

The Wandering Dumb Boy Saga

Text: David Gibbs Photographs: David Gibbs, Nigel Stephens

Background

In late March 2011, someone stole a dumb boy, from the top of Evergreen Path. 'Stole' might be too strong a word, but 'they' - South Somerset District Council - took it away, merely on receiving just ONE request from a member of the public that the gap between the dumb boy and the wall was too narrow. Lots of people were very angry about this.

MLHG Response

We did what any self-respecting Local History Group would do: we grumbled about it, via email mostly, and we published this article as a result.

The Lone Dumb Boy

Once upon a time, before the Evergreen Path bungalows were built, there was a rather narrow lane known as Little Lane that linked Church Street with the then wide open spaces of Hitchen. On one side of the lane was the school and the high wall of the girls' playground, and beyond the playground, nearer to Hitchen, there was a banked hedge over which were school gardening plots and a few allotments. On the other side of the lane, running its full length and behind a high-banked hedge, was Edward Parker's orchard. At the top of the lane, where it met with the road, there were two Victorian cast-iron bollards, known by generations of village folk as the 'dumb boys'. Now one of the dumb boys has gone walkabout and, far from keeping dumb, it seems that a lot of residents are somewhat angry about it. Should they be?

But let's go back to a once-upon-a-time before the once-upon-a-time recalled above, to a once-upon-a-time when Little School was no longer adequate for village needs and the Big School was built. That was 135 years ago, in 1876. And this, more than likely, is when the bollards were installed, a safety measure not to stop kids running out into a virtually traffic-free road (no cars back then, remember) but to stop the lane being used by wheeled vehicles - hand carts, small horse-drawn carts, putts and the like - because long before the school was built the lane provided access to the small parcels of market-gardening land of Hitchen.

With children from the lower parts of the village streaming thorough the lane on their way to and from school, not to mention folk making their way to and from church of a Sunday, it probably made sense to keep the wheeled vehicles out, especially as there was an alternative access track just a short distance along the road. But now, by removing a bollard for a reason that to a lot of people isn't entirely clear, 135 years of harmless local history has been dispensed with, just like that. It may be just a lump of old cast iron but after being around for such a long time they become rather special. That's why folk are angry.

Interestingly, this is not the first time the removal of the dumb boys has caused a stir. Both were removed sometime in the 1980's and taken to Hinton St George and installed there. Residents kicked up such a fuss they brought them back again. At that time it was a Miss Skitterly who couldn't get through with her invalid buggy, so the dumb boys were replaced in a slightly different position so that she could get through.

Then last year, apparently, there was a rumor that they were to be taken away again, so a notice was put on them by the Parish Council that they were not to be taken away, but through the winter the notices blew away, like they do. Now, it seems, it's South Somerset District Council officials who have taken it upon themselves to take action, with apparently very little public consultation or perhaps none at all. Surely that's not true?



Now, the historical worth of the dumb boys is one thing but maybe there are more important concerns to be considered. What might they be? We all know how short of cash our public bodies are right now, so you can be sure SSSDC won't have wasted funds on something that is not absolutely essential. Would they? When they are busy sacking council workers? Of course not; how ridiculous to make such a suggestion.

Public access. Maybe it was impossible to get through the bollards in an invalid carriage or wheelchair. Well, Miss Skitterly made it to church OK, so it can't be that.

Mums with buggies? Mums have been wheeling their kids to and from school for generations - repeat, GENERATIONS - so surely that can't be a valid reason? And remember the gap was widened not so long back. It is true that some present-day buggies are as big as handcarts, sort of over-the-top, person-powered, four by fours. But just as the picture opposite was being taken, a young woman pushing a buggy happened to come by. 'I have no idea why they did it' she said, and promptly demonstrated how easy it was to push her buggy through the original gap. (To who ever that was on Friday, 8th April, just after 3pm, thanks for the demo.)

Could it be the cast iron had rusted through at the base and there was a danger of the bollard collapsing? Was it hazardous in any other way? If so, it was right to remove it. can't argue with Health and Safety issues, not these days.

But mums and dads beware. It's now quite possible for a youngster on a bike to whiz straight past the remaining bollard without the need to slow down at all and the road beyond, unlike the road of years gone by, is rarely free of traffic especially when parents are on the school run - as the picture below, taken a few seconds after the

first shows; that's the front end of a car just coming into view. Could it be that replacing what might be a slight inconvenience for a handful of people has created an on-going safety hazard for many more?



So, on behalf of all of us who treasured the dumb boys, those hundreds of us who swung in circles around them, who leap-frogged over them, whose tiny, childhood hands down all the years burnished the round knobs please can we have our dumb boy back, our

little bit of history? They may not mean much to you but they mean a lot to us!

We invited comments to support our campaign. We weren't exactly inundated, but we did get a few. They are reproduced below.

Comments Received

Why was there no consultation? There is now, belatedly, a **Case Reference number: 253724**. You can call SCC on **0845-345-9155** to support the return of our dumb boy (but perhaps in a slightly different position), for both the historic and H&S reasons, as suggested by David. CAH 14th April

SO MANY ELDERLY PEOPLE HAVE ELECTRIC BUGGIES NOW, COULD THAT HAVE BEEN A REASON FOR ITS REMOVAL? CAN AN ELECTRIC BUGGIE GET THROUGH NOW? I WOULD LIKE TO SEE IT RETURNED. Anon 8th May

Bring back the dumb boy I say and don't go messing with things in the community without asking the community SSDC. SSDC used to be so full of consulting on this and that - what has happened? I don't live in the village any longer, however I would love to know if the dumb boy at the top of half-acre lane (the one going down to Shyners Terrace and Lower Street) is still there? Lynn 18/5/11 (Yes, the Half Acre Lane pair are still there Lynn.)

The Parish Council is looking into listing the dumb boys on Church Street...they should list all four, including the two on Half Acre Lane. Anon 21st May

Pleased to see the dumb boy has been replaced, come on Parish Council get all four listed before the other two go walkabout. M. 31st May

But all's well that ends well. The missing dumb boy was returned to its original position on May 23rd 2011.



Fancy a game of leapfrog, anyone?