

MEMORIES OF CHENIES

By Kath M. Dolling
(née SMITH)

IT was in the golden autumn days of September 1939 that we first set eyes on Chenies.

The wail of the siren in Penge, South London, convinced our parents that their eight-year-old offspring, Pamela Houghton and Kathleen Smith, friends from the first day at school, would be safer in the country at the outbreak of the Second World War

So it was that two 'only children' were 'privately' evacuated to "Loudhams", the beautiful home in Little Chalfont of Sir Cyril & Lady Pauline Kirkpatrick, and found a place (or at least part of a desk!) in Chenies Village School.

St John's School, which we left quite reluctantly, had recently been modernised, with additional airy classrooms, highly polished corridors (along which we were not allowed to run) and efficient loos.

So we were quite unprepared for a crowded classroom, divided by sliding wooden screens, and outside toilets of the bucket-in-bench variety.

"Governess" Mrs Life was the kindly but strict headmistress; a stately lady, with white hair, worn in a bun, much given to wearing knitted cardigan costumes, who disciplined with a few strokes of the ruler on the flat of the hand, or well-aimed chalk. The ultimate deterrent for 'the bad boys' of Barrow Hill School, N.E. London was Mr. Life's slipper!

A small front gate led into the school playground, and "infants" were taught by Mrs Nadine in the room to the left of the entrance.

Miss Atkinson, an imposing lady with catarrhal problems, and a more diminutive Miss Ashton were the guardians of the evacuees from Barrow Hill School.

At lunch-time, when the weather permitted, most of us ate our sandwiches whilst playing on the fallen trees in the adjacent field.

Pam eventually became a "Dinner Mother" when school dinners were introduced and taken in the grandeur of the Long Room at Chenies Manor.

By this time, I had returned to Penge, because Hitler had stayed away.

Pam stayed on, graduated to the top class and from thence to Dr Challoner's.

She feels her one claim to fame was to receive *two* nominations when the vote was taken as to who was to be May Queen.

Prayers were said at the beginning and close of day. Before the 4 o'clock bell, we solemnly sang "Lord keep us safe this night, secure from all our fears,

"May angels guard us while we sleep till morning light appears" with a long drawn-out 'AMEN'.

Most days the school bus would pick us up on the green outside, and transport us to "The Sugar Loaf" stop in Little Chalfont.

In the severe winter of '39/40, on one occasion this bus could not run, so Pam and I simply plodded about three miles through the deep snow in our plimsolls, carrying our Wellingtons!

Our reception at the other end was not too hot, either.

The curriculum included a Scripture lesson, English, arithmetic, history, geography, art, singing and nature study. No fancy titles in those days, but keen students could acquire a good all-round education..

I remember being disturbed because the Chenies' children were already doing fractions when we arrived, and we had only just finished long division in London! Pam and I both attribute our love of poetry to the fact that Governess took time to

read good poetry to us.

It was here I first heard and learned by heart the beautiful carol "Sleep, holy Babe". Great attention was paid to spelling and handwriting - "spelling bees" were a popular way of increasing our word power.

Governess was also a good musician and introduced us to such lovely songs as "Linden Lea", A Brown Bird Singing, "Shenandoah", "Swing low, sweet chariot", and "Brahm's Cradle Song". All words were memorised, and are still retained today. Nature walks were one of my great delights, and our class rambles through local fields and woods opened my town-eyes to the changing face of the countryside, and wildlife secrets that I now delight in sharing with my grandchildren.

Chenies School had quite a high pass rate when scholarship time loomed, and many moved on to Challoners.

Such names as Roy Brennan, Bobby Butterworth (the appetizing boy I should have kissed before the Christmas Panto but I developed chicken-pox instead), Pat Philbey, Joyce Pearce, Beryl Cooper still remain in my memory.

I wonder if I shall meet any of them at Open Day?

This small chapter in my life - just a bare six months - was the watershed that transformed me from a shy, introverted child into a confident, extrovert who still enjoys being a Feature Writer, even though she now has her 'Golden Girls' Bus Pass.

And every time we drive past the turning where the house with the spectacular chimneys marks the winding road to Chenies Village, I proudly say "I went to school down there!"