

Frank West MBE Local Hero. *By Peter Clarke*

Lieutenant-Commander Frank West, M.B.E - Another neglected Benson naval hero.

Considering Benson is as far as any community can be from the sea in England, we seem to be having more than our fair share of recent maritime discoveries, following the accounts of Admiral Miller.



Frank West spent his childhood in Benson, living in 51 Littleworth (the large house sadly unoccupied in recent years). The Historical Group are fortunate indeed to have received a unique account of Benson by him, as he grew up in the house between 1910 and 1923. It is a fascinating bit of local history.

But it is the man himself who is the subject of this article. Nowadays an MBE is generally given for “good works”, but I am told when awarded to Frank, it was for “outstanding acts of courage not in the face of the enemy”. The George Cross, subsequently instituted by King George VI, would later have been his award. The year was 1941.

I have just been reading “Lifeboat Number 7”, a thoroughly dated, but “good read”, being an account by him of what – at the time – was the longest time afloat of any lifeboat, following *S.S Britannia’s* sinking in mid Atlantic by a German ship. Eighty two personnel clung to the lifeboat as they left the sinking ship. Twenty four days later thirty eight came ashore in Brazil. It is his account of that journey, and the outstanding seamanship of a handful of Royal Naval personnel that enabled even those to survive.

West Memoirs

I do not remember when I first realised my interest in the sea for none of my family were or ever had been seafarers. Perhaps it was awakened in me by the story of St. Paul’s shipwreck as told so graphically in the Bible in The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 27. I got to know this Chapter almost by heart for I read it many times instead of listening to long sermons in church. The dog-eared condition of the Bible given to me on my seventh birthday in 1913, particularly the Chapters of The Acts of the Apostles, bears testimony of my selective Bible reading, even taking into consideration I had no alternative option open to me except to pay attention to the sermons.

Sundays in my childhood meant for my brother, three sisters and myself Sunday School in the village Day School at 10 am after which we were taken by our parents to church for Matins. Then Sunday School again in the afternoons and often to Evensong after tea. So with two sermons to sit through on most Sundays without incurring too much displeasure from my parents for lack of attention and general fidgeting or particularly my attempts to tease or annoy my sisters, I would apply myself to the exploits of St. Paul.

I was born in the small Oxfordshire village of Benson - almost as far away from the coastline of England as it is possible to get. My first memory of the sea was at the age of about twelve when I spent a brief holiday with a friend on the Isle of Wight. Standing on the cliffs at the southernmost point of the island I watched a plume of smoke from an unseen ship and presently the two masts of another. The memory after so many years is still clear in my mind - the summer day with the sun high in the sky riding the white cumulus clouds midway to the horizon which stretched in the most perfect curve before it was lost in a distant haze of heat and cloud. While so often cloud patterns have created imaginative pictures in my mind I can still recall as clearly as when first formed, on this day it was not cloud pattern pictures, the bluey-green sea or the wheeling birds that remained uppermost in my memory. I still see two close-set masts and a little eastwards of them a long plume of black smoke

trailing just above the horizon, the smoke and masts keeping an evenness of distance apart as I intently gazed across the intervening sea.

Finding a steep, comfortable, grassy bank I sat to watch and wonder. Why only the masts and smoke, what kind of vessels lay beneath, where had they come from and where were they bound, were they carrying lots of people or perhaps the smoky one was just a “Dirty British Coaster with a cargo of cheap tin trays”. I asked myself these and many other questions and answered some with most improbable, imaginative and wishful flights of fancy, inspired no doubt by Henty, Kipling, RLS and other boyhood reading. What marvellous adventures might await me if I could cross this horizon? Those tall masts sinking beyond the western skyline beckoned me to an unknown world.

It was here then that I knew I would sooner or later have to find out for myself what lay beyond my vision. It did not then take possession of me for my boyhood was too full to have much purpose other than to live from day-to-day and enjoy those days to the full. I went to a Grammar School where without working hard I could get by fairly near the top of my Form. Games and sports were far more important, though I was not outstanding in any of these. I played good hockey and managed to get into the first cricket eleven as a stolid stone-waller batsman and a reasonably safe wicket—keeper. In the summers I learned to handle punts, skiffs and canoes on the River Thames which I came to know well between Oxford and Reading, could swim long distances in a long slow time, could only dive well occasionally between numerous very painful belly-flops, could beat most of my friends at tree climbing and cycle races and could skate well on the frozen Thames floodwaters, for the river did seem to flood and freeze in those bygone days.

I enjoyed a happy home and school life, had many good friends and do not recall any dull moments. I do remember occasions on summer days when I sought solitude and lay day-dreaming of unknown far-away places and creating mental pictures of a world of impossible adventures in the footsteps of my boyhood heroes - David Livingston, H.N.Stanley, General Gordon and Captain Cook sailing among the South Sea Islands.



Benson C of E School (1904)

“Now don’t get dirty” said my mother as she sponged and dried my face and hands outside the entrance door of the Infants classroom. “And Rennie try to see he keeps clean and behaves properly”.

As the school bell rang my mother took me in and handed me over to Miss Cooper the Infant Teacher. My sister Rennie who was a “big girl” for she was two years older than me went to her own classroom with a last reminder from mother to “take care of him at playtime and bring him home to dinner”.

It was usual in those early days of the nineteen hundreds for children of our village who lived near the school to attend when they were three years old. As my birthday was on January 24th, I joined the first term after the Christmas holidays when I was not quite three years old. The school was no more than two hundred yards from our home, reached by a footpath between Mr Young’s orchard on one side and Mr Cook’s field on the other. On that first morning mother held my hand tightly, her other hand

carrying the sponge and towel as we walked the short distance. Could I, I now wonder, have got myself dirty enough in that short walk, restrained by my mother's hand, to necessitate such ablutionary attention for I would have started out in a highly sanitised and polished condition. Cleanliness was next to Godliness was a strict maxim in our young lives though I frequently failed to live up to either.

The village of Benson is recorded in Saxon times when it was a large and important manorial area including Henley to the west and Dorchester to the east. It is referred to in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles as Benesington which records that in the year 777 A.D. King Offa fought a battle nearby. Offas' favourite saint was St.Helen and our church and the one at nearby Berrick Salome are dedicated to her. In the Domesday Book our village is called Bensington and was already losing much of its importance having been severely battered by invading Danes in 1010 A.D. About this time it was described as an unhealthy place lying between the swamps of Roke Marsh and Crows Marsh. Its history has been well recorded, possibly owing to the Manor being in the gift of successive kings. Records of the reign of Edward III give lists of the important inhabitants from the year 1306.

Lying halfway between Henley and Oxford it became a main stage post and three of the old coaching inns survive though now with the more upstage title of hotel. The Crown is at the east end of the High Street, the White Hart at the west end and nearby The Castle, not that Benson ever had a castle but the building does have a semi-circular red brick tower-like frontage. The Crown is dated 1709 and the white stuccoed White Hart is reputed to be much earlier.



Crown

White Hart on left, Castle on right

There were in my youth at least eight Public Houses in and around the village to quench the thirsts of the mainly agricultural workmen. I was never allowed inside these but would stare through open doorways into the taprooms with their sawdust-covered floors. The men sat on wooden benches with their large tankards and I would wait expectantly to see and hear them spit from between their teeth with a sound between a cut-short cluck of a hen and the hiss of a snake, with unerring aim into one of the metal spittoons placed about the floor.

Near the Crown was the Post Office then Mr Smith's grocers shop and at the other end of the High Street the larger grocer shop and bakery run by Mr Wood . Mr Haily had a small grocer shop in Mill Lane and nearby on the corner of Mill Lane and the High Street was the haberdashery shop of Mrs Baker. Next to the shop entrance was the front door of her home but it was also the entrance to the Doctor's surgery and next to this was the front entrance to my Grannie West, still living in the same house as many generation of Wests', these houses having been built c.1750. These played a most important part in our young lives. The only other street was the aptly-named Brook Street which ran from The Crown towards the village of Ewelme, the brook which ran parallel with the street being the overflow from the Ewelme watercress beds. From The White Hart the road passed by the vicarage and

the school towards Oxford, while Crowmarsh Road ran alongside the long vicarage garden and the church to the river and coal wharf then on through the small hamlets of the Crowmarshes - Preston, Battle and Gifford to Wallingford on the other side of the river. We lived at Littleworth, a row of detached and semi-detached cottages on the northern edge of the village. The name derives from old English words meaning 'small homestead'. The cottages faced on to a footpath with behind them a narrow lane called the Back Road.

Soon after I was born we moved our home from one end of Littleworth to the other. My father had bought two old thatched cottages the larger of which he made into our new home. He removed the thatch, heightened the walls and put on a tiled roof - the date 1909 can still be seen cut into the wall of a high gable end. The smaller cottage still remains unaltered. The new home he called 'The Cot' but is now known, not altogether inappropriately as 'West View' and is lived in by an old schoolgirl friend of my youth. The population of Benson in those days was, in the Census of 1910, 1085 - 502 men and 583 women. As I was then three years old I expect I counted as one of the men.



The West family photographed in 1916

Clockwise:-

Ellen aged 7, Fred aged 10, Frederick Walter (father aged 38), Frank (author - aged 9), Miranda aged 12, Mary Ann West neé Nash (mother aged 40), Lucy aged 5

My mother, a slightly built woman of about 5 feet 3 inches tall and my father a good five inches taller and well-built, produced their family of five in almost annual instalments. First came Miranda Mary, usually called Rennie or Renda. Next came Frederick William and a year later Frank Lawrence. I must have proved rather a strain on my mother for it was nearly two years before Ellen Maria arrived. She was known as Nellie in her youngest days and

followed by the more usual interval and lastly, came Lucy Emma Mary. The girls held the advantage of numbers while the male strength was reduced to one for my brother, at an early age, went to live with my maternal grandparents in London. I did my best at all times to maintain male supremacy and gather I did so but according to my sisters' recollections, not always in a gentlemanly or brotherly fashion. It was not until German Zeppelins dropped bombs on London that my brother returned to our country home by which time I had established a clear pecking order.

Our young lives were influenced to a great extent by "our" stretch of the River Thames and the nearby church of St. Helen. In our earliest days "our" stretch of river was between Shillingford Bridge upstream and Wallingford Bridge downstream, both within the walking capacity of our young legs. The walk along the towpath to Wallingford was most looked forward to as it included being taken across the river above the weir by the lock-keeper in the ferry punt and then across the walkway of one of the lock gates.



Benson Lock Ferry

An added attraction and sometimes the cause of childish argument was who would ring the bell to let the ferryman - usually the lock-keeper himself, know we wanted to cross. When we were quite young our mother would succumb to the frequent chorus "can we go down to the river today". In the early spring it would be to the outskirts of the village beyond the church to Preston Crowmarsh to the Cuckoo Pen between the road and part of the river flowing to the weir. Here would be an abundance of Kingcups, the large-flowered yellow Marsh Marigolds with oozy, juicy, sticky stems to be gathered and taken home and placed in jam jars. Each jar for as long as the flowers lasted would be identified as Renda's, Frank's or Nellie's and in due course as we grew older our youngest sister would continue the Kingcup quest.

On the other side of the road from the Cuckoo Pen was a small area of wet marshy land known as the Withy Beds. Later in spring we would go there to collect Cuckoo flowers or as some called them, Lady's Smock. These too were placed in jam jars with the same proprietary claims as for the Kingcups or other flowers we gathered. We rarely picked violets or primroses though there were many on the hedge banks perhaps because they were not close to the river which after all was the main attraction. In summer we had favourite places in the water meadows towards Shillingford Bridge where we found what we called Quaker Grass which most likely were more correctly called Quake Grass or Meadow Grass. These grasses with their long hair like stalks, each bearing its own seed head were not very common in our meadows so there was always some excitement when small patches were found, to be picked and taken home. They would be kept as treasured possessions well into the winter months for as long as our forbearing mother would tolerate the slow shedding of the seed heads.

Other simple pleasures, mostly on Sundays when we could not be boisterous, were to make Daisy chains which we all wore - including parents - for as long as they held together. We also told the time by blowing Dandelion seed heads and would hold a Buttercup under any willing chin to see who liked

butter. We could never get a reflection of the flower under my father's chin and he was most patient as with much laughter we explored his very bald head seeking a yellow reflection from the flower.

In the autumn our gathering activities would take us well away from the river by the promise of edible hazel nuts. Our favourite place was a wide, grassy lane off the Watlington road about a mile east of the village. This lane ran for about half a mile to join the road from Benson to Ewelme at Fifield. On either side were tall, dense hedges of saplings and bushes mostly covered with Old Man's Beard, but interspersed with clumps of Hazel. The nuts were not large but plentiful. These nutting expeditions were greatly looked forward to and enjoyed, especially on warm days of sunshine when they would become the occasion for a special picnic. As we were usually the only people there we could not only gather nuts but run about and play and even make as much noise as our games brought forth without being reprimanded and made to conform to the usual behaviour insisted on when we were in more public places.

Later on as winter approached with the first frosts the last of our seasonal gleanings was the collection of walnuts, to be taken out of their husks and kept for Christmas. There was one very large and heavy-bearing tree on the edge of the school field next to The Three Horseshoes Public House. It was only a couple of hundred yards from our home and as I was an early riser in the mornings I would go down before breakfast and harvest the fallen nuts before other children arrived for school. There were also several walnut trees in Howbery Park between Crowmarsh Battle and Crowmarsh Gifford on the way to Wallingford. A public footpath across the Park had several of these trees close enough for us to stray a little and search for nuts. We could only go nutting here when taken by our mother on an afternoon so others had usually been there before us so we rarely got a very good haul. However my morning visit to the nearby school tree kept us well supplied.

The river in winter brought its own exciting pursuits. With the first heavy rains the current would increase and the level rise bank-high. We watched the fast flowing, swirling water lunging its way down to the weir to plunge over and down with a great swishing roar, forming pools of white foam along its length. The contrast to the steady flow of the summer months held us in silent fascination until called away, for even when quite old we were not allowed near the weir unless accompanied by a parent.

As rains continued came the floods and our excitement grew as the level continued to rise and familiar towpaths, water meadows and nearby roads became inundated. A favourite viewing place was on higher ground behind The Swan Public House at Preston Crowmarsh.



Floods at the Swan Public House

We would reach this by a footpath which ran between fields and the cricket ground. The Crowmarsh road was sometimes several feet under water, the river itself being discernable across the floodwater by its turbulent rapid flow. At this viewpoint we could also hear the loud roar of the water over the weir, its position clearly identifiable in the sea of water by the line of white-painted guardrails of the walkway which provided access to the sluice controls. Another footpath above the floodwater following the line of the Crowmarsh road to the church took us to a good viewing point to see the flooded coal wharf and storage yard.

On the far side of the river, through the winter - bare, leafless willow trees, the floodwater extended over the fields as far as the eye could see. We gazed at it all in silence, wondering how our own quiet, peaceful, friendly Thames of summer days could so change its mood into this overgrown, angry torrent, cold and forbidding.

The scene would change again when the hard frosts came and the flooded fields froze over. While stories were often told of the river itself freezing over and of oxen being spit-roasted over huge fires on the ice, this did not happen during my childhood. Most winters seemed to bring frosts severe enough to provide plenty of ice-skating on the flooded water meadows and each member of our family had skates which could be secured to our normal footwear.



Skating on the River Thames in 1891 (location unknown)

My father was an excellent skater and we children acquired enough skill to have exciting and enjoyable times. Father fitted suitable runners to an old kitchen chair and sitting on this while urging father to greater speeds was a cause for much merriment. My mother also skated or at least ventured on to the ice, but the long voluminous skirts then worn must have been restrictive for active skating but her presence to mark our prowess and generally join in our fun made these very much family occasions. There was a small skating place very near our home. Separated from our garden by a footpath was Mr Cook's field where he grazed his horse in summer. In the middle of this almost triangular field was a large pond and this when frozen over provided limited but convenient skating close to home. As the pond was bordered by rushes and several large willow trees it provided good nesting for birds with many moorhens and dabchicks, so supplying us with interests throughout the year. Fortunately the kindly owner of the field raised no objection to our frequent incursions.

There were of course many other activities near the river. As soon as the weather was warm enough we were taken to the "paddling place". This was a small area no larger than that of an average living room where the river bank had eroded to leave a shallow sandy bay. Here we spent afternoons and summer evenings paddling in the water and having picnics on the bank. In due course when we had learned to swim we moved to a slightly deeper area at one end of the coal wharf. A great attraction for many years was to see the Salters steamers go by and those going downstream would sound their hooters as they passed to warn the lock-keeper of their approach. Then as the steamer continued on its way we enjoyed the excitement of the 'waves' from the wash as they broke on the shallow sand and I confess to added enjoyment if the girls got their dresses wet. I don't think we ever lost the pleasure of seeing the steamers and our visits to the river were often arranged to coincide with the steamer timetable, there being at least two a day in each direction. Although they seemed identical in size and design we each claimed to have our favourite based only on their names, Goring, Streatley, Kingston and other river places. How simple and trivial would such things seem now, but how much pleasure they afforded us in our childhood days.

Flower picking, nutting, paddling, etc. were usually for weekdays only for our father would join us on Sundays when, all wearing our Sunday clothes, we walked along the towpaths usually to Shillingford Bridge and back during the summer months. It was even more of a treat if it was instead of going to

evensong. On these walks we had to go quietly with no lingering or loud talking. For some years my brother, a year older than me, and I were made to walk ahead of our parents and the girls where a watchful eye could be kept on us. While this did not suit me it was appreciated by the sisters. However there were occasions when the rule was relaxed and we walked behind them and made the most of it. The river bank provided a variety of missiles with which to tease and annoy the goody-goody girls, some of which would prick their arms and legs, teazles which adhered to their dresses or long pigtailed of hair or just good ammunition like the hips of the dog roses. The girls were very patient and forbearing and it was usually only when we overdid the bombardment that they remonstrated and my brother and I were ordered to take up forward positions once more.

Two other river activities attracted us - the sand dredger and the coal barges. The dredger would arrive from time to time to remove the accumulation of sand from the river just upstream of the entrance to the lock and the weir. It was beautifully fine, clean, washed sand which after being dredged from the river bed was brought to the bank downstream of the coal wharf and laboriously unloaded to form a large flat-topped mound. No children were allowed to play on it for it was used by local builders who would arrive with handcarts or horse-drawn tipping drays and quantity would be measured by means of a bottomless and topless box which when filled and levelled off held half a yard of sand. The box was then lifted off by strong wooden handles leaving the measured sand to be hand shovelled in to the carts

The coal barges provided a much greater attraction and we liked to go to the coal wharf when they arrived from the Midlands, having made the journey along the Grand Union Canal and then southwards by the Oxford Canal joining the Thames at Oxford and the final fifteen miles to Benson. There was an element of luck in being on the river bank at a point below Shillingford Bridge so as to follow the barges - usually two in tandem - drawn by a pair of draught horses harnessed in tandem with a long towrope which had to be manhandled over the side rails of the wooden bridges taking the towpath over the small brooks flowing into the river. The barges were the traditional longboats decorated with the bright colourful designs favoured by canal barge owners. One of the barges had a small living accommodation and we were intrigued as we watched the bargee's family going about their daily chores. We sometimes got a waft of appetising cooking smells from the coal-fired stove which sent a steady plume of blue-black smoke from a short tin chimney protruding through the cabin roof. We were never invited to go on board much to our disappointment and possibly were regarded as rather inquisitive and possibly rude children. At least I do not remember ever hearing a single word spoken which could have in any way identified these bargees with those who earned the soubriquet "to swear like a bargee".

In time I learned much more about the coal barges for they were of importance to the village. Sometimes during winter flood or frost conditions the barges could not arrive on time and there would be a serious shortage of coal fuel for there was no gas or electricity supply in Benson in those times. The barges belonged to two brothers named Townsend from Nuneaton where they loaded the coal. It was then a slow journey not only limited by the pace of the horses but by the need to pass through a number of locks and by the many changes of the towpath from one bank to the other. The last change before Benson was by means of Shillingford Bridge from the Berkshire to the Oxfordshire side. Other barges would sometimes continue downstream and the horses would then have to change back at Benson to the Berkshire bank by means of the horse punt - a heavy flat-bottomed boat pulled across just below the coal wharf by a large linked iron chain. At Wallingford they would have to change back to the Oxfordshire side by crossing over the fine old road bridge. At one time the river had much barge traffic for it was used for the transport of many types of goods from London to Oxford and places in between. Improved roads and the coming of the railways almost eliminated the barge traffic and I do not recall any but the occasional coal barge returning upstream from below our lock.

At Benson the coal wharf was managed by Mr Haines who we regarded as a good friend. Besides dealing with the coal he had a number of rowing skiffs and several punts for hire and more importantly to us would pay a few pence for any animal bones we collected which was an easy way of augmenting our pocket money. The bones would be sent away to be made into fertiliser. The coal was removed from the barges with wheelbarrows, the men doing the work were known as 'strappers'. For some years the strappers were Mr Bond from Berrick Salome and Mr Roberts who were also the local thatchers. During the period of the unloading the two coal horses would be stabled at The Three Horseshoes near our home.

Without doubt the highlight of the summer river attractions was the annual practice with the village fire engine which still exists after a life of 183 years. Fortunately it has been well restored after lying derelict on a local farm for many years. Though it is now in private ownership it is well-maintained by the Oxfordshire Fire Brigade in the Fire Station at Watlington. An original brass makers plate shows it to have been built in the year 1811 by Tilley of Blackfriars Road, London for the firm of Shand-Mason of Upper Crown Street, also of Blackfriars Road. It is an eight-man, four-a-side pumper - a long wooden box mounted on four iron wheels. Either side are the bars of the pump handles connected to a shaft running through the box to operate the water pump in the rear end. The box also carried inside it the leather hoses, nozzles and other fire-fighting equipment and outside the top provided seats for the driver and fire crew, with low iron rails for the men to hold on with. It is now painted red with the erroneous legend "Benson Fire Brigade" on each side. When I knew it as a boy the traditional red paint had browned over the many years to a lovely mellow shade and on the sides in long panels edged with gold was the old name of the village — BENSINGTON - in large beautifully formed capital letters in Gold on a neutral background, the gold had dulled and cracked with age but it all looked very impressive. That lovely antiquated fire engine was quite rightly the pride of the village.

The Fire Station was a small shed near The White Hart Hotel with a notice on one of the white entrance doors "Key kept at A. Lane". It was naturally assumed that anyone wanting the key would know "A Lane". He lived immediately opposite in a cottage in a short cul-de-sac called Brumagen Yard. At its top end was the village blacksmiths forge run by the three brothers Albert, Ernest and Joe Lane. As boys we would stand in the doorway fascinated by the glowing fire, the sound of the hammers beating on the red-hot iron, the ringing as the hammers hit the anvil itself and the smell of burning hoof. Our joy knew no bounds if on a rare occasion one was allowed inside to work the arm of the bellows which then caused the fire to roar and glow and sparks to rise as one of the Mister Lanes' nestled a horseshoe, gripped by long-handled tongs in the bed of incandescent coals. Mr Albert was in charge of the Fire Station and engine. If a fire call was made during working hours suitable horses in for shoeing would be used to pull the Fire Engine. At other times the two horses needed would be provided by Mr Young who lived near the school and kept the horses to pull what we wrongly called a waggonette which carried about twenty people and was used as transport for outings, cricket matches, etc.

For the annual practice the engine was pulled to the river by manpower or more accurately child power. Most of the village children would turn out to help pull and push the engine to the coal wharf. Along past the vicarage and the church then off to the right along a narrow lane to the river with Mr Lane seeking to restrain the enthusiasm of the attendant children as the heavy appliance made the last few yards down the sharp incline on to the wharf. Not only was the whole journey noisy from the excited and happy chatter but a musical note was added with the ringing sound of the wide-rimmed iron wheels over the gritty surface of the macadam road. There were many grown-ups present keeping an eye on their own youngsters and perhaps recalling earlier years when they had pushed and pulled with similar enthusiasm. Having reached the river children were made to stand well away while the men fastened one end of a length of hose at the rear of the engine and the other end with a large wicker basket attached was dropped into the river. Another much longer hose was attached to the engine with a brass nozzle about three feet long at its remote end then all was ready for pumping to begin. A row of men took up position either side to lift and lower the pump bars working up to a steady rhythm. At the first sign of water at the nozzle there would be clapping and cheering. At first an intermittent flow with lots of plopping and spluttering and then a steady stream of water. The man holding the nozzle would elevate the jet of water and wave it from side to side. Then all would become quiet, there was a hush of anticipation as we waited expectantly and with bated breath for the real fun to begin. The stream of water swung threateningly towards us getting closer and closer and just as we thought we would get soaked pulled back for a few seconds before approaching us again once more causing screams of excitement mixed with some trepidation as children began to move away from the threatening oncoming falling cascade. This would happen several times depending on the patience of the man with the nozzle who no doubt also enjoyed the entertainment he was providing. There may have been some displeasure from parents had we had a soaking and I do not remember if we suffered relief or disappointment as the water stream finally turned away. The pretence of the nozzleman and the slight drift of water spray that did fall on us brought howls of happy laughter from all present.

If it was early evening with the lowering sun still strong in the sky the cries would go up "look at the rainbow". It was a magical effect as the rainbow danced as it followed the falling droplets of water

from the waving water nozzle. Later came groans of disappointment when men stopped pumping and the stream of water and falling spray slowly sank and was lost in the river. When all the hoses and equipment had been returned to the engine we once more pushed and pulled it back to the fire station with no diminishing of the enthusiasm we had shown on the outward journey.

When the practice was carried out in the war years 1914 - 1918 the few men left in the village were glad of the help of the older boys on the pump handles. When I was tall enough to reach the pump bars I felt very grown-up when allowed to participate. If a real fire occurred requiring Fire Brigade help a message would reach Mr Lane who would unlock the station and get the horses harnessed. We had no village fire siren or fire bell and the alarm was passed by word of mouth. It is unlikely that anyone had a telephone and the only one in the village was at the Post Office, but somehow the message got around and some men would reach the station in time to go on the engine while others would follow, usually on their bicycles. On one occasion I was able to help at a real fire and felt even more grownup and important as an active member of the Fire Brigade. It was a hayrick fire near the neighbouring village of Roke Marsh. The fire engine was pumping from a pond a short distance away out of sight and earshot of the rick fire. I had the duty to blow a two-tone horn to indicate to the men on the pump when to stop pumping or restart, Mr Lane telling me when to do so. Hayrick fires were difficult to put out and involved very hard work for the men actually dealing with the fire, for they had to pull the rick apart with hayforks. When one layer of burning hay was extinguished pumping would stop and the steaming, wet, charred hay would be thrown off the rick. Then as more smouldering hay was exposed, pumping was restarted when I gave the signal so that another layer could be dealt with. A long iron rod was pushed into the lower part of the rick to find the seat of the fire and the extent of the heating. It was likely that I got my job as horn blower as the result of nepotism, for while I did not know the exact role of my father in the Brigade he was, I believe, the equivalent today of a sub-officer or leading fireman. What influence this early fire-fighting experience had on me I do not know, but it did happen that the last twenty-five years of my working life were devoted to a specialised branch of fire engineering.

As we grew older our interests and activities widened but the river was always our first love. It ran roughly southeastwards from Days' lock to Benson where it turned sharply southwards and on through Wallingford, Goring and Streatley and then with another change of direction to Reading, London and the sea. The Berkshire bank upstream from Benson was lined with trees, mostly large willows some of which grew to a great height, their large roots exposed at the waters' edge to make secure moorings for our skiffs and punts. There were several backwaters, mostly covered by Bullrushes, some with large bulbous heads, and with various kinds of water-weed. The adjacent properties always appeared deserted and neglected, but this apparent neglect was made up for by the wildness and timeless, peaceful atmosphere broken only by the call of ducks and moorhens and their flapping wings to break the silence as we pushed our boat through the weed-covered water to explore. Occasionally we would here a shout from a gardener, caretaker or it may have been an owner that we were trespassing when with a wave of acknowledgement we would return to the river proper.

On the Oxfordshire bank were open water meadows extending to the Oxford road about a quarter of a mile away. The meadows were broken up by small streams — we called them brooks - and where they crossed the towpath, well-built wooden bridges with high guard rails either side provided a safe crossing for the barge horses. The actual banks were generally about two feet high with normal summer water levels and were lined with a variety of rushes, water weeds and sometimes patches of yellow

water lilies and flags. On the landside between water and towpath was an abundance of common wild plants, Meadow Sweet, Cow Parsley, Mallow etc. while in the fields were the familiar Buttercups, Cornflowers, Thistles and many needle rushes, with all the common grasses, vetches etc. Sometimes we found the tall hollow-stemmed Cowbane from which we would cut a piece of stem about three inches long when with a finger placed over one end and the other end held below the lower lip, with some blowing practice we could produce a loud, deep and fluffy-sounding note. There were also many pollarded willows along the brooks and from a few inches of a small branch we were able by sliding the bark off intact and with a few practised cuts with a pocket knife and replacing the bark, make extremely good whistles. Some fishing was done from this bank of the river and very long bamboo rods had to be used to enable the line and float to be carried over the intervening rushes and weed. The

fish we rarely caught were mostly roach or perch, their earthy flavour being rather an acquired taste. Mr Hargraves kept a good stock of very long bamboo canes in his strange shop in the High Street as well as the very simple fishing tackle we needed.

I never became an enthusiastic fisher for I lacked the patience to wait for something to happen, for a fish to become interested in the bait and for the float to bob up and down. It was too inactive for me and I quickly became restless and would lay my rod aside and go off and climb a tree, look for bird's nests or just sit and dream.

The Berkshire bank towpath downstream was reached by the ferry to the lock and was fenced off from the adjoining fields. The bank opposite was tree-lined with the small Chamberlain's Creek at Crowmarsh Battle Farm having the family boats moored in it and a little further downstream the attractive, flower-decked boathouse of Howbery Park.

Benson Lock was always an attraction with its huge gates and foot-square long wooden arms with which they were opened and closed, the handles like ship's steering wheels to open and close the sluices, the rushing turbulent water as it filled the lock from up-stream. When the water was level in the lock we would go to the downstream gates to see the release of the water, the bubbling soon building up to a boil as the sluices were fully opened and then dying away as the waters levelled and the gates opened. There was interest in the various kinds of small boats and their passengers and best of all the passenger steamers. Another attraction on the lock island was the small herd of goats tethered on long chains fastened to iron stakes, no doubt primarily to keep down the grass and herbage but providing the lock-keeper family with its own meat supply. I cultivated enough friendship with the lockkeeper's son Frank Moffat to give me reasonably valid excuses to visit him from time-to-time. I was also able to go across when my father had to carry out work there.

I recall an occasion when my Uncle Will, who worked for my father, needed to cross to do some work at the lock house. As by then I was allowed on the river on my own and thought - and had convinced my parents - that I was competent to handle a punt, I offered to take Uncle over to save him waiting for the ferry. He left his bicycle on the bank and with his bag of tools and possibly with some trepidation, boarded the punt. As I poled away I thought it a good opportunity to show off what I thought to be my skill with a punt pole. As we arrived at the opposite bank with its overhanging willow trees, my Uncle - a very tall, thin man reached out and grasped a branch intending to pull us into the bank so that he could disembark. For some inexplicable reason I could afterwards never understand I pushed hard on the punt pole but the wrong way. It was an unequal contest. My youthful, vigorous pushing on the pole was no match for Uncle pulling on the thin Willow branch. The gap between punt and bank widened with Uncle stretched full-length across the intervening water. As I pushed and he pulled the brittle branch broke and he plunged with a good belly flop into the river. Fortunately the water was shallow and minus the tool bag he clambered on to the bank while I, realising now that I had been poling the wrong way went full ahead and also reached the bank. Whether Uncle was in shock by his sudden immersion in the cold river water, speechless with anger or merely bemused by the wet, clinging clothes and straggly dripping hair over his face I do not know but he meekly got back in the boat and in complete silence I took him safely to the point of embarkation where he mounted his cycle and made off home to dry out.

This had been a strangely silent course of events so far though I felt it would not continue so when I had to face my father. Uncle had a quiet, placid demeanour and on this occasion hardly remonstrated at all while I expressed my regret and no doubt made my concern and distress very obvious. There had never been any close rapport between nephew and Uncle. We did not meet often and rarely had conversation other than minimal courtesies. I had never even entered his home on the outskirts of the village though as a family we all knew Auntie Gerty for as Miss Baker she had lived next door to Grannie West before she married Uncle.

Having seen him on his way my new worries were twofold - what to do about the sunken bag of tools and how to face my father. The recovery of the tools proved no problem. I poled up to the nearby coal wharf and borrowed a long-handled drag fork with which I easily found and hauled up the bag which fortunately had been closed so to my relief no tools were lost. There was no point in delaying the meeting with father and it was with much perturbation and some foreboding that I moored the boat and made my way homewards, not being sure how he would view my escapade and particularly my incompetence. Normally he was very tolerant of my misdeeds, which in those years seemed to occur

with undue frequency. As it was, on this occasion as in so many others, I got off lightly. There was no alternative to giving a faithful account of what happened and also to admitting that my careless handling of the boat had been the sole cause, for no amount of ingenuity on my part although I was fairly experienced and had some ability in getting out of scrapes could cover up the fact. In due course we met and he let me finish my account without interruption, his silence only adding to my disquiet. There was a long pause which I felt boded ill for me until looking rather challengingly straight at his face I saw the slightest gleam in his eyes and then knew I was on reasonably safe ground and not in such deep water as I had expected. He then told me he had seen Uncle in his bedraggled state riding along the High Street and heard his story. It must have been a very fair and not too incriminatory a description of the events for which I felt some gratitude. I was given a mild censure for my carelessness but the main substance of his remarks was on my rudimentary and inefficient boating skills. Luck had been with me in that there were no witnesses of the occurrence and I was thereafter impelled to develop an ability to punt a boat in a safe and efficient manner.

Before I was old enough to handle a boat my father would hire a punt and take the whole family on the river, primarily I suspect so that he could fish from it. While he did this we all had to sit still and be quiet. I amused myself at these times by pulling faces at the sisters and in various ways making them giggle. This was not too difficult for they were great gigglers. These antics would annoy father very much despite mothers' efforts to restrain us. Only the threat of being taken straight home would bring back more decorous behaviour and give my angling parent the halcyon silence he considered necessary to encourage the fish to bite.

The river throughout the stretch we knew so well maintained a fairly constant width and where we used to swim across it from the coal wharf was about forty to fifty yards. In summertime the current was very slow, but we found it quite strong enough to tire us when we swam against it as far as Shillingford Bridge which was about three quarters of a mile. We would be rewarded with an easy float and swim back to Benson. Before doing this fairly long swim we would have practised getting to the bank across the water weed and rushes in case we got cramp or for some other reason had to hastily leave the water. It did not require much skill to keep the legs still while lying on the weed and using the hands and arms as shallow paddles.

The church also played an important part in our lives and I cannot remember a time when we were not taken to at least one service each Sunday. It was part of our way of life and we had a great love for it. St. Helen's was not exciting architecturally. In my years at Benson I then had no appreciation of the aesthetic, architectural and historical aspects of church architecture so was not aware of the lack of it, which I now feel was fortunate. The love for the church came for its important part in our family life, its permanent sameness, it was always there like a part of our own home, a place to be entered and used respectfully, a place of peacefulness, tranquillity and of solemnity where I could either take interest in all that went on or let my thoughts wander where they would. There I was becalmed and so learned the pleasure of quietude. Such occasions were no doubt a blessing to my parents bringing relief as a contrast to my sometimes restless and aggravating conduct. The vicarage also had an influence on us for on special occasions we were taken into the vicar's study - into a different world to our own home. The building was erected in 1869 and built of flint and red brick with "churchy" windows. It too seemed to us to be a special "holy" place. I wonder now how much of that appeal emanated from the Reverend Edward Field.

It was Mr Field who taught us the prayer we should say when we enter a church and before leaving:

"We thank thee Heavenly Father for bringing Thy child to Thy House this day. Forgive me all my wandering thoughts and Bless and Keep me Thine forever, Amen".

I have been thankful for having been brought to so many churches, but confess my interest has been in their architectural features and the peaceful atmosphere they provide. As for "wandering thoughts" my requests for forgiveness for them has never been sincere in a properly religious way, or the way he meant us to feel. I know of no better place than a church in which to have wandering thoughts. It was my childhood silent thoughtful wanderings in Benson church amongst the grand stories of the Old Testament - the descriptions of seas, ships, distant lands, of trade and barter and war which may well have determined the course of my life.

One lovely passage in Ezekiel gave much scope for wandering thoughts.

“And say unto Tyrus, O thou art situate at the entry of the sea, which art a merchant of the people for many isles. Thus saith the Lord God. Thy borders are in the midst of the seas, Thy builders have perfected thy beauty. They have made all Thy ship boards of fir trees from Senir; they have taken cedars from Lebanon to make masts for thee, of the oaks of Basham have they made thine oars; the company of the Ashurites have made thy benches of ivory, brought out of the isles of Chittin. Fine linen with brodered work from Egypt was that which thou spreadest forth to be thy sail; blue and purple from the isles of Elisah was that which covered thee. The inhabitants of Zidon and Arvad were thy mariners; thy wise men O Tyrus, that were in thee were thy pilots. The ancients of Gebal and the wise men thereof were in thee thy caulkers; all the ships of the sea with their mariners were in thee to occupy thy merchandise. They of Persia and of Lud and of Phut were in thine army, thy men of war; they hanged the shield and helmet in thee; they set forth the comeliness. The men of Arvad with thine army were upon thy walls round about; and the Cammadins were in thy towers they hanged their shields upon thy walls around about; they have made thy beauty perfect. Tarshish was thy merchant by reason of the multitude of all kinds of riches; with silver, iron, tin and lead, they traded in thy fairs, Javan, Tubal and Meshech they were thy merchants. They of the house of Togarmah traded in thy fairs with horses and horsemen and mules. The men of Dedan were thy merchants; many isles were the merchandise of thy hand; they brought thee for a present horns of ivory and ebony. Syria was thy merchant by reason of the multitude of the wares of thy making; they occupied in thy fairs with emeralds, purple and brodered work, and fine linen, and coral and agate”.

And so it went on naming the places and goods. Judah and the land of Israel for wheat, honey, oil and balm. Damascus for wine and white wool. Han and Javan for bright iron, cassia and calamus. Dedan for precious clothes for chariots. Arabia for lambs, rains and goats. Sheba for spices and precious stones and gold. How many sermons I dreamed away with these wonderful words and what fantasies of foreign lands, of merchants and markets, of ships and sails and seas. How much I owe to that dear vicar.

The Reverend Field was vicar throughout my boyhood. I remember him as elderly, grey-haired and short-bearded, of average height and build, quiet in manner and speech - a gentle, kindly, dignified man of whom everyone spoke with warmth and affection. Folk would always refer to him as “a real gentleman”. He baptised all the young Wests’ and I clearly remember attending confirmation classes in his study at the vicarage when amongst other things we had to learn were the Catechism, being able to give all the correct answers to his questions on the Lord’s prayer and the Commandments, also to say the Apostles Creed and to know even if not to completely memorise, the Creed of Saint Athanasius. Mrs Field also took part in church life and Mothers Union meetings were held in the put outside in the large walled garden to play while the mothers went inside to unionise.

There was a peal of eight bells in the church tower and they were rung from the ground level so that we could catch a glimpse of the bellringers through the open door as we went into church. On those occasions when a full peal was not rung my Uncle Charles rang a chime on three bells. This we thought was very clever and we loved to see him doing it. He looped a bellrope under one foot and with a bellrope in each hand held high above his shoulders would ring an even, rhythmic chime.

The early days of the introduction of daylight saving brought an amusing incident. Daylight saving had been unsuccessfully promoted over many years but not accepted by Parliament. In 1915 our enemy had introduced it in Germany. In Britain it at last became law on 17th May 1916 and thanks to its proponent Mr. Willett was named after him as “Willett Time” later being renamed British Summer Time. No time was lost in introducing the new law and clocks were advanced for the first time on Sunday 21st. May 1916. Possibly because of the considerable publicity given to this deviation from normality, it was treated as a novelty and few people were put out by it. Uncle Charles chimed at the correct “new time” and only a few of the Sunday morning church congregation were caught unawares and hearing the bells an hour earlier than usual hastily swallowed their breakfasts’, scrambled into Sunday best clothes, hurried through the village to church in time to hear the vicar preach his sermon.

It was a different story when Willett Time ended on the last Sunday in October that year when clocks were put back one hour. Uncle Charles forgot to alter his watch. This threw the whole village into confusion. There were no wireless time checks nor telephones in Benson in those days and the Sunday morning church bells were a time signal not only for the devout church goers but for most other villagers as well. By chiming the bells one hour early Uncle Charles could be said to have dropped a real danger. All the anticipated pleasures of an extra hour in bed, a leisurely breakfast and walk to

church were suddenly destroyed and doubt and confusion reigned instead. Those who had put their clocks back had doubts as to whether they had done so on the correct Sunday and those who had not done so wondered what Charlie West was up to with this new-fangled time idea. The one person oblivious to all this was Uncle who as usual was taking great pride in his bel-canto ability and was chiming away completely to his own satisfaction.

Villagers rushed to garden gates hoping to see a passer-by to ask, but the village seemed unusually deserted on this Sunday morning. Children were dispatched post-haste to knock on neighbours doors to ask the correct time, but this only added to the confusion as they returned with all kinds of garbled times, messages and explanations. Someone at the top end of the High Street said the Postmaster would be sure to know and went along and hammered on the Post Office door. Mr. Munday who lived above eventually opened the door and was most irate at being disturbed on his day off, nor was he of any help. Those who had put their clocks back hurriedly dressed and set off for church in case they had done so wrongly, others soon realised what had happened and felt suitably smug and began to enjoy the situation.

The Vicar who had appreciated a leisurely breakfast dashed along the path through his garden to the belltower, by which time my Uncle had been ringing for ten of his usual fifteen minutes call to worship. He was quite mystified by the Vicar's urgent request that he stop immediately and very upset when he learned of his mistake. Just as he stopped ringing my father and I arrived on the scene. Our home was nearer the church than the other sidesmen who were on duty that Sunday morning and father, realising what had happened, set off at a great pace with brotherly anxiety to prevent chaos throughout the village. I was nine years old at the time and thought all this excitement was too good to miss so ran alongside father as he strode with long, quick paces to the church by which time a few members of the congregation were arriving and others approaching from the High Street. Explanations were made and rather than sit for an hour in the cold church, the early arrivals gradually dispersed to their homes answering enquiries as they went from still nonplussed villagers standing at their doors or garden gates. When uncle having rung his second chime of the morning, now at the correct time left the belfry and walked down the north side aisle to the vestry, all eyes were turned on him. He was much relieved as he took over the organ pump handle from the choirboy who had pumped for the voluntary and even more relieved once the Vicar and choir had filed into the chancel for the service and he was alone in the vestry to pump the organ out of sight of all sensorial eyes. It was an event long-remembered in the village.

Pumping the organ was a job many of we boys liked doing whenever opportunity arose. Miss Cooper was organist for many years and being the infant school teacher knew all the village boys and had no difficulty in finding volunteers when she wanted to practice or needed someone to pump for weddings. There was much competition for weddings for as a rule it meant a small and welcome addition to pocket money. Following Miss Cooper as organist was Miss Baker who later married my father's brother Will so we then knew her as Auntie Gerty or when out of hearing of grown-ups or other children as Auntie Hurdy Gertie for the street organ which sometimes came to the village we called a 'Hurdy Gerdy'. Before marrying Uncle Will she had lived all her life next to Grannie West so we knew her well but had always had to address her as Miss Baker for she was so much older than us.

Sunday was always a special day in our home starting off by dressing in our best Sunday clothes - kept only for Sundays and special occasions until eventually becoming every-day clothes. Once dressed and inspected for cleanliness by one of our parents we sat down to Sunday breakfast which was different to weekdays as it was a cooked one. Our favourite and almost a ritual was smoked haddock. We were then got ready for Sunday school and church which meant the girls shedding their frilly pinafores and for me yet another inspection of hands, face and boots before putting on outdoor clothes. I always thought it unfair that while I had to clean my own boots one of the parents cleaned the high button-up boots worn by the girls, nor did they seem to receive the same meticulous scrutiny of their appearance that I did.

Our family pew in Benson church was halfway down the south aisle of the nave, so while I was not allowed to look behind I could keep a fairly good watch on all that went on, particularly the younger members of the congregation and part of the choir. I would wait expectantly for the arrival of the regulars. There was Mr Painter a farmer from along Brook Street who always made rather an ostentatious entrance and progress to his seat. He wore a long black overcoat green with age and a top hat which he held in front of him as he walked down the aisle as though he was making an offering of

it. His general bearing was such that as he strutted along the High Street he gave the impression he owned the village. His initials were "J T" and when his name was mentioned by my parents it was almost whispered in a hushed tone of voice which made me feel there was an air of mystery about him. Later I'm afraid it was his Christian names initials for John Thomas which caused growing-up boys to giggle. Then there was Mr Harry Hargreaves, tall and middle-aged with a very red face who sang hymns in a loud, harsh voice. He kept a shop in the High Street and sold a strange assortment of goods, working clothes for the farm labourers and some women's dresses, cottage furniture, garden tools, fishing tackle and various odds and ends. For some reason we were afraid of Mr Hargreaves, he looked down on us from what seemed a great height and conversation was limited to an actual purchase and his general appearance and attitude was abrupt and forbidding. Often when his shop was closed he walked around the allotments and the cricket ground carrying an old-fashioned gun we referred to as his blunderbuss, but we never saw him fire it. Mrs Wood sat opposite us and was always late. She wore a red top-coat with strange voluminous mutton leg sleeves. Mr Wood kept the big grocer shop but he never came to church. Major and Mrs St. John from nearby Preston Crowmarsh are remembered too for the Major had been wounded in the war and had to press a button on his throat to be able to speak and then in a strange bubbly voice. Despite this he would read one of the lessons surprisingly clearly. The Chamberlains from the large farm at Crowmarsh Battle had the front pews of the north aisle and were more of interest when their children were home from boarding schools. The second lesson was always read by a layman and for many years by Colonel Phayre or Admiral Miller. It was the Admiral who had some influence on the course of my life of which more anon.

Immediately below the Lectern and in my straight line of vision was a short pew which with a squash would hold four small boys. These were the probationer choir boys who wore black cassocks before, if considered suitable moving up to become full choir boys wearing surplices as well. Who they were and how they behaved I watched carefully from my seat halfway back. I once became a probationer choirboy but did not last more than a few Sundays. Similarly when I joined the Boy Scouts I lasted but a few weeks. I never learned why I was considered unsuitable to be either a choirboy or a scout. My wish to become a scout was possibly the attraction of the uniform. This was not a very good reason and would not have been acceptable to Lord Baden Powell whom I met many years later. In those days the uniform was more picturesque, khaki bush shirt and shorts, a coloured neck square with a scout knot in front and a white lanyard with a whistle on it. The leather belt carried a large folding scout knife and other small items. Two short lengths of ribbon indicating the patrol colours fluttered from each shoulder of the shirt and from the down turned stocking tops below the knees. The crowning glory of the uniform was the wide-brimmed scout hat with its leather straps and badge. How I would like to have possessed such distinguished head gear. Each scout carried a pole like a well-turned and shaped broom handle and it too carried ribbons of the patrol colours at its top end and usually had thirteen rings slightly indented into the wood an inch apart to serve as a measure. Often the poles were longer than many of the scouts were tall. Most exciting was the band made up of several brass bugles and two or three kettle drums. They produced a dramaturgical sound however badly they were played. The small number of players and equally few in the rest of the troop which followed made a rousing sight and sound as they marched through the village, causing much entertainment and merriment for the onlookers and particularly the pack of non-scout boys and girls which tagged on behind.

My father as one of the Church Sidesmen always took the collection on our side of the church and could at least make sure we put our 'collection money' in the bag. Each of us would be given a halfpenny before leaving home and woe betide us if we lost it or worse still dropped it while in church. I remember my repressed delight if one of the girls dropped her halfpenny and the frantic searching to retrieve it before father reached our pew with the collection bag. My scope for aggravating my sisters was to some extent limited in cold weather. I cannot remember if the church had a heating system but we certainly felt very cold in the winter months, then the two youngest girls would sit either side of mother so that each could put one hand in her muff which was in those days a fashionable item of ladies' wear. This meant I only had Renda as a possible victim. As she was so much older than me she was less susceptible to my efforts to cause annoyance and could exert some degree of disciplinary restraint which I quite unfairly, called being bossy. If I went too far in my efforts to tease and distract the next time we came in church I would be made to sit in the pew immediately in front of my mother so was deprived of any opportunity to provoke. The Vicar's sermons often seemed endless but much worse was The Litany which was said or sung once a month with its constant request to have mercy on

we miserable sinners, to spare us, and twenty-one times we beseeched to be heard. How thankful we were to hear those final words from the Vicar "Here endeth the Litany". I do not think we ever really minded going to church so often for it was little different to going to school every day.

The church was lighted by candles placed in holders around a series of iron hoops about three feet in diameter suspended by chains and then cords which passed over pulleys on the ceilings over the side aisles or from the apex of the main arches so that they could be raised and lowered. The candles were lighted before services by Mr Harris who wore a long black cassock which had turned a strange shade of dirty green. He used a rod about five feet long with at one end a taper and a snuffer. The snuffer was like a small witches' hat and we called the rod Mr Harris's wand. On winter Sunday evenings when father was a Sidesman we had to stay in our seats until he had finished his end of service duties. Then we would watch the cassocked Mr Harris raise the witches wand to each candle in turn and as the hat was raised from the charring candle wick it seemed to lift a spiralling plume of black, blue, white smoke which gradually reached us with pungent, acrid, waxy smell. Gradually the church darkened and long shadows seemed to move around and then fade away as the number of lighted candles diminished. The organ voluntary ended, the chattering choirboys had gone, as had the rest of the congregation, the vicar disrobing in the vestry, the church was quiet and unreal in the ever-deepening gloom. We experienced a mounting apprehension, a strange anxiety, a feeling of awe and became aware of palpitation in our chests. This strange atmosphere created in us a kind of fear and yet mild excitement mixed up with the other strange emotions. The dying shadows played strange tricks on our eyes as we moved closer to each other and the girls sought and held mother's hands, yet we felt a strange reluctance to leave our pew and so break this uneasy, mysterious spell. All these things we discussed in whispers with each other when we got home and had been put to bed. It all had an attraction to us, a strange excitement, feelings we did not understand and to be kept from our parents. I think eventually we looked forward to these particular Sunday evenings.

The Village school was about midway between our home and the church and our parents would wait for us to leave Sunday school to take on to Matins at 11 am. At the day school we had scripture lessons for the first hour every morning, the two top classes always being taken together by the Vicar. I liked these periods for I knew well and enjoyed so many of the good stories in the Bible and in 1917 won the annual Bishop of Oxford's Prize for the best scripture pupil and still have the framed certificate which went with the now long-lost prize prayer book. When older I went to a Boys Bible Class run by The Free Church which was the only other church in Benson. The class was taken by young undergraduates who cycled from Oxford. In summer months we would at the end of the class, go down to the river together with the teacher to bathe. One of the young men became a life-long friend and was responsible for introducing me to the novels of Anthony Trollope, all of whose Barchester stories he sent to me on successive birthdays. He was C.J.Cadoux who later became Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford and also author of many books on aspects of religion which I found far beyond my comprehension. I have always been grateful to him for introducing me to Trollope.

We did not have family prayers in our home as was the custom in many families in those days but did have to say our bedtime prayers to one of our parents. Our great pleasure was to sing hymns on Sunday evenings. A kind of family 'Songs of Praise'. Father would sit at the piano and open his large book of words and music of Hymns Ancient and Modern at its first pages and await our requests. Mother sat at a table with the girls while my brother and I stood either side of father with our violins. As he turned the pages we would each ask for our favourite hymns and this would go on I am sure quite often so that we could delay bedtime. When our pleas for "just one more" were firmly refused candles would be lighted, we went upstairs to call out when we were in bed for parents to come up to hear prayers, put out candles and the nightly admonishment that there should be no talking. I recall one night before going off on an outing early the next morning, after lights out we each got dressed ready for the morning and got back into bed. We were mystified on waking next morning to find we were back in our nightclothes with our best clothes folded neatly ready for the outing. There was much amusement when mother told us how she and father had looked in our room before they went to bed and seeing what we had done undressed us while we slept.

My father had taught himself to play a piano but no matter what music he played it invariably sounded in the style of a hymn or psalm. We used to tease him about this which he took in very good part. He was very even tempered and had a great sense of fun and there was always much laughter in our home.

I am reminded of one story he always enjoyed telling and although we heard it so many times laughed dutifully, obviously to his pleasure. Being the local builder, decorator, carpenter, etc. he often carried out work in ours and surrounding churches. On one occasion his men were decorating the walls in our church working on a scaffolding brushing whitewash and, as they did so their brushes kept time with a lively tune they whistled. The Vicar anxious to know if they would have finished the work before the Sunday service called in to see their progress and hearing the rousing tune they whistled expressed his strong disapprobation, reminding them they were in a church. The men heeded him and changed their tune to "The Old Hundredth", the tune of the hymn 'All People that on Earth do dwell' but in a very, very slow tempo, their brushes moving in unison. As Mr Field left he met father and told him of the irreverence but if the work was to be finished in time they should be encouraged to resume their earlier irreligious tune and speed.

My father's mother, Grannie West lived in a terrace of tall red brick houses on the curve of the High Street which were built about 1750 (according to Pevsner) The curve of the houses continued in a long, high wall behind which was a large yard with numerous buildings. These were my father's workshops, he having bought them from his father who had taken them over from his uncle, so the Wests' had been the local builders for several generations. Our visits to see Grannie West were frequent and always pleasurable for she was such a dear person and known as 'Grannie' to the whole village and beyond for quite often the schoolchildren who walked the several miles from Roke Marsh and Berrick Salome would go along to her during their midday school break to eat their sandwiches, always assured that they would be given a warm drink in cold weather and a cool one at other times. She spoke in the soft, lilting Oxfordshire local dialect, an old-fashioned countrified use of language. The final 'g' of words would be dropped such as 'fishin' and 'mornin'. Pennyworth of sweets became 'pennorth' of sweets, 'them' was used instead of 'they', 'us'll' instead of 'we', with a prolific use of 'thee', 'thy', 'I be', 'us be'. If we were asked to sit down for tea it became 'sit thee down childun and us'll have tea'. There were many double negatives and corruption of words; turnips became 'turmits', a chimney was 'a chimbley', a woman was 'oman', 'weskit' for waistcoat, 'sidders' for scissors. It was not at all offensive to the ear and was common usage amongst the older villagers.

One entered her living room directly from the High Street and one's attention was immediately drawn to the table lamps and the cooking range. There were at least four oil lamps, the brass oil containers so highly polished they reflected images like distorting mirrors. The glass chimneys we called lamp glasses and the white opaque shades were polished without the slightest smear and the wicks trimmed clean and even. The kitchen range provided the only heat for the room as well as for cooking. It had been black-leaded and polished daily for so many years that it too shone brightly and reflected the light of the lamps from the oven door knob and other protruding and angled surfaces. The oven had other attractions for us. Grannie rarely opened the Street door to a knock but would call "come in" in a loud, clear welcoming voice so that she would not have to leave the large Windsor wheel-back chair - we called it 'the Grannie chair' - drawn up to one side of the range. There she sat with a large brown woollen shawl around her shoulders. When she did rise from the chair one saw she was slimly built but being of slightly more than average height for women in those times, looked quite tall. It was the thick, voluminous woollen shawl worn all the year round which filled out the Grannie chair.

Her face was rather thin and she had youthful, rosy cheeks without the heavy creases of old age. Her iron-grey hair was drawn tightly into a bun low down on the back of the head. If she knew we were to visit her there was usually an appetising, mouth-watering aroma as we entered. We learned early on not to make reference to it while she went through the courtesies of welcome and enquiries about everyone's health, about school or church, etc. while we sat in an orderly manner giving no sign of impatience or anticipation, for if we did the conversation would be even longer drawn-out. Then at last Grannie would leave her chair, there would be a rattle of plates and then the oven door would be opened to display the most delicious pastry tarts and quite often mince pies. Grannie was renowned for her lovely, light pastry and this was provided not only for her grandchildren, but for the many other children and visitors who called and were made equally welcome. She had a quiet, impish, fairy-godmother-like sense of fun and making the children wait for her to produce the plates as they politely talked with her while surreptitiously glancing longingly at the oven door gave her considerable pleasure, made evident by the smiles and teasing remarks as the goodies were passed around.

She rarely left her home but when she did wore a black bonnet with long ribbons tied under the chin, a heavy waist-length cape, a voluminous long skirt and black boots with a long row of fastening buttons.

She walked till the end of her life with an upright, sturdy, almost youthfully defiant gait and while she looked old and we treated her with the respect required of the young to the old, such was her demeanour, sense of fun and humour that there seemed to be a strong bond of youth between us. She was indeed a dear person. Grandad West had died when I was very young and I can remember him only as a very old man with a long white beard, sitting in a small summer house in a garden next to the entrance to the builder's yard, his hands clasped on the head of a walking stick and a tobacco pipe between his lips which had stained part of his beard to a shade of brown. We had lasting memories of both these grandparents for they were buried just inside the iron gates leading into the churchyard. The mound was well tended by Uncle Charles who lived with Grannie and had continued to live in the same house till the end of his life.

The builder's yard and workshops were a constant source of amusement, enjoyment and occupation for me, much of it no doubt mischievous. The main building had once been a barn into which an upper floor had been added to make a loft reached by an outside stairway. The ground floor was the main woodworking carpenters workshop. Here I would watch the carpenters, particularly my father using the old—fashioned tools, the wooden planes, the small smoothing one, the larger jack and the very long trying planes. The trying plane was used to get long straight edges to boards before they were given an application of hot size glue then 'rubbed' together and cramped to make wide shelves, table tops, etc. I disliked the smell of the glue for I had been told the Germans were using the bones of dead soldiers killed in the war to make glue for building their zeppelins. There was in this workshop a large chest which held a wide variety of beading planes for making mouldings for window and door frames, window sashes, skirtings and picture rails none of which moulded timbers were available ready made. Best of all I liked the very old wooden framed treadle lathe for copying broken chair or table legs. There were no ready-made doors, windows, etc. and those needed had to be made as required. I have one very precious memory and the earliest I have of my father as he stood at his work-bench putting the finishing touches with a long, yellow-handled paring chisel to a pair of candlesticks - he had carved for the altar of a neighbouring village church. He was a skilled wood carver but I realised in later years that he spoiled much of his work by overcarving. It was inevitable that through watching the men at work I was encouraged to imitate them and had frequent reprimands for using their tools and blunting the chisels, saws and planes until in time I gradually acquired from them gifts of old or duplicate ones for my own. I acquired also, in time, considerable skills in carpentry and joinery which has been a pleasant hobby ever since and at one time also gave me employment building houses in wood.

Above the carpentry shop the loft held the long wooden scaffold poles, the five foot long putlogs and braided wire scaffold ropes. It was a favourite haunt and hideaway of mine and in my imagination became a Spanish Galleon which I attacked from my small Frigate fighting my way up the stairway against tremendous odds with my wooden cutlass flailing the enemy until I boarded in triumph. Often my offensive activities changed to defensive ones as I stood on the small platform at the top of the stairway to repel boarders from a pirate ship attempting to steal my treasure. Sometimes it became a Southsea Island where with all the materials available I could build a primitive shelter in which to sit and dream, and other situations dependant on the adventure book I was currently reading for I was an avid reader from an early age. This loft gave me many hours of enjoyment and I never wanted to share it with other boys.

On one side of the yard was a long single storied building divided into three sections each of which had special attraction. The first was the blacksmith's forge. Here I could heat bars of iron to glowing red and if patient enough to almost white before beating them into useless shapes on the heavy anvil, the ring of the big hammer on the anvil sounding like music as I tapped lightly or more heavily. This was a noisy pastime and could be done usually only when no workmen were about or they would constantly interrupt to see if I was into mischief. I considered such activity as beneficial to my accumulation of skills and not mischievous. It made little noise other than the roar of the fire as I pumped the bellows to melt lead in a ladle and pour it into the patterns I had made in some black moulding clay. This was a pleasing occupation for I could re-melt the lead many times as I found fresh objects with which to make patterns.

The middle section of the building was the paint shop where I would spend long periods of intense, silent concentration mixing the several pigments to see what colours would result. There were no ready mixed paints or colour charts then and paint had to be mixed as required. The base paint came in

one hundredweight kegs of white lead, with five gallon drums of linseed oil and turpentine, kegs of pigments such as ochre, sienna, burnt umber, blues and reds, brown paper bags of lampblack powder and small kegs of dryers. While the painters made up colours to meet the clients' tastes my own efforts produced quite extraordinary hues, eventually and wastefully added to the "smudge" bucket where odds and ends of leftover paint were kept for such purposes as painting the inside of roofing water gutters. The doors and walls of the paintshop had been used for a great many years for 'rubbing out' paint brushes after use. The many layers of paint created a hard bubbly surface with rainbow colours forming picturesque designs into which the imagination could weave figures, faces and all kinds of fanciful notions. One bench was kept for making putty from whitening powder stored in a large wooden barrel and mixed with linseed oil. The whitening powder was also used for making whitewash for ceilings when it was mixed with the same obnoxious, foul-smelling size as the glue I disliked so much, it was then given a few whisks around with a Reckitts blue bag, the same as used when washing white clothes.

The third section was the glass shop with a large bench covered with brown felt onto which the big sheets of glass, lifted by two men from the wooden crate in which they were transported, were placed for cutting into the sizes required. Here my activities were limited unless a workman had been careless enough to leave his diamond glass cutter on the bench, then I would find some discarded glass to cut into small pieces. Most off-cuts were disposed of into an old saw pit in the yard and it was a regret to me that I never saw the pit in use. Also in the glass shop were kept the many wallpaper pattern books, the old ones being used at Christmas times for making our home-made paper chain decorations. The wallpapering paste was made here using ordinary household flour. The hours I spent playing in these workshops were by no means wasted ones for I learned much. During the 1914 - 18 war years my game-playing gradually changed to serious help to the workmen until in time after my father had been called into the army, my mother and the elderly Mr Cherrill carried on and I had to make a real contribution.

During most of the war years as children we were not old enough to fully understand or share the many privations and sadness of the adult world. It did of course have considerable effect on the life of the village but affected the children very little except for those who lost a father, brother or near relative. As the war continued there were increasing numbers of small cards with crosses or bows of black velvet attached and with a photograph of the soldier or sailor of the family who had been killed in action placed in windows where passers by could see them and perhaps then knock on the door to express condolences. If a member of a family with whom we were closely acquainted was killed our mother would explain to us why he would not be coming back to the village. Each Sunday at church prayers were offered for those killed and for the bereaved families. In the war years our services always ended with the singing of the National Anthem.

A spectacular reminder of the war was the occasional convoy of large, solid-tyred army lorries the sound of which took us scampering to some vantage point to watch and if they carried soldiers to cheer with excitable enthusiasm. In our home we each kept maps cut from newspapers, showing the war fronts with flags on pins to mark the lines of our trenches and those of the Germans. We were aware of the many men who had left the village to fight by the number of jobs being carried out by women. The men from the farms, the shops and the postman were replaced by women and some of the younger women went away to work in munitions. At the school it had been the custom to assemble around the tall white flagpole in the school field for a short ceremony and the singing of the National Anthem each Empire Day, now these assemblies were held more frequently to mark special occasions and made us feel very loyal and patriotic and gave special meaning to the flying of the Union flag.

One thing I disliked in these days was that we all had to knit and I considered knitting was 'cissie' and a girls' job. It seemed that everyone had to do it using drab, khaki-coloured wool, balaclavas, socks, scarves and jerseys were made. I received much scolding for my slow progress with scarf knitting and I've no doubt my incompetence was partially deliberate. I could sometimes bribe my sisters to knit a few rows but mother invariably spotted the difference between my poor efforts and the more competent work of the girls. On the other hand I had no dislike of the gardening activities for we all had to help with planting and harvesting potatoes and other main crop vegetables. We had a large garden and were able to grow far more vegetables than we needed for our own use. Father would "sell" vegetables, mainly potatoes, to the poorest of the villagers. He would not "give" for he did not want the recipients to feel they were being offered charity, so generous amounts of produce would be

sold to a person for a charge of one farthing or a halfpenny. Such transactions and thoughtfulness were typical of my father and gave him pleasure. I did not show his generosity in my own transactions for I always drove a hard bargain with my sole customer. The vegetable growing on my small plot had no patriotic motive and were in no way part of the war effort - they were entirely for my own financial gain. That my mother succumbed to what I now feel must have been a form of extortion was perhaps that while I was tending my garden I was not engaged in some mischievous occupation elsewhere.

Another war-time task was making butter. This was not as grand as it may sound. Our daily supply of skimmed milk was allowed to stand until what little cream remained in it had settled. It was then skimmed off and accumulated over several days when it was placed in a screw-topped glass jar and shaken steadily for what seemed a great length of time after which an ounce or two of butter would result. For some reason, I do not recall, a coin - usually a one shilling piece - was placed in the jar before shaking commenced. The remaining buttermilk was used in pastry making. We much disliked the war-time margarine and preferred instead beef dripping or even lard on our bread. The most sought-after part of the dripping was the brown-black jelly at the bottom of the dripping basin.

While it was customary for some villagers to keep pigs, goats, rabbits, hens, ducks, etc. the war shortages increased the numbers doing so as part of the dig for victory effort. We ourselves kept hens and had a good supply of eggs but I do not recollect ever eating any of the bird flesh and certainly neither father nor mother would have killed a bird. I do not know what happened to the too-old-to-lay-birds but expect they were given away or possibly sold on the same basis as vegetables. For a while I kept rabbits but my interest in them waned though rabbit bought from the butcher was a regular item on the menu. It may well have been I found the daily chore of finding dandelion leaves for them to eat and almost daily cleaning of the hutch unrewarding tasks. All scraps of edible and garden vegetables and household waste were carefully segregated and that not used by us passed to neighbours. Small potatoes were all kept and added to the waste and boiled up in a large iron saucepan and gave off a revolting smell. It was mixed with a coarse meal called 'toppings' and it was one of my jobs to do this which I did not find irksome as the hens and I got on well with each other. The hens' liking for me was undoubtedly as the purveyor of their food, mine for them not only because I liked to eat their procreative produce but as I was already developing a fondness and interest in bird and animal life. Despite this latter trend, together with other village boys the slaughter of the back-garden pigs was an event not to be missed, though I am sure had my parents known this activity would have been forbidden me. I did not mind that in almost every case I missed seeing the actual slaughter nor would we have got very close to the action for we had to observe from the nearest vantage point in a lane or footpath. A heap of straw in the pig-owners garden or nearby open space marked the spot and the butchering was carried out by the same two men, Butcher Whichelow and his mate Frenchman Smith who also unloaded the coal barges. The straw bonfire certainly had an attraction as the flames leaped high in the air with lots of sparks, smoke and flying red brands which momentarily increased as the butchers turned the carcass over to singe the hair on both sides or threw ashes on to parts of the carcass not being reached by the flames. As the smoke and smell of the burnt hair died down the now black hairless carcass was pulled away from the ashes and washed with bucketsful of hot water while the butchers scraped with large knives to produce the lovely soft, pinky-white hue like those we saw hanging in butchers' shops.

Another memory towards the end of the war was our excitement when we learned that an aeroplane had come down in a field between Shillingford and Dorchester. Renda and I hurried there on our bicycles for we had never seen an aeroplane, even flying overhead. It was in a field of stubble not far from the road with onlookers making their way to it through a gap in the hedge. The machine was a biplane with a wooden propeller behind the wings within an open-work metal and wire frame which connected the wings to the tail plane and rudder. In front of the wings was the open cockpit rather like half a fat cigar in which two men could sit in tandem. I have since learned it was called a De Havilland One. There was one policeman on duty to guard it and he allowed the by now large group of children and adult spectators to approach quite closely so that we could all satisfy our excited curiosity. This was almost twenty years before the large Benson airfield was made on Beggarbush Hill.

There were less pleasant occasions for me about this time for I had to help my father and 'our' Mr Cherrill with their work, one nasty job being the emptying of cesspools. A small number of houses in the village had replaced earth closets with water closets which drained into pits which had to be emptied from time to time. Normally our workmen would do this in late evening but when our

workforce had been so depleted to father and one and then to one only I had to help. The equipment used was a portable lift pump with three six-foot long folding legs which when opened straddled the pit so that a suction hose could be dropped down. The contents were pumped into a large open-top tank on wide rimmed iron wheels which was wheeled away to a nearby ditch or remote part of a garden and swung over to empty. I was not tall enough to operate the pump handle nor strong enough to push the tank trolley so my role was one of fetching and carrying. As young and unsuited as I was for such a task it did make me feel grown-up and had the added attraction of not having to go to bed at my usual early hour and having some fuss made of me by my mother for being such a helpful son.

I mention 'our' Mr Cherrill to distinguish him from the other Mr Cherrill, his brother, who was the local carrier. Mr Ted drove his horse pulling a covered van most days on a regular service from Ewelme to Benson and Wallingford and back. He carried all kinds of general goods and undertook small commissions and messages. There was room for two passengers sitting alongside him in the driving seat and he charged four pence for the return journey from Benson to Wallingford. There were rare occasions when I was committed to his care but normally visits to Wallingford which was a distance of three miles meant walking with one of the parents until we were old enough to ride on bicycles. Mr Ted was a great favourite of the village children and I myself never minded being sent to meet him to hand in or collect parcels.

As the war years passed by, several of the regular visitors to the village failed to arrive. One of these was unusual for he was a middle-aged Indian of high rank and was known as The Rajah but though he came for many years I never learned if this was his correct title. He was driven by a uniformed chauffeur in a large open touring car which in itself was a notable event for in those years I do not recall that anyone in the village owned a car. The car stopped outside The White Hart Hotel and the news of the arrival of the Rajah spread around very quickly and the children gathered, each to receive a shining new sixpenny piece. I was unfortunate enough to attend this distribution of largesse only once for my home at Littleworth was on the edge of the village and news of the arrival of the Rajah never reached me at other times. His sixpence was equal to three week's pocket money - a fortune indeed. It was not only the children who were glad to see the Rajah for he carried in the car a number of pairs of womens' footwear which were distributed to any old ladies who came along. I learned later that he lived in a nearby Oxfordshire village and travelled around our part of the country handing out his bounty. His arrival always created excitement and was a subject for much conversation long after his benevolent visit. It was understandable to hand out coins to the children but the distribution of footwear to the old ladies was unusual.

In contrast to the Rajah was Mr Bird who always came on foot carrying a heavy red carpet bag and as he was so short of stature the bag was long but not very deep so that it was well off the ground as he walked. He had a portly figure and in spite of this and being not very tall, he had a commanding presence which seemed to demand attention, yet he was not in any way assertive and was softly spoken in an avuncular manner. He wore a magnificent growth of dark whiskers and a long thick beard and dressed in a kind of clerical garb, his long black frockcoat buttoned high to the neck, the buttons cloth-covered and all seemed the worse for wear as was his broad-rimmed black homberg-type hat. Invited into our home he was given refreshment while we crowded around as he opened his bag to show the religious tracts, pamphlets, etc. for Mr Bird was a colporteur - that is a hawker of religious books usually employed by a religious society. Some of the leaflets were about The Band of Hope which was an anti-alcohol temperance organisation aimed at teaching children the evils of drinking. How thankful I have been that I was either too young to comprehend the total abstinence message, too inattentive to hear it or unusually wise for my years to let it influence me for one of my pleasures for many years now has been a daily intake of alcohol as being beneficial to my health and in my own opinion, to my equable temperament. We were all fond of Mr Bird for he seemed to treat us as grown-ups and he so obviously enjoyed the company of children. We missed his visits when he ceased to come. There were meetings of The Band of Hope quite regularly in a building near the centre of the village known as the Tin Tabernacle or more usually as the Tin Tab. The name was no doubt given as its roof and sides were covered by corrugated iron. It belonged to the Free Church and was sometimes used as a village hall - at least for such functions approved of by its management people. I did attend some Band of Hope meetings but have little recollection of them so obviously I was not receptive to their message. I do remember the occasions when I attended social functions there to play my violin accompanied by sister Renda on the piano and cannot now imagine what aural torture I inflicted on the audience for at that time I was but a very raw tyro.

Other visitors we liked were the hurdy-gurdy man and the knife-grinder. The hurdy-gurdy man's arrival was the signal for the children to collect around him as he made his slow musical progress and follow him like a Pied Piper, though not with the same sad legendary ending. Although the large Street organ had the usual two handles for pushing our man sported a donkey to pull it, the tiny animal showing much forbearance of the attention given it by the many patting hands. The knife grinder made less impact but we liked to watch him at work sitting on his brightly—painted and ornamented machine as he treadled away to send a stream of bright sparks off the grinding wheel. Children would rush into their homes to tell mothers the grinding man was here mainly no doubt to collect knives and scissors so they could watch him at work. He certainly had no need to advertise his presence. At one time a muffin and crumpet man came to the village and we gazed hungrily at him carrying a large board of muffins and crumpets on his head. He carried a handbell and rang it vigorously as he proclaimed in a loud voice “muffins and crumpets, very good muffins”. He continued to walk the streets of Wallingford long after he forsook our village and I remember an occasion when I was in the fifth form at the Grammar School our Latin mistress Miss John, heard the muffin bell and thinking it was the bell being rung by King the school porter to indicate the end of the lesson period, dismissed our class. We in all innocence made a hasty departure from the classroom before some dim-witted goody-goody had a chance to point out her mistake. We were, I expect, a lot of nasty little boys.

Winter months brought several magic lantern shows though less frequently in the war years. They were provided by various missionary societies to tell of their work in foreign countries and were often about Africa and India. They made a great impression on me. Held in the village school it was but a short walk for our parents to take us, who also had the task of trying to subdue our excited anticipation at the prospects before us. The lantern itself was truly magic, the large black brass-bound box with a long brass protrusion in front from which the picture came and which the operator kept adjusting to make a clearer picture and a short metal chimney on top which got very hot. It all stood on a tall wooden tripod with adjustable legs and on the floor between them was more magic. A large cylinder about eighteen inches high with a rubber tube leading up and into the box above provided the powerful light which threw a beam on to the screen in front of the audience before the slide with the picture on it was inserted. The lower part of the cylinder contained grey granules of sodium carbide above which was a container of water which slowly dripped on the carbide to make the gas which made the strong white light in the magic box. Seeing the equipment and all the activity of preparation was part of the entertainment and we cheered heartily when the first light appeared on the screen.

Sometimes the speakers were themselves missionaries and appeared in the pictures which brought reality to what was being told and recognition invariably brought the cry from some child of “is that you mister”. The audience was usually invited to ask questions but mostly we were all too young to do so and saved them for our parents when we got home. Such questions as were asked by the children were usually such simple ones as “where do you go for shops?, is there a Doctor ?, why don't the children wear boots does it ever get cold?”. The subjects of church and schools were generally the main content of the slides and lecture. There were usually a few special slides for the amusement of the children with ingenious devices to make the antics of animals and people appear to move about on the screen. One evening there were many unasked questions for the “magic lantern lady” talked about The Zennana Missions. I am sure we had no idea what the talk was all about nor would the speaker have been explicit enough to tell even the grown-ups present more than the bare outline of the Missions' purpose. Our parents, had they known which I doubt, would certainly have evaded answers to our questions. Had we been older I am sure our curiosity and interest in the isolation, segregation and seclusion of women in the Zennana would have roused the boys to have much whispered speculation when out of sight and earshot of parents, especially if there was suspicion of a mystery. These lantern lectures were a source of special interest to me for they showed there was a world beyond our small part of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, a world that was very different, people were a different colour, wore few clothes, had few churches or schools, few if any shops as we knew them where they could buy food and clothes, where the sun always seemed to be shining, where white people were always missionaries, doctors, nurses or explorers. I began to read adventure stories and these became more real when places and happenings could be identified with those I had seen on the magic lantern slides.

Like all young children we had short-lived crazes for the evergreen amusements of our ages. At times it was hoops, the girls wooden ones from Mr Hargreaves shop, the boys iron ones made by the blacksmith, Mr Lane who also made the iron skimmers, with which they were propelled with a nice

ringing sound as the hoop was pushed along with its hooked end. The girls turned to skipping or hopscotch while the boys went for tops, whipping tops, peg tops, humming tops, each in turn being the craze of the moment. Conkers in season brought secret processes for producing a tenner or twelver. On Ash Wednesdays we carried a sprig of an Ash tree and asked the question of others we met "Where's your Ash" which if not produced would result in a mild blow being given with ones' own Ash sprig.

**

Summertime 'treats' for both day and Sunday schools were big events, but became rather curtailed as the war dragged on. The day-school treat was the most elaborate for there was the greater number of children so consequently more parent and other support. There were two Sunday school treats as The Free Church had one for the very few children attending but I have no memory of them. We all wore our best clothes and had to bring and hand in a drinking mug with a coloured ribbon attached to match a ribbon worn by each child. Come tea-time there was concern and often childish distress if anyone had lost their ribbon and so could not claim its mug for it seemed to be "no ribbon, no Mug". A local farmer would supply a well-cleaned hay wagon and smartly-dressed driver to take us to a suitable field well outside the village for riding in the wagon was part of the fun. The wagon would be decorated with bunting and the horse well-groomed and decorated with traditional horse embellishments. Having arrived at the field where parents would have laid out trestle tables and made attractive starting and finishing lines for the races and flags or bunting on poles and hedges to give a festive appearance, games and races would take place with much merriment. The highlight of course was the tea of sandwiches, cakes, lemonade (if you had not lost your ribbon) and always an apple to finish up with. I am sure we all had plenty of apples in our own gardens but none were as good as those given out at the treat. Prize giving was a time when we became agog with anticipation but were made to sit in an orderly manner until each name was called to receive usually a bag of sweets, but it was ensured that no child returned home disappointed for all non-winners would get a consolation prize. The treats were very much a part of our village life.

As we got older we were often taken as a family to see moving pictures at the Corn Exchange in Wallingford which meant a three mile walk each way. The films we saw were usually comedies with Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, The Keystone Cops, etc. and of course the inevitable serial when it seemed the episode would always end with Pearl White tied to a railway track in the path of an oncoming train. We would then have to wait for the next instalment to see her rescued at the last moment by her hero which must have brought some pressure on our parents to take us again next week. I was always intrigued by how the pictures appeared on the screen as one could not see the projector or flickering beams of light as with the magic lantern, for a method of back projection was used. It broke down frequently and there would be long waits for repairs during which the piano player, who improvised during the films, would render items "from his own repertoire". These were mostly summertime outings when our long walk home would be in daylight.

The most important regular visitor was Doctor Birch. He lived in an attractive house on the outskirts of Dorchester about four miles away and came to Benson at noon from Monday to Friday. As a young Doctor he had travelled by bicycle and then a motor cycle with a sidecar, but my memory is of his motor car for it was the first I had seen and usually the only one coming to the village for weeks at a time. It was a small open car called a Swift and had large mudguards over the wheels and a wide running board between the front and back ones each side, one of which carried a box made of mahogany and brassbound to carry the electric battery. On the opposite running board was a spare wheel and a large handbrake lever and of greater attraction a bulbous horn. The car was a constant source of interest to the village boys and we never tired of standing around it to admire and discuss its various features. I am lucky enough to have a photograph with several admiring boys but cannot identify myself.

**

The surgery was in part of the haberdashery shop and residence of Mrs Baker next door to Grannie West's home. It had its own entrance from the street but as we were a fairly healthy family I can rarely have entered it and have but a vague memory of shelves of bottles from which the Doctor dispensed the medicines he prescribed.

The Doctor was of above average height, slimly built and his manner could best be described as 'breezy'. He must have been middle-aged at the time of which I write. I do remember him coming to

my home on one occasion when we were sitting at table in the kitchen having our midday meal, always a cooked one with meat and vegetables. As was his custom he did not knock on the door and wait to be asked in so came in unannounced. As he did so his eye caught sight of a dish of stewed apples on a side table which was to be our pudding. He brought it to the table and spooned a large helping onto each child's plate saying it would do us far more good eaten with our meat and vegetables. I do not recall if on this occasion his two small terrier dogs called Whisky and Mac came in too but it was usual for them to accompany him in to the homes of his patients. He used to say that all a man needed to keep healthy was to drink a pint of beer a day and eat bread and cheese. It was always said he was a "character" and he certainly did have considerable personality. He was a keen fisherman and had a great love for the game of cricket. It was said that no umpire would dare give him "out". I can only surmise that quick-witted umpires called "no-ball" whenever the Doctor was bowled or caught.

Some ten years later while on a visit to England from overseas I went with my parents and sisters to visit Benson and called on the people who then lived in our old home. When we were a young family we had been looked after at times by an old lady, Mrs Strange who now lived with members of her family in "The Cot" the name given by my father when he rebuilt it in 1909. Mrs Strange was very pleased to see us again after so many years and now that we were all grown up. There was much excited conversation as we stood around the kitchen-cum-living room when without warning Mrs Strange collapsed to the stone floor. My father and I picked her up and placed her on the kitchen table realising as we did so that she had died. My sisters hurried to the village to get Doctor Birch who arrived quickly. He seemed to sum up the situation immediately for his first words were "so the old lady has gone at last". In the way he spoke it did not sound disrespectful, on the contrary it conveyed affection for one whom he had treated as a patient for many years, sympathy for the two relatives present and concern for us whose visit had become such a sad one. I am sure that not only my family but most others in the village had a great love for this delightful "character" and friend. He not only helped bring so many of the young ones into the world, but cured our illnesses and brought cheer and comfort by his outgoing manner and the sincere affection he showed for young and old.

Benson High Street, as were all our roads, was of macadam structure which basically was a thick bed of coarse gravel well watered and compressed by a heavy steam roller leaving a level but gritty surface. The noise of iron-rimmed cart wheels, especially if the wheels were made entirely of iron, was considerable. I remember seeing much of The High Street covered with a thick layer of straw to deaden this noise when someone lay ill in a large house just beyond the surgery. It was not unusual to lay straw if someone was seriously ill in a house very close to a busy road. Most of the traffic was horse drawn and many villages had a local haulier with several carters and suitable horses to draw the variety of carts, drays, wagons, etc. suitable for most local haulage needs.

Our Police Station, that is, the home of our Policeman was in Crown Lane. I only remember one Policeman with any clarity and cannot recall his name. The boys regarded him as a friend, though always respectfully and aware of his status and authority. He was a big man with a bushy moustache and a weather beaten, pleasant face which seemed to remain kindly even when he was being stern with us which we often felt was too frequent. On the other hand he would stop just to talk, perhaps about the particular activity we were occupied with at the time, or where the best place was to watch for the trout swimming in the brook or where he had seen an uncommon bird or some activity he thought would be of interest and no doubt having in mind - keep us out of mischief. There was a good understanding between us. Should he catch us doing things of which he disapproved like making undue noise near peoples homes or paddling in the brook which ran the length of Brook Street he would give a mild ticking off with always a final "and don't let me catch you at it again" as though the sin was having been caught. He had on occasion for more serious misdemeanours like scrumping apples, been known to cuff one's ears, though I do not recall having suffered such an indignity either because I was careful not to be caught in the act or because I knew I would suffer much more severely if my parents learned of it.

One nice story of our Policeman comes to mind. There had been several instances of chickens being stolen and eventually he became suspicious of a man he saw walking on the outskirts of the village. He was not a local man known to the Constable who noticed he had a strange bulge under his coat. He stopped him and found he had two dead chickens - still warm - causing the bulge and with no good story as to how they came to be in his possession. The Policeman relieved the culprit of the now

cooling carcasses, took his name and address and sent him on his way. It was several weeks before ownership of the chickens was discovered so in the meantime the Policeman had an urgent disposal problem. The thief eventually appeared before the Magistrates in the Court House at Watlington charged with the theft of the two chickens. Our Policeman was called to the witness box to give his evidence when a Magistrate asked him to produce the birds as evidence. Caught entirely off guard he answered truthfully "they have been eaten Sir, my wife cooked them". I never learned the verdict but feel the accused chicken thief would have felt hard done by to have had to pay too much of a penalty for providing a meal of roast chicken for his captor.

The villagers themselves passed a verdict in a case of a master of the old British School before the new Church of England school was built. The old school, a tall rectangular building of red brick, still has its name THE BRITISH SCHOOL in large lettering high on the apex of one end wall. Parents had to pay a small sum of money weekly for pupils to attend and it was at this school that my father received his education. He told me the weekly payment then was six pence. In my youth the building was used as a furniture repository but was later converted to the present domestic dwellings. No doubt parents considered the payment entitled them to some say in the running of the school and of the staff, for one master incurred severe displeasure. We children did not know the cause of this for it was not spoken of audibly in front of us so we assumed when we were older that it concerned his private life rather than his professional one. Parents, possibly supported by others, had their own way of dealing with this master for he was given "rough music" treatment which left him in no doubt of the feelings of disapproval felt by the village. Rough music was performed by the beating of empty tins, utensils or any item to make a raucous noise. The display of their displeasure was made at night outside his home and was effective, it being said he was "drummed out of the village with rough music". The rough music was not always used as a sign of disapprobation for it was performed at Parliamentary Election times by groups of men supporting their own political party as they roamed around the village. They displayed their party colours by obtaining, from the grocery stores, the small one pound size dark blue or orange coloured thick paper bags into which such goods as sugar, rice, currants, etc. were weighed. These bags were pinned to coat lapels.

Other occasions on which bands of men roamed the village were the evenings of November 5th to mark the Gunpowder Plot on Guy Fawkes Night. There were no organised bonfires and firework displays as now but I have a clear recollection of the chanting of the "mummers" as the band of men were called. It sounded eerie and disturbing as we stood outside our home in the darkness of a November evening. The words they chanted were:-

Remember, Remember
The fifth of November
Gunpowder Treason and Plot
I see no reason
Why Gunpowder Treason
Should ever be forgot.

We also had our own chant :-

Guy Guy Guy
Stick him up on high
Hang him on a Lamp Post
And there let him die.

The route of the mummers was dictated to a large extent by the many Public Houses and this may have some bearing on why the West children never saw them. I am sure we missed out here for it would have been entertaining to see the men wearing an assortment of masks and indulging in comical antics no doubt increasing in absurdity as their tour of the Pubs progressed. Our parents were perhaps too protective, restrictive or would it be unkind to say straight laced, at times. Somehow they made us feel there was a mystery about the mummers and that might have been one reason we felt an

uncomfortable eeriness as we listened to their chanting. We also speculated as to where they were and when they were quiet for a while as to which Pub they were in quenching the thirsts created by their mummering progression. It sounded to us as if the mummers assembled in the village High Street at The Red Lion and then up to The Crown then came quite close to us at the far end of Littleworth to The Sun where there was a long silence. Renewed vociferous mumming appeared to take them down past the Tin Tab to The Castle and another silence. We thought they missed out The White Hart for it may have been too posh for them and they got very close to us again at The Three Horseshoes next to the school, here another pause for refreshment before they were on their way again mumming louder than ever in we thought the direction of The Swan for they sounded as if they were heading past the vicarage and church when we lost the sounds of them.

We did have our own fireworks in a modest way, let off in the garden by father but we were allowed to hold lighted sparklers. When I was older and went to the Grammar School and had chemistry lessons I tried to make my own fireworks, mostly simple flares. Making the basic burning material was fairly easy and I got coloured flames by filing different metals into granules to add to the basic powder. I still carry a scar from the only serious burn I inflicted on myself in this hazardous undertaking.

My mention of paper bags for currants from the grocers reminds me that at around the age of ten years one of my sources of additional pocket money was to do small jobs behind the scenes for Mr Wood in his grocery shop. My frequent task was to unpack, loosen-up and clean currants, sultanas and raisins. They arrived in wooden boxes pressed in very tightly so came out in a solid lump. My job was to break up these lumps of "dry" fruits all stuck together and sticky, into a fine meshed sieve, the mesh being of what looked like narrow strips of bamboo cane. By rubbing these lumps with my hands I would break them up into individual fruits allowing the short stalks and any small foreign bodies to fall through the mesh.

Another holiday-time occupation which I found enjoyable at first though later it became monotonous and tiring, was working in a cornfield. Next door to The Cot was a disused farmyard with dilapidated buildings on two sides and a small thatched cottage all of which were later bought by my father. It belonged to the elderly Mr Cook who lived in the cottage and was looked after by Miss Fletcher. Mr Cook had farmland on the Shillingford Road and would drive there every day in a dogcart drawn by an ancient, tired horse. It was a most uninteresting creature - had no character and it seemed little life - as near being an inanimate object as could be an animal with live flesh and blood. It seemed to have no interest in life and functioned like an automaton and just able to take Mr Cook the half a mile to his farm which was its only duty. Perhaps sheer boredom accounted for its strange nature. As I will now recount I travelled with Mr Cook throughout one long summer school holiday.

At harvest time the corn was cut by a reaping machine we usually called a binder which cut and tied the corn stalks into sheaves. Before the binder started work Mr Cook sent men to cut a swathe around the edge of the field to be harvested and this was done with a scythe, the sweep of the scythe being just the width needed for the machine to make its first cut without damaging the standing crop. The corn cut by the scythe was bundled into sheaves by hand and then tied with a straw 'rope' made by eight or ten stalks held in each hand held just below the ears and then twisting them several times into a knot. A good tightly-bound sheaf could be made with this straw rope - that was, when the farm hands did it. If I ever succeeded in tying the knots my sheaves would invariably fall apart when it came to stooking them. My sheaf-tying attempts were loudly and abusively discouraged by the labourers.

The binder was pulled by two pole horses and a third horse in front of them to be ridden by a boy as the leader. For one season I was Mr Cook's boy to ride the lead horse. I rode on a saddle but my then short legs astride the broad back of the horse gave anything but a comfortable ride. At least it ensured that my feet were safely above the iron traces between horse collar and swingletree. Going around and around the fields for hour after hour in a diminishing circle was monotonous but if my concentration lapsed I earned a quick reprimand from the driver who sat on the machine to drive the two pole horses. The only excitement to break the monotony of the slow circuitous plod was when the uncut corn was reduced to a small area and three or four men with shotguns would take up positions to shoot the rabbits which had been gradually confined within it.

During these seemingly never-ending days plodding slowly around the cornfields I first began forming cloud pictures. The farmland for several miles to the west, north and east was flat and during these

long sunny summer days clouds built up into low banks along the distant horizons. In my mind's eye these turned into panoramic silhouettes between the line of the land and the blue sky above. They formed biblical domed temples, towns and villages, castles defended by crusader knights, snow capped mountains, forests of trees, and sometimes I saw a sea with cliffs and hills of a coastline, all places of mystery and adventure. Then as the sun went down, for we often reaped until the light failed as it was sometimes late in the morning before the corn was considered dry enough to make a start, would appear intensifying colours of yellows and reds with whole landscapes burning and developing in huge holocausts of fire, the foreground shadows could turn into a fleeing populace, mostly on horseback so that I would join them so it became partly real until all was lost in the last minutes of the dying day. How often must the driver behind me have called to me to pay attention as I fantasised in a world of my own. Since those days I have continued to build cloud images, though no longer of mystery and adventure, but of form and colour - and wonder at all their beauty. At times they become dramatic as when travelling at sea or by air and I see a beautiful sunset, the images changing shape, colour and form until the light fades into darkness. Of even greater fascination when dawn breaks as I look out from a high-flying aircraft the images form, come to clarity in strengthening colours then neutralise, slowly to disappear as the new day ripens. Such memories live on to give lasting pleasure in their recollection. I shall always be grateful for that childhood harvest-time and my first awareness of cloud pictures.

After reaping or even as reaping progressed the sheaves were stooked and later carted to the rick yard. It was then that the kindly Mr Cook allowed the village women to glean his fields. They wore long wide aprons, the lower corners held in one hand formed a large bag into which they placed their gleanings which was mainly used to feed their backyard hens.

In due course after the harvest came the threshing. I would sometimes go down to the farm with Mr Cook on days when not at school, mainly attracted by the steam engine, its big wide flywheel driving the threshing machine with a long flapping belt which had a twist in the middle so that the drive on the thresher was in the opposite direction to the turn of the flywheel. The self-propelled steam engines used on the farm land had iron bars ridged across the surfaces of the big wheels to give better grip on soft ground and on the smaller front wheels a single iron rim stood up about an inch around the centre of the wheel surface to give better steering.

The men working on the corn ricks cut the binder twine around the sheaves before throwing them into the top of the thresher. Others below would replace sacks as they filled with corn and heave the disgorged straw on to wagons or directly on to an elevator to build another rick nearby. Threshing was always a scene of great activity, dust and noise, the loud voices of the men as they shouted to be heard over the growling, grumbling, harsh labouring of the thresher and the flap of the driving belt was compensated for by the pleasing steady rhythmic puff-puff of the steam engine. As the bottom layers of the corn rick were reached all men who could be spared armed themselves with pitchforks or other weapons to chase and kill the escaping rats.

Steam engines were always an attraction to me. They were used in great variety. Most picturesque and exciting, not only for their appearance but for the promise of an outing, were the fair engines. They were by far the largest and tallest of the steam engines, covered entirely overhead by a canopy edged with numerous coloured electric light bulbs. Mounted high above the main body of the engine at the front was the electrical generator driven by a belt from a large flywheel for when electrical power was needed. The huge iron wheels had tyres of solid rubber and so made little noise on the macadam roads. The canopy overhead was supported by twisted brass columns and elsewhere was a proliferation of highly polished metalwork. Every other part of the engine which was not of polished brass or copper was painted in the traditional fairground designs and colours. On the road each pulled three or four wagons to convey the dismantled horses and carriages of the roundabouts, the tall frames and gondola-shaped seats of the swings and all other fairground paraphernalia and some would pull the beautifully kept caravans in which the fairground people lived. We watched their passing with great excitement and great anticipation when towards the end of September each year they were on their way to the annual Wallingford Fair.

By comparison with the fair engines the steam rollers used to make and repair the macadam roads were small and less exciting but even so, had an attraction. They were slow and noisy but gave a longer period of interest as they moved backwards and forwards over the length of road on which they were working. First they would tear up the old road surface with iron bars about two inches square and

two feet long, pointed at one end. These bars were fitted into a strong clamp at the rear of the engine, the pointed end adjusted below the road surface level so that as the engine was driven forward it would tear up and loosen the gravel. This was then levelled, more gravel brought along by horse-drawn tipping drays and added then rolled in with copious amounts of water sprayed from a mobile tank replenished from the nearest brook or river. The result was a well-compacted, level, gritty surface. In later years this surface was sprayed with tar and called tar sealing. When moving from one worksite to another, the engine pulled the wheeled water tank and a large box-like wheeled hut which provided meal-time shelter for the roadmen as they were known. The approach of the steam roller unit was heralded well in advance, the puffing of the engine, the wide front roller-wheel surfaces and the narrower rims of the other wheels on the gritty surfaces made a metallic ring unlike any other traction sound made it easily identifiable.

We had but brief glimpses of the steam wagons. These in appearance were not unlike some present-day lorries and they travelled at possibly fifteen or twenty miles an hour on solid rubber tyres. The engine, boiler, coal bunker and driving controls were in a fairly large cab with a driver and fireman-stoker. A brass-rimmed smoke stack protruded through the roof of the cab together with a steam exhaust and steam whistle used to give warning of approach, for these vehicles were surprisingly quiet despite the nice hiss of steam and the noise of the smooth-running engines. They were usually brightly painted in the livery favoured by their owners and usually maintained in excellent condition, for then as now owners and crews seemed to have a special pride in steam-powered units and treated them with loving care. For some reason these wagons and the steam rollers by-passed the main Street of the village and used the narrow lane behind my home so that if there was one to be seen I had a good chance of doing so. I would be even more fortunate to follow and see them take on water at a point on the Shillingford Road we called "The White Rails" where a fast-running brook ran under the road and a suction hose could be dropped into the brook and water be drawn up into the vehicle water tank.

The giants for power must have been the steam plough engines. Like the road rollers, they were entirely functional and without decoration, the only relief to the dull blackness being the well-polished copper and brass pipework and fittings. The iron wheels were very wide to help distribute the weight and had bars across to give a better grip on the soft earth. The most noticeable feature was the huge revolving wire cable drum beneath the body. Two engines were used, one stationed at each side of the field to be ploughed. Their cables were connected to an odd-looking multi-furrow mouldboard plough turning seven furrows and altogether there were fourteen mouldboards and shares. Pulled by the cable in one direction one set of seven would plough while the other seven of this strong rigid assemblage would be up in the air at an angle of about forty degrees and so clear of the ground. With one cable revolving freely, the other engine would engage and wind its cable so pulling the plough across the field. Both engines would then move on the distance of the newly turned furrows, the plough being upended to lower the previously airborne mouldboards, the distant engine would then wind in the cable so ploughing another seven furrows.

The engine drivers' limited communication with each other was by steam whistle, one blast for stop, two for start. A man rode on the plough and may have been able to exercise some directional control. It is difficult to now recall the fascination of this method of ploughing which could hold the interest of usually very active boys for long periods. It may have been the incongruity of the strange partly "aerial" plough with, from a distance, no discernable motive power looking like a prehistoric monster - perhaps a dinosaur- traversing the field with its long neck outstretched. For me it was mainly the huge engines that held my attention as they puffed out from time to time clouds of black smoke and at others plumes of white steam from their safety valves and smoke stacks.

I had at that time rarely seen a railway engine and only a few times the slow smooth-running engines of the Salters River Steamers, but these and the traction engines inevitably made me want to build a steam engine, not an elaborate model but just a wheel that would whiz round by steam power. At the age of ten I was already acquiring some degree of skill with various hand tools, having always been given encouragement to do so by my father who would give me practical instruction as occasionally did some of the workmen. My mother gave me a large old pastry board which I was allowed to place on the kitchen table as a workbench. My steam engine was simple in the extreme. A half pound cocoa tin provided the boiler and a small square tin was turned into a methylated spirit burner to supply the heat. An old bicycle pump provided parts for the cylinder safety valve and steam connections were of the small-bore copper tube used for paraffin incandescent pressure lighting systems. The flywheel

came from a broken toy. Much of the construction was with a soldering iron which I heated in the kitchen cooking range. It all came together eventually and with a driving belt made of whipcord drove various models made with Meccano parts.

James Watt would have approved these amateur efforts but unlike him I, did not go on to bigger and better things with steam. I was blessed with the good fortune that my tin boiler did not blow up and scald hands and face nor did the furnace set the house on fire. I did rather spoil the look of the pastry board with the many burn marks from the soldering iron.

I only recall two accidents when “experimenting”. I have already mentioned a serious burn to my left hand when making fireworks. The second case caused me no bodily harm but had an effect in other directions. I had started having chemistry lessons at school, became interested in the subject and had a collection of chemicals, acids, test-tubes, etc. on an improvised bench in my bedroom. One Sunday afternoon I had some strange mixture in a large test-tube to which I added some hydrochloric acid. The resultant very loud explosion brought the whole family rushing upstairs from their peaceful Sabbath siestas in great alarm to find clouds of nauseous fumes pouring out on to the landing from my blown-open bedroom door, my bedroom in considerable disarray and a very frightened, white-faced, trembling son and brother gasping for fresh air at the open window. I was not punished as my parents were so relieved that I had survived unhurt and the damage to my room was not too severe. Needless to say it was the last of my chemical “experiments”.

Punishments were not frequent occurrences and I possibly justifiably, earned most and certainly many times more reprimands than my brother and sisters together for I did tease them a great deal and often not too kindly. Mother was the disciplinarian and if warning looks were not heeded, reprimand would follow. Most punishments were minor ones and for bad behaviour rather than mischief and mostly for being rude or ill-mannered at meal times. This could lead to being sent to one’s room and so missing the remainder of the meal. Minor issues like having to eat vegetables before having pudding, or as it was more usually called, afters or eating at least one slice of bread and butter before having cake were routine rules, understood and accepted even if not always with good grace and if not accepted would after a warning glance lead to a sulky, slow climb up the stairs to a bedroom. I remember one Sunday when I spilled food on my Sunday clothes I was made to wear one of my sisters’ frilly pinafores, this caused me the deepest depths of humiliation and my tears made matters worse as I was sent from the table. A thin white withy was kept lying prominently across the top of a picture frame in the living room and mother could often restore order by no more than a menacing glance in its direction. Though it was a familiar sight over so many years it seemed to convey that its use would be painful. I used to think at times that if the cane were alive it would leer at me saying it would enjoy being put to use. I suspect it was a guilty conscience that gave such an impression. I cannot remember it ever having been used.

My father only once punished me in a really undignified way with a mild beating. Among my routine chores was to chop boxwood into kindling for lighting the coal fires. At each weekend I was expected to prepare enough for the following week. On one occasion I rebelled and placed several logs of wood in the kindling receptacle with a thin layer of split wood to hide them. There was no hope of getting away with it, nor did I. My father made the punishment fit the crime for he took the longest piece of the boxwood, laid me across his knees and gave a spanking. I do not remember if it was painful but do recall I rushed up to my bedroom before he could see me shed copious tears of mortification and shame for my stupidity.

Another chore was to pump water for household use. Our water came from a well and was lifted by a fairly large semi-rotary hand pump affixed to a large baulk of timber in the scullery. This was a flat-roofed addition to the house containing also an old-fashioned washing-up glazed stoneware sink and a copper used for boiling the clothes on washing day and for heating water for bath nights. The pump lifted the water into a tank on the roof above and also supplied water for the nearby water-flushed lavatory which gave our home a status above the other Littleworth homes and most others in the village which still had earth closets in the gardens. I knew almost precisely how many pushes and pulls on the pump handle were required to meet the varying daily water requirements, so could spread this chore over days to fit in with school and other activities.

Collecting the milk from a nearby farmstead was no real chore for apart from going into the dairy to see the cream being skimmed from the big settling pans, the butter making, etc. I never failed to enjoy

the walk to and fro. There was always something of interest, a newly found birds nest, a hedgehog or other small animal, in spring the new shoots from the hawthorn hedges we called "bread and cheese", sometimes neighbours or better still, strangers to talk with. Often on these routine journeys and on other occasions when rambling in the countryside I would meet up with the men who cut the farmland hedges and cleared the water drainage ditches. These men spent most of their time - indeed most of their working lives doing this same work. The hedges were mostly of hawthorn and several types of cutting tools were used with sickles for lighter work and bill-hooks for the stouter branches and the skilled laying of hedges which was quite an art. The men were hard-working and would do little more than pass the time of day unless I met them when taking a meal. Then they usually welcomed my company and endless questions for I learned much of country lore from these hedgers and ditchers. It was a hedger who helped me make my first really good catapult. He was critical of the one I proudly showed him saying "that things no good". He found a strong fork from the hedge he had been working on, trimmed it expertly with the pocket knife he was using to cut his (real) bread and cheese, inserted the thick catapult elastic in skilfully made slits at the top ends of the forks and so made me a very superior "cattie". At one time father had allowed me to use an old single-shot point two-two gun. He also gave me an airgun. Neither were very effective weapons - at least in my hands - but the airgun was an excellent shooter, using grains of wheat as ammunition, in our war games when a direct hit on bare knees was counted as a "kill".

Between the church and the river was a large house we called "The Pink House", the pink being seen but sketchily through the creeping foliage covering most of the external walls. It was the home of the Bourne family for many years. I did not know the two sons who were naval officers and had an interest in wireless telegraphy. The tall masts and aerials were a source of attraction but it was a year or so after they left the village that I developed a greater interest. Persuading my father to let me have two of his longest scaffold poles I cleaned and painted them white and with help erected them to use as masts to carry an aerial. I bought a book on elementary wireless receivers and set to work making a double aerial of stout copper wire with six feet long bamboo canes as spreaders. I drilled holes through porcelain door handles for insulators. The tuning condenser was black-paint-covered thin copper wire bound closely around a piece of four inch mahogany curtain rail. To hold the crystal I improvised a small brass cup and used terminals from old house bells and worn-out leclanche electric cells, with a flat piece of ebonite for the insulated base. Once again my ability to use a soldering iron was helpful. Like my earlier steam engine it was most primitive and I recall my excitement when it first picked up Morse code signals through the headphones my parents had generously paid for. I was not able to read Morse code but tuned in to different stations on my crude tuning device. In time speech and music were broadcast from a new London broadcasting station called 2LO. By placing the head in an old-fashioned bedroom china washing bowl, several of us could just hear the music by each putting an ear to the rim of the bowl. It must have been a ridiculous spectacle to see several heads around the bowl each with an ear pressed hard on its rim, with hands and arms waving in the air in gestures to those awaiting their turn to make them hush. I did eventually move on to making more sophisticated receivers with valves and accumulators to supply the electric current and purchased parts to replace my crude home-made tuning devices, terminals, etc. Having found I could make a good useable wireless receiver my interest waned and I went on to other things one of which was an interest in music but more of that later.

There had always been music in our home apart from the Sunday evening hymns. Each of the girls had piano lessons while I was learning to play a violin. At first we were taught by Miss Baker and there was constant music practice going on. There was no wireless broadcasting until about the time we left the village to live in Surrey, nor had we a gramophone - we had never even heard one - for I doubt if anyone in our village had one so that all our music was home-made. Our piano was quite a good upright from James Walkers of Reading and I always endeavoured to be at home when their tuner came twice a year, for even the repetitious single notes and chords he struck as he adjusted his large-handled tuning key were pleasing sounds and no doubt helped to develop the acute ear I have for musical graduations of sound. When in 1914 my brother returned home from London, he too was given a violin. What my parents suffered with my sisters repetition of scales and "Blue Bells of Scotland" and other first pieces must have been bearable compared to the strident, harsh piercing, nerve-tingling sounds made by me and my brother in our earliest months of tuition and practice. As each progressed we were from time to time asked to play for visitors to our home and a few times to perform during the intervals at whist drives and socials at the Tin Tab.

During the winter months we were let off school homework on Friday evenings which were given over to games - ludo, halma, draughts, playing cards - usually snap etc. but best of all we gave concerts, our parents being the sole audience. Each of us would perform at least one item, often a favourite piece which had been constantly practised in the preceding weeks. My brother and I would play violin duets from the Pleyel Tutor and in time played pieces accompanied by one of the girls though they did not like doing so for it meant learning something not set by their music teacher. We also sang songs solo or in unison, further variety coming from recitations and dressing - up for strange pretend situations we devised. My own favourite songs sung standing on a stool or low chair were "Farmer Giles" and "Bryan O'Lynne". I have forgotten most of the many verses but still remember :-

I comes from the country my name it is Giles

I've travelled a hundred and forty odd miles

etc. followed by a repetitive chorus -

Ta rara, Ta rara, Ta rara, Ta ray.

sung to the same tune.

I liked Bryan O'Lynne best as I could add all kinds of absurd and sometimes amusing verses about members of the family. Two of the original verses went rather like this :-

Bryan O'Lynne had a house on the moors

The sky was the roof, the ground was the floor,

It had no doors to go out nor in,

It'll do, It'll do, said Bryan O'Lynne, It'll do.

Bryan O'Lynne had no britches to wear

So he got a sheep skin and made him a pair,

The woolly side out and the skinny side in,

It'll do, It'll do, said Bryan O'Lynne, It'll do.

While from time-to-time music practice brought tears we all mostly enjoyed our music making and I found I could memorise easily and improvise. As I made progress I was given a good full-size instrument and quite fortuitously the bow turned out to be by a well-known maker called Tourte and I became very proud of it when it was confirmed as genuine. This violin and bow accompanied me on my world travels for many years until it descended into Davy Jones Locker in mid-Atlantic in wartime. I made little progress as a piano player and when much later I acquired a violincello I played it with little skill but with great enjoyment. The fiddle was my first love. Summer evenings in Benson brought a more active pastime. Mr Cook's field near our home was the venue for my first cricket coaching. The game had loomed large in my young life for I rarely failed to persuade mother to take me to the cricket field on the outskirts of the village to watch father play. Ball games came naturally to him, he bowled slow left arm spinners with considerable success and he batted right handed, very correctly though he had never been coached. While applying himself seriously to his play in matches, it was always with obvious enjoyment and hardly concealed amusement as he tied opposing batsmen into all kinds of knots or when batting he lifted a ball far into the rough surrounds of the field so that a search had to be made for it. He had no need to conceal his amusement when we practised in our own nearby field. He would tease me with "leg stump this time son" or off stump or middle stump and he was too often successful for my liking. Sometimes he placed a halfpenny or penny coin and endeavour to pitch the ball on to it, which he did occasionally. I approved of this variation firstly because his concentration was not on my wicket and secondly I could have the coin should he not have landed a ball on it during the playing session. He did much to teach me to enjoy the game if not to play it skilfully. I learned to keep an even temper no matter how often he broke my stumps or laughed at my inability to defend them.

Our village cricket field was reached from Mill Lane and then off to the right along a rough track between the garden allotments. It was about five or six acres and after a fairly level area at the allotment end, fell away towards the Crowmarsh Road. At the same time this lower part also sloped to the swampy Withy Beds. The pitches were on the level part but the slope beyond made an uphill run-

up for the bowlers that end. The outfield could only be described as rough and there were numerous small mounds, either grassed-over anthills or molehills. These caused a good deal of misfielding resulting in shouts of derision from spectators as fielders, with their eyes on the ball, stumbled over them or failed to hold a catch to loud cries of “butter fingers”. The ground had no amenities so as afternoons and beer consumption wore on there were frequent treks to the spinney and this too would lead to ribald amusement and earthy comments as players or spectators returned with swamp-wetted and muddied boots and trouser legs. A few years later our cricket was played on Mr Chamberlain’s front meadow at Crowmarsh Battle Farm. This was a good level field but the main problem was the preponderance of cow pats.

Matches at Benson were family picnic days and opponents arrived often in four-wheeled carriages carrying about twenty persons and as important, adequate supplies of comestibles. On arrival the waggonette would be placed so as to act as padding up and refreshment centre with the horses tethered to graze nearby. I remember how important I felt when allowed to select the numbered metal plates to hand to the “big boy” who hung them on the telegraph board nearby. There was one occasion when a visiting team came from a village near Wallingford possibly North Stoke. One of its young players was accompanied by his parents. His mother was of distinguished appearance with her very large-brimmed hat and fashionable long dress of the period. The family name was Kennerly-Rumford and the lady Clara Butt the famous contralto singer, who a few years later was created DBE and so became Dame Clara Butt. I was around ten years old at the time but it was much later that I realised what an impression these visitors had made on me. Their impeccable clothes and well-groomed appearance and bearing, particularly the elegant dress and pretty hat had given me a glimpse of a different world beyond that in which I was growing up. It also must have had a lasting influence for even to the present day I experience pleasure when seeing people well-groomed and dressed, not with ostentation or affectation but with good style and taste, a pleasure enhanced in these days of sloppy, scruffy jeans, jumpers and gym shoes - or should I call them trainers.

Early in the year 1918 a great change came about in my life and later in September, for everyone else by the cessation of the Great War. The change for me was leaving the village Church of England school with a scholarship to the County Grammar School at Wallingford. Now I really was “grown up” and given a degree of hitherto unknown independence for I had to cycle the three miles each way to Wallingford six days a week as we had lessons on Saturday mornings. It was early in this year that my father was conscripted into the army and I had to carry out many chores to help my mother with the business and particularly the old Mr Cherrill our one remaining workman. One clear memory stands out clearly of these days, my cycle journeys to Champions the ironmongers in Wallingford to obtain items such as water taps, screws, hinges, etc. needed by Mr Cherrill for his work, in fact any items which could be carried by a small boy on his bicycle. These journeys had to be made before school which commenced at five minutes to nine o’clock, so I had to leave home early enough to be waiting for Champions to open at eight o’clock, obtain the supplies, return home and then go back to Wallingford to school. It was the winter months which come so strongly to mind. Mother would be waiting at our garden gate for my return and would have a warm tea cosy into which I put my bitterly cold hands, often accompanied by very un-grown-up tears as the circulation came back into my fingers with sharp, prickly pains.

My new school brought an entirely fresh form of education with subjects such as French, Latin, Algebra, Geometry, etc. and a different way of learning, of routines and discipline. The greatest change of all was making new friends. Games were compulsory for one hour from four o’clock each afternoon or until too dark to play during winter months. Wednesday afternoons had compulsory games but not on Saturdays though we were expected to attend unless excused on some genuine grounds. For me this was the start of many years of happy school life.

In no way could I claim to have been a “bright” pupil. I did enjoy most subjects, geography and Latin being my favourites. It needed little effort to keep within the top three of the many classes through which I progressed and so was able to devote more attention to games, music and other interests. Homework of which there was a great deal caused some interruption of my extra-mural activities and it was not until much later that I regretted the lost opportunity to become more proficient in the many subjects that would have aided me in later life.

There had been a Grammar School in Wallingford for about 250 years and despite a rather chequered history throughout most of the nineteenth century, it had acquired a high reputation. In 1877 the

present building was erected to provide separate schools for boys and girls. The two were divided by the three-storeys high residences for the Headmaster and Headmistress with single storey classrooms either side. Early in the present century a science laboratory was added architecturally in keeping with the classrooms. The two schools were amalgamated, at least for administration and teaching, but while the girls shared classrooms with boys, at all other times were segregated and kept strictly to their own side of the school. Needless to say we boys found this irksome and it inevitably led to passing notes written surreptitiously in class and slipped into desks and to snatched conversations in corridors to arrange meetings out of school. These restrictions made for more enjoyment of the nefarious contacts and greater still when they achieved the desired result.

The Headmaster was Stanley Heywood. Of medium height and lean build - I would not like to hazard a guess as to his age at the time - he had iron-grey hair closely cropped over his smallish, rounded, wrinkled face. He wore small wire-framed spectacles and was not unkindly, because of his features and quick, sharp movements, known to us as "Monkey Heywood". He had a wry sense of humour, a ready smile and a manner of speech, which though not of great volume or abrupt, seemed to be emitted as though spat out with a degree of vehemence and forcefulness which compelled attention and often compliance. He was most respected and well-liked by his pupils. It was not a large school for the 1921 school photograph shows 94 girls and 94 boys, 3 Masters and 6 Mistresses. The male staff had been depleted by the manpower demands of the war their places having been made up by Mistresses. The most memorable master was C.J.Colquhoun known to all as "Co". Rather above medium height, well-proportioned, with dark wavy hair and a fresh complexion, his face creased perhaps from his frequent smiles which so often turned into shoulder-shaking laughter which was most infectious. He taught mathematics and many of his pupils would have claimed it to be their favourite subject for his classes were always fun even though in a disciplined way. He had an unerring aim with a piece of chalk for when writing on a blackboard he heard talking behind him, he would swing around and in the same movement throw the chalk and invariably make a direct hit on the offender. It took me a long time to realise he could see all that went on behind his back in the reflection in his spectacles as he looked at the blackboard. He had a great fund of amusing stories with which to liven his classes - they were usually quite improbable and told with much twinkling of his large blue eyes which were the outstanding feature of his face. Best of all we liked to hear him play the piano for he was an accomplished pianist. There was no proper assembly room so the large classroom used by Form 3 was used and contained the only school piano. Co played each morning for the assembly hymn and on such occasions as Speech Day when he thundered out and we sang with great gusto the school song "Buck up Wallingford, Buck up School. Play the game with all your might, let this be your rule". But it was out of classroom time, when we could persuade him to do so, that we most enjoyed his playing. He was able to play any tune we requested though usually we just asked "Will you play to us, Sir". Then he would improvise. This is an ode to a cricket bat. This is the Wallingford "Bunk" on its way from the railway station to Cholsey. This will be Oxford winning the boat race. This is West (or some other boy) walking back from the crease after being out first ball. There was no limit to his inventiveness, the subjects were all topical, skilfully descriptive, amusing and accompanied by much laughter. His own enjoyment signified by his heaving shoulders and smiling face.

These musical sessions were denied to the girls as the assembly room was in the boys' part of the school and so out of bounds to the girls during non-lesson time. Co seemed to have time to spend with his musical devotees, yet in other ways he was always in a great hurry as he rushed along corridors and through doors. His academic gown had been caught in doors so often that little but the shoulders and a few tattered ends remained. He did have a complete gown for rare formal occasions. I recently learned that he lived to a dignified and active old age, his wavy black hair turned white, energetically coaching maths and music and living a full life until he died at the age of 102. My love for Co has been lifelong and I am sure this must be true for all those who knew this very dear man and who learned from him far more than the mathematics he taught.

Mr Wilkins - "Wilkie" - was by contrast rather dour, short of stature, slightly built, pale complexioned with neatly parted grey hair, and always immaculately dressed, he had a cruel line of sarcasm turned on any inattentive or ignorant pupil. He taught Chemistry, Science and Geometry. While good at all three subjects I came in for more than a fair share of his disapprobation. Perhaps it was his frequent disparagement of my efforts that brought me good results. My school notebook for the Christmas term of 1921 examinations shows Chem. Pract. 1st. Chem. Theory. 3rd, Geometry 2nd. Wilkys' methods, unpleasant as was the embarrassing ridicule from his acerbic manner in front of my fellow pupils, were

obviously effective. We saw little of him out of the classroom or laboratory though he did sometimes take "drill" as PT was then called. In good weather this was conducted on a near part of the large playing field. An incident occurred one day which would be forever printed in the hearts of those fortunate to witness it. A white Billy goat kept to eat down rough vegetation around the field boundaries was tethered on a long chain to a collar around its neck. About twelve boys were having drill with Wilky facing us giving commands, when the goat which had escaped from its collar, approached him from behind. Wilky became increasingly annoyed by our unusual degree of inattention while we were bursting at the seams to contain our mirth at the prospect of the inevitable encounter. The goat advanced steadily, head held as if assessing the target. When only a few yards away, its decision made and fully committed to the attack, it lowered its head and increased its speed towards the unsuspecting master. In a chorus as if pre-arranged, a shout went up, from twelve insincere boys "look out Sir". It was of course too late and the goats' head and mans' bottom met, lifting the poor, lightly-built Wilky several inches into the air. Our "kind" warning had been in time to enable him to ride the impact to some extent so that he stayed on his feet. Meanwhile the goat having achieved its target came over to us as if inviting praise for its action and received our amicable attention for it was an old friend. The embarrassed master thought we were holding the goat to prevent any further attack on him as we took the animal away to re-tether it. It is unlikely that it would have given us so much pleasure and satisfaction had it been one of the other masters. Strangely enough this incident brought about an improved relationship between Mr Wilkins and the notorious rascally male members of the Upper Fourth.

The games Master was the aptly named Mr Greenfield who also took several fill-in subjects. He was by far the youngest of the staff, tall with an athletic figure. The schools' high reputation for sporting prowess was fully maintained under his training and organisation. As a coach of the three games we played - a term each for cricket, football and hockey - he was strict and sometimes drove us hard as he did also about our general behaviour before, during and after matches, particularly when parents and other spectators were present or when playing away matches. He won my admiration when he first came to the school and boys were helping him to prepare for the annual sports day. Various parts of the field had to be roped off and many stakes had to be driven into the ground using a large wooden maul. Mr Greenfield could swing this with one arm to drive the stakes and I thought this to be a great feat of strength and skill for I could barely lift and carry the maul he used so easily and accurately. From then on I sought to emulate his physical fitness.

We did have a part-time Art master who came on Saturday mornings as did a Music master. Art was not one of my good subjects. Music was very limited with no more than class singing lessons for we had no instrumental tuition. The Mistresses were dears but I can only remember three of them with clarity. Miss Johns was very elderly, grey-haired, of very short stature and taught Latin. This subject I found to my liking and was grateful to her for the extra help she gave me. Miss Grigg by contrast was much younger and unusually tall. She was the senior mistress in charge of the girls' part of the school, but my favourite was Miss Roberts who taught history, literature and English. She was patient and good-natured with a ready smile and even temperament no matter how dull-witted her classes appeared to be. She was also Form Mistress of the Upper Fourth which was without doubt the most challenging of her duties. In the junior Forms through which I passed we were all struggling to learn and to find out how to, also we were subject to strict discipline - a sort of breaking in. Above Upper Fourth work had to be taken seriously in preparation for the Oxford or Cambridge examinations and for matriculation. Upper Fourth was a kind of relaxed halfway house and its members more carefree, relieved from the earlier pressures and making the most of all opportunities to enjoy each day before the grind of more serious times ahead. The brave Miss Roberts was able to maintain a reasonable standard of discipline with this unruly class by her strong personality and understanding of youthful spirits. My membership of that Form was certainly the most enjoyable of many happy years. I get still a feeling of pleasure in recollection when I see in an old notebook her initials following her inspection of it, "B.D.R. Feb.17th. 1922".

I was fortunate to live near Wallingford and to go to school there. It was, and is still, a delightful small town of character with a long history from Saxon times when it was a settlement of some importance. The large mounds on the Kinecroft are the remains of Saxon defensive earthworks and it was my interest in these that lead to learning of the early history. Not much is left of the castle built soon after the Norman Conquest, the knowledge of its early history being confined to the story of Queen Matilda who, in the year 1141 escaped from Oxford castle during a snowstorm dressed all in white, and found

safe refuge at the castle. As Wallingford castle was for so long a residence of successive Kings of England, it too like Benson, has during the time of occupation, a well-recorded history. There were at one time many churches in the town but the number over the years was greatly reduced and I now remember only three and of those, mostly of St. Marys where I was confirmed. Adjacent to St. Marys is the superb Guildhall, unaltered since it was built in 1670. Nearby in the centre of the Square are the railed-in cobblestones of the old bull ring. Leading off is the narrow, ancient St. Marys Street joining High Street with its old-world coaching inns and several large, graciously-fronted houses. Then down to the lovely old stone bridge over the River Thames across which I cycled so many times for several years. The toll house was then still standing but fortunately no longer collecting tolls. The history of Wallingford is of great interest and I restrain myself from dwelling on it.

When visiting Wallingford recently memories came flooding back of school days and particularly of fellow pupils. Turner whose family ran the boatyard by the river bridge, Payne from the Jewellers, Relf from the toy shop in St. Marys Street and Jenkins whose father had the newspaper and stationers. Dearlove the baker in High Street and others of the same name from Shillingford Bridge Hotel. Lindsay Evans from the lovely old George Inn, Naish, Hedges, Wilder, the names are still there. To one, "Chunk" Worley from clocks and watches in High Street I have special regard and thanks. He had left WGS before I became a pupil and I did not know how he came by his strange nick name unless it was because of his short stature and ample girth for one still young. He wore small metal-rimmed spectacles and with his rounded face and squat figure he comes to mind whenever I see a picture of the German composer Franz Schubert, to whose music he introduced me for Worley was a musician. He had just gained his Degree as Mus. Bac. when I first knew him when he formed and conducted a school orchestra. We rehearsed in the Assembly room not in school time but in the early evening. My parents were concerned in my first year that I had to cycle home alone on the dark winter evenings. This I did not mind until passing under the overhanging yew trees outside Benson church, everything so quiet and still with only the wavering beam of my oil-burning cycle lamp seeming to be alive amongst the shadows. It was perhaps the memories of those childish candle-snuffings that made me bend low over the handlebars and pedal hard until I reached the Vicarage and the friendly chestnut trees of The White Hart Hotel before turning on to the footpath by the school and could see the welcoming lights of my home.

The WGS school orchestra was extremely limited, consisting mainly of about twelve violins and I played the lowly part of a third violin. I wince even now to recall some of the atrocious sounds we produced, particularly from the second and third violins. The ear-piercing hurt of the out-of-tune notes high up on the E string, the grating vibrations from bows too harshly applied to the G with every possible aural anguish in between can never be forgotten. What a mercy that in those days there were no tape recorders. Nonetheless I found being in an orchestra much to my liking and it brought considerable enjoyment. Even now I have pleasurable feelings of anticipation when I hear an orchestra tuning-up prior to a performance. Our repertoire was limited but it did introduce me to Schubert whose instrumental compositions have given me lifelong enjoyment, not only to play but always to hear with an added pleasure when I have a miniature score to read. I shall for ever be grateful to Chunk Worley for bringing Schubert into my life. Schubert left little but beautiful music after his short life though I remember a passage from one of his few known letters which said "Live today wisely so that the past is not unpleasant to recollect or the future alarming to contemplate". I do not know if I have always lived wisely but do find the past is pleasant to recollect; nor is the future alarming to contemplate unless contemplating its likely duration. During occasional breaks in our rehearsals we would persuade Worley to play what we called his "party piece" - the Rachmaninov C Sharp Minor Prelude. It was some years after leaving school that I had one of my rare "great" musical experiences when I attended a Rachmaninov Recital at the old Queen's Hall in London.

The school orchestra did little more than rehearse for its own pleasure for I recall no more than two occasions when we played at school functions. Possibly Chunk Worley and the Headmaster realised only too clearly our limitations. It is possible also our performance might have been to a higher standard had some of the girls been allowed to join us. We certainly regarded the orchestra as a strictly male preserve.

An annual event at Wallingford was the Michaelmas Fair held on the Kinecroft near the school. No longer a hiring fair as in olden days, it was solely for entertainment with swings, roundabouts, hoop-la, boxing booths, fat ladies, etc, and all "the fun of the fair". In our younger days we walked to the Fair

with our parents, but once at WGS I was allowed to go in the evening with school friends with strict instructions to be home at the given time. On one occasion I and several others left our cycles in the school bicycle shed while at the fair. My friends bought and smoked cigarettes which were no novelty to me for when visiting the bed-ridden Mr Champion who lived next to Mr Woods' grocers he always gave me a cigarette and insisted that I smoked it. My parents knew this but did not mind as long as I did not smoke at any other time. On this evening at the Fair I bought a smoking pipe and tobacco, feeling very grown up. In due course we collected our bikes from school and rode home by which time I was feeling anything but grown up and tried to assure mother that the pale face and unhappy condition were due to an excess of brandy snaps. Next morning I knew I was not cut out to be a pipe-man so gave the pipe and remaining tobacco to King the school caretaker who accepted them readily. After assembly and back in our form room we had a visit from the Headmaster. It was not unusual for he had the habit of going to different classes after assemblies to talk briefly on various matters. This morning his talk had unusual significance and for several of us, topicality. He spoke at length on the dangers of smoking tobacco, on the possible damage to our lungs and the effect this could have on our sport playing ability if such a habit became prevalent at the school. No longer would the school continue its successes in matches against other schools and would soon lose its high reputation. He warmed up to this subject making the most dire predictions, suggesting that if it were possible, even our brains would become even more stultified. Then the cause of this tirade became clear. He had been walking round the school premises the previous evening to ensure all was in order when he saw four boys in the cycle shed, each of them smoking. Fixing his gaze briefly but most pointedly at each of my smoking companions in turn, then looking hard at me said with great deliberation "I'm not mentioning any names am I West?". Then with a broad smile he walked out of the room so that our lesson could commence. It was a great many years before I smoked again, and never a pipe.

Later in my sojourn in Upper Fourth I experienced his sense of humour once again during one of his brief I had begun to take a greater interest in my appearance, having progressed from the almost standard dress for young country boys of collarless Norfolk jacket worn with a wide, white, starched Eton collar over the neckline of the jacket and breeches buckled below the knee over long stockings. Now I wore a proper suit, shirt, collar and tie and also adopted the manly style of having my hair cut short back and sides, leaving a generous growth on top plastered close to the scalp with an abundance of Pears Solid Brilliantine, the hair parted to one side with a brushed-up quiff. Eventually for some reason I do not recall I became dissatisfied with this hairstyle, or could not afford to spend pocket money on more brilliantine, before school I went in to Mr Emery's hair dressing saloon in the High Street and had my hair cropped closely like Mr Heywoods'. Feeling rather naked and very self-conscious on arriving at school I received a good deal of ribbing from other boys. Far worse was to come. On that morning Monkey Heywood descended on our class and almost immediately saw my shorn head and drew attention at extreme and I thought unnecessary length on Wests' good sense in wearing his hair neatly and sensibly cut. He and the class had good fun at my expense but the Head was being genuinely congratulatory.

The members of Upper Fourth regarded the very superior members of the Sixth Form as their sworn enemies. We lost no opportunity to aggravate, them which was not too difficult for during Break periods they were above mixing with we lesser fry and spent the time in their Form room. I had a fixed bias against them for when about twelve years old I came into conflict with them and justly or not was given a Sixth Form thrashing. This consisted of being held face down on a table and beaten on the buttocks with a cricket stump by a boy on either side. It was customary to do this immediately before the bell rang at the end of the dinner break. I was released just at that moment and thrust into my classroom with tears streaming down my face, in considerable pain, in great distress and could not sit down. Mr Wilkins with whom I did not always find favour, realising my predicament sent me to a cloakroom to wash away the tears and try to regain some composure. The skin on my bottom was very black and blue for many days afterwards and it was painful to sit. My parents were upset at my condition, but to my relief took no action other than to apply a salve to ease the soreness. I do not recall any other boy being so severely beaten, but this is not the incident I set out to recount.

During one very wet dinner break it was planned to raid the hated Sixth and cause havoc in their room. Our first attempt failed as in anticipation they had placed desks against the door from the corridor. We decided to try again a few minutes before the bell. Quietly we crept up to the door, I on the handle with others in support. Altogether we heaved, the door opened easily and in we fell, a sprawling heap inside. Being first down I was last up to see Monkey Heywood looking at us with what seemed a grin

of satisfaction on his face at having caught us in unseemly horseplay. He had entered by a door from the adjoining assembly room which was why we had not seen him earlier. "Come with me West" he said in a sharp, stern voice and I followed him the full length of the room and into the Hall of his house. He stopped at the hall-stand and with great deliberation sorted through walking sticks and umbrellas, taking what seemed to be ages in doing so. Meanwhile I had little doubt as to what was going to happen, my main thought being the consoling one that in no way could it be as bad as that administered by the brutish sixth formers. Eventually he turned and faced me with an umbrella in his hands and a huge smile on his face "Run down to the garage West and order a taxi for my wife". It was no wonder that pupils felt the highest regard for and goodwill towards this endearing and very human Headmaster.

While as Head he had a considerable understanding of the ways and minds of his pupils he could not have fully appreciated the vulgarity of young boys in the earliest stages of puberty. He was fond of shortening words; the large Websters Dictionary became "the big Dic", the reference library the "Ref". He had several unusual phrases, a request to a pupil to revise or refresh work would be to "rub it up". When some of those Heywoodisms were brought together they could result in unintentional misconstruction. One cause of muffled giggles behind closed hands or handkerchiefs by the boys was when one was told to "go the Ref. get the big Dic. and rub it up".

A further reward The Grammar School brought me when first there were new friendships. It meant an almost complete break with my Benson schoolmates, the brothers Gurney, Sellwood, Wells, Bill Skinner, Tom Bevan, Beckley, Green, Belcher and many others. Of similar age and joining WGS about the same time were Saunders, Gray and Jenkins. Saunders parents were Benson school teachers, father being Headmaster. They lived in the adjoining house, which was an extension of the school. Stuart Gray lived in a pleasant house along the High Street, his father being the District Health Surveyor. The third member of the band was Maurice Jenkins whose family lived at Blenheim House at the river end of Littleworth on the Oxford Road. His father had the newsagents in St. Marys Street in Wallingford. Both Saunders and Jenkins had attractive sisters who later went to the same school. Our quartet later became a quintet when we were joined by Bob Brighting who lived at Preston Crowmarsh and whose mother was the District Nurse - a large woman who rode about her duties on a bicycle with her "black bag" strapped on to a metal carrier over the rear wheel. His father was a very small man whose main interest was cycle racing. We all got on extremely well together and I recall no real conflicts during our four or five years of friendship. In school term-time combined activities were limited though we did meet every morning during summer to bathe off the coal wharf before going to school. During Henley Week we also cycled, with special dispensation to miss school games, to see the boat races on the Wednesday and Saturday. In the Winter months we sometimes cycled the seventeen miles to Reading to watch Reading Town Football Club matches, but it was the enjoyment of the ride through Goring and Streatley and Pangbourne - following the river, that gave most pleasure for we had no great interest in soccer though in due course we each played for the school first team. In school holidays we spent much of our time together and were fiercely competitive in our outdoor activities and during the long holiday competed and kept records of our performances in running, jumping, cycling, swimming, diving, tree-climbing, etc. Jenkins' had a tennis court, an orchard and fairly large area of woodland across the Oxford Road from his home and this was the base for all such activities. The river held first place and Jenkins father owned a punt which at times we were permitted to use much to our enjoyment.

The river itself demanded compliance with its own traditional standards of usage in those days before the advent of large, fast, fume and wash-producing motor cruisers. Then it ran quietly, unruffled, dignified and compelled a degree of decorum; at others it became powerful, spacious, turbulent, fearsome as it hurried in a frenzy of swirling eddies towards the weir to tumble over in a mass of foam and spray with a thunderous roar which could be heard in the village a quarter of a mile away. In all its moods it demanded to be treated with respect. Skiffs with one, two, three or occasionally four pairs of oars were propelled by white-flannelled, straw-hatted oarsmen pulling together, lightly feathering the blades over the surface of the water and displaying skill and pride in their achievement. Punts were poled by the competent in a lazy, graceful slow motion where the water depth and shingle river bed permitted. We soon learned that our continued enjoyment of it depended on conforming to the required standards of behaviour and river courtesies. In so small a village our parents would soon have learned of any lapse on our part with no doubt restrictions for what was considered an appropriate

period on our use of the boats available to us. It became a matter of pride that each acquired competence in handling the river boats.

Mr Haines at the wharf had skiffs, punts and a canoe for hire and was most generous in his calculation of time and charge. The limitation with the canoe was that it could only take two at a time so we had to take turns to practice intricate manoeuvres with the dexterity of American Indians. The Salters steamers created diversions for the wash they created caused exciting movements of the boat as a change to the normal smooth surface and slow-running flow. Likewise it also gave a slight variation to our swimming sessions so that the steamers' time tables were an essential consideration in planning our daily activities. We preferred the standard river punt rather than the less common narrower racing punt or a rowing skiff. A punt was stable and allowed up to six if necessary to move around freely without rocking the boat unduly. On the good punting reach downstream from Wallingford we could pile the cushions, personal gear and the essential containers of food and drink which our healthy appetites continually demanded, into the middle of the boat leaving a narrow but clear passageway either side. This enabled the two best punters to drop a pole at one end of the boat and keep it on the shingle river bottom while running the full length of the well. With others paddling at the fore and after ends we could work up a considerable turn of speed and out-distance most other craft than a racing eight. We were never reprimanded for this activity, irregular and a little boisterous as it appeared to the usual more sedate and less active river users for we regarded it as a serious boating achievement. It certainly gave us pleasure and some satisfaction when working in unison as a well-drilled crew we maintained good speed and a straight course. At all times on the river we found we were accepted providing we made little noise and extended the proper courtesies.

For our longer excursions over several days we converted the punt for camping by adding iron hoops to support a long canvas fitted cover which by day was rolled and secured centrally overhead to the iron frames. This did deny poling to the more staid paddling but the pleasures of camping far outweighed this slight restriction and we had other ways of working off boyish energy. By now we were able to extend "our" stretch of the river to Abingdon upstream and Pangbourne downstream. We had many favourite camping sites where there were good tree branches to moor to and where we could light a fire for cooking. While we never fished even to augment the food supply, we did explore most of the privately owned backwaters. There were occasional excursions away from the river in addition to the frequent visits to nearby village grocery shops and bakeries to replenish food supplies. A favourite was the steep climb up the Wittenham Clumps - an iron-age hilltop fort on the Sinodun Hills - not made through any interest in archaeology but for the sheer enjoyment of the hard climb up and the exhilarating race down. The visits to Dorchester Abbey, of much historical and architectural interest to me later, were combined not only with the purchase of food in this delightful village, but more importantly, with the difficulties in negotiating the winding and narrow tributary of the River Thames for several miles and the constant effort to pick our way through the dense overhead branches and foliage of willow. All this turned us into intrepid explorers of an unknown river through dense jungle, the occasional glimpses of cattle, sheep and horses grazing contentedly in the adjacent meadows becoming in our lively, imaginative make-believe, dangerous wild animals.

We ate well and heartily, each taking a turn to cook. Swans would offer to join us for meals, though sometimes became a nuisance as their long necks reached out and a large yellow bill grabbed food from our improvised table. This was our own fault for we liked to throw food to attract fish - not to catch but just to observe. At nights we were disturbed when water rats ran over the canvas boat cover and swimming snakes occasionally attracted attention by day. These diversions formed part of our interest and enjoyment of the river and its environment.

Another favourite excursion was to walk over the meadows at Moulsoford near the fine red-brick bridge built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel to carry the Great Western Railway over the river. While the bridge was worthy of admiration it was the great steam locomotives hauling their line of cream and brown livened carriages at speed that we came to see, the long name boards telling us their destinations, Falmouth, Truro, Plymouth, Torquay, Exeter, to us all foreign places.

There were seasonal activities such as birds nesting in early spring though I was not greatly interested in collecting eggs I got much pleasure from the challenge of reaching nests high up in trees difficult to climb. I was about the best tree climber and once for a dare, tackled one of the tall horse-chestnuts in the grounds of The White Hart Hotel to bring down an egg from a crow's nest on a slender topmost bough. The only way to carry the egg was in my mouth and I could have given no thought to the

possibility of it breaking to allow a partly formed crow to escape its enclosing shell. We also liked to pit our wits against the peewits, lapwings or plovers. These nested in the lush spring growth of the water meadows. Alarmed by our presence the birds would fly from their nests and settle a short distance away in attempts to mislead us. We did not want their eggs and I don't remember any of us taking them home to eat but it was not unusual for some villagers to collect them for the table. Winter holidays were the time for cross country running, mostly in the area of the river, also a variation of tree climbing. A small brook ran under The White Rails on the Shillingford Road and emptied itself in the Thames about a quarter of a mile away. It was flanked either side by willow trees which had not been pollarded for many years so had a strong growth of long, sturdy branches from the crown of the trunk some eight feet above the shallow fast running stream. The brook was about eight feet wide and our game was to climb the first tree by the road and make our way to the river by criss-crossing the stream on the willow branches. I do not recall we ever damaged the trees by doing this. The small group of us which spent so much of our time together on this beautiful part of the Thames Valley had a real love for it. It was our own piece of England, made to seem so by the rare sight of other people for we mostly had it to ourselves so we had a protective interest in it.

I was fortunate that my fathers' work took him to many of the larger houses in the district and often to nearby village churches where he carried out building repairs and decorations. I was sometimes taken by him so that together with my change of school I became increasingly aware of the world beyond our own village. By seeing inside the homes of more affluent people I learned there was a different style of living to that in which I was growing up. One house had special significance though I do not now recall much of its interior or its family occupants. The house is still standing unchanged from those boyhood days. This was Greenhayes at Preston Crowmarsh. A family called Neal lived there during the summer months, bringing their domestic staff with them from their home in Kensington in London including one who was to become my mother. It was there that my parents met. I have little doubt that the red silk-lined bowler hat and the Eton jacket worn on Sundays when I was about ten years old, of which I was so proud despite the amount of teasing I received from other boys, were hand-me-downs from a young Master Neal.

A special lasting memory is of going to a large red brick Georgian house called Gould's Grove at the top of Beggarbush Hill on the Henley Road where father was carrying out work. To my lasting sorrow I did not even see, let alone speak to its then occupant Mr. Jerome K Jerome who wrote the evergreen book "Three Men in a Boat", a story set in "our" stretch of the River Thames. The house was about three miles from the river and I remember little of it except for a very large clock and a bell high up on an outside wall. The bell had a long dangling chain ending in a short length of rope and used possibly as a fire warning or for telling outside staff when to knock off work. When we camped on the river we liked to think we were emulating the adventures of the author and his friends, George and Harris. We were far more practical boatmen than they and not tempted to carry a canine passenger like Montmorency. We speculated on the author's middle initial 'K' and found it to be 'Kiapta' which was a unusual Christian name. On his death Jerome K Jerome was buried in the churchyard of our neighbouring village Ewelme

In the larger houses I did enter I was always impressed by the beautiful furniture, curtains, carpets, pictures, objects and ornaments many of which must have been brought back from foreign lands. All in such contrast to most of the village homes. My father was discerning in artistic matters and over the years purchased at local auction sales a considerable collection of excellent glassware, china and pewter which he displayed in our home in glass-fronted cabinets he made. It was not unusual for his advice to be sought by his clients in the preparation of schemes for decoration, furnishings and interior design. Many of the walls in our home were decorated with his murals of country scenes and gardens which I feel would now be described as Primitive Art but it was pleasant to the eye.

Oxford which was twelve miles away came more and more into our lives as we grew up. At first a visit there was a special event when mother would take us on our bicycles. There was a bus service between Wallingford, Benson and Oxford but I do not remember ever having travelled on it. The bus was a single decker, words in small white lettering on a red background said "speed limit twelve miles per hour" were painted on one side. The wheels had solid rubber tyres so twelve was perhaps a safe and comfortable speed along the very narrow road which nowadays would be classed as a country lane. Mother was good company on these trips for she always gave attention to the things we found of interest and had endless patience. We stopped often in our slow progress, perhaps to watch a steamer

or the barges where the road was near the river just beyond Shillingford, or to see a steam engine driving a threshing machine or men cutting down trees. Sometimes only a brief stop out of curiosity to see patients walking or working in the grounds of the Mental Hospital at Littlemore. We called it The Asylum and after a very quick look were bidden to “come along because it is rude to stare at those people”

Our longest stop was often at the entrance to Nuneham Park as we entered Nuneham Courtenay. We propped our machines and gazed expectantly through the bars of the large ornate wrought iron gates. Within was an acre or so of greensward surrounded by a dense backdrop of trees and shrubs broken only by the tunnel-like entrance of a narrow gravelled driveway leading to we decided, a mysterious and unseen foreign land beyond. Usually we were rewarded as we peered with excitement and fascination at the dozen or more peafowl, the hens wandering quietly picking and pecking at anything they thought edible while the cocks strutted restively and noisily, dragging their long tail feathers. They soon realised they had a human audience and raise and expand their tail feathers into huge fans, the lustrous blue of the feathers adorned with yellow-eyed spots. They paraded ostentatiously before us, ignoring the while the peahens to whom they should have been directing their amorous attentions. As they tired of their abortive but no doubt self-satisfying displays, the fans would slowly fold and the long feathers vibrate and shimmer as they returned once again to a long gown-like train behind them. The beauty of the fans and the shining blue breasts were some justification for their proud but pompous exhibitionism when they were being so completely ignored and denied their natural desires by their own hens. While a visual delight, their raucous, shrill, piercing cries made them less attractive aurally.

Having reached Oxford and crossed the River Cherwell by Magdalen Bridge first stop was Christ Church Meadow for the eagerly awaited picnic and if time allowed to cross the Meadow to the Thames to see the ornate college barges. It was a bonus if rowing eights were out training. The Botanic Gardens had an attraction for mother but brought sighs of impatience from her offspring. My later visits to Oxford brought me many new experiences. First attendance to watch rugby football - University against Harlequins; a first sight of an Australian touring cricket team; first Shakespeare play in a theatre which was given by the Ben Greet Shakespeare Company; athletics on the Iffley ground. Then school cricket and hockey matches against schools and colleges at various locations. Sometimes I and friends would go to Oxford during “Rag” week and on one occasion soon after the opening of the Tutankhamun tomb in Egypt by Howard Carter, the Undergrads had dressed up the outside of a gentlemen’s public lavatory to look like the entrance to a tomb. Not all of their pranks during Rag week were so acceptable for I once saw a battle between two sides with dead rats as the ammunition.

My school life at Wallingford became increasingly concentrated on sport. I played football and got a place in the first eleven, with no great skill or love for the game, could kick well with either foot and played left back or outside left. My best game as a player was hockey, again usually playing left wing. The school had a high reputation and played to a high standard, often against club teams from distant towns. Athletics also appealed to me though I was but a mediocre performer despite my serious training in high and long jumping as well as half and one mile running. I cannot remember ever having been placed. It was cricket that gave me most pleasure despite my lack of any outstanding ability. It certainly played a major role during my years at W.G.S.

My first bat must have been acquired by father at an auction sale in the distant past for it was old-fashioned and more suitable for a large, strong, tall man than a shortish small boy for it was unusually long in both blade and handle. The face of the blade was rounded and it seemed very narrow, whether because of its length or my inability to use it successfully. The lovely rich brown colour made it attractive to look at and in the present day I see such bats in the display cabinets in the Long Room at Lords. It was a special day when father took me to the sports shop at Wallingford to buy a new bat and much time and care was given to the selection of such an important item to ensure its suitability for my size. Despite this new bat and all the care I took of it I was still unable to make many runs but could defend my wicket for an appreciable length of time. It became my most treasured possession. Other exciting items were my first flannels and cricket boots. I had admired father’s white doeskin boots from an early age but sensibly I was given boots with stout white canvas uppers. With such accoutrements I thought I was well on the way to becoming a cricketer and no doubt had high hopes in that direction. My hopes, enthusiasm and serious attention to practice and physical fitness never took

me to great heights, but did give much pleasure. Never able to bowl or throw well I reacted quickly enough to field close, in. With the bat I became a stone-waller. I was eventually vice-Captain and then Captain of the second eleven and sometimes got a place in the first eleven and either opened our innings with instructions to “stay there” or sent in last to “have a go”. My real success was as wicket keeper which I did reasonably well and took pride in ensuring that matches were not lost by the extras I let by. Our coaching was by no means as expert as it would be today though it was most disciplined. Repeated failure to carry out correct stance and strokes or other failures would lead to appropriate punishments. One was to spend a certain length of time pulling the big roller. While it did have shafts for a horse, never did I see a horse pull it, nor do I know how many boys equalled one horse power. There seemed to be no shortage of transgressors. (There is a well-preserved roller of the same vintage preserved in the Coronation Garden at Lord’s Cricket Ground in London.) Some boys would practice to attain a degree of skill in copying the style of play of their own cricket heroes. I well remember how Saunders copied so successfully the wristy glance past square leg played so notably by Ranjitsinghi in earlier days. We all had our own special favourites amongst the County players though our opportunities for actually seeing them were limited. I was rather more fortunate than most of my friends for I had such an enthusiastic cricketer-father.

During the war the normal County fixture list games had been curtailed and the summer of 1919 saw the return of County cricket. In that year father took me to see one days’ play of the Champion County versus The Rest at the Kennington Oval in London. I was twelve years old and even with the help of Wisden I recall little of it except for a clear recollection of my then cricket hero Wilfred Rhodes, so my attendance must have been on the second day of the match as I can still picture him bowling and fielding. He had started his career with Yorkshire as a bowler going in last man in the batting order. In time he became equally skilled as a batsman and even opened for England with Jack Hobbs in Test matches against Australia. In this match in 1919 he had little success with the ball and made only 19 and 25 with the bat. This was the first Champion County against The Rest match following the Great War of 1914 - 18 and there were some formidable players in it. Percy Holmes and Herbert Sutcliffe opened for Yorkshire followed by such fine players as Roy Kilner and George Hirst. The Rest of England included Jack Hobbs of Surrey who scored 101, Philip Mead of Hampshire, Patsy Hendren of Middlesex, H H Spooner, Frank Wooley who made 164 and J.W.H.T. (John won’t Hit Today) Douglas. How I wish I could now recall in detail that match with so much cricketing talent who were also playing their part in helping the country to return to normality after four years of war. No doubt I was taken to Champion County games in 1920 and 1921 when in both years Middlesex played the Rest of England. Now a current member of Middlesex County Cricket Club and of that well-known Club which in those days selected the Rest of England team) I should be ashamed to admit I have no recollection of those two games.

In May 1921 with school friends I cycled to Oxford to see the Australian tourists against the University on The Parks for the second day of a two-day match. University batted first and made 180, A.A.Mailey the googly bowler taking five wickets. Australia replied with 294, most of the team scoring runs. Oxford in their second innings made 174 with D.R.Jardine the future England Captain making 96 not out. The Australians were captained by W.W Armstrong and I think of that team as composed of giants and pigmies for Armstrong - a most appropriate name - at this time late in his career was a giant of a man - gargantuan, or so he seemed to me. He still justified his place as Captain, batsman and bowler as well as agility in the field despite his size and increasing years. There was the very tall Andrews, Gregory, also very tall and a great all-rounder, Hendry known as “The Stork” and Mayne, an opening bat. Then by way of contrast and equally great cricketers, Macartney, Arthur Halley of googly renown, Oldfield the little wicket keeper and the small batsman Johnny Taylor. There were illustrious names on the University side, D.R.Jardine, Surrey, England and bodyline, G.T.S.Stevens who played for Middlesex and England and R.C. Robertson-Glasgow one of the best-known writers on cricket. I have always considered myself fortunate to have seen so many of the great men of cricket in one match.

As often happens it is trivial and insignificant happenings that stay in the mind. In this match most spectators were sitting or standing on the grass around the playing area. A dog, long legged and short haired, lightly built, white and of no determinable ancestry was wandering around sniffing as dogs do. Having sniffed a desirable location to cock its leg it did so and proceeded to discharge with an unusual volume and no doubt relief and satisfaction. Now in this year of 1921 it was fashionable for many young men to affect trousers known as “Oxford Bags” which had trouser legs each looking like a long

skirt. The dogs' chosen spot was the bagged leg of a nearby male spectator. With such voluminous folds of trouser material the poor wearer was quite unaware of the canine cascade seeping into his trousers. Had I or the other observant bystanders acted in a gentlemanly manner, the dog would have been shooed off. Not only did we not act as gentlemen at a cricket match should, we actually watched expectantly with amusement though disappointed that the dog completed its flow and departed with the recipient still unaware of his urenic baptism. Why does one remember such trivialities?

My next attendance at first class cricket was in 1922 at Kennington Oval when Yorkshire were Champion County and this was the last time I saw the subject of my boyish hero worship. Rhodes made 19 and then 96 in the second innings when he was bowled by the legendary P.G.H.Fender, Captain of Surrey before and for many years after the war. It was a good match for Rhodes who also took 4 wickets for 61 runs. The Yorkshire team was almost the same as in 1919 but now included a most prolific batsman Maurice Leyland who played in 41 test matches for England. The Rest for this match included Jack Hobbs who opened the innings with a century and then lost his wicket without further score, one of the two Tyldesley brothers, Frank Wooley, Patsy Hendren, A.E.W.Carr who was Captain and A.E.R.Gilligan, one of three cricketing brothers who, each made names in first class cricket. I am glad to say I do remember much of this game and its distinguished players.

I played little cricket after I left school at Wallingford for soon afterwards I went to New Zealand where I played from time-to-time on a picturesque ground at the estuary of the Urenui River in North Taranaki. The cricket was certainly not to a very high standard but was very enjoyable for cricket days in such a remote place were family occasions. During and after the 1939-45 war I played for H.M.S. Vernon at Portsmouth until ill-health put an end to my playing days and I had to be content with the less strenuous role of umpire. The Vernon matches are memorable, not for the quality of the cricket even if we and our opponents sometimes fielded University Blues and County cricketers. Our contests started on the arrival of the visiting team when true Naval hospitality was extended to the members in full measure, while ones' own alcoholic intake was by various stratagems kept to minimal proportions consistent to being good hosts. None-the-less this did have for me as wicket keeper certain dangers for there was little recovery time after our enjoyable if not entirely artless provision of hospitality. The hazards I faced were not so great if we batted first for I was low down on the batting order, but if fielding first the danger was considerable, though lessened if my lunch time intake of alcohol had been kept strictly minimal. Regrettably there were occasions when it would appear to me that more than one figure was running up to bowl, numerous arms flailing, half that number of balls being hurled at me and several batsmen and bats in my close view. From the slow bowlers I faced the danger of a swinging bat as I stood up to the stumps. I must have doubted often on the wisdom of our pre-match "gamesmanship". Strangely I never got hurt in these games even when as visitors ourselves the same tactics were adopted by our hosts. Perhaps it was just retribution that in an evening match at Gosport with no pre-match entertainment I sustained injury when I failed to sight the second delivery of the game and took the ball full on my mouth, splitting the lower lip so that it hung in two horrible bloody ribbons. Discarding gloves and pads I went in search of medical help and found an elderly Senior Medical Officer pruning roses in the wardroom garden. "Come to the Sick Bay my boy, I must stitch it together". After cleaning up the by now horribly swollen, bruised and meaty-looking mouth he told me in a stern voice of command "I cannot give an anaesthetic so clench your fists and keep still" and proceeded to do an expert sewing job within and without as if he had had much experience of mending mouths after impact by cricket balls. It was several weeks before I could eat and drink in a normal manner and meanwhile was banished from the dining room to a small nearby guest room where with my head held well back I could ingest food by dropping it into the gory-looking aperture and suck liquids through a rubber tube. The method was indelicate to say the least and I am sure my fellow Officers would have found it a revolting accompaniment to their meals had I not been warned off.

My playing days are now long past and I am one of the "oldies" who "watch" cricket during sunny and enjoyable days at Lord's. The proximity to a bar and the quality of the wine influence the amount of cricket I actually see for these have a soporific effect which causes me to dose peacefully until awakened to awareness by applause by more alert spectators. Having in this way missed some of the highlights I can watch the evening television screen to catch up with the main events. How horrified some of the keen spectators must feel to see me enjoy cricket in this civilised, somnolent and indulgent manner. When I look up at the weather vane above the Grandstand, Father Time seems to be nodding his approval. Not once have I seen him make a gesture of disapprobation with his long-bladed scythe. Cricket still draws its young hero worshippers, excitedly obtaining autographs from the top players

and keeping scores in their own printed scorebook. The sight of these young enthusiasts adds greatly to my enjoyment and cancels out to some extent the aural discomfort of the mindless football-type chanting which has encroached in recent times.

After these diversions I must go back in years to Wallingford where with so many activities I was leading a full and gratifying life. At least it was gratifying to me if not to the staff from whom I was expected to absorb their teaching. On more than one occasion the Headmaster and others remonstrated with me for my lack of serious application to scholarship. I did however apply myself to developing my interest in music and its performance but this was not a school subject.

My music teacher was now Mr Nash who lived in one of a long terrace of small houses at Winterbrook on the outskirts of Wallingford. He must have been in his early fifties, was fairly tall and well-proportioned with iron-grey hair and moustache, both of which were plentiful, well-trimmed and neatly kept. When first I saw him it seemed the large square head with the iron-grey hair gave him a sparten, stern appearance, but that was not so for he was quietly spoken with a pleasing voice and gentle manner. His complexion was sallow which no doubt came of spending long hours indoors; he would have been quite out of his element when he ventured outside, if he ever did. His dress was sombre and in keeping with the room in which he worked. The dark velvet jacket had long since seen its best days and the brocade waistcoat was so faded and worn that little was left of any original colours. He always wore an old-fashioned starched wing collar with a faded, large knotted tie which too had lost all its colours so that it had a drab appearance.

Lessons took place in "the front room" beyond which was a kitchen-cum-sitting room which he referred to as "the parlour" and was the abode of his elderly spinster sister who kept house for him. Entering the narrow dark hallway the first door on the right was the "front room" while the door ahead was into the "parlour", the passageway was gloomy with no natural light and was uninviting, almost repelling with its lack of fresh air as well as light. The front room was small and equally uninviting to say the least, not only in deep gloom, it gave the impression that it had never had any fresh air, it felt oppressive and stale. The ceiling was low, there was one small window looking out on to the Reading Road but it could not distract pupils for it was heavily curtained with dark material, the curtain pole not extending far enough each side of the window to enable the curtains to be fully drawn back. Dark nondescript wallpaper covered the walls though little of it could be seen for the vast amount of bric-a-brac lodged or hung on every possible resting place. The furniture was inevitably sparse in such a small room but what there was was of dark mahogany with threadbare upholstery. The focal point was the piano, upright, dated and with an elaborate fretted front above the keyboard backed by pleated green material. I do not remember if the legs were covered with material though it would have been in keeping if they were. The whole room gave an air of extreme Victorian genteel poverty. It says much for Mr Nash's ability as a teacher that any pupil, no matter how keen to learn, could do so in such forbidding stygian gloom. While I did not find it claustrophobic there was something sepulchral about the room as if it still contained a lingering presence of long-dead, sallow-faced music teachers.

I was aware of this strange atmosphere as I first entered the room and more so as I was occasionally left alone in it while Mr Nash was called to the door. It was then that I had time to study it and so implant such strong recollections in my mind. It in no way disconcerted me while the lesson was in progress for my teacher was able to absorb my attention completely in the music and the use of the instrument. He had endless patience and was of even temperament and I do not recall him ever being cross or short no matter how badly I failed to do his bidding and produce the correct sounds. When notes were out of tune he made me whistle or sing the sequence saying "if you can sing in tune you must be able to play in tune". Often during lessons he would take sips of some liquid from an opaque glass so that I could never see its colour or hazard a guess as to what it was. I did not have the courage to make closer examination or taste it when he left me alone for a few minutes.

Miss Nash was small, elderly and wizened. Arriving too early or before Mr Nash was free to take me, I was invited into the parlour and given a biscuit or cake while Miss Nash plied me with questions about school, home, family, etc. for she so obviously wanted someone to talk with. Her parlour had some of the atmosphere of the front room though I did not get the same uncomfortable feeling when entering it.

Occasionally both would talk to me after my lesson, but I now only recall one subject which for some reason was especial in their memories for the story was told many times. In the days of the wave of

emigration to The United States of America ancestors of theirs set out with their family to seek a fortune in the New World. During the long voyage another child was born to them and named after the ship that carried them and the ocean on which it sailed. The poor child lived its life with the names "Europa Atlantic". At the time of first hearing the story I thought it an unkind thing to do and speculated on by what shortened version the child was known from day-to-day. I do not remember if it was a boy or girl but decided that whichever it was it would inevitably be "Ropey".

My sisters were also taught by Mr Nash and they too were regaled with biscuits or cake by his small wizened little sister. Like her hair, all else in her parlour seemed grey. A grey shawl was always around her shoulders over an old-fashioned high-neck dress turned grey with age. The curtains and furnishings such as they were, were faded and drab and but little light came through the small window giving a grey half-light to the cooking-smelly atmosphere, but all these did nothing to lessen the warmth with which her brothers' pupils were welcomed into her small world. She was most kind and Ruby Cook remembered when, having torn her coat on the garden railings as she went along the garden path to the front door, Miss Nash seeing her distress made good repairs despite her badly deformed arthritic hands. She was a dear, lonely, person and they were a devoted couple. It was often with a feeling of sadness that I came away after my lessons for they seemed so wear and their home so dreary - in such contrast to my own. I have remained grateful to Mr Nash, not only for teaching me the rudiments of music and to play a violin with moderate skill, but for implanting in me a love of music which has played so important a part in my life.

These were self-indulgent, agreeable years with as yet no realisation that one day they would end. Each day was looked forward to with enthusiasm for whatever it would bring. My father gave me a lightweight racing bicycle so I was then able to go much further afield and with the freedom of not having to be accompanied, for while I enjoyed the companionship of parents, brother, sisters and school friends, increasingly periods of solitude, especially when spent in the open air, brought relaxation and tranquillity.

By now my brother was living in Warwick and I often cycled the forty miles there, setting out at dawn. I would enter Oxford as the city was coming to life, the streets still almost deserted with bicycles of Undergraduates propped in their numbers against walls adjacent to College gates. Almost the first signs of life were the dark-clothed college scouts hastening silently along pavements under high walls as I passed Magdalen, turned right to leave The High, curving round into The Broad. Then just outside the main gate into Balliol, the brightly worn metal cross set into the road surface told me the spot where the Bishops Latimer, Cranmer and Ridley were burnt at the stake in the year 1555, then right again into St. Giles, past the Martyrs' Memorial with memories of the annual St. Giles fair, to the Woodstock Road. Sometimes after crossing Magdalen Bridge I would turn left instead of right to pass Merton, Corpus Christi and Oriel into St. Aldgate. If I had timed my journey correctly I would hear the deep, sonorous, mellifluous boom of Great Tom in its tower over Cardinal Wolsey's gateway striking the hour of 6 a.m. In later years I frequently heard Great Tom boom out its one hundred nightly calls as it had done since medieval times when that was the number of students being summoned back to college each evening at 9 p.m. Then along Cornmarket, past the Saxon Tower of St. Michael's church and so back to my route to Woodstock and Warwick. Often on those early morning rides I would have the streets of Oxford almost to myself.

Visits in earlier years with mother and sisters had introduced me to Wolsey's famous kitchen at Christ Church and to the annual fair in St. Giles. During the war we had been taken to visit a wounded soldier in a temporary hospital in part of University College. Leaving our bicycles by the entrance we mounted a wide stairway into a large hall with rows of beds. We had never before been in so grand a building or into a hospital and were reduced to overawed silence which was unusual for the young Wests' who were rarely silent except in church or on those days or evenings when we would be silenced with "your father is doing his books". We thought he was very clever when he would suddenly change holding his pen from one hand to the other, for he was ambidextrous.

During the Second World War I was fortunate enough to twice be invited to attend month-long residential courses at Balliol. The courses were for personnel from overseas and a few British from the three services were invited to act as hosts. To be in Oxford at all was enjoyable, but to stay there and to have a room looking out on to the Martyrs' Memorial and the second time on to the church of St. Mary Magdalene gave me the greatest pleasure.

Now to resume my journey. Approaching Woodstock a brief reminder of history lessons as I passed the entrance to Blenheim Palace presented to the victor of the battle of Waterloo by a grateful nation. On to the pretty town of Banbury with a stop to buy a Banbury cake or more likely several after my dawn start, a glance at the Cross with perhaps the thought why “a cockhorse to Banbury Cross” and then on the long village-less stretch over lovely undulating country to Warwick. I made this journey many times, always finding something new to see.

Warwick did much to stimulate my interest in medieval architecture. The castle was the first I had ever visited, nor had I before seen so fine a parish church as St. Mary's with its 12th century crypt and the superb Gothic Beauchamp Chapel with such beautiful traceried fan vaulting. These and the Chapel of St. James over the West Gate, built in 1123 and other early buildings prompted me to take special interest in ecclesiastical architecture which has since given me lifelong pleasure. I cycled over much of the Shakespeare country, dismounting to walk through the villages to admire the timbered buildings and to visit the churches, in no way claiming to be studiously concerned with the works of Shakespeare. I quite enjoyed our school studies of the plays and sonnets and like some of my friends would visit “the Ref” and turn to well-thumbed pages in the collected works to dwell on those lines our teachers must have considered unsuitable for discussion in class by such young and undefiled minds as ours. Another and more satisfying reason to visit “the Ref” was to surreptitiously view the pages in a large volume of classical paintings and drawings, the most studied being Jacques-Louis David's picture of “Les Sabines” which we perhaps wrongly preferred to call “The Rape of the Sabine Women”. To our young groping minds we thought we were being naughty while actually we were beginning to experience signs of adolescence.

There were many opportunities to attend performances of the plays, usually when these were presented in Oxford. At that time the actor-manager Ben Greet was promoting the interest of school children in the works of Shakespeare through his theatrical touring companies for which work he was later knighted. He lived in our neighbouring village of Warborough about two miles from Benson and is commemorated there by The Ben Greet Memorial Barn Theatre. Not long after leaving school I saw a Ben Greet presentation of Julius Caesar in Guildford in Surrey near where I lived for a short time. The performance was well produced and acted and attended by a large appreciative audience. The play proceeded normally up to almost the end of the Ghost scene. The stage was dimly lighted with a misty greyness which provided the ghostly atmosphere. The audience was hushed and tense during the short discourse between Brutus and the Ghost. The Ghost spoke his last line “Ay, at Phillippi” and began his exit across the stage with Brutus replying “Why, I will see thee at Phillippi” when catastrophe occurred. One of the large scenery flats, about eight feet high and four feet wide at the back of the stage fell forward and landed flat on the stage with a resounding crack almost like the sound of a gun being fired. It narrowly missed Brutus and Lucius, leaving what at first looked like a large black cave behind them. In the cave entrance was a vague shadowy outline of a human form above which were two white arms as if from a dismembered body suspended in the air. As my eyes became adjusted I saw the human form was that of a kneeling stage hand, his white-shirted arms raised above his head as though still supporting the fallen flat. He seemed to be transfixed in this position and unaware of what had happened. I have but a cloudy memory of what followed but recall the stunned silence of the audience and the stage curtains hastily drawn. It was fortunate that the incident occurred almost at the end of the play, for the rest of the performance was quite ruined.

I recall another incident in a theatre (apart from proposing to my wife during a performance of “The Man who came to Dinner” with Robert Morley at the Savoy Theatre in London way back in the forties) it has nothing to do with my life in Benson or Shakespeare and still amuses me. It happened long ago when I was a member of an audience at the old Kings Theatre in Plymouth. The play was White Horse Inn and if I were to describe the performance kindly I would say the players appeared to be doing their best to act, while the audience did its best to show some appreciation of their efforts. In due course of the play the scene came when the Royal entourage crossed a lake in a steamer to go ashore at the landing stage at St. Wolfgang. The highly decorated steamer with its gaily clad passengers slowly began to emerge from the prompt side wing. With only about a quarter of its length on stage the boat came to a halt, refusing to continue its voyage. After what seemed a long delay it was hauled back out of sight. A few moments later it reappeared and this time the whole forepart up to the bridge arrived on stage before again the hauling mechanism jammed and after a while, with hoots of laughter from the audience, was again pulled back into the wings. Then once more the boat appeared slowly on to the stage. The audience now silent and waiting expectantly, the theatre strangely quiet as

the make-believe boat gradually continued its slow voyage to the landing place. The actors on the boat did their best to seem at ease as if the two previous attempts had not happened. The “boat” was about to fetch up successfully at the appointed place, the audience still hushed when I quite involuntarily let out a very loud “hooray”. Suddenly there were roars of laughter, clapping and cheering, the most tumultuous welcome on stage the actors could ever have received. From then on players and audience seemed to have reached an amicable and appreciative rapport. It is high time I ceased these wandering thoughts of later years and once more returned to those peaceful, carefree Benson days.

One other frequent cycle journey of about twenty-four miles again took me through Oxford to just beyond Woodstock where I turned westwards for a few miles to the pleasant, small, Cotswold stone-built township of Charlbury. Some neighbours from Benson had gone to live there whose daughter was my own age and had long been a friend. I must have been a devoted one to consider the journey more than just an excuse for a cycle ride in the country. Usually I stayed in their home for several days on such visits and was made most welcome. Their daughter and I spent much of our time during the summer visits on the banks of the prettily named and picturesque tributary of the river Thames, The Evenlode. Here the slow-running stream was little more than twenty feet wide, running through green fields, the grazing cattle, trees, hedges and wild flowers making it a truly pastoral scene. We would lay idly on the grassy bank enjoying the isolation for we rarely saw other people, the only sounds the bird songs or flapping wings and cluck-clucking of head bobbing moorhens. With the blue skies and warm sun of summer we felt quiet contentment in each others’ company, inconsequential chatter and smoking an occasional cigarette which made us feel slightly daring. But this was to change, for me at least. Until now I had regarded girls as only sisters or playmates when no other boys were around, they were only different because they had long hair tied with bows of coloured ribbons and wore dresses they were always being forbidden to get dirty. It was here on this quiet, isolated river bank that came my first awareness a girl could bring new feelings within me. Having grown up with three sisters I was fully aware of the physical differences between boys and girls, despite certain rules even when we were very small about keeping “the private parts” of our bodies covered. But now I began to have strange emotional feelings and arousals previously unknown which were very exciting and pleasurable. I was at first unsure of the meaning of this new sensory knowledge for I had been given no indication by my parents that such a development would in due course take place. I did now realise I was growing up and found its effect on my body very agreeable. The visits to the river bank with my now more attractive companion brought an awareness of her difference to me as I sought to analyse, understand and enjoyably accept this sensual advance to adolescence. These things were secret to me alone and could not be mentioned to my fair enlightener, but it was not long afterwards that I knew my three closest school friends had made similar discoveries and discussions took place on our prowess, not without a certain amount of boasting and no doubt, exaggeration on our attainments.

Now I must go back in time to much younger days. I was taken to stay with my maternal grandparents in London. It must have been just before the commencement of the First World War as my brother was still living there so I was about seven years old. I vaguely remember occasional horse-drawn omnibuses with curved outside rear stairs to upper seats open to the weather, but almost all were now motor driven though the bodies appeared unchanged. I returned home eventually with a large collection of the many-coloured bus tickets which conductors carried on a small board with the bundles of tickets held on by springs like those of a mousetrap. Grandma and Granddad Nash lived in a short cul-de-sac off Lillie Road, near West Brompton Railway Station. It was my delight to stand for hours on the pavement to watch a different world go by. Coal carts from a nearby depot laden with big black sacks of coal displaying near the driver’s seat a notice “four shillings and sixpence per hundred-weight”. The cart would be halted nearby while an extra horse was attached to help pull the load up the steep incline of the humpback bridge carrying the Lillie Road over the District Railway line. At the top of the bridge the horses were halted again for the extra horse to be unhitched and an iron shoe be placed under a rear wheel to act as a brake as it went down the equally steep incline the other side. The horse would return to near where I stood to await the next load. Sometimes returning empty coal or other carts would come down the slope without a brake shoe or other form of brake so that the horse would have to lay back on the harness breeching piece. If the road surface was wet or greasy the horses would have great difficulty to keep upright as their iron-shod hooves sought to get a grip. I never tired of this entertainment, to see the horse-drawn carts of all descriptions, the red motor buses and more motor cars than I had ever seen before and so many people, particularly when workers were

entering or leaving the adjacent exhibition grounds and when they all rushed out together at the end of work. It was all a never-ending source of interest and delight to a young country bumpkin.

My brother who had lived with Grandma Nash since I was born was a stranger to me and did not understand or appreciate my interest in all these strange novelties. He was made to accompany me though at first with ill concealed impatience, for it was all so commonplace to him. I think my visits were intended by my parents to bring us together and in due course a normal brotherly relationship grew between us. Just over the railway bridge was the large West Brompton Cemetery to which we were taken for walks. I liked this far more than going shopping with Grandmother in the street market in North End Road. It too was a new and novel experience, but not an appealing one for with so many jostling people I could see little of the stalls and merchandise or what was going on, nor did I understand much of the cockneyish sales talk of the vendors. It was a strange, garrulous, noisy and disconcerting way of shopping compared to the unruffled, slow, gossipy transactions in Mr Woods' grocery shop in Benson.

The walks in the Cemetery were looked forward to and provided much that was new to gain my attention. The main entrance gateway was just wide enough for a horse-drawn hearse and its attendant carriages to pass through and was dwarfed by the massive crescent of its adjoining high, round columns and heavy lintels. Such an imposing entrance made me feel it was the way in to a very important place which of course it was for those entering it to take up permanent residence. Immediately within one looked along the main avenue with at its remote end in the far distance, a large, domed chapel. The avenue looked as if it cut through the dense sea of tall memorial tombstones, crosses, columns and monuments of great variety, placed so closely together that it was difficult to walk between them once off the avenue. Further back the graves and their memorials were less dense, nor generally so ornate and imposing. Many were of original and unusual design and artistry, some were even bizarre. Most intriguing and of interest were the family mausoleums and tombs, much to a standard size overall and again with originality in style, ornamentation and a few of unadorned simplicity. Our favourite was a miniature chapel of ornamented stonework in the Gothic style of architecture, its unglazed windows and doorway allowed us to look inside though disappointingly enough there was nothing to see but a sheet of rusty iron forming the floor. It was a charming memorial, giving the feeling of joyousness and delight as if it was a child's play church.

Near the end of the main avenue were the four huge stone-built quadrants of the catacombs and we would stand and look with awe at the sloping entrances, talking in whispers as we discussed rather morbidly what it must be like inside with all those dead people. We could not understand why we were allowed to walk up the steps and along the colonnades above where so many dead people were buried when elsewhere we had to be careful not to tread on a grave or tombstone. Nor did we know why, when walking along the colonnades we were made to talk in subdued voices but had no restriction when in other parts of the cemetery, though we always had to be careful not run about or call out to each other for fear of the threat to be taken home. Sometimes we would watch a grave digger or stand still and raise our caps as a funeral cortege went by. It was not the funereal elements, but the avenue of trees, the well-kept grass, the flowers and birds that made me look forward to these visits. I was used to these, they were familiar and a normal part of my life. At first I did notice the faded and sad-looking flowers in makeshift vases on mounds of new earth and wreaths in various stages of decay awaiting removal by the gardeners. The odium of these was soon relegated to the back of my mind. My visits to the cemetery and to my Grandparents were usually of short duration and I remember my elation when the times came to return to my own countryside. These visits ended soon after the outbreak of the war in 1914.

My brother came to live with us at Benson shortly after and almost immediately developed a tubercular hip. After being bedridden for many months he wore a heavy leather-covered splint from hip to ankle and walked with the aid of crutches. His right boot had an iron frame to raise it about six inches off the ground so that his left leg and hip carried no weight. His dexterity and agility on the crutches was extraordinary and he was able to participate in many of our boyish activities. In due course he made a complete recovery and became a pupil at the Grammar School. This caused perpetual confusion for I was West one and my brother West three although he was older than me. In between was West two who came from Didcot and was no relation. Boys Christian names were never used at the Grammar School and rarely elsewhere and it was not until mid-1924 that I was addressed other than by my surname except within the family.

Inevitably my thoughts eventually had to turn to the future as I was nearing the end of my schooldays. I do not recall my parents ever mentioning the question of what I wished to do after leaving school. They may have expected that I would automatically join the family business though I had shown no enthusiasm or wish to do so. While I was not aware of it, they were contemplating leaving Benson to start a similar business elsewhere. I gathered much later they thought a move from our small village would be advantageous to their children though it was never discussed with us. Meanwhile my thoughts returned frequently to those two ships I had partly seen on the horizon, to the stories of foreign lands described by the missionaries, to the adventures of St. Paul and his many journeys. I was not fired with any real ambition or noble purpose, my thoughts were entirely nebulous. There had never been time or the inclination to think beyond the immediate few days ahead, nor a need to do so but now the time had come when I must do so. Eventually I broached the subject to my father and told him I wished to join the Royal Navy. My father's reaction was that he would go and talk to "The Admiral". Rear Admiral Miller came to Preston Crowmarsh after the war and married Mrs Stevenson. Father frequently carried out work at her home and I had met her many times but not the Admiral though I recall his portly figure clearly. There was an occasion; it may have been to do with the cricket club when a men only supper was held in their coach house with the Admiral as host. I do not know how I was able to attend for I could have been only about thirteen years old at the time. A long trestle table was set up through the middle of the coach house laden with food of a basic type, mostly cottage loaves, large slabs of cheese and most memorable of all, several huge ribs of beef. Never before had I seen such vast hunks of meat for little at all had been available in the war years, so the time of this event was about the winter of 1920 - 1921 for that was when meat rationing ended. I was not allowed to carve my own meat as the men were doing, but have gained much satisfaction ever since in carving whenever opportunities arose as I have in recollecting the rare redness of those coach house ribs and my continuing enjoyment of the succulence of beef cooked only to a proper British blue. I feel gratitude to the Admiral for educating me to the joy of blue beef but had no appreciation of the advice he gave my father "don't let the boy join the Royal Navy". This was about 1922 so it was understandable for at that time there was a considerable contraction of all the armed services. My next attempt was to suggest getting into the Merchant Navy as a Cadet. Once again my father said he would talk to the Admiral. The result of this second talk was equally terse but not in such civil terms. This advice was again reasonable at a time when British Merchant ships were laid up and rusting away in remote anchorages in many parts of the world. I then obtained information about becoming a musician in a Royal Marine Band. This was perhaps inspired by the World Tour made in 1920 by the then Prince of Wales aboard the battleship R.M.S. Renown when a Royal Marine Band played so great a role in the many ceremonial receptions, etc. My application form was never submitted for I appeared not to have the necessary qualifications. By this time I had left school and had moved with the family to Woking in Surrey where father started his new business. I helped him in this in the course of which I met a Director of a firm of agents in Calcutta who offered me a post there as a clerk in his business. My father again said an emphatic "NO" but with good reason. I had earlier written to The India Office for information about joining The Indian Civil Service but soon discovered my schooling, while giving me much enjoyment, did not give me - at least I did not take from it - the essential educational standards required for entry. The information sent to me included advice not to go to India for a post outside the I.C.S. I was not aware my father had seen this correspondence until I received his firm refusal and the reason he gave for it.

The lure of lands beyond the seas took me several times to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 and it was there in the New Zealand Pavilion that the opportunity to look beyond the horizon began to emerge. Assisted passages were being offered to schoolboys to go out as farm pupils. The scheme was called The Public Schools Employment Bureau and one intention was that those selected would eventually have capital available to take up land by ballot and turn it into productive farmland. I could see only two problems. Firstly I had not attended a Public School and secondly it was extremely unlikely there would ever be a capital sum of money available to me.

Undaunted by these possible setbacks I collected much information about New Zealand, together with a form of application and returned home wondering how to win the assent of my parents. Too excited to use any finesse in my approach, I announced that I was going to New Zealand.

"And what will you do there" said my father.

"I am going to become a farm pupil" I replied.

“You have never shown any interest in farming before now so why go so far away now”

Though I did not say so, it was quite true I had no special interest in farm work nor had ever contemplated it. I could answer truthfully the second part of his question.

“New Zealand is the country furthest from England and it will take at least six weeks to get there, so I shall have six weeks at sea.”

That appeared to me ample justification and the possibility that I would not like farming, or even like New Zealand, or that New Zealand would not like me and then what would I do in such eventualities, never occurred to me.

I made my application and was called for an interview which took place in London at the Chambers of a King's Counsel in The Temple - a most pleasant man who was apparently a member of the committee administering the scheme. I skipped down the stone steps from his Chambers feeling the world lay in front of me for I did qualify as W.G.S. was a Headmasters' Conference School and the matter of financial capital being available could be left to the future. All that was needed now was a medical examination, father to agree and pay Ten pounds for the assisted passage, provide me with the recommended outfit of clothes and the suggested ten pounds pocket money. I collected my bicycle, which I had left propped up against the entrance railings and pedalled my way back home, wondering how to make the most persuasive approach to the parents. By now they had become resigned to the idea for they offered no opposition, but I do remember fathers' final words

“Now you will be on your own my son”.

My energetic year in Woking had given me pleasure. I became an active member of Christ Church Boys Bible Class and its Club for which I played football and tennis. I played hockey for the nearby village of Ripley, the home games being played on the picturesque Village Green with away matches against numerous attractive surrounding village and town clubs. Motor car racing was spectacular to watch at Brooklands Motor Racing Circuit and I saw most of the famous racing aces of that time when for cars to race at 100 miles an hour was considered very fast. I also cycled many times to Twickenham to watch Rugby football games and after these matches went on to stay with relations at Putney near the River Thames on the outskirts of London. My two cousins Reg and Muriel Nash were musicians, Reg being an excellent violinist and Muriel a cellist. It was still an age when families made their own music and I enjoyed many musical evenings in their company and that of my Aunt and Uncle. Uncle would sing the popular ballads of the day and I remember his stentorian voice rendering “My Old Shako” when his long pointed, waxed moustache would quiver with the feeling and passion with which he sang about his military headgear.

On one of my visits to these cousins they took me to the Queens Hall to hear a recital by Sergei Rachmaninov the Russian pianist and composer. This was to give me one of the most outstanding and memorable musical experiences of my life and I retain a vivid mental picture of this man. He was about fifty years old at the time and I recall him as above average height, slimly built with short-cropped iron-grey hair. His oval, egg-shaped, lined face was of sallow complexion, stern, unsmiling, ascetic. At all times he seemed unaware of his audience even when acknowledging the tumultuous applause. His dour, set face, his unseeing demeanour gave the impression he was in another world, remote from his worshipping audience. He made a great impact on me and I remember far more of him than of the music he played. I do not remember the content of his programme nor of the encores he returned time and again to play. The audience would not let him go and he realised the inevitability that they would not do so until he played the C Sharp Minor Prelude. It was his ninth encore and I can still picture the scene and hear the sound as he played the strong opening chords, but even more clearly I see him as he rose from the piano with a slight bow to his audience, walking slowly away, rather like a blind man, remote, detached and appearing to be mentally and physically exhausted. Only since, have I had any understanding of his reputed remark that the piece became a sore trial to him.. That recital gave me an interest in his compositions which continues to this day.

During this short period I was able to find much time for music-making and also to attend theatres in London. I saw the Co-Optimists several times with many of their distinguished players. Beatrice Lilley doing her “Wind around my Heart” monologue, Stanley Holloway and Leslie Henson, and one lovely line by Henson. Holloway was on stage doing his “Green Eye of the little Yellow God” turn and Leslie Henson in one of the boxes dressed in colourful military mess kit constantly interrupting him

saying "When I was on the sewerage commission at Littlebellygurglepoo". Also playing with the Co-Optimists at that time were Fred and Adele Astaire the famous dancing brother and sister.

My medical examination for NZ had revealed my need for a rupture operation and I spent two weeks in St. Bartholomew's hospital in London. The timing was unfortunate for I had to be content to listen to a commentary on wireless headphones instead of being at Twickenham for the international Rugby football match between England and the All Blacks from New Zealand played on January 3rd 1925, a memorable match which the All Blacks won 17 - 11. I learned one useful lesson during my two weeks at Barts which saved me much discomfort during subsequent periods in hospitals. At that time it was customary for a Ward Sister to ask patients each evening about bowels, the usual query being "Yes or No"? At first I answered truthfully until I found that a "No" was followed by a large dose off Castor Oil which I found repulsive in the extreme, thereafter I became an emphatic "Yes" man. On one later occasion, perhaps I had been reading about George Washington, I inadvertently slipped up and gave a truthful answer. This was in a Hospital in New Plymouth in New Zealand where no doubt I was considered to be an honest word-of-an-Englishman type, for a nurse brought the noxious purgative and placed it on my bedside table instead of the usual "now drink this down". My bed was on a veranda with large opening windows opening out on to a lawn. With some recklessness for it was only a few hours after an operation I painfully struggled to the window and threw the offensive liquid on to the grass outside. I omitted to check later to see what effect it had on the grass, I did know what it would have done to me.

After leaving St. Bartholomew's the next few months were taken up with hectic preparations and farewells to my recently made friends. I also visited Benson and Wallingford for one last nostalgic look at the river. How fortunate I had been to spend my boyhood in such surroundings. Now I was what Grandma Nash had called me "A hobble-de-hoy, ne'er man nor boy" when in May 1925 I travelled to Liverpool, staying at The Adelphi Hotel overnight and boarding the S.S. Rimutaka of the New Zealand Shipping Company the next morning for Auckland, New Zealand.

It was many years later that I again stayed overnight at the Adelphi Hotel before sailing out of Liverpool. This time bound for Alexandria via Bombay. I did not reach either destination and eventually made my landfall on a small island off the coast of Brazil. But that is another story.