

Appendix A

THE VILLAGE AND VILLAGE LIFE

An interview with Dr Ian Hurle (ex-resident and ex-pupil of Shrivenham School between 1940-43, now living in Chester) and David Boobyer.

What was that story you told me about Bob Hope and the Prince of Wales pub?

Bob Hope and Frances Langford - came by car from the Swindon direction and pulled up at the Prince of Wales for them to see the village and have a drink. Mr Childs was landlord then. They were on way to entertain the American troops in Becketts, so it must have been late 1942, 1943 time - certainly before D-Day.

There is also a story about the landlord of the Barrington Arms refusing Americans whisky (so that he could keep it for the locals). Other than that, how well did the Americans fit in, in the area?

I cannot believe that the Barrington Arms refused the Americans anything. The Americans were the most generous people you could imagine, a long way from home, and over here to help us win the war. I don't think the villagers would have stood by and tolerated them being refused a drink, Scotch or otherwise. The Barrington Arms (run by Chambers then) has always been a bit of a scruffy place (still is, as far as I can see) and most preferred the Prince of Wales or the Crown, (down by the empty grocery shop which used to be call Hammonds). More below on the Americans.

The village has substantially changed since you left. There is now a large percentage of people who have come from outside and don't have roots here. Do you remember it as more of a close-knit community - everyone knowing everyone else and their business?

I do not consider the village was a very close-knit community. People tended to keep themselves to themselves - much as I think they tend to today.

There was a mixture of the true old-time villagers (e.g. Aingers - the thatchers), relative newcomers like myself, the evacuees and the army fraternity (like the Billings) living on the periphery down in Park Avenue. The only places where all were united were at school and in church. The Home Guard formed a unity, as did the Army Cadets. Both lots were in similar khaki uniform and shared a bond of rivalry. Les Judd, officer i/c of the Army Cadets, was also a member of the Home Guard. One could, when of age, graduate from the Cadets into the Home Guard. Les was a splendid

person, a perfect army type and officer, but was refused a commission when recruited into the regular army - presumably because of his upbringing in Stallpits. Such were class attitudes then, even in time of war.

There were two - at least to me - highlights in village life in the war. One was the Saturday night film show held in a hangar at Watchfield aerodrome, which we were allowed to attend: large contingents from the village walked there across the fields (starting at milkman Day's and crossing Gypsy Lane and Watchfield Brook, both where the two golf courses are now), returning in the dark on the pathway by the road from Watchfield. The other hangars, lit up inside and with open doors, permitted us to look at the planes - mainly Oxfords and Ansons - being worked on and smell the characteristic aluminium/rubber/dope/glycol smell that service aircraft have.

Sometimes, on the way back on cold nights, we would be allowed into the YMCA in Watchfield and get a cup of cocoa - and even be allowed to play snooker. The other highlight was the Army Cadet band, in which I was a bugler. It was a bugle and drum band - ginger-haired Sammy Curtis from Watchfield hammered the big drum - and was trained by Mr Dance (no relation, used to cut hair as well in his shed up Stallpits) and practised in a remote Nissen hut on the airfield. The band trained to a very high standard and was sought after to play at parades and events in the area. We even played for the Americans when Eisenhower visited the Beckett's base with Monty prior to D-Day. Eisenhower considered us very young to be in Monty's army!

Specific locations - The village was formed of little communities. The Ashbury Road people were Ashbury Road types: High Street people were different, as were the few remote ones down the station road. Park Avenue people were transient and new. Living in the Memorial Hall, my family was 'different' again. Some evacuee's parents bought houses in the village to live with their children - mainly in the Almshouses at each end - and were, of course, those 'Londoners'. The Morris's (3 girls) lived up by us in the end almshouse near the Hall.

The 'Sleepy Valley,' or 'Stallpits,' dwellers were seen in some cases to be 'rather rough' and, while on the periphery of the true village, constituted a high proportion of the inhabitants. There was no Station Road or Swindon road communities, as there are now - you could walk across the fields between the two roads without seeing a soul. The present 'Old Manor' houses did not exist - where they are was all the Manor Grounds. The Rectory Grounds stretched from High Street to the pond and orchard on the Lower Road: there were no houses in between as now. Ashbury Rd had no houses between that Lower Road and Mr Pound's, on the LHS, or Lower road and Mr Wilsons corner house on High Street on the RHS. Longcott Road was basically as it is at present and Park Avenue and surrounds were more or less exactly as they are now.

The Cross was still a natural village centre, and had a big hollow tree but no stocks. These look too new and artificial and I don't like them. The Italian POW's from the submarine - they were the entire crew who had surrendered - used the Cross for a gathering and singing place at night. They worked on the farms, but where they all

actually lived, I never knew. Village girls seemed to like them though!

There were large family groups, spread out across the village - the Knapps, the Days, the Fortys etc. Did that make for a hostile or friendly reception when your family moved in or was it like a closed shop?

You mention the Knapps (who seemed to own everything), the Days - Victor's family and the Milkman round by the church; the Fortys - of these John Forty, later to read physics - as I did - and become professor of the same at Warwick University, used to travel with me on the bus to Swindon school every day. There were also the Pounds, of whom Bob built Swiss Cottage for teacher Miss Gregory when he married her; the Bradfields, the Dances, the Hambridges (these were all Sleepy Valley and young Hambridge delivered the telegrams). Who lived in the huge and walled Shrivenham House we were never to know. The Manor (burnt down) was full of 'very-much-in-demand' Land Army Girls, who worked on local farms.

When we moved into the Memorial Hall to live we seemed to be treated normally by all the villagers. Only Headmaster Mr Dance seemed to make a hobby of being nasty to us - me particularly at school - but this was because Dad wouldn't join his Home Guard private army or let the school use his best wickets. I had no trouble making friends at school.

How true, or corny, is the idea that rural life was a lot safer then - no-one used to lock their doors etc.? Was life really better/cleaner/safer "in the old days"?

There is no question that life in the village felt very safe - apart from the wretched Germans - and I do not recall hearing of burglaries, assault, vandalism, etc. The worst happenings were things like stealing fruit, riding bikes in the blackout, trying to get someone else's sweet coupons, shooting the odd rabbit or pheasant for the pot, etc. I do not recall seeing trouble or overt police presence anywhere. Without hesitation or question and, although under the constant wartime threat, life was uncomplicated, happy, adventurous and friendly and, because of the wartime events - exciting. Everyone shared the same problems and aspirations; a sense of unity and togetherness prevailed. I recall being most disappointed later - and after the war - when political arguing and Mr Churchill's ungenerous dismissal set in and destroyed the unity I believed was part of the country.

I do recall one act of gross vandalism! An RAF trailer carrying the remains of

a Junkers 88 (shot down the other side of Swindon and en route to Goering's graveyard at Morris Cowley) pulled up at the Prince of Wales. In the time it took the driver to have a pint, most of the movable pieces of the aircraft were cut or torn off and taken away as souvenirs. There was not a lot left when the driver came out the pub. I had one of the landing lights and a piece of the main spar, someone staggered off carrying the whole fin with Swastika on it but these were seen to be more a right than stealing.

In the same vein, while the Home Guard were issued with real 0.303 rifles (but no ammunition), the Army Cadets had to make do with funny old pieces which had had the firing pins removed (mine was a South African 0.22 long barrel, with Winchester action). My Dad quickly had the armourers at Beckett's put it right and it felled many pheasants on Lambourn Downs. We kept and used it for years after hostilities ended!

And the role of the village bobby? Was there much crime?

The village bobby - I think he was Sergeant Lyford who lived in one of the first houses on the right going into the village from Swindon end. There was, of course, a huge - for the size of Shrivenham - police station, with the air-raid siren mounted on top, on the left just past the allotments as you came in from Swindon. It has now been converted into a large residence. What was in such a large building was a bit of a mystery, outside, there was a big and fascinating notice board displaying the dangers of booby traps, like the Butterfly Bomb, and other - to me - most fascinating gadgets. As I said above, I can recall no crime of the type which is common place today. While one might have expected, on statistical grounds, some problems from the large collection of military personnel in the area, I can bring none to mind.

The American military, which must have played an important part of our village life during the war, how well did it fit in? Where they accepted, or just put up with?

The US soldiers came to Shrivenham into Beckett's Barracks, I think in late 1942. They displaced the British Army and its OCTU. Persons of great interest to the villagers, they behaved well and were very friendly and smart.

A particular friend of all we village children was the sentry on the gate at the Longcott Road entrance to Park Avenue. He could imitate Donald Duck and loved duck's eggs - he came from a farm in America. In exchange for these (obtained by us 'locally'), he gave us candy bars and comics. I often wonder what happened to all the

American soldiers on and after D-Day and how many of them got back home.

Another friend, an American officer - who became known as Uncle Dick to all the children - used to come regularly to the Rec and talk to us about almost anything. We all gathered round him, sat down in a circle. I think he was lonely for his own children and felt sorry for we deprived lot. We used to watch the Tiger Moths and Oxfords coming out of Watchfield aerodrome, flying into a SW wind out over the Rec. He used to explain how they flew, what the pilots were training for - and gave little presents to the first child to see the blades of grass falling from the wheels. He told us very interesting stories of America. These were truly happy times. The Americans used the old Zebra Mess to give Xmas parties to the Watchfield children (where the mess was) and we in Shrivenham were envious.

Entertainers used to come to the US forces from America. Apart from Bob Hope, I saw Joe Louis give a demonstration boxing match and got his autograph.

The Americans gave Dad a lot of problems in that he had to convert all the sports fields to US games - US football, baseball, etc. These games didn't serve his prize grass very well but the Americans loved their sports and made it worthwhile. I consider the Americans fitted in with our lifestyle very easily. We were shown copies of the little leaflet that they were all given to read in advance about us. I recall it started with lines similar to:

'When you meet these British people you will find them very reserved and you may think them even unsociable but remember, they have suffered war, deprivation, hardship, losses and setbacks for the past three years while we have enjoyed times of plenty. Also remember, should you be invited to eat in their homes, that they are a generous people - but what is on the table may be the family's rations for the week!'

There were inevitable problems in that, for example, at the Memorial Hall dances, there were sometimes problems with the Watchfield airmen, who found it difficult to compete with the 'doughboys' for the girls. Also, the buses to Swindon were standing room only with so many Americans 'going into town' Even our 08:20 school bus was packed and the 16:15 was sometimes too full to get back from school. One dreaded seeing these buses pass by without stopping, being full up, and not another for hours. 'relief' buses became commonplace, however.

I'm sure many often said 'bloody Americans.....' but when the huge Ambulance sidings were built down at the station in advance of D - Day (and the village knew something was afoot) and were subsequently seen to be in constant use, ferrying the wounded to nearly military hospitals, it was more like Kipling's "But its 'Good Old Tommy Atkins', when the bands begin to play".

There have been a vast number of physical changes since you were a child here - street lighting, housing estates, re-routed roads. What for you are the most noticeable? HAS the village changed dramatically? For the better or worse?

The amazing thing to me (as it was also to Joy Thomas) was the few (if any) changes that have been made to Shrivenham in sixty years - outside of the main housing developments at the Swindon end, Ashbury Road, Station Road and the area of the old Manor and the Rectory. The main street looks exactly the same - apart from the disgusting Tandoorii at the old Benford's bakery! The shops on the left opposite where the old blacksmith's - run by 'Grump' Tucker when he wasn't 'inside' (he was always engaged in some type of crime away from Shrivenham) are completely new, most convenient and attractive. The school carries countless unchanged features, as Sue Currie has kindly let us behold - and they have even preserved old Dance's whipping desk and chair!! It all looks so happy now that the ogre is not looming over the classrooms - but I don't wish to disparage all that he stood for, which was teaching us to understand nature, the countryside and England.

The pubs are exactly the same, but I think the Crown - which was down past Fennel's - has gone. Fennel's, of course was once both Dikes and Moon's grocery shop (not sure in which order) outside which all the children queued - and fought - to spend their sweet coupons on a Saturday night, once a week - or was it monthly? Next to Fennel's was a bank or old library and the butchers was next to the red phone kiosk there. Otherwise, it's all much the same and totally recognisable at a glance.

In short, the village has changed very little. What change there is, is very unobtrusive. The by-pass, of course, is totally new and beneficial. That's the only new road around the area. The 'nature reserve' down the Ashbury Road was, in my view, a change for the worse. That area of the old canal, all the way through to Beckett's, was a beautifully wild part, all wildflowers, home to countless frighteningly large grass snakes, moorhens nests (their countless eggs attracted the latter) and home to innumerable catapult battles between village children (every child made a catapult from an ash fork, a car inner tube and the tongue from a shoe). Now it is a tarmac waste, seeming only to serve those wishing to visit by car and probably, even then, not getting out of it.

I have yet to see new Shrivenham at night and the blackout denied any street lighting in our times. One groped one's way around, with the odd shielded torch. So I can't compare it with today.

In short, I don't think the village has changed much and no doubt the Parish Council has a lot to be thanked for in that respect (give my and the Billing's regards to dear old Victor Day).

How agricultural was Shrivenham at the time? What percentage would you estimate were involved in one way or another with farming?

The fields around Shrivenham (except where necessarily built upon) I found to be instantly and remarkably recognisable. Hedgerows have been left where they were - and should be. This was truly a delight to the eyes.

Curiously, there were - and, as far as I could see, still are - few farms round the village. The big one up Stallpits - I think College Farm - owned a great deal of the land. But the only place to see other farmhouses was - and still seems to be - down Longcott Road: and, perhaps, Station Road towards Bourton. Knapps must have had some land, also Pounds - but I can think of no more. I would have guessed that not a large percentage of people were involved with farming. Crops were mostly cereal ones and the rest grazing. I recall chickens, ducks and pigs being kept for the eggs and food.

In a previous interview you mentioned "The Dig for Victory" campaign - was the area more or less self-sufficient in terms of food?

Everyone was encouraged by the government to Dig for Victory (the allotments were well worked) or to keep a pig. All in all, I would imagine the area was fairly self-sufficient, foodwise.

Tractors were not plentiful (horses were) and the old reaping and binding machines, together with the elevator, had yet to be replaced by the combined harvester.

We have in the archives a number of photographs of the local shops as they were at the time. Do you have any memories of any that have disappeared? Did the locals totally rely on them for everything or were trips often made into Swindon or Oxford?

I think there was one greengrocer's shop down in that row between the Tandoori and Prince of Wales and one butchers opposite. All bread came from Benfords, in the Tandoori. There were two grocers, Dikes/Moons at Fennels and Hammonds - a decidedly gloomy shop - further down the main street on same side. The shell is still there but it appears empty now. Kath Forty, John Forty's sister, worked at Dikes. There were two dairies - Mr Days round the back of the church, past the almshouses, and the inevitable Knapps enterprise down on the RHS at the beginning of Longcott Road. I don't recall a separate newsagents, presumably Dike's sold papers. The only other shop, to my knowledge, was Grump Tucker's blacksmith's shop up High Street opposite the chapel area. Perhaps the Post Office was where it is now - I can't recall - but I seem to picture it being down where the telephone kiosk is.

There were a set of kind of 'shops' up the side of the Prince of Wales, but they were more like prefab huts housing the tailors Burberrys, Alkits, Moss Bros, etc., there

to fit out the cadets from the OCTU at Becketts with uniforms when they received their commissions. The Burberry's men used also to lodge with us in the Memorial Hall. Staff came to the shops from London only for one or two days each week.

Were home deliveries/personal service more popular? If so, who would deliver to the door?

There were certainly no supermarket shops. Home deliveries were unheard of. I think everyone relied on these few shops - there were a couple more at Watchfield, if one ventured that far afield. I don't think people journeyed as far afield as Swindon or Faringdon to shop for other than clothes, shoes, etc. - but did go there to enjoy a restaurant or cinema. There were not that many buses and few people had cars or, if so, were lucky enough to get more than a little of the rationed petrol. I don't recall anyone ever going to Oxford - it was the other end of the world to me. I once cycled as far as Lechlade to fish the Thames and quite often cycled to school in Swindon, to be able to get home after football. This entailed, before playing, a further cycle ride from the College and up Victoria Hill, out to the school playing fields at Wroughton.

One of the school teachers from London - who lodged with us for a spell in the Memorial Hall - took me to London by train. She lived in Croydon and the night we got there the 1941 blitz started, finishing off what was left of Crystal Palace following the fire. We stayed most of the week in the shelter. My Mum thought I was ill on getting back - because I had had little or no sleep during the nightly raids!

The railway station is quite a walk away from the centre of the village. Was it a busy station? If not for commuter traffic, how was it used?

True, it is a long way from the village but it was a hive of activity in the war. Because there were so many servicemen in the area it had its own RTO (Rail Transport Office) where travel warrants were issued for servicemen going on leave. There were lots of trains stopping and going to and fro. Platforms on each side of the rail were quite crowded when trains were due. The main part of the station was on the Shrivenham side. There were massive coal yards to service the whole area. Coal went thence by local lorry all over the place. When the ambulance/hospital sidings were built in advance of D-Day the station area was enormously busy, coping with the many trains arriving from the various Channel ports. I don't think anyone used the station much to commute (buses did for that) - it was more used if you were 'going somewhere' -

although the service to Swindon was reliable and quick.

The bus service nowadays is terribly infrequent. How good was it then?

Apart from going to school in Swindon on the 08:20 - from by the Dog Pound - and returning from outside where the old Regent Cinema was (all buses left from the Swindon Town Hall Square) at 4:15 I hardly ever used the bus. Going the other way it went to Faringdon. It was run by a Swindon company. I think they were fairly frequent - the bus went back and forth Swindon to Faringdon all day - hence, say every two hours. They were always very full and reliefs were often run.

The bus went to Swindon via South Marston and Stratton. On the way it passed the Short's Aircraft factory and airfield (now Honda). Each night a Short Stirling bomber was assembled there - the engines and other small parts were made up the Highworth Road at Sevenhampton in the sheds with serrated roofs, and taken to South Marston. When our school bus arrived the four-engined bomber could be relied upon to be being towed across the road into the airfield for a test flight and thence, if OK, immediate delivery to a bomber station. These tests and delivery were made with a crew of just one lady ferry pilot --it was unnerving to watch her walk out and climb up the ladder into the huge aircraft on her own. On take off, the girls would fly to Swindon GWR station and follow the appropriate railway line to their scheduled bomber station. Rumour has it they flew low to read the names of the stations en route, but I recall most station names were taken down - together with many of the road signposts (but some of these were just turned round and left)- to confuse the Germans if they came .

Do you remember The Men's Institute? How popular was that?

I have never heard of that in any connection.

Church attendance has fallen over the years but I suppose it was more popular in the Forties. Would you say that the church had a more central role in village life? Was the vicar one of the central figures in the community?

From time to time I was - with many others - both a choirboy and an organ pumper in the church. It was always quite full. Whether this was out of fear or reverence I never

knew, but I would say that, on the whole, church was more popular in those times: it hadn't started trying to be 'trendy', like today. The Chapel, up High Street, was quite popular too.

I don't think the church played a central part in many people's lives. Of course, like today, there were some whose lives revolved around it. I consider the vicar - then either a Vicar Metcalf or Metford - was a central figure: one couldn't miss him, as he was a very tall and well-built man (as equally was his daughter). Of course, he insisted on using his position and influence to open the C of E school each day with his prayers and hymns; on the bell ending, he would charge in from across the road in a flowing robe like a black whirlwind. Mr Dance never seemed to enjoy this time of day - I think he saw it as an intrusion. They never seemed to get on together.

Being a relative newcomer myself (a paltry 15 years), I can only look back in comparison to life here today. There must be other, maybe less obvious, changes that strike you - what are they?

Quite frankly, apart from the dreadful Tandoori (so out of place), the too-artificial stocks at the Cross, the unnecessarily obtrusive Ashbury Road 'Nature Reserve' (nature was doing quite well there without it), the beneficial new bypass, the tidy and welcome shops up by the Chapel, the modernisation of the school, there has been surprisingly little change in 63 years. I think Shrivenham Parish Council, the Headmistress and other public-minded persons are due for a round of applause in these respects.

Ian Hurle 8th October 2003

Appendix 2

ASHRIVENHAM PRIMARY SCHOOL

An interview with Dr Ian Hurle (ex-resident and ex-pupil of Shrivenham School between 1940-43, now living in Chester) and David Boobyer.

Just to set the scene, could you tell me when you were at school in Shrivenham and roughly how many pupils were there at the time?

I was at the C of E Primary School at Shrivenham from early 1940 until mid 1943. After that I went to Euclid Street Grammar for two years before leaving Shrivenham altogether to live in Oxfordshire.

To the best of my recollection and from the sizes of the three classrooms, I would estimate there were around 25 children in the junior class, 25 in the middle class and around $20+30 = 50$ in the senior class, the latter being housed in two parts in the big class room with the divider partition in between. This partition was opened for prayers etc and closed for lessons. (I think it divided the older children by age - up to 12 on back door side, over 12 on the front. The back door way came into the boy's cloakroom via a path through the wall and house gardens).

Thus, a total of 100 children in the whole school wouldn't seem far off. The catchment area included Watchfield as well as Shrivenham. I'm not sure about Bourton. Of course, there were also our friends from Beckett's and the evacuees from London - these came from East and West Ham.

In the big room, three to four children sat together in bench-type desks, having an inkwell each - there was no back support. These desks were metal and wood and moved around only with difficulty. Mr Dance sat centrally on the junior side of the partition, his desk and chair on a raised platform. He did the register each day and observed all behaviour closely.

And evacuees - roughly how many of them?

It is easier to recall and count the evacuees whom, for some reason, are indelibly remembered. There were three Morris sisters - Daphne, Ginger and a smaller girl (their parents bought one of the almshouses up by the Memorial Hall). There were two Abraham's boys. There were individual boys: Wyatt (rough and rather unpleasant), Pinkie (nice singing voice, lodged with milkman Day), Bonzo Brown (nice and lodged in thatched house, top of Station Road), Walter Bale (aptly called Bucket), Buddy Mitcham (looked like a Brylcreem advert and, for some reason, always seemed to be wearing a double-breasted brown jacket - which completed the

image!) and not more than one or two others. I do not recall individual girls. I would guess therefore there were around a dozen or so evacuees.

They all came from East or West Ham. (Bill Billing has contacted and spoken recently to Bucket - still living in East Ham - and he is trying to locate other of the evacuees). They ranged from very poor kids (Wyatt, Bucket) through to the reasonably well off Morris's and Bonzo. The evacuees thus would have boosted the school size from about 90 to 100, or by about 10%.

What did the 'local' children make of the evacuees? Did they mix well or did they feel isolated by their special circumstances?

The evacuees, to my recollection, were fully accepted by the other children. Wyatt was very aggressive, always ready to fight you at the drop of a hat - but this was not unlike some village kids! Bale was a quiet thinker from a poor family, as was Wyatt (but he was a doer, not a thinker!) The Abraham's were studious and nice: I think they were Jewish. They seemed always to wear green clothes. Pinkie was a dreamer - didn't realise that milk came from cows or eggs from chickens. The vicar had him sing all the hymns at Christmas - I recall those moments vividly. The Morris girls were all pretty and most popular with the boys. Bonzo was a handsome chap with curly blond hair - the girls all liked him. Buddy - as the name implies, liked and was liked by everybody. His special pal was Bill Billing.

I don't recall any cause for the evacuees to have felt isolated. I think we all realised they were not there of their own choice and, from the Blitz news, were better off with us than being in London. I think we felt a bit sorry for them, having no Mums and Dads - except Wyatt who seemed to be befriended only by Bill Billing. Bill told me recently that his Mum forbid him to bring Wyatt anywhere near their house in Park Avenue, he was so scruffy and unruly! (It has just occurred to me that each evacuee may have been significantly influenced by the foster parents, with whom they were lodged and that this could have conditioned their behaviour somewhat. They certainly must have felt lonely and out of place on occasions but didn't complain).

What were the school hours? Describe (if its possible) a typical day?

The morning bell went at 0900; prayers were then taken by the vicar. (I think that because of this, Mr Dance often pretended not to be there). After this, there was a period where we had collectively or, in cases of error, individually, to recite the tables up to times 12 or 14. These were followed by further round-the-class oral

spelling questions - if the wrong answer was given to a word you had to write the correct version out 20 or 50 times after school or at break. Learning was swift. After this, normal lessons began.

Lunch time was around 12.00 to 13.00 (I was able to go home, the rest played in the playground and, presumably, had some food which they brought - I don't think any food was provided). I think we ended round 15.30 and all walked home. Of note, there were of course no school buses, no parent's cars, and no bicycle sheds that I can recall - I think everyone walked to and from school, including those from Watchfield.

Neither were there any events after school - like there appear to be now - nor parents' evenings. I don't recall ever seeing a parent anywhere near the school - certainly none met the children at the end of day, like now. How times have changed!

There were school Sports Days on the Rec and, quite often, we all went off across the fields up by Watchfield Brook picking rose hips to be sent away to make imitation orange juice, containing vitamin C. During the day I remember we were all given a big spoonful of cod liver oil - also to make up for deficiencies in the wartime diet.

Lessons - Following prayers and the introductory tables or spelling sessions mentioned above, we stayed at the same desk in the same room all day, regardless of subject. The lessons I recall most readily were:

- * Maths, where at 10 years we were doing algebra equal to present GCSE level,
- * Art, in which Mr Dance took a personal interest, introducing wild flower themes,
- * Singing, which Mr Dance (again) led us in patriotic songs like 'There'll always be an England....'; 'Fight for freedom everyone, Build the ship and man the gun...'; and, of course, on November 11th 'O Valiant Hearts, Who to your glory came...', all words expressing worthy sentiments which seem unfortunately unacceptable in this day and age,
- * English Grammar, certainly up to and even beyond the little that seems taught at GCSE,
- * History, mainly the Kings and Queens of England around the Elizabethan times,
- * Science - there appeared to be a lack of lessons in any area other than Nature (Mr Dance).

Curiously, I don't recall what we did in Religious Instruction - even though the vicar was readily at hand and, presumably, did administer in this area

During the Boer War and WWI teachers would, to certain extent, keep the children up-to-date with current affairs. Was there much teaching of current affairs during WWII?

I don't recall any formal teaching in this area. Mr Dance would, at the end of the morning assembly, bring to note any important events on the world stage - like e.g.

Dunkirk or the sinking of The Bismarck. Most families in the war listened avidly to the BBC news bulletins and they were - by today's standards - collectively well up-to-date with events.

What were the war-time precautions given to the children? Did the school have any wartime defence mechanisms or shelters on the premises?

War-time precautions and shelters - you ask of these at school but, apart from the sticky tape put on all the windows and on the partition in the big room (this had frosted windows in it), I don't recall any precautions. At my previous school, further down Wiltshire on Salisbury Plain, we were shown how to crawl up big drainpipes carrying our gas masks in the event of air raids (these never came, thank God, because there were some very nasty things to be found up the drains): but I cannot recall any similar precautions at Shrivenham, not even on how to get to any air raid shelters - in fact, I don't think there were any shelters anywhere in Shrivenham and would be most interested to learn if there were. Carrying one's gas mask was about all that we did.

External to school, there was always something exciting to be read on the notice board outside the Police Station - like the butterfly bombs, fascinating objects of great interest, themselves demanding to be found by curious boys - and the defensive slit trenches on the Rec. There were, of course, shelters up at the aerodrome.

I'm sure that many modern children feel 'hard done by' by some teachers but the treatment of crime and punishment must have been far stricter in your days. With regard to the less obvious misdemeanours - talking in class, not putting your hand up, passing notes when the teacher's back is turned etc. - how strictly were lessons managed?

Strictness and misdemeanours - you remark that modern children may feel 'hard done by' but that crime and punishment must have been stricter in earlier days. Certainly, punishment was but I do not recall juvenile crime anywhere near approaching what is evident in society today. There is no question that Mr Dance's cane managed the school with total authority, referral to him was by being sent to stand facing into the corner by the side of his desk. On being found there, a caning was inevitable. This was around three to six strokes on each hand, most painful and a wonderful deterrent.

I became used to the cane, for reasons mentioned previously, but never grew

either to fear or to like it! I had no problem in accepting the cane as a just form of punishment. With it, there was no need to institute alternatives, such as detention but I do recall that writing out 'lines' after school was used by some teachers for lesser offences.

In spite of the frequent canings that I seemed to be well-qualified to receive, there were not a lot otherwise: school to me was a happy place with teachers (there were two or three in addition to Mr Dance) who were kind and nice. Miss Gregory was Welsh, very pretty and a favourite not to be upset. I do not recall any spitefulness or persistent bad behaviour. I felt no fear in school over anything but, like all others, had respect for the teachers. I can recall no instance of a child - not even the rougher ones - answering back or otherwise challenging a teacher. Our attitudes and mannerisms at school were conditioned by our upbringing at home.

We often hear in the press about 'namby-pamby' teaching from some parents who seem to be in direct contrast to others who complain about there being not enough control and discipline! How well-respected, would you say, the teaching profession was in your days (by parents)? Was 'little Johnny' always right, or was the teacher's word 'gospel'?

Namby-Pamby teaching - by these words it seems you mean there is less control in the classrooms of today. If so, I thoroughly agree. But I think the change stems both from the way the teaching profession has brought itself to be regarded these days by society and the attitudes of the parents themselves towards disciplining their children.

While in my village - and certainly also in Shrivenham today - things appear to be more like they used to be as far as the teachers and parents are concerned, in towns the attitudes and dress of some of the more trendy members of the teaching profession can bring the rest into disrepute. At the same time, discipline of children towards society within some families seems to be non-existent.

This combination seems inevitably to give rise to some undisciplined children showing unacceptable behaviour towards those few teachers for whom there is little or no respect. I think the vociferous liberal elements, by which society seems led these days, have much to be accountable for in these respects - but blame can be lodged with both parents and teachers.

Certainly, members of the teaching profession in our school days were both professionally and socially seen to be on a par with doctors and other professional classes. They were both respected and aspired to within the community, with opinions much to be solicited and respected. I don't think there was much by way of other than 'the teacher was always right' rather than 'little Johnny was never wrong', as you so aptly put it. I think it must have been rare for a child or a parent to challenge a teacher - it just was not done.

Did you get much/any homework? How easy was that to do considering the help you had to give your parents? Was an air raid a good enough excuse for not doing your set work?

Homework - there never was any to my recollection. Instead, we had the daily Table and Spelling sessions mentioned above. Because of the absence of homework there was no need to miss or to dodge it. Homework however, began in earnest on transition to Grammar School. (Please note here that only very few children sat the then 11plus Exam - called the Moray House Exam if I recall correctly - to qualify to move on to Grammar School - boys to Swindon, girls to Faringdon. I can recall only John Forty, myself and Joy Billing doing so.

How about truancy? At the end of the 19th century, when schooling was not seen as a priority by parents, the local headteacher used to get exasperated by children being required by their parents to 'hop off' school to pick acorns which could be sold to local pig farmers and by girls that were needed at home before their parents came back from a morning in the fields, to prepare lunch for the family. Were there any equally interesting excuses/reasons that you can remember for 'bunking off'?

Truancy - I enjoyed school very much and didn't want to stay away. I don't recall any cases of persistent absences. There was some light relief from school when we older children all went en masse to local farms to help pick up potatoes. Individually, some of us also helped with the harvest for pocket money, but these were Saturday or weekday evening jobs.

I think the sort of times you refer to - when children were more involved with local farming requirements and their parents dependent on the children doing their share - belonged to the earlier era of the previous two generations (around the turn of the century) and before the advent of the tractor and mechanised farming.

As a church school, Shrivenham has always been under the cosh, so-to-speak, of the local vicar and one gets the impression that the relationship was not always fully appreciated by the headteacher. How much influence did the church have (as far as you know) during the Forties?

The church (by way of vicar Metford) was involved in leading prayers each day and

on festive church occasions. I think he must have been involved with RI (see above) but do not remember how. Otherwise, we didn't see much of him. He and Mr Dance certainly were not great pals. (I wonder if Dance was a Presbyterian - I think he had Scottish ancestry). So I think the church had little influence on the school in a formal way but there was, of course, the route through meetings of the Parish Council where some form of control may have been exercised over the school by the Vicar.

Today, schools are pretty well equipped to ease the children into 'modern' life. They have computers and internet access etc. I get the impression that facilities were in short supply and that even repairs to the school were only carried out when things became almost unbearable. Earlier in the century, the school had to be closed when it couldn't be heated properly and parents complained. How well do you remember the quality and quantity of equipment and the general fabric of the school?

As you say, the school is relatively well equipped today with modern teaching aids. The only aids that I recall were the blackboards and easels on which lessons were conducted, a large shiny map of the world and equally attractive coloured charts of birds and animals. There were stuffed birds - I well remember the Barn Owl - along the walls on top of cupboards. I think most pictures were either religious or studies of Nature.

Each room was heated by a large, free - standing 'Tortoise' stove ('Slow but Sure') surrounded by a mesh guard with the chimney going up high through the roof. Large funnel-shaped containers full of coke were used to refuel it. Who looked after - or lit - them I never knew (I suppose there was a caretaker). They often ran red hot - hence the guard - and kept the school warm. There was no central heating or hot water anywhere, neither were there any cooking facilities.

I don't recall repairs ever being carried out to anything - but the school didn't look too bad ever. The playground was a bit rough but the toilets were modern for that day and age. We enjoyed being sent to work in the school garden. The cloakrooms had ample space to put our clothes and gas masks. We had decent cricket and football gear - but I personally don't recall having a pair of football boots until I got to play for the Swindon Grammar School team. The reading books, text books and the lined exercise books - in which we neatly wrote - were good quality ones. You never 'owned' them, they were given out in class at the start of each lesson and taken back to be marked at its conclusion. The desks had no storage space. In short, I never felt conscious that we were lacking in any equipment or facilities of any real importance.

What would you say were the main differences between school/teaching today to when you were at school? Better or worse, or just different?

Main differences with school and teaching then and today - I would summarise these to be as follows as regards equipment and facilities:

- * there seem to be more children, all nicely dressed, clean and tidy, unlike the rabble we were (the boys wore anything - including dad's shortened long trousers),
- * the large assembly hall must mean that, apart from other activities, the school is now able to come together in one room - a distinct advantage over the old days,
- * the three old classrooms, while having basically still the same shape and size, seem to be more effectively utilised. The computer facilities are an eye opener,
- * the other many visual - aid facilities must be most useful,
- * the playgrounds are much the same; the retention of hopscotch is to be applauded,
- * it was nice to hear Mrs Currie say the school bell is still sounded in the mornings,
- * it seems a pity that the mosaic - quality tiles in the boys cloakroom were removed,
- * it seems a pity that the old school house is no longer part of the school.

I am, of course, unable to comment on teaching methods today or on relations between parents and teachers. But at the 'meeting-out-of-school-of-children-by-the-many-parents' - a feature of today's schools - no long faces were apparent on either side! The children all looked well dressed and happy. The teachers were attentive and the parents seemed pleased.

However, as regards the general standard of education at schools then and today, I am able (by way of the tuition I have given to children in Physics and Mathematics over the past 20 years) categorically to say that the level we were educated to at eleven years of age - for the 11 plus exam - was equal to that of the GCSE level of today, while today's A levels are around the standard of the old O level of 15/20 years ago. These, to me, are saddening and somewhat depressing thoughts and seem born of insufficient attention being given to the 3 R's as well as an overly liberal-led approach towards education in the past two decades.

I know I always finish with these two questions BUT; is there anything I have left out that you think is of interest and do you have any funny stories that aren't encompassed in your answers above?

Any other comments? - I don't think there is anything of interest left out in the above. I suppose the school in the 40s was similar to most others in villages round the country. The Village School was one of the most essential features, alongside the church, and ranked in importance with the pubs and shops. While it provided for every child a centre to village life it did this, curiously, without ever really being

central to it. This is difficult to explain, but I mean that the parents never seemed to see the school as being something they owned or were part of but rather a place that they once previously had 'had to go to' when they were kids.

This difference, together with the advent of parents/teachers evenings, the introduction of a type of school uniform and other forms of expression demanding of association with the locality, seem to make the village school of today a more basic and interactive part of village life. Evidence of this integration is to me a most welcome and positive advance.

Ian Hurle 5th November 2003

Appendix C

THE MEMORIAL HALL AND RECREATION GROUNDS

An interview with Dr Ian Hurle (ex-resident and ex-pupil of Shrivenham School between 1940-43, now living in Chester) and David Boobyer.

You told me that your family lived in the Memorial Hall flat and looked after the Hall and the Recreation Grounds.

My father was moved by the Army from the Warminster/Devizes area up to Shrivenham in 1940 to prepare and look after the recreation grounds in the Shrivenham Barracks (now Military College of Science, but then an OCTU - Officer Cadet's Training Unit). He was then the Head Groundsman for the Southern Command of the British Army.

What was your father's official position, how did he come by it and for how long was he in charge?

At first we lodged with his sister in Swindon but then, somehow, Shrivenham Parish Council got in touch with him to look after the Memorial Hall Recreation Ground in return for living in the upstairs flat in the Hall and also becoming its Caretaker. We, as a family, thus took up living in the hall in 1940 and remained there until 1945. I attended the Primary School from 1940 to 1943 and then, post the 11+ exam, went on to Euclid Street Grammar in Swindon.

My father's duties in the Hall were to generally take care of all the facilities, the cricket pavilion, the Saturday night dances and attend to the central heating - as well as maintain the recreation ground for its associated uses. Foremost among these was the cricket table, which he made for the Army to play on and the village to use. It offered the Army a far better pitch and surroundings than those available at the barracks, for their Interservices matches.

My mother took care of the catering for the dances while my elder brother and I ran, respectively, the gents and ladies cloakrooms. Dad also arranged the bar, spread the necessary dance salts on the floor, kept the furnace stoked up and saw to the blackout curtains. We were one happy family.

Because the flat was more than big enough for us, we used to let at weekends the room with the balcony (looking out over the Rec) as a bedsitting room to officers and their visiting wives. We made many longstanding friends that way and, I suppose, could be said to have contributed to the war effort! Some Saturday nights, girls from

Swindon also stayed there so as not to have to leave the dancing early to catch the last bus home.

These were very happy days. The dances were full of soldiers from the barracks, airmen from Watchfield airfield, local and Swindon girls plus the Women's Land Army living in the Manor (since burnt down) - who could walk home afterwards across the Rec (some felt the need apparently also to lie down on the way!). Later in life, I oft thought how few of these servicemen may have actually survived those troubled times and felt good that at least we may have provided at the time some comforts to them.

When the Americans arrived prior to D-Day, things changed. Different sounds were heard at the dances, famous musicians gave their appearance - I remember watching, from the balcony in the Hall, Dave Brubeck on the drums and many other forgotten names - and my Mum was kindly supplied with 'American Style Food' by our guests, while I had Superman comics. One problem, however, was that I often had difficulty getting on the bus home from Swindon after school because it was full of US troops - bless them all. Shrivenham was a livelier place in those years and Becketts, round the Lake, was a training ground with troops crossing the water on ropes, having explosives - sending up plumes of water visible from the Rec, set off beneath them. Many returned to Shrivenham, after the early D-Days, into the ambulance sidings that were built down by the station bridge.

The Hall has quite a large cellar. Do you remember how was it used? The Parish Clerk told me that recently a very large bed was found in there! In fact, it was so big that it had to be sawed up to be removed - they can't figure out how it got down there! Was there an external entrance?

I think I can clarify things about the cellar and the bed. The cellar's prime use in our time was to store the coal and coke used for the huge furnace and boiler located there but it also served as an air-raid shelter for the Hurle family - and, come to that, anyone else caught out by the siren on the police station roof nearby. The solid fuel was tipped into the cellar through outside, ground-level trap doors and created huge amounts of dust. The big bed that puzzles you was probably the one we kept down there for communal use, to sit on and play cards, should the All Clear be late in sounding. The cellar had no other uses, to my knowledge, nor did it have another entrance - except through the trap doors; I believe that the bed you had to saw up to remove went down through these.

The Parish Council are currently looking at ways of making the (expensive to

maintain) Hall self-sufficient or even profitable! What are your recollections about how the Hall was used during the war?

Apart from the dances at the weekend, the two main uses I recall were for the Home Guard having lectures, etc while we - the Army Cadet Force - used the concrete in front of the cricket pavilion as a parade ground. Curiously we - 'F' Company, 4th Battalion, Royal Berks, Bugle and Drum band - were not allowed in there to practice, presumably because of fears that the roof wouldn't stand it! But there was an additional occasional use - as a morgue. Things being what they were in those days, the number of vehicles dashing about with hardly any lights and the blackout to boot, people were often run over. Their bodies were put in the room first on the left through the little entrance under our flat, next to the kitchen. I found this out to my distress one night when I went in there to get my bike out of the room and saw a large white sheet on a table. Thinking this was covering up food!...

Do you remember any of the musicians who played at the dances?

The musicians for the dances were frequently 'The Squadronaires', who went on after the war. Joe Loss made the odd appearance, neither Victor Sylvester, Vera Lyn nor Anne Shelton came. American entertainers - as above - did. As a dance hall, in those days, the Memorial Hall was quite a place and still, in my view, is. (How lovely if we could have a school reunion there and dance to 40's music with our friends from those years. Could we do this?)

Were the dances popular? Was there a bar?

Yes, the dances were tremendously popular and full to the brim. Watching as I used to from the balcony - avoiding the couples 'relaxing' up there - it was difficult to see how people could move, let alone dance. The overspill went into the bar and refreshments, in an outer room.

Do you remember the evacuees being schooled there?

When you say "Do I remember the evacuees being schooled there", do you mean in the Hall? If so, it is an emphatic - No! This, to my knowledge, would only have occurred over the dead body of Mr Dance who, rest assured, was very much alive. The

evacuees, bless their souls, were lodged all around the village and firmly located under his wing in the Primary School - with Vicar Metford spreading each morning his more ethereal appendages over them.

Apparently, a dentist used to hold a surgery in the Hall, was that at this time?

No, I never recall a dentist holding a surgery in the Memorial Hall and would have ran a mile if so.

How about clubs and societies - cubs, scouts, guides, gardening clubs, sports clubs, the local hunt, talks, lectures etc.

As regards clubs and societies, etc using the Hall. I do not recall any, apart from the Home Guard and Army Cadets, as above. We had no cubs or scouts, the war and the cadets - one could join at 11 years - was enough. Gardening was devoted to the "Dig for Victory" campaign and everyone ate the lot - few grew flowers to justify flower shows! There must have been whist drives, or the like, since I recall a room full of folding, green baize card tables. I never saw a hunt anywhere near Shrivenham in the war - or since!

Do you remember films being projected in the Main Hall?

Films, now, are a different matter. The Hall was used extensively for films that were produced by the Ministry of Information and these were good value, propaganda as they may have been. The raised stage was excellent for the purpose and the hall was usually crowded, with kids sitting on the floor; I recall it as being most cosy, Dad stoked up the furnace and drew the blackout curtains. The film I recall vividly was of the German planes shooting up our fishing boats in the North Sea - in the early days - and, later, of course, El Alamein. I never recall any private showings but I do recall first seeing "How Green was my Valley" around these times and it wasn't at a proper cinema, so perhaps there indeed were other film shows.

Your father was responsible for maintaining the Hall's Grounds. These days, they are used by the football, cricket and tennis clubs, the school holds lessons and sports days

*there and the village also hold various annual fetes. Was this the same in the 40s?
Was there any military use for the Rec? I think you mentioned trenches!*

Slit Trenches were about 5 ft deep by 2ft wide and 7ft long dug round the edge of the Recreation Ground on the war-wounded houses side of the chestnut avenue. They all faced (broadside on) inwards towards the centre of the Rec and were to be used as machine-gun and rifle emplacements should German paratroops or gliders land on the Rec. They were mostly in use either for the kids hide-and-seek or mock battles between the Home Guard and Army Cadets. There were a dozen or so. These (trenches) and the circular groups of trees, provided excellent cover but, one day, the Home Guard unwisely barricaded themselves behind bales of straw in the area of the now tennis courts. A few thunderflashes thrown by us set it well alight and the mock war was abandoned. Mr Dance, who led the Home Guard, was caught in the middle and took it out on all we cadets at school the next day.

Other Defensive Mechanisms - in the village, I can only recall the pill-box machine- gun emplacement on the corner ground (with the shed) on the 'other to the Memorial Hall side' of the lane down the side of the Rec. It was solid concrete and positioned to fire up and down the main road. Incidentally, the shed was an auxiliary fire station housing a huge portable hose on wheels, with an engine to pump the water. My Dad looked after the shed as part of the Memorial Hall property. Around the aerodrome there were sited many gun emplacements, as there were inside and round the barracks.

In the Rec, the men from the last war played bowls all day. Once, two German planes came high over the Rec - to all intents and purposes out of range of our guns, the black puffs appearing to be well below them. We kids all gazed up until the shrapnel started to whistle down and through the trees and ran for cover. The bowlers laughed, carrying on their game.

There were not a lot of people playing on the Rec in those days. The village school had its football and cricket there, there were tennis courts of a kind - not like today - and rounders was popular. There were no organised grown up games (apart from Army cricket), everyone seemed to be away in the war. Any military uses were confined to the antics of the Home Guard/Army Cadets who, curiously, coexisted within a kind of rivalry, holding shoots out at Becketts Stables - I once saw a Home Guard Marksman snap shoot a fast and low pigeon at 100 yards with a single 0.22 bullet and later, a different member of this elite body perforate (with the same gun) the hand of a cadet from Watchfield while he was changing the paper target in a shootout between us, up on the hills in camp at Ashbourne Park.

Each evening, almost the entire population of village kids and evacuees used to convene in the Rec armed each with a type of wooden bat, to play a game whereby the person with a ball chased everyone, tried to hit anyone of them with the thrown ball, while the target defended himself with his bat (no girls ever played). The person who was eventually hit then had to become the chaser. Literally, our entire lives revolved

around this game. It had no war significance, it was not cops and robbers, but it is one of my fondest memories. It took place in the area of the round shrubberies - there today - and I feel I could still find my hiding places in them. Woe betide the person hiding in a slit trench - there were nasty things in them. Someone once found a six-foot grass snake as co-occupant. The game went on each night to blackout time. There was no school homework in those days. Parents didn't mind.

The old photos on the upstairs landing (at Beckett House) are marvellous - as well as German POW's (some of whom worked for my Dad on the sports grounds) there were the crew of an Italian submarine which apparently surrendered intact to us in the Med. They formed a singing group and were very popular with the village girls!

You mention that German POW's worked with your father on the sports grounds. How were they guarded? Did they ever try to escape? How were they treated by the villagers?

They were not as free to come and go as were the Italians. They were guarded - if I recall correctly - by British Military Police and kept in a wire-enclosed cage at the far Eastern side of the College site - Longcot end- where Dad's major sports fields (which they worked on) were. They made annoying little Bavarian-type wooden music boxes, which opened and played tunes, presumably in the hope of pleasing people .

I don't recall them ever getting into the village like the Italians did. I would assume they didn't try to escape - if they got home to Germany they'd only have to suffer the war again (the biggest fear of the Italians). I don't think anyone had much interest in them.

For the record, tell me the full story of your father's confrontation with Mr Dance, the local Headmaster, over the cricket pitch.

Mr Dance, theoretically, as Head of the Parish Council, must have had some form of authority over my father and could have told him to do whatever things. As Head of the Home Guard, he also expected Dad to join it. Dad would not acknowledge either. He was wounded in the First War and had had enough with his leg. Mr Dance used to use me - literally - as the whipping boy in this situation. One day, I had helped Dad prepare a marl wicket for an Interservices cricket match to be held next day. Mr Dance decided the school would play on the prepared wicket. My Dad, in disagreeing within what became a shouting match between Mr Dance and himself (featuring Mr Dance accusing Dad of not being an Englishman - I think Dance himself was Scottish - or his wife was) had me help him pull - with his tractor - the five ton roller out to sit between

the two wickets. Mr Dance, thus thwarted, succeeded in breaking the cane on me next morning and had me go out and cut a new knotty one, with which he completed my punishment. I don't think Dance was cruel, I didn't mind because he taught us to have a sense of value and pride in our country and its flag but he was a vindictive person - as Vicar Metford could vouch!

One thing to be eternally grateful to Mr Dance for was he taught us children to be proud of our country and the need to keep it free. Can you imagine schools singing today:

'Fight for freedom everyone,

Build the ship and man the gun,

Do as you have never done,

To keep the people free'?

We had this and 'There'll Always be an England' to sing each day (but never 'Rule Britannia - such was his measure). It was not a sin in those days to feel patriotic - indeed, it was essential in order to survive.

What standard were the sports held here at that time?

Other than school sports and sports days, I do not recall any others.

Ian Hurle September 20th 2003