

Sunshine Corner

David Gibbs

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

*Sunshine Corner, Oh! It's jolly fine!
It's for children under ninety-nine.
All are welcome, seats are given free.
Merriott Sunshine Corner is the place for me.*

Yes indeed it was, and for my friends too. For a whole week no game, no pastime, no adventure, no mischief making could even begin to match Sunshine Corner. Absolutely nothing.

'Come Early And Bring A Friend', the poster stuck up in the post office window boldly implored, and all across the bottom there was a drawing of a little fat policeman with a truncheon in his hand chasing a diminishing gaggle of children, driving them along to Sunshine Corner.

Sunshine Corner was an evangelical mission aimed primarily at children although it attracted a good number of adults too, including a sprinkling of Italian prisoners of war who were detained in huts that had been erected on the recreation ground.

The mission ran for a week or so in the Elim Gospel Church - or as we always knew it, Out Four Square. (The 'Out' is important; we never spoke of Four Square without the Out.)

Out Four Square was a rather austere brick building. It had been built just before the war alongside the unmade roadway, known by everyone as 'Track', that provided access to a group of cottages, a spur of fourteen council houses and to the surrounding arable land and allotments close by. Track is a made-up road now, the arable land and allotments are covered in houses, and Out Four Square is no more, also being replaced by housing in 1999.

The leading light behind Sunshine Corner was Uncle Harry - not my Uncle Harry exactly, he was everyone's Uncle Harry. He was, in fact, the Reverend Harry Kitching and I believe he was from Lancashire, or perhaps Yorkshire. Anyway, wherever he was from he had an unfamiliar accent but he played a ukulele, just like George Formby, so I reckon he must have come from Lancashire.

Now, my mates and I didn't need to be told to come early. We were there, night after night, waiting for the doors to open at six o'clock. There was a good reason for our enthusiasm because the children who arrived first played in the band, which consisted of an





assortment of six or seven tambourines and a collection of triangles. Those who were first through the door got a tambourine. Those who arrived later only got a triangle, although there were big triangles and smaller triangles. But even a very big triangle was a poor substitute for a tambourine, even one of the small tambourines. I tried to make sure I got a tambourine, preferably a big one.

Now as I mentioned in an earlier article, I went down to the Wesleyan chapel to Sunday school. The only music I ever heard down Wesleyan came from a treadle organ. Even a piano, I suspect, would have been quite unacceptable to the Wesleyan worthies at that time. And as for ukuleles, tambourines and triangles - well, whatever next! I suspect the goings-on Out Four Square were viewed with disdain by a good many village folk, be they church or chapel, who had more conventional views about how to make music to worship the Almighty. But for me, and for my pals, no old treadle organ could even start to compete with tambourines and triangles, or Uncle Harry's ukulele.

Neither were the conventional hymns of Sunday school quite a match for the rousing choruses we learnt and sang so lustily at Sunshine Corner. Even now, I remember them all, word for word. And the tunes too, which in some cases were 'borrowed' from popular songs of the day, a version of the '*why-should-the-Devil-have-all-the-best-tunes*' strategy normally associated with the Salvation Army. In one instance, the words were pinched as well, every word that is except for one. It went something like this:

*Keep in the firing line!
Keep in the firing line!
For the Devil he is busy
And you 're sure to knock him dizzy
If you keep in the firing line!*

I think in the original version of that little song it was Hitler who was intended to be on the receiving end, not the Devil. But whatever the origins, it was a good tambourine song:

*Keep in the firing line!
BASH-BASH! BASH! BASH! BASH!
Keep in the firing line!
BASH-BASH! BASH! BASH! BASH!*

Pity those who got there late and only had a triangle because they never had a chance to be heard! Even Uncle Harry on his ukulele had a job to be heard when we 'tambourinists' set about that one.

Not all the choruses were quite so rousing. Indeed, some were quite mournful, like the one that proclaimed the Saviour's Coming:

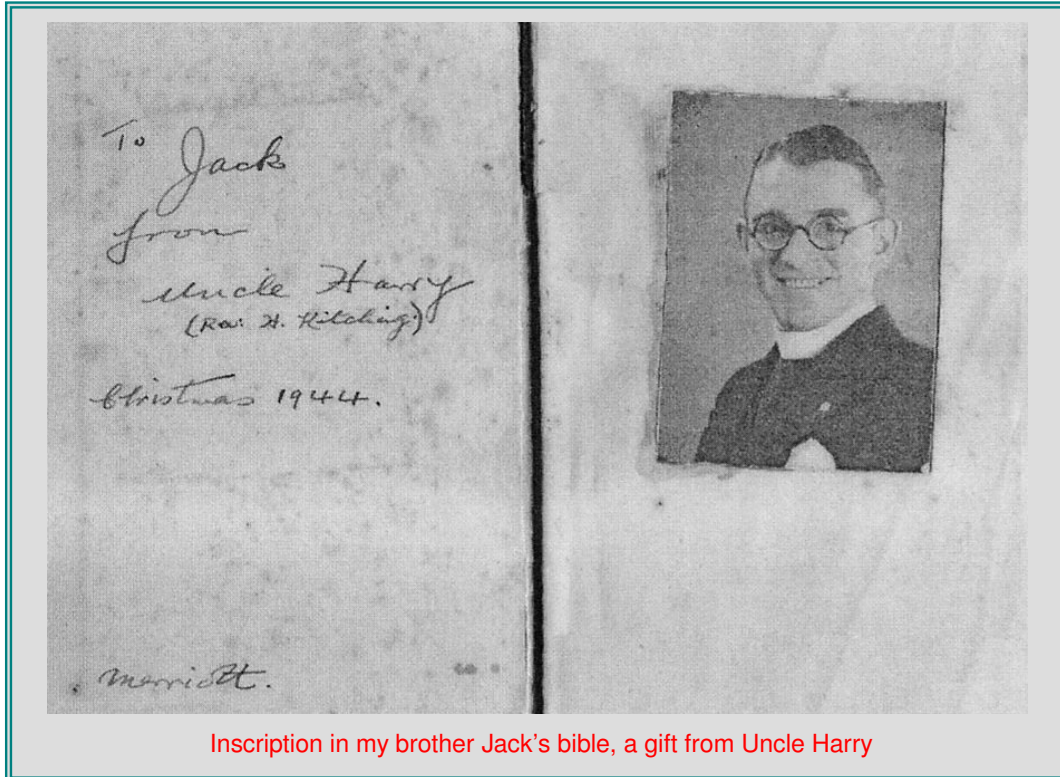
*He's coming soon,
He's coming very soon,
With joy we welcome His returning.
It may be day, it may be night or noon.
We know He's coming soon.*

More a tinkly triangle tune, that one was. And so was the tune of the chorus with which Uncle Harry always ended a meeting. It went like this:

*Come into my heart,
Come into my heart,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.
Come in today,
Take sin away,
Come into my heart Lord Jesus.*

Now Uncle Harry used to insist that we sing this one very softly, no tambourines or triangles, our heads bowed in prayer. And as we sang, he gently asked for those who wanted to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour to hold up their hands. It was all a bit above we kids really, so at first we left it to the grown-ups, restricting our involvement merely to having a squint behind to see who had their hands up so that they would be 'saved'.

But then one night, somebody - I think it was an evacuee called Billy Levy - got so swept along by it all that he put his hand up and got himself saved. From then on the importance of being saved soon became apparent because Billy told all. If you got saved you stayed behind and Uncle Harry said a special prayer for you and then you got a TOFFEE! As the word spread, so the numbers of people being saved each evening steadily increased. I was saved one evening, and I duly got my toffee. Some people got saved night after night! The wonder is that Uncle Harry had enough toffees to go round, being that sweets were rationed at the time.

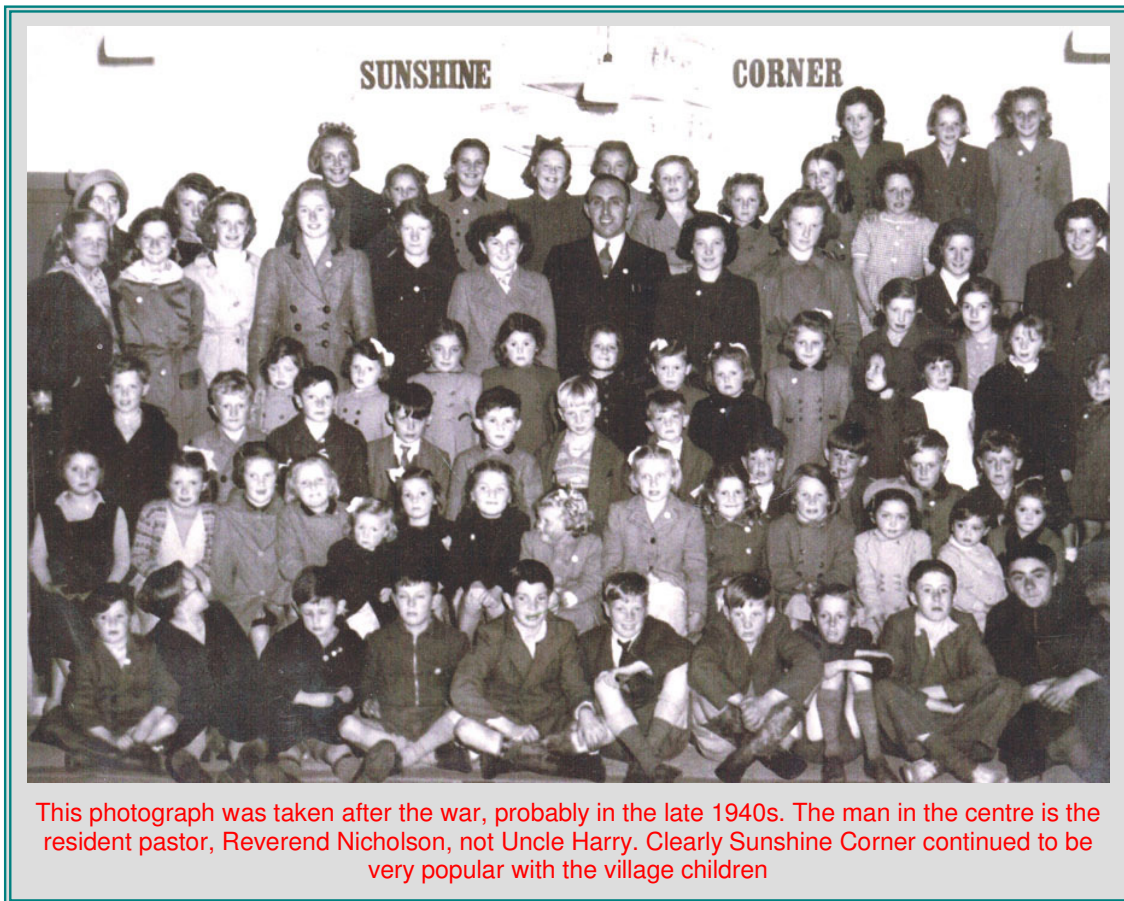


The success of Sunshine Corner though had very little to do with toffees, nor a ukulele, nor tambourines, nor triangles big or small. It was due entirely to the

personality of Uncle Harry, this stranger who came into our midst and gave us so much pleasure. He was a great character as far as we children were concerned.

We loved the singing, the competitions, and the fun of it all. And we loved him. He was a pied piper if ever there was, a pied piper that played a ukulele and wore a dog collar.

When the week came to an end and Uncle Harry moved on to his next venue, the village was, for a few days at least, a much duller place. There was little consolation to be had that he had promised to come back again next year.



This photograph was taken after the war, probably in the late 1940s. The man in the centre is the resident pastor, Reverend Nicholson, not Uncle Harry. Clearly Sunshine Corner continued to be very popular with the village children