



CHAPTER TWO - SCHOOL.

Around the turn of the century the status of the village school changed from a board school, to a Mixed Council School. There were approximately sixty children in the three infant classes, and two hundred in the seven classes of the big school. At that time the building had a small steeple with a bell which was rung for five minutes before school to remind dawdlers that time was getting on. The steeple has disappeared, but the bell is still there for use as a fire alarm.

Everybody walked to school, for there were no school buses. Most children had to take their dinners, since school meals and milk had not been thought of. At mid-day all class rooms had to be empty and so the meals had to be eaten in the lobby or playground. The weather had to be really bad for children to be allowed to stay in a warm classroom. Boots and shoes were generally of poor quality and rubber ones were unknown, so in winter time many children arrived with wet feet and were in that state all day.

One of the first impressions on my mind was the arrival of a long double "crocodile" of girls, followed by boys in clothing more or less a uniform, and on asking who they were, I was told, "Oh, they are the Uniform kids". They had marched from the workhouse, just over a mile away. At mid-day an old man would be at the gate with a donkey and cart, and in the cart was a hugh hamper from which he handed out a packet to each of the "uniform kids". One day they would contain beef sandwiches and a piece of sedy cake the next day it would be a big piece of bread pudding or rice pudding cooked hard and cut into squares, these youngsters were actually better fed and clothed than some of those, who I am afraid, looked down on them and somewhat despised them.

Just before World War 1, the Board of Guardians bought two houses, one in our village as a home for these boys the other for girls in a

neighbouring village. The boys were then quite close to the school and so were able to go home to dinner they also came to school in little groups with other children, and better still, they were allowed if they wished, to join in village activities such as Scouts and Church choir and so the "Uniform kids" became the boys from Chalfont, which had quite a different atmosphere about it.

At this time reading was taught by sounds, Ba, Ca, Da, Sis and so on. When I tried them out at home, Dad just could not understand this system at all and he would say "Keep on Ba, Ca, Da, Sising about! Why don't you spell it and be done with it?" But I kept on with Ba, Ca, Da and Sis and it wasn't very long before I could read fairly well.

The lesson I enjoyed most was music. You will see what an influence this has had throughout my life. Even to this day when I hear the hymn "Hark, hark my soul" I can smell a coke fire and hear a great big bass voice, for when I first went to school the heating was by slow combustion stoves which burnt coke and morning and evening as many as possible assembled in the big room for hymns and prayers. Being quite a small chap I was squeezed into the front row right by the stove, on the other side of which stood the master with the big bass voice. I had never heard a man sing before and I've never forgotten him.

While still in the infants school one day a new girl came, and was put in the desk in front of me. She had long natural curls just right for pencil or pen to be pushed through, which I did every time I got the chance thus making myself rather objectionable to her. That didn't matter much for I thought her rather soppy, but some years later we both changed our minds, for she liked singing too.

At different times of the year little things happened which livened up our school day. Just before the summer holiday, then better known as the hop-picking holiday we always had a visit from Mr. Harvey, a well known temperance reformer, who would give the whole school a talk on the evils of strong drink, afterwards everyone had to write an essay on the subject and for the best ones from each class there would be a small prize. Later in the actual hop-picking season he would visit the hop gardens giving out literature and inviting one to come and see his magic lantern shows, on one night in the yard of the Upper Green forge, and another night at the yard of the Lower Green forge; both of these blocks of buildings have long since disappeared. On these nights there was usually a good crowd for a magic lantern wasn't to be seen every night.

A big white sheet would be hung on the side of the wheelwright's shop, and the lantern with its multi-burner acetylene gas lamp set up on the other side of the yard on a fairly high stand, the gas generator standing on the ground beneath it, connected to the lamp by a rubber pipe. When the show was under way someone would creep up to it and pinch the pipe. Out would go the lamp and then what a smell of gas!

Mr. Harvey would patiently light up again and carry on as if nothing had happened, but if you looked round you would see that the village "bobby" had taken his stand on the other side of the lantern and so the meeting would carry through quietly to the end.

Another fairly regular visitor was John Brown, the ventriloquist, who would turn up at the school gate at mid-day when he would hand out notices announcing that he would be giving a performance at 4.30 p.m. on the bowls green at the Royal Oak...cost of admission, one pound of rags or bones, or two jam jars. Those who went home to dinner could usually find one or the other and a number of others who could not get home would raid the Churchyard at the back of the school. It was surprising how many jam jars could be found.

When everybody was in on the lawn he would go to a little summer house in the corner, where there was a table and chair. He would place a bag on the table and the first thing he would produce from it was a concertina on which he would play "Rule Britannia", all joining in on the second time through. Next thing out was a bag of boiled sweets which he would throw out for a lovely scramble, followed by a few tricks with a few things taken from his pocket and finally young John would be taken from the bag, a big painted doll dresses as a sailor. His mouth would open and close, he would turn his head and wave his arms. Whether John Brown was a good ventriloquist or not I don't know, but his performance lasted about half an hour and we thought it wonderful. Actually he hadn't done too badly, for he had got together a goodly collection of rags and bones, without paying much in cash and it was brought to him in one place, whereas these merchants usually have to call around the street and pay a little for their collection.

A day of mixed feelings was when the doctor came for the periodic examination. Some of us would be quite scared, others would try to be brave and many more pleased because they hadn't got to be "done". Parents were notified beforehand if their children were amongst those who were to see the doctor, so that they could be present.

On the day before, these children would be measured and weighed. In our class there was one boy much smaller than the rest and he was quite a cheeky lad; I believe he was healthy enough only he was small. The measuring was done in stockings and he nearly always had holes in his stockings and as he walked under the bobbin on the measuring rod, he would look up at it as though it were miles high and as it dropped on to his head, he would grin and close one eye. You can be sure what happened to the rest of the class, always a good laugh when Tom Bowley was measured. Some of the children were more often in trouble than out and Gaffer Nash sometimes had to use the stick, for that period in school history he was very lenient in his methods of punishment. Most of the boys when they knew that they were going to have the stick, on their way out to the front of the class would spit on their hands so that it wouldn't sting so much.

Fatty Blink was one of those fellows who never got through a day without something going wrong. One day after he had tried poor Molly Morgan, the teacher of standard one, until she could stand it no longer, she sent for Gaffer who came with his stick. This time the crime was so bad that he bent Fatty's head down between his legs and prepared for business but Fatty was quicker than Gaffer and turning his head round bit his bottom and then ran away. Of course, we youngsters only saw the funny side of it and weren't at all sorry for poor Gaffer.

In the house almost opposite the school lived an old maiden lady with her cook-housekeeper and a page boy. In front of the house was a lovely wall for playing various ball games. When children played here she used to get very annoyed. Also on the side of the house there was a glass covered verandah which got more than its fair share of broken panes and it was quite a common thing to see the page boy coming with a letter of complaint. The unfortunate thing was that she knew the names of a few boys who lived near, of whom I was one and she would name some of these always as the offenders, so if one of the group happened to see the messenger, word soon went round that there was trouble with Carrie Finch.

The front approach to the house was up five or six steps with a gate at the top and an iron fence on either side. One day a boy heard the Vicar invite her to the Vicarage to dinner that evening. The Vicarage was next to the school in those days. Now Carrie always wore a big ostrich feather in her hat, and this lad, with the help of one or two pals threaded several strands of black cotton from one iron fence to the other and then hung around to see her come out. The poor old lady got nicely mixed up in the cotton, but to the boys surprise she made no comment. The messenger to the school next day was not the page boy, but the policeman.

Of the teachers, some of whom were at the school for many years, others for only a short time, children soon found the ones they had to respect and those whom they could play up. One, a Miss Henderby, was really a very nice person, but somehow or other hardly a day passed without someone playing a prank on her. One of the fashions of those days were furs, made of animal skins, such as foxes, with the head and tail left on and they were fastened round the shoulders by a spring clip fixed under the nose. Having been caught in heavy rain, Miss Henderby hung her fur on the side of a cupboard to dry and someone during the day managed to find a mouse and put it in the spring clip. It so happened that the good lady went to see if the fur was dry while the class was still in the room and of course she took hold of the mouse and let out a terrific shriek, much to everyone's amusement.

Another, whom most children respected and who I should think held a record for time spent at one school was Ann Radcliff, who lived about two hundred yards away from the school. She was an

uncertificated teacher, and for all except the first three or four years of her long life both as pupil and teacher she had gone up and down that piece of road for over sixty years.

For a short time there was an under master known as Tammy and at times in the playground quite a strong buzz of chanting could be heard; there were so many taking part that little could be done to stop it -

"Molly Morgan played the organ
Tammy beat the drum
Gaffer put his night shirt on
And then the fun begun".

In those days quite a number of games, particularly with the girls were played with verse and song. I haven't noticed any games of this kind for a long time now.

One that was popular with the boys was High Cockalorum, which was played by any number. One would stand with his back to the wall and act as buffer and umpire, another would bend down and put his head on the umpire's stomach, thus forming the start of the "horse", then the next one would run and jump on to his back and say the following ditty:-

"High cockalorum,
High jig jig,
My old sow's got three young pigs".

If he fell off before finishing the verse, he would have to join the horse and two would jump before the recitation started and so on, the idea being to get the horse as long as possible, but when it collapsed, the whole thing would start again.

Games used to run in seasons, a good many of them being played in the roads, and so of course these have disappeared because of traffic conditions. These included hoops, wooden ones for girls and iron ones for boys, while in school they were hung all round the playground fence.

Tops were spun by both boys and girls, "sausages", "window-breakers", "double deckers", and "peg tops", to be bought in all colours for one half penny, or large ones for one penny, but if you had a penny one someone would soon say "swank" and so most were satisfied with a half penny one. The biggest job was to keep up the supply of string.

While boys played marbles from home to school and back again, the girls would have a skipping season. This would be followed by the girls with diabolo. For this two sticks about eighteen inches long were used, joined by a length of string, and a large reel. The

player would take a stick in each hand, place the reel on the string and with an up and down movement of the sticks the reel could be spun, thrown into the air and caught again. Some girls could keep this up for quite a long time.

Several games were played by the boys with cigarette cards. Very pretty and instructive series of these cards were to be found with nearly all cigarettes and were always in great demand.

Every now and then there would be a round of bargers. Matches could be bought at three boxes for one half-penny, or found in other ways. The bargs were made by scraping the heads of the matches into a padlock key, tied on the end of a piece of string, on the other end of which was a nail, the point of which was put in the key, after loading. The string was then grasped in the centre and swung for the nail head to hit a wall or the road, and then, what a barg.

One boy found an extra large key in which he put fourteen match heads. The dust bin in the boys playground was a brick built affair with a corrugated iron roof. He got inside this for the big barg, and when it did go away went the roof and you couldn't see Calf for ashes!

During the mid day break the boys would play football in the road, using four folded coats for goal posts. The side winning the toss kicked downhill. The number of players didn't matter much so long as it was about the same both ways. The game was always disturbed at approximately ten past one, when farmer Shooter's team of giant cart horses were being taken from their stables back to work for the afternoon. These animals were well bred and kept in first class condition and so were very lively. When they had passed and everyone felt safe, some would scrape their boots on the road, the noise making the horses start kicking and plunging all over the place. I was never quite sure whether this was done to see the antics of the animals or to hear the none too polite remarks made by the carter and his mate.

The children of to-day, by going to school by bus or bicycle miss a lot of the things we enjoyed on the leisurely walks to and fro. According to the season there were birds nests, wild strawberries, nuts and blackberries all to be found.

One wild strawberry I shall never forget. I hadn't been going to school long and was only a tidler, when one morning I found this extra large strawberry which I promptly picked and ate. Unfortunately a big boy who lived further along the road had been watching it for days, waiting for it to ripen. He saw me pick it and straightway boxed my ears. At midday I went home crying about it and was rather afraid about going out again, but my father took me to the gate to wait for this boy and I hoped that he was going

to box his ears but he didn't. He gave him a penny to take me to school, then what a champion I had. He called for me every day for weeks, until the old lady who kept Jocko's tuck shop had some penny fishing lines. Now this boy wanted one ever so badly but he just could not get a penny. At last he had a real brain wave! He set on to me and made sure I went home crying, but I'm sorry now to say that he was unlucky.

One morning in 1910 the whole school was assembled in the big room. The headmaster stood in one corner beside a small table and he explained at some length what a scholarship was. Most of us had never heard of one before. He then called out quite a small boy of ten and stood him on the table and told how proud we should be of Alec Norden who was the first pupil from our school to win a scholarship, which entitled him to two years free education at a secondary school and a sum of money to help with his equipment. After singing "For he's a jolly good fellow", and giving him three cheers, the whole company had the rest of the day for a holiday. Since that far off day many pupils have gained honours of various kinds, the numbers being well up to the average for Council schools.

I don't know what some of the older people of that period would say if they could see the wonderfully equiped technical and science class rooms of to-day, for there were many grumbles about the money wasted to fit up the first woodwork class with eight double sided benches, with tools for sixteen boys and these grumbles came mostly from the parents of boys to whom the project should have been a real benefit, for very few could afford to pay the premium such as was required for any apprenticeship in those days and then keep their boys for several years with almost no pay at all.

Now, of course, the parents of to-day are the boys who went to those early classes, and generally speaking they have a very different outlook on such matters.

I sometimes wonder what became of some of the boys and girls of those days. A few I do know a little about. The boy who won the first scholarship became a house master in one of the big public schools of our country, another became quite well known as a Methodist Preacher, while a third was "front page" on more than one occasion as a famous submarine commander in World War 11. Unfortunately he in the end was lost with his equally famous submarine.

Just to give you some idea of how opportunities have changed for those youngsters who are capable of doing things, one lad has gone from this school, on to a secondary, from there to a well known college where he gained a B.Sc. degree and a place in an American University from which he holds a M.Sc., from there to Oxford, to become a Dr.Ph. and gain a Fellowship of the University of Adelaide.

Good luck to the children of to-day, and the future, and may still more take advantage of these great opportunities!