

George Harris's Recollections of His Shipton Boyhood

By Peggy Walmsley

SOME PEOPLE may lament the changes which have inevitably taken place in Shipton village, but for old Oxonian, George Harris, who was born at home in Shipton on 20 January 1923, many changes are very welcome indeed. Blenheim Cottages were then a row of five cottages, two up, two down with no electricity, water or sanitation. George was the second child and the eldest of three sons of Cissy and George Harris, a plumber.

There was a well at the back of the cottages, George tells me, but it went dry in the summer, so we boys had to bring water in buckets up the hill from the taps at the top of Little Lane. "We went down in the morning to school, left the buckets turned upside down by the taps, brought them back up the hill when we came home for dinner, took more empty buckets down to bring back up when we came home from school for tea. Sometimes we would wear an ox yoke so we could bring up two buckets at the same time."

The outside toilet was about 50 yards behind the house, near the pig sty. The winters were brutally cold and the Burford Road was routinely impassable because of snow. If nature called after dark, George's mother gave him a candle in a jam jar to light the way. When the wind howled and the tramps who lingered in the area were shielding in some neighbouring place, nature's call was a very scary and unpleasant experience. Frequently the candle blew out in the wind, and when it did

the only solution was to "drop it and run for home".

Apparently, George's father was always the one called upon to fix the pumping mechanism in the well behind the cottages. "My father would be lowered into the well in a bucket holding a candle to light his work, and he would then change the rubber washer which needed repair". Imagine the consequences if the candle blew out under those circumstances!

The Harris family, like many families in Shipton, kept two pigs. The local butcher paid a visit to the house to kill the pigs, and charred the carcasses to remove the hair. George reliably informs me that "chitterlings" (intestines) are delicious, that there is nothing equal to home cured lard in rosemary, and that pigs trotters were so prized they warranted a separate meal. He remembers with fondness liver and onions with "scratchings" and the joys of placing the sides of bacon in a lead lined trough to rub salt into them to cure them. A whole side of bacon hung either side of the fireplace. George's father enjoyed listening to his crystal set, but it meant the whole family had to be still and silent...an almost impossible feat.

The policeman, Mr. Algie Holland, always knew which house to visit first if any naughtiness was reported. George now admits being regularly caned by School Master George Horn and then locked in the school house to be kept from joining in games. On one such occasion, George and his

mate Cyril Dangerfield, decided to put an end to caning altogether. Whilst incarcerated in the school house they broke the cane into little bits and stuffed it up the chimney. After the school holidays when the chimney had been swept, the broken evidence was carefully laid out on the School Master's table, but the culprits were never revealed. Nor were the culprits discovered when George and two conspirators attended to nature's call by relieving themselves in the school aquarium. Lack of oxygen was blamed for killing the contents of the aquarium, and naughty George escaped again.

Scrumping apples was a skill George perfected, and it became very handy when he wanted to reward the horses for a job well done. On Saturday morning he was paid a shilling by Percy Holloway to work on the farm and drive a wagon with sheaves of corn to Grove Farm.

The drive at Grove Farm was steep, and George had to reverse the wagon into the apple orchard opposite to give the horses a good run at the drive. Several apples were the usual reward for both horses and driver. The policeman, Mr. Holland, regularly caught George with more than the usual quota of apples.

It is not too surprising that Mrs. Barnsley, the leader of the Life Boys, greeted George's application for joining with the comment "We've heard terrible things about you George, but if you promise to behave we will offer you an opportunity to join". Small wonder then that a reformed George, after success in the Life Boys, rose to the dizzy heights of Staff Sergeant in the Boys' Brigade.

The reform was only partial, however, because although George was a regular choir boy who carried with great pride the processional cross which is still used in Shipton



church, when he attended church at what was then known as the Tin Church in Upper End, he could not resist the temptation to tweak the bell cord at the moment of deepest prayerful silence.

When George was ten the family moved from Blenheim Cottages to a three bedroom house in the Swinbrook Road. Arthur Rainbow's horse and cart was hired to do the removal. Shortly after the move George began cultivating an allotment, and was soon asked to keep more allotments. He decided to buy a saddle-back sow and raise pigs. The sow was so amorous that she no sooner finished weaning one litter of piglets than she would escape from her pen in pursuit of the boar belonging to a neighbouring farmer.

George remembers spending a great deal of time attempting to separate the pair.

His first job was at the Till Factory (8s 1d per week), now the Old Till House near the Lamb Inn. Soon he was hired by Jackie Kethroe, the baker across the road from the Till Factory, for the princely sum of 12s 6d per week. A plain lardy was 10d, a fruit lardy was a shilling, a dough cake a shilling, a small white loaf 2d, and a small brown loaf 3d. That was the beginning of George's career in Shipton which continues to this day. Early to bed, early to rise, George still has the impish twinkle in his eye, and must be one of the fittest men in the village.

He is a tremendous credit to the community.

FIRST WYCHWOOD GUIDES

Despite our wet experience last year it was not long before we were thinking about camping again in 1999. We decided to tempt fate and return to the same site at Wilcote where we were washed out last year: after all lightning never strikes twice!

We settled on the May bank holiday weekend as this coincides with half-term for the children and means that the adults do not have to take precious holiday from work. All the initial planning was completed and we were ready to load the lorries and head off.

Now that our tents are stored under the stage at Shipton Village Hall it is relatively easy to take out what is needed – a surprisingly large load however many campers we have.

This year we had to be in and out of the hall early on the Friday afternoon as a wedding was taking place on Saturday and the hall was being prepared. From there we went to Milton Post Office where John and Edna still kindly store our less tidy equipment in their old bakehouse and put up with us taking over their back garden for a while as we sort and load what we need.

By the time the children arrived we had everything unloaded and several tents already pitched, but they still had their own patrol and toilet tents to deal with. Once they were up the girls take great delight in organising their tents and cannot wait to spread out their ground-sheets and bedding rolls. By this time everyone is beginning to feel hungry and thirsty so the fire is lit and kettles boiled to make a well earned