

MEMORIES OF PENSURST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Chapter 5

VILLAGE LIFE

Motor Cars

Petrol was strictly rationed, private motoring was unheard of: most family cars throughout the war were kept in their garages, propped up on wood blocks or piles of bricks, with their wheels removed to preserve their rubber tyres. For extra security, to immobilise all vehicles, it was common practice not only to remove the ignition keys but also take out the rotor arm. Some drivers regularly did this whenever they parked especially in town or at night.

Apart from military vehicles, tradesmen's vans, essential services like the doctor and district nurse as well as farmers, these were the only ones with a small petrol allowance, rationed by coupons. All through the war, Gordon Goodwin from Elliott's farm had an Austin car with registration number AHV 65, Ossie Cunningham's from Salman's number was EKO 903, Cecil Barrow the ironmonger and oilman had a Riley CLY 667 kept in his garage but he could not use it until after the war. He ran a Morgan 3-wheeler van for his essential work delivering paraffin oil and methylated spirits for cooking, heating and lighting to the outlying houses and hamlets not connected to the main electricity supply. Those who were allowed to drive quickly learned to eke out their supply and reduce petrol consumption by coasting downhill in neutral gear with the engine ignition switched off, although this was dangerous and probably illegal.

An interesting consequence of private cars being taken off the road was that when they started to reappear at the end of the war, there were some unfamiliar and exotic makes of cars on the roads. So rare were these, that collecting car makes and numbers commonly made an interesting hobby for some of us boys. Where else could I have seen a 'Lanchester'?

Bus Services

The Maidstone & District Bus Company operated throughout the war. For their rural services they used single-decker Leyland buses. Two of them brought Penshurst an hourly service from their Tunbridge Wells depot. The No.78 came via Rusthall, Langton Green and Fordcombe and on to Penshurst where it waited for 20 minutes before returning. Later it was changed to a double-decker, the No.33, and extended its route through Tunbridge Wells to Paddock Wood and Maidstone. The No 93, on which I travelled for seven years to and from school after the war, ran on a circular route, Tunbridge Wells; Southborough; Bidborough; Penshurst; Chiddingstone Causeway; Bough Beech; Edenbridge; Cowden; Ashurst; Langton Green and back to Tunbridge Wells, the whole circular route taking two hours. If you were really bored you could ride all the way round.

The buses were used a lot for carrying parcels and the Village Hall was the Penshurst parcel depot. If there was anything for the bus to collect, a sign with a large letter 'P' was put in the window by the front door. Sometimes the drivers forgot to look. When the bus brought a package, my father hated

this chore if it contained bottles of sticky orange juice for the infant welfare clinic. These frequently had breakages through rough handling and leaked all over the floor.

The Village School

Penshurst Church of England Primary School gave me all my early education. This began one misty September Monday morning in 1941 when, age 5, for the first and only time, my mother walked with me down the road to the school, a distance of only about 200 yards. I was on my own because at the end of the previous term my brother and sister had moved on secondary schools, brother Robert to the Boys Technical School in Tunbridge Wells, my sister Pamela to Tonbridge County Grammar School for Girls.

I went first into the infants class where the teacher was a kindly lady called Miss Hubbard. We all loved her, especially when she let us play with the sand trays. The whole class was heartbroken when she retired and left at the end of our first year. Her replacement was Miss Allum, a fierce and bitter spinster who was no fun to be with at all. She came out by bus each day from Sevenoaks, at least an hour's journey involving a change of buses. No wonder she was always unhappy. Later she moved into lodgings up Smarts Hill in the home of David Brake the baker who she eventually married: pity him.

People don't believe me when I tell them that after the first year sitting in chairs round little tables, we had to sit up in rows at long benches rather like pews. Because of the shortage of paper we often had to write on slate boards with special slate pencils. But we did have pastels for colouring pictures. Sitting in the infants' class we could hear much of what was going on in the top class in the next room. One day in 1942 there was a burst of applause. "That's a clap for Peter Webb", said Miss Allum. Peter had just learned he had passed 'The Scholarship' to go to the grammar school. He could either choose Judd School in Tonbridge or The Skinners' School in Tunbridge Wells. He chose Skinners' and I followed him there five years later in 1947. No other pupil from Penshurst C of E primary school passed the Scholarship to go to a grammar school in between those years. After two years with Miss Allum I move across the yard to Mrs Wiles's class, the middle school. At that time, unless they passed the Scholarship, pupils left the school aged 14. After just two years I was fast-tracked up into the top class taken by her husband, the head teacher Reginald Wiles. Then came the 1944 Education Act which completely reorganised secondary education and all the older pupils went by special bus every day to schools in Tonbridge. On the first morning after this happened, I was the only one left in the room. "Good morning class", said Reggie and I stood up.

They quickly reorganised the numbers by moving about 20 other boys and girls in from the middle school to join me and we took it on from there. Numbers were not quite enough to justify both Mr & Mrs Wiles, so for a time Reggie went off to teach at another school in Tunbridge Wells. But he came back in time to help me through my final year, 1946-47. He was astute and influential enough to sort out the confusion when, taking the Scholarship examination for real, I turned over two pages together and missed out the complete centrefold. I had to go into Skinners' to retake the exam one Saturday morning, but I passed and the rest is history.

Church and School

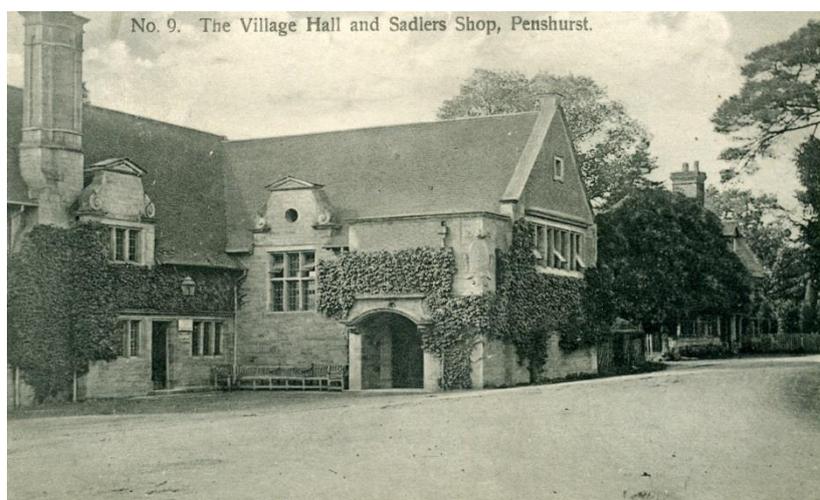
Penshurst was, and still is, a Church of England Primary School, so there were strong links. One morning each week the Rector, The Reverend Peveril Turnbull, came to take a class. "Take out your Catechisms," was the usual opening instruction. I'm afraid I don't remember much more except that he taught us the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed. It was a tradition that the whole school went to church on the morning of Ascension Day. We all brought bunches of flowers and walked with them in a crocodile up the village street to the church. We always sang the hymn "Dear Lord we offer Thee all that is fairest, blooms from the garden etc."

The Rev Turnbull was a colourful character. In a corner of the Rectory garden, next to the village telephone exchange, was a large shed and in it he had the biggest and most impressive Hornby 00 model railway set- up we could ever imagine. He had three children who went away to school and he played trains in there with his younger son. I only once had a glimpse inside and saw the trains, when we were trespassing in the rectory garden and they had inadvertently left the door open. We rarely went into that garden because Charlie Hopkins the gardener got angry and fiercely chased us off.

The 'Rectory Kids', two boys and a daughter Marjorie, the middle one, were kept remote and Mrs Turnbull the Rector's wife was considered to be a 'bit posh'. She was certainly not pleased when the three 'Rectory Kids' were caught breaking into Hammerfield House while it stood empty in the holidays and stealing some money. It was hushed up, of course, but the family moved away soon afterwards.

The Village Institute

The Village Institute was a large stone building standing on the corner by the main road junction, at the very centre of the village on a site originally occupied by three almshouses. It was built in 1900 as a result of a bequest from local benefactors Arnold Hills and his family. They also paid for the building of a village hall in the family's home village of Chiddingstone Causeway. Their family business was in London, the Thames Ironworks, an iron smelting company.



Penshurst Village Institute

In the late 19th century, inspired by the opening of Working Men's Clubs in other areas, up and down the country local benefactors such as the Hills, considered that clubs, where people could meet their friends, socialise, relax, play games, read books and newspapers, were more desirable alternative places of recreation than public houses.

Penshurst Village Club had a large hall the 'Arnold Hills Memorial Hall' with a balcony, a well-equipped stage with a greenroom below, and lavatory with wash-basin and a separate rear emergency entrance. There was plenty of room for the Penshurst Amateur Dramatic Society to store scenery in the outbuildings and also a large storage cupboard for costumes and props on the landing outside the billiard room. This excellent facility, with a fireplace and armchairs, had a full-size billiard table and a walk-in cupboard where regular players could hang their personal cues for storage. But there was nobody to play on the billiard table during the war.

On the ground floor there was a library/reading room with regular daily papers, 'News Chronicle', 'Daily Herald' 'Daily Sketch' and magazines including 'Punch'. One section of library shelving was set aside as a branch of the Kent County Library, a borrowing facility where the books were regularly changed and could be specially requested. The library contained many donated books, including a full set of Encyclopaedia Britannica together with a 10-volume set of a modern encyclopaedia. In one cupboard, there was a full set of pre-war copies of Wisden's Cricketers Almanac and many back numbers of the Kent County Cricket Club Yearbook, one of which recorded that one of our family, a certain George Martin, a bowler from Leigh, made a few appearances for the county in the 1920s.

The vestibule also served as shop/café serving teas and light refreshments, sweets (when available), cigarettes and tobacco: before the war they had sold ice-cream. In one corner was a public telephone booth advertised outside with a sign 'You may telephone from here'. Public access to a telephone was not at all common but there was a proper red phone box near the Leicester Arms. The Club also provided a public bathroom available for use by members on payment of a small charge. A few village men used this regularly, i.e. once a week. One of the regular bathers worked in Cardens, the chestnut fencing manufacturers who used a lot of creosote so his hands were always coated with it. Having checked him in and collected his money, my father used to nip round quickly to start running the water for the bath but at the same time throwing in a good handful of washing soda to make it easier to clean off the tide-mark afterwards. I don't think he ever guessed.

My father had taken over as steward of the Penshurst Village Club in 1935, shortly before I was born and my mother helped him run the place. Our attached cottage at the rear had its own entrance and a small garden with an area of lawn and kitchen garden.

All in all, what a place for a boy to grow up in: right at the heart of village life. But we never travelled and on reflection the first ten years of my life were confined within an area of about one square mile.

THE END OF THE WAR

War in Europe came to an end a few months after the army moved out when Germany surrendered on Monday May 7th 1945. In anticipation of this day, Cecil Barrow had hoarded a considerable stock of pre-war fireworks. He brought these out for the VE Day celebration bonfire, held a few days later on the hillside above Elliott's Farm known to all

as the 'Plain'. The celebrations were spectacular: naturally the Fire Brigade took charge of the fire and I believe a certain amount of beer was consumed.

VJ Day, marking the end of the war with Japan in the Far East a few months later was not celebrated in quite the same way. There were no fireworks left.

The bells of St John the Baptist church were rung again and the Penshurst tradition of ringing a curfew every evening at eight o'clock was resumed, a practice dating back to pre-war years.

ADDENDUM What did we eat?

In Monty Python's sketch 'Four Yorkshiremen', the characters try and outdo each other recalling the extent of their youthful deprivation in drinking a cup of tea.

'Cup of cold tea, without milk or sugar, drunk out of a rolled up newspaper... And you try and tell the young people of today that...they won't believe you.'

With me it was bananas. I never saw or smelt a banana until after the war when I was nine years old. A rumour got round that Chapman's Stores had received bananas. They were quickly snapped up and rationed one per child, to regular customers with a children's ration book. When eventually presented with one to eat, I simply did not know how to deal with it.

Oranges, too, started to appear, delivered in wooden crates or 'orange boxes'. Much of the fruit was bruised and bad, already growing a whitish mould. Chapman's used to dump rubbish like this behind the sheds down at the bottom of their orchard. Although the oranges smelt a bit 'off', this didn't deter us from picking through the rotting pile, to see if we could find any sound and edible ones.

We did not have any kind of refrigeration for cold storage until well into the 1950s. Food supplies were mostly purchased weekly and kept in the cool larder. Perishable stuff that attracted flies was kept under a muslin mesh cover or in a meat safe. Butter was stored in an earthenware pot, kept damp to create evaporation and was therefore cool.

Eggs were kept in a big glazed pot called a 'crock' and covered with a solution of isinglass. This is a soluble form of gelatin, extracted from the viscera of certain fish such as the sturgeon. It formed a coating on the eggshells, preventing gaseous exchange through the shell pores, which inhibited deterioration of the contents.

This old practice, though regarded with suspicion by some, was sound and really worked, although much depended on the condition of the eggs when first immersed. In the USA it was common practice in storing eggs for transport to spray the shells lightly with a harmless vegetable oil. Egg oiling, although perfectly safe, was not permitted in Great Britain or elsewhere in Europe, where the whole objective was to produce eggs close to their point of consumption and avoid the need for storage for more than a few days.

What we did import from the USA during the war was spray-dried whole egg, a product simply known as 'dried egg'. This came in rectangular tins with a 'Stars & Stripes' flag pictured on the label. Intended mainly for use in cooking, dried egg made excellent scrambled eggs or omelettes. Another welcome imported food product from the USA was peanut butter, which I had also never seen before. But the most successful import of all was undoubtedly tinned 'Spam'. (**Specially Processed Artificial Meat.**) During and after the war we ate a lot of spam: sliced straight out of the tin; grilled or coated with batter and deep fried as fritters. Monty Python again: 'Spam, spam, spam and spam'.

Domestic food supplies were boosted by what my father could grow in the garden. It was not a particularly good garden, the soil was poor and much of the plot was in constant shade. The 'Greyhound' cabbage plants never hearted up properly. Brussels sprouts were small but after picking them off, leaving the stumps in the ground meant you could cut off the regrown tops for 'spring greens'. But all the 'greens' after cooking, i.e. boiling for hours, came out dark green and tasting strong and frankly vile. This vegetable, which was supposed to be highly nutritious could only be eaten if soured in vinegar, a bottle of which was always on the table along with the salt and pepper.

Runner beans however were a different matter. My father could grow those successfully in the same trench year after year, always using seed dried and kept from the previous crop. The bean trench was lined with whatever leaf mould or organic matter was available, sometimes even soot left by the chimney sweep or shredded newspaper to help retain moisture. His real joy came if he looked out of a window and saw a passing horse defaecate. He would rush into the kitchen, grab the coal shovel and a bucket and go out on the road to collect the pile of droppings while it was still steaming. Leave it any longer and somebody else might beat him to it.

There was usually a heavy crop of runner beans so any surplus would be stored. The beans were picked, washed and sliced in the usual way, but then dried off and packed in a glazed earthenware pot, mixing in alternate layers of salt before sealing the top with greaseproof paper. Salted down like this they would last for months. Before cooking they needed a thorough rinsing to get rid of excess salt. Although a bit soft and mushy and hardly delicious, they were welcome.

There were clumps of sweet chestnut trees in various places in Penshurst Park. We knew the best locations and gathered ripe chestnuts from under the trees in the autumn. We put them in a large biscuit tin and buried it in the garden, cool and safe. The tin was dug up at Christmas and the chestnuts were still fine. They were usually roasted on the coal shovel over a glowing fire or sometimes we boiled them.

Ice cream disappeared completely for the duration. Walls ice cream together with teas and soft drinks had been sold in the shop at the Village Hall before the war. I can just also remember the 'Stop me and buy one' man on his tricycle coming to the village at some stage, possibly just before the war. It was a sad moment when, early in the war, a van came out to collect the Walls Ice Cream storage cabinet and it was never seen again.

Walls ice cream was highly popular and much sought after when they resumed production after the war. But they refused to reappoint the Village Hall as a retail outlet despite my father's pleading. For some reason they did start to supply the restaurant at the Spotted Dog, way out of the village. Eventually, a Walls ice cream van began to tour the local villages arriving in Penshurst at Sunday lunchtime. We used to listen out for the chimes so we could go and purchase a 'family brick' for

lunch. It was always a close-run thing on Sundays between the ice cream van arriving and my father returning from the Leicester Arms.

What about birthdays, I have been asked? Well, that was easy: we just did not celebrate birthdays. During the war and in fact in all the time I lived at home, I never had a birthday party. What's more, I can only remember once going to one, it must have been in the summer of 1947, the birthday of a girl at school called Maureen McGrath.

Christmases during the war passed quietly without fuss. We never had a tree or much else in the way of decorations, apart from a few sprigs of holly poked in behind the pictures in the sitting room. We once had a chicken, the first time I ever tasted it and I was not impressed. But to be fair, it was only a scrawny old laying hen from Salman's farm and my mother's experience of cooking chicken was limited.

I have also been asked if we ate out - what a question! The first time I can remember 'eating out' was after the war. We had gone up to London on a day trip for 'Salute the Soldier Day' and rounded it off by going to the Lyons Corner House in the Strand. I had Lancashire Hotpot served in a small round earthenware pot. Previous to that I had never eaten off anything other than a plate. That probably would have been 1946. Imagine that, I was nearly 10 years old before I first 'ate out'.

Children nowadays...they just don't realise.