

# Reminiscences of Great Paxton

By Bert Goodwin

Walking from St Neots to Paxton seems to be much more of an effort than it was fifty or more years ago, Approaching Weald (or Gallow) Brook, the natural boundary of Great Paxton, I stopped to observe the landscape. The farm in the hollow still stands, though the small orchard has disappeared, and the water meadows have given way to ploughland, Old Pryke, once the church warden of Paxton, lived there in 1890, and I remember Jack Coville from Haverhill, and Thomason from the same area with their herds of black and white Frisian cows. The railway still takes its old  
10 course, but with sleeker, quieter trains; the roaring hiss of steam, the long plume of smoke, and the blaze of light at night from the open firebox have gone.

The two spinneys bisected by the road are but a shadow of their former glory, when great elms reached across to envelop the road. Where the old implement shed stood there is now a modern house, with peacocks sitting on the chimney pots. Even the skew bridge has changed, along with the narrow plightle on its east side which once belonged to the Sandy Poor ground. Paxton hill House bought it out soon after the enclosures; they did not seem to relish the idea of it being intermingled with their estate. Even the old black poplar beside the bridge has gone.

I continued my walk as the little hill became steeper, past the oaks (or what's left of  
20 them) to the west, with the spinney where as children we crept through to pick bluebells and violets on the spring holidays; then past the little lodge house (such tiny rooms) where Mrs Crecy lived with her two daughters. She was the Priestleys' nanny, and a widow of the 1914/18 war.

The tarmac road is easier to walk along than the rolled gravel I knew, but motor vehicles are more likely to kill you than any horse and trap. It passes what was called The White House in my day. Now it is black, painted over in 1938-9 for old Harley. He came from London to live there, and was afraid that it would be seen by German bombers. It seemed rather run down compared to my memories of it, with no nice clipped hedges or flowers in the front garden. The old poultry farm that stood behind  
30 and a bit to north is now smaller, having had a storey or two taken off it. Now it is some kind of works. This was a famous beauty spot in years gone by; folk in hard hats with walking canes, end couples in horses and traps, the gentlemen in swallow-tailed coats, pinstriped trousers and spats, the ladies in long dresses with leg-of-mutton sleeves and pink parasols, came to admire it. Only the river now remains, with huge sand and gravel pits.

The Toseland road seemed as straight as ever. That part was built some time after 1811, after the enclosures of the old common fields by the Turnpike Trust. The little wedge of green in the centre of the T-Junction has long gone, with the finger post which said, 'Toseland 2 miles, Great Paxton 1, St Neots 2". it was a lonely old road  
40 in those days. The three sets of barns, Townsend' s, Gaunt' s, and Whitaker's, have all gone now. The Paxton parson walked along it every third Sunday night to take the service at Toseland Church. "Holy Moses" too walked this road every Sunday night,

summer and winter. He was a lay preacher, who preached for nothing on a circuit of chapels. Some of the village lads lay in wait for him one winter night in an old barn. One walked across the road in front of him wearing a white sheet. Far from being alarmed, the old fellow cried out, "If you're a man you'll bear me, if you're a ghost you'll vanish", and with a mighty leap sprang upon the unfortunate lad's back, bringing him to the ground.

50 Windyridge, an imposing building, seems more secluded than it used to be. The hedges are higher, the shrubs less pruned, and the house itself after sixty years has weathered a bit. Lionel Abrahams lived there once; he was a big man with glasses, a solicitor as I remember him. He drove a huge black Bentley, and always had time for a word or a lift for Paxton people. His brother was Harold Abrahams, of "Chariots of Fire" fame. This site was called Beacon Field in the 15th Century, and maybe also in the 14th Century when the beacon network was organised; but not, so far as I can find out, after the mid-16th Century.

60 I finally reached the crest of the hill, but, before descending, stopped to look and reflect upon how that scene had appeared all those years ago. Tucked down in the hollow was Paxton itself. Away to the right on a high ridge stood a stark line of bushes and trees which I instinctively knew as the old "Abbotsley baulk"; a ridgeway or grass road on high ground, therefore dry and passable in bad weather. It is referred to as The Processional Way in a 16th century document in Huntingdon Record Office. At least that was still there, along with the church of Holy Trinity, not looking quite so imposing as I had expected. Part of the main street seemed the same, but, that apart, it was a completely different world. Gone were the trees and hedges (some had been as high as six feet), gone were the watermeadows, the island, the ferry house; and the small fields have all been ploughed into one. Most of it was unrecognisable.

70 I've stood on the crest of Paxton Hill with Uncle Jim, who was born in the 1850s. I wonder what he would think to it now. On an autumn evening the sounds would be so different from today. The steady click... click... of a binder still at work in a cornfield; the call of men to horses as they clopped their way, the cart and gears (as harness was then called) creaking on the uneven gravel roads, bringing in the loads of sheaves; the cluck of coveys of partridges feeding on the open stubble; and the chug-chug of the corncrake just before dusk. In spring the lark would climb singing, high in the clear sky, a linnet would sing from a five-barred gate, and a red fox would hurry from a cornfield before a sharp-eyed farmer could get a shot in. Most of these sights and sounds have gone.

80 I pondered as to whether I should turn back. The hill looked long and steep; as a lad I had often been up and down it as many as four times a day, I often walked from St Neots on a winter's night in bright moonlight to stop here and see the outline of the village sitting snug in its little fold of the hills. Smoke circled from each chimney, and on black nights the few lights from oil lamps (and there were few because folk drew their black or dark blue flaxen oiled blinds on the approach of darkness) would beckon me on, knowing that this was the last mile home.

One incident I remember was during the bad winter of 1936. There was about a foot of snow which over the previous day had drifted and been impacted on the roads by foot, horse, cart, and some motor vehicles. There was no gritting or salting then. The few motor vehicles that there were used chains on their wheels, and many had solid tyres. I was riding home from St Neots on my bicycle (it cost £8.50 - about £800 in today's money) and my oil lamp was on the blink. I met a friend, Rowley Pigeons, who was going to St Neots. Slipping and sliding to a halt, we exchanged a few words as to the state of the roads we had passed along. He explained that Paxton Hill was very bad at the bottom, especially since there was a slight bend in the road, and he advised me not to brake at that point. Resuming our respective Journeys, I passed the Toseland turn without noticing a policeman from Offord standing behind the finger post on the patch of green there, "Stop!" he called, "where's your light?" Without a word I dashed down the hill until the pedals could go no faster, and, glancing behind, saw his light gaining on me. Obviously his weight gave him the extra speed. However, at the slight bend at the foot of the hill I remembered that advice about not braking, and got round by clipping the grass verge. P.C. Potter did brake, and instantly found himself in a hedge amid a huge snowdrift.

On arriving home I quickly put my coat and cycle behind a hedge, and stood on the path by the wicket gate. Along he came, puffing and panting with his helmet smothered in snow. "Anyone on a bike passed this way?" he asked. "Yes" I replied, "just two minutes ago, going like fury towards Offord". As I watched him go, little did I think how trivial it would seem fifty years later. Police are far too busy nowadays to bother about folk riding on footpaths or without lights. In those days country bobbies in particular would spend hours in hiding to catch such offenders.

It seemed easier walking down the hill. The old Gault Hill gate and the single elm had gone, and the lucerne field had been built on, but the lofty horse chestnut was still there. Children in the 'twenties spent hours throwing sticks and stones up to knock the conkers down, before they were really ripe. They would be dried, or baked, or put in brine and then dried, to produce the hardest nut possible for playing conkers. There used to be a spring by the conker tree (Spring Well, it was called) which flowed even in the driest summers, but it suddenly stopped when Graveley airfield was built. They must have broken the vein, because it never flowed again. The high hedge and corner opposite River Lane have been levelled and banked; no sign now of where the bombs dropped in 1940.

The river side of the road has completely changed. Gone are the tall trees, the stunted sycamore, and the grass close where, years ago, they dug clay for brickmaking, causing a steep bank across the field some twenty or thirty feet high. Here as children we came after the first heavy snow, perhaps making a toboggan out of a couple of pieces of four-by-two, with bits of old iron for runners and a few slats to hold it together, to have a wonderful time on those man-made slopes. At other times we would have battles, which the side on top of the slope almost always won, Direct assault failing, those at the bottom would build a snow fort and snowball the defenders, who usually countered by rolling a giant snowball down the slope and smashing the fort to pieces. Home we would go, clothes and feet soaked through, to get into trouble with our parents, who had to stuff the leather boots with newspaper

before drying them slowly before the fire; too fast, and you would go to school next day with boots like iron, and the leather would crack if they weren't greased. Now the man-made hill has gone, with the rabbits whose home it was. It is now an agricultural machinery works.

140 I next walked down the river lane; "An ancient road", according to the Enclosure Award minute book. On the north corner there still stands the little bungalow built by a Mr Smith in 1921 on the site of the old brick kilns. The gardens have been extended, and now cover where the old claypits used to be. They were an eyesore, and are not missed. The tall saplings planted to hide them have also been cleared away, much improving the view.

150 The railroad bridge has been decently repaired. The original part, built in 1848-9, stood up to the pounding of modern trains better than the extensions of 1896. Those three arches have given shelter to hundreds of tramps - "Milestone inspectors", Paxton folk called them. They would descend on us in June and July, at the time of the catch crops, pea picking and lifting the early potatoes for a few shillings. In the evening you could see as many as thirty of them at a time cooking bacon, sausages, potatoes etcetera on open fires; some had tents, some had old prams, some slept under sacks or ragged coats in the open, or under the railway arches, depending on the direction of the wind. Never once can I remember any child being harmed by them. Our farmhouse was something of a staging post to them; no tramp ever passed without calling. I think they chalked a sign nearby that all 'Gentlemen of the road' understood, or else they told one another. My mother never refused any of them; it may not have been much, but they all received something. At that time it was an offence to beg or ask for food, so they generally started by asking for hot water, to get the lie of the land, and then asked. "if you could spare a little tea or sugar, lady?" My mother used to buy things at Jumble sales and stored them in a barn. She once gave a tramp without a coat an old parson's cassock; he went on his way delighted, probably fancying himself as an itinerant vicar.

160 Further down, the canal, or "cut" as it was called, was unrecognisable; just a tangled mass of reeds, bushes, and briars. The canal which the railway excavated to the south in 1848 to carry bricks and material by barge to make the bridge, had been filled in altogether. The village "cut" had seen its heyday in the 16th and 17th centuries, when coal, wood, timber, gravel, reeds, osiers, and many other commodities were transported to and from Paxton by river barge. After 1860 it had gradually become a tip for the village - there was no refuse collection in those days. Bottles, ashes, old bikes and general refuse all went into it.

170 The sign post for the footpath to the ferry no longer points to the middle of the field but, more conveniently, round the edge of it. In the past, these fields were water meadows, where you could pick milkmaids, wild orchids, quaking grass, dog daisies, and a host of other common wild flowers.

Now it is all ploughland. I returned back up the lane, and over Willow Brook; Sallow Brook, some old fellows called it, or Stoke Brook in earlier times; it matters little now as all have gone. The first bridge over this brook, probably a wooden one, was built

around 1540. In his will, one John Pische left six shillings and eightpence to pay for it. Before that, presumably, folk had to wade across.

180 The brook still trickles over the pebbles much as it always did. There used to be a little roadway alongside the road which led to the brook, where people could dip for water. There was also a sheep dip on the east side; a few crumbling bricks remain to mark its site. As a boy had watched my father and grandfather fold the sheep, and then dip them for sheep scab and maggot fly. When dry, they were sheared by hand before trotting away, a good deal cooler and cleaner. The old hand shears still hang up in my shed today.

We children made paper boats and floated them under the bridge, looked for caddis fly larvae and small fish, or dammed it up and got into trouble, with more to follow when we got home with wet feet.

There was a small close on the west side of the brook which was always wet. No one ever seemed to know who it belonged to, A Swedish house now graces it.

190 Low farm, where we lived, stands back from the road. It is empty now, and looks old, gaunt, and uncared for. The long lawns are a mass of long grass, and the weeping willow in the centre has gone, along with many of the farm buildings. They don't need them nowadays, with only corn being grown and no grass meadows or closes for cattle and sheep. Old Thomas Bottom lived here or hereabouts; his will of 1497 mentions "My house at the town's end". There is a Council housing estate where his close used to be, with high hawthorn and bramble hedges, rows of stately elms, and flocks of guinea fowl which wandered along this shady brook, calling noisily if an intruder, human or animal, was about.

200 There was a chapel here which has vanished completely; demolished in the early 1959' s. It was built about 1835-40 as a Methodist chapel, but called the Gospel Hall in my day. Generally lay and itinerant preachers came once a week and Sunday. It wasn't thought much of by Church people, who looked down on Chapel folk. Before the Enclosures, a road, "The Surveyer's Highway", ran there to the gravel pits, but fell into disuse after the railway came.

210 Eliza Hook's old house once stood here, end-on to the road. Only part of an end wall is left, with traces of where the post box was. She was postmistress there before the post office was moved to the shop, and was 96 when she died about 1957. She was a prim and elegant woman, with a black bonnet, long black clothes to the ground, and black boots with a dozen shiny buttons up the side, and she always looked at you over the top of gold wire spectacles. The brickwork for her house came from The Fox, a pub which stood on Toseland Road corner. The original timber frame house was very old; the deeds went back to 1718.

Ouse Dale, and Pax Cottage with its long orchard, seem much the same. I can hear old John Barton now, singing The Floral Dance in a heavy bass. The orchard beyond has been built over; yet more Swedish houses, here today and gone tomorrow. Two old cottages stood there, before my time. My grandmother lived in one as a child William Ward held meetings here, circa 1838, before the Methodist chapel was built, after applying to the Church (the Bishop of Lincoln) for permission.

220 Taking a brisk walk over the school playing field I entered "God's Half Acre". It was pleasing to see how tidy the old part of the churchyard was kept; no desecration of gravestones here. The blue cedar tree which Jack White planted and lovingly tended for over forty years looked in peak condition. Inside, the church was much as I remembered it. A rood loft had been installed between the nave and chancel, and a plaque on the west wall commemorates previous vicars and rectors.

This church, or minster as it was looked upon in years gone by, dates back to Saxon times, particularly the rounded arcades on the north and south sides. Some schools of thought say it has Danish or Viking influence, there being a church of this type in Germany. There seems little to substantiate this idea; 900 A.D. seems a little too early, especially for the billet mouldings on the massive chancel arches. Something like 1040-50 seems a more realistic estimate.

230 I peeped into the vestry where, as a boy, I had robed in cassock and surplice for the choir every Sunday. Being the smallest and youngest, had the unfortunate privilege of sitting next to the Vicar, and in full view of the congregation; the other boys could safely chew sweets and whisper to each other during prayers.

I passed the War Memorial on my way back to the road, read the names on it, and remembered the many times we were led by the parson from school to the memorial on November 11th for prayers and the One Minute's Silence. We were too small to understand the real meaning of it all, and little did we know how many of our generation would be killed in a second Great War.

240 The most talked-of place in the village was the Black Bull, the centre of merriment, singing, shouting, and swearing. The iron handrail is still there, as in earlier days, to assist over-indulged men on their perilous way down the three stone steps at the front door. I say men, because no ladies ever went into the place. There was a "best room" with soft leather chairs, but it was kept locked except during the summer, or at Paxton Feast, when folk from London and other cities came back to their birthplace. They had real money to spend, and immaculately-dressed wives or girlfriends, whose lipstick and paint was highly disapproved of by the village wives. Only then was the Best Room opened, and prices went up - a halfpenny on beer, and a penny on spirits. The tap room had high-backed wooden benches, sawdust on the brick floor, and a spittoon by the hearth. A skittle table in one corner, and a table with  
250 some chairs, were the only comforts. Beer drawn from the wood, mild or bitter, was fourpence a pint, cigarettes twopence, and tobacco fourpence a packet. The regulars' personal beer mugs hung on the wall, and woe betide any unwary stranger who tried to use one of them.

As a child of five or six I must have gone to the Black Bull hundreds of times, with a sixpence wrapped in paper in case I dropped it. "Go round to the back" they would tell me (for no child under sixteen was allowed into a pub to get alcohol) "and ask Mr Hunt for a half of half-and-half and half an ounce of Hearts of Oak". All for sixpence. Sometimes it took a great deal of knocking to get any attention, when the noise inside drowned my feeble tapping. Sometimes Mrs Hunt would answer. She was a  
260 lady, and a Jewess; no work for Mrs Hunt, except to sit and look refined in fine clothes with immaculate hair. "I'm coming, do be patient" old Hunt would say.

Sometimes 'Aunty', an old dear well over eighty, would take the money and Jug, and go to the cellar. From the top of the cellar steps I could peep through the jamb of the door and watch them draw the beer, first taking out the peg in the top to let the air in. The tobacco was wrapped so that it could not be seen by prying eyes. Walking home carefully, so as not to spill any of the precious liquid, I would smell the tobacco, and then the beer. It smelt most appetising, and I continued to do this until one day I tasted the beer. Never since then have I drunk the stuff, except once.

270 It was mid-August, and my father and grandfather with a few labourers were stacking corn in a field a mile or more from the nearest water. Corn was usually stacked in the rickyard, and the ricks fenced round with barbed wire to keep the cattle away. Logs were first laid on the ground, then brushwood strewn over them, and then a layer of straw or dried bracken. On this the sheaves, or "shoaves" were laid, with the ears inwards. "Keep the middle well filled, and she'll never topple over", the old fellows would tell you. A four and a half gallon barrel of beer was carefully put in a shady spot out of the sun, and at breakfast and at lunchtime it would be tapped. I had taken a flask of cold tea (no milk or sugar in it, they only make you more parched, my father said) but by lunchtime I had nothing left. The heat and the dust from the straw parched my throat and dried up my lips, and I cast around for water, but there was  
280 none. Desperate, I drew half a pint of beer and drank it in one go. Half an hour later I was lying dizzy under a hedge with an awful headache. I came round after an hour, and that was the last time I touched beer. Possibly the heat, and being partially dehydrated, did not help matters.

Beside the Black Bull were two cottages, now turned into one. The blacksmith lived in one with his family, and his striker in the other. Cyril lived in one half, with his mother Annie. Her brothers, Bill and Ernie, lived in the other; two dour, hardworking old fellows nicknamed Trilby and Doughy who had worked the land all their lives. Cyril, their nephew, lived alone after his mother died. He was positively workshy; a painter by trade, he worked a couple of days, asked for a sub, and then went off to  
290 town on his bike for bottles of wine and spirits which he then took to bed, staying there maybe three or four days until he sobered up. He would smoke dried tea leaves, or sage leaves when times were hard for him. He would wait until his uncle Ernie had put the cat's milk out next door, then get it quickly before the cat drank it. My mother, as usual, seemed to attract all waifs and strays, and Cyril was no exception. One morning he came to beg a bit of lard. "What did you have for your breakfast?" Asked my mother. "Fried bread" came the reply. "How did you fry it without fat?" she asked. "I fried it in water". He certainly was a character, never worrying about anything.

300 Trilby and Doughy hated him. They hated him because they were unable to force him to change his ways. The two cottages only had a stud partition between the bedrooms, a timber frame covered with hessian and then several layers of wallpaper on top. One Sunday morning they both lay in bed, knowing full well that Cyril could hear them. Trilby said, "What are we having for breakfast, Ernie ?" "I'll have bacon, two eggs and sausages". Cyril, having no food in the house, sings out, "While you're at it, throw one or two b.....s in for me".

Poor Cyril died of alcohol some years after. I don't suppose anybody in the village remembers him now.

310 Opposite stood the reading room, a fine building in early times. Built by Edward and Hamer Towgood, on land given by them, it belonged solely to the parish, with the Incumbent as trustee. Many happy hours were spent there by the men and lads of the village. There were two large rooms with open fires. One contained a full-sized billiards table, for the use of which you put a penny in the box on the mantelpiece. The other room, more popular with the youths, had table tennis, cards, dominoes, and a shelf of books. Membership cost twopence a week. It was open from October until the end of March, and during the summer months it was used for the cricket tea on Saturday, and for storage of sports gear generally. Some twenty years ago, to the detriment of the incumbent, it was sold to an estate agent for £60. I remonstrated with the vicar at the time, as I never understood what interest he had in the sale. The story he told me was that he wrote to each and every parishioner, asking if they  
320 wanted it to be kept or sold, and only got five answers, four of which wanted it sold. What good £60 did for the village I shall never know; to me, it was like Judas' thirty pieces of silver. Recently it was sold for over £30,000 and made into a dwelling. The Towgoods would turn in their graves if they could see it.

330 Opposite the Reading Rooms stood Accommodation Farm, very old and mellow. We moved here from Low Farm, and here I spent most of my boyhood and most happy days. A farmer's life then was nothing like it is now; most farmers, gentlemen farmers excepted, worked harder and much longer hours than their men, and their children also worked. There were always jobs to be done, even for the smallest ones. Once over the age of ten, such work as leading plough, managing animals, feeding the poultry, and milking cows all became after-school chores.

My mother made butter and cheese, washed eggs for market, scalded a pig for scraping after it was killed, besides the management of the dairy with all its milk to be sold to villagers by the pint or quart. Skimmed milk was a penny a quart, new milk a penny a pint, and it was my job to take it to the regular customers, morning and evening. Huge flat pans stood on wooden benches around the dairy walls, and milk was poured in by the pailful after being strained through muslin. The cream was skimmed off the next day and stood in a big brown earthenware vessel, with salt, until the next Wednesday, when it was churned, patted, and pressed to release the buttermilk, as to leave it in would make the butter taste yeasty. Then it was patted  
340 into half- and one-pound patts, with an oak leaf and acorn on top, ready for market on Thursday. The skimmed milk was either sold, made into cheese or fed to the pigs. Many a time I was told to get home quickly from school to help churn the butter, especially on a hot or thundery day when the cream was difficult to turn. Then there were the vessels, skimmers, milk pails, and benches to be scrubbed and scalded, along with the great stone slabs of the dairy floor; all this, and more, in addition to the ordinary housework.

The sounds and smells of a farmyard meant nothing to someone who had always experienced it. Cockerels crowing at the crack of dawn, one against another; pigs squealing for their breakfast; the clip-clop of shod hooves as horses were brought



350 from stable to cart hovel, along with the creak of leather and the jingle of harness;  
the bleat of sheep in the far-off pasture or the bark of Jim the collie as the cows  
came in to be milked; all this was the normal background to our lives.

All animals were fed off the land. Cows were let out to pasture most of the year, and  
only fed in the yard in heavy frost and snow. Then they were fed on hay, dried  
lucerne, or clover cut out of the stack in great square wads with a stack knife. At  
milking time they were fed on a mixture of mangolds, swedes and kohlrabi, which  
were wintered in a root store; after cleaning they were ground up in a hand-operated  
360 machine. To this was added barley or oat chaff, and linseed oil cake, the only thing  
bought. This came in two-by-one-foot slabs, about an inch thick, which also had to  
be broken up, in a cake blender. The whole mixture was put into a zinc bath with a  
sack over it, ready for the next milking session.

I was taught to milk at the age of eleven. How it made my hands and forearms ache,  
until I got accustomed to it. I remember plainly the order of method my grandfather  
taught me. The animals had to be fetched from the close, and the times had to be  
most regular; 5.30 a.m., and 4.30 p.m. The cows knew these times too, because  
they would be waiting by the gate. Once it was open, off they went, tails swishing,  
led by the oldest one, straight into their own stalls in the milking parlour. If one  
happened to get into another's stall there would be bedlam until they had sorted  
themselves out. The long manger had holes in it, through which passed ropes with a  
370 halter one end and a block of oak at the other. This gave the animals a degree of  
freedom while feeding. The three-legged stool was put in position, on the cow's right  
side, and after a friendly word or two and a pat, to get the animal settled down, the  
udders were washed. Then, with your cap on back to front, you pressed your head  
into the cow's flank, close to where the thighbone joins the back, to discourage  
kicking. For the same reason, one's left knee was placed by the cow's back leg,  
because, unlike horses, cows always move their leg forward before kicking  
sideways; this is difficult if your leg is already there. A great deal of time and patience  
is needed to milk cows in the old way.

Accommodation Farm was a typical late 17th century farmhouse, consisting of a  
380 large dining room the width of the house, a huge brick inglenook fireplace partially  
converted to accommodate an 18th century range with an oven one side, a two-  
barred fireplace, and a hot water tank the other side with a tap. The parlour was  
slightly smaller; it had a door which led to the grain store, which also had an outside  
door. The huge pantry was larger than any modern living room, and the "back  
House" consisted of a huge stone sink, a cooking range, and a door to the dairy,  
over which was a loft, once the servant's bedroom. It was all very primitive by today's  
standards. The huge oak beam across the living room was all knotted and gnarled,  
and had spikes for hanging bacon and ham to dry. Part of the room around the  
fireplace was curtained off during the winter with heavy red hessian curtains, to keep  
390 out the cold and drafts. An oil lamp stood on the table, as the mantelshelf was too  
high for it. The grate was big enough to hold a faggot (a bundle of sticks about a foot  
across and a yard or more long) which would be lit around seven on a winter  
evening. It not only gave warmth, but extra light for reading by. When it had burnt  
out, it would be time "to go up the wooden hill", my grandparents would say.

Winter evening jobs included sorting dried peas on a tray. A hundredweight sack would take several evenings. I invariably came in for this job, my grandfather pointing out that his eyes were not so good as they used to be for such work. Before retiring to bed, he would check the animals one last time, and bury three or four large potatoes in the ashes of the fire. He would study the daily paper for a bit, and the magazine "Farm, Field and Fireside", cut a shaving to light the fire next morning, (it reminded me of a reindeer), and split a dozen spills with a knife for lighting his pipe and the oil lamp. The potatoes would be taken out of the ash pan by 8.30 p.m. with crusty jackets on, the tops cut off, and a knob of butter put inside. There's no way to make them as crusty or tasty as they do in ashes, or perhaps it was being young and hungry that made them taste so good.

My grandfather was a stern man, who never used two words when one would do, but he never got me into trouble with my parents. Once on a summer holiday I and some other boys splashed walnuts from Judd's trees. I hid mine in some land drainage pipes that were stacked by the side of the house. At lunchtime I was sitting opposite my grandfather, with mother and the rest further down the table. In the middle of the meal he suddenly looked up and said, "I know where there's a lot of little green apples". My grandmother and mother demanded further details. "I know where there's a lot of little green apples", he repeated. Try as they might, they could not get another word out of the old man. As for me, I breathed a sigh of relief and swiftly got rid of those little green apples.

There must have been a second house there once, as there were two ponds close together. (Generally, a pond was dug by the garden boundary; if more was needed, it was easier to extend it to an L-shape than to dig a second pond). As our house was nothing but timber frame, stud, mud, and wattle, I would imagine the other house was the same.

The stack yard was about a hundred yards from the house, usually containing four or five corn or legume stacks. The day the threshing machine came was quite an occasion. The drum and elevator and chaffcutter were got into position with great difficulty, because of the mud, but when the engine finally got onto firm ground it winched the rest of the implements into place. The unfamiliar smell of smoke and hot oil soon filled the yard, with the shouts of men and the laughter of small boys; everybody seemed to be there. Many casual labourers were employed for this chore; we needed men to stack the straw, men to fetch water in the water cart, men to cut the bands which tied the sheaves, men to fork the sheaves from stack to drum, men to work the chaffcutter; and, men to carry away the corn. They had to be strong; a sack of wheat weighed 12 stone, barley 16 stone, peas 18, and beans 20 stone; 280 lb, or 127 kg in today's terms. Chaff carrying was the easiest, as it weighed little.

One of the jobs for us, when we got home from school, was raking cavings (the winnowings from the ears of corn) from under the drum. Somehow I always got this job, especially when barley was being threshed. This chaff-like mixture was full of tails (the bearded barley's bristles) which works its way through your clothes until it reaches the skin; and then you really start to itch. The other job would be in the chaff barn. This was an end section of a barn, but partitioned off almost up to the roof. The

440 chaff cutter climbed up a ladder outside and tipped his sack down into the enclosed space. As the level rose higher it had to be pressed down by treading it, and this job was given to the boys. Old Tom Barnett would be the carrier, and, if he could, he would get up the ladder quietly, without our hearing him, and tip the whole bagful all over us. You can imagine the bother we got into at home, when we undressed and strewed chaff all over the bedroom floor.

In some years, the price of peas and beans would be too low to cover the cost of threshing. I have seen as many as a hundred rats killed when a two year old stack was threshed, and twice as many mice. None of this happens today, with modern harvesting and storage systems and E.E.C. intervention buying, so now there are few rats, and therefore even fewer barn owls, in the countryside.

450 Accommodation farm house still stands, converted into two cottages. All the rest is now either a housing estate or part of the prairie.

When I think of those times, in the light of what I now know about the years before them, I feel that very little changed between the 1820s and the 1920s. Only the steam threshing machine and the railways, and, perhaps, the bicycle, had any effect on our lives. Cars and aeroplanes were negligible; you might see three cars in a day, and an aeroplane was a very rare sight. I remember one snowy January day, coming out of school, we saw the newspaper boy's bicycle against the railings. Papers were delivered from St Neots, and a lad just out of school usually did the job. They arrived about 10 a. m., but on this day, because of the snow, the lad was late, and had  
460 found it easier to walk than to cycle. Being mischievous, we stuffed both wheels with snow so that they looked solid. Next day the lad came again, but did not say anything to us. Three weeks later, as we came out of school, he told us that an aeroplane had just landed in the meadows by the river; The whole herd of kids rushed off down to these meadows, splashing through the wet fields and five meadows before realizing that we had been well and truly 'had'.

The school looks much as it did, except that the iron railings and flagpole have gone, as have the little bits of garden which the boys had to tend in gardening lessons. Inside the building, the long dark rafters are now hidden behind a low ceiling. No wonder we were so cold on winter days. The attendance board used to hang just  
470 inside the door, saying "Average pupils 42-45". The teacher's desk stood next to the open fire, and to left of it was the door to the Infants' Room. I began there the day I was three; we sat in small round-backed chairs, so that it was impossible to fall out once put close to a desk. Next to the blackboard and easel with its yellow duster, there was a big abacus; the teacher would stand behind it, flicking over a number of coloured balls, and we had to give the answer. Slates and slate pencils were used, along with sand trays for the littlest ones to draw letters and figures in with sticks. After Standard 3 had been passed the pupils graduated into the big room, where classes were divided into two sections: 4 and 5 down one side, and 6, 7, and X7 the other. A huge Tortoise stove helped to heat the room, one of the older boys being  
480 nominated each week to look after all fires and get in the coke. A kettle was always on the boil on the stove. I well recollect my first day of Fire Care, being educated in the art by an older boy, who showed me how, by filling the stove with coke and

putting a shovelful of coal dust on top, and then sticking a long poker through the dust, you could create a small explosion and fill the room with smoke. This gave the children much pleasure, but was frowned on by the schoolmistress.

490 On the wall behind her desk hung the cane, a long instrument with a sort of walking-stick handle. I well remember being called before her desk "Chandler, hold out your hand", she said, and he did so, but pulled it away as the cane fell. This was repeated a second time, followed by a silly snigger. She grabbed the wretched boy by the collar and dragged him over the desk, saying "Laugh again, Chandler" as the cane descended on his backside. I stood there amazed, watching the spectacular sight of the dust flying from his pants in a shaft of sunlight. When she let go of him he ran out of school, and in the excitement I quietly slipped back into my place.

500 Miss Etchells was schoolmistress when I first went to school, as she was when my mother went to school. A teacher of the old type, she was very stern, very strict, sometimes even cruel, but always very fair. She would help anyone who was willing, but woe betide anyone she thought was slacking. She believed strongly in the three R's, the main curriculum at that time. Wrongdoers were either caned, or for lesser misdemeanours were stood in a corner with hands above the head. To me, this was even worse than the cane, as it held a child up to ridicule, and also they sometimes forgot that you were there. One child fainted as a result, and the practice was then stopped for some time. On some evenings we would have to go and collect wild flowers for school next day, to see who could get the greatest number of different species, and a nature study lesson was given on them, She was strongly backed by the Towgoods of Paxton Hall, and also by the vicar, who gave scripture lessons once or twice a week.

510 Great emphasis was placed on writing. Pens in those days were the dip type, ink wells being filled by the monitors every Monday morning. It was thin strokes up and thick strokes down, blots lost marks, and any writing sloping to the left was thrown out with no marks at all. It was not all that easy to write with the long steel nibs, especially if they had got crossed by falling like darts into the floor, or if the ink was thick from the dust of ages. The lift-up desks, four in a row, were made of iron. Anyone moving about in them would get a petrifying stare over those gold-rimmed spectacles.

520 A hymn was sung morning and evening. We rushed the evening one as much as we could, impatient to get out, Any wrong-doing outside the school would be reported, irrespective of what it was, and even if you had already been punished for it. I remember Miss Etchells coming out of the schoolhouse one evening with the cane, to whip two boys who were fighting on the green. She finally went to Morcott in Rutland, invited there by Mr. Fydell G. Rowley, the squire of St. Neots. Morcott was his ancestral home, he owned most of it, and wanted the best teacher he could get for its school.

A slightly different, more relaxed regime came to the village with Miss Coles, a much younger teacher. We now went for nature walks in school time, while painting, and periods of reading quietly to oneself, became popular. The dunce's cap went out, but the cane still hung in its rightful place, though less used. In this period, children were

not taught so rigorously, and very seldom did any get to the grammar school. I remember taking the 11+ down at St. Neots; no one passed. Not until my brother's time, twelve years later, did the authorities find out that the prescribed curriculum  
530 was not being taught. So you will when reading this understand that I am a little short on the pen.

The school playing field was once the Parson's Close, now taken over by the Council. Half is now built up, and much of what remains is taken up by mobile classrooms. The old walnut tree opposite has gone. On windy days we would race out of school to gather any nuts that had come down during the lesson. We used the jamb of the porch door as a nutcracker.

There are some new houses on the right, north of the village shop, where Judd's farm, or Hedding's before him, used to be, with two sixteenth century cottages. The old village shop, post office, and bakery have closed down, although the buildings  
540 are still there. We would rush from school to see what new kinds of sweets, toys, or other interesting things like that were in the windows. New lines came out each year at certain times. On dry spring days it was whips and tops; later came marbles, either little glazed earthenware ones or big coloured glass balls with wonderful spirals inside, called "glardies". To play, you scooped a hole in the ground and scratched a line about three feet away. Each in turn then had a shot at flicking a marble into the hole. If it went in, the opponent's marble was shot towards the hole. The first to get five in took all. Skilful players who only played inferior opponents amassed great hoards of marbles, which they carried around in tins or old tea caddies. Iron hoops were bowled along the road, with a guide or stick. In wet  
550 weather, stilts (always home-made) came into fashion; some who couldn't get properly made wooden ones improvised with two large cans with strings through the top. Cigarette cards were always very popular with small boys; the game with them, rather like marbles, was played in any convenient corner. You flicked them in turn until one landed on top of another, then all that lay there were won.

Around October, even more small noses were pressed against the glass. As fireworks began to appear in the shop window. They cost between a farthing and twopence each. A shoe box was obtained, and the collection went on for about five weeks, to end in one glorious bang on the fifth of November.

The shop was always humming with business, for almost everything was sold there; needles and thread, patent medicines, food, bread, stamps, and even chicken corn,  
560 Poor Mrs Bradley must have had the patience of Job; Children waiting their turn would sit on the box of chicken corn, and lose their money in it. The old lady then had to turn it all out to find the lost sixpence. A loaf of bread was twopence, freshly baked, still warm, and smelling of yeast. Many a child got into trouble for picking at the crust on the way home.

Walking down the slope you pass The Bell, on the site of an old beer house. There used to be some fine elms opposite, under whose shade the inebriated would slumber; and the odd coin often slipped from their pockets. Many a child has run to the shop for sweets after finding a penny or two there. The beer came on Fridays at  
570 lunchtime in Jenkins & Jones' dray, an old Foden chain-driven vehicle. It had solid

tyres, and a wicker basket swinging behind, full of assorted bungs, taps, pegs and bottle openers, which we children liked to investigate while the men were inside. I remember returning to school one day with a friend. There were two bells to call the pupils back to school; the first was a warning bell, and anyone not inside when the second bell rang was in trouble. The first bell had already rung, and we still had a way to go. Let's get a lift on the back of the dray, we decided. As its top speed was only 20 mph we easily jumped up behind and held onto the tailboard with our feet swinging clear of the ground. As it approached the school the dray gathered speed, and, being the more cautious, I let go, just in time to see a face and two hands  
580 appear over the backboard and grab the wrists of my friend. I popped into school just in time, while the dray and my friend disappeared past the Vicarage. About an hour later a bedraggled Albert came into school, and got several severe strokes of the cane, not daring to tell the whole truth.

I paused by Low farm. It looked dark and sullen, no movement of people or animals. The railway track was also very quiet compared to when we used to sit on the heavy pickled railway fence, taking engine names when trains seemed to go by every few minutes. Pretty Polly, Blink Bonny, Hyperion, Flying Fox - they were all named after racehorses. Passenger, express, goods, cattle, parcels, and coal, some with as many as a hundred empty trucks on their way back to the pitheads. Every day at 11  
590 a.m., right on time, the Pullman went through. There was great excitement when we heard through the grapevine (the signalman, I suppose) that a new "hush-hush" type of engine would be passing through. We waited for hours until it came: No.10,000, the first silver streamlined engine, pulling coal trucks on an experimental trip. It was still called "the hush-hush" for many years up and down the old Great Northern line.

Before I finally left the village, my thoughts went back to all the trades-men who came into the place in those days. The one solitary bus trundled through twice, on Thursday only, the market day in St Neots. Otherwise, if you needed to go into town, it was Shanks's pony; in general, only the young rode cycles, In consequence, many tradesmen delivered their wares to villages like ours. The baker was Bert Baker of  
600 Huntingdon St., St. Neots. He had men and boys who carried bread in huge wicker baskets all round the village, wet or fine, snow or frost, twice a week. The fishmonger came on Fridays. Somerlite of Cambridge, the trade name of a Robert C. Brown, came on Monday with pots, pans, polish, pegs, paraffin, and any other hardware. What he hadn't got he brought the next week. Boot makers came periodically to measure people's feet and go away to make the boots. There seemed to be no shoes for children then. Setchfields of Godmanchester came in a solid-tyred van with confectionery, and fruit like oranges and bananas.

But the butchers were the most numerous; George Bartlett, Eayres, and Sam Abraham who with his boy Ken Payne covered three parts of Huntingdonshire. Their  
610 old horse stopped at every pub, without being told. Ken would be put off the cart at Great Paxton with a basket of meat, and walk up Adams Lane, with mud and water over his boot tops in winter, to College Farm (which had been given to St. John's College by Henry VIII); then on to Cottons Farm, which is half way to Graveley, where he collected more rabbits and game than the meat he delivered; then along a mud track onto Toseland Road to Lodge Farm, delivering there and in Toseland

itself; then Staveley, and finally cutting down a sunken lane into Papworth St, Agnes, to meet up with his employer who had traversed the roads of Offord, Godmanchester, and through to Papworth Everard on the old London road. His day started at 7 a.m., and he was lucky if he got home by eight at night.

620 Ted Hunt was the king of the butchers to look at, with his striped apron, glossy leather gaiters, and leather money bag. He spent more time in the pubs than with his customers, however, who often found their Sunday joint on the mangle in the barn. The coalman, old Ratcliffe, had a horse and trolley which was usually parked outside the pub for two hours after deliveries. They said that the horse took him home.

On this visit I only saw two people, neither of whom I had known. The houses seemed closed, and the people at work elsewhere, possibly commuting as far as London and only using the village as a sleeping place. It seems that village life declined gradually after the first world war, and the second one killed it altogether.