

A THING OF BEAUTY IS A JOY FOREVER

MEMORIES OF A CHILD IN THE VALLEY OF THE CHESS by Betty Healing

I was brought up in a beautiful but remote part of the Chess Valley in the early twenties. On the one side was Sarratt, on the other the 'Ducal' estate of Chenies owned by the Duke of Bedford. The river running through the valley was the boundary between Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

In this part of the valley lies the hamlet where I lived with my parents on a small farm which belonged to Auntie and Uncle Smith, who were as second parents to my brother and me.

Altogether there were eight houses and two farms, the larger one being 'Valley Farm' at the top of the moor, farmed by Mr Saunders.

Known locally as the 'Bottom', there were two lanes leading up to Sarratt which we called the top: one was Dawes Lane, the other Moor Lane, and there were a few shops on the Green. There was no vehicle access to Chenies unless you were lucky enough to own a pony and trap like Uncle Smith, otherwise we had to go via Sarratt and North Hills on to the Chorleywood Road, a distance of about eight miles.

I come from a very old Chenies family. At that time, there were four generations living in the village, and so it was natural for me to spend most of my time on that side of the valley. Although living on the Herts side of the valley, I really had the best of both worlds.

My mother was an only child and moved to Chenies from Chorleywood where she went to school, when Grandma became Licensee of the Red Lion Hotel. Long before my time, Grandma had retired and moved to the cottage next door and had re-married, to a Mr Westell, a tall gentleman with a long grey beard; I never took kindly to him or his beard.

I was often told how mother had to get up in the morning to scrub the floors and blacklead the grates before going to her work as a civil servant in London. One of those rooms is still the same today. My father was one of seven children and they lived on the edge of the Green; he was an interior decorator but some of his brothers and sisters worked on the estate or in the larger houses for the gentry in the village.

Grandfather was coachman at the Bedford Arms Hotel, and he had a black cab which was closed in with curtains at the windows and was drawn by one horse. His job was to take people to Chorleywood Station for one and sixpence, and to the Church on Sundays, but his regular job was to take the Lady Blandford for her two hourly afternoon ride.

It was a special treat to sit up on the box beside him; he wore a high hat and a long black cloak and had a whip by his side and his reins in his hand.

On one side of the Green was an old well and the school, on the other a row of cottages with diamond pane windows. Great grandma lived in one of them with her two daughters.

From the Green, a drive, the Court, leads to the Church and the Manor House, where the Duke of Bedford lived for a short time a long while ago. Their Russell family vault is in Chenies Church.

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Behind the Manor House is the 'Plait', an area of very old trees which surrounds the house and the workmen's cottages. One tree in the middle is hollow inside, large enough for two people. It is said that Alfred the Great hid there, but I'm not sure about that.

I was allowed to attend Chenies School and had the privilege of using the village amenities. Other children in the valley (there were six) went to Sarratt School.

Living by the river, I learned to swim at a young age so the use of the swimming pool was my favourite pastime. This was an antiquated corrugated iron building standing on the river bank by Chenies Mill. The pool was fed from the river through pipes and it was naturally very murky but you were certain where the bottom was when going in off the boards at the deep end. The pool was demolished about the second year of the Second World War. The entrance to the moor was through a five barred gate by our house and I earned my pocket money opening that gate for cars going through when people came to picnic in the summer and sometimes swim as well. Mainly grasslands and boggy patches, I knew every step of the way; the moor was a delight in summer, but in the winter the winds blew anything away that was not fastened down. Nevertheless, this was my playground. The woods and meadows along the valley were private property but nobody concerned themselves with a little girl roaming around, usually alone. I had always been taught to close the gates behind me.

Our cottage was two up and two down with a black grate with the oven on one side and on the other a boiler which heated water. Mother knew only too well how to clean grates. We had no gas or electricity; lighting was by oil lamps, although we did progress to a shining chrome lamp called an 'Aladdin' which burnt pink paraffin.

Aunty's house, which adjoined ours, was much larger. She had gas and it was once a public house called 'The Cart & Horses'. Their house still had the tap room with a large open fireplace and a black settle which would seat five people. The door into the bar was in two halves, like a stable door, the lower half had a shelf for glasses. The cellar, down two steps, had a cold stone floor and had a very different use in my day.

The little farm, or smallholding as it was called, had five cows, two pigs, some sheep, and lots of chickens. One of the cows, called Mollie, let me ride on her back when she was taken in for milking. Mother used to help with the milking, but was always happy when she had young lambs indoors to feed on the bottle. It was always sad when they had to have their tails chopped off. We always had fresh warm milk straight from the cow for our breakfast cereal, which was called 'Force'.

Butter-making was a long tedious job; aunty sat for hours with a churn on her lap turning the handle to make butter from the rich cream which was then made into blocks with butterpats. Occasionally it refused to turn. On the whole, we were provided with a good living.

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Saturday was visiting day for the family and we would set off over the moor to Mount Wood which took us out to the path behind the Red Lion and grandma's cottage where we stayed for dinner. I would look for the ice-cream man who came through the village on his three-wheel bike with a barrel on the front for his ices, and who used to call "Stop me and buy one". There was always Miss Kentish's shop to buy a sherbet dab with a stick of licquorice on it for a penny.

Past the butchers and the Post Office was the 'Bedford Arms' where we could get a quarter of ham for a shilling.

After cups of tea with my other grandparents, aunts and uncles, we finally went to great grandma. She would be sitting in her rocking chair by the fire wearing a lace cap on her head and a white starched apron over several black skirts. In one of them there was a pocket for her leather bag and her money.

To get to school I had to walk 1½ miles over the moor, by Mount Wood to the Three Step Field, so called because it had three steps up to the stile. (Today there are six steps). This field was a short cut to the Common and avoided the steep climb up Holloway Hill. From the top of the field, I could see my mother on the moor watching for me. Aunty's old mongrel, 'Nort', was generally with me and sometimes waiting when I came out of school in the afternoon. There were sheep and rabbits and cattle in the field, and once I saw a white rabbit as well. My father used to come to this field to pick mushrooms early in the morning. Walking to school never really bothered me; I was used to going to Chenies on my own. In the long winter months I wore wellies and macs or gaiters with buttons up the sides which had to be done up with a button hook, that pinched legs. These were a hindrance and hard going for tiny feet when the snow lay deep and crisp and even, but in the summer there was so much to see aound me.

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