

My Place in the Country

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

*H*anging in a recess at the top of my stairs I have a framed 1927 Ordnance Survey map of Merriott, the Somerset village where I was born in September 1934, the village I like to think of as *my* village. Ian, my son, gave the map to me some years ago. After hearing so much about the village over the years, I guess he knew how much the place still meant to me. He was right; the roots run deep.

The map shows the village and the surrounding countryside in detail: the church, the tithe barn, every dwelling, every chapel, every pub, every field, every allotment, every orchard, and every footpath. In fact, it shows the village just as it was in my young days.

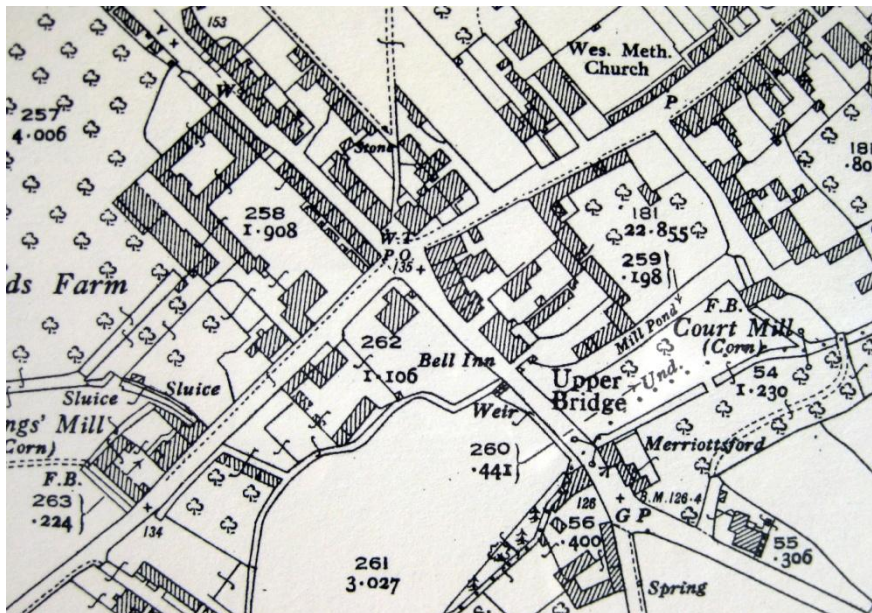
In moments of nostalgia I sit on my stairs, look at the map, and recall those days. In my mind I again walk the myriad footpaths, explore the lanes, wander the fields. And I remember, mostly with affection, many of the village folk of yesterday who now rest in All Saints churchyard including nowadays some of my own generation.

Geographically the village is quite large, not a one-street village, more D-shaped, embracing a route of about one and half miles. In days gone by the village was very spacious. Much of the land within the D had once been common land but in my day was pasture or arable, crisscrossed with footpaths and tracks. Most of these footpaths and tracks have disappeared almost without trace and the land covered in houses built along newly named roads and streets with which, after so many years away, I am not familiar. Nor particularly wish to be. They are not part of the village I remember.

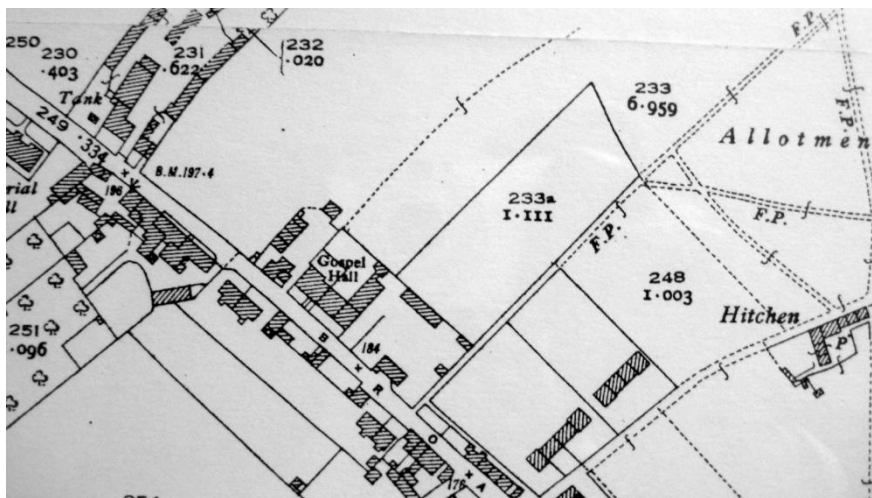


The village taken from a field off Hazelbury Road in 1950, before the building of houses at Hitchen and Manor Close. The five rows of post-war prefabricated houses erected in Beadon Lane can be seen on the left of the picture

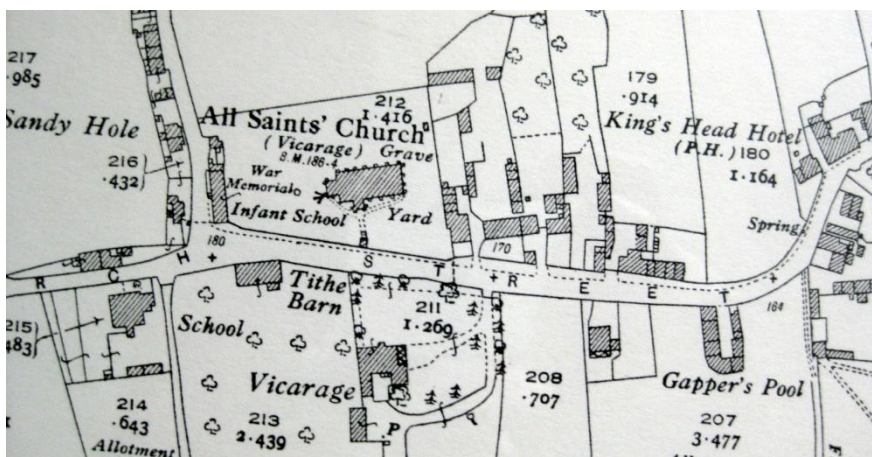
Fortunately, in spite of a plethora of new and unfamiliar names, many of the old village place names endure, just as they have done for centuries past. They were, and still are, a delight: Knapp, Tinkers' Lodge, Boozer Pit, Sandy Hole, Bowood Lane, Clapperhay, Gapper's Pool, Monkhouse Farm, Bakehouse Corner, most being marked on my Ordnance Survey map.



Knapp

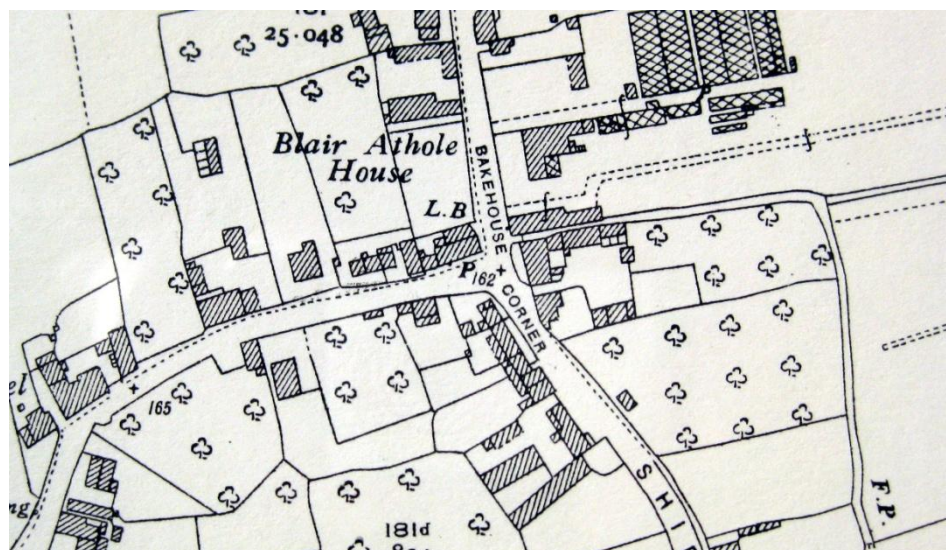


Hitchen

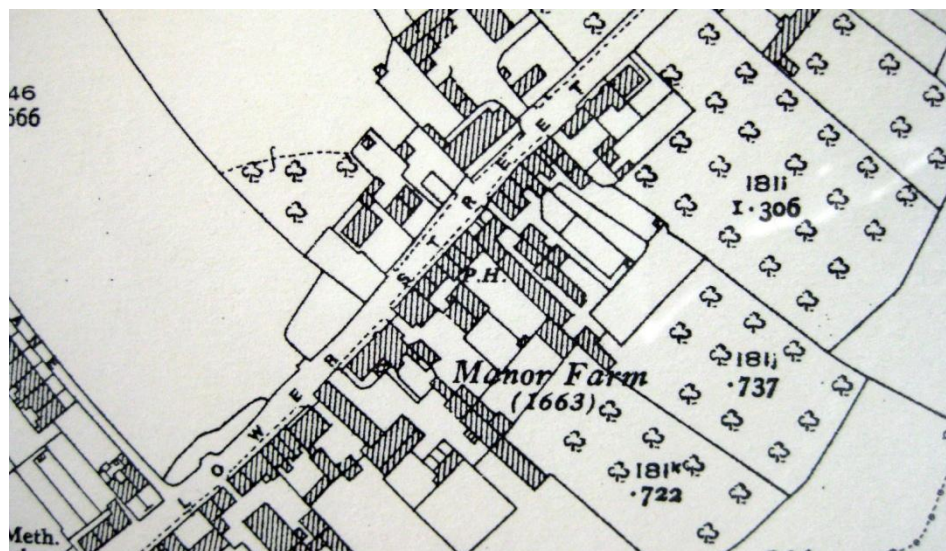


Church Street

Bakehouse
Corner



Lower Street



Knapp and lower Broadway taken in the early 1950s showing the post office and, on the left of the picture, Harold Best's barbershop (George Sprake's barbershop having closed some years before)

I was born in a cottage a few yards from Knapp, at the lower end of Broadway. When I

was very small, Broadway, which happened to be very narrow at that time, and Knapp was the part of the village with which I was particularly familiar.

If the village ever had a centre, then at that time Knapp was it. Here there was a cluster of shops: the post office, the Co-Op, Henry Sprake's barbershop, Batstone's haberdashers, and my aunt Annie's sweet shop.

From the outset, my village, and I suppose within it my place in the world, was of great importance to me. I remember the pleasure I got from being told that it was the *biggest village in Somerset!* The inhabitants numbered about 1200. I reckon that by the time I was fifteen years old I knew most of them. Most, I expect, knew who I was. That was the way it was back then.

I believe that the village of my young days was very much the way it had been for many, many years. Changes were occurring but the pace of change had yet to gather momentum. It was still essentially an agricultural-horticultural community. There were at least eighteen farms or smallholdings, probably more. Two water-powered mills, Billing's Mill and Court Mill, were still grinding corn from time to time; I once stood inside Court Mill when it was in action. Horses were still very much in use although I can



Merriott resident, Arthur Taylor who lived at The Girdlers, Lower Street. For me, Mr Taylor, with his flat cap waistcoat and watch chain, is typical of the old countryman of my youth. The spades, one worn one new, tell their own story!

remember very well when the first Fordson and John Deere tractors, provided by the Americans as part of the war effort, arrived in the village in the early 1940s. And in addition to the farms and smallholdings providing employment, Scott's Nurseries employed a good many people, as did two small factories. It was very much a working village.

The village folk back then were, in the main, very much country people, and by that I don't mean people who simply *lived* in the country but people who had the country in their blood, people with country ways and whose families, my own included, went back generations, people who *belonged* to the village. There were a few newcomers, of course, but not many.

In common with many south-Somerset villages, there was a predominance of certain surnames, in particular Pattemore, Mitchell,

Osborne, Lawrence, Wills, Hooper and French. There were so many people having these surnames that people were sometimes known solely by a nickname. For instance, my cousin, Laura Gibbs, married a local man called William Wills who was known to everyone as Willie Winkle. Another Wills was known as Sammy Nameldish, an Osborne as Sammy Duchy and a Lawrence as Lizzie Partridge. How these nicknames came about, heaven only knows.

The rich Somerset accent was still very much in evidence and many of the older

generation spoke in an old-English dialect that had survived in the locality from Saxon times. My father, for example, still used words such as '*thee*', '*thic*' and '*canst*' as a matter of course. When the two, accent and dialect, were combined, the result was a language that I imagine sounded quite foreign, maybe even somewhat coarse, to the unaccustomed ear.

The women, I remember thinking, seemed to talk rather a lot, gossiping I suppose, often lowering their voices as an inquisitive child walked by. On the other hand, they often made derogatory remarks about someone close by *intending* they should hear, a rather unpleasant habit referred to as '*chucking off*': some folk were very good at chucking off and were noted for it.

The men of the village were less talkative and slow to smile but were not without humour, a dry, sometimes caustic humour in which facial expression played no part so that at times it was not possible to tell if they were joking or being serious. And they could be somewhat belligerent, relishing a fight, particularly with strangers and especially when they had a drop too much cider to drink. Because of this inherent aggression, a characteristic commonly associated with Irishmen, the village was once known as 'Little Ireland'. How this trait came to be so prevalent in Merriott men, and how the Little Ireland label originated, may have an explanation. According to a past village historian Richmond Munn, a local aristocrat called Nicholas Fitzharding had connections with the Earl of Pembroke who invaded Ireland on behalf of Henry II around 1166 (and in so doing opened the first chapter in the on-going Irish problem that lingers to this day). Consequently, Fitzharding was able to obtain plenty of cheap Irish labour for his various projects such as building a manor house, quarrying stone and land reclamation work. There were probably so many Irishmen working in the village that Irish blood was introduced into the local Anglo-Saxon stock.

In my young days, the spiritual needs of the village folk were met by no less than five places of worship, all well attended. They were the parish church of All Saints and four chapels: Methodist, Congregational, Elim Four Square Pentecostal Church and the Gospel Hall. The Methodist church is now a private residence. The Congregational was extended in an incredibly ugly and insensitive way and is now a squash club. The Elim Four Square, which didn't exist at the time my Ordnance Survey map was compiled but was built in the mid-1930s, was demolished in 1999 and the site used for house building. Now, of the chapels only the Gospel Hall continues in use, albeit with a very small congregation. My immediate family was Methodist but at various times I attended the parish church and all of the chapels for specific occasions, some of which I refer to later.

In the parish, there are over seventy listed buildings and structures but perhaps the most significant is that of All Saints church. It stands on the northern periphery and, just like many a village family, it is here where, according to the Parish Registers, a steady flow of my own family were baptised, married and eventually laid to rest in the surrounding churchyard.

Close by the parish church there are three other old buildings that down the long years have played, and continue to play, an important role in the life of the community:

namely, the two schools and the tithe barn.

The schools were built in 1834 and 1876 respectively, the little school being initially a Sunday school. I attended both schools in the 1930s and 1940s when the schools were



WW2 British soldiers on the pebble

known simply as 'little school' and 'big school'. My experiences as a pupil are described in later chapters.

Outside the little school there is a large kidney-shaped rock, known when I was young as the 'pebble'. I once asked my father who was a boy in the late 1890s, how it got there. He had no idea but he could not remember a time when it wasn't, so it has been there for well over a hundred years. It provided a natural meeting place, particularly for young boys. I remember how you could stand on it, reach over and grab the curved wall bordering the churchyard, place your foot in a well-worn recess in the hamstone wall and heave yourself over. Children were not supposed to set foot in the churchyard without permission, and to run or even walk on a

grave was strictly forbidden. Perhaps that explains why clambering over the wall was such mischievous fun. I always glance at the pebble whenever I drive by, just to make sure that it is still there. And the other day I took a closer look to see if the recess was still in the wall. It is, and still in use, it seems.

The nearby 14c tithe barn was used for all sorts of social activities such as dances, whist drives, concerts, wedding receptions and so on, and no doubt still is. But its most interesting role in its very long history - and one which I well remember - must surely be that of a mess for some of the American soldiers who were camped in the village recreation ground prior to D-Day. Their food was cooked in a Nissen-type cookhouse, which stood in the orchard next to the barn. After the war, the cookhouse became a scout hut and it was not until 2000 that a remaining extension to the cookhouse was eventually pulled down and the old orchard became the site of yet more houses and a small car park.

A half mile or so away is another, more modern, building, the Blake Memorial Hall, that served the community in a way similar to the tithe barn, including being used during the war years by the American soldiers and also Italian and German prisoners of war. Later on, I recall the mass vaccination of children against poliomyelitis, myself included, and long queues of mothers with their children waiting their turn. Around that time, a big attraction was the weekly film show on Wednesday evenings, George Formby films being particularly popular. The classical pianist, Joseph Cooper, a friend of Mr Batstone the baker, gave concerts there on two occasions, long before he found television fame as the compere of *Face The Music*. His performances were probably too highbrow for most village folk but not so the week of performances by a touring Canadian hypnotist who used to whistle *Beautiful Dreamer* to put his 'victims' to sleep! Seeing village people

I knew well behaving in a ridiculous manner when hypnotised convinced me for all time that hypnosis was a reality, not a myth.

Another building worthy of mention is Moorlands House. Once a handsome Victorian country residence it is now split into two dwellings thus its original grandeur is now somewhat diminished. But of special interest is that during the Spanish Civil War it was the home of a group of refugees and during World War II it was taken over by the Air Ministry.



The Spanish refugees at Moorlands House, circa 1938

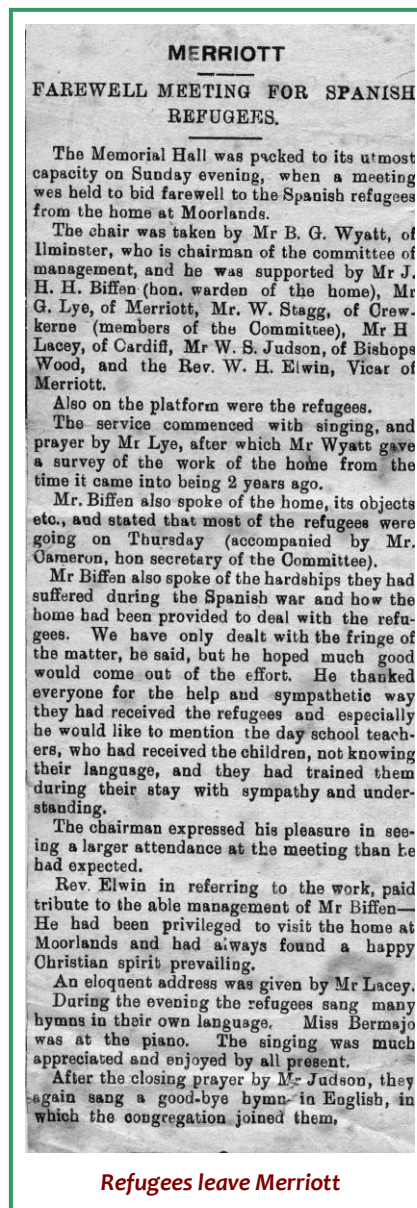
The refugees were in some way linked to the Gospel Hall, I'm not sure how, being the Spaniards were most likely Catholic and the Gospel Hall community are non-conformist. What I do know is that they attended services and other events there on a regular basis.

My particular memory of them is as a very small pre-school boy sitting on our cottage steps in Broadway when suddenly around the corner from Moorlands would come this group of young Spanish women and girls. With shrieks of exuberance, they used to head for me and would sit beside me for a while, cuddle me and otherwise make a fuss of me in typical Spanish fashion before making their way up the hill to the chapel. I imagine I would have quite enjoyed the attention.

Who were the Spanish refugees who came to live at Moorlands and how did they get there? Here's my attempt at a brief explanation.

The Spanish Civil War has its roots in the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s. In response to widespread poverty and unemployment, socialism gathered momentum and, in 1931, the Spanish people, having dispensed with the monarchy, voted overwhelmingly for a Socialist Republic. Attempts at social reform, however, were only partially successful and, by 1933, there was a reversal of political fortunes. A right-wing government came to power and promptly demolished all the reforms introduced by the socialists. Over the next two or three years there was much civil unrest. In 1936

there was yet another election, the Popular Front regained power, and they soon set about releasing political prisoners and again introducing reforms that penalised the rich.



Refugees leave Merriott

Seeing their privileged way of life being eroded, the wealthier Spaniards, supported by senior army officers, began plotting to overthrow the Popular Front government. Franco, who was now commander of the army in Spain's African colonies, joined in the revolt and led a military assault on southern Spain. Elements of the Spanish army stationed on the mainland supported the rebellion; others, about fifty percent of the armed forces, supported the legitimately elected Popular Front government. After just three or four weeks of fighting, the Nationalist Front army controlled about one third of the country. The fighting, which, thanks to the German and Italian involvement, now included aerial bombardment and mechanised warfare, intensified. Both sides committed appalling atrocities. Thousands of men and boys were killed in battle or captured and shot. Hundreds of civilians caught up in the fighting, especially the bombing raids on undefended cities, were killed and injured. (Only in recent times, as mass graves are excavated, is the full extent of these atrocities, especially those committed by the Nationalists, being revealed.) As the Nationalists pushed north, refugees, mainly women and children, began pouring over the border from the Basque region of Spain into France. In response to public concern, the British Conservative government agreed to take a limited number of refugees but refused to finance them and so many organisations such as trade unions and the churches formed relief committees to raise funds, arrange accommodation and provide ongoing support. Consequently, on 22nd May

1937, an old liner called the *Habana*, carrying 4000 refugees, mainly women and children, many of the children unaccompanied by an adult relative, set sail from northern Spain bound for Southampton. On arrival in Southampton two days later, the passengers were housed in a tented camp and later dispersed and sent to live in 'settlements' dotted around the country. Since the *Habana* appears to have been the only refugee ship to sail to England, it seems highly probable that the Spanish refugees who ended up in Merriott were amongst those passengers.

Eventually the legitimately elected Popular Front government was overthrown and Franco established a right-wing authoritarian regime that was to last until 1978. Thus peace of a sort prevailed and so the British government, urged on by the Franco regime and the Catholic Church but opposed by the relief committees, recommended

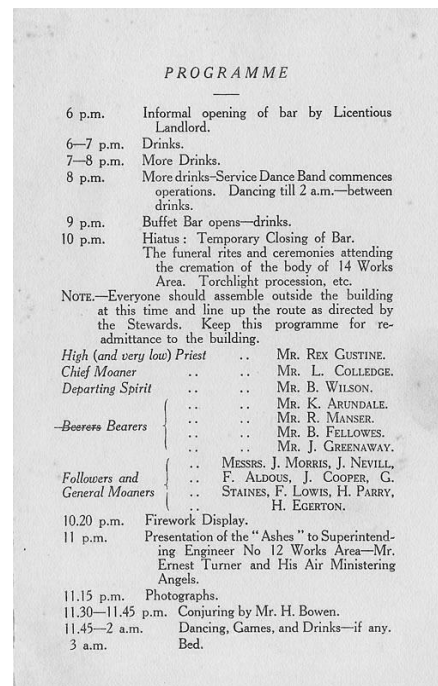
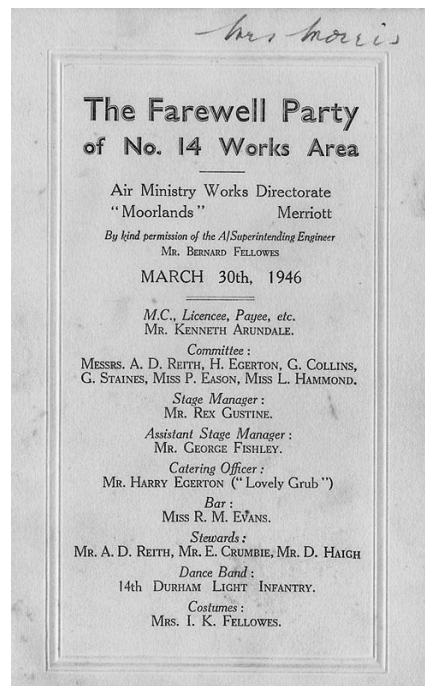
repatriation. Most refugees did return, but not all, believing, or perhaps knowing, that it was simply not safe to do so. They were probably right, because many women returned home to find that husbands and brothers they had left behind had been killed or were imprisoned. The persecution of Popular Front supporters by Franco's regime continued. Many of the returning children - maybe some of those happy faces in the Moorland's photograph - ended up in orphanages where they were often badly treated. Look again at those children and consider this: it could well be that the happiest days of their young lives were those spent in Merriott.

As far as the Air Ministry goes, and regarding the type of work that went on at Moorlands during the war, my friend Bryan Morris, whose father worked there, tells me

it was the headquarters of Area 14 of the Air Ministry Works

Directorate. The AMWD was responsible for the construction and maintenance of aerodromes, hangars, offices etc. and it seems likely that the Moorlands work involved the planning and provisioning of airfields and other RAF establishments in the South West of which there quite a few, the nearest being at Ilton.

I recall that each evening a large group of office workers headed down Moorlands Road for Knapp, many to catch the 5.20pm Safeway



A section of Air Ministry employees at Moorlands Farewell Party and the official Invitation and programme. (Another photograph taken at the time shows a similar number of people)

bus to Crewkerne and perhaps to other villages further on. I also remember a dance being held at Moorlands and one warm evening, with a group of friends, watching the dancing through an open ground floor window and listening to the music. It now seems likely that it must have been the Farewell Party and that the dance band was that of the Durham Light Infantry, music well worth listening to, no doubt. I can't recall any fireworks, though.

Earlier I referred to the two small factories, both were down Tail Mill Lane. One of these was originally a water-powered weaving mill where, it is claimed, the sails for Nelson's flagship Victory were produced. The women who worked there in the late 1800s and early 1900s, including my paternal grandmother, wore bonnets just like the more-familiar Lancashire mill girls. I still have my grandmother's bonnet.



Tail Mill (circa 1900). Although the millpond is still evident, the tall chimney suggests that by this time a steam engine had been installed and that waterpower had been abandoned



My grandmother's Tail Mill bonnet

During the war years the old mill accommodated a London company specialising in the then somewhat new technology of compression and other plastic moulding techniques, an activity that has continued on the site for many years, providing employment for many local people, both men and women. My father and my sister Florrie worked there at times during the war years and just afterwards, my father in the department that



A Merriott Mouldings works outing to Bristol in 1949

accurately weighed the moulding powder into small tubs in preparation for loading into the moulds, my sister in the finishing shop removing the excess bakelite, known as 'flash', from the moulded items. I also worked at Merriott Mouldings in 1950, my very first job; it was not a very pleasant experience and I have more to say about it later.

At 6.00pm, at the end of the end of the working day, Tail Mill Lane would be crowded with cyclists and pedestrians making their way home, many of the pedestrians who were not village folk boarding two Southern National buses waiting at the top of Tail Mill Lane to take them to Crewkerne and beyond.

The second factory was much smaller and employed just a handful of people. It specialised in weaving rolls of webbing, about three inches in width, which was used principally for edging coconut matting. The looms were belt driven, the drive shafts being powered by a large solitary diesel engine the rhythmic thud of which could be heard from quite a distant away. Production of webbing finally stopped in the 1970s, thus ending the village connection with the weaving trade that had once been so prominent in the West Country.

But it did not end the village's indirect connection with the wider cloth trade. Many Merriott women and girls, including my mother and sisters, worked in Crewkerne shirt and pyjama factories at various times. For others, batches of work were delivered to their homes and paid for, rather poorly, on a piecework basis. Similar piecework was sometimes available from the Yeovil, Stoke-under-Ham and South Petherton glove factories.



Crewkerne Van Heusen shirt factory, circ 1954. Many Merriott women worked in the Crewkerne shirt and pyjama factories over the years