

*P. J. Melling*

Having often been asked to write down some of my memories of long ago, I have at last decided to do so.

I was born of working class parents in the village of Chenies in Buckinghamshire. My father at that time worked in the Flour Mill which stands on the side of the river Chess, but soon after he worked as a driver of an agricultural engine for the firm of T.T. Boughton and travelled to the farms in the district around to thresh the corn from the ricks, where it was stacked when hargested from the fields.

Chenies was considered a model village having been mostly rebuilt during the last century when Lord Wriothsesley Russell was the Rector 1870, but that of course was before my time, in fact it was just before my father was born.

The village is surrounded by farms, in my younger days the Manor & Mill Farms were run as one unit by Mr. Harry Boughton. The two Green Street farms by Mr. Woods and the Mount Farm by Mr. Darvell, Home Close by Mr. Hughes.

The whole estate was until 1954 owned by the Duke's of Bedford, they in turn kept a Bailiff here and about half a dozen men who worked full time keeping hedges and grass verges cut and tidy, also the Church Cemetery. In the summer theywells in the yards of the cottages were cleaned out ready for the winter rains to fill them again.

At that time the village was practically self supporting. We had a Post Office and General Store where No. 30 and 31 till about 1914 a Drapery Store, that is now the Post Office and Antique, a General Store at Banner Rest, a Butchers, a Bakery, two Public Houses (the Bedford and Red Lion). Then there was a Blacksmiths Shop in Back Lane, now the electricity shed, a Wheelwrights (now No. 18). A Carrier who made weekly journey's to London, Mr. Kilby at 41 had a Smallholding and kept a pony and trap, the cherry trees were a great attraction at hay making times when all the children around would help him collect the hay and pile it into heaps ready to be carted to the rick, we were usually given a

handful of cherries as reward. My eldest brother worked after school for him cutting the wood ready for lighting the fires and getting in coal cleaning shoes and helping to clean the stable, for this he was paid the princely sum of eight pence a week.

We were able to buy milk from Mr. Hughes who also kept cows as well as the Butchers Shop.

Also from Mr. Goodson at the Bedford Arms and we would go along twice a day with tin cans with lids on to buy either fresh milk or skimmed, the latter was a can full for a penny.

The Bedford also kept horse carriages and took people to and from the station, that being the only public transport as the buses only started to run through from Watford to Chesham about 1921.

We had a grocers, drapers, oilman, a man with straw hats, the muffin man, who came round with a tray of muffins on his head ringing his bell, these came round regularly or spasmodically according to their trades.

Miss Palmer ran a little business at her house on the corner by the green making and selling baskets she also employed a younger woman to help her.

The Mill was worked by Mr. Todd and every day we would see him come up the hill with his white smock and white millers hat on to go for his drink at the Bedford.

Mr. Howell the Blacksmith would go also with a jug to bring his drink home, I can picture him now a large man wearing a leather apron (a large and brownny man was he, just as the poem says). It was a favourite thing to go round to watch him shoeing the horses and from where I lived on the green we could hear the ringing of his hammer on the iron.

Chenies House was the home of Miss Russell she was a small lady usually wearing black and I remember Mr. Kilby who had been her butler coming into the school and telling us she had died, after her Lady Blandford lived at Chenies House, she was a very dear lady and much liked by us all, apart from the fact that she used to come visiting just at meal times, she would come while we were having our midday meal and being a large family of us it wasn't



always very convenient, but if anyone was ill she would send soup or a cake or jelly. Once when it had been a very hot summer I had run around without stockings and didn't want to wear them when it turned cooler and the dear lady noticed and I was presented with three pairs of black stockings with coloured checks (embroidery) up the sides, green, red and blue. I'll never forget those stockings.

The Dowager Duckess Adeline of Bedford lived at Woodside House and each year she presented the children of the village with something at Christmas one year it was a red riding hood cloak for the girls and a red jersey for the boys. Another year it was boots for each child and one year I remember I had a doll but cannot recall if every girl had one.

We had a party in the Long Room where we were given these, my chief memory of the parties are having an orange and a large bun each as we came out.

I mustn't forget the watercress beds kept by Mr. Hollimore, especially as I later married my husband when he had them.

The river keeper Mr. King lived in the cottage at the corner of the wood and we would always look carefully to see if he was in sight when we went wooding, not that he would say anything to us, but he and Mr. Macgregor were always regarded with awe by the children.

The houses were very much below today's standard with no taps indoors, the water was carried in pails from a tap in the road, we had a pump over the stone sink which gave us rain water when there was any in the tanks or wells out in the back yards, no drains from indoors so every drop of water had to be carried out to an outside communal drain.

In the house where I grew up the washing copper was in the corner of the room on the opposite side to the door, imagine if you can the steam filling the house when the clothes were boiling, also the smoke if the fire didn't draw up properly when fed with wood or coal, then there was the odd times when it all boiled over and flooded the floor with hot soapy water, this also happened if one forgot to watch the bucket under the sink and a bowl full was

tipped down.

Bath night meant the copper was lit again and a washing bath in front of the fire. We had to go across the back yard to the toilet which was inside a wood and coal shed, in the winter time it was quite an expedition as the younger children would not go on their own, so it meant lighting a candle in a glass sided lantern and as the top would get hot we had to be careful not to touch it.

We had/very large gardens and everyone grew their own vegetables and fruit, also attached to most there was a pigsty and we kept pigs. An elderly man from the village Mr. Charley Beeson would come when they were large enough to kill them, we would hide indoors till the squealing stopped, pigs always squeal as soon as they are touched. Then would come the straw fire and the carcass was burnt to singe all hairs off. Parts of the pigs were sold to neighbours and part kept for home use. Every part was used even the intestines were cleaned out turned inside out and soaked for several days before using. The fat parts were rendered down to make lard, that was good as butter.

No one seemed to keep chickens (I dont know if there was a rule against it) so eggs were a real luxury to us, we always had one for Easter Day Breakfast and I had one when I visited my grandmother in Finch Lane Amersham Common, it was a long walk so I usually stopped the night and sometimes from Friday until Sunday.

Our school master was Mr. James or "Old Tommy" to us outside school, he and his wife were Welsh so we had plenty of singing. The Rector Mr. Shann came on Monday mornings to give us scripture lessons and Miss Grace from the Drapers Shop came to teach us girls to sew and the boys were taught to garden.

We played games like skipping, Farmers-in-the-Debn Poor Jennie and many games that are still carried on but one I never see now is a marble game called dabbers played with five marbles, we would sit on our spread out coats and each game had a name like ones, twoers, threes, long and short sprawl and creeps. Hoops, the girls had wooden ones with sticks to bowl them along and the boys had iron ones with a hook of iron to guide them along.

In the summer holidays we would take our picnic teas and go on the Platt or the Common or even venture as far as the Walks and amuse ourselves by having races or making daisy chains or hide and seek. The old oak tree on the Platt made a real grand house to play in. According to historic books I have read this tree was set by Queen Elizabeth I in 1570 and a hundred years ago was said to be decayed inside and hollow enough for eight or ten people to shelter in.

At one time we had a resident District Nurse who was a great friend to everyone and as babies arrived very frequently she was kept busy.

Also there were special Policemen and later a real Policeman lived for a time here. We used to see the cows and sheep go through as they were driven to Watford Market with the men walking or running with them.

The timber carts would come up the hill in pairs leaving one lot at the bottom so all the horses were used to pull up the hill, then they were taken back down for the next load.

The coach came through to Hendover twice a week, they changed the horses at the Bedford each way. We always ran to see them, later we would run to watch a car come as we could hear it a long way off.

One of my memories of the beginning of the first war was seeing some of the farm horses being taken away.

Winter evenings were spent playing games like rings or snakes and ladders. When my Uncles called in they and my Dad would get the melodians out and we would sing songs.

Every year my Dad would make a new rug from a sack, we would cut old clothes up into strips about 6 inches by one and he just pulled them through with a clip hook.

Saturday mornings we had jobs to do like polishing the spoons etc. and the tin saucepan lids which were hung flat on the wall, then we would have to take the rubbish to the pit at Claypits, we were told it was bottomless and by the amount of things that disappeared in it that could well be.



We would go into the woods to collect fallen bits of branches and twigs for fire lighting for this we had a truck made from a large wooden box mounted on pram wheels.

On summer Sunday evenings my father would take us for long walks through the woods and fields so we got to know all the footpaths.

In winter after Church I would go to a friends house and join with her family in singing hymns or at home where we all joined in.

The Scouts and Girl Guides were started and were called "Duchess Adelades Own" and each girl had to work the shoulder flash in cross stitch.

Then there was the Band of Hope held in the upper Long Room, the hand bell ringing, the choir practice and later the club for the lads, with a billiard table which Mr. Stafford Charles had installed and for which they paid a bit each time they had a game until the £30 was paid. This table is still there but is now in the possession of Mr. M. Mathews who bought the Manor House and the Long Room.

During the 1914-18 war we had concerts in the school, these were run by Mrs. MacLaren who lived at Rose Cottage now the Manse. I remember once we were dressed as geese with feathers stuck all over the costumes, the sliding doors in the school made ideal screens for the stage and the little room at the back for dressing up. Perriot Troup sang all the popular songs, one which always reminds me of them is "Let the great big world keep turning". The school would be packed as everyone looked forward to such events.

The Sunday School was held in the school as well and the parties usually held in summer time were at the Rectory, if fine in the garden if wet we were allowed in the Parish Room (now a garage) and in the lofts over the sheds.

The W.I was started in 19 by Mrs. Wishart and Mrs. Stafford Charles who lived at Woodside House after the Duchess had died. (The Girl Guides formed a guard of honour at her funeral). My mother was one of the first members and learnt to do fruit bottling, canework and stools etc. She had always made jam and had been a cook before marriage, they had outings and rallies in those days too, I have photographs to prove it.

Mr Maclean gave a few of us some lessons in French speaking and that is the only few words of French I ever learnt. She made her telephone available for calls to the Doctor for anyone in the village.

In 1926 my parents and family moved to the Mill House and my father once more worked the Mill in the evenings and on Saturdays by now it was only used for grinding corn for animal feeding. The house and the garden were very dirty and neglected and a great deal of work was put in by my mother, especially, to make it habitable.

It was like stepping back in time as we had to use oil lamps once more and all cooking on a kitchen range (no gas). There was however a tap indoors and a drain from the sink also the wash house was outside with the copper, in fact there were two large coppers, I have no idea why.

As I said Dad worked the Mill and sometimes at night it would start up by itself and he would have to get up to stop it again, as it vibrated the house. The grain was brought in very large carts with seats high up in the air and unloaded to the top part of the Mill.

It was a sad day for Dad when it was finally closed in 1933, he was the last person to run it, and soon after he moved out of Chenies to live for the first time in his life.

During the 1914-18 War the school children collected Horse Chestnuts and Acorns for pig feed, Beechnuts to be sent to Wooburn for growing into trees and blackberries for collection for jam making, my pick was just ½lb for which I received one half penny. After that my mother said I was more useful at home helping her.