

Salad Server Days

David Gibbs

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

After I failed the scholarship, catching the bus from Merriott to Crewkerne every Thursday to attend Cuthbert Sweet's woodwork class at the school in North Street became a feature of my schooling. It was then, like a good many other lads who lived in the Crewkerne area, that I made my pair of salad servers.



Salad servers, made with a little help when I was about 12 years old

They started life as a couple of bits of two by one, each about nine inches long, that I planed and sawed and split and glued until they began to resemble a large spoon and fork with large head-shaped lumps at the end of the handles. At that stage Cuthbert stepped in and, with a few skilful thrusts of chisel and gouge, miraculously carved a Red Indian squaw's head on the spoon and a chief's head on the fork; hook noses, flowing headdresses of feathers and all.

That was followed by a rather boring sandpapering session, and eventually by painting; primer, undercoat and a topcoat of bright yellow gloss. Then Cuthbert came to the rescue again and, with a few deft flicks of a number of very small paintbrushes, he turned the Yellow Indians into Red Indians, added colour to their headdresses, a glow to the squaw's cheeks and a wicked gleam to the chief's eye.

The once-a-week visit to Cuthbert was a welcome interlude in the school routine, for otherwise it would have meant sitting at the same desk all day every day and having contact with just one teacher, Mr Masters. He was the Merriott school headmaster - 'Sir' without fail to his face, 'Freddie' behind his back, and to the villagers in general just simply 'Freddie Masters'.

I think Freddie Masters must have enjoyed the days he was able to send children off to Crewkerne - girls to cookery one day, boys to woodwork another - just as much as we enjoyed going. He must have needed the break. What a difficult job his must have been, trying to motivate thirty to forty mixed-ability children, with ages spanning two years or more, day after day, in the same room, and with virtually no equipment other than a trestle blackboard and a piece of chalk. It was surely asking too much of any teacher. It was as well that maintaining discipline was one of Freddie's strong points. For instance, boys and girls were always addressed by their surnames. I never remember Freddie ever using a Christian name, certainly he never used mine.

On one occasion, all the boys went off playing football during the dinner hour. We normally played with a tennis ball in the playground but somebody had been given a leather football, a rare commodity just after the war, so we had to go and play the game properly, in a field, with jackets as goal posts. There was about twenty of us and we arrived back at school, all hot and sweaty, about half an hour late. That was quite unacceptable as far as Freddie was concerned, so he lined us up and caned the lot of us, one stroke on each hand that really hurt. We continued with the lunchtime football but we made sure we were back on time.

Timekeeping generally, though, was never a major problem. In fact, it was the prospect of playing football in the playground that was responsible for getting a good many of us to school well before we needed to be.

The game started as soon as the owner of a tennis ball arrived. A quick spot of dip, dip, dipping and two sides were formed. Two chalk marks on the wall served as goal posts at one end of the playground, and two angle-iron uprights that supported a wire-netting screen designed to stop balls going over the wall into the road served the purpose at the other. The halfway mark was dead in line with the gate that led from the playground into the school gardens, or 'plots', as we called them.

As others boys arrived, they were allocated to one team or the other in strict rotation. Teams that consisted of just two or three players at the start of the game gradually grew and grew so that eventually there were twenty or more on each side. Because the structure of the teams depended on timekeeping rather than football ability, the score often increased in a somewhat haphazard manner. By the time Freddie blew his whistle at nine o'clock the Ups might be beating the Downs to the tune of 24-3 which was fine if you were in the Ups team but a bit depressing if you were in the Downs, especially if you were the goalkeeper.

The school day proper always began with an hour of silent Bible reading, nothing more than an hour of keeping quiet really. Invariably we were charged with learning a passage off by heart, endless verses I can still remember: Psalms 23 and 24 of course, Matthew 5, Exodus 20 and many more beside. And I know where in the Good Book to find a few naughty words, words smutty enough to set a couple of bored twelve-year-olds giggling when they happened to come across them. Actually, you couldn't help but come across them for the pages that contained them were extremely well thumbed.

The second half of the morning was devoted to 'sums' - long division, fractions, measuring various objects, that sort of thing - and all done in standard Somerset

County Council Education Committee green exercise books that had a list of *Safety First Do's and Don'ts* printed on the back, like

*Don't trundle a hoop across the road
Don't hang on to or climb on to any moving cart or van*

At the end of the morning, before we could leave the classroom and go off to have our school dinner, we had to stand at our desks and sing grace.

*We thank the Lord for this our food,
But more because of Jesus' blood.
Let manna to our souls be given,
The bread of life sent down from Heaven.
Amen.*

Sometimes, when we mumbled or sang too quickly, Freddie would stop us in full flood and make us start all over again.

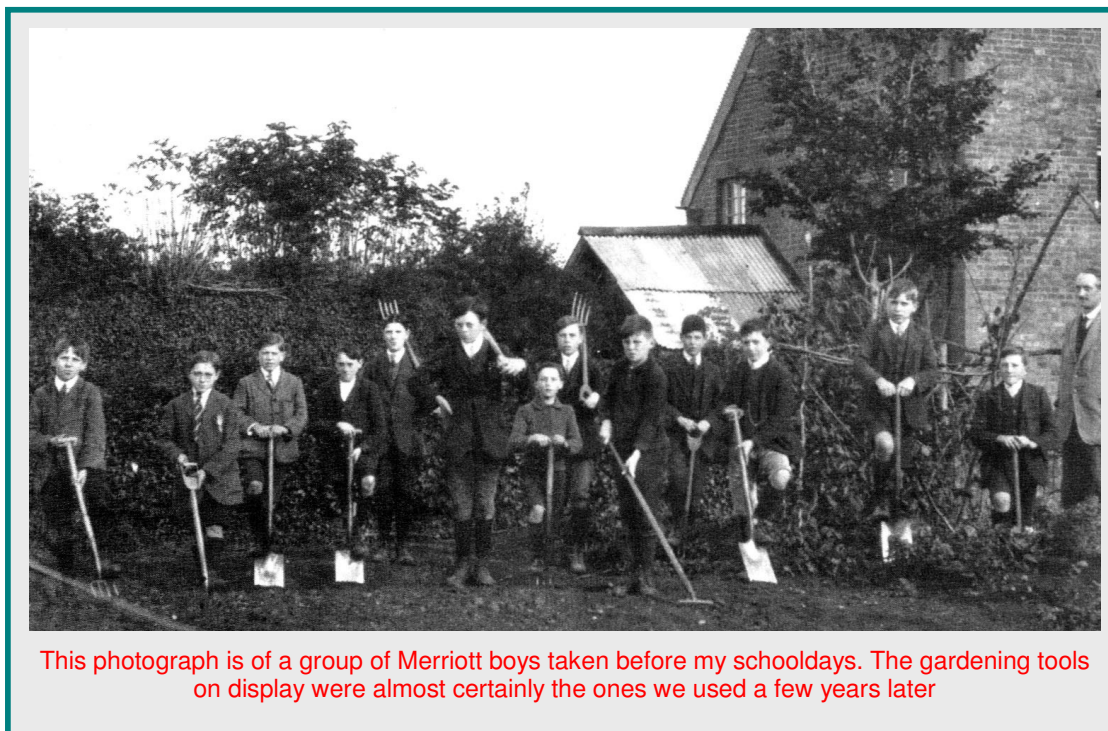
School dinners had not long been available. The food was delivered by van from a central kitchen in Stoke-under-Ham, some five or six miles away. Mrs Follet and Mrs Sweet were the very first dinner ladies, working from a kitchen that was nothing more than a couple of large sinks and a cupboard fitted along one wall of an unused classroom. Initially we ate in the classroom where we had our lessons. The desks were hastily rearranged to form one long dining table and this was then covered in smelly oilcloth; later there were proper dining tables with forms to sit on. The dinners cost 2/1 a week (5p each), or only 1/8 (4p each) if you had a sibling. They were very good dinners too, in spite of our childish ridicule that declared the chocolate semolina to be mud and the tapioca pudding frogs' spawn.

After dinner, the learning was more concerned with English - compositions, spelling, and reading aloud. But occasionally there were deviations from the norm, like basic science lessons for instance.

For one such science lesson Freddie heated a dented table-tennis ball over a candle flame until the dent popped out, and then explained that it was all to do with the molecules becoming agitated as they got warmer and bashing themselves against the inside surface of the ball. On another occasion, Freddie took his Thermos flask to bits and explained where the vacuum was and how heat, or cold, couldn't travel across the void. I remember doing a rather elaborate cross-sectional drawing of the flask with all the features labelled. Those couple of examples may not say much for the level of science teaching then available to children who would soon be leaving school, but they say quite a bit about the resourcefulness of the teacher who had no other equipment for such purposes.

But the science lessons were no match for the gardening lessons. All the older boys had a small plot of land just beyond the playground. I suppose it originated in the idea being a country lad ought to know how to grow a vegetable or two. It was unnecessary, really. There was so much growing going on around Merriott in those days that not to know how to sow a row of seeds, earth up a row of 'tiddies', or cross a cabbage stump with a

sharp knife to produce more leaf growth, would have meant going around with your eyes shut. But Freddie was a keen gardener and there were things to learn.



One of his tips was to sow the larger seeds like beetroot or parsnip in clumps of two or three rather than in a long drill as it saved seed and made thinning easy. (I still sow mine that way.) And it was Freddie who told me that sprinkling a little bit of 'ICI' either side of my onion rows would encourage growth. So I caught the Safeway bus to Crewkerne and bought a brown paper bag full of ICI for four pence in the Dorset Farmers shop. I think the ICI was nitrate of soda, but whatever it was Freddie instructed me to leave one row untreated so that I could see the effect it had.

One day Ernie Elswood came to the school to see Freddie. Ernie was the publican of the Swann Inn and he was also one of the village undertakers. A baby girl had died and Ernie was looking for four lads to be bearers at her funeral. I was chosen as one of the four.

It was with a mixture of pride and apprehension that I viewed the prospect of being a bearer. Two things bothered me. Firstly, the other three boys all wore long trousers and I didn't have any. Secondly, they were all taller than I was, so how could the coffin rest on my shoulder?

The first problem was insurmountable. I knew my mother didn't have the money to buy me long trousers, so I soon stopped worrying about it. And as it turned out, I needn't have worried about the difference in height either because we didn't carry the coffin in the normal way; it was much too small for that. Instead, we carried it slung between us, supported by loops of white webbing. We carried the coffin into the church and gently placed it on a trestle. Then, after the service, we carried it outside again, up into the churchyard to the graveside when the webbing was replaced by longer lengths, so

that we could lower the coffin into the grave. It was a very sad occasion, one I have never forgotten. To this day, I still visit the grave from time to time.

A few months later, there was another interruption to my school routine. I have no idea how it all came about but it resulted in my mother taking me off to Yeovil for the day, to take the entrance examination for the Technical School in Kingston.

I sat one examination paper in the morning and another in the afternoon. In between times, I had an interview with the headmaster, Mr Pryor. When it was all over, my mother took me to The Rendezvous Cafe just opposite the school and I was allowed to choose what I wanted from the menu - within reason, of course. I settled for prunes and custard. It was probably just as well that I didn't have them earlier.

A few weeks later, my parents got the result of the examination. I'd passed. This meant I would now stay on at school until I was fifteen instead of leaving at fourteen. But I can't say I was over enamoured with having to travel the nine or ten miles to Yeovil every day.

As my final term at the village school moved to its end, I pulled the last of my beetroot and took them home. During the very last week of term I harvested my carefully nurtured onion crop; a little early perhaps, but I didn't like the idea of leaving them for someone else to have. I was all for digging up my parsnips too, but Freddie said I had to leave them. *'You can't dig parsnips until they've had a frost on them,'* he said. That was the last thing he ever taught me.

Leaving the village school also meant the end of Cuthbert Sweet's woodwork lessons and that was a great pity for even at the Technical School there was never a teacher who could match Cuthbert's practical skills, let alone his ability to pass them on to others. A lifetime further on and I still treasure my salad servers.