

EPHRAIM

Written by Michael Skinner

I do not suppose many people in Penshurst will know me – or remember me, but my name is still just visible on the board over the entrance to the Post Office (formerly The Forge): I am described as SMITH & COACH BUILDER, Agent for agricultural implements. How much longer that inscription will last I cannot imagine, having been painted more than 100 years ago.



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Allow me to introduce myself: my name is John Ephraim SKINNER. I was born in November, 1872, at Wadhurst, East Sussex, the eldest son of a couple of farm workers. My father, Thomas, was a ploughman; my mother was just 20 years old when I was born. To be the eldest of 13 children gives anyone some position in life, and so it is no surprise that I grew up feeling rather responsible, not to say patronising towards my younger brothers and sisters.



Look at me in the photograph, which I reproduce here. I could not help wearing a suit and butterfly collar – it was prescribed for me, but I did not object. Mind you – it was Sunday wear: we are in the days when everyone had to attend church, and had to dress formally – collar and tie, waistcoat, boots. How on earth do you think an agricultural worker and his wife could feed and clothe such a large family on their pathetic income? I cannot remember passing down clothes to younger boys when I outgrew them; I cannot ever remember having new clothes bought for me. After all, we lived miles from any town with tailors' shops. The nearest town to Wadhurst was Tunbridge Wells, and we certainly never went there shopping. In fact, we did not go anywhere, but to the village school and church, and in the vacations into the fields to help Father – unpaid, of course.

My brothers and I grew up in an understanding that society was based on the class system: titled people in grand mansions; clergy in large rectories; school-masters that had to be obeyed; farmers that made money from selling crops; and the rest of us... We lived in a tied cottage, with three bedrooms. You can imagine it was a bit crowded, especially when the family reached thirteen children (and two parents). That was the point at which my father decided to move us all to somewhere a little more ambitious – and more comfortable.

My father's ambition and desire to offer better living conditions to his family led him to accept a job with a house near Sevenoaks, and so we all moved there. That was when we had the photo taken – for what reason I have never been able to discover – but it must have been a costly business for my modest parents! I was 18, and impatient to lead my own life and career (although it was never called that in those days). Farm labourer I would not be; professional engineer I could not be. Something in between: what about blacksmith? There was plenty of work available: horses in abundance – and would be for the foreseeable future. Everyone used horses – from royal carriages to dung-carts; from Masters of Foxhounds to children's ponies; from London cabs to farmers' ploughs. There would always be an abundance of livelihood as a blacksmith, servicing horse owners. But to do it properly you would have to learn the craft, study for a certificate and get lots of practice.

Where would I find the appropriate Master Smith in or around Sevenoaks? We lived in so-called Gracious Lane, on the south edge of the town. Our house was immediately opposite one of those large ventilation chimneys which adorned the countryside wherever there was a railway tunnel running underneath. This one was part of the main line from London to Hastings via Tonbridge: the trains that used that tunnel varied from Continental boat-trains to local pull-and-push branch-lines – they all made an incredible rumbling noise and a large cloud of smoke! I wanted to get out of that house as much as I could – even if it meant living where I might be employed.

It was imperative for me to find a blacksmith's forge with a master farrier who would train me, and enter into gaining a certificate in this craft, with the eventual object of owning/renting/running my own forge, and perhaps settling down to a lifetime career. I was at this time aware that the motor-car was entering the transport arena, but I never for one moment thought that it would someday almost replace the horse in matters of transport. After all, people had been breeding horses for many centuries, for hauling wagons, carrying passengers, riding to hounds, racing, fighting the enemy in numerous wars. All of these needed shoeing, the wagons and carriages needed repair, farm implements and metal appliances of all sorts had to be maintained. There would always be a future for a qualified, skilled smith.

Fortunately, I was not slow to discover a really good craftsman on the outskirts of the town, who was not only qualified but pleasant-mannered and generous. Mr Goodfellow was well named: nothing was too much for him. No wonder he had a flourishing business. His four assistants were all qualified – Members of the Association of the Farriers Company of London. So I started working with and for Mr Goodfellow, avidly taking in all the hints and advice about iron and its qualities, forging it in the fire and onto the anvil; creating shapes (including horseshoes), piercing holes, plunging it into the water tank to cool it; then on to studying the horse and its treatment: removing its shoes, filing its hooves, applying a red-hot shoe (coping with the clouds of smoke, the animal's objection to the operation, culminating in one or two types of excretion!)

That was not all! The blacksmith's workshop was more than a shoeing centre. We must remember that horses were used for all purposes on the farm, so that there were cart-wheels to mend: new rims to be fitted; ploughshares needed maintaining, and every other form of ironwork could be brought in by customers expecting us to repair, replace, drill, sharpen... Which reminds me: the grindstone – a huge wheel of sandstone rock, which, as you turned the handle, passed through the trough of water to keep it moist. Someone else sat up on the seat above the wheel and sharpened a knife, scythe, clippers – or any other tool, which a customer expected us to present in tip-top condition in next to no time!

In addition to the various operations in the Forge, there was learning all about the dozens of spare parts, all stored in wooden drawers along two of the walls: nails, screws, nuts, bolts, staples, washers – everything a worker in iron could need. On another wall were racks of iron rods, strips, pipes...and so it goes on. The number of long-handled tongs, chisels, hammers, rasps was endless – all had to be used, studied and understood....

How patient Mr Goodfellow was: he earned his name!

After I had been working at his forge for several months, and getting to know my colleagues (who were all local lads) on one or two occasions some of them asked me to join them after work at a local public house. I had no experience of beer-drinking, and have in fact never taken to it. But it was an opportunity to meet a few different people – including one particular man, for whom I felt a certain respect. When he came out of the bar he put on his bowler hat – a sign of a fairly ‘senior’ member of staff at a gentleman’s residence.

One summer evening he invited me to join him for supper at his work-place – Whitby Hall – about a quarter of a mile from the town centre. Of course, we went in by the servants’ entrance, straight to the butler’s pantry, where we sat and talked over bread and cheese and coffee about the world situation (as much as we understood it!), about his career as a butler, but not one word about his employers...! What he did tell was that they had two residences – one here in Kent (handy for London) and another in Yorkshire, not surprisingly near Whitby (which I did not dare admit I had never heard of). So the servants (or some of them) had to move when the family had their ‘season’ in either house.

‘Some of my staff are natives of Yorkshire, and speak in a very strange accent’, said Mr Butler (for that was his name!), ‘especially one young woman – the laundry-maid – a real Northerner. Do you know where Whitby is? I have been there several times. It is on the east coast – at the mouth of the river Esk. The speciality there is a substance called jet – ever heard of it? Well, it’s a dense, black mineral, retrieved from the cliffs, and they make ornaments and beads from it. I have this egg-cup, which was given me by the laundrymaid’s mother when I was there last year. Apparently the girl’s father was a visiting Danish sea-captain...say no more.... Her mother worked on the pier at Whitby, selling this jet...’

‘Sounds interesting’ I ventured to say. ‘I would like to meet this girl.’ And not more than five minutes later there came a tap at the door.

‘Come in, if you must’ said Mr Butler in an affected voice. ‘Yes?’

‘Please, Mr Butler, I have to report that I shall not be able to travel to Yorkshire tomorrow, as I have hurt my leg...’

‘Never mind, Louisa, I expect we can find you something to do here while they are away. Oh! This is Mr Skinner---a blacksmith. He is on a visit...er, maybe you know him...?’

‘No, sir. How do you do, Mr Skinner?’ And her eyes met mine; I could not look away...

‘Perhaps we shall meet again, er, Louisa?’

‘Perhaps we shall, sir.’

‘Now run along, young lady’ said Mr Butler.

I thought: what a pleasant atmosphere in this household. I had always thought that servants had to bow and scrape all the time....And what a lovely girl, despite her accent. I must get to meet her again....

It did not take me long. Could you believe that the next Sunday I attended Morning Prayer at the Parish Church, and as I came out, who should I meet but Louisa, accompanied by two other servant girls from other houses.

‘Hello, she said, where have we met?’ And she gave me the same lovely smile that I recognised from the other evening.

‘I was with your Mr Butler...Do you like him? Is he kind to you?’ And numerous other questions, including: ‘When are you off duty during the week, Louisa?’

‘Most Mondays, sir.’

‘Oh please, don’t call me sir. I am your friend – John Ephraim. Can we meet next Monday evening, outside your place of employment...what is it called...Whitby House?’

So come next Monday I got off work nice and promptly, went home and had a good wash, and stood outside Whitby House (servants’ exit) for nearly half an hour, and nearly gave up. Then Louisa came out, all dressed up (as far as possible on her modest wage as laundry-maid).

As a child, I had always wondered why I was called Ephraim, and what it meant. What did my parents mean by giving me such a name, even though it was my second name, and I was always referred to and addressed as John. I was afraid to ask! When I was young we went as a family to church regularly. In those days they read any or all of the Old Testament at length, and I once even heard my name mentioned in a reading from the book of Genesis. But I did not dare ask, and nobody offered to explain! I was given a Bible as a birthday present when I was 14, so I was able to look it up for myself.

Considering that in those days the Bible was written in 17th century English, it was not easy to understand everything, in addition to the fact that many of the Old Testament characters had more than one name! But what I did learn was that Ephraim meant ‘be fruitful’ – in other words ‘have children’. So I was determined to get married, but maybe not quite so fruitfully as my father and mother!

I also read that Ephraim was instrumental in making Israel strong and important – a political aim. I felt that I ought to do similarly. How could I help to build up a nation with decent, fair standards – a nation that put an end to wars? What could be done to eliminate injustice between peoples, religions and sexes, to destroy poverty, and give opportunity to all men and women in life?

So I had two ambitions in life: marriage and politics.

On the first subject I will miss out the many occasions of meeting my sweetheart. She came over as a lovely girl, with kindness and generosity, also very practical, which quality she had undoubtedly gained from her employment. What I did not know for a long time was that she was my senior by over three years. But that did not put me off. We got married in June, 1893, at Sevenoaks parish church, the place where we had met so many times on a Sunday morning.

Meanwhile I had pursued my trade training at the forge, eventually taking and passing an examination, leading to a Certificate from the Farriers Company of London. So I was ambitious to run a business of my own – not easy to do without money. Besides, Louisa and I were living with my mother and some of my siblings – my father having died several years earlier.

It was not long before we started a family: our first son was born in 1895. We called him Ephraim Herbert, so as to perpetuate the name. I am not prepared to state whether our son lived up to his name, but I do know that he called his only child John Ephraim. A year after Herbert came Lilian Louise Grace – obviously named after her mother, Louisa. We had one more son in 1898, William Thomas Frederick (his middle name was a tribute to my father). I will come back to our children later. Suffice it to say that they all attended Lady Boswell's school in Sevenoaks, and were very happy there.

Still holding fast to my ambition as Ephraim, I took an intense interest in politics – not just for the sake of arguing with people, but rather for instilling in the nation and community a fresh attitude. We were still in the Victorian era of the British Empire, of class distinction, military prowess, poverty, inequality of the sexes – and a myriad more injustices. I was determined to do my bit to alter the situation – but how? It was never easy to be accepted by the people with the power: the landed aristocracy and the politicians. Certainly you were not welcome if you had no money and were not connected to anyone they knew.

What made me take up politics, you may ask. I have asked myself the same question numerous times throughout a long career on councils – parish, district and county. Could it be ambition, pride, lack of fulfilment in other areas of my life – trade, hobbies, family? I have sometimes wondered whether I ever achieved any good results. The reason I started to show an interest in politics dates well back to my 20's. I do not have to tell you that in those days our nation was little further forward than it had been in the 17th century. True, we had stopped having civil wars, but we were constantly prepared to take part abroad in military action, whether to conquer more peoples and lands, or to intervene in other nations' affairs. The British Empire occupied a huge proportion of the world; the Royal Navy ruled most of the oceans.

At home we were ruled by a so-called elected government, consisting mainly of titled men (no women), elected by a proportion of the male population. Local councils tended to be run by rich, titled men, who lived in big houses, surrounded by lands acquired honourably or otherwise in previous centuries. The rest of the population worked long hours on farms, in factories and mines, or served in the armed forces. Women brought up big families in very small cottages, on very little income, with no rights at all. (My own mother was a case in point). Education was limited to elementary schools, which pupils left at an early age to start

work. If you had money and power, you could go to a so-called Public School, and on to university.

So I saw it as a challenge to do something to alter things, to improve matters, to let the population know that it did not have to remain the same for ever. In foreign countries, such as France and Russia, they had bloody revolutions, which often ended up with different people ruling, but not necessarily for the better. We in Britain could have a democracy, if enough people fought for it (politically). I read as much as I could about national and international affairs. I attended meetings of political parties, so as to learn what I could of their policies and opinions, as well as getting to know some of their members. I even bought myself a car – the latest luxury! – a Darracq, so that I could get about to other places besides Sevenoaks, which to be truthful was a hothouse of Conservatism.

My work as a blacksmith continued and prospered. I was ambitious to take on my own forge, and always kept my ears and eyes open to any possibility. Eventually, we moved to a little hamlet called Bough Beech, which had a blacksmith's shop, with a modest house attached. Our children attended school in Chiddingstone (a good two miles' walk each way). In 1910 I saw advertised a blacksmith's shop at the village of Penshurst, which was coming vacant, but unfortunately there was no family accommodation attached. So: nothing daunted, nothing won. I enquired of the agents for Penshurst estate whether they would consider building a house for me and my family. Of course, I kept my political self quiet, as the estate belonged to Lord de Lisle, a notable Conservative.

To my delight and astonishment they agreed not only to build a house, but even asked my wife what was the most suitable accommodation for the family! Should we have a dining-room or an office? How many bedrooms were needed for our family? Should there be a garden? How to get from the house into the forge? etc, etc. We were very satisfied with the house as well as the forge, and for many years to come lived and worked happily there.

That did not hide my continued study of the national and international situation.

Our children grew up – the boys took part in local sports and activities, our daughter had music lessons from a local organist. Altogether we had a happy – dare I say, prosperous – life. There was always plenty of trade: horses to be shod, cartwheels to be repaired, ploughshares to be serviced...

My younger son, William, showed great promise at school – winning prizes for essay-writing, etc. As a pupil at the nearby Penshurst Cof E School, he received in December 1912 a prize book, awarded for the best essay on 'Our Visit to the Castle', meaning Penshurst Place. I was not particularly pleased at what I regarded as possible indoctrination. Although I had nothing in common with the owner of the castle, who was my landlord, I gave credit to my son for his talent and ingenuity. He was now 13, and would have to leave school next summer, so I compromised my principles, and arranged for him to attend the Judd School in Tonbridge. I did not like having to pay, and did not agree with paying for schooling. I knew nothing about the school, but was intrigued by its connection with the Skinners Company of London.

Who were the Skinners Company? They were nothing to do with my family – that was for sure! But centuries ago people who dealt in animal skins, making fur and leather goods, got together, just like the Farriers, etc – a good idea; but like most things it had changed through the years into a closed group of posh people, interested in themselves and their money! But people locally that I spoke to, who sent their boys to the School (as well as to Tonbridge School and Skinners' School in Tunbridge Wells) were very satisfied with the education received at any of these establishments. So William attended the Judd School for two years (1912-14) until he got the urge to work, and found himself a job at a watchmaker's shop, Payne Jenkins in Tunbridge Wells, cycling there daily. He was a keen cyclist, as well as being fascinated by all things mechanical, such as barometers, watches, clocks of all sorts. I have forgotten the exact circumstances, but I suspect one of their employees had left to join the army, because, as you see, we are in 1914, the year of the outbreak of war. Suffice it to say that after two years at the 'clock shop' William himself was called up – into the Army Service Corps.

I was very fed up about this, but we were living in an era of 'do as you are told', rather than 'do what you like'. I made up my mind I would do something after the war to alter things.

As part of his war service, William was sent abroad. He later related to us how the soldiers travelled across Europe in cattle trucks, standing up. The train stopped twice daily for the men to eat and drink, then on again to the Mediterranean, where they took ship to Egypt. His best story was when he told us that he had been employed to shoe camels – which I at first found difficult to believe. But what was more amazing was on Christmas Day, 1917, he and his colleagues lined up for their dinner – to be served by none other than William Chapman, a lad from our local grocery, who was in the Army Catering Corps!

On his return from the army in 1918, Will came back to work for me and with me at the Forge. He still retained his interest in clocks and watches; but I suppose he found it easier to work at home, and for the next fifty years or so we got on fine as a team. By the 1940's I had got so involved in public duties that I left him in charge of the Forge, and (by then) the bike shop, petrol pumps and battery-charging service. He did very well, with the occasional help from his younger son, Michael, at weekends and school holidays.

My elder son, Herbert, had the 'honour' or responsibility of taking on his own forge when he got married. This one was at Charcott, a small hamlet near Penshurst station. Like all blacksmiths, his work got less, owing to a) the reduction of the number of horses around as agriculture became mechanised, and b) the effect of World War II. His forge was situated right on the edge of Penshurst Airfield, which played an active part in World Wars I and II, but the military men did not make much use of horse transport, especially in the Second War! Bert had always been an expert chimney-sweep, and that side of his work did not reduce until electrification of households began to take place.

My daughter, Lilian, was, of course, excluded from all this dirty work. The nearest she got to the forge was by learning to ride horses! Despite my socialist views, I encouraged her to find employment with wealthy, 'posh' people, and so she took piano (later organ) lessons, got herself taught some French, and through the offices of the then rector's wife, found herself

working as governess to the children of the Barclay banking family in Norfolk. Apparently she was happy – for a time – until the son of the family made unhealthy approaches to her, and she was dismissed! When she married Sidney, a local man who had been gassed during the World War, they both became pacifists and tee-totallers. When she was widowed, she ran a small sweet-shop in her front room in New Road.

My brother, Tom, trained as a blacksmith, and took over the forge at Bough Beech. I do not think his trade prospered, as he was soon to become a victim of drink, and he broke many bones while walking home at night after an evening in a pub. He even drove a car! If I was ever tempted to take to alcohol, Tom's experience was enough to put me off for life. I was sorry for his poor wife, who had to stay in while he went out, and eventually also had to open a sweet shop in her front room, to make some income, when it was not forthcoming from elsewhere! It was probably a good job they had no children!

The First World War was one of the worst periods in our history. To be fighting the Germans to satisfy the greed of our rulers and theirs (who were nearly all related in any case); to carry out much of the warfare in France was unfair on that nation and people. To introduce air attacks seemed to make things worse.

If I had not been anti-establishment, left-wing, defender of the rights of workers, in favour of sexual equality, before the War, I most certainly was during and after it.

The activities of the Sevenoaks Labour Party, however limited at that time, attracted me to join and to take an active part in bringing in real democracy. Sevenoaks was not the easiest place for someone with left-wing views. It was, and remained, a middle-class town, full of London businessmen and their families; the rest of the constituency was predominantly rural, with landlords commanding large estates of agricultural workers and their families, living in tiny, cramped cottages. (I had experienced just that when young). Their women-folk had almost no rights, apart from rearing large families, and working in between times on the land, in farmhouse kitchens, or as drudges in gentlemen's residences and stately homes. There was not much future for their children, but to follow them in the same ruts. Education was limited to church infant and junior schools, which thrived on teaching children obedience to God, and subservience to their earthly masters. Attendance at church was expected. I KNOW, BECAUSE I MYSELF EXPERIENCED ALL THESE THINGS IN MY EARLY LIFE.

I may have been one of the more outspoken members of Sevenoaks Labour Party (for what that was worth), and because of that I was talked into becoming the candidate for the 1918 General Election. (In those days people stood for their own area – it has all changed since: nowadays candidates look for safe seats, and move accordingly, or run two homes, so as to comply with the requirements of the local party and represent the populace.) With the help and support of my daughter, Lilian, who was appointed Secretary of the local party, I put my policies out on a printed postcard, which was widely distributed throughout the constituency. Nobody could be under any misapprehension as to what we were aiming to achieve: to get the country back to normal after the War, and, more than that, to improve on what life had been like previously. One of the most important tenets of our policy was to fight for women's rights, and achieve equality. This should have increased the number of votes! I must say that I relied for support on my daughter. As Secretary she fulfilled a gap in her life, as well as

taking all the paper work off me. (When she later married Sidney Hollingsworth, a local man who had been gassed while on military service during the War, they both became Quakers, so appalled were they at the conventional militaristic attitude that persisted nationwide.)

The outcome of the General Election was, I suppose, inevitable. Out of an electorate of 30,189 (which included women over 30 with minimum property qualifications) Sir Thomas Bennett, the Unionist, scored 10,650; I was lucky to get 3,323! It was after all very early days for working-class voters, and full women's votes did not come in until 1928. Nationally, there were 63 Labour MPs, forming the main Opposition to the Government. Nearly 11 million votes were cast for Labour – twice as many as in 1910. We were getting there – slowly! There were no women MPs – yet!

In July 1917 I was asked to join a meeting in Penshurst to discuss coal supply, which was a national problem during the war. Either I was encouraged to take up local issues, or I was spotted by local people, who encouraged me to join the Parish Council (or both!). Suffice it to say that I was elected in March, 1919, and stayed on until March, 1952, dealing with such matters as Allotments, Footpaths, Fire Brigade, Housing, etc. I became Vice-Chairman in 1931, Chairman in 1941. Among other things that we arranged were celebrations for the 1935 Jubilee and the 1937 Coronation (neither of which I had any interest in).

I had been encouraged by the outcome of the Russian Revolution of 1917, but sorry to see Lenin ill and later (1924) die, bringing Stalin into power, and all the wrongs that followed there. The introduction of radio in Britain helped to get our cause made known. The election of Ramsay MacDonald as Leader of the Labour Party in 1922 led to victory in the January, 1924 Election: there was a serious reduction in unemployment, and a bolder housing policy. The 1930's saw the beginning of women MPs, as well as the founding of *The Daily Worker*, a newspaper that I took and read daily. I got myself elected to Sevenoaks Rural District Council in 1924, and stayed there until 1949. As you can see, we are talking about the period of the Second World War, and the subsequent Labour government under Clement Attlee, which was such an encouragement to such as me, who had worked all my life for fairer deals for everyone.

The War for me was very frustrating, but I tried to make the best of it: when food was rationed, you had to be registered with a grocer. Because we had two such shops in Penshurst, I insisted that our three rations should be bought from each shop on alternate weeks. It was probably not legal, but all concerned seemed to find it acceptable. I gave my old Daracq car (long since off the road) as part of the barricade material, ostensibly to block the German invasion. It never happened, but the car disappeared! My two sons became Special Constables for the duration of the hostilities, cycling around their locality, warning residents to black out their windows during air-raids. My personal contribution to the war effort was to shave off my beard (for fear of being mistaken for a Nazi!) I resumed my former appearance as soon as possible.

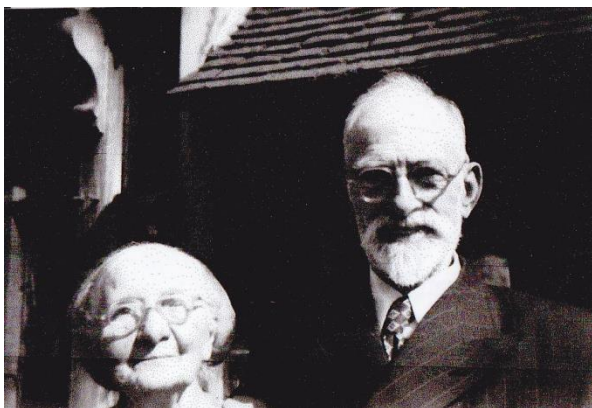
In the 1930's I had arranged to install petrol pumps outside the Forge. I had to take advice not to spoil the picturesque view of the building (which appeared on numerous picture postcards through the decades). Petrol was the incoming thing as the number of cars and lorries increased. However, during the Second World War all fuel was rationed until 1950, and many people had to restrict the use of their vehicle(s). (I was fortunate to have an allowance to get around on my duties as a District and County Councillor.)

In addition to petrol, we sold engine oil, pumped up tyres, mended, and attended to radiators and batteries. The left-hand section of the Forge building became known as the bike shop. Here we bought, sold and serviced bicycles, mending punctures and selling paraffin and batteries for lamps (and torches). The other service available to village people with the new-fangled wireless sets was charging accumulators. Not long before the Second War we had installed cigarette machines, but the rationing of tobacco put paid to that for years!

Horses were beginning to give way to tractors on farms and for transport, and we had no huge demand from hunting, riding stables or race-courses in our area, but there was enough work to keep William going full time until he retired in the 1960's, considering that he updated to oxy-acetylene welding, as well as the post-war demand for petrol. I was lucky to be able to leave responsibility to him while away on public duties.

As a County Councillor, I was involved in the Kent War Agricultural Committee, which did a lot to make the life and work of our farmers bearable during the Second War, when many of them and their employees were called up into the armed forces, and quite a lot of their work was handed over to members of the Women's Land Army, and later on to groups of German, Italian and Polish prisoners-of-war.

I tried to bring influence to bear at all levels – County, District and Parish. My wife was very understanding. The only way I could make up for my constant absence from home was to take her out to lunch on Sundays – although, of course, during the war and rationing that was not possible. On weekdays my son William had his lunch with his mother, and then went home to tea with his wife and children. On Saturdays the latter often came to us after lunch: the boys played in and around the forge, rolling balls down the slope from the gate.



After the war there was a more than superficial change to the countryside and properties. Farming became much more mechanised: most agricultural processes were done automatically – the horse became a back number. The introduction of the combine harvester rendered several other machines redundant – including the threshing machine with its steam

engine partner. Fewer men – and women – were needed. The typical crop of our area – the hop – was becoming eclipsed by foreign products. Fewer men were needed – women too! The annual invasion by the London hop-pickers ended too.

Along with the changes in the appearance of the countryside came the large-scale changes in property ownership. Notable in our parish were:

Swaylands – a huge house just outside the village, built in 1842, and owned by rich families for nearly a century. During the war it was taken over as a military hospital. Afterwards it became a boarding school for difficult children from Middlesex

South Park – seat of Lord Hardinge, one time Viceroy of India - became redundant on his death, and in fact was partially demolished.

Just a bit nearer to us – and smaller – was The Glebe, which was bought after the war by a retired RAF officer, who created a Country Club. He invited local people to join: myself and my family played bowls and tennis on his premises. My eldest grandson, Peter, who married a local girl, Babs Fredericks, held his wedding reception there.

The only estate relatively unaffected by the post-war changes was Penshurst Place. What it has done is to open its doors and gardens for longer hours, and increased its attractions to visitors from across the world.

Another alteration to village life was the 1944 Education Act, which took children over eleven away from village schools to the towns – by bus and train. However, the Parish church continued to flourish, with a full-time Rector, and a chapel-of-ease at Smarts Hill. There was also a dissenting chapel nearby. We had a resident doctor – W.Charrington Wood, and his son Arthur.

The gradual change in shopping habits (supermarkets and deliveries from the towns) made village shops redundant. More local people got cars, especially when petrol rationing ended, and many of the ‘outsiders’ who moved into the area commuted to London, driving to Hildenborough station for the City. These included Messrs Dubuissou, Hunter (from the BBC), Letts (of diary fame) and Meredith (who with Drew made biscuits), Anstee (director of Bentalls of Kingston) and Hoblyn. The Pawson family (notable cricketers) lived at Penshurst Place. None of these needed the blacksmith’s shop, but were very good customers at the petrol pumps!

I must say that, if I had to choose a different place to live, I would have some difficulty making a decision. I travelled widely throughout Kent in the course of my work as a Councillor, and did not discover any other village I would prefer. Not only is the environment pleasant, with fields, rivers and antique buildings, but many of the residents were acceptable, generous and interesting characters. I got on well with the shopkeepers, such as Mrs Cook, Messrs Chapman, Barrow, Jackson, Thompsett and Eagleton. As for fellow craftsmen I could not do better than Will Meade. Originally from Wiltshire, Will worked as a saddler and harness-maker in his father’s business, but later took a job as foreman in a high-class firm in Sevenoaks. This firm had a branch in Penshurst, and Will was appointed Manager in 1901, the year of his marriage to one of his music pupils. He was a self-taught organist, and for 33 years accompanied services at Poundsbridge Cemetery chapel. He wrote poetry, some of

which is in Wiltshire dialect. When motor transport developed, there was obviously less demand for harnesses and saddles (just as there was for my shoeing and cart-wheels). So his workshop became a tea-room – The Fir Tree – visited by more and more numerous visitors to the village and Penshurst Place. But more important than all that, Will Meade was a true friend and support. His son, Edward (always known as Ginger), worked at the ball factory in Chiddingstone Causeway, played cricket and football for Penshurst Park for many years, and regularly played the organ in the parish church.

My younger son, William, was a real sportsman all his life. As a boy and a young man he was a very competent footballer and cross-country runner. After an accident in the forge, in which he damaged his thumb in a drill, he was forced to give up playing, but spent the rest of his life umpiring cricket at Penshurst Park, and stoolball at Chiddingstone Causeway, where his wife was a star performer – even captaining West Kent on occasions. I have always been curious to know the history and origin of stoolball, which only flourishes in Sussex and West Kent. We had a regular team at Penshurst.

My old pal, Will Meade, once pointed out to me a quotation from our own ‘local’ poet, Sir Philip Sidney:

‘A tyme there is for all, my Mother often says,
When she with skirts tuckt very hy, with girls at stoolball playes.’

(The Countesse of Pembroke’s Arcadia, 1613)

I always had an interest in singing, though I never became a member of a choir – until the late 1940’s – after the war – when William and his son Michael became members of the Causeway Choral Society – we never had such a thing in Penshurst – so I joined them. It entailed a weekly rehearsal in the Village Hall, conducted by Moira Hills, wife of the landlord of the Redleaf estate. How I managed to drive there on a dark night I shall never know. Sheer determination, I suppose!

When it came to the Festival of Britain (1951) there were celebrations in Penshurst – quite a pageant in the Park, with well-known names from the world of entertainment, and – a quiet, religious procession from the church and around part of the village. I was chosen to lead the choir in singing The Old Hundredth – unaccompanied, of course!

You could not expect me to celebrate the Queen’s Coronation in June, 1953, but by a sheer coincidence the day after that was our Diamond Wedding, which we observed (moderately quietly) at home with those of our family who were able to come. This included one of my sisters, who had emigrated to New Zealand early in the century, and she brought her husband and daughter. What a lovely surprise! I was part of such a large family, many of whom I kept in touch with all my life, because they nearly all lived fairly locally. But in those days communications with foreign parts were not easy.

When we had small family parties, especially on Boxing Day, I would be entreated to fetch out my squeezebox to accompany carols. I learnt to play it when I was a boy, but never practised it between these rare occasions!

Amongst the improvements noticeable in the post-war period has to be opportunities for young people. When I think of myself and my contemporaries and the very restricted education we received, then my own children, who got very little better, my grandchildren all did very well in their own particular careers. I had four grandsons and one grand-daughter. The eldest was my daughter's only child, Peter. He was helped by joining the R.A.F. as a boy before the War. At demob. he found it difficult to find employment, so took his wife and son to Australia for a number of years, On return he settled down eventually as a manager for the National Trust.

The second grandson, Maurice, on leaving the Technical Institute at Tunbridge Wells, got himself a job with British Railways in the signalling department, eventually ending up as an Inspector. The third in age, John, was to be employed in an estate-agent's firm, eventually becoming a partner. The youngest, Michael, won a scholarship to the Judd School, took A Level in French and Latin, so that when he was recruited for National Service in the R.A.F. he studied and qualified as an interpreter in Russian, which gave him an opening to Cambridge University, and a life-long career as a teacher and examiner. (I amused him once when I told him that I had been to Oxford – true, I had attended a conference at Ruskin College. He was annoyed when I referred to 'my old friend Lenin!') Much later in life Michael produced two books: one on 'What we did for the Russians' and also 'Changing Scenes of Life' – an account of his early life in Penshurst and district.

My only grand-daughter, Marjorie, qualified as a librarian, and worked in Tunbridge Wells. When she married a local lad, Dennis Jenner, they took over the Penshurst Post Office from Mrs Eagleton, while it was still in Leicester Square.

None of these career opportunities would have been available fifty years earlier, and much credit is due to the forward-looking attitude of local and national politicians in the first half of the Twentieth century. I am proud to belong to that number, and only wish I could have done more. But: I was a member of Sevenoaks Rural Council from 1924 until 1951. Mr J.Randerson described me as 'my old friend for many years'. He went on to say that I had done my work well both on the District Council and on the Penshurst Parish Council. Lord Cornwallis, sometime Chairman of Kent County Council, also spoke well of me (for a Tory!). My contribution as a Justice of the Peace was rewarded by my own feeling of satisfaction.

(In 1950 Penshurst was chosen as the typical example of how rural life was changing. The British Petroleum Co sent an (American) crew down to film scenes from daily activities in and around the village, including us working in the Forge. The film was eventually made available to clubs and organisations, which, it turned out, included my grandson's school Young Farmers Club. So when the teacher in charge discovered it was made locally, he very kindly invited those of us (including the Rector, Mr Hooper) who featured in the film to attend a showing of it at Judd School one afternoon at 4 p.m., which we did! The film got lost for decades, and was only found accidentally by a local man, Barry Littlechild, in a job lot that he bought; he and his friends, Ian Streeter and Rob Sellings, revived it and showed it in Penshurst in 2009 – well after my time!)

I departed this life in 1957, a few years after my beloved wife, leaving my family to continue the good work as long as they could.

How much longer my name will be visible on that board over the door of the Forge, I cannot imagine!