

## ERNIE REMEMBERS

Memories of a boy growing up in Gt. Wakering from 1910 to 1924.

As I am writing this paper as Chairman of the Governors of our Primary School to present to the children at one of our Friday afternoon talks, it must of necessity deal chiefly with school days.

Starting school in the village in those days of large families was not such a formal business as it is these days. Often a youngster would go along with his or her older brothers or sisters and if he or she liked then they stayed. I remember my mother telling me that one of my older brothers was only about 2.5 years old when he started going to school.

I can remember vividly going to school for the first time. I did not want to go and my mother had to drag me crying and protesting every step of the way, and even after she had left me I tried to escape and go home. The memory of this day has never left me and I have a lot of sympathy for those children who do not look forward to going to school. Fortunately the Education authorities nowadays realize what a great event it is for a child going to school for the first time, and organise their reception in a much better way.

Having got to school, the situation was in no way improved by the Headmistress. To a boy of five she appeared to be a fearsome lady. Her name was Miss Pennington and she was an absolute expert with what was known in those days as a pointer. She would walk up and down the rows of desks with her pointer and she had so much practice that her aim was perfect and she could rap you on the knuckles for any small misdemeanour.

I had two other great dreads in those first weeks at school. The first was the school caretaker, Mr. Wisdom, who to a small boy appeared to be a very old and grumpy man. His job was to keep the school clean and to get there early in the morning to light all the fires in the classrooms. I can still picture him as he appeared to me then, a very old man who was always carrying a scuttle of coal or a broom, or both. The second dread was the covered way. This was the route we had to take down to the infants' toilets and as a very small boy Very scared of going down there and I often wetted my pants rather than go down what to a small boy was a most frightening tunnel. When you arrived at the toilets they were dreadful places. They consisted of holes in the ground with a seat built over it. Just try to imagine what these places were like as they were only cleaned out when absolutely necessary. So you see my starting school was a bit grim, but fortunately there were some things which compensated for what to me were the horrible parts of early school life.

Miss Goodman, one of the teachers who was the daughter of the village harness maker, always appeared to me to be an angel. She was kind and I am sure that all the boys like myself were in love with her. The other thing which seemed wonderful were the lessons. Probably by your present day standards they were very crude, but to me, a small boy, a new world was opening up. I was learning to add up, multiply and subtract. To go home and tell Mum that you had been doing long division was really something.

The education was really very basic, it was just really the three R's. It couldn't be anything else as the teachers were not trained as they are these days. Reading would be stories about the Empire and the men who created it. Stories from the Bible, large passages of which we learned off by heart. Writing would be generally at teacher's dictation and it was in fact called "dictation lesson" and teacher would come round the class while she was dictating to check up on and correct your spelling. Arithmetic which was the third of the three R's consisted to a large extent on chanting the tables until we all knew that 7x7's were 49 upside down and standing on our heads. Remember when we first started school for a year or two we only had slates to write. This we did with a slate pencil. This could easily be rubbed out and you started again. This is probably where the saying "He's got a clean slate" originated. It was a great day when you were allowed to use paper and pen and ink, you really were somebody then. You were ready to pass over the corridor from the Infants School to the "big" school. Here you came under the influence of Mr. Lay, who was the schoolmaster of the very old fashioned type who thought that all boys should have plenty of caning especially if they were boys from working class homes. I don't think he ever caned a farmer's or businessman's son, or so it seemed to me. But in spite of the caning, and I had my share, the pleasure of being at school was increasing all the time. We learnt to sing all the wonderful songs about our great British Empire, songs like Hearts of Oak, The British Grenadiers, Tom Bowling, Cherry Ripe and although our singing did not come up to B.B.C standards it was a lesson I really used to enjoy.

There was nothing to do at school except lessons, and if you did not like these then school was one long waste of time and the thought uppermost in most minds especially the boys, was to leave school and go to work. To this end there was an exam which was known as the labour exam, and if a boy reached the required standard in the three R's he was allowed to leave school when he was twelve years old.

Mr. Lay who was the Headmaster made regular trips across the road to the White Hart, and on his return we were certain by the lovely glow on his face and the smell on his breath he would never have passed the breathalyser test had there been one in those days. On Sunday Mr. Lay read the lesson in Church and among the many jingles which were made up about him was one "Mr Lay is a very good man, he goes to Church on Sunday to ask the Lord to give him strength to whack the boys on Monday".

He was the secretary of the Village Cricket Team, and on Friday afternoons he would take about ten of us boys down to the cricket pitch which was in the field in front of Lt. Wakering Hall, and we would have to roll the cricket pitch. Half of us sat on the roller to make it heavier and the other half pushed, and after about three turns we would change over, so that we sat on the roller or pushed according to Mr. Lay's instructions. Usually we received a penny each for this work. The Cricket Club was a very snobbish affair, you couldn't play cricket unless you were an important person in the village, like a Farmer, Squire, Doctor, Schoolmaster, Parson or important Tradesman.

The great day at school was Empire Day which was on May 24th. A platform was erected in the playground. As this was prizegiving day there would be a table on the platform with all the prizes on. We would march into the playground carrying flags of all the countries which were part of the Empire, and there were quite a lot in those days. We would sing the National Anthem and patriotic songs like Land of Hope and Glory and the British Grenadiers. Mr. Lay would read some stirring poems, the Vicar would offer prayers and the Squire would present the prizes.

Another occasion which I remember well was the Master bringing us all out into the playground to see a German Airship called a Zeppelin fly over, that was about 1913.

We did not have a half term holiday as we do now, but if the attendance had been sufficiently high and had reached a certain percentage, the Attendance Officer would let us have a half-day holiday on the last Friday in the month.

We were summoned to school by the school bell, and this was important for you see in those days not everyone had a clock and you hadn't got a wireless or television telling you the time. Everyone walked to school of course, even the children who came from North Shoebury or Potten Island walked to school.

Perhaps you might begin to get a better picture of my village in those days if I tell you all the things we had not got. There was no buses, no street lights, no water in the houses only standpipes in the street, no gas, no electricity, no motor cars, no aeroplanes, no national health service, no family allowance, no old age pensions, and no council houses. But I must not give you the idea that because of all these No's life was dull for us boys, not a bit of it. We were busy all the time, there was no playing fields so we played all our games in the street. For a football we got a pig's bladder from the butcher and blew it up. Perhaps not as good as Wembley but to us boys hours and hours of fun with our goal posts a couple of boxes in the street.

To own a shut knife was every boys ambition for with this you could make so many things to play with. A shut knife and piece of elder tree and you soon had a pop gun and you could get one of the springs out of your mother's corsets you would soon have a spring gun which would fire matches

An ash stick was the best for the game we called "nippy" where you had a bent piece of wood which you would strike to make it jump and then you would see how far you could drive it with your ash stick.

Another game we played when we were feeling mischievous was "last across". When somebody was driving their horse and cart along the road we would stand one side of the road see who could be the last across, you almost had to run under the horse's head. You can imagine what the drivers used to call us. I wouldn't advise you to try this game with the present day motor cars.

We climbed trees, swam in the creeks, went fishing on the Maplin Sands and picked up cockles and winkles. All our activities had their particular season. We knew when to go to look for mushrooms or blackberries, and we always knew where to find any particular bird's nest.

There was always loads of farm produce going to Shoebury station to be loaded onto goods trains to be taken to the London markets, and we would walk behind the load to the station in order to have a ride back in the wagon. Not very exciting you probably are thinking but you see to hold the reins and drive these large farm horses was a great thrill for us boys.

Another lively day would be when a farmer was having a corn stack thrashed. This would be before the days of the combine harvester. The corn would be cut with a self binder pulled by horses, it would be loaded onto wagons and taken to the farmyard where it was built into a large stack. Then in the winter time the thrashing machine would come along to separate the corn from the straw and chaff. By this time the stack would be infested by mice and us boys would stand around the stack with sticks to kill all the mice as they tried to escape. At the end of the day we would get two pence for our efforts.

Life was rather dull for the girls, about the only things they did were skipping or bowling hoops and of course working in the house leaning to cook and sew etc. But we must get back to school or we will never reach 1924.

Although we had lots of fun we were also very early in life introduced to the sad things. As I have previously said there was no National Health Service, no Clinics, no Immunisation, no Injections, and children died from fevers and diseases which are now happily almost unknown such as dyptheria, measles, scarlet fever, and tuberculosis. When a child contracted one of these complaints it was often fatal. There was the Doctor in the village but he would only come if you paid him, so if you were very poor you put off calling him in until it was often too late for him to do any good. We would sometimes attend the funeral of our classmate and sometimes even carried the corpse in slings to the Churchyard. So when you next have to go to the doctors or clinic don't just take it for granted but thank God that many years ago some wise men introduced the National Health Service into our lives.

The "NO" on my list which no doubt has a great bearing on the lives of people in the village was No Council Houses. Most houses were grossly overcrowded and in some there would be four generations of a family living. There would be Granny living looked after by Mum for in those days there was no Geriatric Ward to pack Granny off to, she was looked after and loved in the house which had been her home ever since she could remember. There would be Mum & Dad with perhaps as many as eight children, the eldest of which would get married and live in Mum's front room, so that when they had a baby there were four generations living in that house. This was not unusual. When I was a boy I slept in a bedroom with three of my brothers. We had two beds in the bedroom and that was all there was room for. I would wager that when I was a boy you could have counted the number of bathrooms in Wakering on the fingers of one hand. Bathnight for us boys was a large tin bath in the kitchen in front of the fire, and the copper which Mother washed our clothes would be boiling away to produce loads of hot water, after that a cup of cocoa and off to bed.

One of the events I remember with great pleasure was the Coronation of King George the Fifth. We had a great party in the meadow at Chrouchmans Farm, a grand tea and races, and it was here I remember winning my first race. We were presented with a Coronation Mug when the party ended.

We had no newspapers as we could not afford to buy them and there was no wireless so items of news were often late in getting to us. I remember the great sadness over the village when the great liner Titanic was sunk.

The first World War which commenced in 1914 had a tremendous effect on the village, all our older brothers were called up to the forces and women began to do jobs that previously had been done by men. The excitement of events was great to us boys as we were not old enough to appreciate all the horrible things which were happening. It was great for us to get up in the middle of the night when there was an air-raid for this meant tea and biscuits.

Back to school again. In 1915 the whole direction of our village school was changed, Mr. Lay had gone and we had a new Headmaster, Mr. Hamm. He soon introduced us to all things that we had never had. Things like organised sport, school plays, and that most mysterious of all mathematical wonders called Algebra. The girls were introduced by Mrs. Hamm to more advanced fields of needlework, cookery Hygiene, and such subjects that they had never heard of.

To me Mr. Hamm appeared to be an absolute marvel. When he came to Wakering I was a ten year old boy thirsting for knowledge, getting nowhere. Mr. Hamm was soon talking of scholarships to the Southend High School for Boys and I was one of the first boys in the village to win one of these places. As I said before there were no buses in those days and so for four years from 1918 to 1922 I rode a bicycle every day from Wakering to Victoria Circus where the Boys High School was in those days. What a wonderful four years it was for me. This really was another world. Football, Cricket, Tennis, Hockey all on proper pitches with proper gear. This really was a far cry from a pig's bladder in the street, but I am certain that those very humble beginnings helped me appreciate the good things when they came a long and never to take them for granted.

I hope that having listened to my story you will realize what wonderful opportunities you all have. Grasp them with all the enthusiasm that you can muster, please occasionally spare a thought for all those boys and girls of my childhood who never had these wonderful things, and I am sure if you do you will never spoil the pleasure of having them by taking them for granted.

I could go on for ages writing about my Wakering, but I must finish now for this time with the sentiments that I finished my paper on Wakering High Street with:- A tremendously friendly village, everyone knew everyone and shared their joys and sorrows. An exciting village for a lively schoolboy. A village of many pleasures and happy memories. My Schoolboy Wakering.