

## THE LEMS福德 I KNEW. Part 1: ST. JOHN'S SCHOOL

by Keith Ladbury

The monthly arrival of the excellent 'Parish News' brings back (tender) memories of Lemsford when, more than 80 years ago and as a small boy, I lived at the School House.

My Father, following a series of Headmistresses, was appointed Head in 1902. I remember hearing of his arrival at Hatfield station (dressed in frock coat plus top hat) for his interview, and being met by the Vicar, the Rev. Coggin who had driven to the station in his carriage to meet him.

The school as I remember had some 100 pupils, boys and girls aged 5 -14 years.

For a short time my parents lived at 'Bridge House' while various alterations were made at the School House; a door put from the kitchen into the hall while another, from the kitchen to what was to be our dining room, sealed up. The stairs of course went the other way to as now. Our 'larder' was a cupboard under the stairs though improved later with a small window cut through the wall facing the church.

One 'feature' I always remember, and which frightened me as a small boy, was a hole cut in the back of the cupboard on the left-hand side of the fireplace in the back bedroom. From this hung a sinister looking rope which was connected with the school bell housed in a cupola on the roof of the adjoining classroom; this to be rung in the case of fire at the house. The theory, presumably, was for someone in the village to hear it and arouse Mr Wilmot at the Post Office. He, in turn would (on the only telephone in the village) ring the Hatfield Fire Brigade. Being a part-time establishment, the team would collect, harness the horses, and drive with all speed to the scene. The requisite water would, I imagine, be drawn from our well. Fortunately for all concerned, the occasion did not arise.

And thinking of wells makes me write of our domestic arrangements. 'Primitive' was sufficient to describe the sanitary facilities of school and house. Of water, there was a soft water pump (which went dry in the Summer) over the stone sink in the kitchen. Drinking water for school and house came from a deep well. The first outside our dining room window but filled in before I remember it. The second, which lasted quite a time, sunk near the back door. A couple of school boys used to draw up the water with rope and bucket and empty into a water cart. Later, when the well contents were considered not sufficiently attractive to drink, we used a deep well. at the Vicarage - the Vicarage by the Church -. By means of a vast wheel water was drawn up to a tank in the vicarage roof and available also from a tap by the wheel. During school holidays it was my job to work the wheel and fill the water cart.

On Mondays someone would come up the hill to deal with our weekly wash. A fire would be lit under the large copper built into the 'Wash House' at the bottom of the garden, which also housed a coal-fired range (never used) and a sink (no water) plus our large mangle.

Much later, after the War, around 1921/22, we had our own deep well and water laid on at' the house. Oil lamps and candles gave way to electric light and we even had a telephone (Welwyn Garden 411).

A brick wall divided our garden from what was then the girls' Playground and which boasted a swing. The main playground - no tarmac in those days - was for general use and here were two swings side by side but removed early on as the iron supporting rings became too worn. Beyond the playground rather laid out a series of gardens where the older boys (on Thursdays I think it was when the girls had needlework) were taught the cultivation of vegetables - which we ate.

Beyond that, a tennis court and Summer House where we as a family plus friends spent many happy hours.

The usual school holidays prevailed though governed to some extent by the agricultural needs of the district. Mr Horn of Handside Farm, or Mr Sherriff at the Mill would call and arrange with my Father for

a week's holiday to enable such children as would to help with the potato picking.

All through those early years before the First World War, the School was very fortunate from the great interest taken by the owners of Brocket Hall. Lord and Lady Mount Stephen were in residence with, in those days, a vast indoor staff; a Head Gardener who had his own house near the Walled Gardens with the adjoining Botchy where the gardeners lived; an Estate Carpenter, also with his own house; the Estate Farm with its fine herd of prize cattle.

Much attention was given to the preservation of game, Brocket being noted - as I gather still is - for its shoots.

King George V, being a keen shot, would come down at least once a Season with Queen Mary, a personal friend of Lady Mount. The journey would be to Hatfield station; met there by the Brocket carriage and pair, and driven back to the Hall. On such occasions, a note would come to my Father so that the school children could line up on either side of the iron railings - long since gone - to wave as the carriage - always brought to walking pace - passed to the Lodge Gates.

Other memories which return were the Christmas Treats provided by Lady Mount. in those years around 1910 - 1914. Each girl was given a dress length (red or green) with lining and each boy two woollen jerseys - which necessitated much prior measuring by the teachers. A number of books were also given as prizes attendance, work etc. which my Father would arrange and order. I well remember the yearly Autumnal arrival of a large parcel of books, usually G.A. Henty, which enabled me to read them on the quiet before being presented to their rightful owners.

The Christmas Prize Giving was an Occasion. Desks - long to seat 4/5? - were turned round and tops adjusted to form tables. Early in the day a van would arrive from the Hall with vast supplies of 'tin' loaves, Estate butter, buns and cakes. The Teachers would prepare masses of bread and butter, always popular since, in those days, butter, and Estate butter at that could not have been in great supply. Additional supplies of a more delicate nature would also arrive for the tea, over which my Mother would preside, and held in our drawing room for Lady Mount, The Vicar and School Managers.

Tea over, with the majority of the children sent out into the playground to let off steam, the older boys rearranged the desks, set tables stacked with clothing and prizes which, in due course, Lady Mount presented.

After the usual 'three cheers' all departed each with a large paper bag tied with red tape - containing a red Canadian apple (reminiscent of Canadian railroad 'Mount Stephen' days) a baker's bun and an orange.

Entertainment in those early days had to be provided locally. I remember hearing of the Lemsford Football Team playing on the field just above the 'Long & Short Arm'. Father used to go and cheer them on or on occasion act as Referee as he had played football in his College days. The School did its part, Father making up for the children several forms of Operetta. These if I remember aright were based - highly unauthorised I suspect - on extracts from the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas then much in vogue. "Three little Maids from School" or extracts from 'Pinafore' come to mind for I was involved as Accompanist. Our piano was brought in from the house (the school instrument being well past its prime) A few chairs also from home for the 'Specials', then chairs from the Reading Room or desks turned round for the remainder. Mr Hale, the Village Carpenter and his excellent 'Sammy' Welch, would erect a stage with curtains over the Infants' Gallery. The children would dress in the Classroom, run round the playground into the Infants' Lobby and via steps to the stage.

These concerts were popular at the time. In fact, on one heady occasion, Father even took 'The Enchanted Rose' to perform on Saturday afternoon in Hatfield in a sad type of building then opposite the station. This must have been about 1916.

An Annual Sale of Work was another event. Mother ran a class of children working for the Cripples

Branch of, the then 'Waifs and Strays' Society. A Sale either on the tennis court or in the School and usually opened by someone from the Society. Magic Lantern Lectures too happened now and then. There was a large screen which could be let down in front of the infants gallery with the partition opened back to make one room. Father operated a lantern - a triple paraffin burner (which also provided occasional black smuts) for the necessary light.