

The Young Gangbazzler

by
Richard P Mayer



The Young Gangbazzler

By Richard P Mayer

Preface

“Paiper! Speshul paiper! War declared on Kaiser! Read all about it! Paiper!”

The previous day German troops had crossed the Belgian frontier -Sir Edward Grey dispatched an ultimatum demanding its withdrawal. That evening the yelling news boys darted through the streets broadcasting news of the event that spelt disaster to the rest of Europe. Though none dared to admit it, August 4th 1914 was the dawn of a new prosperity for the Black Country, for without coal and iron, there could be no munitions. Stud cable for warships, chain of all sorts by the mile, horse shoes by the thousand, nails by the million, pig iron by the megaton to make steel for gun barrels, brass for bullets and shell cases, explosives and poison gas from the chemical works and a thousand and one other things that meant death and destruction to friend and foe alike, but would bring prosperity to the Black Country to last as long as the war lasted.

The illustrations are an amalgam of childhood memories and figments of the imagination. For lack I was but a five year old boy at that time. Among my early memories the sole one remaining that definitely relates to this momentous event is that while returning home from Wales with my mother at the end of August, our train was shunted onto a siding at Shrewsbury station where we waived through the window as troop train after troop train with its waving soldiers passed by.

I make no excuse for starting my attempt to entertain the readers of my book of Black Country recollection with a reference to the First World War. For, though I may seldom mention it, It and its aftermath were the backdrop against which all of us then led our lives. As to the

book itself, it is no work of erudition, just an attempt to give the feel of the place at that time. of a better definition, I'll call them primitive post impressions.

How and from whom did I learn about the things I've committed to paper, you may ask. "Born and bred in the briar patch," might be a valid, though partial, answer. If I give you a few details of my childhood background, you can judge for yourself. According to my birth certificate, I was born in Smethwick in the County of Stafford on October 13th 1909. My father is described as "Master Draper" and it was above my parents' shop that I first saw light of day.

As far back as my memory goes, on early closing days, my father would take me to places where I could stare in wonder at the flaming furnaces or the whirring pit head gear, or watch the continuous chain of telefer buckets carried on overhead cables as, one after another, they tipped coal into waiting canal boats or railway wagons, or to other places where we could feel the quaking thud-thud of a steam hammer. Occasionally, he would take me further afield by tram to explore some more distant part of the Black Country. I remember particularly riding on his shoulders up to the top of a hillock near Langley where a large searchlight, together with those on other high places, swept the sky in search of Zeppelins. On the evening of January 31st 1916, one of them dropped bombs on Tipton and Wednesbury. Next day, the body of a little girl was found in the rafters of one of the demolished houses. The coroner's jury insisted on recording a verdict of wilful murder against the German Kaiser.

Sometimes my mother would take me to one of the parks to listen to the band, or to Birmingham on a shopping trip, or to one of the wholesalers to buy fresh stock for the shop. At other times, we would spend a few days at an ancient cottage on Adams Hill, Clent, where Mrs Morris kept about a dozen donkeys in a corrugated iron stable on the green. I spent many a penny pocket money riding on them. She had a stable-boy known as Japanor was it Jamaica?

Trade must have been flourishing since, for as long as I can remember, my parents employed a "maid". My favourite was a girl named Lily. Though she seemed almost grown up to me at the time, I now doubt whether she was more than fourteen or fifteen years old. She, like all the others, sat at table with us at meal times and was treated almost as a member of the family. I was expected to do my share of the washing up. Sometimes on a sunny Saturday afternoon when

both my parents were busy in the shop, after making some such excuse as “Going to feed the ducks in the park,” under oaths of secrecy, we would scramble up the Tump to watch the miners racing their whippets. On several other occasions, we would sneak off to Oldbury on the tram to visit her mother in the kitchen of a little house that stood in the shadow of a foundry wall and shared its “foad” its back yard - with its neighbours. It was there that I heard about the School Board Man who used to call round if Lily had played truant to help her mother with washing. Often on a cold winter evening, I would sit by Lily at our kitchen fireside while she told tales of the antics of her neighbours.

There were but two bedrooms on the top floor of our living quarters, Lily’s and mine. Sometimes after tossing and turning in my own bed, I would creep into her bedroom to find comfort and warmth snuggled against her breast in her own bed. Though in retrospect I doubt whether my parents, liberal as they were, would have approved. I learned a lot from Lily - even that the way they dressed was not the only difference between boys and girls. I think that was my first introduction to real Black Country folk - now I’ll tell you about some of the others.

Because I managed to catch mumps, measles - German and otherwise -whooping cough, chicken pox, the lot with each epidemic in its season (I can remember being carted off to the fever hospital in a horse drawn ambulance accused of spreading scarlet fever), my schooling was both sporadic and patchy. So I learned little about my fellow pupils or anything else during my short stay at the local infants’ school and I will say no more about that.

My best introduction to real Black Country folk was when I met them as hop-pickers while I was living on a farm. I will have more to say about that later.

Here’s a small personal note from a later date. Following the introduction of the National Health Service, my work brought me into contact with many old Black Country folk; sometimes I had to visit them in their own homes. After the few minutes they spent getting used to me, the strain of “talking proper” would begin to tell and before long many of them would relapse into their own dialect as though they were easing their feet from a pair of pinching shoes and sliding them into a pair of well worn carpet slippers

Though I never mastered the art of speaking it fluently, I understood it well enough to join in a conversation. I could never resist the temptation to linger long listening to the trials and tribulations of their early lives. It was from them that I learned about the appalling conditions under which they had to work in their younger days. The threat of the ghastly “workus” that had once threatened those who had been too old or too feeble to work still haunted the memory of some of them, though by now the buildings which had once housed those hateful institutions had been converted into hospitals such as Burton Road and Wordsley.

Why have I called my piece of nostalgia *The Young Gongoozler*, you may ask. In my childhood days the complex system of canals still played an important part in transporting the heavy material for which the area was famous. A horse could move no more than a thirty hundredweight load on a wagon along the roads while it could pull thirty tons or more in a narrow-boat on the water. Those who are familiar with the jargon of the inland waterways will know that the little bands of men, women and children who used to gather gazing with an air of “I like work; I could watch it all day,” at the scenes unfolding on the canal before their eyes, were known as *gongoozlers*.

Looking back over the years, I realize that I have been gongoozling rather than being directly involved in my fellow Black Countrymen’s activities as they passed along the river of life.

The Young Gongoozler

Maybe you are a stranger to the district still known as the Black Country so, before I start to tell my stories in earnest, I’ll make a brief survey of the place. It roughly corresponds with the area marked on a modern map as the boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall. It is said to have received its dismal name from the thick seam of coal, which, despite three centuries of mining, still



underlies it. Faults in the strata made mining beyond its boundary pointless. If you study an older map you will see that it shows a patchwork quilt of pieces of Worcestershire and Staffordshire that fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. These were controlled by a varied assortment of local councils - each had its distinctive shape and colour of lamp posts.

It must be difficult for anyone who only knows the Black Country as the sanitary smokeless zone that it now is, to realize that earlier in the century it was still a land where clouds of soot and grime belched forth from a forest of smoke stacks to blacken the landscape, and where bursts of flame from blast furnaces reddened the night sky.

I have been told that at one time iron was mined in the district and that there are still traces of an Iron Age furnace at Moxley; and that before the introduction of coke in the seventeenth century, much of the timber of the once well-forested district was felled to make charcoal for fuelling the furnaces to reduce it to cast iron. Though the ore was long since worked out, there was still an endless supply of coke, and the limestone needed for flux was still being mined from the caverns beneath the Wrens Nest.

As the Industrial Revolution gained pace, so did the demand for iron and steel - and what could be better found to fill it than the skill and muscle of the workers at the furnaces, foundries and forges of the Black Country. But the expansion meant that the men needed somewhere where they and their families could live. Despoiling almost all that was left of the countryside, terrace behind terrace of cramped cottages were thrown up along scores of mean streets to house them. In Victorian times and later some families had a large number of children -how on earth did they fit into two small rooms upstairs and a parlour and kitchen below?

Many of the back doors opened on to back yards known locally as 'foads', where the privies and brewhouses were sited.

Mercifully for its continued prosperity, iron and steel were not the only trades for which the Black Country was famous. To mention but a few Walsall was noted for its saddlery, Oldbury for its chemicals, Smethwick for its optical glass - most of the world's lighthouse lenses were made at Chance's works, and Amblecote and Wordsley were, and still are, renowned for their 'Stourbridge' cut glass.

Besides the major works with their distinctive sounding hooters - 'bulls' we used to call them - there were hundreds of other factories and workshops, small and even not so small, where you would have found the master working side by side with his workmen. The most notorious of these were the backyard nail and chain makers. I remember one somewhere by Blackheath where a stable type door, half open, faced straight into the street. Standing on the pavement, peering over the closed bottom half, I could watch a strong-armed woman garbed in a heavy burn-pocked apron, thrust with long tongs a piece of iron into the white heat of a glowing hearth. Then she would withdraw it and hammer it on some sort of anvil into I know not what. She repeated the action with the rapid rhythm of a well oiled machine. Through the haze I could follow the shadowy movements of someone working the bellows and another thumping away on the 'oliver', heavy trip hammer operated with a pedal.

Nailmaking had been one of the trades of the district as far back as mediaeval times or even earlier. At one time it was a valuable and respected craft. There is the record of a nailer being raised to the ranks of the peerage, and the story of the nailer's 'wench' who became a countess is still current in the Black Country. In the olden days the iron was flattened with sledge hammers and split with steel wedges into strips ready for the nail makers, a very laborious process.

There's nothing new about industrial espionage. Sometime in the late seventeenth century a member of the Foley family set out for Sweden intent on discovering how their forges managed to perform that feat mechanically. In the guise of an imbecile dumb fiddler he was allowed to wander at will around their splitting mills, secretly noting and sketching the machinery used to accomplish this task. On his return the Foleys equipped a splitting mill to his design, but he had to make a second visit to Sweden before it worked satisfactorily. The Foleys were even less able to keep the secret than the Swedish iron strip and rods soon became freely available.

Few individual nailers or chain makers could purchase or store large enough quantities of strip or rod to interest an iron -master, or to produce enough to enable them to market the finished product themselves. So both these transactions were carried out by firms that called themselves stockholders, but were better known locally as 'foggers'. These performed both functions, reputedly at great profit to themselves leaving less for their clients.

In early and mid Victorian times, before the introduction of mass produced wire nails, when workers dwellings were being erected by the thousand in the expanding industrial areas of Britain, hand forged wrought iron nails were required by the million. Despite the depredations of the foggers, by the sweat of brows, working as a family at that time managed to make a reasonable living. A considerable number of impoverished agricultural labourers took to the trade to augment their income. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, largely due to the competition of wire nails, the demand for hand made nails was reduced to those required for special purposes such as hobnails or boots. From thence onwards, except for a temporary recovery during the 1914 -1918 war doing 'odd work', the trade became notorious for the abject poverty of the men, women and children who slaved all hours that God sent at the fires of their back yard forges.

Here's a thought on the matter of poverty in the district. Most Black Country men had a Sunday-go-to-meeting outfit. No matter what was the state of the exchequer in the old cracked teapot on the kitchen mantelpiece, in order to 'raise the wind' for the coming week's expenses, many a wife would take them to one of the many pawnbrokers' shops each Monday morning to ask him to 'put them up the spout', then return on the following Saturday evening to redeem the pledge with the week's wages. Lack of funds wasn't the only reason for this practice - he pawnbroker was bound by law to keep the clothes in good condition, something not easily done in their own homes. The police had a fund to provide barefoot children with boots. Sad to say they often followed the suit up the spout.

Besides the obvious deadly dangers of working at the fire - burns were treated with 'caron oil', a messy mixture of linseed oil and limewater - there's the ever present risk of dehydration. The sweat that oozes out from every pore must be constantly replenished. The law of the land decreed that copious quantities of oatmeal water or barley water should be at hand in the works to quench their thirst. I suppose there would have



been teetotallers among them who relied entirely on this tasteless brew, but most of them had a predilection for beer. Come to think of it, brewing must be counted amongst the other industries for which the Black Country was famous. There were six or seven large breweries and a host of smaller ones with no more than a single pub.

Inns, taverns and 'hotels' were conspicuous landmarks of every main street in the district. Nearly every tram stop was known by the name of a public house: you would ask for a ticket to the 'Blue Gates', 'the Swan' or 'the Fighting Cocks'. Each political club and many a pub had its own bowling green where, provided they were seen and not heard, children were tolerated. But my opinion of pubs themselves was coloured by the forceful "Ger-rout" I received when, curiosity overcoming caution, I dared to poke my nose through the door of one of them. There were two pubs facing each other further up the street from where I lived. One of them could be quite rowdy on a Saturday night. I used to feel sorry for the children who would cluster aimlessly round its door waiting for their fathers to come out and take them home. Then of course there were the off-licences, 'jug and bottle' we used to call them, in almost every side street where working mothers could send their offspring armed with sixpence and an empty pitcher to fetch the day's supply.

Then there was the home brew. At the cost of five shillings a year, a licence could be obtained from the Customs and Excise which allowed people to brew ale for their own use. I don't know whether many Black Countrymen bothered to get one, but I do know that many of them did brew their own beer - and I am sure that that is why the outhouses behind their dwellings were called brewhouses, or rather 'brewuses', for it was in the brewus coppers that they boiled and fermented their mashes.

In these days of jacuzzis and washing machines maybe few folk remember what a 'copper' was. In my early days fitted bathrooms and indoor toilets were the exception rather than the rule, but every brewus and every scullery was equipped with a copper - an inverted cast iron bowl about two and a half feet deep and two and a half feet wide with a small fire grate under it. Set in a brickwork surround, it had a wooden lid to cover it. It was usually used for boiling dirty clothes and for heating water for the tin bath to wash the grime off the worker's body after the day's work in the foundry or down the mine.

What did we have to eat? I was very young at the time and had slight notions of the hardships suffered by many of my neighbours because of the war time shortages of food, nor did I realise how much depended on the pay packets of people who lived hand to mouth. In my imagination we were living in a land of plenty. I can still recall to my mind's eye not only the noisy bustling market stalls but also the many food shops that stood within a quarter mile radius of my high street home. Besides the ubiquitous Home & Colonial, Maypole Dairy and Marsh & Baxter, there were four family butchers, one at least of whom had his own slaughterhouse. There were two bakers and one had his own bakery. I can still remember the taste of his parkin, his lardy-cake and his pikelets when toasted and soaked in butter.

Then there was Willy Walker the pork butcher with his displays of saveloys and polonies, black puddings, white puddings, German sausages, flat pans of lard both with and without rosemary, in fact everything edible that was derived from a pig. There was a cooked meat shop - today it would be called a delicatessen. Two greengrocers who also sold rabbits and poultry stared at each other across the street. A fishmonger had a sign "Fresh daily from Grimsby" and a 'high class' grocer had two shops knocked into one big one. A corn merchant, whose building boasted a large sign advertising "Old Calabar" dog biscuits, sold, amongst other things, pin-head oatmeal for making porridge, pearl barley for stews, groats for groatypudding and malt for brewing ale. Just round the corner was a flourishing fish and chip shop with its bubbling pans of boiling fat, where we would queue up to buy a Friday evening's supper. If I remember rightly six pennyworth of cod and three pennyworth of chips and maybe a few pieces of roe or a few scollops made a good meal for our family. Another shop nearby sold steaming hot faggots and mushy peas in tin cans with handles and loose lids on them. This was another nourishing meal at a reasonable price. I remember yet another shop that sold tripe, chitlings, scratchings and I am not sure whether it was that or yet another shop that sold cow heels and neatsfoot oil for preserving horses harness.

"A pig in the foad means bacon for breakfast." Often in many parts of the Black Country small groups of neighbours would club together to pool their scraps and potato peelings to boil up for swill - yet another use for the brewus copper - to fatten a pig that they were rearing in a

back yard. When killed, the carcass was divided amongst the contributors. A Gypsy family from Gornal used to tour the area selling large blocks of salt so necessary for pickling.

Many a hungry belly was filled by a bowlful of nourishing groaty pudding, a traditional dish seldom found outside the Black Country. The basic ingredients were groats, meat that was either chopped fine or minced, chopped leaks and onions, stewed together in a large iron saucepan with a stock made from a ham bone. Pepper and salt were added to taste. The recipe

and the method of preparation had been handed down from generation to generation. I suspect that the quantities used were measured by guesswork and that they varied not only according to the whim and fancy of the cook, but also to the relative availability of the ingredients. It was usually



prepared by placing them into the large iron saucepan, bringing them to the boil, the allowing them to simmer on the kitchen hob overnight. Some experts insisted that beef was the proper meat for the purpose, others that it was mutton, but in an emergency when cash was short almost any kind would be used. If you decide to experiment with it, and it's well worth a try, make sure that the capacity of the vessel you choose is large enough to allow for the swelling of the groats and that when the ingredients are cooking they are kept moist enough to prevent burning. Unlike with faggots and peas, there were few if any shops that specialised in selling piping hot 'Grorty Dick', as it was often called, but I have heard that it used to be served in one or two of the pubs. By the way there was one way to get cheap meat. In the days before butchers' shops had refrigerators, any meat left unsold before Sunday morning was unlikely to be fit for sale when they reopened the following Tuesday. Consequently, except for pickled beef, everything still in stock had to go at whatever 'give away' price they could get for it. There was a

butcher's shop across the street facing my window. around midnight on Saturdays I would often hear his pleading voice cry "Cumalong – ma – legalamb – fera – shilling!" or something like it.

Then of course there was that dubious substance sold as milk. Tuberculin testing was an unheard of safeguard in those days. I still have a scar to remind me that when I was seven years old a gland infected with tuberculosis was excised from my neck. The operation was performed not in a hospital, but by the surgeon on a table set up by our own sitting room window. I still remember cringing with dread when the time came to change the dressings and when the lint drains were drawn out of the wound.

The dairyman who supplied our needs ran his business from a range of buildings in the lane near the drill hall. The rings on his clip over bottle stoppers added a rubbery taint to the smoky flavour of his supposedly germ free sterilized milk. I have no knowledge of how or where he got his raw supplies and I have no reason to believe that they were any better or worse than those of his competitors. Judging by the dozens of clattering milk churns unloaded each day on to the platform of our local railway station from the luggage vans of the trains from Worcester, I assume that it was from around there that most of our milk came.

Passenger cars were not the only ones that ran on the extensive Black Country tramways, there were also special trains called 'Parcels Expresses' that were designed to carry goods. Each morning, between three and four o'clock one of these specials left Dudley, Kinver bound, laden with empty churns to be distributed to their owners en route. Then, when at Kinver itself and the return journey as far as Forester's Arms, it would stop by the farm gates to reload with churns of fresh milk. From there it ran express through Wollaston, Amblecote and Brierley Hill to a central depot in Dudley. I have been told that it was the only 'milk train' that ran on a street tramway in Britain. I remember clearly watching the milkman, on his sprightly 'float' with its big brassbound churn, using a set of tin ladles to measure out pints and gills of milk into the jugs and pitchers of waiting women and children while his patient horse stood munching contentedly from its nosebag. The milkman had a perforated metal disc fixed to the end of a long rod, and had the disconcerting habit of standing it face down on the dirty floor before plunging it unwashed into the churn to stop the cream from settling on top of the milk.

On thinking back to the scenes that I witnessed in the street beneath my window, I am carried back to a dark winter night by the shouting, I was horrified to flickering across my bedroom the window and on looking out from the front of the oil and further up the street. I watched spellbound as the local brewery's fire engine, bell clanging, horses at the gallop charged past.



when, having been awakened see the reflection of flames walls and ceiling. I sprang to saw flames billowing out colourman's shop a little

It is said that iron eats into the soul, and that there were many rough tough characters among the Black Countrymen. Many of the heroes of the old Wild West such as the Earps and the Hardins were of Black Country origin. Even in the days of my youth there were still streets in Dudley where for safety's sake policemen had to patrol in pairs. During the previous century the district had been famous, or infamous, for its bare knuckle pugilists and boxing was still the traditional sport. Bull baiting had by then been stamped out, but almost every town in the Black Country still had its 'Bull Ring'

There were still rumours of organised dog fights. Coursing with whippets was a popular sport, as was pigeon racing. There were lofts in many a back yard. Baskets of birds were put on trains to distant destinations with instructions that they should be released at a given time. Whole flocks of them were often to be seen milling round in the sky.

Were the Black Countrymen really religious? If you judge by their Christian names they must have been. Besides the Enoch and Eli of repute and the ubiquitous Josephs, Josuahs, Davids and Adams, there were Abels, Abrahams, Isaacs, Aarons, Hezechias, Issachars, Zacharias and Zedechias, together with the names of all the heroes, priests and prophets of the Old Testament.

Besides the parish churches, high, broad and low, the Black Country was studded with chapels of all sorts, shapes and sizes from the stark Peculiar Baptists' Cave of Adullam, through the 'Bethels', 'Ebenzers' and 'Zions' of the various shades of Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists, to the tin tabernacle Gospel Halls of the Plymouth Brethren. Then there

were the Salvation Army, God bless them, who made valiant efforts to save the souls of those abandoned by the rest.

When I was very young we went to the local Wesleyan chapel where I was severely reprimanded for attempting to help myself to pennies from the collection plate. I remember going on one of their Sunday school outings from Kidderminster on the tram to Stourport, and from thence on the steamer down river to Holt Fleet and back. Later we went to the Congregational chapel, though why they changed I never knew, the difference was too subtle for my childish imagination.



Then there were the trams. I admit that I have been addicted to them since I was a small boy. At the age when the aim of any normal boy was to be an engine driver, my ambition was to drive a tram. This interest was so embedded in my mind that some years ago, though long after the last tram car had rumbled to oblivion, while lying near to death's door in Burton Road Hospital suffering from some obscure viral fever that was effecting my brain, I was able to maintain my sanity by 'borrowing' a tram for the nearest depot and, remembering to slow down to a crawl at 'facing points', notch by notch on the controller, in my perfervid mind driving it along all the once extensive Black Country lines and along the Light Railway track to Kinver.

Except for the lines in Walsall and Wolverhampton where they were operated by their own corporations, the tramways were controlled by the British Electric traction seemed to have an infinite that their Tiverdale works been given a free hand in open topped double-wheels - most of the trains that ran on the Walsall and Wolverhampton lines were like that too. Then there were the long open topped eight-wheelers, with the sign 'Black Country Through



Car' along their sides, that ran a through service between Birmingham and Bilston. Even on those which were later fitted with tops, the upper decks were still called 'outside' and the lower inside. Besides the double-deckers, there were numerous kinds of single-deckers, some had clerestory windows on their roofs, others hadn't. There were some routes on which double-deckers never ran. Long toast-rack bogie cars ran during the summer months on the Kinver Light Railway. Parcels Expresses and trains fitted as mobile workshops played their respective role.

There were small single-deckers that ran on short shuttle services like the one along Spon Lane from West Bromwich to Smethwick. I was told a story about that particular line that ran like this. One stormy night at eleven o'clock, an empty tram was about to leave on its final journey of the day back to the depot at Smethwick, when a young woman climbed aboard to take her place on one of the hard seats that ran full length of the car's interior. As soon as the conductor went to collect her fare he realised that the girl was in labour and, as there was no hope of immediate help at that hour, there was no alternative but that with the driver's help he must act as midwife. I have no reason to doubt the truth of the story for I heard it from the lips of the woman herself, and I am certain that the delivery was successful for I met the flourishing offspring - that was many years later of course.

How came this obsession with trains? I think it can be traced back to my curiosity about the track along the street in front of my bedroom window. Until the year of my birth it had been worked by steam engines when, without re-laying, it had been converted to electric traction. Not in pristine condition even then, by the time I am telling about it was a case of 'make do and mend'. With the war, complete renewal was out of the question. From time to time, hours after I had gone to bed, after the last passenger car had returned to its depot, on hearing the special workshop tram grind to a halt, I would spring to the window to watch the regular gang of workmen with their 'billy-cock' hatted foreman decant to unload their tools, wheelbarrows and other gear from its trailer. In next to no time, I would see that the storm lanterns, the benzoline flares and the braziers were lit and burning brightly and that the barriers were set up to cordon off the area of activity.

Then I could hear the sledge hammers striking the spikes used to prise the granite setts away from the damaged track - there were no pneumatic drills in those days - and the picks and shovels as they dug out the packing beneath it. I would watch with wonder as the man with his eye shield, using his oxyacetylene torch, sheared through the steel rail to remove the damaged section and weld in a new piece. Hours later, lying in bed, I would hear the mechanical grindstone smoothing the new joints as the special tram moved backwards and forwards over them.

Even eighty years later, in my mind I can still savour the aroma of frying bacon which drifted through my open window as the workmen fried their breakfast on shovels above the glowing embers of a brazier. Soon this would be replaced by the bituminous fumes from the molten tar that was being poured to refix the granite sets that bordered the track.

In my enthusiasm for trams, I nearly forgot the buses. While almost every other motor bus in England had been taken to France to carry troops from their bases up to the front, deeming that the Tilling Stevens petrol-electric engines were too complex for the rough and ready handling of the army mechanics, the Midland Red were allowed to keep their fleet intact. They didn't compete on routes operated by trams - after all they both belonged to the same group of companies. The single deck busses had solid rubber tyres. Petrol being in short supply, some of them had big balloon-like contraptions fixed above their roofs to hold coal gas for their propulsion. They had no brakes on the front wheels. When one was crawling its way up a steep slope, the conductor would walk behind with a large 'scotch' on the end of a broom stave, held at the ready in case the bus began to roll backwards.

Whatever then polluted the atmosphere, it wasn't exhaust fumes from private motor cars - more of them have passed my window during the last quarter of an hour than then existed in the whole of the Black Country. There were plenty of horses of course, but none for riding. Without doubt the usual form of personal transport was 'Shanks's pony'. Everybody walked. Whichever school I happened to be attending at the time, I walked there and I walked back again. Men who lived within walking distance of their work walked there. Often, while lying abed in the early morning hearing the siren calls of the factory 'bells', I would listen to the clatter of

the workers' hobnailed boots as they trudged along the blue-brick pavement on their way to the day shifts at their respective factories.

Now here in a funny sort of way is something that connects walking with railways. When the time came to celebrate my seventh birthday I was confined to bed with those wretched tubercular glands. Asked what I would like for a present, I had badgered my parents to buy me a proper steam engine - the spring was broken in my clockwork one - and they seemed to think that it was an excellent suggestion and, believing that they had already got it hidden away, I plied them with such questions as "Will it really be steam?" to be confirmed with "Yes, plenty of steam." "Will it have lamps?" "Yes two on the front." "Has it got a tender?" "Oh yes, it's got a tender behind. You'll have to be careful where you run it in case it leaks," and I was perfectly satisfied with the answers.

The morning came, there was a knock on the door and my father and mother came in bearing a stout cardboard box which they placed on my bed. "Now be careful how you open it - keep it the right way up." In excited anticipation, I untied the string and lifted the lid. To my utter surprise out jumped a little wire haired terrier that started to lick my face.

Well it did have two headlamps; I could see the steam; I presumed it would leak and no doubt it had a tender behind. Of course, like any other dog, he needed exercise and before long we had our regular two mile daily walks.

During the war my father was a special constable and Pip would often accompany him on his beat. For years afterwards he would attach himself to almost any man wearing a similar uniform. I remember seeing him sitting beside a traffic policeman in the middle of the road. Then there was one particular tram inspector whom he used to follow on his rounds jumping on and off the trains.

One day a visiting neighbour accompanied by her two year old child, was being entertained in our kitchen by my mother. Suddenly it came to their notice that the child was missing and, after a brief search, they looked outside through the window. Across the yard they saw a scene reminiscent of Landseer's 'Dignity and Impudence'. There, clearly enjoying himself, the infant was wriggling inside the kennel, while Pip patiently kept guard by its side. This was

strange because he always defended his territory and no one else dared to go near when he was there. Pip was my boon companion and lived till he was seventeen years old.

Now back to railways - the heavy industries of the Black Country would have been impossible without the web of railway tracks that interlaced the whole area. The moving plumes of smoke and steam from the engines and the clank, clank, clank of the shunting wagons were the outward signs of the life-blood flowing through its arteries. There were dozens of stations on those lines which carried passengers as well as goods. It was possible to cross the district from one corner to another by changing trains at various junctions. For instance you could get from Halesowen to Walsall by changing at Old Hill and Great Bridge. Bradshaw was then a very useful book

Besides these were the many miles of mineral lines from mines and quarries and the lines that served the great steel works, foundries and forges. Each had its own engines and other rolling stock.



The railways had yet another important function for the Black Country folk. There were no paid holidays in those days, but year after year each September thousands of men, women and children, left the drudgery of life back home to pick the ripe flowers in the hop-yards on the far side of the River Severn - and it was the special trains run by the railways that took them there to do it. And that was where I was bound to go, so I can tell you more about that later.

* * *

Early in 1918, after being confined to bed for a month or so suffering from I know not what, our doctor recommended real fresh air as the only permanent cure for my malady so, by the time that I was reasonably recovered it had been arranged that I was to be sent forthwith to live under the eagle eye of an aunt, the chatelaine of a large farmhouse on the borders of Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

I remember the day of my exile as though it were yesterday. All futile objections overruled, farewells finished, I was taken by tram to Dudley station. Walking along the platform with my mother, I was introduced to the young man named Tim, the farmer's pupil, who was to escort me to my new home. Before long, the great engine of Worcester bound train slowed to a halt. I was bundled into a carriage, a porter slammed the door and before I could wave to my mother I was driven back from the window by the sulphurous smoke that poured in as the train rumbled through the tunnel.

I had brought two books with me to read en route. I burned my nose in my copy of the Rev. Woodward's book of wild animals. Tim thought the illustrated book of gospel stories would be more edifying to my youthful mind. I can't remember how we travelled from Worcester to the farm, but it must have been in Tommy's trap, for that was the only way. The only other memory of that day was of climbing the main stairway of that rambling old house led by a demure young woman who lighted the way with a candle. All was so quiet that I could hear nothing but the tick-tock" of the grandfather clock below

The next morning I was allowed the never to be repeated boon of lingering in bed listening to the crowing cocks and other farmyard sounds as they drifted through the open casement window. One that I had thought to be someone sharpening a scythe with a whetstone, I later learned had been the call of a guineafowl to its mate. No trains - no factory bells - no street pianos - even the smells were different. When I realised that I was being left to my own devices, I dressed and, finding my way along several passages, I descended the stairs that I had ascended the night before, opened the door opposite the clock and found myself in the kitchen - well that was what it was called - it must have been ten times the size of my Black Country kitchen. I was greeted by Anne, the girl who had led me up stairs last night. The row of brass bells on spiral springs that hung above the door at the end of the room were relics of the good old days ' when plenty of housemaids were willing to work for five shillings a week or less. She was clearly feeling unhappy about the extra work that an unwanted young townie would bring. Had I expected to lead a pampered existence I was soon to be disillusioned. In future it would be up with the lark or no breakfast.

Furthermore I learned that the front stairs and the tidy rooms would be out of bounds to smelly young boys with muddy boots and that “make your own bed and empty your own chamber pot into the slop bucket” would be the order of future days. She did relent a bit later on.



I won't tell you where the farm was because there is hardly anything recognizable left in the modern village from the village that I was then about to know. It is as different as was the Black Country of my youth from the smokeless zone of today. A car-a-minute 'A' road has superseded the winding lane that used to wend its way from Worcester into Herefordshire. The blacksmith's forge with its smell of singeing hooves, the wheelwright's workshop, the postmistress's shop with the apparatus for sending and receiving telegrams on its counter - no one in the village had a telephone - the pub on the main street favoured by the farmers, the village shop that stocked everything from paraffin to Pontefract cakes and many other things have vanished from the face of the earth. Gone are the odorous fold-yards where the manure fermented that was required for feeding the hungry hops. Few of the kilns, kells we used to call them, used for drying them, once essential equipment of every farm in the region, now remain. The few that do have been converted into living quarters. The buildings of the school and the chapel still stand, though no longer used for their proper purposes. Saddest of all - all the folk and creatures then the life of the village are now no more than an ephemeral dream.

“Custom is stronger than law.” Like villages all over England, ours had its own secret code of conduct and woe betide the persistent offender against it. Many of the villagers were either each others' first, second or third cousins and most of the others were related, though more distantly.

Everyone knew more of their neighbour's faults and failings, real or imaginary, than they did of their own. Mixed like the rest of humanity, some were saints but most were sinners, some drank while others were sobersides.

Needless to say accidents did happen even in the best regulated of families and it would have been most unwise for a stranger to enquire too closely into who was really who. What did happen to spare children in those days before formal adoption became legal? They must have been enfolded into the bosom of some family or another. I suspect that some of their birth certificates would have been economical with the truth. “Judge not that ye be not judged” was the text of the day. What effected one family reflected on them all. Scandal must stop at the wall of silence surrounding the village. There was one golden rule - strange nosey parkers must be shunned at all cost.

I don't know to this day what had persuaded my aunt to accept the additional burden of caring for a miserable young townie like me. It must have been obvious that by the very nature of things unless or until I became accustomed to country life, I could do no more than wander like a lost sheep about the kitchens, the farm and the village, totally ignored by the local children, making an intolerable nuisance of myself. Yet I suppose, remembering her devotion to the principles of ‘noblesse oblige’, having been asked, refusal would have been unthinkable.

I must remind you that because the terrible war was still at its height, many of the younger country folk were away in the forces - alas some were either dead or prisoners - while others had gone to the towns to make munitions, leaving for the most part their elders and youngsters to work doubly hard on the land.

The empty bedrooms in the older part of the house told that in the days before the war sufficient maids had lived-in to assist in the never ending tasks expected of the chatelaine of a large farmhouse. By 1918 there was no one but the lady herself with the aid of Anne and the occasional ‘daily’ from the village to do all the work.

There had been nurses in my mother's family ever since the days of the Crimean War. By dint of hard work, study and devotion to duty. Aunt had risen from the ranks to become the senior matron of the local hospital, and Matron was the title by which she was respectfully addressed by the grateful villagers. Needless to say there wasn't a doctor in the village, neither was there a telephone nor a motor car. Therefore, in case of accident or illness, they turned to Matron, and she considered it her bounden duty never to refuse to set a broken bone, dress a

wound or burn or treat a fever or the minor maladies that the local children were heir to - oh those terrible chilblains. It was only when she so ordered that a boy would be sent on a bicycle to the doctors with a note to summon his assistance. Hours would often pass before his arrival. And all this was in addition to the multifarious duties of running the farmhouse. Of course, I knew none of those things that I have just told you on the evening of my arrival, or on the bewildering days that followed it.

After that first morning on the farm, responding to Tim's "Up you get young lazybones." I found my way down by the back stairs and across the cavernous back kitchen, to sit by his side on one of the benches that flanked the long table, maybe large enough for twenty people to sit at, that occupied the middle of the 'kitchen's' worn flagstone floor. At my old Black Country home I had become accustomed to my war time ration of bread and marge, here I seemed to be in the land of plenty.

Hams hung from hooks like pictures on the wall, flitches of bacon rested on slats nailed to the underside of the great oaken beam that supported the floor above. I remember my surprise when told to help myself to a thick chunk of home baked bread and as much salty strong butter as I fancied. It was the first time that I had ever had a duck egg for breakfast. What else would I have noticed when looking round this seemingly enormous room? I must have seen that the middle of one of the longer walls was occupied by a willow pattern dressed dresser and that the other side harboured the big blackleaded range with its glowing fire.

I was at a loose end and felt that I was in everybody's way. Both Aunt and Anne made it crystal clear that with the best will in the world they had more important things to do than entertain a scraggy boy who kept getting under their feet, and I soon learned that a strange young townie garbed in a crest emblazoned blazer would be shunned by every self-respecting village child. The novelty of country life as I then saw it quickly wore off, and I became more and more miserable until I was suffering from an acute attack of home-sickness that was rapidly becoming chronic.

I am only guessing, but I am sure there must have been some correspondence with my parents and discussions with some of the neighbours, for the reaction was rapid. First I was

driven to town in the trap. Tommy the pony was left at the livery stable under the care of the ostler and I was taken to an outfitter's shop to be fitted out with clothes more suitable for the rough and tumble of the countryside. I remember that they were baggy enough to allow for my filling them out when I grew fatter. But though less conspicuous, I still stood out like a sore thumb and, plain as a pike staff, nothing but company of my own age could remedy that.

Individualists though the local farmers were, in order to surmount war time difficulties, a group of them had co-operated to found a dairy so that by pooling the milk produced on their farms they could market their produce more efficiently. This was managed by Will. Clerk who, amongst other duties had a role in running our hop-yards. He was aided by his wife who was responsible for much of the hard work such as scalding the churns and selling the milk. They had a precocious young daughter named Eva and, like it or not, she was chosen to be my companion. I have been told that in many ways we were both very advanced for our age. She was a boyish extrovert whereas I was an introvert loner.

At least I was properly dressed, but full of trepidation when I was taken to the 'Dairy' to meet this tomboy. It was clear that she hadn't been forewarned of my visit for, till this day, I can remember the horrified look of disgust on her face at the time of our first meeting, and feel the flaming red. blush on mine as I stood squirming with embarrassment. Rejection seemed to be absolute.

On the following Saturday morning my response to Tim's peremptory call to rise had been so sluggish that by the time that I was downstairs closing the door into the back kitchen behind me, Tim, already fed and dressed for work, was opening the door that led out into the farmyard. Wondering if I were too late for breakfast, I crossed the floor and opened the one into the big kitchen. It was my turn to be flabbergasted. A silent gesture from Anne's forefinger indicated that I must take my place on the far side of the long table. The freckle-faced tomboy was sitting there as though that had been her rightful place for years. Reluctantly I obeyed Anne's command and dumbfounded, I sat gingerly beside her to eat the food that was placed before us.

I don't know for certain what had induced her to change her mind but, having done so, she accepted the challenge with the enthusiasm of the convert. She kept on asking "When's he coming to school?" And the answer couldn't be long delayed.

It was unusual for children of well-to-do, even not quite so well-to-do Black Country families to go to a 'board school'. Instead, lad in badge-emblazoned uniforms, they were sent to supposedly superior private academies to be turned out as intolerable young snobs., I can't claim to have been an exception.

I don't know about other villages, but there were no prep schools in ours - just the church school and no others, so for me it was either go there or go back to the Black Country. Armed with authority to settle the matter, my mother came to stay with us for a few days.



It so happened that Uncle and Aunt, like most of the farmers and gentry of the parish were Church of England. As the parish church was two or three miles distant, the village school, its desks tipped over to form pews, served as chapel-of-ease. That Sunday my mother and I went there with them for evensong. After the service we were introduced to the school mistress. As neither Eva nor I were consulted, I know nothing of any negotiations that followed. I remember that Eva was on tenterhooks till she learned that after the coming Easter it would be her duty to take me with her to school. She had cured my homesickness and my mother had approved of the treatment.

Aunt was 'church' but Eva's family were 'chapel' and Anne who was also chapel used to call church goers "Pharisees". My parents who were 'chapel' but of a different sort from the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion of our village, didn't mind whether I went to church or to chapel provided that I went regularly. If Eva's mother thought the church folk were Pharisees, Aunt was the exception that proved the rule.

Easter was a special event, Eva, primly dressed in her Sunday best, proud as punch, accompanied Aunt and me to the ancient parish church. The pattern was set, some times she would come to the service at the village school with Aunt, at others I would go with Anne and sit

behind Eva in chapel. Later this led to my temporary disgrace. One Sunday, peeping through the cervices between my fingers in the middle of the reverend's tedious prayers, I was mesmerised by the shiny red rope of Eva's plait that was dangling before my eyes. Overcome by temptation I gave it a sharp tug.. I must leave the contemplation of the aftermath to your imaginations

Here's just a thought - it's only now that I am sifting through the snapshots dredged from the mire of shifting memory that the paradoxes and anomalies in these disjointed mental pictures puzzle my mind. I must confess that by now I am not even sure which were fact and which were merely fancy. However I am sure that whatever the adults which form part of them may have done, we children didn't waste our time philosophising about the whys and wherefores of the events then taking place, and I will try my best to refrain from doing so now. Having said that, let me try to piece together the memories of my first day at the village school.

I must have risen bright and early, gone down to the back kitchen sink to give a cold water cat-lick and a promise to my face. This would have been followed by a routine inspection behind my ears and at the back of my neck to ascertain that they were reasonably clean. For breakfast there would have been a dollop of porridge followed by a rasher of bacon toasted in a Dutch oven hooked onto the bars of the kitchen range, together with a slice of bread soaked in the fat that had dripped from it. Eva would have burst in with "Come along boy. We'll be late if you don't hurry" I'd have forced my feet into my dubbinned boots as I hustled out through the back kitchen.

We would have scurried across the farmyard, scattering the flustered fowl as we went, then down the foredraft to wait by the gate till the last laggard was ambling by "like snail unwillingly to school", then we would have run down the road to scramble through the door just as the last clang was sounding from the cracked bell in the school's turret.

But what do I remember that differentiated the first day from all the others? Nothing much except that having committed some act of indiscipline, Eva and I were ordered up to the teacher's desk to receive two sharp strokes of the cane across the palms of our hands - there was to be no favouritism there.

If Uncle and Aunt had had any children of their own, would they have pampered them? Who knows, but I am certain that my parents had instructed them that under no circumstances were any special privileges to be given to me. Some farmers, or more particularly their wives, thought that their offspring were superior beings and encouraged them to assume the airs and graces of the landed gentry. I don't know which schools they attended, it wasn't the one in our village., I suppose that considering that I was Aunt's nephew they were forced to accept me as their social equal, but they looked down on Eva as a mere villager.

One evening one of these ladies came with her daughter to pay her respects to Aunt and I was invited to visit their farm and spend a day with their family - though Eva was not. I was told that they had a small brown pony and that they would teach me to ride. A few days before the visit was set to take place Eva and I were about to enter the kitchen when I overheard some scrap of the conversation that went something like this: "Why on earth did you say you'd let him go there - he's filthy!" I can just see that prim little toffee nose wrinkling up when she gets a whiff of him, and Aunt's voice replying, "Doesn't seem to worry his young lady love. Wouldn't have been polite to refuse."

It was clear that they thought that I needed a bath.

Now I think that it would be fair to say that back in my Black Country home for his day and generation my father was somewhat of a bathroom fanatic. One of my earliest childhood memories is of an upturned enamelled cast iron bath crawling upstairs.- of course there must have been a man under it on its way to be fitted into a new bathroom. All mod cons, wash basin with hot and cold water taps and flush toilet included. But here every drop of water that was used had to be pumped by hand either from the well beneath the back kitchen floor or from the one out in the yard.. If we needed hot water for making tea or cooking it was boiled in a kettle over the kitchen fire. If we needed hot water in larger quantities we had to light a fire under the copper in the back kitchen and heat it in that. There was a bathroom of sorts without running water - not for the use of grubby young boys. I never even used the bowl and pitcher that sat on my bedroom's wash stand. I used the bucket that stood under it to carry the slops from the chamber pot downstairs. There were privies out in the garden and in the farmyard but none indoors.

Now back to this bathing business. The rug was rolled up and moved to where it wouldn't get soaked. The tin bath - the one that was used when scalding and scraping the pig's carcass after one had been killed to make bacon - was placed on the flags before the kitchen fire. A couple of bucketsful of hot water from the copper was poured into it, Aunt would test the temperature with her hand. Then the boy dressed as the Good Lord made him was sat in the water for a good scrubbing with carbolic soap from tip to toe. Told to stand up, he was sluiced with fresh water poured from a pitcher over his head. When he had been dried with warm towels, the dirty water was emptied down the drain and the bath hung back on its peg, the puddles were mopped up.

The rug was re-laid and the boy or girl re-clothed., I have said girl for exactly the same thing happened to Eva at the Dairy. In fact she suggested that there would be a great saving in time and effort if we were to share the same bath water turn and turn about at her home and mine. Sound reasoning no doubt, but it was never put into practice.

The day of the visit arrived and, full of expectation, I hurried across our back orchard and over their front one to be met by the girl who had invited me, a younger brother, a sister and the pony that had an air of sweet innocence on? her face. The only previous experience that I had had of riding was on Mrs. Morris's donkeys at Clent, but I was all agog to have a go. "She's a quiet little mare - up you get," said the girl. The boy held the bridle while I eased myself into the saddle. Suddenly he released his hold and gave the animal a slap across its rump. Away we charged up the long field, wheeled round and flew back again at full gallop to come to a dead stop at the edge of the duck pond. Over her head I went and landed with a splash in the water - and Here endeth the first lesson." Apart from the soaking, except to my pride, no further damage was done. I did learn to ride and I quite often visited the farm again, but the farmer took umbrage when anyone refused to enjoy his 'blue-veiny' cheese soaked in port wine of which he was justly proud. I hadn't by then developed a taste for it but for politeness sake had to pretend that I enjoyed it.

Partly screened by a line of scraggy larch trees, the house lay well back from -the road behind a piece of meadow land which was an extension of the farm's front orchard. It was

approached by a well worn foredraft which on one side skirted the farm buildings, and on the other was separated by a flat topped iron fence from the marshy meadow.

There was a large five-bar gate at each end, one opened on to the road, the other onto the farmyard where a visitor would scatter the flocks of white leghorns and Rhode Island reds which scraped and pecked its rough surface for grit, before reaching the back door of the house. The farm buildings formed a quadrangle surrounding the foldyard. At milking times Old Harry, the cowman, would hold open the gate from the meadow calling “Cwp, cwp,cwp” as the cows, udders full, filed slowly across the foredraft, through a gap between buildings, along the foldyard pavement and into the stalls in the long cowshed whose back wall bordered the road.

All the milking was done by hand, the machines then available were far from satisfactory. The pig sties with the place for cooking the swill separated that gap from the next one which was used by the horses on the way to the stables which formed part of the quadrangle facing the cow sheds. The engine house, entered from the rickyard occupied the far corner of the quadrangle. This housed the swirling bladed chaff cutter, the tool for chopping mangolds and swedes, the mill for kibbling oats and the pump for filling the cistern that supplied water to the cow sheds next door. All these were driven through a series of unguarded shafts ,belts and pulleys by a Blackstone oil engine. When Tim came to use it, with the aid of a blowlamp he heated a tube that protruded from the end of its cylinder till it glowed red hot, then, by standing on one of the spokes of the large flywheel, with a loud bang it would start. He had to spring clear with alacrity.

At the corner nearest to the house - the one diagonally opposite to the engine house - the ground floor of the building was divided longitudinally by a wall. The doors that opened onto the foldyard pavement belonged to the stables, the home of the great shire horses, Prince the work horse and Tommy the pony when the were not out working or in the fields.

The side that faced the farmyard formed the open sided shelter for wagons and carts and other implements and tools the like of which are now to be found only in museums. At the corner where the farmyard joined the rickyard, the buildings were devoted entirely to the preparation of hops. The two cowl topped towers of the roundel kilns, or kells as we used to call them, brooded like wimpled nuns across the rest of the buildings. There was a large airy barn

with double doors large enough for a loaded wagon to drive through between those and the engine shed. In my time this was reserved as a dormitory for the Black Country pickers when they came on their annual pilgrimages. Its original function was performed by a copious corrugated iron Dutch barn on the far side of the farmyard.

The foldyard was surrounded by a stone pavement. Day by day the dung and urine soaked soiled straw litter were swept from byres, sties and stables into the seething square sump that occupied its centre. There these were left to ferment into the valuable manure so vital to the health of the crops. Superphosphate, basic slag and spent lime from the gas works were the only other things added to improve the land that I can remember. Hops are particularly hungry plants that need a lot of fertilizer.

Although hops were the speciality, the farms of the district were mixed farms. If any form of 'factory farming' was practised it wasn't there. Fowl scratched and pecked freely in the farmyard, and pigs, though destined to end their days in a Tipton sausage factory, were for the most part free to rummage at will in the front orchard. Apart from those worked by the oil engine, all the tools and implements not held by hand were hauled and operated by horses. The motor tractors then available were far too weak to turn a furrough in the heavy clay soil, a task easily performed by a plough pulled by the three great horses in tandem.

Horses and cattle needed fodder. Silos and silage were few and far between, so fodder meant hay and hay making. When the weather was fair and the meadows ripe for mowing, a horse drawn mowing machine cropped the grass and a large horse drawn rake turned the new mown hay to dry in the sunshine. Then all hands available armed with wooden rakes and pitchforks - pikes we called them - loaded it into horse drawn wagons to convey it to the rickyard where, with the utmost alacrity, before it poured with rain, it was built into ricks and temporarily covered with tarpaulins. Later they were properly thatched with straw. In 1918 the army sent a squad of men with a traction engine and a baling press with a fearsome long tined grab to commandeer one of our stacks for their horses in France.

The drills for sowing seed, rollers Cambridge and smooth, harrows, hoes for dealing with weeds, the plough-like mooter for earthing up potatoes, the muck spreader, the tank on wheels

with its pump for spraying the hop vines with a stinking fishy soft soap solution to rid them of black fly blight and many other implements were all drawn by horses.

Combine harvesters have long since taken much of the 'if and when' out of harvesting cereals which then depended entirely on the weather. We, and I believe most of the other farmers, had their own horse drawn reaper-binder, a machine which not only cut the stalks close to the ground but at the same time bound them with twine into sheaves. When the corn was ripe and the opportunity arose, the machine was driven in ever decreasing circuits round the field followed by all hands available, men, women and children, who stood the sheaves upright into stooks so that the ears were away from the ground. As the rabbits ran out Uncle shot them - which brings to mind the mouth-watering flavour of the cold rabbit pie that I had at Eva's mother's for dinner.

There was a young German prisoner of war working with us in the field in 1918. We called him Fritz. Neither Eva nor I could square up this pleasant young man - I suppose he would have been no more than sixteen years old at the time - with the terrible ogres that we had read and heard so much about. I remember that when the last load was on its way to be stowed in the Dutch barn, she and I were seated on the horse's broad back as it drew the wagon in the wake of the weary workers along the road.

Farmers owned their own implements such as mowers and reapers where nature decreed that they would be needed for use at the same time, but threshing machines and the engines to work them were hired by the farms in rotation from contractors. Our turn came in November. On the Saturday evening Eva and I watched as the threshing box was set up alongside the Dutch barn where the sheaves could be pitched right on top of it. The horse was backed, turned and brought forward until the stationary steam engine was manoeuvred into a position with its fly wheel in alignment with the pulley on the threshing box. The two were then connected by the longest balata belt that I have ever seen in my life.

On the morning of Monday November 11th, when Eva came to escort me to school, work was already under way. Maybe there was an air of expectancy as we took our places at our desks in the class room that morning, but I do remember that at eleven o'clock the hush was

disturbed by the rumble of distant maroons. The teacher announced that the war was over and that we were excused lessons for the rest of the day. Expecting that every one else would have stopped work to rejoice, Eva and I returned to the farmyard to find that work was in progress as though nothing had happened. We were ordered not to stop and stare but give a hand moving the boltings of straw as they tumbled from the back of the machine.

Come war come peace, the job must be finished - another farm needed the engine next week.

Here's something I nearly forgot - the labourers could come each morning to our "cellar" to refill their costrels or jars with cider or perry. Each autumn when the apples and pears were ripe, fresh batches were pressed to replenish the empty casks that lined its walls. Although there were the remains of an ancient stone mill in the farmyard where a horse would have walked round and round at the end of a pole, the press now used was a wooden contraption hired from contractors.

Hop picking was the great event of the year. No other branch of agriculture needs such specialised skills and equipment, or such an intense use of labour with such hazardous expectations of success as does the culture of hops. Fortunes were made and fortunes were lost by growing them. There are still a few hop yards left in Worcestershire and Herefordshire - and long may they flourish. But because of the devastation caused by vertecillium wilt and foreign competition most of the hundreds of acres that were once such a striking feature of the landscape are now no more than a fading memory.

Before the introduction of machinery in the late 1930s, the flowers had to be picked by hand - a task far beyond the capacity of the local population. By the beginning of September the bines were heavy with ripe flowers and ready for picking. The hinterland bordering the River Severn separated the Black Country folks two worlds. To the east lay the place where for eleven months of the year they toiled at their fires, to



the west lay the land laden with hops ready for harvesting. If hard manual work was the obverse side of many of their lives, then the Septembers spent in the hop fields was its reverse side. It was a time for renewal, a period amongst the young for liaisons which no doubt complicated further the relationships of an already complex inbred society.

It was a month free from drudgery. Folk harvested the hops and were paid for doing it. Nothing but sickness or death was allowed to interfere with the annual pilgrimage. Generation after generation, members of the same Black Country families became attached to the same farms, almost as though by hereditary right. Year after year since the railways first opened, on the first Saturday of the month families of hop pickers, men, women and children with babies in washing baskets, with their tin trunks stuffed with paliases, blankets and pots and pans crowded the platforms to wait for the 'specials' that would convey them across the river to the hop yards. I remember that one of these trains began its journey at Smethwick junction, picked up passengers at the stations between there and Stourbridge Junction, Crossed the river at Worcester and distributed them at stations along the line that ran through Bromyard and Leominster to end its journey at Presteign. Another train crossed the Severn at Dowles Bridge and went along the line to Tenbury Wells.

Both in the Black Country and in the hop growing districts, the school holidays extended over September so that the children could help with the work, no doubt a matter of Hobson's choice as far as the education authorities were concerned for they would have played truant if they hadn't.

The week before the pickers arrival was one of feverish preparation on the farm. The large freshly limewashed barn was freed from lumber, swept out, and a heap of clean fresh straw was piled into one corner ready for the pickers to stuff their palliasses.

Our hop bines were trained on the 'Worcester System', they climbed coir strings strung from overhead wires fixed to the tops of permanent poles. Alleys wide enough for horse drawn hoes, sprayers and carts separated the rows of 'stocks' which were themselves six or seven feet apart.

Setting up the 'cribs', the deep hessian troughs on wooden frames placed at the ends of the alleys ready to receive the flowers from the pickers' fingers was another job that had to be done that week. Everything to do with the kells had to be checked and ready to process the flowers from the first load of 'pokes' brought in. Once started the process must proceed uninterrupted night and day till the last of the crop was dry. Nothing must be left to chance.

The great day would come and the special rumbled over the iron girders of the bridge over the river, the frontier between the pilgrims two worlds. The farmers sent wagons to the local stations to collect their tin trunks and small children, the rest of the pickers would trail back in their wake to the farms.

Once our pickers had taken possession of the barn it was out of bounds to the rest of us. They seldom made friends with the country folk. On the Monday morning after their arrival, they would be by their cribs plucking the flowers from the bines now being cut down from the wires. Many times the pickers at a crib would be close relations of each other, sometimes two or three generations of a family together. The elders themselves would have been brought by their parents, now their sons and daughters had brought their own children.

Two or three times during a day Eva's father, armed with a bushel basket, would visit each crib to measure out the flowers into 'pokes', hessian sacks that held six or seven bushels, held open by a fellow farm worker. Metal tokens were issued indicating the number of bushels measured out. This was also noted by the accompanying 'Clerks' in their note books. Eva and I sometimes acted as clerks. The pokes were loaded onto a cart to take the 'green hops' to the kells for drying. The tokens were changed into their equivalent value in money before the pickers returned to the Black Country. In the mean time the village shop and taverns would accept them in lieu of cash.

Some pickers were so nimble that the stripped bines piled up into untidy heaps as the day wore on. One day Prince, the work horse, while bringing up a fresh load of bines to the cribs, stopped dead in his tracks and refused to move an inch further forward. Had he done so he would have put his hoof on a basket in which lay a baby snugly asleep. It had become covered by a layer of discarded hulum.

Eva and I carried out several other jobs such as ferrying food and drink to the men working non stop in the kells. In her role as Matron, Anne held a ‘surgery’ in the back kitchen to treat the visitors’ cuts, strains, sprains and bruises. We leant a hand with that too.

Did it rain during those September days? I suppose it must have done sometimes but I don’t remember it doing so. To me they were halcyon days. Looking back across eighty years my most lasting memory of the season is of the picker women lolling and sitting on the front orchard grass, chatting and gossiping round a blazing brazier, and of the men congregating round the taverns.

By the end of September the hop yards stood stark like skeletons. the pickers had exchanged their tokens for real money and, Paradise lost, the trains had rumbled back across the river to deliver them back to their Black Country home and hard labour till they returned in the following year. Now here’s a strange thought that has just come to mind - if the ‘ranters’ in their Back Country chapels had promised Elysian hop fields to the righteous instead of eternal damnation to the wicked, wouldn’t they have been more successful in keeping their congregations on the straight and narrow path? The hops now dried and pressed hard into pockets were loaded on to wagons and taken to the hop market at Worcester.

I learned much about nature, both human and otherwise, during my three year sojourn in the village. There can be little doubt that the farm workers expected that I was destined in years to come to become the farm pupil and they did their best to teach me the basics of their special skills. I had accompanied Old Harry when taking a cow to the bull, and I had watched the calves,, the lambs and the piglets being born. I had seen the land being ploughed, the various crops being sown, tilled and harvested in their season and I had been with Uncle to the markets at Worcester and Bromyard.

In all our exploits Eva was my constant companion, I believe that in the villagers’ minds we were linked together and inseparable like bread and butter. For fear of offending Aunt if they objected, we were allowed to wander where most of the other children feared to tread. We had our own secret places when we needed to be alone. A favourite was the ‘Wilderness’, a small abandoned orchard on the far side of the moat which could only be reached by crossing a rickety

old footbridge that wouldn't have born the weight of an adult. Another was by a pool in a secluded dingle through which ran a tributary of the River Teme. There we could watch the water voles and daydream of a future, never to be fulfilled, when I would be a farmer and she would be my wife, and where it was safe to jump in the water and swim around to cool off on a hot summer evening.

But, as Rabbie Burns said "The best laid schemes of mice and men aft gang alee" and, for some inexplicable reason considering the abysmal reports which my schooling must have shown, my father became convinced that with the aid of yet another prep—school I would be able to gain a place at King Edward's School in New Street Birmingham. And so it came to pass that I must return to my old Black Country home.

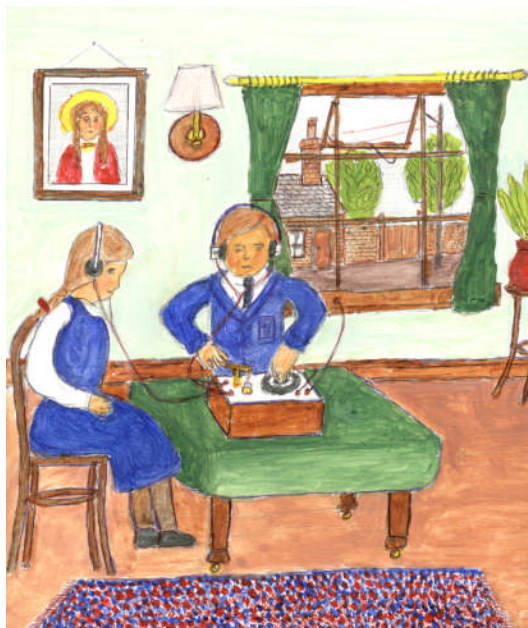
Needless to say that when the time came to sit that entrance examination, the result was abject failure. I can still remember sitting staring at the arithmetic paper which, for all that I could answer might have been written in Greek.

The war had been over for three years and Prime Minister David Lloyd George's promise of a home fit for heroes to live in was no more than a hollow dream. No more munitions were needed and the pall of smoke above the Black Country had grown thinner. The tram track in front of my home had been relayed during my absence but with German rails received from Krupps as reparations in stead of good Black Country steel. Small bands of unemployed ex-service men wearing dishevelled uniforms now paraded along the pavement kerbs playing battered brass instruments in the hope of staving off starvation from their wives and children. Day by day queues of disconsolate men outside the 'labour exchanges grew longer and longer. Then the mine owners tried to reduce the miners' wages and there were strikes. I remember seeing women and children picking lumps of coal from the pit mounds. Some of the pits flooded and never reopened.

Nevertheless, there was a brighter side to life in the 1920s Black Country. Because of the multiplicity of trades, bad as they were, conditions never became as desperate as they did in towns like Jarrow which depended on a single industry. For instance firms like Clino, Beans, Sunbeam and *A.J.S.* were building cars and motor bicycles at reasonable prices. The municipal

authorities were beginning to build estates of neat little houses each of which had a bathroom. These were to be let at a reasonable rent. presumably that would have kept the brick works busy too.

Needless to say Pip had been pleased to see me back but, in the course of my absence, I had become a complete country lad. I had no interest in football, cricket or anything else in common with the townie boys of my new prep-school, and I made but one firm friend during the whole time that I attended it. I missed the horses and other animals and above all the stimulus of Eva's lively companionship. This school was some two or three miles distant from my home and, while walking there with me each morning, my father would persist in questioning my spelling and arithmetic which he considered, with justification, to have been abysmal, thus adding to my discomfort. To be quite truthful my light never shone brightly at any school that I ever attended. I believe I learned far more from books. Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia was a mine of information.



One new thing at that time took my fancy the wireless we called it. In 1923 I think it was, the British Broadcasting Company started transmitting from 54T Birmingham, I spent hours winding coils of wire to make a crystal set then, by finding a sensitive spot with the 'cat's whisker', the signal came through loud and clear. Later I made a more elaborate receiver with thermionic valves and a loudspeaker. When conditions were favourable I could pick up far distant signals on that.

I did return to the farm for a few weeks and was laid low with rheumatic fever.

I achieved neither my ambition to become a farmer nor a tram driver.