would like to do something completely different and go as a fancy black-out! She said she would come to the house and sort out the necessary gear for me and then dress me up for the part. I was appalled. I wanted no part of such a plan. I wanted to dress as a nurse and that was it! My parents argued together with Mrs McKay that nurses at the parade would be two-a-penny and that a fancy black-out would be much more original. It made no difference: I dug my heels in and stayed with the idea of dressing as a nurse - and surprise, surprise...I won a prize of National Savings Certificates. The family was rather taken aback since my costume lacked any originality. The parade was quite large and colourful and moved along the High Street slowly. The other character that I remember was shopkeeper Ted Turner sitting in a cart/lorry dressed as Mussolini!

After the VE celebrations, we returned to school and things went on much as before. They had to for a while, because the Victory in Europe celebrations were only part of the celebrations. For a few weeks we were still at war with Japan although it was the theatre of war in Europe that had made the greatest impact on us as children. Japan seemed so far away.

The old estates and their owners with their large properties were gradually undergoing changes. Local attitudes, together with what can only be called old-fashioned respect - and in many cases, awe - were already in a state of transition. Shotover House was to become a prisoner-of-war camp. The Miller family which had for years been caring employers with a genuine interest in the local community found many of the estate workers being summoned for military service: Major Miller did not live there during the war. The Balfours at Holton Park House had part of their estate taken over by the military and a hospital for neuro-surgery built on the estate. Their house was later to be used as a girls' school. Shotover House was eventually returned to Major Miller and continued to be used as a private residence after the war but Holton Park never again assumed a role in community life. The time when the country estate and the 'big house' had been able to tap a vast source of domestic labour from the local community seemed to have gone forever. Those huge kitchens like the one at Coombe House, with cavernous ceilings, high wooden shelves and cupboards loaded with more china and pots and pans than, as a child, I could ever imagine ever being strictly necessary, would soon be consigned to a museum. Strange things like fish kettles and copper ladles abounded there. Indeed, to a young and impressionable child I never ceased to be amazed that the huge piles of china and glass seemed to match! It really was a different world; however, with the coming of war, life there was about to change forever.

Chapter 16: Maypole

Perhaps the most lasting memory of Mrs Chapman and Standard One was the Maypole dancing. I remember seeing a very unsteady brown painted maypole which was unceremoniously stored most of the time at the boys' entrance to the rear of the School in a lobby. It was tall and had to be propped at an angle to accommodate its size and would probably account for its unsteadiness and the many knocks it sustained as dozens of untamed - or so it seemed - irreverent little boys pushed past it every day en route to the toilets at the rear of the playground

and near Standard One classroom. Most of the class consisted of evacuees from London. Many of them had no idea what a maypole was, but they were very soon enlightened. We were told by Mr Key that some of us would be dancing the maypole for the Sports Day at the end of the Summer Term and that we were to inform our parents so that they could come along and watch. My father was particularly interested. He had never danced the maypole but he had done 'garlanding' as a small child at school and he laughed as he reflected, and obviously remembered some of its lighter moments.

We practised for ages beforehand. Mrs Chapman instructed us in the intricacies of maypole dancing steps. I understood from people who came to watch that she had done this for years and had even instructed some of the parents in this skill. When she was not available, Mrs Chambers took the class. Apart from the Barber's Pole, I do not remember the names of any of the dances.

As far as I recall, there were eight pairs of dancers: eight girls and eight boys, although to make up numbers and to give everyone a chance who was interested, Mrs Chambers would allow some of the girls to partner each other. Thus, the following 'teams' were forged:

Myself (Christine Tombs) & Ronnie Morris
Margot Hinton & Derek Hildreth (Waterperry: evacuee)
Margaret Wheeler & Tony Bossom
Phyllis Day & Peter Wakelin (Littleworth)
Gillian Knight & Michael Crimmins (Littleworth: evacuee)
Jean Wilson & Myrtle Smith

There were always 'reserves', whose names now escape me, but even after moving into the higher classes of the school, maypole dancing was always performed by Mrs Chapman's Standard One class on Sports Day in July. Our musical accompaniment was by means of a rather ancient wind-up gramophone and by clapping and laa laa-ing. When Sports Day was to include maypole dancing, it was performed in the school playground. Other school events would sometimes take place in Fane's field at the back of the school but obviously a flat surface and short grass could not be guaranteed anywhere other than the playground for the actual dancing. Our red, white and blue streamers were sometimes sewn and sometimes pinned to the maypole by Mrs Chapman. Long lengths of our school 'drill' ribbons were used but they had a tendency to fray and the pinned repairs were frequently necessary. Again, Mrs Chambers helped out when necessary.

For Maypole dancing we had no set uniform. It was preferred that the girls wore dresses with a white background perhaps with a light floral pattern and the boys were asked to wear white shorts if possible but as this was war time and with clothing already rationed, it would not have been practicable to have insisted on anything too rigidly.

Chapter 17: Winter of 1947

That winter of 1947 made quite an impact not only at school but at home as well. Most homes were heated by coal fires alone with a fire usually in one room only as fuel was in very short supply. We were urged to save on heating wherever possible: central heating generally was a distant dream although in our house it was

considered to be an unhealthy luxury "which no-one needed anyway"!

The huts in the Church Road school playground were really quite warm and comfortable by comparison. Large black cast-iron heaters guarded by black fireguards worked well as we sat at the long 6/8-seater desks all fitted along their full length with individual ink-wells. The desk compartment itself was cavernous and the seat was a hinged affair and hideously heavy to lift up. Indeed, it was easier to slide along its full five- or six-foot length and move out the rest of its incumbents if your place unfortunately, was somewhere in the middle and you needed to see the teacher at the front of the room. I was always aware that these desks were old and looking back now, they certainly had an almost Dickensian look about them. Even then we regarded them as museum pieces.

Outside the ground crackled with the frost for weeks on end and at home two clipped Macrocarpa trees on either side of the front door at Milne Cottage gave up in the low temperatures and died. Most children of school age had some sort of home-made sledge usually made from salvaged corrugated iron sheets and bent into shape. Packaging in those days amounted usually to wooden crates in which most shop goods were delivered; large metal biscuit tins and the wooden crates could be coaxed into sledge shapes with the help of a co-operative parent. A length of rope would be fixed through the cut holes at the front of the contraption and again with the help of friends, one could be dragged to school provided, of course, that the friend who did the dragging was also allowed to have a ride as well. A selection of these home-made sledges usually littered the back of the Merry Bells garden during school hours. It was fun but a somewhat uncomfortable experience although we would have died rather than admit it!

Milne Cottage was a cold house at the best of times but in 1947, particularly when the temperature was at its worst, even going from room to room necessitated warm clothing and an iron will. A bowl of newly-laid eggs froze and cracked in the food cupboard in the kitchen overnight, I remember: windows were iced up inside and out. Manny Shinwell's name (Minister for Fuel & Power at the time) was mentioned in terms of loathing. Our main living room was heated by a coal-fuelled range and was warm enough but the bedrooms were unheated and consequently considered to be 'more healthy' as each morning, irrespective of the weather outside, the windows would be flung open - ice encrustations permitting - to let in the fresh air: central heating was for wimps!

The only toilet was an outside one: it froze over, family feeling at the time of construction being that indoor toilets were unhealthy. Hence, going to the lavatory in mid-January 1947 was indeed a character-building experience! Only when the deep freeze was at its worst did Father put a small paraffin lamp in there to heat it up and then only very reluctantly, lest anyone felt tempted to linger!

Indeed, when my parents moved next door to 'Zeals' in the 1960s, the builder there was somewhat perplexed by their refusal to have the installation of central heating. It was only when the visiting family complained that weekend stays would have to be curtailed in winter that they finally relented! But even then, solid fuel central heating was deemed "better and less intrusive!" - they liked open coal fires - thereby prolonging the worst aspects and inconveniences of the old system and denying themselves the best of the new, as Father still struggled to bring in the coal buckets well into his eighties!

Yes, central heating really was for wimps!

Chapter 18: Wheatley after the war

The end of the war, the 1947 Big Freeze and the return of many fathers to the family home meant that the children began to settle down with a parent they had hardly known until recently. Most of the evacuees had returned home although some of them opted to make their home in Wheatley permanently. Several of those who did return to London returned to their former 'host' families for several years afterwards at holiday times. As mentioned previously, one or two of the German prisoners decided not to return home at the end of the war and remained in Wheatley, becoming stalwarts of the community. The tale of Jinny Abrahams and family may also be recalled, having scandalized the neighbours by returning to London in an open lorry having heaved herself and family and all her belongings into the back after 'thumbing' one down on the A40 outside her digs. It kept tongues wagging for ages and only recently was remembered by one of my late father's neighbours - but this time with amusement.

The Americans had long since gone as had their huge transporter lorries. These were replaced by hospital transport and brown army ambulances with the Red Cross marking on the side at the Holton Park Hospital. The royal blue uniforms of the military patients there continued to be seen around the village. Many of them with bandaged heads - this was a hospital for neurosurgery - were wheeled down into the village for outings and were a regular feature of village life.

Huge carriers with aircraft parts on them continued to travel along the A40. They were a menace and made road crossing very hazardous. The volume of traffic, particularly cars, increased considerably at this time and holiday periods were a particular problem when it was sometimes necessary to wait 20 minutes or more before there was a break in the traffic and one could cross the road. My grandmother, Keziah Tombs, petitioned for years for a speed limit along the main London Road through Wheatley, especially after the death of schoolboy Jimmy Johnson from The Avenue. However, her efforts were always uncomprehendingly dismissed by the transport gurus.

Rationing of food continued. By now everyone took this in their stride and amounts of various foods were still adjusted by various government decrees. Some weeks an extra allowance of butter or margarine might be allowed - perhaps by as little as two ounces or so. It was certainly not enough to set the pulses racing! One joke that did the rounds at the time was that the meat ration was to be increased and would be big enough to wrap in a bus ticket but one had to be careful lest it fell through the punch hole! A sense of humour was a valuable commodity still in post-war Britain. Butter and margarine were 'married' in our household and I suspect in many others as well and the combined mixture was supposed to boost family morale at the sight of its increased bulk!

Saturday mornings saw me at Dodd's, the bakers, in Church Road collecting the family bread for the weekend.

The hooter at the Avery sawmill reverted to its former use and was an important marker of the village day. Whereas it had been the siren air raid warning during wartime, it was used again now to denote lunchtime at 1pm and the end of the working day at 6pm. Village clocks were reliably set by it.

In the late 1940s transport may have been a factor in keeping the village community together. Not everybody had a car. Public transport to Wheatley was reasonable although the last bus left Oxford at 10pm and so theatre visits had to

be frequently curtailed to fit the timetable. The 75-bus service from High Wycombe was poor and the 82 service from Aylesbury was scheduled at 40-minute intervals. The 73 and 74 from Milton were less frequent and went to Oxford via Forest Hill. Their drivers and conductors became familiar faces over the years and, indeed, even into the 1950s we joked that if one of the 'regulars' had not arrived at the bus stop for his usual bus, it was not unknown for the conductor to ask: "Shall we hang on a bit?"

Trains still ran at Wheatley station under the admirable supervision of Mr Clarke, the stationmaster, and Mr Billy Goodlake, whose portly figure and monk-like tonsure made him a familiar figure to regular rail travellers. He would also, as mentioned, 'hold the train' for regular commuters! His other duties seemed to be watering and weeding the plant beds at one end of the station platform and very well he did that too.

Horses were still in regular use on the local farms and Mr Willie Sheldon continued to be kept very busy at his forge in Church Road. I liked Mr Sheldon. He once gave me a butterfly net from amongst his accumulation of bric-a-brac there.

Major Miller was a well-known figure in the village and for years when we lived at Milne Cottage, he used to catch the early morning post - sometimes before 7am. He would come down from Shotover on his horse and post his letters at the letterbox outside our gate. (The General Post Office paid my Father a peppercorn rent of 1d a year to place the box on his land). Major Miller would never dismount and time and time again, he would attempt to ride up the slope to the letterbox. As I lay awake in bed, I would hear the clatter of his first unsuccessful forays. Eventually, of course, he would reach the letterbox - still mounted. His mission successfully accomplished, he would carefully 'back down' and ride away. To hear his attempts at reaching the letter box was a bit like Chinese water torture, but it was a ritual that never changed.

Walking was a frequent pastime - especially after Sunday lunch. Mr Horace Jones who lived opposite the station at Wheatley - on Ladder Hill - kept the most beautiful garden in Wheatley and people from some distance would visit and peer at it over the hedge. It was always worth the effort. His garden was his pride and joy. Gardening was perhaps the usual occupation of most of the villagers. Mr C H Middleton, the BBC radio gardening expert who broadcast on Sunday afternoons at 2pm, was everybody's guru.

For the teenagers, although I suppose one should not use such terminology for the 1940s as it implied a brash precociousness for that age group - our ideas were very much coloured by the American films we saw - and for those in the 7-10 age group, there were the Monday night pictures at the cinema set up at the Merry Bells each week. There were two sittings at 5.30 and 8pm. *The Magic Bow* and the strains of Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald in *Rosemarie* saw us through many a cold winter evening, happy in fact to leave behind the dripping sheets and pillowcases from a disastrously foggy and wet Monday washday at home, high on the drying lines, hastily hoisted up in the kitchen. Homemade soups and 'bubble and squeak' were the usual Monday fare made up from the left-over joint and vegetables from the day before. This had the advantage of being a quick and easy meal to prepare which enabled one to get out to the First House in time whilst leaving parents stretched out in front of the fire recovering from a heavy and strenuous full day stint of washing and allied chores. George Formby and Will Hay

films were all great crowd pullers.

The young children sat on hard numbing benches at the front for 10d. For the older ones there were benches on the platform at the back for 1 /3d. Here, the more adventurous souls among us would smoke and choke in a haze of sickly, eye-watering sophistication until the local constabulary in the persons of PC 'Blondie' Bryant with arms akimbo, a benign smile on his face and exhibiting all the best qualities one would expect in a village 'bobby' - right down to his cycle clips - or Sergeant West in his little box-like car, would put in an appearance. Innocence would reign supreme and half-smoked Woodbines, Goldflake and Players would be ground underfoot.

I was never quite certain what the role of the Police was on such an occasion. It appeared a bit blurred and not unlike that of our Schools Inspector of the time, Mr Savage, whose job was similarly vague to us. We were all a little bit frightened of the Police but no-one knew exactly why. They were held in some awe and respect and no-one would ever have thought of being rude to them. Such an action would possibly have provoked a clip around the ear both from parents and maybe from 'Blondie' as well!

The wireless occupied a major part of our leisure hours. *Children's Hour,* with Uncle Mac in the role of 'Dennis the dachshund' in *Toy Town* aided by 'David' and 'Elizabeth' were firm favourites. *Children's Request Week* on the same programme was a matter for serious thought and consideration. *Regional Round* and Peter Scott's *Nature Parliament* were very carefully thought over and the Uncle Mac Appeal at Christmas was never airily dismissed. We would sort out our money box and then feeling like a Nubar Gulbenkian, we would go along to the Post Office and send off our postal order, so certain we were that our 2/6d was going to make all the difference to the success or otherwise of the appeal! Mrs Slatter at the Post Office was not so certain and after selling her twentieth postal order in a row, used to become distinctly tetchy particularly at Christmas.

These were the days when the psychologists and all the other psycho experts were beginning to assess seriously the effect of certain radio programmes upon the listeners. There were ominous warnings from 'experts' indicating that Britain's future was in dire peril should particular programmes be allowed to continue. *Dick Barton - Special Agent* was allegedly corrupting the nation's youth. We happily delighted in such decadence and astounded everyone years later by our unexpected normality.

The wireless continued to play an important part in our lives and sports features in particular made an impact. Charlie Buchan with his 'football round-up' and Raymond Glendenning with his horse-racing commentaries became household names, everything stopping for 'the results'. On Saturday evenings Father eagerly waited to discover whether Littlewoods or Shermans would pay him out a fortune that week.

The 2 o'clock at Kempton or the 3.30 at Newmarket would assume a particular importance and I would occasionally be dispatched to Jack Stephens' house in Church Road with an envelope regarding that day's "dead cert"!

"Don't give this note to old Jack if 'Blondie' is there," Father would stress.

"What do I do, Dad, if he is?" I would ask.

"For God's sake, girl," he would snap, "use a bit of common. Go and have a chat with Jack's missus or something!"

I would then go and join a small gathering of like-minded villagers at the Stephens' house and as far as I remember, I never had to return Father's envelope unopened. 'Blondie' would occasionally appear but by then there was never any sign of illegal dealings or anything amiss. Could it have been possible that he, too, had a personal interest in the Turf? Perish the thought!

Not unexpectedly, the aftermath of the war continued to have a domino effect on village life. Religion - church-going and faith generally - were influential. Sunday School at the Chapel was twice a day - in the mornings and afternoons and there were morning and evening services which usually saw the place full. People still tended to dress up for the occasion and few ladies would have dreamt of entering Chapel without wearing a hat. Remembrance Sunday was particularly meaningful and I remember Mr and Mrs Pratt who lived in the High Street supplying specially printed hymn sheets for us all to sing O, *Valiant Hearts* in memory of their son, Edgar, who was killed in battle. It was always an emotional occasion and would move some of the older ones to tears; even for us children, it made quite an impact.

Sadly, ecumenicalism did not rate highly in village life. Mixed marriages, that is Catholic and Protestant, were still referred to critically in behind-the-hand conversations and when a neighbour married into an Irish- Catholic family, tongues wagged in earnest in spite of the fact that individually both parties were well-liked! Religious diversions caused hackles to rise. Some of the local 'worthies' with High Church inclinations were known never to shop locally at Harris' in the High Street as they regarded them as "too Chapel"! (Mr Harris played the Chapel organ).

Indeed, my grandmother, Keziah Tombs, had long wanted to be a member of the Mother's Union. They appeared to uphold all the principles of family life, all aspects which she held dear and central to the wellbeing of the family but queries were raised as to her suitability because she was seen to be too firmly entrenched in Chapel pursuits. In fact, she had to wait till March 25th 1947 before she was allowed to become a member of the Wheatley branch.

Village fetes returned to delight the Summer days. Mrs Ezzie Cripps at the windmill possessed a marvellous dress which was covered with one hundred pockets. As can be imagined it was a voluminous garment and was used for 'lucky dip' sideshows. It was also frequently in use for village 'dos'.

Mrs Cripps, a delightful lady with deep-set eyes and a ready smile, had very set ideas on most things. She lived at the windmill along from Ladder Hill where the Cripps family had been for several generations. She used to talk animatedly of her husband, "My Ezzie", whom unfortunately I had never known but apparently was remembered with great affection by the older villagers. Mrs Cripps knew my grandmother, Keziah, well and she used to lend her *the* dress for some of the Chapel functions. It was always a great success.

Mrs Cripps also had other interests and on one particular occasion, my Aunt Rose, father's sister, was walking back to Horspath from Wheatley late one night along past the windmill when she was accosted by a shout from Mrs Cripps who was outside her cottage, asking her for her views on cremation!

Cremation or burial was a debating point in Wheatley in the late 1940s. The churchyard was becoming full up. Most people still opted for burials but the trendier ones seemed to favour cremation apparently with the same zeal and fervour that wholemeal bread is favoured by 'those in the know' today. Mrs Cripps was very concerned by the whole business and was anxious to get a cross-section

of village views. Auntie Rose arrived home - a nervous wreck!

Mr Bob Holifield on the corner of Bell Lane continued to make coffins but there seemed to be fewer people wending their way behind the local bier and carrying their floral tributes. Black-suited mourners were becoming fewer. People tended to scandalize friends and neighbours by wearing 'ordinary' clothing on such occasions although the war perhaps had accounted in some way for the lack of black clothes - and lack of clothing coupons - for such occasions. Indeed my Mother, as previously stated, shocked her sister by wearing a grey coat for the funeral of her mother. More and more people favoured the use of a hearse and limousines for the nearest relatives of the deceased until the village bier went out of use completely. Gradually, as the number of burials decreased and the number of cremations increased, there was shock and dismay initially at the reduction in size of the floral tributes that were once customary. It was still a novel idea to substitute money to a charity in which the deceased may have had an interest. Such matters could still scandalize and cause adverse comment.

Queuing was still a national pastime. Mr Bill Berry in Church Road once again sold bananas in his shop. I had only known what they were from the faded transfer advertisement on the window, a legacy from halcyon pre-war days. Admittedly, they were only available on the children's green ration book but at least they were there. Mr Berry also supplied the only fish and chips in the area although I remember that later on, we were able to buy fish and chips from a mobile van which used to park in the back road (Old London Road) on Saturday evenings.

Trains travelling to Wheatley were mostly of the steam variety and were smelly. If you were foolish enough to look out of the window, you were inevitably covered with soot particles. One never wore one's best clothes for travelling by train. There was however, a two-carriage diesel train which came to Wheatley via Horspath Halt and had been in service for years. Such a journey entailed paying Billy Goodlake the fare on arrival at Wheatley. The diesel was much cleaner.

One man who never bothered about matters sartorial was Jack Davis, the road sweeper in Wheatley for years. He lived in an old cottage in Friday Lane. Always dressed in dark overcoat and flat, greasy cap, he mumbled and arthritically shuffled his way through litter that must have amounted to several tons in the course of the years he was at work. The village boys used to shout outrageous remarks to him just to see him angrily wave his broom at them as they darted away, rudely bawling over their shoulders.

Older villagers spoke with affection of Mr and Mrs Knowles who lived in Crown Road. Mr Knowles, a delightful gentleman with masses of old-world charm, was bespectacled and I understood a former schoolteacher at Wheatley School. He always revelled in strolling through the village. He was always very formally dressed, even in retirement - never ever seen without a suit and tie, a beige raincoat and grey Homberg hat. He had a brisk, splay-footed walk which some lads cruelly saw fit to mimic, and with cheery smile and hat held ever aloft, he would pass by. His natural politeness and beautifully mannered approach were strangely reminiscent of an era long since passed. He was never seen without his walking stick - used not for support but to complete a vision of pure sartorial elegance. He could indeed have stepped straight from the fitting rooms of Gieves & Hawkes. Mrs Knowles was equally elegant. She dressed almost a la Raj, with beautiful wide-brimmed hats and gathered flower-printed dresses as she teetered along beside him on wildly impractical high-heeled shoes, sporting a parasol, in a haze of perfumed and bath-

salted splendour. Her tightly curled, almost powdered hair peeped hesitantly below her upswept brim and she never looked any different in all the years she spent in Wheatley. They were a well-loved couple and much respected in the community.

Certain characters within a village are always noticed. One such was Connie Washington from Holton who for years 'did' the hedges in Wheatley. His skill is now a fast dying one. He would cut the hedges and then weave and pattern the branches and chop and bend the twigs into a work of art. Connie, pipe-smoking and be-wellingtoned, was never seen without a sack on his back. What it contained was a matter for speculation.

Gypsies abounded. One or two of their highly decorated caravans were to be found on a piece of land near the Bridge Hotel but many more lived along the Waterperry Road. They came round to the houses selling pegs.

Another person, well-known to a small circle of piano-owning musicians in the village was Mr Batten. He had tuned the village pianos for years. Who was he? We never really knew. Prior to each call, we would each receive a small business card with beautiful copper-plate handwriting, which always began in the same way: "Subject to your convenience ..." Indeed, he was known locally as Mr Subject-to-your-convenience. An elderly man, he spoke in well-modulated tones and was obviously well- educated but somehow or other seemed to have fallen on hard times. He wore thin worn-out plimsolls kept together with string and cardboard and a thin, tweed, buttonless overcoat with a cap over his white hair. He used to arrive just after breakfast. My mother would show him into the sitting room and then leave him to sort out the ravages which three not-very-good pianists had inflicted on the instrument since his last call. He dealt with this side of things very competently. Then my mother would make up the fire and more often than not, he would then snooze on the settee in front of the fire before once again facing the elements en route to his next call. It was not unknown for him to make the job last all day! He was a proud man and any sympathy we had for his predicament had to be well-hidden. He lived at the 'Laurels' in Headington where presumably he spent his final days.

Characters like these were still easily identifiable and distinctive in the 1940s. Wheatley had grown but not so much that people and one-off individuals were lost in the crowd. They helped to mould the community which on the whole was a caring one.

Chapter 19: Early School Days

For most people there are special days which have a certain significance, memories of which lie etched in the mind maybe for years and even which decades later are remembered with awe. Such a day was one in September 1941 ... at least I think it was a September day.

It was my first day at nursery school. I remember it was warm and sunny and I was wearing a white summer dress with large poppies printed on it. I also remember carrying a government-issue green-faced gas mask boxed in stiff cardboard with canvas strap. This was an everyday encumbrance and was hauled out on each outing and shopping expedition. I was to be enrolled. I learnt from my mother that the local nursery school at the Chapel in Wheatley had a few vacancies for local children (most already attending there were evacuees) and she delighted

in telling me the story of a deputation of crocodiled children in pairs, headed by 'teacher', a Mrs Forty, calling at Milne Cottage one morning and asking if her little daughter would like to join their class.

I was then about 3½ years of age and already *au fait* with what went on around me. Mother, with Father's approval, agreed that it would be a good idea to go along "just to put you in the mood for school". I was rather uncertain and just a little bit frightened too. Adults at that time tended not to discuss details of such important steps into student life with their offspring in case they remonstrated. Such outbursts had to be avoided at all costs, so the least a child was told the better! No margin was allowed for varying temperaments. All children were the same. Very bewildering - one learnt not to ask questions because that too could cause trouble: parents seemed frightened of losing face. So, the fewer enquiries made, the better. My parents were no exception. I listened to the talk about nursery school and then forgot about it until that morning of the first day of term and then decided that perhaps I would rather stay at home after all!

Mrs Powell, a friend of my mother's, arrived to take me to school on that first day. She was a cheery, chatty soul. I brooded quietly in the corner with gas mask box on my lap. When we did eventually set out, the walk to the Chapel school in the village was completed in silence.

Mrs Powell told my mother that school "would be the making of her". It was an expression which I never understood and which I suspected implied something sinister and unpleasant. She told me that she would come back for me at lunchtime and she hoped that I would not be silly and cry when she had gone away. I did not cry but I was utterly bewildered by the comings and goings of that first morning. It would have been more comfortable had my mother been able to take me to school herself but she had to "mind the shop" and so was not available.

I remember standing outside the Chapel by green iron-spiked railings and waiting for someone to come with the keys to open the place up. I did not speak to anyone but did feel a little uncomfortable by the uncontrolled weeping of some of the boys who as far as I could see, were far less brave and controlled than the girls. Their mothers were far more fussy about leaving them as well.

Looking back, far greater importance is placed today on the preparation of children for school than in the 1940s. Then you sank or swam and little attention was paid to how each child reacted under the stress of leaving home and familiar surroundings. It was assumed that all children were idiots and the "force 'em and they'll soon learn" attitude was the only method to adopt when dealing with them.

The green-spiked railings at the Chapel looked like a cage inset with a dusty box hedge into which the dogs peed and the children pushed their sweet papers. The hedge smelt dreadfully and I hated standing so close to it. The parents seemed happy enough, though. Eventually, a key to the schoolroom was procured from Mrs Huxter across the road. The chattering increased as the mothers pushed their pushchairs into the railings and the hedge as they all tried to crowd through the narrow-railed gate together. While all this was going on, a lady dressed in a catkin-coloured costume, topped by a maroon hat with feather-shaped felt trimmings of the same colour, stood by and said little. She was accompanied by a young girl of about nine years of age with ginger plaits wound around her head.

Soon, a tall cottage-loaf-shaped lady with long brown skirt, covered at the front by a long, black apron, only inches from the ground, joined the crowd at the gate. To me, she seemed a rather formidable lady. Her grey- bunned hair was only

loosely held in place and stray bits of curled strands hung down the side of her face which was topped by a hand-knitted, patterned brown coarse woollen hat with a welt the depth of the hat itself. It was pinned into place with a large metal hatpin, the middle of which I was convinced must have penetrated the shiny, loose-pleated skin that covered her skull. Her name was Mrs Brazil (pronounced Brasill). She lived a few doors away from the Chapel. As a small child I was rather uncertain of her exact function in our small school community. She used to shuffle through the classroom, unbidden at all times of the day and even Mrs Forty, the tweed-suited teacher at the school gate seemed, to my immature mind, to go in awe of her. Once I ventured to ask what Mrs Brazil did at school and was informed that she 'did' the heating. Since the place was heated by radiators along the wooden and tiled walls and Mrs Brazil disappeared through a door near the kitchen by the coal hole, I failed to understand the connection. Did she push burning coals through the piping, I wondered? I would never understand where this operation started because the black bakelite and trimmings of the radiators were housed in the main classroom and I never saw her ever touch them. The process of heating the building was, for me at four years of age, a complete mystery. But unbidden or not, Mrs Brazil continued to saunter through that room, growling menacingly at us if we got in her way and glancing unsmilingly at poor Mrs Forty who even at my tender age, I could appreciate, found her ministrations to the heating system something of a trial!

I knew no-one in the class and remember chewing my handkerchief till holes appeared in the fabric. I needed to go to the toilet but was too frightened to ask and wet my knickers. I was terrified that a damp mark would appear on the back of my dress and fearful of scolds and smacks when I got home at lunchtime. I desperately wanted to cry but feared that people would laugh at me. The prospects were indeed too frightening to contemplate. I wanted to go home but felt that I could not cope with further scolds there as well.

I suppose that I did have one advantage over the rest of my schoolmates: I knew roughly the layout of the building from my weekly Sunday school visits. I knew also that the toilet there was dark with the door shut. It never had a light in there and being right opposite the coal store, was usually pretty grimy. I was aware that even if one managed to stay clean during the course of the school day, this fate could never be avoided for those unfortunate enough to have to go to the lavatory.

Such primitive toilet facilities would never have passed the more stringent by-laws now imposed by local authorities, but this was 1941 and wartime limitations were accepted without question. No-one complained: most people seemed grateful that there was somewhere the children, mostly evacuees, could go during the day.

"... Muriel Clements, Peter Wakelin, Margaret Wheeler, Jean Wilson ..." Everyday started with the 'register' and everyone was at first nervous at answering "Present" with the conviction that 'teacher' expected. The names soon became automatic but it was a long time before I felt comfortable in replying and ceased blushing at the idea of that split moment's prominence in class.

"Speak up", Mrs Forty would say, but I had doubts as to whether I could improve on my present tone.

A moment of chair-scraping would then ensue, raised voices quickly being followed by the words: "Hands together, eyes closed ...

Father we thank thee for the night,

And for the pleasant morning light:

For the rest and food and loving care,
And all that makes the day so fair."

Sometimes I peeped and found that everyone had done as bidden. There was complete obedience which I thought that God would like. Small voices that were deeply earnest and serious would suddenly chorus their daily prayer, before shouts, more chair-scraping and shhh-ing recommenced. Each small table with two low chairs in place would house a couple of the new intake at each one. Coats, and biscuits for lunch break in small paper bags were put with the boxed gas-masks and hung up in the corner of the schoolroom. Then 'lessons' began. I liked this part. Sometimes I was asked to be 'paper monitor' and this meant being able to leave the table for a few moments and take coloured paper and scissors around to the others. At the end of the lesson, a large bag was sent round for any offcuts that could be salvaged for another lesson another day. Nothing was ever wasted. Sand boxes were an important part of the lessons later that morning. Woe betide anyone who was stupid enough to drop the sand box!

"Just stand in the corner with your back to the class", was the punishment for this particular misdemeanour. Happily, I escaped this but some of my classmates did not and offended more than once! However, they did not seem to worry and their friends giggled; I did so much envy this carefree attitude.

The Chapel schoolroom was divided into two parts: the platform where Mrs Forty sat with Elyse, her daughter, and the main part where the children sat. Our chairs were tiny and alongside our coats were our beds for our rest period. These were silvery painted X-framed camp beds covered in pale green canvas and these were used every afternoon after playtime. Along the right-hand wall, as one came in from the entrance lobby, was a high wooden-framed bookcase which held our Sunday hymn books and our play bricks boxes during the week. Everything about the classroom was dark: brown- painted stage; brown tiles and brown 'church-arched' window frames with diamond-leaded glass panes of white and mauve. At the back of the room backing on to the lobby was a heavy brown bench which the older children commandeered for seating on Sunday together with all the green *Golden Bells* hymn books. The rest of us were pushed towards the front and had to use the blue-coloured version. The use of the heavy bench and the green books were accepted at Sunday School as symbols of their seniority! Sunday School and Nursery School were in my mind totally separate and when one morning on going into the latter I found a green *Golden Bells* book that someone had forgotten to pack away after Sunday School, I was just a little disappointed to find it to be exactly like my blue one! At other times of the week, it was a stepping stone to pick-a-back game and a stepping block to the mysterious books that packed the higher shelves of the bookcase. We were not afraid of 'teacher' by doing so, when she went into the kitchen at the side of the platform. Sometimes we were caught and sometimes we were lucky. Those who were caught were summoned on to the platform and made to stand, eyes averted, with backs to the rest of the class. It was all a bit of a game but I took it, nonetheless, rather seriously.

At 3.15pm in the afternoon, we were all collected. We always knew when the day was nearing the end because the small lobby just outside the classroom was filled with a low buzz of chatter from waiting mothers, all trying to squeeze themselves and their perambulators - all high and capacious - and toddling siblings into a two-square yard area that was under shelter.

Our school day - Nursery as opposed to Sunday - began with a little prayer which sometimes led into a hymn and was accompanied on the piano by Mrs Forty. She taught us nursery rhymes which we acted out. She read stories and the delight of the week was coloured paper-cutting. We were duly handed khaki-coloured sticky paper. It was great fun but the floor was usually strewn with the tiniest clips of paper when we had finished and for poor Mrs Forty, this must have been a problem. Mrs Brazil also 'did' the Chapel and the schoolroom cleaning.

Fridays were marvellous. Each child was given a tiny biblical text - much treasured - which we had to take home and memorize. I lived for Fridays and studiously learnt my text. At the end of term, the 'text' was really something. It was the size of a small picture and had a little string tag at the top so that it could be pinned to the wall - quite a prize! Unfortunately, I was ill on the last week of term and missed out on my stringed text. Word got around that I wanted a "text with a coat hanger" and that I was very upset not to have received one, so much so that Mrs Forty came to the house and personally presented me with one! My delight knew no bounds.

Days at the nursery school were wonderfully happy. We sang and we danced to Mrs Forty's piano music. We did air-raid practice which consisted of rolling up into a ball and squeezing under our little tables. We learnt to put on our gas masks and I did so want to be able to wear the Mickey Mouse blue and red mask which was government issue for small children of nursery school age. Sadly, even at that age, my face was too wide to be able to wear one and I had to be allocated with an adult one instead. We were aware that gas mask drill could be a life-saving operation. The girls always took this exercise very seriously but the boys were rather more dismissive. They were slower at putting on their masks and seemed less able to fix the chin into the base of the contraption. The girls would smugly look on whilst some of the boys resorted to tears.

One evacuee friend who used to pass my home on the way to school at the Chapel was Julia Johnson, a plump little fair-haired girl who lived at the Bridge Hotel bungalow. Julia had older sisters, Alice and Lizzie, and they frightened me. They had loud, coarse laughs and always sided with Julia in any arguments. Her mother wore long gold earrings and possessed the loudest voice of the lot! She really put the fear of God into us and I always tried to avoid her if possible. Unfortunately, Mrs Johnson was a lady with a social conscience and acted with the kindest intentions. She always insisted that she accompany me home so that I could be "put across the road". Her dominant voice reached the farthest side of the busiest street with ease and clarity. Years of overlaid cigarette smoke gave it that special resonance and gritty delivery. I cringed when she shouted "Goodbye" to me each day. I tried to understand that her actions were well-intentioned and I did not dare criticize 'the voice' when in ear-shot of my parents. Julia, too, spoke like her mother, minus the nicotine additives. Julia told me that it was necessary to speak loudly because she wanted to be a 'clippie' when she grew up. I always thought that this ambition was well within her reach. She had the sort of voice that was best heard over a chugging engine or the harsh rasp of grated gears!

In spite of the fear that Mrs Johnson instilled into me, her fears over my crossing the road were indeed well-founded. Most of the local children had been highly drilled regarding road safety and we were all well aware of the dangers. The story of little Jimmy Johnson (no relation) had been taken to heart. Although I had not known him, everybody in the school seemed to have heard of his particular

fate - one that, incidentally, was not repeated at that school until the 1970s.

There were other Nursery School contemporaries that I remember well, particularly Jean Wilson, a quiet, very well-dressed girl whose jumpers always looked pristine fresh and whose dresses were always new. Her mother was a great dressmaker and knitter. Jean's clothes were quite superb; even her short pleated skirts looked as if they had come straight from the cleaners. Each item was just the right length: never ever did Jean sport a dress with a large hem "just to grow into" - her clothes fitted perfectly all the time. She was a pleasant girl with always a fresh white hair ribbon in her curls. She too was an evacuee and, as far as I could see, her mother seemed to spend all day knitting outside her home in the High Street. I never saw Mrs Wilson without a clean smock on and with a ball of knitting wool coming from the pocket of her pinafore as she knitted quickly outside Roberts' flats there. I supposed that she did go indoors sometimes but she always seemed to be there whenever we were taken out for walks by Mrs Forty. Apparently, Mrs Wilson used to give lovely birthday parties for Jean and although I learnt of their magnificence second-hand, I never went. The invitation always came but I was frightened of venturing anywhere new and so never passed on the invitation to my mother until it was too late. Mrs Wilson must have thought our manners were atrocious but I never told anyone that I was too frightened to go.

One evacuee whose name sticks in my memory was a fair-haired little boy called Gordon Richards, who lived in Fridays Lane. Gordon was rather a cry-baby and although he lived just a short distance away from the Chapel, his mother always brought him to school on the front of her big pram. He always hated it when she left him and Mrs Forty usually spent the first few minutes of registration time trying to stem the flow of her son's tears. He always wore black velvet bib-and-brace short trousers which he wet everyday. We all pretended that we had not noticed because we liked Gordon but we always assiduously avoided the wet patch on his chair!

Nursery School days continued through what seemed an endless Summer. I enjoyed the walks through the village - sometimes along Ladder Hill and the station; other times up Vicarage Hill and along by the park wall, or maybe a different way altogether: to Waterperry and the road to Holton. The Ladder Hill walk and on to Coombe Wood was a particular favourite. Here we would pick bluebells to take home and from the numerous bunches, some were saved for Teacher's desk. Many died as they fell from hot, sticky hands en route back to class, but bluebell picking was a favourite way of spending an hour out of the classroom. Some tried to vary the bunch by way of a handful of bracken as they passed Windmill Close near the top of the hill but more often than not, bracken picking was abandoned because it cut and scratched small hands. Clover and cowslips were other favourites. The cowslips had a delightful smell and were particularly treasured although the boys on the trip always walked past them and referred to them as "sissy" flowers. The primroses came later - the best of all - and many handfuls were picked on these walks. Sadly, many of these did not make it to back to classroom vases either, similarly expiring in the warm sweaty clutches of their captives!

We knew about the next stage up the education ladder. Miss Flood was our next teacher at the Infants school in Bell Lane. We were occasionally taken to see her. She never seemed to change in appearance from the first time I saw her to the last time when I introduced myself because she had gone blind. She always kept her sprightly walk and it was a common sight to see Miss Flood and her sister, Sybil, walking along Crown Road. Sybil was a simple soul who faithfully kept her

company and apart from school, was never seen without her. Miss Flood always wore a dark skirt and blouse and her grey hair was fastened back in a bun and kept in place at the front by a narrow velvet ribbon. She was a lovely person although her immediate superior had the reputation of being a more forceful individual and we all felt a little apprehensive about our chances of survival in her class two years hence. But those days were still a long way off.

Gas-mask practice continued. I loved the rubbery smell that exuded from the mask. At this stage, the memories of smells made quite an impression. The schoolroom where we played had a lovely lingering smell about it. The cynics would probably say that this was dust - but we were never aware of it. It was, I suppose, a mixture of varnish and old books. Even forty years on, the school room at the Chapel has retained that mysterious 'pot pourri' tang.

Our elevenses breaks continued and I used to take two biscuits to eat at this time. Mrs Forty and Elyse would go into the kitchen and make a drink and on one occasion, I was unwell and they made me a drink of milk after which I was promptly sick. I still hate milk today.

My Nursery School education continued and in 1941/2, the talk was of "going up" which did not mean a great deal to a young child but I soon found out that it meant going into Miss Flood's class at the 'proper' infants' school in Bell Lane. From what I had seen, I quite liked her but I was a little cautious at the prospect because she knew my parents reasonably well through coming to the shop to do her shopping and I knew that they used to laugh at the occasional funny remark that a particular child may have made during the week. So, one obviously had to be careful at the Infants' School.

Elevation to the Infants' School was greeted with relief by the parents since the gateway to the school and the larger playground afforded greater convenience to mothers waiting with prams and toddlers. I had become used to the easy informality of the chapel school and dreaded having to make new beginnings with new children and new teachers. I was horrified by the double- seat toilets that had friends crowding round the door. I hated it and determined never to go there! Consequently, I wet myself every day to the despair of my parents and, I suspect, of my teachers. For the boys, it seemed even worse as theirs was next door, open to the elements and in full view of Mrs Kitchen's house and garden. The Holifields had a vegetable garden on the other side of the playground and were thus spared such sights!

Education at Bell Lane now began in earnest with reading high on the list of priorities. Miss Flood's classroom seemed adequately equipped with small individual blackboards at adult-knee-height and chalk ledges under each. In the corner behind a large guard was a lovely coal fire in the winter together with blackened coal scuttle, full of more fuel to replenish the blaze. In front of the fire was the master blackboard on an easel on which was suspended large printed sheets of words. The lists were attached to a wooden pole which in turn was affixed to the blackboard by a sturdy cord. Those sitting in front were usually showered from the ledge underneath whenever the door from the next-door classroom was opened. The boys always tried to make for the desks at the back leaving the girls to cope with the 'fall-out' from the front, not for reasons sartorial but because they felt they had a better chance of escaping Miss Flood's searching glances.

"You be lucky," Father said, "when we wus at school, Old Leyshon used to sling the chalk at us if he thought we weren't paying attention. Chalk dust won't

hurt 'ee. Anyway, you be there to learn" he said, almost as an afterthought.

Having arrived in the Infants', the School Medical was a must for all beginners. Our infant classroom was cleared of all children, the fire was stoked up and the School Doctor took possession until we had all been seen by him. He was Dr Cooke, the doctor from Great Milton. All the parents seemed to know him and took note of all he said, with possibly one or two exceptions. My red and chilblained feet and toes were paraded before him and needed treatment, or so the School Doctor said.

"Rubbish," said my mother, "we never bother doctors with chilblains. It is an acceptable part of living in a damp climate!"

I did not know at this stage that she was frightened of Dr Orchard, our local GP. The chilblains remained. Yet this particular examination was not half as bad as the one I remembered at the village hall's (Merry Bells) children's clinic on Thursdays. I remembered with horror the scarlet fever and diphtheria injections there when my screams caused the doctor to say that he would call at the house for follow-up jabs. To continue them here would have put infant morale under too great a strain!

The School Dental Service was even more vivid in my memory. I was terrified of the dentist, having had one never-to-be-forgotten incident at Headington. I was despatched with Auntie Blanche from Coombe House to see her dentist, Mr Fox. The preliminaries and the pain that went with tooth extraction lived with me for years afterwards and I dreaded ever having to have any further treatment. So as soon as I saw the dentist's chair being set up at school, I instantly became a quivering mass of jelly. It was with real trepidation that I took home my letter from the School Dentist stating 'what needed to be done'. For days afterwards whenever the door of the classroom opened, I tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. As the next name for dental treatment was called out, classmates giggled and those already treated sat up smartly, treating us lesser mortals with an air of superiority and complete disdain. It was unsettling and very demoralizing especially when Miss Wren said:

"We all have to be brave sometimes and being afraid of dentists is really so silly."

I was certain that she looked straight at me but somehow or other I could not really conquer that terrible fear. Memories of Mr Fox and Headington lingered on. Perhaps bravery was something that one acquired as one grew up. I did not know but ardently wished that I did.

Visits by 'Nitty Norah' were better received by the children. Nurse Welham's 'search for nits' was accepted by them all. She was a tall lady in a tailored navy suit and with short brown/grey hair. She would call at the school from time to time and would cause us to be hurriedly put into single line ready for a head inspection. Such was my innocence that I had absolutely no idea what she was looking for! Miss Flood's room was hurriedly cleared and one by one, we were summoned to the inner sanctum while this highly respected lady lifted our locks and inspected our scalps. Her duties apparently also entailed an inspection of our fingernails. None of these attentions was particularly unpleasant but the danger arose when she tended to chat to individual children for longer than was usual, perhaps about family matters and subjects quite unconnected with the current visit. This gave rise to all sorts of rumours. Eyebrows were raised and everyone drew their own conclusions and usually arrived at the wrong one! For days afterwards

even one's friends tended to treat one with caution and deep suspicion. Headlice, as today, was a subject that polite society did not wish to acknowledge and in the 1940s, ignorance was just as rife. Nurse Welham was succeeded in this essential work by an equally efficient lady, Nurse Trowbridge. She was pleasant enough, dressed similarly but with the addition of a navy felt hat with a brim that was worn off the face. She tended to be a bit more short-tempered than her predecessor and moreover had a reputation of treating all the mothers like idiots. They all tended to be rather frightened of her. I lost faith in this paragon of medical knowledge when on inspecting my barely visible, sore and raggedly-chewed finger nails, she announced that bitter aloes were the answer in my case. I had this yellowish-brown liquid applied to my nails - and then continued to bite them! Up until that time I really believed all that adults told me. Nurse Trowbridge shattered my illusions!

"Get your mother to paint them," she said, "and stop this filthy habit"

The bitter aloes bottle eventually found its way to the back of the medicine cupboard, only half used. I knew that bitten nails were ugly: I agreed with everything that she had said but somehow or other I seemed unable to stop.

Life in Miss Flood's class was incredibly happy. All my previous fears about venturing into the 'Infants' were completely unfounded. As five-year-olds we were oblivious, on the whole, to wartime pressures. Wheatley for us seemed a good place to be.

Every second Tuesday in the month was the day that we all looked forward to at Bell Lane. This was the day when Enid Blyton's *Sunny Stories* were put on sale and these thin little red and blue booklets were the highlight of our existence. Most of the girls would bring them back to school after lunch and we would take it in turns to try to read them. These played a greater role in teaching the nation's youth to read than many of the established text books. The story of *Old Lobb* was our official reader. But it did not really inspire and its characters, Mr Dann the dog and Miss Tibbs the cat, with Mrs Cuddie the cow, roused little enthusiasm in the class. As we progressed to Miss Wren's class, *Old Lobb* assumed a greater importance and this was interspersed with *Mr Puffin* books. Mr Puffin was more interesting than Old Lobb but even he could not compete with *Sunny Stories* which was purchased from Arkle's in the High Street. Arkle's was an interesting place for a six-year-old as apart from the newspapers and magazines it sported a large notice which dangled from the ceiling: "Do not ask for credit as refusal may cause offence". It looked impressive. It was impressive, but it was years before I understood just what it meant!

On *Sunny Stories* day, my infant contemporaries and I would sit on a wooden seat which used to surround the bole of a large tree - a chestnut, I think - in the centre of the playground at Bell Lane. Sometimes in the summer we played skipping games, marbles and the boys rolled hoops and occasionally we played a group game which we called 'Fair Rosie'. The least popular game was one in which the boys of the class used to indulge, which caused us considerable distress: they would cut elderberry stems on the way to school, hollow out the stem and then blow haws at us through the pipe. But they had to be very careful because Miss Wren knew exactly what everyone did.

In winter, Bell Lane Infants school was warm. We enjoyed the homely comfort of a coal fire in the classroom and were occasionally reduced to uncontrollable giggles when our teacher, Miss Wren, would hoist her skirts to reveal be-knickered legs, cosily encased in dark brown interlock directoires, as she warmed

herself in front of the open fire.

Apart from *Old Lobb we* continued to read from the large sheets or word lists attached to a wooden pole that was fixed to the blackboard. Miss Wren had a high chair in addition to the blackboard and we would be summoned out in groups of three or four at a time to read to her individually around the high chair. She overcame the chalk problem by wearing a blue- and-white-flowered overall.

There were occasional walks to Shotover in the summer to see the haymaking. One of our classmates, Billy Robertson, was actually allowed to fork up some hay. I was very impressed. Billy always seemed a sad little boy and was constantly in difficulties at school because he failed invariably to reach the toilet in time and usually had to go home early.

There were other outings, of course. The Police used to put on road safety films and this would involve a trek from school to Fane's field (at the back of the Big School wall in Church Road, Wheatley). Here, we would sit down on the grass and watch, with all the children from the Big School, *A Ride with Uncle Jim*. Most of us had seen the film before and some knew the script by heart. Uncle Jim was a lorry driver and would comment on motoring and pedestrian misdemeanours from the comfort of the driving cab. It did make quite an impression on us. The mobile cinema arrangements also always caused a certain amount of excitement amongst the boys.

Occasionally, PC 'Blondie' Bryant from Wheatley Police Station would come along to the Bell Lane Infants School and bring some ammunition with him. I understood them to be bullets and we were all warned never to touch anything that we did not understand. Bullets or anything similar were absolutely taboo. After that I spent ages looking in gutters for interesting finds but never ever found anything vaguely exciting. It was all rather disappointing.

Acting out nursery songs and rhymes was still part of the school routine even in Miss Wren's class. These were lovely warm and happy times and so much better than those early days of uncertainty and dilemma. But I did miss those band practice days that we had enjoyed with Mrs Forty a couple of years previously. Then, the boys of the class always made a beeline for the drums and somehow or other the girls were beaten in the rush to the box stored under the Chapel stage. It always seemed to be so unfair as once again I would find myself consigned to the triangle. Nevertheless, the band was an important part of the day's proceedings and any ill-feeling that had initially existed was dissipated by the end of the practice. Puffed with pride and deafened by the noise, the class would again quietly resume its normal activities. The band was fun: I did miss it.

Drawing was a favourite lesson although all lessons from now on at Bell Lane seemed to assume greater importance than previously. We had only white chalk to portray budding Michelangelo masterpieces: the coloured variety seemed not to be available. Drawing I enjoyed: it was fun - that is, until the morning when all the class was told to illustrate the story of Jesus with the disciples on the Sea of Galilee in a fishing boat. The subject seemed simple enough: so, full of enthusiasm and with tongue clenched between teeth and brow furrowed with concentration, I endeavoured to show off my artistic skills.

"No, dear," sighed Miss Wren, "your drawing of Jesus is not good. In future if you want to draw Jesus, you must not draw him like that. You must put a cross in the place where you intend him to be!"

With Jesus banned from my artistic efforts, I was quite devastated and felt

sure that he would not have minded or raised any objection as to how he was depicted so long as I remained mindful of him. My Mother saw no problem and laughed. She said that she had encountered similar problems at my age. Apparently, there was a picture in her parents' dining room. It was of a group of First World War soldiers all wearing tin hats, under which was the caption: "I am with you always". The result was that she spent most of her early years convinced that Jesus always wore a tin hat! For the rest of my time in Miss Wren's class, I remained very confused as to how exactly Jesus really looked and it did rather worry me. Many years later, my mother-in-law, whose painting skills at an early age were of a similarly primitive nature, told me that she had had a teacher with a more subtle approach to matters of such delicacy:

"Wonderful, Maudie ... what is it?"

The Americans from Holton Park and from their tented camp in Sandy Piece continued to wander down into the village. It seemed that most of the women in the village had some sort of job there: many continued to take in laundry and as stated previously, were prepared to work all hours. Certainly, those who worked "up the park" seemed to be never short of those extras which at the time I felt it would have been nice to have had. They always appeared to have plenty of sweets and cigarettes, and very generously seemed eager to share them with the villagers. Life was obviously good if you were 'in' with the right people and I did so wonder why we were not.

"Got any gum, chum?" my classmates continued to yell as the Americans sauntered through the village.

"Can't think what their mothers must be thinking of, letting their kids scrounge like that," my mother would say.

I listened but thought it did not seem such a bad idea if sweets and chewing gum was so easily obtained as a result. But deep down, I knew that I would not have had the courage or cheek to ask from a complete stranger. The demand for "gum" by the children continued unabated and was given unstintingly.

"Don't talk to anyone you don't know," my parents urged.

I tried to remember but did wonder how I could take chewing gum from anyone and not say "thank you". I felt that perhaps my parents did not fully understand the situation.

There was one bright spell when Peggy Redman from the Black bungalows in London Road informed my mother that a Sammy Darknell, an injured American pilot, was at the Holton Park Hospital and had told her that he was fed up with the place! At the same time, my mother's mother had heard from relatives in the States that Sammy was "stuck in a hospital in the grounds of a gentleman's house" near Oxford and was anxious for a transfer to the American hospital in Cambridge. He did not know that my mother, his cousin, lived a short distance away. She never did meet him because by the time she had confirmed the details, he had been transferred and under the wing of my uncle at Kings Lynn and my grandmother, his Aunt. Peggy worked at the hospital at Holton as a ward maid and got to know him well. She was as sad as my mother that my mother and Sammy never actually met up with each other. During the latter part of our year in Miss Wren's class, we were encouraged to write little notes to the servicemen - not to anyone in particular. These notes were kept simple and forwarded from school through one of the service organizations. It was always a thrill when the class received replies to our efforts. These arrived on blue-crested white cards and were

put on the mantelpiece in the classroom for us to try to read. Usually there were difficulties because the servicemen always wrote in looped 'grown-up' writing and we, at that stage were only just able to print. Looped writing came later and there was always a severe reprimand if anyone was silly enough to attempt to do anything else other than printing. It was so even later when we arrived at the 'Big School' in Church Road. Looped writing was for adults or so we were informed. My Father saw no reason why it was such a sin to use 'double-writing' but at school, rules were rules.

In Miss Wren's class we were only ever allowed to use pencil. Ink would have been too messy. The humble biro was not yet in common use and even four years later at Grammar School, biros were considered far too stylish and modern to be allowed for serious schoolwork! Fountain pens were permitted - but biros, not at all.

In 1943-4 I was ready to go to the 'Big School' in Church Road, and again I was full fears and anxieties. How would I manage? I had become used to Miss Wren's class with its cosy informality. Big School was going to be different.

Actually, it was not - well, not at first. I knew Mrs Chapman, the Standard One teacher. She had taught my father; indeed, she had taught most of the class' parents! She always looked the same. Her grey hair was sparse and covered with a grey hairnet with tiny curls poking out at the edges. She wore black metal-rimmed spectacles with thick lenses and was married to Hurrill Chapman, a local builder and undertaker. Every morning I saw her on my way to school taking a short cut to Church Road through the allotments that used to back onto her house, Rosemary Cottage, in London Road to a gateway that opened on to Church Road. Her garb was usually the same: two astrakhan coats - one white, one black - and these were worn alternatively over a variety of indoor clothing. The coats were worn winter and summer alike. At first, I thought they were knitted with an intricate twist stitch. I had not realized that animals grew wool like that. As with Miss Wren, Mrs Chapman had a high chair from which she would read to us at the end of the day. She also had a high desk from which she conducted registration. It was from Mrs Chapman that I was first introduced to the stories of Conan Doyle and in particular to the tales of Sherlock Holmes. *The Speckled Band* was a favourite. *The Just So* stories we all enjoyed but *The House at Pooh Corner* and other stories by A A Milne I imagined must have been written for very young children. Somehow or other I felt that I must have by-passed the age group for which they were intended. I loathed them.

In Mrs Chapman's class I shared a desk with a hinged lid and flap-up seat with my friend, Margaret Wheeler. We were all given exercise writing books with lines and maths books with squared paper covered with different coloured covers to distinguish separate subjects. There was a strange system in practice. When using the lined books, we had to miss a line out and write on every second line. When we reached the end of the book, it was necessary to turn the book upside down and then use the lines in between and use it from the other end! This ensured that no paper was ever wasted. It was indeed a valuable commodity and waste of any kind was frowned upon. The squared arithmetic books were not so versatile. For daily mental arithmetic, torn up envelopes were slit and used. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was wasted!

Our desks were equipped with ink wells and from time to time the ink monitor from an older class would go to each desk and pour a concoction of ink

and water from an earthenware cider-type jug complete with cork and rubber bung. This had to last a considerable time. We were given pencils and later pens; we were allowed new pen-nibs occasionally once we had been taught to use them properly. We had to take great care of the nibs lest they became twisted and refused to write. Most pens 'bit the dust' literally when the contents of the inkwells began to dry up and the sediment at the bottom thickened and caught in the nib. New blotting paper was given out at the beginning of term and this was expected to last. It did not, of course: blotting paper dipped in ink was the perfect missile and could be launched from a well-angled ruler! The boys were particularly good at this type of 'sport'.

Our school day at Church Road began with a hymn and prayer led by Mr Key, the Headmaster. As there was no large assembly room, all the doors of the classrooms were opened and he would wander from one door to the other during the service, his voice ranging from a whisper at the further point from Standard One to a bellow when he was actually speaking from the door leading to our room. The system worked well enough. Apart from the prayers in the morning, there was 'grace' at lunchtime when once more the doors to all the classrooms were flung open so that we could hear Mr Key's voice. This ritual was repeated at 3.30pm when we were dismissed to our homes following a closing prayer.

As far as I was able to discern, Mr Key was an aloof character and best kept at a distance. I was always a little frightened of him. He taught the older children, Standard Six, but was also responsible for a number of bizarre punishments which even at seven years of age I found a little disconcerting and downright odd. At the end of each playtime he would come out into the playground which meant that the area bordering on to the churchyard was the boys' area and the rest of the school was for the girls. On entering the playground to announce the end of playtime, a whistle would blast out and everyone - and I mean *everyone* - would stand stock still whether it be in mid-skip or mid-anything, and woe betide any child who dared to move! A silence then settled on the playground and he could be heard moving amongst the boys and talking to them although we could not hear what exactly was said. This period of silence following the first whistle was absolute and would be followed by a second blast which meant that we were all to line up in front of the school steps in class order ready for filing into our classrooms. If by any chance any noise should break the silence between the whistle blasts he would institute a number of bizarre punishments: one of his favourites was to line up a class and then in single file, make each individual walk heel-to-toe around the perimeter of the playground, holding their tongue at the same time. I was never quite sure what result exactly this was supposed to produce. He had been known to enforce this punishment on a class of children walking out in the street - usually between Church Road and the Merry Bells - where Standards Four and Five had their lessons. This particular form of 'correction' was never imposed on me beyond the Church Road school entrance although I was forced to undergo the heel-toe-tongue punishment in the school playground once when someone in the playground circle around me spoke just after the first whistle had gone!

Another favoured punishment for boys and girls alike, was to force miscreants to walk around the playground with hands on their heads! Such a punishment, had I had to undergo it for any length of time, would have sent me into a giddy faint. Fortunately for me, it did not happen. Corporal punishment was accepted as a normal part of school routine and for emphasis, a swishy cane was

kept prominently at the side of his desk and was used on the boys with some frequency.

One aspect of Mr Key's 'discipline' which I found totally degrading was the fact that toilet paper was not allowed in the toilets! Should such a commodity ever be necessary, a roll was kept on his desk and this would be handed out, a sheet at a time! Even at this age, I failed to understand why a Headmaster needed to waste precious time dealing with such menial tasks. He was not cruel in the accepted sense of the word but some of his actions towards the more sensitive children were difficult to understand. He was a strict disciplinarian and seemed to be highly respected by the parents although it is well to remember that this was the 1940s, a time when people tended to accept situations without too many questions. To have done so would have been on a par with lack of patriotism. The 'glass ceiling' syndrome was not the invention of the 21st century; it was well and truly in force sixty years beforehand when aspirations and ambitions were not encouraged among the 'lower orders'!

The teacher in Standard Two was Miss Sharpe, somewhat younger in years than most of the other teachers at school. As a nervous and rather introspective child, her sarcasm was difficult for me to understand and accept. I dreaded going to school. In retrospect, she was obviously very keen to introduce new ideas. We did modelling and made scenes from *Hiawatha,* by Longfellow. We brought turf, watered it and put it on a tea tray. It was cut regularly with scissors to keep the 'site' looking trim. Hand mirrors were used to portray the lake and we painted Red Indian tents and made a totem pole. The result was most effective. We kept silkworms which were ordered from a silk farm in Kent and we were all asked to search for mulberry leaves to feed the worms. Apparently, these little creatures could live on dandelions but once fed on mulberry leaves, they would not return to dandelions!

I managed to find a mulberry tree in Holton and would collect a few leaves from there to take to school for the silkworms. As far as the teacher was concerned it was the only thing that I ever did right! We kept tadpoles in a tank and took it in turns to feed them. One of my classmates from Littleworth shared my difficulty and frequently incurred Miss Sharpe's wrath but unlike me, decided to something about it - and settled on a drastic plan of revenge: he put something called anti-gas powder into the tank and killed all the livestock in it - or at least that is something he was accused of doing. There was a searching enquiry and life in Standard Two was very difficult for a while. During this time, I became more and more nervous of school which unfortunately was interpreted as sulkiness. My school work deteriorated and Miss Sharpe nicknamed me "Muddlecome"! I was very upset particularly as erstwhile friends in class also began to refer to me in the same way. The moodiness was in fact an early indicator of a bout of depression which unfortunately was not recognized at the time as possible in a child as young as eight years of age. Standard Two for me represented one of the unhappiest times at school. It culminated with Terry Crimmins' death, as previously stated.

His death was of concern not only to the school but to the wider community of Wheatley generally. Wheatley-was still very much a closed village, events within its perimeter still being the concern of its inhabitants. The evacuees by this time - 1945 - were now accepted, and the feeling was that a tragedy like this concerned everyone.

However, the sense of gloom and personal unhappiness in Standard Two

was somewhat mitigated by its last dramatic weeks. Current events caused our parents to listen avidly to all the BBC news reports. The wireless was usually red hot with use. Shouts of "Shhh...!" followed such announcements as: "This is the news with Alvar Liddell/Frank Phillips reading it." The news bulletins were sacrosanct.

Even so, Mr Key's appearance one afternoon during our sewing class in the hut in the playground took us rather by surprise.

"It is possible, just possible that tomorrow might be a holiday," he pronounced. "Peace might be declared at any time," he continued. "However, if the war is not over, would you please come to school as usual."

We listened and commented to each other and as our voices became more and more excited and the volume of noise grew, he barked out:

"Quiet! Quiet!"

The noise level decreased. We knew better than to argue.

It was a bit of an anti-climax really because at 8 years of age, I could never imagine things being any different from the way they had always been. Apart from the Bridge Hotel bomb, as a child growing up in Wheatley, we seemed to have suffered no particular hardships. I suppose that we had been cushioned from the harsh realities of the conflict.

Mr Key was right. Peace was declared.

Things brightened up a little in Standard Three and here I began to enjoy school again. Mrs Hayes, our teacher, had a reputation for being difficult, although I always found her helpful. Mr Hart from Milton also took Standard Three for some lessons and he had an easy manner, although he too, was a strict disciplinarian. He used to wear a heavy sleeveless leather jacket throughout the year and the general feeling of the class was that he felt the cold! Mrs Hayes elicited a certain sympathy. She had heavily bandaged legs and walked with a certain difficulty. Standing all day long in front of a large class could hardly have helped her legs or her uncertain temper. We never argued or answered back when either of them was taking the class.

Children who went to school during the war years rarely had a male teacher and this of course, was true at Wheatley schools. Apart from Mr Key at the Big School in Church Road, all the teachers were women: the men were usually away at the war. Mr Hart in Standard 3 was the first male teacher we had had since first starting school and Standard 3 was my first year at school in peacetime.

School was not confined to the main building in Church Road: the huts in the playground also played an important part in our lessons. A large hut in the main part of the playground was used to teach cookery and to house the domestic equipment for the girls in Standard Six. I think that this was also used for teaching woodwork to the boys in the senior classes. The smaller hut next door was used for needlework lessons with Mrs Chambers.

Our dressmaking repertoire was not extensive but basic and, on the whole useful. The first garment that all the girls had to make was pilch knickers. Boring, terribly boring! We all agreed that none of us would ever wear them and we longed to be able to do something a little more adventurous but the ability to make knickers apparently was the basis on which all aspiring Christian Diors and Norman Hartnells founded their fashion houses and reputations! So, knickers it was!

Some of the older girls were really quite expert with the sewing needle and some made very attractive dresses but my own sewing ability never amounted to a

great deal. We were also taught knitting and embroidery and great emphasis was placed on learning and practising the correct stitches. Every girl had to make a sampler of the various embroidery stitches that we had learnt. Some of the class also did patchwork which I found both enjoyable and potentially useful although we were always denied the pleasure of seeing the finished article because we never finished our ambition-inspired quilts.

For me, Classes Four and Five were perhaps the best years of my early school life at the Big School. Mrs Chambers had the almost impossible job of trying to teach in the same room at the Merry Bells, two groups consisting of nearly 60 children often and eleven years of age with differing abilities - ranging from one child who was educationally sub-normal with its attendant problems to the opposite extreme of children with potential Grammar School ability. She had a mammoth task there and yet somehow or other, we got by. The educational experts would have had a field day had this been the 21st century, but then as far as I was aware, no-one ever questioned the situation. Private education was deemed necessary for the 'bettermus' classes only and even had any of the parents with whom we mixed had other ideas, this would have been condemned! With hindsight it is easy to smile but class consciousness was a serious business then! It was accepted that we were the workhorses of the next generation. Airs and graces were definitely not encouraged and sadly good education was still regarded as "not for the likes of us". Enlightenment of an educational nature was still light years away. I suppose that acceptance of one's position in the village hierarchy was the cement that kept village society ticking over.

Each day Mrs Chambers would collect us after Assembly at the Big School and in pairs, would walk us down to the Merry Bells for lessons. This did present certain difficulties as the large room there would have been in use for the usual village activities the night before: Whist Drives; Beetle Drives; and dancing. Before we could start lessons, we had to set out tables, chairs and forms for lessons; all books had to be collected from a storeroom outside at the back of the building where each individual child's books and pens were housed in canvas bags, each one with a child's name on it. These bags were kept on shelves that lined the storeroom overnight. It meant, of course, that lessons were always slightly delayed whilst our schoolroom was being prepared. Occasionally, the debris of the last evening's activities were left littering the toilets but these were not days of early enlightenment and most of us were not too bothered by some of the boys' graphic explanations. There were only two toilets for sixty of us - one for the boys; one for the girls.

The room was warmed by two open but guarded coal fires at the widest part of the room and in 1947, when I was a pupil there, the bitter weather made life very difficult indeed. It was so cold that we used to sit all day at our tables with our coats on. The path to the Merry Bells from Church Road was unpaved and rutted and the overnight frosts and snows of that year made walking to the classrooms at the bottom very difficult indeed. Mrs Chambers clad in overcoat would walk from one fire to the other whilst we would shiver should anyone foolishly leave one of the doors to the passageway outside unfastened. At noon sharp, the classroom was cleared for 'dinners' as this was the main lunch centre for the Big School as well and every Friday we had to spend the afternoon with cloths and hot water, cleaning the tables so that they would be free from stickiness for lessons the following week. We all survived. So did Mrs Chambers.

Mr Benson, who had taught at the Big School prior to military service,

returned to Wheatley lodging at Mr and Mrs Chesterman's in London Road, as before. My parents had known him previously although he did not teach me because by that time, I was already in one of the 'senior' classes. The older children from Holton came to Wheatley by coach each day whilst the younger Holton children went locally to the school at Holton opposite the Green. There were no commercial bus routes from Holton at this time and if you were unfortunate enough to miss the school bus, you walked. Mrs Harris from Milton taught at Holton School and would cycle past us each day on the London Road on her way to Holton and we would politely bid her "Good Morning" as she passed us.

After Mrs Chambers' classes, the Standard Six children returned to the main building of the Big School where Mr Key attended to their educational needs. I was never certain what these were as the Standard Six boys always seemed to be employed in digging Mr Key's front garden! They had, apparently, other duties as well which perhaps were not so pleasant although I could never exactly understand what these were. I learned from some of the other children that because the school was not on the main sewer, their duties also included emptying a cesspit at the back of the school toilets. Certainly, they seemed to spend a lot of time digging in the area by the wall at the side of Standard Two classroom but what exactly was done there was a bit of a mystery as far as the younger children were concerned. A wall surrounded the area which added to the mystery. By comparison, digging Mr Key's garden seemed pleasant enough but what it did for one's educational needs it is harder to say. The boys were also occupied in picking off the daisy heads on his lawn. Parents certainly seemed unaware and such activities raised no particular concern.

Come 1948 the talk was of 'The Scholarship'. Some parents talked of nothing else and from what my classmates said their hopes of brand-new bicycles depended very much on the results of this examination. If successful, the boys involved would go to Thame Grammar School and the girls to Holton Park Girls' Grammar School, from 1949. If ever there was a case of sexist talk, this was it!

"A good education is so important for a boy "Girls don't need it ... they only get married anyway ..." Some of the worst offenders were women. The results were eagerly awaited and neighbourhood bitchiness was at its worst. Most of the candidates themselves were, I am sure, not really aware as to just how important its effects could be. I sat for the examination one morning but at that time was not overawed by the occasion. Few of us were. We did not even discuss the questions amongst ourselves later and certainly no-one discussed the questions in class. The examination was over - so forget it!

Eventually, the results were notified to our parents. There were two successful candidates: Ronnie Clifton and myself, both from London Road. Our respective parents were delighted at the prospect of our educational advancement although my poor Father was subjected to all sorts of advice mainly from people whose vision was limited by sheer old-fashioned prejudice! One customer of my father's even went so far as to go down to the Local Education Committee and query whether her son "could do a swap" with my allocated place!

"I thought I should tell you Mr Tombs," she announced, "just in case they contact you! Education is wasted on girls!"

Fortunately, my place at Grammar school was safe. The Local Education Authority did not engage in swaps! It was shortly before the end of the summer term at Wheatley Big School in 1949 that my mother and I were invited to attend

Holton Park school for a short meeting with other parents and girls to meet teachers there, acquaint ourselves with their working methods and to settle any queries that had arisen following the scholarship notification, prior to our starting there the following September.

My Mother was nervous - as was I: we hardly spoke to each other as we walked along the main London Road, opposite the high stone wall that encompassed Holton Park House and the grounds of the military hospital. Along the length of the wall were several small wooden doors - locked and let into the wall. Occasionally, one door would open and a workman would emerge hastily only to lock the door behind him. Even at this stage, the Grammar School and its environs were something of an isolated unit, seemingly neither belonging to Wheatley nor indeed to Holton. To go there at all was unusual and seemed to emphasize its isolation and ultimately mine as well. I was not a naturally gregarious child and thus was not unduly bothered by the situation although it was obvious that from now on my contacts would be mainly with people who came from outside Wheatley.

To be absolutely fair, to have a Grammar School here at all was unusual. 1948/9 saw its transition from Wood Eaton Manor to Holton Park - so there was no tradition of a school of this kind before in the vicinity. Wheatley was still a country village with memories that remained deeply rooted in the "them" and "us" era. Although nowadays it is considered politically incorrect to talk in such terms; it was still entrenched in an old- fashioned class structure that went back centuries.

Sadly, to most people - working people of our background, that is - the Grammar School still represented money, privilege and what some recalled as "upper-class pretentiousness". It meant, however erroneously, not doing anything "useful" until one was 18! It meant being a "burden" on one's parents when all your relatives were talking about work and "getting a *real* job". It meant not adding to the family's income when all the others were talking about the extras that they could now afford when mine would be "making sacrifices". Sadly, it seemed to force the family into some sort of social apartheid and straddling the divide between 'them' and 'us'. Actually, as a family we did not feel any different. Why should we? But we were certainly made to feel isolated - not just by erstwhile friends but by relatives as well. They could see no justification whatsoever in our sort of family needing to go to a Grammar School at all and most certainly not for a girl!

As we walked to Holton Park that day back in 1949, my isolation from friends and family was almost tangible; I sensed that my mother probably felt the same. In the more enlightened days of the 21st century, such ostracism seems ridiculous. It was therefore a very serious and worried little girl that walked up to her prospective new school that afternoon. At eleven years of age I felt that in addition to having to prove myself and do well, the onus was on me to remain celibate for all time! I decided that I had no intention of getting married anyway. Indeed, in spite of my parents repeatedly saying: "Not all girls marry" or "She could be widowed early" to intrusive and questioning relatives, it did seem to be the most heinous crime in the book to have a Grammar school education and also to marry later! So, at eleven years of age, the choice seemed simple enough: marriage or Grammar school. The options were obviously quite incompatible. Later on, I found that apart from two married teachers at Holton Park, all the rest were single - which at the time, I supposed proved the point! I really was not interested in marriage anyway!

Mr Harry Ingram, a London Road neighbour and customer at the shop, was the council road sweeper at this time and was busy working along by the wall opposite Morland House. He saw us coming and shouted out to my mother:

"So, it's the front door for you today then Ellen, is it?"

He had worked at Holton Park as a groom years before at the same time that my mother had worked for the Balfours, the previous occupants of the Holton Park House. His work at the stables and my mother's job as kitchen maid at the house, occasionally brought them into contact and he knew the family very well. Apparently, in their day "Staff' had to use the Staff Entrance and never, ever the front door. As a very insignificant pupil there, it was many years before I was allowed to use the front door but as the parent of a current pupil my mother was now welcome to use it at any time and I think the idea amused her. At least Mr Ingram did not rate her as an idiot bent on undermining the family cohesion. It made a change.

The front door was opened by Mrs Blucher, the School Secretary of the time, who showed us up to the chairs in the front hall with chairs continuing out and beyond the front staircases into the central hall. Mother and I sat down and both of us looked nervously along the row where most of the other visitors had already taken their seat. The majority were studiously looking down at the floor in silence.

They seemed a normal lot: no-one had two heads; no-one spoke with an exaggerated accent - or rather those who did dare to whisper and look around seemed to have the same sort of accent as mine. We were all as nervous as one another. What a relief! Most of us sat, eyes averted, carefully surveying our Startrite-shod feet and clean white ankle socks with just the occasional chair scraping on the flag-stoned floor.

At one stage, the lesson bell rang out and the hall was filled with girls all presumably making for their next lesson. That bit of the proceedings I did find daunting. They all seemed so much more grown-up than me, so much more self-assured. Eventually, a very slim lady with frizzy grey hair in suit and high heels, clattered down the stone staircase and called out several names from a list that she was carrying. Mine was one of them. Three of us then followed her back up the stairs to a room off the landing where she proceeded to 'lay down the ground rules'. She told us that she wanted us to complete a holiday diary over the summer and to hand it in to her at the beginning of our first term. With the preliminaries completed, she smiled at us and said:

"Girls, this is a beautiful place: you are very privileged. History was made here. Work hard and enjoy your schooldays here."

Over the years I came to know Mrs Arrowsmith very well. She never ceased being a teacher and treating all her pupils and ex-pupils as if they were still in her charge at school! I corresponded with her for years after I left Holton Park and was always amused to receive my letters back, carefully read and commented on as I raised points I thought to be of mutual interest. With her red pen still at the ready - even in retirement - she would insert comments, correct grammar, amend punctuation and underline with notes alongside in the margin. Typical of such remarks were:

"No, Christine. This is a common noun and as such requires only lower-case lettering."!!

As a very elderly lady, well into her eighties, she was still a stickler for the

correct version of things. Even pronunciation came within her sphere for correction - if it seemed necessary.

My husband and I remember with some amusement an incident when we met her in Oxford one morning shortly after our marriage:

"We do not come down to Oxford very often these days," I exclaimed. "We both work in London."

"Oh good, Christine, good," she replied. "How nice to find you pronounce 'often' properly! You see, the't' is silent."

My husband suppressed his mirth with some difficulty. Her teaching days certainly did not cease at 60 years of age! She was a character and a very loveable one at that. My school contemporaries remember her with great affection.

As we walked home from Holton Park later that interview afternoon, the strained silence of our earlier outward walk was replaced by a happier mood. In spite of all our fears, everyone there had seemed to be boringly 'normal'.

Chapter 20: Secondary School Days

That first morning at Holton Park was a difficult one for us as we sat quietly and very self-consciously in our new school uniforms of navy gymslips and white Viyella blouses awaiting registration. We were very mindful of being in an old building (we had to wear 'house shoes' or light shoes to protect the floors and staircases - particularly the front one which was stone.) My uniform was provided courtesy of the Local Education Authority who allowed my parents a uniform grant to purchase what was necessary, the receipts for which I had to produce to Miss Davis, the Headmistress, at the beginning of the term. I suspect that there were others in the class who were in a similar situation.

I also qualified for free school meals - at which Mother drew the line! Clothing was one thing: food was quite another. No-one in her family was going to have free school meals! When the notification came through of my entitlement, Mother went berserk. She had her pride and took the next bus down to the educational offices in New Road and plainly stated her objections. It caused something of a stir there as nothing in their rules covered the situation where those who had an entitlement actually refused them!

Our outer uniform consisted of a navy coat/raincoat and navy berets. Some of us sported navy and yellow-striped scarves which over the weekend saw extra service as football supporters' gear when Headington United played at home as by coincidence, they were the same colour. Stephanie Coppock, a classmate whose Father was their manager at the time, urged us to wear them to show our support. We all had to wear brown lace-up shoes and at the beginning of each term, our form teacher would check that each article we wore conformed to the uniform code and was marked with our name - right down to our knickers and socks! There were never any arguments; indeed any offending article that did not conform to the rules was marked down in a notebook and rechecked the following week. It was a well-ordered life but a happy one. Corporal punishment had no place here and I never saw any behaviour that ever warranted anything so draconian. There were detentions during lunch hours occasionally for not producing homework but that was all. After-school detentions were never possible because public transport was a problem once the regular school coaches had departed. The atmosphere was a caring one and I enjoyed my schooldays there immensely, as did most of my

classmates.

The girls came from a wide radius, coaches bringing them in from Chinnor, Thame, Towersey and Risinghurst - with two girls from Long Crendon. The girls from Forest Hill, Stanton St John, Garsington and Cuddesdon usually cycled and those from Stadhampton came on the Thame bus. For the same reasons as after-school detentions, after-school sports fixtures were not possible. Most fixtures of that sort were arranged for the weekend when willing parents would use their cars to transport their daughters back and forth. On the whole life was great and many indeed were the opportunities.

My first day at Holton was a bit of a disaster, having lost myself somewhere between the toilets and the back staircase. I was rescued by Miss Worthy who took me by the hand and very pointedly deposited me in the vicinity of my first-year room upstairs.

"You really are the silliest little girl of your year!" she exclaimed. "You really must get a sense of direction!"

That comment showed great foresight. Sadly, I still have no sense of direction and continue to turn road maps upside down whenever branching off the main route!

Our First Form room which overlooked the moat on one side and the school playing fields on the other was light and airy and a world away from our Merry Bells classroom. Miss Risden, our First Form teacher - dressed always in sensible tweed skirts, lisle stockings and flat shoes - was one of the old school and a strict disciplinarian. Her lessons were quiet, strictly controlled and rather frightening for someone who had come from the free and easy atmosphere of a leisurely primary school. We went in awe of her. She had the art of sarcasm finely tuned. No-one ever argued with her.

She decided in our English lessons that unless we could enunciate correctly and open up our flat Oxfordshire vowels, our world of work would be a very limited one indeed. Great stress was placed on speaking properly and the chanting of "How Now Brown Cow" was no laughing matter! We "ee-ed" and we "ah-ed"; we "oo-ed" and we "ing-ed" en class and individually but for some reason or another, the 'right' sound usually evaded us as we collapsed into giggles - quickly suppressed. The one exercise that really stretched us to the limits of our linguistic abilities was: "Into the blue, the doomed schooner soon moved", which was intoned at the beginning of each First Form English lesson. Of course, none of us dared speak a la Risden at home as that would have confirmed the family class warriors' worst fears that we were beginning to develop airs and graces that were, according to them, inconsistent with normal working-class life! Heaven forbid! Speaking standard English and eliminating our rural accents assumed great importance throughout that first year. Afterwards, as we progressed from the First Form, flattened vowel sounds were assumed to have been 'cured'. Unfortunately, for poor Miss Risden such success may have been short-lived: whilst resting one day in the sick bay next to the art room - situated to the right of the front door - after having been taken ill, she heard a voice which she immediately recognized as hailing from one of her First-Formers:

"I ain't got no yaller!"

Poor woman! It must have put back her recovery by weeks! Nevertheless, she persevered although I gather there was some uncertainty as to the extent of her success in taming and mellowing the more extreme accents of our year. A good

sense of humour was the number one priority at all times during those elocution months.

As time went on and further subjects were added to our curriculum, we rued the day that the Romans had set foot on our shores. Latin and French took on a new importance: we declined our nouns, parsed our sentences, conjugated our verbs endlessly and chanted our irregular ones with some earnestness - although not always with enthusiasm. We pondered our past participles, studied our subjunctives, considered our conditionals and at the end of it all, debate still raged as to the correct use of 'would' and 'should[1]. Those first three years were rigorous and thorough but happy and mind-broadening, nevertheless.

There was a downside: I was absolutely hopeless in the gym and on the sports field. We had tennis in summer when my parents, more in hope than expectation, bought me a racquet from Abrahams store on Magdalen Bridge, Oxford. There were the occasional rounders and in winter, dressed in navy knickers and white blouse, we would tear round the hockey field and netball pitch. I loathed both games with a passion and found myself last out of the cloakroom prior to a match and first back there afterwards. I was awkward and usually the last in the line to be selected for team events. It did not worry me unduly although it would have been nice occasionally to have been selected before the 'rabbits' came on line!

Sport for me in winter was a nightmare as I struggled to keep warm, hands and feet covered in chilblains and legs blue with cold. I did try; I did run as fast as I could and jump as high as I was able but it was obvious to most people that I was never going to be another Maureen Gardner (the 1948 Olympic athlete). Physical training was also a grim reminder of my sporting limitations. With arms and legs going in all directions at the same time and with my co-ordination at the lowest point on the register, I really was a sorry sports specimen. My long-suffering sports teacher, Mrs Rigden, saw my limitations and happily for both of us did not force the impossible. As far as my father was concerned - and he had always enjoyed and been good at sport in his youth -I must have been a dreadful disappointment. His cousin, Tom Shepherd, had played cricket for Surrey. The family sporting genes seemed to have bypassed my genetic make-up completely.

Break-times were occupied watching the more athletically-inclined amongst us on the sports field away from the main building, or spent on the seats along the gravel paths chatting and giggling as the teacher on break duty occasionally passed by. We could see the island but that was out of reach to we mortals of the lower forms (from First to Fifth Forms). The island was sacrosanct and only to be used by that illustrious group - the Sixth Form and Staff. As far as we were concerned, they were God and very remote from the rest of us.

Grandad Suter, by now a widower, having been waited on hand-and- foot all his life and completely untrained in matters domestic - being bereft of the most basic kitchen skills - was deemed incapable of looking after himself and so came to live at High Wycombe with my mother's sister, Aunt May and her husband. He had mellowed a little in old age but in matters educational had changed not one iota. He came to stay with us occasionally and was then accommodated in the front room which was placed at his disposal. Homework then had to be done in the bedroom and on this point, he was as dogmatic as ever. He strongly disapproved of homework and my mother used to say that, when she was at school, a well-intentioned teacher used to give her class lists of spellings to be learnt at home. She dared not produce her list whilst he was there as it would lead to the inevitable

outburst of:

"You leave your work at school. Don't bring it home with you. I don't believe in it!"

She became quite adept at learning her spellings under the bedclothes at night. She knew they would have been confiscated had she been careless enough to have left them around.

No, Grandad had not changed. He was as opposed as ever to education for women and never once did he enquire as to my progress at school. He had said his 'piece' at the outset and his convictions remained constant.

We all looked forward to the annual carol service as we were lined up in pairs and crocodiled from school to Holton Church. There was a wonderful Christmasy atmosphere about that event as with shoes brightly polished and gymslips neatly pressed, we walked along an almost deserted road to the church. Most parents were already in their seats when we arrived on that last day of term. Our teachers walked alongside - all with hats and no-nonsense country shoes apart from Mrs Arrowsmith who as usual, teetered along on her high heels. It was an ecumenical service and the Wheatley Chapel minister, Dr McIntosh, took part. The Reverend Hooper from the rectory across the road from the church led the proceedings. The Sixth Form used the stairs at the back of the church outside and participated from the gallery but this was a special privilege and to go upstairs those 'outside' were compelled to change into their plimsolls as a means of reducing the noise on the stairs - and presumably wear and tear on the gallery.

The Reverend Hooper and his wife were a delightful couple and straight from a clip of an Ealing comedy film. He had a large upright bicycle on which he used to ride and, in the summer, wore a large white panama hat. Mrs Hooper complemented the picture of the country parson and wife duo. She usually wore flowered dresses and a straw hat - whatever the weather. They were a popular couple and fitted perfectly the role of the spiritual leaders of a small community. The school carol service set the tone for the beginning of the Christmas celebrations. We all loved it.

Prior to that special Christmas service were the 'house' parties. Each of us had been assigned to a house when joining the school in the First Form and we remained loyal to that house - Hampden, Tyndale or Wykeham - until the day we left. Sports fixtures at the end of term were usually inter-house. The House parties appealed to us greatly especially whilst we were in the lower forms as we took our food contributions and happily snacked throughout that particular afternoon. Most of us had never heard of bulimia or other weight-reducing illnesses. We were not targeted in the same way as today's youth by fashionable magazines; most of us could not afford them anyway. It was a different world. Our teachers relaxed a little on House Party afternoons as they drifted in from one party to another. It was all very enjoyable.

Memories of those Holton days crowd into the mind and one little incident of the early 1950s that was particularly amusing and appealing was a Boxing Day hour or so spent at Mrs Hassall's invitation to the Manor House, Wheatley. Several of the girls who lived locally enjoyed the Hassall's' hospitality, laughing and smiling at the spectacle of Mrs Hassall in full Father Christmas rig, emerging rear first from one of the large Tudor chimneys into the room. It was a fun afternoon.

With holidays over, it was back to school in earnest and a return to a very

set routine. Morning assembly took place in the hall overlooking the terrace and rose garden and, in the summer, when the windows and doors were opened onto the garden, we were aware of insects buzzing and continuous birdsong - or so it seemed. There was no traffic noise to interrupt an otherwise wonderful rural setting. Even the proximity of the military hospital had no detrimental effect. We were incredibly privileged - just as Mrs Arrowsmith had told us that we would be on our interview day. Sadly, just how lucky was never really appreciated at the time. Life for us was sheltered and a world away from the busy hustle and buzz of Wheatley or Holton itself.

Miss Davis, our Headmistress, had a small portable platform at the garden end of the hall and after a hymn and prayer, with staff in chairs alongside, we would sit cross-legged on the floor whilst the notices were read out and letters from home handed in. We each had our own hymn book given to us on our first day at Holton which was retained by us until the day we left. 'Assembly' set the tone for the day and most took part in it. The format never changed.

At 10.50am sharp, the bell was vigorously rung by one of the older girls and this signalled the morning break. Here we collected our free milk from the crates outside the back door and purchased a cream bun from a tray set up in the front porch. These were especially welcome and had been recently delivered from the baker's in Wheatley.

Music was an important part of school life at Holton. Some of the girls paid for private piano lessons after school and later on, violin, cello and viola lessons were introduced in the lunch hour for those interested in learning a stringed instrument. A selection of school instruments was available for those who did not possess one of their own but who nevertheless were interested in learning. Mr George at the Triangle cafe gave me a violin on which I practised and subsequently drove my parents, our pet moggy and fellow pupils to distraction. It was painfully obvious to whoever happened to be in my company for any length of time that I had little talent in this particular direction either. I was no Fritz Kreisler, but I did enjoy my lessons! In the summer when all the windows at school were open, the air of studious tranquillity that should have encompassed the area, was shattered more often than not by the tuneless scraping and tuning-up techniques of the school orchestra to which we all aspired. Mrs Hassall, our art teacher, was on break duty one lunch hour and whilst talking to us on the terrace overlooking the Dell, found herself competing with the cacophony of sound that was issuing from the upstairs classroom windows, describing them as "those barbaric instruments". I gathered from the response that she was not a music-lover - or perhaps she was!

At the same time, Miss Ward with great patience, tried to instil in me a love of mathematics. I pondered Pythagoras, lingered long over logarithm tables and muddled my geometry mnemonics. Sadly, it was obvious to all that I was no mathematician either as I struggled to understand algebraic equations and tried in vain to learn other important mathematical formulae. I needed a science for 'O' levels and was eventually advised to concentrate on Biology instead, which I enjoyed apart from the early introduction by Misses Parkin and Knee as to the delights of studying the amoeba and spirogyra - most of which caused my eyes to glaze over and much of the lesson to go over my head. The later dissection of rabbits and earthworms was far more interesting and on one special occasion one of the Garsington girls brought to school a horse foetus in a bucket on her bicycle. I suspect it was a little out of the usual teaching range for dissection but we all

gazed in fascination at this equine specimen and wondered how the teacher was going to dispose of it afterwards.

Art lessons were a great favourite. Mrs Hassall seemed to find something to praise in most of our artistic offerings and in the winter months we set up our easels in the newly constructed hall just across from the old main school building, sometimes composing design work but more often than not doing still-life studies. Art lessons in the summer were a delight with pupils being allowed to set up their easels on either the island, terrace or lawn leading down to the edge of the moat where waterlilies graced the surface by the bridge and moorhens and coots cooed and clucked. Occasionally, we would see a heron swoop and there was also the occasional kingfisher but these were few and we counted ourselves lucky if we saw one.

The school gardens were one of the delights of the school day and were competently managed by Mr Edwards and Mr Jesse Hilbury with occasional help from Mr Young, who acted also as school handyman. They trimmed the grass and kept the lawns in first-class condition, planted the flowers and cared for the collection of shrubs on the island. They clipped the hedges, raked the gravel on the paths round the school and generally made the grounds a joy to behold. Litter was not tolerated and would have merited a telling-off at the very least. But litter was never really a problem as we were all very proud of the school gardens. From the neatly edged lawns outside the front door to the dead-heading of the roses outside the assembly hall overlooking the Dell; from planting and tending the damp-seeking plants by the saddle stones at the side of the moat and to trimming the plants and shrubs on the island which was linked to the main grounds by a rustic bridge, opposite the old house - they managed it all. That bridge initially was something of a mystery and being local I was asked if I could find out who had built it and if it were very old. I asked my father who looked at me oddly and exclaimed:

"You idiot! I helped build that years back when I worked for Culhams!"

It was all rather a let-down but at least the mystery of the bridge was solved.

The stone gamekeeper statue on the left of the moat stood with gun cocked, facing the house. Behind and in front of him were tennis courts in addition to the sports field. The gamekeeper had been there for years. Everyone knew the gamekeeper statue and I was so saddened to find out many years later - in the 1970s - that it had been removed and was then residing in the garden of a neighbouring house in Holton. Such a shame! It really had been part of the Holton Park gardens' scene for so long. My Mother remembered the 'gamekeeper' statue from her days there back in the 1930s.

"What is it doing here?" I asked the occupant.

"The kids would have ruined it," I was told.

"Surely not", I thought at the time. No-one would have dreamt of touching it when I was at school there. It seems that our new freedoms may have changed all that. So sad!

However, thirty years after meeting the 'guardian' of the gamekeeper and almost fifty years after being at school there, I again visited Holton Park gardens and was horrified by what I saw: the lawns were no longer so manicured; the gravel paths which used to contrast sharply with the lawn colouring had been 'tarmac-ed' over; the island was bereft of flowers and shrubs and had reverted to the wild; and sadly the moat appeared dead, murky and stagnant - no waterlilies and no 'flags'

which Miss Ward had taken such a delight in gathering for the school. Instead crisp bags and other rubbish littered the lawns and the moat itself had paper and debris deposited in it including, as far as I could judge from the bridge, a fairly recently completed exercise book. Even the wildlife seemed to have deserted the place - no coots or moorhens were in sight and even Canada geese, which are not particularly fussy birds, seemed to have given the place a miss! The Dell where we used to sit and do 'O'-level revision was restricted: the 1,000-year oak was cordoned off and, perhaps saddest of all, the wisteria that used to cover the walls of the old building overlooking the Dell had all been removed and the area where the gamekeeper statue once stood had been fenced off. The whole place was in need of some tlc from the likes of Messrs Hilbury, Edwards and Young. Even the lodge at the top of the drive where the Young family had once lived looked dilapidated and deserted.

Maybe it is a mistake sometimes to look back. Even the main front hall of the old house was not without a certain sadness. The large table in the front hall graced by the flower arrangement in which Miss Ward always took such pride - and which visitors saw first - was no longer there. It lacked her attention to detail and in the central hall, looking curiously incongruous against the portraits of former residents of the Old House, was a selection of modern 'art' exhibits hung on the wall. The place seemed to have had its soul ripped out. It was so sad. It was a glorious and vibrant place once, the memories of which will always be cherished above anything else.

But let us return to happier times. School functions continued with the county music festivals at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford and with visits to the theatre with school groups. One particular outing caused us some amusement when we were all shepherded along to the Ritz cinema in Oxford to see the film *Hamlet.* For some reason, the film had been coupled with another, *The Black Tent,* a risqué film at that time. But our arrival was badly timed - or perhaps not - as we made our entrance in a large group to our seats, just in time to see Anita Ekberg and Anthony Steele in a passionate embrace. It lightened the afternoon's entertainment quite considerably.

Some of the girls who were studying 'O' level Chemistry went each week to Thame Grammar School where supposedly the laboratories were better equipped. Dr Winifred Leyshon, who I had known most of my life and who lived in a house opposite The Kings Arms at Wheatley - her Father taught my father - came out of retirement to Holton to teach Physics and was well-liked. New staff came as others retired and moved on: Mrs Payne from Holton village took over the School Secretaryship from Mrs Blucher and the Misses Farington, Ottoway and Paterson moved on gradually to other posts away to be replaced eventually by Miss Fison who continued the singing and other musical tuition at school and also the Sheldonian Music festivals.

There were, of course, other trips out - one of which I remember as part of my 'A' level Classics lessons when I saw a particularly bloody production of *Oedipus Rex* at the Holywell Music Rooms. There were other visits throughout the year - including a trip to Kidlington to see the annual agricultural show - which on the whole were interesting and quite enlightening apart from one particular excursion when a rather unimaginative speaker due to talk to us on country matters, treated us to a mind-numbing lecture on the inside workings of the Massey Ferguson tractor! That was, however, the exception. On one occasion we were

walked along in pairs, to Wheatley Secondary Modern School at Littleworth Road, to see the film version of *Henry V* with the lead acted by Laurence Olivier. But inter-schools' activities were rare apart from the weekend sports fixtures which were against usually other Grammar schools. I remember Mrs Arrowsmith giving up one of her precious Saturdays to take a group of us to see the ruins of a manor house at Minster Lovell which we reached in wellingtons and where she still seemed to manage on her high-heeled shoes.

The School Inspector throughout all our Holton schooldays was Lady Helena Asquith, daughter of the Liberal Prime Minister. Lady Helena was a rather dour lady with naturally wavy hair, grey and cut short. She always seemed to wear a plum-coloured tweed costume and usually sat at the back of the class - apparently dozing, always silent and uncommunicative - even during history lessons when we were discussing the merits or otherwise of the Liberal government's home or foreign policies of the 20th century. She must have felt tempted on occasion to intervene, I am sure, and her unique insight would have been welcomed but, of course, she never did.

School life in the upper forms meant lots of hard work but there was also an upside. Our entry into the Fourth Form meant that we began to be treated as adults. No longer did we have to wear the dreaded gymslips and we were actually allowed to wear a skirt - still a navy one but at least it was a start. This had to be below the knee in length - moderation in all things - and for the first time we were allowed to use the terrace and the Dell during break times. This was a special privilege which we really enjoyed and appreciated. It gave us a different view of the gardens. We could see across the field to the military hospital in the distance but in no way did that intrude upon our enjoyment of the scenery. We could walk in the Dell and view at close range the thousand-year-old oak and if we wanted just to relax, we could sit on one of the wooden benches on the terrace and enjoy the atmosphere. Wisteria grew on the walls on that side of the building and cascaded almost to waist level in the summer; all that side of the house was awash with a lilac-blue colouring.

In school itself, we enjoyed the School radio broadcasts and listened to various speakers who included Sir Stephen King-Hall, a favourite from *Children's Hour* days, who spoke on current topics. As we worked towards 'O' levels, our homework increased but we all accepted that such was the importance of good results that we took it in our stride.

It was in the course of my Fourth Form time that I remember hearing news of the death of King George VI. It was during the break before afternoon lessons that Carolyn Staples, a Holton pupil who went home for lunch, returned to school earlier than usual and told the news to Miss Worthy who was on dinner break duty. Miss Worthy quickly went inside school presumably to tell the Staff and Carolyn came and told us. It was sad although it did cause some sort of frisson of excited chatter among us and, rather unpatriotically perhaps, some of the girls wondered aloud as to whether that meant a day's holiday from school. It did not: we were all given the news of the King's death - officially, as we sat down for afternoon classes. The early excited chatter which greeted the original announcement soon died down and most of us were anxious for the afternoon to end so that we could race home and find out more details.

An active interest in current events was encouraged from our earliest days at Holton Park. A mock election prior to the 1950 General Election was arranged

there and all of us were expected to be actively involved. I had not been particularly interested in the 1945 General Election when everything from national government right down to local levels was being 'dusted down' after the upheaval of wartime. I suppose I was really too young to understand what was involved. My parents held very strong socialist views and they harped back to the 1930s when my father was out of work for three years; as far as they were concerned, anything that stopped such an event recurring was to be encouraged. The new ideas and ideals following the 1945 election were eagerly discussed and dissected. Memories of that side of political events tended not to be too clear as they did not interest me a great deal. As for events abroad, I do remember my mother, having just heard the news on the wireless, shouting to my father - who was upstairs at the time - that President Roosevelt had died, but otherwise the Brave New World of 1945, politically speaking, did not fire my imagination. Yet by the 1950s I had become perhaps a little more mature and found the subject did perhaps have something to commend it.

At school, under the able direction of Mrs Arrowsmith, the mock election and the school candidates representing the main parties were encouraged to discuss and write about their respective policies during the lunch hour and morning breaks. It was fun although most of us schoolgirl voters tended to support and extol the ideas of our parents.

Our 'Conservative' candidate from Long Crendon was a Fifth-Former and Janet Gadge from Thame spoke of the policies of the Liberal Party. The Communist candidate, Cynthia Hobbs, also from Long Crendon, was a very fiery speaker and we were all convinced that she would go far. Margaret Maxton from Headington spoke for the Labour Party and we thought that she had had a head start being the granddaughter of Jimmy Maxton, one of that party's early founders. Margaret spoke well and really got us caught up in her oratory. Her two brothers, Jim and Jake, went to Thame Grammar School and I understand that one of them is now the Member of Parliament in a Glasgow constituency although whether it is his grandfather's old parliamentary seat, I am unsure. Maybe after all, that early mock election did help to inspire and encourage.

The Conservative candidate was 'returned' at Holton Park. I had voted for Margaret - not from any strong political feeling, but because she had a pleasant personality. I suspect that in the end, personalities at our young age counted for rather more than policies.

I think my parents were mildly amused at the idea of women in politics. Dr Edith Summerskill, one of Parliament's leading ladies of the time, had strong views on boxing: Father liked the sport and viewed her policies with some disdain despite the fact that she was a stalwart of the party that he claimed to support. Bessie Braddock, another Labour party stalwart, was always vociferous in her views but as a role model for any aspiring teenage politician, we felt at school that perhaps, she too lacked that special quality that is essential to encourage youngsters into politics. Mrs Braddock was no doubt charming but could hardly be described as glamorous. At thirteen years of age, glamour was something we all craved particularly after a childhood of such austerity.

Not all the girls felt as our little group did. Anne Mallalieu, who came to Holton Park sometime later, was obviously unaffected by our shallow concerns in the political arena. But by then, I suspect, the world was changing and new ideas were taking over.

Miss Davis, our Headmistress at Holton, encouraged, cajoled and tried to spell out the importance of staying on at school after reaching the age of sixteen. She was a tower of strength and a sad loss to the diplomatic service as she tried to encourage parents to allow us to stay on at school to follow the 'A'-level curriculum. My parents were happy to allow me to do this but sadly some very able girls were discouraged from so doing. She must have spent hours in trying to persuade reluctant parents to be bold, to resist the views of families who still considered the education of girls to be a waste of time and money. Occasionally, she did succeed. Sadly, most times, she did not and our Sixth Form was a very small one indeed.

Our entry to the Sixth Form at Holton meant for the first time being able to use the front door of the main school building and also being able to come across the island to school instead of walking all-round the side of the moat. We enjoyed these new privileges. Somehow or other, homework and revision done sitting on a bench on the island was a world away from most people's ideas of school.

'A' levels meant greater effort and the school library on the left of the front door was much in demand. But it was to the island with its wooden park-type benches and the peace and quiet of the place that most Sixth - Formers made for. There was space enough for us all to work alone and unhindered by the usual background noise of other voices.

Sadness did occasionally come our way when one of the Watlington girls contracted meningitis and died. We were all taken to the Churchill Hospital for vaccination and, happily for us, no-one else contracted the illness. But it did bring us all up with something of a jolt.

My first year in the Sixth Form was really rather idyllic. It was hard work but enjoyable although I anguished over the books of the Aeneid, slaved away at Cicero and toiled over the intricacies of the Trojan Wars. The books on early flight by Antoine de Ste Exupery took up most of my school hours and much of my leisure time. A very welcoming French family took me under its wing as I imposed on them for weeks at a time during the summer holidays as they strove to improve my accent and my French vocabulary. Modern history was my special interest and again under Mrs Arrowsmith's patient guidance, I spent many happy hours ploughing through piles of books and leaflets which she somehow had unearthed in addition to the usual set books.

"Never leave your revision to the end, girls," she would insist. "Put your books away two days before your exams and take yourselves off to a Gilbert & Sullivan opera. W.S. Gilbert was a great satirist and if you listen carefully to his lyrics, your history will come alive!"

The D'Oyly Carte Opera company usually arrived at the New Theatre (Apollo) about exam time in those days and I was sorely tempted.

Then, there was the question of sex lessons at school ...

This was an age when information on the subject was rather vague. None of us were very enlightened. One or two of the older girls mysteriously 'disappeared' from school during our early years at Holton but after the initial questions amongst those in the know - no-one mentioned them again. It was assumed by us that their information on the subject was of a rather more advanced variety. We had dissected worms, discussed the sex life of a rabbit and prepared for our 'O' level Biology papers - which it was assumed would fill the gaps. It was the information in between that intrigued us. However, the two Headmistresses of Holton Park and Milham

Ford School in Oxford decided that some further form of enlightenment was obviously called for and so several of us in the Sixth Form were sent to Milham Ford School for some weeks for a course on the development of the mind, body and spirit. A psychiatrist from the Warneford Hospital came to lecture on the mind development part of the series, a local doctor came to lecture on body development and a local vicar spoke on spiritual development. It was hardly mind-blowing stuff!

However, when speaking to a work colleague on the subject many years later, she claimed that it was an improvement on her convent's attitude to such a subject. There, sex talks were always given in the convent chapel with girls sitting awkwardly on hard seats that had been specially brought in for the occasion. They were expected to sit in newly pressed school uniforms, all wearing their school hats whilst the nuns sat quietly by and one of them did the talking. On reflection, we decided that perhaps Holton Park's ideas were maybe a little more enlightened ... but of course, these were early pioneering days in the subject.

After that first year in the Sixth Form, the real test was about to begin. Miss Davis was adamant that some of her Sixth Form were capable of following a university degree course and using all her persuasive skills, she set to work on hesitant parents. It was an uphill struggle. The old idea that girls did not need that sort of education very quickly came to the fore. I was summoned to her study and asked if I had considered trying for a scholarship to a university. Obviously, I was enthusiastic and not a little flattered to be thought capable of pursuing such a course but realized that I might well meet family resistance. My father was enthusiastic but cautious. He had never had a great deal of money and feared that the financial side of things would put too great a strain on the family purse strings. My mother who was more susceptible to family pressures, particularly her father's, feared that as her three daughters grew up, their work and interests would become so diverse as to set them apart. She therefore favoured using the same mould for all three and, in such a way, any family splits could be averted. Miss Davis understood their fears and assured my father that a full scholarship was within my capabilities and that it would take care of the money side of things. I think she understood less well the social pressures to which we would all be subjected, but nevertheless managed to persuade them that their fears regarding the family split were extremely unlikely and totally unjustified.

Mother had worked at Jesus College, Oxford during the late 1920s and had seen at first-hand what she considered to be the 'them' and 'us' divide. At that time, Dr Hazel, the Principal during those years, had a very good relationship with domestic staff there. The "young gentlemen" students however, were a class apart and there would have been little social contact between them and certainly no-one among the domestic staff would have presumed to have spoken to any of them even if recognized outside the college. I think she feared that something of the kind could happen inside her family. Overseas students and official visitors to the college had no such qualms and she delighted in telling us of her meeting and long conversation with General Jan Smuts, the South African statesman, who was a frequent visitor to Jesus College at the time.

Apparently, she was in the kitchen alone, washing-up when there was a knock at the door and someone came in. General Smuts apparently was a "real" gentleman who always thanked everyone including the kitchen staff for helping to make his stay in Oxford a happy one. He stood chatting to her whilst she continued to wash up. He made quite an impression.

Mrs Arrowsmith had warned us of the prejudice we were likely to encounter and usually quoted Mrs Indira Gandhi who said on one occasion:

"Educate a man and you educate one person but educate a woman and you educate a family."

She smiled philosophically when she told us of the prejudice she was encountering at the time at school. Apparently, there were discretionary salary enhancements for certain functions additional to the normal teaching programme that one could apply for. She was the school 'first-aider' and had applied for one such allowance, only to be informed:

"Sorry, you're married. You don't need the money!"

She smiled and proclaimed:

"Things will change, girls. You just have to be patient!"

With 'A'-level examinations completed, Jane Bath, a classmate from Haseley, and I were sent off to the Bodleian Library in Oxford to do what was then a comparatively new thing: work experience, under the very able supervision of Mr Bill and Dr Hassall who at the time was researching his book on one thousand years of history in Wheatley. It was then that my enthusiasm for family history really took off and he very kindly suggested various lines of research that might be of particular interest to us. The Juggins family were also a source of some curiosity to him as well as my own Tombs family. The Juggins family by this time had died out in the villages but my own family was still flourishing. I look back to those three weeks at the Bodleian and still think how fortuitous it was that research material could so easily be found and that expert help was so readily available.

We worked hard and enjoyed our time there as we carefully sorted documents and amused ourselves reading snippets of old newspaper items and details from parish records. We found out that it cost four shillings (20 pence) to thatch the roof of an ordinary cottage a couple of hundred years ago. We were horrified to read of a young unmarried mother with her baby, who had arrived on the coach from London only to be told to "go to another parish" and of another who was told to go and "break stones" in the quarry by the Parish Overseers. It made our Charles Dickens' stories come alive and our time there passed all too quickly.

The 'A'-level results came through at last and the local authority awarded me one of their County Scholarships - so the financial side of my tuition at Exeter University was assured. But the worst was yet to come. I had been through the 'advice' side of things before when I originally went to Holton Park Girls' Grammar School and as news of my scholarship filtered through the pressure and the prejudice that came with it had become no easier to bear: "She'll split the family!" or "She'll only go and get married!" and "What a waste of money!" were typical of the comments my family and I had to endure.

It was Mr Fred Anson, Headmaster at the local Secondary Modern School at Littleworth, who came round to Milne Cottage. He was a near neighbour and he and his family lived in Willowdene, a house which backed on to our orchard. He was unique in his enthusiasm and congratulated me and enthused about the new educational opportunities that were opening up before me: his interest was genuine and helpful. It was such a departure from the usual sort of reaction.

"Any idea what you want to do?" he enquired.

"Possibly teaching," I remember replying.

It was a mixture of so many things that crowded into my thoughts. I was

eighteen and a very highly-strung eighteen-year-old at that: I knew that night school would have been a more acceptable option in the eyes of the wider family and many 'friends', as a means of 'bettering oneself - how I came to hate that cliché! - as that would have represented 'honest afterwork toil' and did not prejudice any 'working class' credentials. But a scholarship was something else and alien to what many genuinely believed in. Some almost regarded it as a 'hand-out in the worst sense of that phrase. Books, reading and study did not mean 'hard graft' as they knew it. Books were for relaxing with after hard physical toil: real work meant getting one's hands dirty. Many 'friends' and family really believed that.

Perhaps the 'advice' that hurt most centred around a couple of local 'working class' 'pioneers' on the local educational ladder who had also been to Grammar School. The first of them had "gone wrong" which was put down to his "getting out of his class", "falling into the company of fine friends" and "easy money" - a notoriously upper-class weakness apparently! It was considered something of which I should be made aware - and I was - many times! All these points were studiously 'worked on' and brought to my attention.

When my less-than-illustrious predecessor's heinous crime hit the local headlines of the *Oxford Mail,* I was still in my early years at Holton Park and I had no idea what blackmail and extortion actually was! Indeed, so naive but intrigued was I by the behind-the-hand whispers that I actually went and looked up both words in the dictionary at home. The village had a field day.

However, when a second village and Grammar school 'pioneer' also transgressed and was convicted of theft - and once again hit the headlines, the pressure on me became quite intolerable.

I had, up to then, led a fairly simple and uncomplicated life and had never shown any traits - as far as I was aware - that could give rise to any concern! Indeed, I was just the sort of person who could so easily have faded into the wallpaper.

Perhaps the most hurtful and offensive were the occasions when my moral standards were called into question, when once away from the direct influence of home and family:

"I'd be worried if it were a daughter of mine: how do you know what she will get up to, living away from home like that! You've only got to go into Oxford and see what goes on there ..."

They never seemed to elaborate on that point, interesting though it sounded. Who knew what could happen once I was allowed to spread my wings and leave home? The possibilities obviously were too horrendous - or interesting - to contemplate! I lost count of the times my mother had to add:

"Well, I trust her!"

These remarks were offensive and unnecessary; what should have been a happy occasion was marred by insensitivities of that kind. Mr Anson's call on us that morning with his enthusiasm really had been a breath of fresh air.

And so, it was that I finally left Holton Park with the full support of enthusiastic teachers and the exhortation to keep in touch. With hopes high, a full scholarship under my belt, the dire warnings of the class warriors and family and village moralists ringing in my ears that no good would come of it, I entered the real world outside.

What next? I was unsure ... maybe a reaffirmation of the celibacy oath whilst waiting for the criminal tendencies to surface!

Index of Personal names