

## Merriott As I Knew It

Hilda Isaacs (nee Tasker)

A village and its inhabitants like no other!

When my Father decided to leave the town where I was born, abandon his career as an engineer, leave relatives and friends and all mod cons of a little town house, the move was frowned upon on all sides. In fact, an uncle was heard to comment, he was quite sure taking a little girl of six to a place like Merriott was a grave mistake, the locals were most odd, and spoke a dialect all their own which normal people found very difficult to understand, so it was most unlikely Hilda would ever be able to understand the King's English, or anything else for that matter My Mother didn't seem to mind, in fact I think she rather liked the idea of living in the country, so in due course my Father bought his smallholding, the idea, to become a Poultry Farmer. Having kept a few chickens during the First World War which laid eggs very well, he also exhibited at Poultry Shows and won many prizes for his Buff Orpingtons or White Leghorns – the future looked rosy!



Dad bought his smallholding in 1922 but the address, even for us, was a little bit much to swallow—yes , you've guessed it "Boozey Pit" !!!, especially as my parents were strict Non-Conformists. I'm afraid we rather got away with it, my Father called the house "Homeleigh" and as we were the only Taskers in the village "Homeleigh" Merriott sufficed.



'Homeleigh', down 'Boozey Pit'.

By the time these pictures were taken the original thatched roof had been replaced by tiles. In the picture on the right, the windows had also been replaced.

The locals always showed great interest in any newcomers so we were known as “They volks down Boozey Pit”.

Merriott was a large village, with no gas or electricity, at least not when we first went there. The roads were not made up and, for a large part of the year, covered in mud, so one of the first things to be purchased was a pair of lace-up boots for me—how I hated those boots!. Fortunately Wellington Boots and Russian Boots soon became fashionable and solved many problems.

Some of our neighbours who liked to call themselves farmers owned about six cows each, cats, a dog and a few chickens. Some of them had no grass land attached to their homes but owned fields on the outskirts of the village, in other words beyond where we lived, so small herds of cows passed the house daily, all quite harmless we discovered in due course.

Being six years old I had to go to school. I remember being taken by my Mother to meet Miss Winch, a formidable lady, and was duly installed in her class. An excellent teacher, you remembered what she taught you—or else, and a great believer in the use of the ruler, or even the cane. I think in later years she suffered from rheumatism of some sort and hardly left her desk but in my day she suffered from no such ailment and moved around the classroom like a ship in full sail, measuring out punishment as and where necessary. Aged eight I moved to “The Big School”, what a relief that was! Life was not nearly as strict. The Staff consisted of four teachers, the Headmaster, Mr. Masters, Miss Mitchell Standard V, Miss Pamphlet Standard IV and Mrs Pamphlet Standards II & III. I enjoyed my days at The Big School and made some very good friends with whom I kept in touch for years.

Merriott was well endowed with both places of worship and public houses. The Church was next to the schools both of which were Church schools. They were frequently visited by the vicar a Rev. Percival. Most of the children attended Church and regarded themselves rather superior to the lesser breed of children who attended Sunday School at either the Congregational or Methodist classes.

There was also a Gospel Hall at the top of Broadway, well attended I believe but of which I know little. The highlight of our year was the Sunday School outing. Char-a-bancs were hired, usually two, lined up near the Chapel and everybody, children, parents and teachers bundled in and away we went on our way to Weymouth. First, of course, having to make our ascent of Wynyard’s Gap. I’m sure the concern felt by everybody would not have been greater had we been climbing Everest. Silence reigned. Sometimes the poor old chara couldn’t make it then everybody had to get out and walk to the top. We finally reached Weymouth where the water was always freezing cold but we would pretend it wasn’t. Donkey rides, ice-creams and Punch & Judy all followed, then of course a visit to Woolworths to buy the present to take home to Mum or Dad or whoever had had to stay behind. Going to Sunday School twice on Sundays all the rest of the year was worth it to qualify for the Sunday School Outing.

Merriott also boasted a factory of its own at Tail Mill where Flax was woven into Sail Cloth for Sailing Ships. The factory was still working when we first went to Merriott but not for long. However the woman who passed our door daily was a cause of great wonderment to my Mother and me. Her attire was something we had never seen before, she wore boots, woollen stockings, a skirt over which she wore a white apron, a shawl around her shoulders, and a bonnet the like of which we had never seen. Made of white calico it must have been an oblong piece of material worn over the head, reaching the shoulders, every bit of which was pin-tucked, then gathered in at the back with more pin-tucks and embroidery, the whole idea I suppose to keep the fluff from the flax from getting into the womens’ hair. I last saw one of those bonnets in the Crewkerne museum. The factory closed in due course but later became a Shirt Factory. The making of shirts was also short-lived and, if I remember rightly, the next time the factory was used was during the war when the people employed made small parts for, I think, aircraft but I’m not at all sure about that.

We had quite a number of shops in the village most of which sold a wonderful variety of things, groceries, ribbons, stockings, soap, washing powders, soda, that is until the war

came along and with it rationing, which took a little while to get used to. There was also the Blackout, however careful you were it was so difficult to keep every bit of light from showing from inside our houses especially in the winter months. The Air Raid Wardens were ever on the alert, not an easy job, but they did their best and got little thanks. On one such occasion, the warden saw a light, and with a sharp rat-tat on the door shouted "Put out that light". The poor man had the shock of his life when the door flung smartly open and a most irate lady shouted at him "*I da know who you be, so don't ee tell I to put me light out*" !!

Mention must be made of the Merriott bomb. For a time German bombers had a nasty habit of flying over the village en route for Bristol, at night of course. On this particular occasion our fighter aircraft came out to intercept and one bomber jettisoned its load. Fortunately most of the bombs fell on the open grassland but one fell in the village behind a row of cottages. We all heard it whistling down, landed, but did not explode, so we knew we had a time bomb in our midst. All a bit of a problem but little we could do, except one worthy who decided he was going to find out. Armed with his little torch he went in search, and came back – luckily for him! To state that the bomb was in the orchard and he had seen the hole with the bomb shining at the bottom. It duly exploded about an hour later with no damage to the houses or to any person, except that a little chicken house with six chickens in it departed without trace, well, with the exception of a few feathers scattered around.

As well as the Church, Chapels, and Public houses the village also boasted a Tithe Barn and a Memorial Hall. During the war dances and sometimes a play took place, great events for the village, and I also remember a Fete being held in the Recreation Field when the little girls dressed in white and wearing coloured sashes danced The Maypole.

Ah me! It all happened a long, long time ago. As an afterthought, yes, I remember Laura Gibbs and her sister Gwen. They went to the Wesleyan Chapel where Mr and Mrs Hutchings were members. The Hutchings family lived a short distance from us in Higher St. so I became friendly with Dorothy who was a little older than me. I sometimes went to Chapel with her. On one never to be forgotten occasion I was invited to join the choir as there was to be a Magic Lantern Show accompanied by readings and music entitled "Jessica's First Prayer". It took us a little while to learn the musical pieces but finally the great night arrived. Taking place in the schoolroom, the choir was hidden from view in an alcove with curtains drawn and the lantern partly hidden. The audience arrived rather noisily and the Show began. It was rather hot behind the curtain, our throats in due course rather parched,

and voices not "quite" up to standard so "Half-time" was very welcome. The Lantern was turned off, and the lights turned on. The choir was released and made its way in some haste to the tea and lemonade table. Drinks having been purchased and feeling somewhat refreshed, one woman was heard to say to another "*Yer! Your face idn't 'alf dirty*" "*Well, I washed en before I came away*" was the somewhat terse retort. Then followed a vigorous rub with a handkerchief and the face was duly held up for inspection, accompanied immediately with a "*Your face idn't none too clean either*" The awful truth dawned, the magic lantern had smoked and every one of us behind the curtain now resembled a band of Kentucky Minstrels. Whatever happened to Jessica and her first prayer I can't remember. I expect it was abandoned until a later date --much later, but the amusement caused was never forgotten!

A while later the Hutchings family left Merriott and moved to London where Mr and Mrs Hutchings became caretakers of Wesley's Chapel and House in City Road. They returned to Merriott for holidays and in due course I became bridesmaid at Dorothy's wedding, getting married myself later in the same year (1946) So ended my sojourn in the village, but the memories linger on, which is a good thing bearing in mind that "The old order changeth - giving place to new" but never could it be funnier than in THE OLD DAYS.

\*\*\*\*\*

Footnote: This photo of Hilda was taken in 2004, around the time she recorded her memories of living in Merriott. She has just celebrated her 95 birthday (late 2011) and was pleased to know her article, which was first published on Sue Osborne's website

[www.merriottfamiliesgenealog.net](http://www.merriottfamiliesgenealog.net) was also published on [www.merriottlocalhistorygroup.co.uk](http://www.merriottlocalhistorygroup.co.uk)

Thank you, Hilda!

