

PAST TIMES IN MYDDLE

(Life in the 1920's and 1930's in a village in Shropshire, England)

By Ernest Griffiths

Ernest Griffiths was born in 1920 and he was at Myddle School until the age of 14.

All the tales he recounts here are about those days and would have been in the years culminating in 1934.

In 1941 at the age of 21 Ernest Griffiths was conscripted into the army and finally returned to farming in 1945.

Following is a collection of articles that were originally written for inclusion in the parish magazine "The Myddle Messenger" published monthly and are presented in their entirety below.

Thinking back to early schooldays, our family then lived at Lower Houlston which is two miles from Myddle School. As there were five or six of us going to school together, we had a pony and trap for transport. The trap was left at the blacksmith and the pony on the field, where the Hodnett's bungalow stands.

If I remember correctly, with the exception of Castle Farm, there were only four houses on the left side of the road from the Smithy to the Fenemere turn at Myddle Wood. On those days, the road through the village was little more than a lane and just rough stone, no tarmacadam then.

I can well recall the road being widened, and stone put down, soil thrown over it, and then sprayed with water and rolled with a steamroller. I think they called it 'puddling the stone in', using soil and water to key it all together. After the road surface had dried, a layer of bitumen was applied, a forerunner of our roads as we know them today. What a thrill it was to us schoolboys, watching all this going on outside the school!

During my schooldays at Myddle, Mr Percy Porch was Headmaster and taught the seniors. Mrs Porch taught the infants, and I think it was Miss Yeomans who took the intermediate class.

I well remember when I was in the infant class, making a rather rude remark about Mr Porch, who was teaching singing, and my classmate very kindly told Mrs Porch, who then grabbed me to take me through to Mr Porch for some punishment. I was rather against the idea and hung onto the desk, but she dragged me and the desk to the door of the big room, where Mr Porch met us and rapped my knuckles with the cane so that I had to let go. At that time, the older children did canework, baskets etc, to there was always a good supply of canes soaking in a bath of water to make them more pliable, so they were good for meting out punishment too.

There were two playgrounds then; girls and boys were kept separate, and woe betide anyone caught on the wrong side of the fence.

During the lunch hour we were allowed to leave the school premises, and often in good weather, we would gang up to play Fox and Hounds; one boy would be given a ten minute start, and then the pack would give chase and try to catch him. Today, I shudder to think of the risks we took among the hills and quarries at Webscott.

Sometimes we actually arrived back at school a minute or two late, only to find the door locked. Mr Porch would ignore us for twenty minutes or so, then let us in to give us a few strokes of the cane for being half an hour late for class - most unfair we thought!

My sister has just reminded me of a few little rhymes that we used to sing at school, obviously outside during dinner break when Mr and Mrs Porch had gone over to the schoolhouse, which is now the post office.

*Percy Porch was a very good man,
He went to church on Sundays.
He prayed to God to give him strength
To wallop the kids on Mondays.*

*Harmer Hill bulldogs fastened in a pen,
Can't get out for Myddle men.*

(Enough to cause a civil war)

Looking back over what I have written, I must be giving the impression that Mr Porch was a monster, but he wasn't really - well, perhaps a little one! He wasn't very big anyway. In any case, a few strokes of the cane never did us any harm. It all added to the excitement, especially when someone else was on the receiving end. However, I always enjoyed school and I always looked forward to the end of term exams. It must have been my competitive nature! - or was it because it meant the end of term?

Mr Porch owned a complete set of handbells, and during the time he was at Myddle, there was always a team of ringers. When I was in the team, we went to the BBC Studios in Birmingham to take part in a "Children's Hour" programme. Christmas was a good time too, because we played carols at all the local Halls: Marton, Shotton, Burlton and Petton, which were all occupied by the gentry in those days.

I also enjoyed the practical gardening sessions in the school house garden. We older boys were each allotted a plot, which we had to dig and plant with vegetables, and keep free from weeds. I remember one year I was planting potatoes, and forgot to move the line at one end. It is said that parallel lines appear to meet, well, my parallel lines did meet. The evidence was there for all to see!

Mr Porch had a car, and on Fridays after school I had to help him start it. I, of course, turned the handle while he twiddled the knobs (no electric starters then). The car was not used during the week, so it was a bit stupid on occasions.

I have just thought of another rhyme, but as this is for the Church Messenger, perhaps I had better forget it.

When I was at school, there was a 'kissing wicket' opposite and we used the field for sports - cricket, football, etc. when playing cricket, we had to allow extra time between stumps for dodging or leaping over cowpats.

On one occasion when in the field, I got into a fight with the school bully, which came to a sudden end when he fell into the brook, which was in full spate. I rather think he must have slipped; I cannot imagine that it was my boxing prowess which put him there. However, some of the big lads fished him out, and he went home to change his clothes. I went back into school in fear and trembling, expecting to be caned, but when B..... came in late Mr Porch said "Well, B.....! I have never seen you looking so clean", and that was that, Phew!

In last month's *Country Corner*, reference was made to the footsteps in the rock on Myddle Hill and I am proud to say that I was one of many who used those steps. To get up on the rock it was a case of fingers and toes, then we slid down on one foot. I think Father used to wonder why it was that I was always wearing out the studs in my right boot. We always wore hob-nailed boots for school and as the nails wore down, Father replaced them so that the actual sole of the boot did not wear out so quickly.

Another good place to play was the old Quarry (now filled in and houses built on it). It was used as the village dump and all sorts of exciting things could be discovered. When crab apples, which grew around the quarry rim were in season, we had many good crab fights. The enemy on the top pelted the defenders in the bottom who used old dustbin lids, etc, to ward off the crabs raining down on them. There were often a few black eyes and bloody noses when the missiles found the target.

But it was good fun, and we loved it.

Just after I reached the grand old age of nine, my uncle who farmed Houlston Manor died suddenly and my father bought the farm. So with the exception of my elder brother, we moved from Lower Houlston to the “Manor”. (Sounds grand, doesn’t it?) I can remember wheeling all my worldly goods in a wheelbarrow to my new home. However, because we were half a mile nearer to the school, and by this time there were only two of us going to Myddle, we had to dispose of the pony and trap, and thereafter it was Shank’s pony. Ah well, the exercise did us good. At least, that is what my father said; *we* didn’t believe it.

At this time, also, I joined the Church choir (and still there sixty odd years later) and because of the distance involved, Mrs Nesbit, the Rector’s wife, insisted that I went straight to the Rectory from school on choir practice nights. There I was given tea with the family. It consisted of four boys and two girls, one of whom was very pretty and my age, a wonderful incentive to attend practice regularly. The Rectory then was almost double the size it is now (the old Rectory) and in winter was very cold, so we always had our tea on small tables round a huge fire, very cosy.

We had practice in the drawing room which was very large with a grand piano at one end. Miss Walton was our organist then, and we used to play all sorts of tricks on her. On one occasion at a choir supper, we boys were sitting on a bench with Miss Walton at one end. At a given signal we stood up, the bench reared up and Miss Walton was dumped on the floor. Although she is now in her nineties, she still talks of her happy days with the choir. She was a good sport and took it all in her stride.

About this time, Father bought our first wireless. I don’t know why it was called a wireless because there were wires everywhere, including a high level wire stretching from the farm buildings to the house, the purpose of which was to collect the wireless signals. The magic box was delivered and installed by Mitchells of Shrewsbury. The cabinet was about four feet high, with a great horn on the top. The top half of the cabinet had a drop front and contained the “works” with all its knobs and dials, and in the bottom was the space for the wet batteries which periodically had to be taken to a garage to be recharged. What excitement there was when it was finally switched on, all squawks and squeals to begin with.

More of this exciting tale next month. Don’t miss it!

There used to be a summer house in the Rector's Coppice on Hillside, and one day when we were out playing "Fox and Hounds", in an attempt to escape the hounds, the fox climbed an oak tree which over-hung the summer house. When he saw that the hounds were very close he crawled out along the over-hanging branch and dropped down on to the roof, but the roof was very rotten and he went straight through, disappearing in a cloud of dust and dead leaves which cushioned his fall. He was unhurt and made a quick dash to freedom.

The School had a visit from the local Policeman a few days later, but of course no-one knew anything about it. It must have been a *really* big fox! I won't mention any names; perhaps the police are still looking for the culprit. After all, it was only sixty-five years ago.

P.C. Mills was our village "bobby" and we boys and girls had a great respect for him. He was a big fellow with a large tummy held in with a wide leather belt, which he would not hesitate to use on anyone misbehaving - well, *threaten* to use - we disappeared rapidly if we saw him about to take it off. (I often think that something like that would not come amiss today).

When I reached the age of twelve, I sat an examination at Wem Grammar School and gained a scholarship for a free place at that school, but the powers that be decided that my Dad could afford to pay for my schooling, so I was unable to take it up. Naturally, the decision upset my Dad (he did not know he had such a brilliant son). I might have gone on to University (or prison!)

The result was that I was the only one of the family who did not go on to a boarding school, and I stayed on at Myddle - probably that is why I am so clever? I can add up without using my fingers and toes or a calculator.

Myddle School was delighted to get rid of me a few days after my fourteenth birthday - what a shame!

It is often said that the best days of your life are spent at school and having left school, I was soon to find out whether or not it was true.

Dad, in his wisdom wanted to give us a good training in farming so, on leaving school, we had to do a year with pigs, and I *hated* pigs!

We made cheese in those days, and there was always a plentiful supply of whey (a by-product of cheese) which was piped from the dairy to an underground tank in the piggery. Here it was hauled up with a bucket on a rope, meal was mixed with it, and the resulting “goo” was then carried in buckets to the pig pens - quite a job, especially in the summer when we had up to a hundred pigs to fatten.

Unknown to me, help was on the way. My so-called Uncle Alf (who was head of a plumbing company in Salford) came to visit one weekend, and watched me pig feeding. After a little while he said “I could make that job much easier for you”, and I thought “What a hope!” However, a few weeks later a lorry arrived, loaded with copper pipes and fittings, plus three workmen, and within a couple of days a system was installed to pump the whey into a high-level tank from where it was all piped to all the pig pens, so all I and to do was carry the dry meal and turn on the taps and the wiggies mixed their own “goo”.

It seemed like heaven, after what had gone before. Three cheers for Uncle Alf Rouse! (Does that name ring a bell? Yes, you have guessed right - he was John Rouse’s grandfather). I only wish he could have rigged up something to clean out the pens. Pigs like to be kept clean, and it didn’t matter about me, I *always* smelled of pigs. Ugh!

Please Dad, can I go back to school?!

Of course I couldn't go back to school, so pigs it had to be. Anyway, it was a lot better now the feeding was so easy, but there were lots of other jobs which had to be done, such as lamp cleaning.

Milking was done by hand and in winter we used eight hurricane lanterns for lighting the cow shed, so one of the daily chores was washing the lamp glasses, trimming the wicks and filling up with paraffin ready for evening milking.

I quite liked milking; it was fine in cold frosty weather to sit between two nice warm cows. It was quite cosy, so much so that it was easy to fall asleep, especially after a late night! I remember my brother falling asleep and tumbling out from between two cows with a bucket full of milk which went down the drain. Dad didn't think it very funny, but I did! In the summer we milked over one hundred cows, so we had extra help from our workmen's wives and one or two other ladies from the village; we often had ten or twelve milkers.

Dad used to make all the three-legged milking stools and a little while ago when cleaning out a farm loft, I found a pile of stool seats and a number of legs which were obviously put ready for repairs or replacement, but sadly not used any more so ended up as firewood, but it did bring back some memories.

In the cowshed the milk was filtered into five gallon buckets and then carried (with the aid of a yoke which fitted across the shoulders) across to the dairy at the house where it was again filtered into a three-hundred gallon vat in which the cheese was made.

My mother and sisters made the cheese, so I wasn't very involved with that except for turning the curd mill to grind the curd (cheese) prior to putting into the moulds and then under the cheese presses. Invariably this would happen in the middle of lunch and when the cheese was ready for grinding it had to be done right away.

More next month.

In the early 1930's farming was going through a very difficult time. I remember Dad selling top quality cheese for 4½ d per pound, less than 2p in today's money, milk was sold off the farms for 3½ d per gallon, and the pigs that I worked so hard to fatten were selling at £5 per head, but then of course one pig would buy a ton of pig meal.

With the formation of the Milk Marketing Board things began to improve, so in 1937 Dad was persuaded to install one of those new-fangled milking machines. It was all very exciting, and when the fitters came they lodged with us as members of the family, and some evenings we played cards, usually New Market, using matches for money.

After the machine was installed, the fitters stayed on for a while to teach us how to use it and to get the cows accustomed to it (and that was not easy!) We had a few sore places made by kicking cows. Like Dad, I don't think they approved of the new gadgets.

Dad did not believe that the machine would milk the cows properly, so we had strippers (no *not* that sort!) meaning that we had to follow on with a bucket and stool to strip the last drop of milk, but that idea did not last long; we found that the machine *would* do the job provided it was used correctly.

Some evenings in the summer we would cycle to my Uncle and Aunt at Webscott where they had a tennis court *and* five nice daughters. On one occasion we must have been seen by our neighbour, Mr Jackson, because a day or two later he met up with Dad and said "Gaffer, you want to give those youngsters of yours more work and less mate (meat) - it will soon put a stop to their gallivanting". Haymaking did put a stop to it. We had to work all the daylight hours for, running the two farms together, we made up to 150 acres of hay - it seemed to go on for months.

I remember one very wet summer when we took 6 weeks to clear one field of 30 acres. It is very frustrating when the hay is just ready for carting and down comes the rain, so you just start all over again and hope for better weather.

We change as we get older, but the weather doesn't!

Before the last war a lot of labour was involved in haymaking. There were horse drawn machines for turning the part dried grass, and we did have a machine called a Kicker which really kicked the hay about to assist the drying process. Unfortunately, it kept kicking itself to pieces, such was the vibration. Of course, there were no pick-up balers, so the hay had to be loaded by hand with pitchforks, taken to the stackyard and built into ricks and stacks. The unloader reached up as high as he could to another man in the "pitch-hole" who then threw it up to the stack builder above. This was one of the times when I was guilty of breaking one of the ten commandments, because our near neighbour had a hay elevator worked by a horse, which walked round and round in a "Jenny Ring" which, with a system of shafts and gears, operated the elevator. A boring job for the horse, but a pleasure for the unloader, always downhill unloading. (I can just remember the village pump at Harmer Hill being worked the same way).

One Harvest, I did most of the mowing, and because the horses would be needed for other work during the day, I had to be up soon after 4.00am to make a start. I didn't mind too much, it was a glorious part of the day, and I had two grand horses, Ranger and Blossom to talk to. They became so used to the mowing that if the mower started to block (as the old cutter bars did) they would stop without being told, and back up for the blockage to be cleared - usually caused by a fieldmouse's nest sticking on the points. You probably don't believe this, but I assure you it was a fact. I presume they could tell when the load increased. I really loved those horses; they were almost human.

Harvest 1937, a local farmer acquired a baler (it was certainly the first in Shropshire). He was Ben Whittingham, whose fields seemed to grow old tractors and machines. However, he came to do some baling for us. The baler, driven by a long belt from a tractor, was parked in the middle of the field and the hay pushed to it by means of a "sweep" fitted on the front of an old car, and then fed into the baler by hand. The bales were tied by wire bands. The operator had to push a special needle through the bale chamber, thread two wires through, dash round to the other side, push the ends of the wires back through another needle, and dash back again to tie the wires before the bale came out. It was a bit hectic, especially on a hot day.

But I remember having a rest one day because Ben wasn't looking where he was reversing, and backed into a pond in the middle of the field. We had to stop baling until the horses were fetched to drag him and his old car back onto dry land. What a laugh - poor Ben!

PS I have just been shown a photograph of the Jenny Ring at Harmer Hill.

Second PS The passage about the blocking of the cutter bar recalled memories for another Old Farmer. While attempting to mow a rather wet and rotten field, stoppages were very frequent. To raise the cutter bar involved using a foot pedal. As the result of a very frustrating day of go stop go stop go stop and a much-used leg and foot on the pedal, nightmares followed. Unfortunately there was a small hole in one of the sheets on the bed. The following morning there was a complete extra sheet.

A few days ago I saw our neighbour spreading manure with a ten-ton spreader, and loaded by a machine capable of lifting up to two tons of manure at a time, and I could not help comparing it with the same job when I was young (I've forgotten when, it was a long time ago!) In those days, all the manure was wheeled from the cowsheds with a wheelbarrow and piled in a heap in the midden. As the heap became higher, we used wooden planks up which to wheel the barrow and as it became steeper, there was always the risk of your feet slipping away, and the pusher landing face down in the load of manure. It happened to me on more than one occasion, ugh! But it was always good for a laugh when it happened to someone else.

Sometime in the winter when there was a good frost, it was all hands to the manure carting. We used three horses and carts, one being loaded by hand (by hand fork I mean, it would be a bit messy by hand only), one cart would be loaded on its way to the field, and the other unloaded in the field where it was pulled off the cart with a muck-hook, which had a very long handle with tines at right angles. It was all pulled off into small heaps about eight yards apart. On one occasion the waggoner was very quickly back with the empty cart and said "Gaffer! I've had a bishop!" I thought what on earth does he mean? I know that he was working in the 'Chapel Field' but I couldn't imagine what the Bishop was doing there. It transpired that he had accidentally tipped the whole load off in one place, and "Having a bishop" was an old Shropshire saying which meant that someone had to load it up again. After that I heard it applied to other loads of hay or corn that fell off.

Sometimes the carting would go on for a week or two, and then came the business of spreading it all. Can you imagine going into a thirty-acre field with literally thousands of heaps to spread? A bit daunting, but it was usually a team job, and we soon got into the knack of giving the fork a quick twist at the right moment so that it spread evenly.

It has been a bit 'mucky' this month, hasn't it? I promise to clean it up before the next epistle.

Prior to 1939 no Government was particularly interested in farming, but soon after the outbreak of war there was a dramatic change.

Much of our merchant shipping was being sunk by U-boats every day, and the powers that be soon realised that the nation could not survive without its farmers. Early in 1940 the War Agricultural Committee was formed, and the members were given the power to visit all the farms in the country to instruct farmers to plough up more grassland and to decide what crops should be grown; in the first year over 1½ million extra acres of land was sown with cereals.

Naturally, many farmers did not like being told what to grow, and of course they knew what were the best crops to grow on their own land, but the “war Ag” had the power to take on the running of the farm if their instructions were not carried out and, in extreme cases could turn out the farmer and his family from their own farm.

In 1941 Dad was told to plant 25 acres of potatoes when other, drier farms were planting wheat but, in spite of protests, it had to be done. The outcome was that, due to the weather, the land was *too* wet to enable the crop to be harvested in the autumn and it was left until the land had dried out in the following Spring. Needless to say, most of the crop had gone rotten and did little to help stock the nation’s larder. Fortunately, Houlston grew the wheat the next year - someone else had the spuds.

As time went on, every available acre was ploughed, many golf courses and school playing fields being cropped to help feed the population (and livestock). The “War Ag” had their own drainage machinery, and land which was too waterlogged to grow corn was drained. So now you know what happened to our wetlands and low lying meadows.

Because all our factories were being ordered to make “weapons of war”, and the import of farm machinery was becoming increasingly difficult, any farmer wishing to purchase any machine had to obtain a permit from the “War Ag”, who checked up to see that it was really necessary.

I can remember Dad ordering a new binder (for cutting and binding the wheat). The order was put in before the wheat was sown, but the binder did not arrive until nearly a year later, just in time for harvest.

More next month about the arrival of our first iron horse (tractor).

Soon after the ploughing orders started to come in, and Dad decided (or was he persuaded?) to buy a tractor, so off he went to see our friend, Ben Whittingham, whose field, as I have mentioned before, seemed to sprout second-hand tractors and implements. It was not long before a tractor arrived.

It was an “Oliver 80” built in America, but sadly, it had no rubber tyres, just iron wheels with spikes, and a cast iron seat without any springs - it was an ideal machine for giving you a ‘tender behind!’ At that time tractors were intended for towing implements, so our motley collection of machines had to be adapted for use with the tractor. We *did* manage to buy a new tractor plough, and the new binder, when it finally came, was fitted out for horses or tractor. The old tractor did speed up the work, especially the ploughing - we were now ploughing ten acres per day instead of the one or two with the single furrow horse plough. (Today’s modern tractors with their multi-furrowed ploughs are capable of ploughing up to forty acres daily).

I used to love cutting the corn with the tractor and binder, but I hated having to stook the sheaves afterwards. We worked in pairs, putting six or eight sheaves in a stook or ‘mow’, but on a windy day the stooks would blow over as soon as they were built. Dad used to grumble at us for not making a better job of it. I can remember him saying “Bump ‘em down harder lad, the straws will go into the cracks in the ground, they can’t blow down then”, but they still did, and it was a thankless task on a breezy day.

Then came the carting; the sheaves had to be loaded, heads inwards, and woe betide the pitcher who put them up the wrong way round because, as often as not, the loader would push them off, because with sheaves coming up from both sides of the wagon, the loader had no time to turn them round. The same thing applied when making the stack, but then it was important to keep the centre of the stack higher than the sides, so that the straws sloped downwards to the outside, so preventing the rain-water running into the centre.

After each load was put on I have seen Dad go round with a long-handled shovel, batting the ends of the straws level; he always liked to see a tidy stack, be it in a barn or out in the open. He really was a perfectionist and we were expected to be the same.

You may be wondering what I am going to write about this month - well, so am I! Perhaps I shall think about something; what about water, or the lack of it, for a start?

Prior to 1939 the water supply for Lower Houlston Farm was from two 60 feet deep wells, brick lined, one of which was very close to the house and the other in the field not far away. Here, at the Manor, there were three wells - all very shallow, only 15 feet deep. One, which supplied all the cattle, was underneath the cow shed; another, at the house, underneath the back kitchen, supplied the household and dairy via a hand pump, and the third, which my father and I dug, was in the garden.

However, in the summer of 1939 both wells at Lower Houlston dried up. A well boring team was called in, and it was decided to drill in the bottom of one well. After drilling down to 200 feet or more, ample water was found, but it contained a high element of salt, so was not usable. It was decided that it would be pointless drilling too near the same spot, so the rig was moved to a field in the front of the house at the Manor, but again it was a failure because at about 30 feet they encountered running sand (a mixture of fine sand and water) and were unable to sink the bore linings through it, so, on the advice of the Geological Society, the drill was moved on again to a point on the Myddle side of the farmhouse. Here, as forecast, the earth was totally different. The drill went down through 62 feet of solid clay into sandstone rock, and at 156 feet a limitless supply of water was found. In fact the drill team thought that there may be an underground stream because the drill virtually dropped the last nine feet, and no spoil was brought out. As the supply was so good, it was decided to abandon the three wells and supply both farms and two bungalows from the new borehole. The water is of excellent quality, and also goes via a bottling plant to many hotels, restaurants and pubs in Shropshire and beyond under the brand name Houlston Manor Water.

I was also thinking of writing about field names, because I have a Tythe Map dated 1834, and every field in the parish is named and, believe me, there are some very peculiar names, but I am sure the editor will be saying "enough is enough", so maybe it will make a subject for next month.

As I have a Myddle Parish Tythe Map of 1839, I thought that perhaps I could write a little about field names.

Here at Houlston, some of our fields are still identified by their old names. For instance, **The Farthings** was three fields - **Near Farthing**, **The Farthing** and **Far Farthing**. According to the book of Shropshire Field Names by H D Foxall, the farthing could be part of a larger area, or land of little value. I think the last would apply in this case because until the field was drained it was extremely wet, and could only be grazed for a short time in mid-summer.

Then we have a **Tailor's Field** and next to it the **College Field**. (Did we have a college at Houlston?) Adjoining that is **The Slings**. On the map it was three fields, i.e. two **Slugs**, and a **Sling**. (Perhaps it was from there that David slung the stone that killed Goliath)

The **Pools** comes next. It adjoins Myddle Brook and still lives up to its name in wet winters. Somewhere in Gough's History it states that a certain gentleman stole cattle from around the area and hid them on Houlston Pools until the hue and cry had died down, so it must have been a very wild area in days gone by. Then we have the **Big Sturdy** and the **Little Sturdy**. I wonder where "Sturdy" came from? Beyond that is the **Gorsty**; perhaps it used to grow a lot of gorse.

The next field, **Chapel Field**, I *can* explain. It adjoins what was once Houlston Chapel; in fact, the building still exists. What a lot of chapels there were in the Parish! One other field could be interesting - **The Cockpit**. I wonder if it could have been the scene of the old sport of cock fighting in the dim and distant past. The rest of the fields are mainly cow pastures or identified by the acreage.

There are so many interesting field names in the Parish, that I should need the whole of the Messenger to write about them. But there is one I should like to mention, which is right in Myddle. The field on which the school now stands was called **The Field next to Mary Griffiths**. I can't understand what my wife was doing in Myddle in 1839.

My last two articles deviated from my original plan, so I am now going back to the War years.

Shortly after Dunkirk, Mr Churchill asked for volunteers to form a local Defence Force, and the response was overwhelming, maybe because it was shortly after the luxury liner “City of Benares” was torpedoed in mid-Atlantic, when carrying over one hundred children to safety in Canada, and only ten children survived.

Some of my brothers and I went to the first meeting at Albrighton Village Hall, organised by Mr Sam Mayall. The response from the parish was so great that it was decided to set up a platoon at Harmer Hill. Mr Geoff Glover was appointed Commander, and we were soon able to carry out our duties as a Local Defence Force. Our armoury in those early days consisted of a few sporting guns and rifles, and a lot of pitchforks and homemade pikes. We were given the power to stop all vehicles on the roads after dark, and various wicked looking roadblocks were set up. Petrol was strictly rationed, and anyone using a car had to have a very good reason for doing so. It was amazing what a lot of calves and bags of potatoes had to be delivered at night; the strange thing was that the calves and potatoes were still in the boot on the return journey! (Young farmers doing a spot of courting, perhaps?) I wonder what would have happened had we stopped a car full of German Paratroops armed to the teeth?

A year or so later the force was renamed “The Home Guard” and we began to be issued with uniforms and 303 rifles. Our Commander wrote a song about the platoon, mentioning nearly every member. It goes as follows:

*We're members of the Home Guard
Of the Harmer Hill Platoon.
We've answered Winston's call to arms
To you we'll prove a boon.*

*We've pitchforks and rifles
And trenches in the clay,
And nasty looking barricades
To bar the right of way.*

*One Morn, alarmed, the village woke,
A rifle shot it came,
But twas only Thomas Stockton
With his rifle shooting game.*

I wish that I could remember more of it, but please if there is anyone with a copy of it, I should be delighted to hear from you.

(I was on duty with Tom when he shot the rabbit, but the Landlord of the Bridgewater came out in his nightshirt and claimed it!)

In 1940-1941 thousands of tons of Allied Merchant Shipping was sunk by German submarines. Supplies of food of all descriptions were becoming very scarce and were having to be strictly rationed, but here on the farm we were fortunate to be able to grow our own vegetables and to kill a pig (under licence) for our own use.

Our main concern, I think, was the acute shortage of cattle food. All imported foods had stopped, but I do remember some cotton cake and groundnut cake arriving occasionally, and that came in slabs about three feet by two feet which had to be put through a cake crusher which was turned by hand. The only alternative was to grow more food for the cattle, so we ploughed up even more land to grow mangolds, turnips and kale, and how I hated having to cut and cart the kale in winter! It grew up to five or six feet high with stems like wood, and every time you swiped at it to cut one off you were showered with water (or snow). Often it was covered in ice and all had to be picked by hand.

We also made some silage, and that was really hard work. The grass was cut with an ordinary horse mower, then loaded onto carts by hand, and then unloaded into self-supporting wire bins lined with a very strong waterproof paper. When filling, the grass had to be trodden down (oh! my poor legs), and every few inches of grass a can of black treacle was put on. We only cleared about two acres per day. Compare that with our modern forage harvesters, which are capable of picking up eighty to a hundred acres in a day.

In winter, all our cattle were kept inside, so all this food had to be brought in with wheelbarrows. The mangolds were put through a machine which sliced them into big chips and then mixed with chopped straw, which was also put through a chaff-cutter to chop the straw into short pieces. All this was done by hand and, thinking back, I wonder how we coped with it all.

In 1941 land girls began to arrive on the farms, and the powers that be decided that I was not needed anymore. A couple of days after Christmas 1941 I received a message from the War Ministry saying that the war was not going very well, would I go to help out, and I kindly said I would, so that was the end of my farming for the next 4½ years.

(A good thing I went though; we did win in the end. I wonder what would have happened without my help!)

Shortly after I received my call-up papers at the end of 1941, I was called to an interview to decide which branch of the Services I wanted to join. I thought anything other than the Infantry (too much foot slogging), so I asked to join the R.A.F. Ground Crew. I had already heard that if you were a cook in civilian life you were likely to be sent to be a mechanic, and if mechanic in “civvy street” you would probably end up as a cook!

Imagine my dismay when the order came for me to report to an Infantry Training Depot in Nottinghamshire. I quite enjoyed the drill and weapon training, but oh! How I hated bayonet practice, yelling our heads off, charging at sacks of straw with bayonets at the ready. Thank goodness I never had to use it against a human being.

Surprise, surprise, at the end of six weeks very intensive training, we were told, “You are now fully qualified soldiers; here is your railway pass to go home for seven days. You will be notified of your next destination.” This time I was pleasantly surprised - I was to report to No 5, Driver Training Battalion R.A.S.C. stationed in and around Mansfield, only a few miles from where I had received my initial training. There were over one hundred of us arriving that day, and we were soon fixed up with billets in the area. I, with twenty or so others, ended up in the Working Men’s Club which had been taken over by the Army.

The Battalion trained drivers for all sorts of vehicles, from staff cars to heavy vehicles, including tank transporters (fifty ton low loaders). The morning after my arrival, because I had been driving before my call-up, a Sergeant took me on a driving test, first in a Humber staff car and then in a six-wheeled lorry, both of which I managed quite well.

A few days later I was called in before the Company Commander, who said, “We are very short of driving instructors, so you will be awarded a stripe and will be joining the permanent staff.” I just could not believe it - less than two months after my call-up I was a Lance Corporal with an Instructor’s position, maybe for the duration of the war. Someone up above must have been looking after me. Can you bear a few war-time experiences? If not, don’t read my next article.

Mansfield must have been somewhat awed by the turn of events after the war broke out. The main dance hall was taken over to be used as an Army canteen, the two big garages and car showrooms were annexed for Army use, the Town Hall was taken over for NCO billets, as were quite a number of private houses, and the Parish Church Hall was taken for a Navy, Army and Air Force Institute canteen.

Apart from missing “home comforts” I was quite enjoying my new lifestyle. A new batch of would-be drivers arrived every six weeks, and during that time they were trained to drive all types of vehicles, as well as general maintenance. Perhaps the most nerve-wracking part of the job was the convoy work, especially the night driving. The convoy would consist of up to 100 trucks, depending on the number of learner drivers available, and only the leading truck was allowed any front lights and, of course, they were hooded to prevent them being seen from above. The remainder had to rely on a small light fitted underneath the rear of the truck floor, which shone on a white spot painted on the rear axle. We were never given the route - only the leading driver knew that - so you can imagine what happened if a driver fell too far back and lost the truck up ahead. On occasions half the convoy would arrive back at base with the rest scattered about a very dark countryside. (Heap big trouble next morning). Of course, no lights could be shown anywhere, town or country, and all the sign posts had been removed, so it was a bit tricky at night.

However, life did have its brighter side. I made some very good friends, some of whom I still keep in touch with. One, I remember very well. On one occasion he reversed a truck out of the car showroom without opening the huge glass doors, and another time some of us were resting on our beds one Sunday afternoon (this was in the Banqueting Hall of the Town Hall) when a pair of boots came crashing through the window. Someone said, “I bet it’s Donovan”, and it was. He had fetched his boots from the repair shop and was walking across the Square, swinging them by the laces when the laces broke at the wrong moment. He was always referred to as “Smasher Donavon” for the rest of our stay in Mansfield!

There were quite a number of coal mines around Mansfield, being the centre of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, and in 1942 another nasty shock hit the area because a lot of miners in their twenties were called up for the army. It was decreed from Whitehall that any young men between 16 and 18 years of age should be directed to work in the coal mines. They were known as the "Bevan Boys" because it was a minister by the name of Bevan (or was it Bevin?) who instigated the idea, but it was a dreadful shock to these young lads, most of whom had never been near a coal mine. The poor lads had no choice - they were not old enough for the army, so it was down the pits with pick and shovel, no coal cutting machines and conveyors in those days.

Still 1942 and countrywide food was becoming scarce, so the Women's Voluntary Service set up a chain of cafes across the country to ensure that the civilian population would be able to obtain at least one hot meal per day. These eating places became known as British Restaurants. One was opened in Mansfield, where it was possible to have a good wholesome lunch for 1/6d (7¹/₂p). It sometimes made a change from the army bully beef and horrible rissoles.

Due to the continuous bombing of our major cities, the supply of fire hose was getting exhausted, and in the spring of 1942 many farmers in Nottinghamshire were instructed to plant flax, the fibre of which was used in the production of fire hose. The root of the plant was the main provider of the necessary fibre, so the whole crop had to be pulled up by hand; there was no spare labour on the farms, so a lot of the local army units were called in to help, and fortunately our Company was one of them. It was hard backbreaking work, but we had some fun, especially when the rabbits started to bolt as we reached the final patch.

It was good to get away from trainer driving for a week or two and, as for me, I was back where I really belonged - farming.

Late in 1942 I was allowed home for nine days leave. It was great to be home again but, goodness me, there had been quite a few changes in my absence. Firstly, there was a Searchlight Battery and a Battery of Anti-Aircraft Guns on land just off the Balderton Road between Newton turn and Alderton.

Sleap Airfield was in the process of being built, and this did have some effect on our two farms. Land was taken off Lower Houlston and, because both farms were in line with the main runways, we lost a lot of mature trees. Shortly after the airfield was put into use, a lot of poles with lights on the top were erected across both farms. They were placed in the form of a letter Y which guided aircraft onto the beginning of the runways. The lights were only switched on when an identified aircraft was actually coming in to land. The first occupants of the airfield were Wellington bombers, and it was some time in 1943 that one failed to make it, and crashed on our farm boundary, just over in Alford Farm.

However, my leave was soon over and it was back to Mansfield, to be greeted by the news that I was to report to the Army Post Office in Matlock, and there I was told to help sort the mail for all the military units in Nottinghamshire. It was a really "cushy" job, the food was first class, and I was billeted in a nice private house with a smashing view over Matlock, but sadly it only lasted three months, then it was back to driver training.

At that time all our Company vehicles were parked, hidden in woods around the area to avoid any risk of bombing, but early in 1943 it was thought that the risk of being bombed had receded, and it was decided to close one of Mansfield's roads to make a vehicle park. It was more convenient for the Army, but bad for the local inhabitants. Not long after the move I found myself in real trouble. It was claimed that a truck had been stolen from the park during the night when I had been in charge of the guard. I felt very confident that it had not, but nevertheless I was up before the Commanding Officer and suspended from duty, pending further enquiries. However, I had some very good friends, who visited every household in the area and, fortunately for me, a gentleman had seen a truck leave the park a few minutes *after* my guard had come off duty, so I was 'off the hook' and back on duty.

It transpired that one of our learner drivers had taken it because he had a grudge against one of the instructors who happened to be on guard duty that night. It was his bad luck that he mistimed the theft!

1943 was a very busy year for driver training. We did not know then but of course it was all part of the build up for “D” Day 1944. One thing that struck me rather forcibly was the fact that the new intakes of trainees were getting older as time progressed; a pointer to the fact that the supply of young men was beginning to dry up.

In spite of being so busy, I did manage to attend the Mansfield Parish Church fairly often and it was there that I met two families with whom I became very friendly; they were related to each other and Christmas that year was rather special as we all got together and I was invited to bring any army friends along. I could not be at home for Christmas, but we had a good time and I have always felt grateful to them for their friendship; we still keep in touch with each other even after 53 years. Two of the boys were “Bevan Boys”.

Whilst sorting through a drawer one day, I came across my Army Pay Book. It is full of useless information such as on being awarded my first stripe (high promotion indeed). My weekly pay was increased to 21/- (£1.05). Also in June of that year I was granted fourteen days agricultural leave to come home to help with the harvest. On arrival at home I found more changes. The RAF had set up a practice bombing range on land between Sleaford and Birmarsh and all day long every day Oxford twin-engined bombers skimmed the tree tops around here, practising low-level bombing. I presume that the bomb release mechanism was fitted with a camera which photographed the target area. Some days, dive-bombers were used, and that was even worse – the noise was horrific as they pulled out of the dive.

My thoughts go back to harvest that year when we were loading wheat sheaves on a field not far from the target area and we had two Italian prisoners of war helping, one of whom was loading. We had nearly loaded up when I heard a yell and the loader disappeared over the back of the load! I dashed round the back of the wagon expecting to find him with a broken leg or worse because he had fallen at least 12 feet on to ground like concrete, but he was getting back onto his feet, laughing his head off. When he recovered his senses, he said, “De boss, he dragged the hoss on”. Whenever the waggoner moved the wagon he always shouted “How’d Ya”, which in English means “hold fast”, but on this occasion the poor old loader had not heard the warning due to aircraft noise, and had overbalanced.

That spell at home was hard work, but it was great to be “back to the land” even though it was only for a fortnight.

Sadly my agricultural leave had to come to an end, and it was back to Mansfield to a rather doubtful future in driver training. In the days leading up to D Day 1944 our intakes of prospective drivers was getting less and less and we found ourselves more as a general transport unit, carrying food rations and supplies to the various military units left in Nottinghamshire and surrounding counties, but we all realised that the days of the 5th Training Battalion RASC were numbered.

Come to an end it did early one morning in September. Without prior notice we were called from our beds and told to pack all our kit and report to the vehicle park, as we were to move out as soon as it was daylight. Every truck that was available was to proceed to a big army depot at Long Marston near Aylesbury, there to be loaded with Bailey Bridge sections to be delivered to the banks of the River Rhine on the German border. We were told that the British Forces were approaching the river and had sent out an urgent request for bridging material.

So it was goodbye to Mansfield and my friends, no time to let them know that we were leaving. One day we had a nice soft job in England, and next, who knows? I had an idea that if the German army saw us unloading bridge sections on the river bank they would give us a nice warm welcome, but that was a few days away.

By late evening on that first day we were all loaded up ready for the journey down to Tilbury docks next day, there to drive on to tank landing craft for our Channel crossing to Dieppe. Each boat carried eight or ten trucks. They were like flat-bottomed barges with a ramp at both ends. Fortunately the sea was calm because it only took a bit of a ripple to set them rocking, and I am not a good sailor. We sailed through the night and arrived off Dieppe the next afternoon. I was completely unprepared for the total devastation of the port area – railway lines were torn up and the massive dockside cranes were completely wrecked.

Our transport was unable to get into the port, so we had to wait for the high tide when we were able to drive off on to the beach. After disembarking, we were directed to an assembly area where all loads were checked and trucks numbered so that all the bridge sections would arrive in sequence, thus making it easier for the Royal Engineers constructing the bridge. We stayed in Dieppe for the night to be ready for an early start next morning. Before we left we heard that the Engineers had cleared and repaired one dock and that the first British supply ship was due any day; prior to that all supplies had landed on the temporary Mulberry Harbour which was now getting too far behind the British Forces.

Before leaving the Dieppe area we were given a prep talk by our Commanding Officer who gave us the welcome news that the British Infantry had now gained a foothold on the German side of the River Rhine, so now there would be much less risk of being fired on during the unloading of the bridge sections; in any case we should be unloading during the hours of darkness. (Hooray, I didn't fancy being a sitting duck for the Germans to shoot at!) So it was with much lighter hearts that we set off on our journey across France and Belgium to the Rhine in the Cologne-Krefeld area. The roads were in a dreadful state due to the bombing and heavy traffic, first by German tanks and then by British and American armoured divisions. The first town of any size was Abbeville, almost totally destroyed. It was not surprising that the local population did not welcome us with open arms. After all, the Brits had helped to devastate the area. I felt very sad to see the lovely old towns of Arras Douai and Liege all destroyed.

We parked up for the night near the ruins of Liege; next morning on to Aachen and Krefeld where we were held up to wait for the darkness and then on to the unloading area. The whole district appeared to be full of tanks and heavy guns, obviously waiting to cross the river, so I imagine that our delivery was very welcome.

We were all wondering what would happen to our unit after completing our task. Instructions soon arrived. We were to be incorporated into Monty's Eighth Army and to return to Dieppe to provide transport for the supplies now beginning to come into the port, so now we found ourselves (and trucks) at a depot at St Valery within sight of England on a clear day. To start with, it was mainly petrol and ammunition which we transported up to the forward supply dumps near the German border. After a while the petrol stopped coming and we discovered that it was because of PLUTO, an abbreviation of "Pipeline under the Ocean", and now petrol was being pumped across to Belgium and Holland. It appeared that nothing was impossible when it was to help the war effort. At least it stopped the theft of petrol by French civilians. We discovered that, whilst climbing slowly up the hill outside Dieppe, young French lads were climbing up onto the back of the trucks, throwing cans off to be picked up by their mates and hidden away, probably a very lucrative venture. After this thieving was discovered, we carried an armed guard on every load.

At last the war was going in our favour and despite various setbacks, the Allied Forces were pushing ahead into Holland and West Germany and, having worked from Dieppe docks for several weeks, our company was under orders to move up nearer the German border. After delivering our last load of supplies we were to report to an area near Eindhoven in the Netherlands. There we were billeted in various houses still occupied by some of the owners, and what a welcome we received! So different from the reception we received in France. There, in Eindhoven, we were the conquering heroes, although I must admit I felt a bit guilty about that because the only conquering we had done was the awful roads and some very unreliable vehicles.

Next morning, after settling in and getting the cook-house organised, (very important) we were told to report to a sand quarry where our trucks were to be loaded up with sand (and I thought there was a war on!). when we reached the unloading area I began to understand – we were to build a bank of sand around a series of huge petrol storage tanks. I wondered if this was the terminal for “P.L.U.T.O.” The idea was to build up banks of sand around each tank, leaving enough space to contain the contents of the tank in the event of it being ruptured by enemy action or otherwise. In this way, should there be a fire, the burning petrol could not spread over the whole site. As mentioned previously, almost all our trucks were getting very tired and we were continually having problems. I was driving a six-wheeled Canadian Ford at the time, and if much more than a ton was loaded on it, I had an awful job to coax it up the slope out of the quarry.

Our Commanding Officer had tried to get some replacements, but was told that none was available. In any case he was told that it did not matter if it took until the end of the war to build those “Bunds”, so it just went to show what a very important unit we were. I thought that we might as well go home (we wouldn’t be missed - or would we?)

After about three weeks, someone somewhere remembered us and we were detailed to go up to the forward areas to collect prisoners of war for transport to POW camps back in Belgium and France. I suppose I should not have felt sorry for the enemy but they were so shattered and dejected, many of them only young lads of sixteen and seventeen; after all, they didn’t want to go to war any more than we did.

The tide of war had now turned more and more in our favour and we were going deeper into Germany to collect prisoners of war, and once again we were under orders to move on, this time to an area between Minden and Osnabruck and, because we were moving forward so quickly, there was no time to get fixed up with billets with a roof over our heads. We slept in the back of our vehicles (not very comfortable) with a mobile army kitchen in attendance.

It was obvious that the war could not last much longer – we had not seen any German aircraft for weeks. Then came the news that our forces had met up with the Russian Army on the River Elbe. We were off again now to Luneburg, not far from Hamburg and we were going back to general transport, working from Hamburg Docks (what was left of them). The city itself had been subject to several incendiary attacks and was virtually destroyed by fire; it was so sad to see such a wonderful city in ruins.

Although the war was practically over, supplies were still pouring in, mainly food and spare parts for vehicles and tanks, as of course there were now thousands of troops in Germany. Round about the end of April and early May a lot of troops moved into the Luneburg area and certainly more “top brass” than I had seen all through the war and it was obvious that something was brewing. What we did not know was that the Armistice was about to be signed in a caravan on Luneburg Heath, not far away, but when the news did break what a relief it was, although it had little effect on our Company. We carried on as before; food had to be brought in, now more than ever as there were thousands of displaced persons to be fed too. These were the workers Hitler had forcibly removed from their homes in Latvia and Estonia to be made to work for the German war effort. All the same it was nice to be able to go out without steel helmets, gas masks and rifles at the ready.

Looking through my Army Service and Pay Book, I notice that I was awarded nine days home leave, the first for eighteen months, with effect from 17th May. It was very exciting and great to be home again but it was soon over and it was back to Germany but at least it was without the threat of enemy action, or so I thought, but on arrival back with the Company I was greeted with the news that we were getting all the necessary jabs for typhus, etc. and were going on standby for transfer to the Far East. The war with Japan was far from over, and we all knew that the Japanese would fight to the bitter end.

During the writing of this epistle it has made me think of what a lot of parents must have suffered when seeing off their sons (and daughters) not knowing whether they would ever see them again, my own parents included, because my elder brother was in the Royal Navy.

The weeks were slipping away and still no sign of transfer to the Far East. We had now moved into billets on the outskirts of Hanover and were usefully employed in transporting displaced persons back to their countries of origins, mainly Latvia and Estonia. They were long and tiring journeys, but well worth it just to see the joy on the faces of the people who were being returned after being forcibly removed from their homes to work for the German war effort.

One of my happier memories of Germany was of the long avenues of lime trees in Hanover. Whenever I smell the scent of lime in the spring now it takes me back to the weeks that we spent in that city. It also reminds me of my schooldays because there was a large lime tree in the school playground.

Earlier in August, there were rumours that a new type of bomb had been dropped on Japan and that the war would soon be over. What a relief it was when the Japanese surrendered on August 15th. I don't think that any of us fancied jungle warfare. I know that many people think that the atomic bomb should never have been used but there is no doubt that it saved many thousands of British and American lives (my own included) because I am sure that the Japanese would have fought to the bitter end. I thought that now we should soon be back home but it was not to be. But I *was* sent home on September 9th for twenty-eight days agricultural leave to help with the harvest.

On return to Germany I was told that we were all moving back to England any day, but it was not until six months later that we finally left for a transit camp in Kent. After a few days there we were sent on to a demobilisation centre in Oulton Park, Cheshire to be issued with a suit of clothes and a raincoat as well as ration books and a civilian identity card. It was very exciting but also very amusing. We had dispensed with one uniform only to be issued with another because most of the suits were identical and for months after it was easy to tell who had served in the army because of the 'de-mob' clothes. However, we were then taken to Beeston Station with a railway pass to Stafford and that was it! ("We have finished with you now lads, you can make your own way home from there." I was able to phone home to get someone to fetch me from Stafford and the family did not even know that I was back in England.

So that was Good Friday 1946 and I had been away four years and four months. Now it was back to work with a vengeance, as food was still very scarce.

It was great to be home again, but within a few days I had a rather nasty shock. Everything was strictly rationed and coupons had to be produced to obtain food, clothing, petrol and many other items. During my army service there was no question of shortages; there was always plenty to eat, although of dubious quality – dried egg, dried milk, dried everything, plus tons of rissoles and potato cakes, because the cooks couldn't cope with anything more exciting.

Back home the week's meat ration was about as big as an Oxo cube, the same with cheeses and butter and sugar was even more scarce. I can well remember my mum coming home with the rations, carefully weighing out the sugar – so much for cooking, the remainder divided equally between us. We each had a honey jar with our name on, so if we were too greedy with it at the beginning, we just had to do without for the rest of the week.

Fortunately I kept all the farm account books from 1946 onwards, so I have access to a great deal of information, some interesting, some useless. Our petrol ration appears to have been ten gallons monthly, which cost 19s. 2d – about 9¹/₂p per gallon.

We seem to have had plenty of apples in 1946 as there were several payments from Phillips' Stores in Shrewsbury and two payments for consignments sent to a Mr Impey in Alderney. All sales of cattle, sheep and pigs were to the Ministry of Food and this continued until June 1954 when the Ministry was disbanded, presumably because more food was now being imported from America under a lease-lend agreement.

I was finding work on the farm a bit tough, especially after not doing much manual work for over four years but there was plenty of 'prisoners of war' labour available. I notice that payments for their work go on until June 1948; it appears that the last of the Germans and Italians were not repatriated until the end of that year.

A lot of men were employed on the farms in those days. For instance, sugar beet was very labour intensive and as soon as the young beet were established, gangs of men with hoes would work through the crop, knocking out surplus plants to leave a nine inch space between the plants and then a week or two later the process was repeated to knock out the weeds and to ensure that only single plants were left to grow on.

I can remember up to twenty men working in the beet on a neighbouring farm. Today, the beet are sown singly with a precision drill and sprayed to kill the weeds, with one man doing the work instead of twenty.

I am writing this article in a nice warm room and outside it is snowing and blowing and it has reminded me that the farmers and their workers of past years must have been a very hardy breed. In last month's Messenger I wrote of the sowing and hoeing of the sugar beet crop and this is the time of year for harvesting it.

Way back in the forties there were no beet harvesting machines and the crop was all lifted by hand. First of all a horse-drawn special plough was used to run underneath the beet to loosen them, followed by men working in pairs; the first pulled up the beet in twos, banged them together to knock off the soil and the second man then picked them up to cut off the tops with a vicious looking knife rather like the old pirates' cutlasses. (I wonder how many fingers went missing when the plants were covered with hoar frost). The beet was then collected by horse and cart and taken to the local railway station to be loaded onto trucks for transport to the beet factory.

Today, a beet harvester comes along digging, topping and cleaning up to six rows at a time and loading direct onto trailers running alongside – a two-man operation with both drivers sitting in nice warm cabs – that *must* be a change for the better and I don't think that the machines get aching backs either. We did not grow any sugar beet here but we did grow a fair acreage of mangolds and swedes and pulling and topping them was certainly not my favourite pastime, to say nothing of my poor aching back. On a cold wet morning our main protective clothing was a strong hessian sack tied round the waist and a similar sack over the shoulders fastened with a four inch nail at the throat. The average wage in 1946 for farm workers was under £5 per week and that would be for anything up to sixty hours. Most of them lived in tied cottages for which they paid 3s (15p) rent; in our case milk was provided free of charge.

There were four houses in Myddle belonging to this farm, two where Mrs Sheppard now lives, one of which was a bungalow and for a time was also the village shop and Post Office. Another old stone house was endways on to the road where the Butlers live and that was demolished in 1963 to make way for two new ones. Incidentally, that old house was used as a private school at one time. The fourth house, the only one still standing, is the one up the steps where Mr and Mrs Ken Finnemore live. I imagine that it has been greatly improved since it parted company with the farm.


By the summer of 1946 I was getting more accustomed to the work on the farm, but I did find it a bit tough after over four years away from it. I think that Dad thought that I was a “bit of a weakling” because he said that he couldn’t see anything very hard about it and he was more than double my age. Ah well! Fathers know what is best for you, or do they?

By this time I was back in the church choir and that provided a bit of light relief. Mind you, we hadn’t Miss Joyce Witcher in charge then, otherwise I may have worded it differently! (Sorry Joyce, I am only joking!)

In September that year Dad decided to get rid of all the hurricane lanterns and an electricity generator was installed. This was driven by the same engine that drove the milking machine so we had a good light for milking but when that was finished out went the lights. Mother couldn’t see why we should have all the lights outside when she had to make do with lamps and candles in the house, so very soon afterwards a bank of batteries was installed. We all had light at the flick of a switch and everybody was very happy. (Incidentally, the batteries were ex the Royal Navy, intended for use in submarines, but were now surplus to requirements. I’m glad that we didn’t have to say “up periscope” every time we wanted to look out of the window!). The generating plant was not powerful enough to run any electric appliances but it was great to have better lighting. Actually, it was not until the summer of 1963 that we were connected to the mains electricity. Can you imagine life without washing machines, irons and kettles, etc? Certainly at the present time I would not like to be without my electric blanket; isn’t it nice to get into a warm bed?

Looking through the accounts for that year, I see that there are lots of payments to D Lloyd for cattle haulage. I’m sure that the older inhabitants of Myddle will remember Dave Lloyd of the Red Lion with his one small cattle wagon. I suppose he was the forerunner of the present Launchburys’ Transport.

I note that the rates bill for 1946 was £15.13s.3d and that was for the farmhouse and four cottages. The car insurance premium was £3.12s.2d and the fire insurance on the house, buildings and cottages was £3.3s.8d. How costs have escalated in fifty years; I suppose it is the result of inflation, at least that is what we are told.

One of my main dislikes was the threshing machine. In the days before the combine harvester arrived on the farming scene the corn was cut with a binder, stacked in the barns and threshed during the winter months. As the straw and grain was used up by the cattle we would hire a threshing machine for one or two days each month to replenish the supplies. None of us liked to see the machine arrive because it was a very dusty and dirty job to keep the “monster” supplied and it took a minimum of eight men to keep the threshing running smoothly. It was hard work too. All the grain was bagged up from the machine and had to be carried up the stackyard then up steps into the granary. There was no respite – if you were too long away the next sack would be full to overflowing. When we were threshing wheat for sale, that was put into two cwt sacks (just over one hundred kilos). I can’t think how we used to handle it but the sacks were provided by the grain buyers and that was the weight they wanted so it had to be done – little wonder that I have ended up with two artificial knees. Thankfully, as time went by common-sense prevailed and the weights were reduced to 1  cwt.

The winter of 1947 was very severe and several times we had to dig a way through deep snowdrifts to allow the milk lorry to collect the milk. At that time my sister and her husband were farming near Cleobury Mortimer and the road past their farm was blocked with snow twenty feet deep and when council workmen arrived to start to clear it, they hung their jackets on the top of a telephone pole. In fact, my sister still has a cutting from a local newspaper with a photograph to prove it. What a job it must have been to clear all that snow – no diggers and snow blowers then, just horses and carts.

All through that winter our cattle had to be turned out twice daily for water. I can well remember having to break the ice on the pool each morning and by the end of the frosty spell, the ice on the unbroken part was over eighteen inches thick. However, in some ways the frost was a blessing in disguise, because by the following winter we had installed water bowls for every individual cow and there was no need to turn them out for water.

Just after war broke out we had a family of evacuees from Manchester, one a little boy of about six years old. On one occasion we had set up for a day’s threshing, and he so wanted to see the thresher working, but his mum said “No! You have to go to school”. He was *so* disappointed. In the afternoon we had just finished when he arrived on the scene, totally out of breath. He had run all the way from school but was just too late. Poor JR. (Who is JR? Can you guess?)

We take so much for granted today, but I do think back to just after the war when there was very little machinery on the farms. There were no mechanical manure spreaders and no machines for spreading artificial fertiliser by hand. About that time we had a 'bull-nosed' Morris car (it would be worth a fortune now). The car body was replaced with a flat platform and it would carry 10 – 12cwt. I can remember three or four of us going out in a morning with a load of Nitro chalk (nitrogen) to be broadcast on ten acres or so. We each had a special hopper designed to fit on the left hip, supported by a leather strap over the right shoulder and it was quite heavy when full. The system was to grab a handful of fertiliser with the right hand as the left foot went forward and then to release it on the next left foot forward. It sounds complicated, but there was a real rhythm to it and it was amazing what a large area could be covered in a day. I have seen Dad spreading with two hands, but one was enough for me. Now one man with a tractor broadcaster can spread up to one hundred acres per day. As for manure spreaders I think that I have mentioned before that we had a machine to spread the manure heaps in the field and then someone came up with a bright idea why can't we fit one of these on the back of a trailer – and so the forerunner of today's spreader was born.

Now that more steel was coming available it was not long before more machinery was being built for more peaceful purposes. Food was still extremely scarce and a lot of money was being invested in agriculture. More tractors were now available and I see that in August 1948 we purchased a new David Brown tractor, complete with front-end loader for the princely sum of £495-10s. Also, a new manure spreader arrived on the scene so all the hard work had gone out of manure handling.

Around that time I invested in an adding machine for the farm office. It was a massive piece of machinery compared with the modern calculator but it did the job well and took a bit of pressure off my poor old brain. Mrs Gethin at Myddle Post Office bought one at the same time, but she didn't trust it. After adding up on the machine she would go through all the figures with pencil and paper to make sure that the result was correct!

A few days ago I was chatting with my brother, John, who now lives in Wem. He told me that he had been without a phone for a week because the telephone engineers were waiting for a mechanical hoist to do some work on a pole.

This conversation took me back to 1930, shortly after Dad had acquired Houlston Manor. As we were then running the two farms together we needed a system of communication with Lower Houlston, so he enquired of the GPO about the possibility of installing telephones. Yes, they said, it can be done, but it would mean erecting poles and wires all down the lane which is just over a mile. However, within a few weeks the work was underway. I remember it all very well as I was walking to school at the time. The men would dig out the hole with a good slope up one end, the pole was then laid in position with the butt end over the sloping part of the prepared hole, then three or four men would give the pole a quick hoist and up it went. There were no mechanical diggers or hydraulic hoists then. We soon had our telephones installed, and our numbers were nice and short- just 16X1 and 16Y1. What a thrill it was; the few phones that were about then were often connected to the same pair of wires to the Exchange and often, when you picked up the phone, you couldn't use it because someone was using the line and you could hear all the conversation, hence the saying "Get off the line".

Recently, Miss Sylvia Swain reminded me of an amusing little story concerning Wem Station. It happened way back when every station had its own Station Master and plenty of uniformed staff. A message had come through informing the Station Master that the Royal Train would be passing through Wem at 3am and all staff must be present in their best uniforms and all the station oil lamps were to be cleaned and lit for the occasion. As the crucial time approached, all the staff were standing to attention on the platform, but the train was travelling very fast and it brought with it such a rush of air which blew all the lamps out, so by the time the carriage went by, the station was in total darkness. (Anyway, the King was sure to have been asleep at that time of the morning).

I seem to have deviated from my usual agricultural articles this month. Ah well! I hope that someone will read it.

I wonder if any of my older readers remember a Mr Yewdall of Manchester. He was a general dealer who came to Wem Market every Thursday to buy poultry, cheese, butter and fruit in season to take back to Manchester to sell in the markets there. At that time we had an uncle and aunt who lived in Salford (they were really my mother's second or third cousins) and on occasion one or other of the family was invited to stay with them.

It was before we had a car, and one means of getting there was on the back of Mr Yewdall's lorry. He would make a little space for me in amongst the crates of old hens and I would arrive at his depot stinking of hen____. Mother took me to Wem in the pony and trap and auntie or uncle met me at Yewdall's depot and then it was a tram ride (more exciting) out to Pendleton (or was it Pendlebury? John Rouse would know). The return journey was the same procedure in reverse. It wasn't a very pleasant journey. The lorry was an old Dennis on solid rubber tyres and with a chain drive from the gearbox to the back axle so it was very noisy and bumpy but I was not accompanied by smelly hens on my return to Wem.

Another event which has stuck in my memory, perhaps because I have a lump on my shoulder to remind me, was when I fell out of a damson tree and hurt my shoulder. Dad was so cross with me as I shouldn't have been climbing damson trees so he sent me off to walk to see the Parish Nurse who then lived in a cottage opposite Moss Farm. After a quick look at my shoulder she said that I had broken my collarbone and proceeded to strap my arm to my chest with adhesive tape. Needless to say I was not over-happy about it. Unfortunately, a few days later I was in even greater pain. It transpired that I was allergic to sticky tape and when nurse took it off, it removed a bank of skin from around my back and sides – not a happy memory, that one!

Poor old Dad! With seven boys to contend with, there was always one in trouble. I remember one cutting his arm badly in a chaff cutter – a machine with several vicious blades on it for chopping straw. Another had the fleshy part of his arm wound into the gears on a cake crusher (the machine had to be turned backwards to free his arm) and I remember fishing my younger brother out of a pond when he had fallen in trying to reach a water-hen's nest.

It was an exciting time but we had some good fun too.

Seeing the damson blossom out in the spring reminded me of the time when damson picking was a major operation here at the farm. We had two small orchards that were nearly all damson trees and quite a lot more scattered around in the hedgerows. In fact, I was told that when my uncle was at the farm, pre-1924 when it belonged to the Bridgewater Estate, in a good fruit year the income was sufficient to pay the rent for the whole farm and I am sure that it would, for during my damson picking days, I can remember us picking up to eight tons of the little black horrors. (I didn't like the job – I have no head for heights).

Pre-war, practically no winter corn was sown, so that autumn was fairly slack time on the farm, so it was all hands to the damson picking. Most of our fruit went to Leyland in Lancashire where it was used for dye making to supply the great woollen mills of the county. After the outbreak of the second war it was diverted to the food industry and ours went to a Hartley jam factory.

In the years after the war the demand for damsons became less and less and the price did likewise and I think that it was in about 1950 that we had a considerable amount ready for collection when the buyer failed to arrive. We couldn't sell them locally, so they all had to be dumped. Dad said "enough is enough" and that was virtually the end of damsons at Houlston. Also, new varieties of wheat and oats were now being introduced which needed sowing in the autumn, so time for picking fruit was getting rather limited. Practically all the trees have gone now and sadly, the great Shropshire damson is fading away.

Looking through my diary of 1949, I happened to spot the sale of a horse. It could well have been our last working horse, because at about the same time I noticed the purchase of another new tractor and plough - £498, and a new tractor mower for £88.

My keeping of a diary was very erratic; sometimes I kept going until September but mostly they came to a stop in June or July. Could it have been pressure of work at harvest time? (A good excuse anyway). However, they do serve to jog my memory of the goings on of fifty years ago.

(Since my musings of last month, Miss Sylvia Swain has called with a photograph of Mr Yewdall and his lorry).

By the early 1950's farm workers' wages were beginning to rise a little from the thirty shillings pre-war to an average of between £5 and £6 which included overtime for weekends. Not many could afford to run a car even if one was available and men usually came on bicycles bringing their midday sandwiches with them. They sat in what was the old sadleroom to eat their food. The room soon came to be called "the butty house" and still goes under that name today, although it is now a general store.

In January 1952 there was a payment of £29.5s.0d for the installation of mains electricity in our four cottages in Myddle, so I presume that mains electricity had just arrived in the village. I'm not quite sure when the church was connected to the mains but I do remember the new system being dedicated.

As I still do, forty-five years later, I was sitting in the choir stall adjacent to the switchboard and had the honour of switching all the lights on for the first time. What an occasion it was and what a contrast to the old oil lamps and candles. The chancel and sanctuary used to be lit entirely by candles – a large chandelier in the centre with fifteen to twenty candles and a pole with about five candles in the middle of the choir stalls on each side (these were great for spattering the choir and music with hot candle grease!) Often, as a choirboy, I had the dubious honour of lighting all these candles before the evening service. I was so nervous I couldn't hold the pole with a taper on the end still enough to light one candle (and there were only about twenty-nine to go!)

That year too, I met the girl who later became my wife. It was somewhat of a shock to my family because by now I was into my thirties and they all thought I was destined to be a bachelor. Shortly before we were married, my two brothers and I went to Lincolnshire to look at a new threshing machine with a view to purchase. At that time Mary was working in the County Architect's Office in Shrewsbury and when she told the girls in the office where I had gone and for what, they were highly amused. I think they thought it was a machine to keep my new wife in order!

On a recent trip on the Heart of Wales Railway the train stopped briefly at Penybont Station and it really took me back to the days when sheep sales were held in the area. I can remember going to a sale with my father and after purchasing some 150 sheep, we had to walk them to Penybont Station, there to be loaded onto the train for despatch to our local station. On our arrival home it was a question of waiting for a phone call from Yorton to say that our sheep had arrived and were awaiting collection. Sometimes it was in the early hours of the next day. Then, of course, we had to walk them home. I wonder what the railways would make of it these days – hundreds of sheep to be loaded at a small station on a single track railway to be despatched all over the country; they would probably lose them en route.

As mentioned in my last article, as a result of our visit to Lincolnshire we did purchase a new Foster threshing machine (definitely not for threshing my wife!) It had all the latest improvements, including a chaff blower complete with pipes that would blow the chaff virtually to wherever you wanted. It was a great idea because the man appointed to move the chaff had the filthiest job of all. Also, the machine had a system of self-feed which meant that only one man was needed on top of the machine. Apart from that, it made it much safer; the feeder's job was very dangerous and it was not unknown for a man to lose a leg.

We had recently bought a pick-up baler and it was ideal for baling the straw because it had its own engine, so now we were threshing with five men instead of the usual eight. Our threshing bill had been in the region of £300 per year and our share in the new machine was only £233, so it was a good move.

I have been accused of missing important bits out of my writings, particularly the last one, so especially for you Bryan and Heather, if you *really* want to know, I met my future wife at a friend's wedding at Hadnall on April 27th 1952 and we were married on April 29th 1953.


I have in front of me the catalogue of the sale of the Myddle and Harmer Hill portion of the Bridgewater Estate, which took place on October 9th, 1924. A large proportion of Myddle Parish was for sale, including nearly all Myddle village, with the exception of the Rectory and Yew Tree Cottage.

The Estate comprised 2,360 acres and, according to Sale Particulars, included some of the finest and best equipped farms in the country from 50 to 360 acres, 20 excellent smallholdings from half an acre to 10 acres, 47 country cottages and gardens, and 8 detached gardens and orchards, two licensed premises, the Bridgewater Arms and the Red Lion, timber yard and workshop, and excellent smithy. Four working quarries along Lower Road were included, together with the disused quarry in Myddle which, it was suggested, would make a fine site for a wayside garage. (A rather interesting point there – I wouldn't have thought that there would be many cars on the roads in 1924 – someone with good foresight, perhaps). All the properties are listed and described, so I thought I would pick out a few that might be of interest:

LOT 3 A superior small holding known as “Jubilee Cottage”, the property includes the house, shippons for three cows, stables, cart shed, calf house and a further stock shed.

LOT 7 “The Bridgewater Arms”. Let on a twenty-one year lease to the People's Refreshment House Association, it commands excellent views to the Welsh mountains and is a favourite calling place for tourists. (Were there lots of tourists about in the early twenties? Perhaps they walked from Myddle and Burlton). The outbuildings included a stable for eight horses and a shippon for four cows.

LOTS 125 & 126 Bristle Bridge Quarry and Owens Quarry. Stone was taken from both these quarries for the building of Marton Hall which had recently been completed, and also for the restoration of Shrewsbury Abbey and, at a later date, for the wall surrounding the new extension to Myddle Churchyard.

LOT 124 Myddle Park Wood, which extends to 34  acres, containing first class timber. It is notable that oak recently taken from the wood was sufficiently good and straight enough for railway requirements.

According to the plan of Myddle village there were only fourteen houses. I wonder when the school house was built, as it is not on the plan of 1924. There is one other property which is worth a mention – the Smithy and store shed at the top of the hill – but, buyers beware, the roof and the doors are the property of the tenant.

I think it is rather a pity that some of the prices realised are not entered in the catalogue. The only one mentioned is Houlston Manor, 278 acres with a fine range of newly erected buildings. This was sold for £7,200, just under £26 per acre.

In view of the interest shown in my last article, I make no apology for returning to the same subject. According to the 1924 Bridgewater Estate Plan of Harmer Hill, there were not many dwelling houses in the village. The Chapel and adjoining house are marked, but nothing between there and the Bridgewater Hotel. There must have been one or two at the bottom of Chapel Bank because Mrs Betty Drummond tells me that she was born there, but there is only a disused quarry marked. On the opposite side there is Cliffe Cottage (Whittingham's) and at the bottom of the bank there is, or was, a lane leading off to the right to a group of three cottages known as "The Rookery". Beyond the Webscott turn are the present cottages and, I think, the Red Castle. Next is the stone-built house which was not for sale, and down the lane were two more houses, and at the end a smallholding of 3½ acres. I notice that one of the houses down there was occupied by Richard Harper. I remember him as the local pig killer and dresser.

On the triangle between the main roads there were only three houses. On the opposite side of the Wem Road were two semi-detached cottages, one of which, where Mrs Drummond Now lives, was let to Salop County Council as a Police House, and I vaguely remember P.C. Arkenstall there. Later the Police moved to Jubilee Cottage, and I have memories of P.C. Mills living there. He was a big fellow and he "scared me stiff". (As a boy I used to go there to collect a licence to send pigs to market). It is interesting to note that nearly all the land now built on at Harmer Hill was sold as an excellent building site.

Looking at the list of farms for sale I am at a bit of a loss to know why, out of nine farms, Lower Houlston had to pay two fee farm rents of £2 and £10 to the vicar and churchwardens of St Chads, Shrewsbury. I was born at Lower Houlston, but I don't remember it being mentioned.

Perhaps it is time for me to stop writing for the Messenger, but a few readers want me to carry on and, as long as something of interest keeps turning up, I am happy to do so – that is, of course, until the Editor says enough is enough.

(No chance of that yet! Ed.)

A few weeks ago, our Rector gave me a copy of the Shropshire Summer Assizes of 1924. I believe it came from a lady in Australia who is doing some research into the Done family. It appears that Samuel Done was born in Myddle in 1804 and, for reasons not given, was sent to Australia along with a boat load of other criminals. He died in West Maitland, New South Wales in 1871 and, on the Death Certificate, his occupation is given as Convict, Farmer and Publican.

Turning back to the Assizes, there is a list of the Criminal Prisoners in the custody of William Henry Griffiths, Keeper of His Majesty's Gaol for the County of Salop. (I had a brother of the same name, but I don't think there was any relationship).

There follows a list of all the prisoners and the treatment handed out by a Judge, such as:

- Thomas Davies, age 17, charged on suspicion of breaking into a house and stealing diver's articles. Judgement of death recorded.
- William Morris, age 22, charged on suspicion of stealing from John Walmesley on the King's highway at Astley, a small box containing one half-crown, one shilling and one sixpence. "Discharged by Proclamation".
- Samuel Done, age 21, of Myddle, charged with stealing one cow out of a cow house at Hordley, also charged with stealing a brown mare out of a field at Middle, also charged with stealing a book from Edward Brookfield of West Felton. Sentence of death recorded.
- This appears to be the same Samuel Done who died in Australia; the Judge must have relented him and had him transported instead.

Thomas Ward, age 15, charged with entering a house at Shifnal and stealing a quantity of wearing apparel. Sentence of death recorded.

I have only picked out a few who had connections with Myddle, but practically all on the list were sentenced to death. My goodness, it was rough justice in those days, but there wouldn't be many coming back to commit further crimes!

P.S. I wonder what will turn up for next month?

I have been glancing through the Messengers of the 60's when Revd Ayling was Rector, and his letter in the January 1968 issue caught my attention. He writes of the effort now needed to get back to church again, to rebuild the congregation and to share once again in the celebration of Holy Communion. Of course, as some of you will have realised, this was written in the aftermath of the great foot and mouth epidemic in the final months of 1967. It really was a dreadful time. No-one could do any visiting and, although bands of straw soaked in disinfectant were laid on the roads, people generally did not travel unless it was strictly necessary because of the fear of spreading the disease.

Whenever I hear Handel's Water Music, I am forcibly reminded of the terrible anxiety of the months leading up to Christmas. Every morning on Radio 4 at a few minutes to six, after a burst of Handel, the list of new confirmed outbreaks from the previous day was read out, and it was getting ever nearer to Myddle. On the day that my own farm was on the list, there were forty-two new farms with foot and mouth confirmed. At one stage I was beginning to think that we might miss it. All the Myddle farms had gone down in November, our near neighbour Balderton Hall went down on November 18th, my neighbour the other side went on November 22nd and I, right in between, was still holding out in early December.

There was a map of this area in a London newspaper showing all the farms which had gone down, and Houlston Manor was depicted as a fortress standing four square to beat off all attacks, but unfortunately it failed and we finally contracted the disease on December 6th, and all our 187 cows were shot and buried. It was the saddest day of my life; lots of those cows would come to me in the field to have their ears tickled. In a way, when it finally happened, I felt almost a sense of relief because the stress and anxiety had been so great. I had become almost afraid to go out to the cows in the morning; I was terrified of what I might find. That same London paper also listed the losses; to mention just the three locals:- Castle Farm –171 cattle, 110 sheep and 46 pigs, Alford Farm – 208 cattle and 70 sheep, Balderton Hall – 191 cattle and 17 sheep.

I have been lent a cutting from a newspaper dated January 4th 1968. A large headline states "All five brothers plagued". It goes on to report that all five farms owned by the Griffiths brothers of Shropshire had been infected by foot and mouth, the first one at West Felton, the last at Calverhall. There was more than a hint that we had been visiting each other, but nothing could be further from the truth. The Rector ends his letter "It is a tragedy without precedence. Not only does it strike the farmers and their families, but what about the farm workers and the village shop and public house and the animal feed mills whose supplies are no longer required?"

To end on a lighter note, as a result of the map in the London paper, the following summer we had a visit from an elderly couple from the London area whose surname was Houlston. They were doing some research into the origins of their family name.

Following on from my notes of last month, as soon as all the cattle had been slaughtered and buried, a squad of airmen from RAF Shawbury, under the supervision of a Ministry Official, moved in to clean, scrub and disinfect all the buildings in which cattle had been housed. It was not a very pleasant job for them, but when they moved on several days later everywhere was spotless. It was vitally important that it should be so, for we had heard that a farm or two in the Oswestry area where the epidemic had started had restocked too soon and had become re-infected and, as I was not prepared to take the risk, I decided not to purchase any more cattle for at least six months.

I missed the cattle so much that winter (apart from the work). It was so quiet going out of the house each morning, and all the buildings were so cold, it was uncanny.

We, the family, went to stay with friends that Christmas. It was my first work-free Christmas in the whole of my working life. As the farm was now stock free, it gave us the opportunity to plough up some of the old pastures to re-seed with some of the newer and more productive grasses. We also grew a good acreage of spring wheat; it was essential to supplement our income now that the monthly milk cheque was non-existent. We did receive compensation from the Government for all the lost cattle, but they were valued at their market value at the time of slaughter when cows were plentiful and now, six months later, cows were in short supply and prices had more than doubled.

However, it was now time to look around for replacements, and it was not going to be easy so, in desperation, I contacted a dealer who eventually supplied me with sixty cows from the Scottish borders. Fortunately, there was not a bad one among them, but it was a bit risky – I always feel that farmers are not going to part with their best cows. A short time later I bought thirty-six young cattle from Scotland, but this time I was not quite so fortunate. When my vet inspected them on arrival he said that I would have to treat them all for liver fluke, a nasty parasite which lives in and eats away the liver, but I have another story to tell on that subject, maybe next month.

It was not very long after the cattle arrived from Scotland that my wife and daughter, myself, my brother and his daughter-in-law all developed a mysterious illness, accompanied by severe pains in various parts of the body. During the weeks up to Christmas the pains grew steadily worse; I well remember kneeling on the floor by a chair, pressing my stomach against the seat in an effort to relieve the pain.

Our doctors were completely mystified and my brother's daughter-in-law who, by this time, was in hospital, was told that it was "all in the mind" which of course it wasn't – we all knew that. Shortly after Christmas a stomach specialist was called in to see my brother who had taken to his bed. Even the consultant was very puzzled but, as he was leaving the bedroom, he turned back and said, "Have you been eating watercress?" Yes, we had all eaten it, taken from the same stream on the same day. "Ah", he said, "I am pretty sure you are all suffering from liver fluke". Quite by chance, he had just returned from America where several cases of liver fluke had cropped up whilst he was there.

Then began a series of daily blood tests which confirmed his diagnosis, but as we were the first patients to contract the disease, no remedy was available in this country so the drug had to be obtained from America. I remember that there was a postal strike at the time and in order to speed things up, my very kind brother-in-law volunteered to drive down to Heathrow to meet the plane. When the drug arrived it was in 'bulk' and then had to be put into capsules. The treatment was soon underway, but what horrible treatment! Within minutes of taking a capsule we were subject to severe and prolonged vomiting – it was awful! I suppose that the drug had to be strong enough to kill the 'flukes' that were chewing away at our livers and it nearly killed us in the process.

Gradually we started to recover and as we were still having daily blood tests, there were soon signs that the drug was working. It had been a long painful time and our daughter had missed a whole school term when her education was at a critical point. During our recuperation we had several visits from various members of the medical profession, but they were not very interested in us; the stream where the offending watercress came from was much more interesting.

Later in the year the County Council offered to supply the pipes if I would do the work, so the ditch was piped and filled in.

We certainly made the news that year, local and national and I wonder if the watercress sales were down. Mary and I were having a celebration lunch at the Feathers Hotel in Ludlow when two gentlemen at the next table were served steak with watercress garnish which they refused to eat. I wonder what they would have said had we told them who we were.

What a year - first foot and mouth, then liver fluke. What next?

I am sorry that Times Past did not appear in last month's Messenger, but I am finding it increasingly difficult to find something of interest. Perhaps my brain is not working as it should!

It is nearly four years since I started writing, and I have enjoyed doing it. However, I am not giving up altogether; I shall continue to be on the look-out for anything that I feel may be of interest.

I would like to thank all my readers who have given me such encouragement. The following poem may jog a few memories in the farming community. I spotted it in a newspaper cutting dated 1940.

Keep It Clean

*Oh! Woe is me, my cowman Jack
Has had a churn of milk sent back.
The buyer wrote a note as well
Saying "The stuff ain't fit to sell".*

*It seems too bad, to make a fuss
We work so hard, men like us.
But what's the cause? I'd like to know,
So down the shippon I think I'll go.*

*Well! Dang we now, it seems as clean
As any other shed I've seen.
The cooler's dry, and nice and bright,
And all these pails appear alright.*

*But hey! What's this? Here Jack, you fool
Just look at filthy milking stool.
You ought to know, my lad, by now,
You handle stool as well as cow.*

*And if its legs are caked in dirt
Your hands convey the same to "Gert"
And she, poor lass, can't help your crime
So back comes milk a second time.*

*The moral of this tale, we've seen
Is milking stools must be kept clean.*