

SCHOOLDAYS IN THE VILLAGE

A few weeks ago I received a letter which really kept me guessing. It was from Chenies County Combined School, inviting me to attend some of the celebrations at the school in July.

Apparently this year is the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the school by the then Duchess of Bedford for the children of workers on the Bedford Estate, of which Chenies Village formed part. I was most intrigued - how, after all these years, had they traced me? I had been a pupil at Chenies School for a few years when we left London to escape the wartime air raids and went to live in Little Chalfont. It was all so long ago, and my name was Houghton then, not Gomm. The mystery remained - how had they traced me?

I gave up trying to work it out and decided I must let my friend Kath know about the Anniversary, as she too had attended Chenies School when we were evacuees together. Kath's laughter came over the phone. "I already know, I gave them your name" she said. "There was a notice in the Bucks Examiner for former pupils to contact the Head Teacher, didn't you see it?" Kath now lives in London and the Examiner is sent to her by a friend every week. She had spotted the notice, whereas I, who live in the area and buy the paper locally, had missed it. So much for my powers of observation. We agreed that, all being well, we would go to the Open Evening at the school next July as we are indeed "old pupils" - well, getting on a bit anyway!

I know I've mentioned some of this before in previous articles, but just for the record the



Headmistress at that time, whom we had to call Governess, was a tall, upright lady with white hair worn in a bun. She maintained strict discipline with the aid of a ruler (a few strokes on the flat of the hand) or a well aimed piece of chalk. This did wonders for our concentration but that type of punishment was permitted and considered quite mild in those days, and Governess was really a caring teacher who wanted her pupils to do well. Her task was made extremely difficult owing to the fact that a large number of children from a school in North London together with two of their teachers, had been evacuated to Chenies. They were billeted in the village and attended the school, thus almost doubling the number of pupils. It wasn't too easy for us children either. There were more than 40 in each class, some of us sitting three to a desk, and all credit is due to the teachers for the sound basic education that we received.

Our day began with "calling the register", prayers and a scripture lesson, and each week we diligently worked our way through arithmetic, history, geography and English. Governess would read good poetry to us, and I'm sure that is where my love of poetry began. Much attention was paid to handwriting and also to spelling, which was helped by holding the occasional "spelling bee" where two teams competed against each other. In fine weather we would go for Nature Walks through the local fields and woods, and sometimes the residents of the village would kindly allow us to wander around their lovely gardens. On these walks we learned something of flowers, trees and wild life - an early biology lesson in fact. Governess was fond of music and played the piano well. Sometimes music was the last lesson of the



afternoon in the form of either "sight reading" or singing. I remember many of the songs she taught us, and very varied they were too - "Brown Bird Singing", "Trees", "Swing Low Sweet Chariot", "Shenandoah", "John Brown's Body", "Jerusalem", "Brahms Cradle Song" - quite a mixture!

One spring, Governess decided we must have a May Queen and we all had to vote for "the girl most likely". She would wear a white frock and a blue cloak and would be crowned with blossoms, while the rest of us poor souls danced around a maypole singing suitable songs (I can't remember what!) It was a foregone conclusion - our chosen May Queen was pretty and blonde, whilst I, being dark-haired then and not particularly pretty, got two votes. I wasn't too disappointed though, that was two more than I had expected, and I thought I could guess who had voted for me which was quite exciting!

When I first went to Chenies School we took sandwiches for lunch but after a time we were told that "school dinners" were going to be available. This was surprising enough, but when we heard where we were going to eat them we were suitably overcome with awe. In the Long Room at Chenies Manor! What grandeur! Chenies Manor is such a beautiful and interesting place, but when I go there on Open Days during the summer months, as soon as I enter the Long Room I can smell those school dinners! Just imagination of course. They were really quite good meals considering it was wartime. Some of us older girls were chosen by Governess to be "Dinner Mothers". (Why "Mothers" and not "Monitors" I can't imagine). We helped to serve the meals and wash up, and



we each wore a large round badge which we had made ourselves in felt type material, embroidered with a "D".

It had taken me a long time to adjust to my schooldays at Chenies. It was different in almost every respect from my London school, and I admit that at first, with childish superiority, I considered it old-fashioned and "behind the times". However, by the time I reached the "top class" I was well settled in and the school had become cosily familiar. What I have realised since is that Chenies School's standard of education, far from being "behind the times", prepared me well for "passing the scholarship" as we used to say, and moving on to Challoners.

At the Open Evening in July I know I'll picture Governess at the piano, wearing her lilac two-piece, and accompanying us as we sang before going home each day :-

"Lord, keep us safe this night
Secure from all our fears
May angels guard us while we sleep
Till morning light appears."



Pam Gomm

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TOONS

by Dan

