

Pam Latchford

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I was born in a cottage near the top of Brewhouse Hill. Nurse Hawkins was the village midwife then and for many years; I remember that she used to ride her bicycle everywhere.

When I was a child, all that part of the village was farms. The Chennells had a farm on Nomansland with cows in the fields at the top of Brewhouse Hill; we used to meet the cows on the road on their way to the milking sheds. Ash Grove was a cart track to Bury Farm; that was our playground. Mr Throssell was the farmer there. He lived in the big house and his brother-in-law Mr Parkins lived at Bury Farm Cottages – we always called it “Throssell and Parkins”. All that area was built on with new houses in the 1970s.

Mr Ball had a butcher’s shop in Church Street; we used to watch him slaughtering the animals. I could never eat veal, especially after seeing the little calves being driven into the slaughterhouse at Simons butchers by the mill. We ordered our coal from Mr Hawkins or Mr Warder. Mr Bozier came round in his cart with a churn full of milk and you scooped what you wanted into a jug. The cream was really thick.

We always used to play out of doors. We paddled in the river in The Meads; I cut my foot there, I still have the scar. We used to swim at Newbridge too. We could leave our clothes in the reeds and find them again afterwards. We caught crayfish in the garden sieve; they were good to eat. We used to play rounders in the farm fields; I remember the bull had a tin plate over his eyes so we could see him but he couldn’t see us. There were two lovely cart-horses too; they were called Punch and Kitty; they were great big animals but very gentle.

I can remember Charlie Collins had a big sledge and six children could ride on it.

Soon after my fifth birthday in 1933, I started at St Helen’s School. That was in the Old School building in Church Street. I remember that it was very cold in winter. There was a big stove in the middle of the room and, when the bottles of milk froze, they were arranged round the stove to thaw out.

My first teacher, in what would now be called the Reception class, was Miss Warren. I thought she was very strict and rather frightening. If there was too much noise in class, she would say “Children: put your hands on your head” or sometimes “Go to sleep”. She lived in Marford Road.

After a year, I went up to the next class. The teacher was Miss Young; she was a dear old soul. She lived in the big house across the road from the school. The focus was firmly on the three Rs - reading, writing and arithmetic. We learned our tables by rote and a lady called Mavis taught the girls (not the boys) knitting.

The next step up, when I was seven, was into Standard I. There were about 20 children in the class. We had to take dictation and write essays, as well as practising handwriting by writing out line after line of capital letters, then line after line of small letters, before we moved on to joined-up writing. We always knew when it was nearly the end of the school day because we could hear Patrick Lamb’s father on his motorbike coming to collect Patrick and take him home.

It was a Church of England School and the rector, Mr Baird-Smith, came in every day for morning prayers and he also gave out the prizes at the end of the year. The prizes were based on tests that we had to take each term. Mr Housden, the headmaster, was strict but fair; it was often the same boys who were in trouble over and over again. I remember one day one of the boys flicked a paper pellet at me and I called out. I was told to see Mr Housden and I had to wait, petrified, outside his door. But he just told me off; only the boys were caned. Mr Housden lived at Ayot and later married Mrs Ling who had been housekeeper to Mr Lee, the station master and church organist. He was killed in a road accident on Marford Road.

I used to run down Brewhouse Hill to school when I heard the bell ringing; I had to get there before it stopped and line up with the other children in my class before we filed into school. The children from Gustard Wood came to school by bus and the Folly children walked; they had to walk through a tunnel under the railway line at Newbridge. We all rather looked down on the Folly children; we said they had fleas.

Even when we were in school, we tended to play with the children who lived near us at home so most of my friends lived near Brewhouse Hill.

Standards II, III and IV were all taught in the Old School building but, when I moved up into Standard V in the Senior School, it meant going to the new school across the road which had been built in 1932. It was much warmer and lighter than the Old School. When they were raising the money to build it, people could 'buy a brick' for sixpence and have their initials carved in it. Many of the bricks had the initials 'MLK'; that was for Melissa Kemp who lived at Mackerye End. Her parents owned Kemps Biscuits. She died very young and her parents gave a piece of land by the river at The Folly to the parish; that is why it is called Melissa Field. It used to be a sports field with play equipment such as a seesaw and swings. We used to pick wild daffodils at Mackerye End for Mothering Sunday. The Cory Wrights moved into Mackerye End later. We lived in Marshalls Heath Lane for a while and I remember one day Mrs Cory Wright turned over her car trying to go round the corner. She had the corner house demolished after that! She was a terror!

Mr Barnes was my teacher in Standard V and the lessons were more varied, with Geography and History, though there was still a lot of singing. We did plenty of mental arithmetic – no calculators then! There were practical lessons too: cookery for the girls and woodwork for the boys.

There were big changes at school when war broke out in September 1939. A lot of evacuee children arrived in the village. There were so many of them that they went to school in the mornings in one week and we went in the afternoons then, in the next week, it was the other way round. There was an air raid shelter in the field behind the new school. It was horrid; all concrete and dark with rows of hard wooden forms to sit on.

I left school when I was 14, on Maundy Thursday, and went to work at the Helmets factory on the following Tuesday. I think my father must have helped to get me that job. The original Helmets factory, where he worked, had opened in the old brewery building on Brewhouse Hill in 1928; they made cork helmets and policemen's helmets and they started making firemen's helmets when the war came. The Moat factory, where I worked, made miner's

caps and pilots' helmets. It opened in the 1930s and both factories were open at the same time for a while, until all the work was concentrated at the Moat.

I left Helmets when I married but I went back to work after my son grew up; that was at Murphy's and that is another story!