

Reminiscences from Hilda & Brian Tasker

Contributed September 2004 by Hilda Isaacs (nee Tasker) Age 87

Thank you Hilda! What a gem of a story!

Brian has sent a copy of the original first page of Hilda's writing. He notes: "I could not help also scanning a portion of her original just to record her characteristic print style which has served her well through her near eighty-eight years. Very neat as you will see, but I have never discovered why Merriott School never succeeded with her "joined-up" writing!"

Thanks to both Hilda and her brother Brian for this contribution.

MERRIOTT.
+s I Knew It

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 Butty Farmer. Having kept a few chickens during the First World War which laid eggs very well, he also exhibited at Butty Shows and won many prizes for his Buff Orpingtons or White Leghorns & the

so the future looked rosy.

Dad bought his smallholding, but the address, even for us, was a bit much to swallow -- yes you've guessed it - Boozer Pit!!! Especially as my parents were strict Non-Conformists, so 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. The locals always showed great interest in any newcomers so we were known as "They folks 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 were 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 grassland 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 5, Miss Pamphlet Standard 4, Mrs Pamphlet Standards 2 & 3. 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 and frequently visited by the vicar, a Rev. Percival. Most of the children attended Church and regarded themselves as 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 would finally reach Weymouth. The water was always freezing cold, but we pretended it wasn't. Donkey rides, Ice creams, 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 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 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 house 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 and 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 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.

However we had quite a number of shops in the village, most of which sold a wonderful variety of things, groceries, ribbons, stockings, soap, washing powder, soda, that is until the War came and with it rationing, which took a little while to get used to. There was also the Blackout, however careful you were it was difficult to keep every bit of light from showing from inside our houses especially during 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, a smart rat-tat on the door and a shout of "Put out that light !!" The poor man had the shock of his life when the door was smartly flung open and a most irate old lady shouted at him, "I da know who you be, so don't you tell I to put my 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 open grassland but one fell in the village behind a row of cottages. We all heard it whistling down, it 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 went in search, and came back - luckily for him ! - to state that the bomb was in the orchard. 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 chicken 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 and their daughter were members. The Hutchings family lived a short distance from us in Higher St so I became friendly with Dorothy although a little older than me. I also sometimes went to Chapel with her, and on one, never to be forgotten occasion, 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 school-room, with the Choir hidden from view in an alcove with curtains drawn and the Lantern also partly hidden, the audience arrived , rather noisily, and the Show began. Although, it must be said, it was rather hot behind the curtain, and our throats got rather parched in due course and voices not quite up to standard. Half-time was very welcome, the Lantern was turned off, the lights came on, and the choir was released and all made their 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 face was held up for inspection, accompanied immediately with a " Your face idn't none too clean either ! " Then the awful truth dawned, the magic lantern had smoked and every one of us, especially those behind the curtain, 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 never did it cause the same amusement.

A while later the Hutchings family left Merriott and moved to London when 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, and was married myself later in that year.

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 because it could never be any funnier than in THE OLD DAYS !!!

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