GROWING UP IN HARMER HILL – THE VILLAGE SCHOOL

Nowadays the number of village schools in Britain is declining steadily, as each year still more small villages lose their schools in the interests of economy; but in the 'fifties, when I was a child, there were plenty of them still in existence, and in Harmer Hill I was fortunate enough to be educated in one until I was eleven. Now the children go to school at Myddle, and, though they may have gained in terms of facilities and equipment, I'm sure they have missed out in other respects.

My first real acquaintance with the village of Harmer Hill happened when I was nearly five, as we lived at the time in Yorton Heath. This was on the day I started school, at the beginning of the Easter term in1955. Now, when I look at the school building, it seems small and low, cramped to the extent that I can hardly believe it ever accommodated forty children, and the furniture, when last I saw it, seemed more fitted to a dolls' house than the real world; but when I was five, I was fully convinced that it was the biggest building in the world, occupied by thousands of rough eleven-year-old giants. So strong was this impression that on the first day I took refuge under the chair of one of the few 'big boys' whom I knew by sight!

Having been lured out by a doll kept for the dual purposes of reassuring new children and representing the Infant Jesus in the Christmas play, and which, even to my unsophisticated eye, looked considerably worse for wear, I was introduced to my new class. The infants' classroom, I was relieved to find, was much less awe-inspiring than the 'Big Room' in which I had been initiated, and was occupied by four groups, each of four children seated at a table. On ledges beneath the tables we kept our belongings, which consisted of a pencil (mine, however often it was replaced, persisted in breaking and in writing unevenly), books for sums and writing, an elementary reader and a hymn book. We also had access to a number of educational toys: blocks for counting, beads to thread and so forth. As we progressed through the school we acquired text books on history and geography, dictionaries and several more exercise books. Finally we graduated from pencils and inkwells and 'dip-in' pens, and ultimately to 'joined-up' handwriting.

The sounds remarkably like the career of any child in a modern primary school, but there were many differences. Firstly, Harmer Hill School had only forty pupils, divided into two classes and taught by two teachers. Thus, each teacher was responsible for pupils who might be anything up to four years apart in age, and of widely diverse intelligence. This was done by dividing the classes into four groups (four children to a group in the infants' class and six in the juniors') and setting work for three groups while teaching the fourth; a system which prevailed in elementary schools from the beginning of compulsory education in 1870 until quite recently. For some subjects, of course, such as history and geography, the whole class could be taught together.

There were certain features of the school which would probably be quite unacceptable today. The ones which stick in my mind are the toilets and the lunches. The girls had the use of three Elsan toilets in graduated sizes; in theory, the largest was for the teachers but, since at lease one was invariably out of action because it was leaking, we all used any of them which was available, and they were generally considered quite unspeakable (I might add that this did not prevent us from using them as headquarters for our 'secret societies'; a practice which the teachers strongly discouraged). In any case we had to use them in pairs, as the 'window' consisted of a missing brick at the

back of each cubicle, and one girl had to hold handkerchief over the aperture while the other used the toilet to prevent the boys from spying on us from the orchard which backed onto the playground; needless to say, we were not supposed to be in the orchard, but when the teachers were indoors we usually were, especially during the damson harvest!

As for the lunches, even though school meals are a traditional cause for complaint, I think any modern child would find them quite as repulsive as we did. They were brought to the school from somewhere else in a van, and served from large round insulated canisters. They were traditional in content, tending towards stew and stodgy puddings doused in custard, and had either suffered in the transportation or had been abominably cooked. Since the school didn't even boast a water supply, the van also brought a container of drinking water, and one of hot, in which Mrs Owen washed up, often assisted by some of the older girls. She also dealt with the minor grazes and bumps which inevitably occurred at lunch-time as the children played in the tarmac playground.

At that time the school was very much part of the village, and we were by no means confined within the fences. Apart from our illicit occupation of the orchard, we were also allowed to go to the Post Office to spend our pocket money on such delicacies as black jacks and aniseed balls, and in the summer we fetched water from the pump to supplement the supply which came in the van.

In addition to these unofficial outings, we had regular 'nature walks'. We enjoyed these and absorbed considerable amounts of information about the countryside. More formal teaching on this subject came from the schools broadcasts, which also helped us in other respects, notably with music and singing. The radio must have been an enormous boon to schools such as ours, with limited facilities, and was a wonderful novelty. Nowadays, most schools have not only radio, but television, which adds a further dimension to education.

Despite the limitations of a small building, no mains water or cooking facilities, and heating provided by a fearsome stove in each room, we sampled a remarkable range of activities. In addition to the usual school subjects, we did painting, singing, country dancing (accompanied by a gramophone and 78 rpm records which would be worth a fortune today!), PT, games, including cricket and rounders, pottery (though, as far as I remember, only once) and other handicrafts; not only sewing and knitting, but also weaving, making Christmas decorations and a host of other things. One which remains in my mind is 'French knitting'; we all persuaded our fathers to construct a machine consisting of four nails hammered into an old cotton reel and were provided with a darning needle with which to work the stitches. But matters got out of hand as, instead of producing woolly hats or table mats, we outdid each other in a competition to make the longest 'tail'. Several of them reached more than once the length of the classroom!

Religious education played a very important part in the curriculum, as Harmer Hill was a Church school; not only in the usual sense, but it was also, as it is now, a Church in its spare time. Every Friday afternoon we had to stack the desks and chairs, and the 'Big Room' would resound with the noise of the big boys opening the partition at the east tend of the room to reveal the altar, and setting out the adult-sized chairs. Thus the transformation was effected.

‘Scripture’ took the form of daily prayers and hymns, with a Bible story each morning. In addition, the Catechism was recited each Friday; not a favourite part of our week and one which, I imagine, has long since fallen into disuse. Occasionally we were able to persuade Mrs Platt to let us sing hymns instead, which was much preferable. Once a year, the vicar would conduct a ‘Scripture Examination’, in which we would sing some hymns and he would ask questions about religion. Subsequently a Prayer Book would be awarded to the outstanding pupil and certificates to those who had done well; though I feel sure now that these awards must have been decided by Mrs Platt and not by the vicar, who could hardly have assessed us adequately in one morning!

For most of us, the years at Harmer Hill School led towards one goal, now unknown in most of Britain; the Eleven-Plus exam. The main part of our education was aimed at preparing us for this, in addition to ensuring that we left for our secondary schools able to spell, write fluently and do basic mathematics, and with an adequate amount of general knowledge. In the last year or so, we had homework based on the 11+. Finally, the great day came, and we assembled by the Red Castle to catch the school bus to Baschurch Secondary Modern School, where the exam was to be held. We each clutched our favourite pen (with brand new nib) and several new, sharp pencils, and most of us had a lucky mascot. In general, the day was looked on as a treat; there was the unaccustomed thrill of the bus ride, the school, which was large and modern and most unlike ours, the luxury of a palatable lunch and water closets, and even the examination itself, which was a familiar format to us, and really quite fun. Also, there was the opportunity to meet many more children from the locality.

Finally the results would reach us, and usually Harmer Hill had a good percentage of passes. Those who failed didn’t mind too much, as they would be going on to Baschurch in the company of friends, whereas those who passed would be distributed among several grammar schools and would probably know few other children when they arrived.

Whatever our destination, there is no doubt that we entered Harmer Hill School more or less illiterate and differing widely in intellectual ability, and were thrown together into a class covering a wide age range. As a teacher myself, coping with such a situation would horrify me; yet Mrs Platt and her assistants handled us with apparent ease and, almost without exception, we left their care able to read, to do mathematics, to write accurately, and in possession of considerable general knowledge. Admittedly many modern teachers have their own problems of discipline and uncooperative parents which did not exist in Harmer Hill, yet how many of them could take twenty children aged between seven and eleven, and educate them all adequately?

My elder son will be starting school in less than a year, and, though I have no fears that his education will be inadequate or that he will suffer from lack of good school equipment, I’m sure that his primary school will be very different from mine and, though he will undoubtedly have advantages that I lacked, I know that my schooling had features which have gone for good and whose passing is much to be regretted.

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(Written from Wegberg, West Germany 1980)