

Memories of Lemsford School 1966 - 1971

by Richard Borrie



Classroom scene in the late 1960s with centre, Richard Borrie and Guy Scott.

My first memory of St. John's Lemsford was being dragged up the hill from the village by my Mother. Naturally, at the age of 4 I did not want to go so I screamed all the way. I don't know how long this went on for, but by the time the Beatles had reached number one several years later with Penny Lane I must have got used to it because I can remember singing it on the way up the hill.

Life at St. John's was simple. Mrs Temple taught all the infants in the small room and Mr Temple taught the big children in the big classroom although by the time I got to the big classroom I think he had retired. There was little intrusion from the world beyond the village, what little we knew was picked up from the Janet and John reading books

I can only remember three seasons at St. John's. It was either Harvest Festival, Christmas, or summer. At harvest festival we went to the nearby church, which was full of ornaments made of corn. At about this time we also spent lots of time in the playground with conkers. At Christmas we lit candles and had a party at the end of term. We spent weeks making decorations for the big room, including getting holly from the nearby hedgerows, and we played lots of party games. I can clearly remember winning musical chairs, or at least coming second. I had discovered the trick of sitting down before the music stopped by the simple expedient of watching Mrs Temple on the piano out of the corner of my eye. You could tell she was about to stop because she would pause, and then plunge her hands on to the keyboard.

It was always cold in the classroom in the winter, a bitter icy cold that could not be imagined these days, since global warming had not been invented. Most of the children at the school lived within walking distance so everyone had stories of ice and frost to tell from the journey to school. Of those in the village I had to walk the furthest but there were some children from outlying farms towards

Hatfield and Wheathampstead.

Summer consisted of lessons sitting out under the cherry tree in the area between the school and the church. This must have been idyllic (a word I could not have understood or spelt at that age.) Strangely, I cannot remember learning anything at all in my time at St. John's, although I must clearly have learned to read and write then, and what more start in life could one need. I have a vague memory of a teacher (not Mrs Temple I think) holding up words on small cards, whilst we all sat around in a big semi-circle. Whoever knew the word would shout it out. This was great fun, until in what seemed like an instant, I had learned to read and knew all the words. This was because a friend of my parents had given me a book called 'Blind Dog Tom', which I read from cover to cover, thereby suddenly taking me beyond the simple territory of Janet and John, which was all that was available in the little classroom.

Summer at St. John's officially started when the white lines were painted on the playing field for the races. At the time it seemed such a long way from the start in the lower field, round the old fruit trees, and then up the hill to the long straight and the finish. Until very recently I was certain the track was at least a mile in length but my father showed me an old photograph of me in the flat race, and it cannot have been more than 50 metres from start to finish. There was also an excellent aluminium climbing frame, positioned to one side of the playground. If you fell off it hurt, and plenty of blood was spilt on it because there was no soft-play or child-friendly surfaces in those days, just hard concrete. But we didn't mind.

I can remember some of the names of my classmates, but not the faces anymore. Guy Scott, Peter Coles, Julie Robb, Mark Lander, John Horsley, Carl Sutterby (we called him 'Sutterbox') and Tom and Matt Baker. All too soon life moved on and at the age of about 8 I left St. John's never to return. In later years I came across several semi-autobiographical novels which described their author's school days in small rural village schools - 'Lark Rise to Candleford', 'Le Grand Meaulnes', and 'Claudine a l'Ecole'. Although written half a century earlier, the similarities with St. John's in semi-rural Hertfordshire were still detectable: the village life, the simple classrooms with children of all ages lumped together, the excitement of the different seasons, the happy incomprehensibility of it all. It was not the last word in educational establishments, but it was a good start in life.