

## My time at St Gregory's Church of England Primary School, Marnhull, Dorsetshire: 1947 – 1953

I look back at my time at St Gregory's, Marn'1l, as being a great privilege to be taught in a village school in a safe and caring community.

I started in 1947 just after the Second World War, but unable to remember my first day. Few parents owned cars and, like all pupils, I walked to school from my home in Crown Road in all weathers – with the exception of children from Moorside and Todber who were transported in Mr Vic Little's taxi.

Mr Leonard S. Howell was Headmaster throughout my years at the school, for whom I held in great respect.

### **My First Teacher**

My first teacher was Miss Dibsdale who taught the infants in the classroom nearest the road. She lived on Carraway Lane and I recall she was quite strict!

It was a bright classroom with big windows with a separate front entrance door, from that of the main school entrance with a porch which was located approximately half way along the south wall facing the road.

Teaching aids included small round counters for arithmetic and crayons and pencils for drawing. One particular memory was the smell of coffee in the mornings wafting in from Mr Howell's adjoining classroom!

### **Tops**

At morning playtime all were provided with milk delivered in one third pint glass bottles to the front porch by Mr Raindle of Hayters Farm, Moorside – in later years I recall doing duty as milk monitor. Before the days of aluminium caps, the bottles were sealed with a cardboard disc inserted into the neck of the bottle – drinking straws were provided for inserting into a small hole in the centre of the disc.

The cardboard 'tops' were collected to provide many hours of competitive playtime fun! Two players or more would stand at a set distance, flick a top from between the first and second finger to land at the base of the playground wall. The top falling closest to the wall would be deemed the winner, with the winning player claiming their opponent's top(s). At the end of playtime a skilful player could be seen with short trouser pockets bulging with milk bottle tops!

### **Nature Walks**

On sunny days in the spring and summer, classes would be led on nature walks around the village – a great way to study nature, get fresh air and exercise. A walk along Chippel Lane (known to us as ‘Chippets’) remains a firm memory where the celandines still grow today.

### **School Dinners**

School dinners were provided for all in the old chapel in New Street (now Providence Place, a private residence). There was no pavement and we walked in twos up New Street to the dinner hall to be fed with hot meals, cooked onsite by ladies from the village, supervised by Mrs Dickens. The meals, consisting of a main course and pudding, were good and wholesome. The teachers sat at a separate table at the front on the right-hand side. We sat in groups on wooden benches (as illustrated in the Marn’l Book – First edition).

### **Classrooms and Teachers**

There were three classrooms for the respective age groups. The second, situated at the easterly end of the building with desks facing the front road, hold more memories. During my time in Class 2, I recall having three teachers: Miss Hatcher, Mr Mitchell and Mr Field.

I remember when Miss Hatcher produced and directed a play about Queen Elizabeth I, which was performed in front of an audience at Nash Court.

Mr Mitchell was quite strict and kept an orderly class. I recall once being “disruptive”, reprimanded and punished by writing a hundred lines – “Manners maketh man!”

Mr Field lived in the school house and was of a quieter disposition. One of his class projects I remember clearly; the creation of a small (miniature) in an area between the infants’ classroom and the road. It was not as easy as it seemed as we all had to do a scale plan prior to starting the construction. On reflection, this was good for our concentration and development. With our plans completed it was time to start clearing the area of stones and weeds. Finally, divided into groups we were allocated areas to mark out and commence planting the borders.

The second classroom was separated from Mr Howell’s classroom by a folding partition. On entering Mr Howell’s room the main entrance was situated on the immediate left and the door opposite led to the cloakrooms and rear playground.

My final years with Mr Howell hold many memories. He was strict, interesting, but fair and always held with much respect. We sat in twos at desks facing the Headmaster’s desk at the west end of the

room. His desk held many books and papers, but most importantly the school attendance register and, yes, the cane! The latter used on many occasions!

### **Mr Howell**

Each day commenced with a hymn and a prayer. Mr Howell would play the piano as loud as possible (it always seemed!) in a standing position. I shall always remember singing the hymn 'Father hear the prayer we offer', most days.

The register would then be read and filled in with red ink. We were provided with pens with detachable nibs and pencils. Desks contained ink wells and we all took turns at being ink monitor.

Mr Howell was a smoker and on occasions he would send pupils, often Tony Clarke, up to the village shop for a "packet of fags!" I think the brand was Craven A.

Regular class reading, learning the times tables and spelling tests were a very important part of our learning. We had spelling books to learn ten new words each week. I recall having great difficulty in spelling 'chrysanthemum' and Mr Howell taught me to split the word into parts i.e. chry – san – the – mum (this I found a great help!)

Mr Howell had a radio placed on a table to his left and twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays, I think) the class would join in the BBC schools broadcasts 'Singing Together'. Songs recalled: Grand Old Duke of York, The British Grenadiers and London's Burning.

Mr Howell was keen on cricket and it would appear that England Test Match broadcasts always coincided with silent reading for the class! Mr Howell would listen in and do some 'important' paperwork at the same time! I am sure most boys liked those lessons and enjoyed John Arlott's commentaries, remembering Captain Len Hutton, Colin Cowdrey, Alec Bedser, Cyril Washbrook, Tom Graveney, bowlers Tony Lock, Jim Laker and Fred Trueman, Dennis Compton, Peter May, Brian Statham – the cricket legends.

### **Attendance Checks**

Periodically, Mr Hayes the Dorset School inspector would visit for a meeting with Mr Howell and to inspect the attendance register. On few occasions parents of 'poor attendances' were summoned for an explanation with Mr Hayes. Such meetings were held outside the classroom in the porch as Mr Howell did not have a private office.

### **The School Nurse**

We had visits from a nurse to check our hair for nits. We were all called up in turn to the back of the classroom to be prodded around

the head with wooden spatulas. I am fairly certain that the same ones were used throughout the exercise!

### **The Mobile Dentist**

A fateful day arrived when a caravan appeared in the playground in the form of the Dorset Health mobile dentist. It was a very painful ordeal, not only with the drilling, but also with the extractions. Parents were present for extractions with the application of 'gas'. Not fully understanding the process, mine was very frightening – all life's subsequent extractions have been by injections, not gas!

### **School Heating**

There was no central heating in the school and the only heat came from a coke-fired, cast iron stove located next to the wall on the left of the classroom, a short distance from the main entrance. During very cold weather groups would take it in turns to stand by the stove protected by a guard rail, but the top of the stove was in easy reach – no health and safety in those days! We didn't have school uniform but it was customary for boys to wear short trousers in those days!

The coke was stored in a shed at the back of the School House accessed through a door at the front of the classroom. Boys helped to refill the coke bins and top-up the stove. Incidentally, the coke was put into the stove through a hinged lid at the top and extreme care was required to avoid burnt fingers!

The stove was lit using 'faggot wood' – a form of kindling/hedge cuttings. These were supplied in bundles by Mr Duffett from Hinton St Mary. On one delivery Mr Howell sent me and Alfie Frampton to help Mr Duffett unload and stack the faggots in the shed at the back. This provided us with exercise and storage skills, an essential part of the curriculum of the day!

### **The Coronation**

The day of the Coronation of HM Queen Elizabeth II will always be remembered. Bearing in mind very few households in Marnhull (if any) had a television, St Gregory's hired a television from Andrew Bros (New Street shop) for pupils to not only watch a television, but to view the Coronation broadcast! This was a special day.

In addition to this special treat, we were provided with a number of daily newspapers to read in class. I recall a number of editions were printed in gold ink.

There was a special occasion when the Queen visited The National Stud at Sandley, arriving by train at Gillingham Station where she was presented with a copy of the newly published Marn'll Book.

A school trip was arranged for us to see the Queen as she travelled by car through the streets of Gillingham on her way to Sandley. We all travelled by the local duo-brown coloured Bere Regis Bedford coaches. Arriving at Gillingham we took up our viewing positions at the Methodist Church. It was a fleeting glimpse of Her Majesty I recall, but a special occasion in our young lives.

### **Empire Day**

I remember on one occasion we all assembled in the front playground facing St Gregory's Church, saluting the Union Jack to celebrate British Empire Day!

### **May Day Celebration**

It is unsure whether maypole dancing actually took place on May Day, but at that time of the year a pole was placed in the front playground where we all took turns at dancing round the maypole grasping different coloured ribbons.

We concentrated hard during the practice sessions, but the actual performances didn't always go to plan when some pupils took the wrong direction and the ribbons became entangled! Dancing did not come naturally for us boys and we seemed to find the technique more difficult!

### **Physical Training**

Physical training involving many team games took a regular place in our school activities. Different coloured braids (red, blue, green and yellow and made of hessian) were handed out to the teams. There was no school hall or gymnasium, but there must have been some indoor PT during the winter.

Football was a regular playtime game which took place in the back playground, on the 'pitch' between the inner wall and the low stone perimeter wall. Cricket also was enjoyed during the summer and we couldn't wait for playtime to continue our innings! It is uncertain whether wickets were painted or chalked on the inner wall. We only had one well worn bat with a split and less than complete handle!

One football match is remembered when we travelled for an away match to Woodville Primary School, Stour Provost. Their team was quite physical I think we lost!

There were no public swimming baths for miles or a school swimming pool. The only chance to attempt swimming was on the annual outings by bus to Weymouth!

However, it came as a total surprise when we were told at short notice that swimming had been organised to take place in the River Stour at Kings Mill. I must have forgotten the day and I was sent 'hot foot'

down to my home in Crown Road to fetch my swimming trunks and towel! The class then walked down to Kings Mill to venture in for a dip in the mill pool. This was a first time great adventure and I recall treading on the muddy river bottom and having to clean the mud from my toes afterwards!

### **The Road to Wembley**

On the subject of football, Mr Howell organised a coach trip to see a Schoolboys International match between England and Scotland at the old Wembley Stadium.

This was a long journey up the A30 (no motorway, dual carriageways or many by-passes in the 1950s). Clothing for the day was short trousers, pullovers and raincoats (before the days of anoraks!) We were instructed to bring refreshments so my mother gave me egg sandwiches. Long before the days of plastic lunchboxes with icepacks, I put my sandwiches, packed in a paper bag, into my raincoat pocket.

However, we stopped at a tearoom on the way at Hartley Wintley. Liquid refreshment in the form of lemonade or Vimto was much appreciated. It was a great experience to see the famous twin towers come into view and then to watch a live football match in a colossal stadium. This must have been the furthest we had been away from home at the time.

### **The Coffee Aroma**

During morning playtime, the coffee aroma wafted throughout the school. Mr Howell would always have a tin of Lyons Ground coffee (green tin) nearby. With no recollection of the presence of an electric kettle, hot water must have been from a kettle on the top of the stove.

The school was also a point for the distribution of tinned milk powder and bottled concentrated orange juice supplied by the Ministry of Food (a system introduced during the War years, presumably). Mindful that food rationing continued for a number of years after the war. Helping with the deliveries of the tins and packages is remembered as well as the mothers calling to collect their supplies.

### **Cigarette Cards**

Smoking cigarettes was an acceptable social pleasure enjoyed by many adults in those days. This provided a great interesting hobby for the lads in collecting cigarette cards. As a form of promotional gifts, most popular brands enclosed picture cards in the cigarette packets, featuring a number of collectable series and subjects such as footballers, cricketers, Kings and Queens etc. Playtime became a regular scene for the activity of swapping cards with the aim of achieving full sets of cards – the beginnings of learning business skills!

### **Christmas Party**

A party took place after school hours. We had to bring plates and cups for the tea – these came in the form of enamel, the popular kitchenware of the day (no disposables or plastic at that time). Our mothers were asked to identify the mugs with coloured wool tied around the handle. Tea and games took place in the main classroom with musical chairs being a popular game at the time. A large Christmas tree was placed next to the wall at the back of the classroom, not far from the front door.

The climax of the evening was, of course, the arrival of Father Christmas. The room was darkened, probably lit by one bulb, when there was a loud knock on the front door. A very tall Father Christmas entered carrying a sack, and one by one we were called to receive a present. I recall receiving a quality leather-backed notebook (it was sometime later when we found out that the presents were donated by the Beausire sisters who lived at Nash Court). It was a special memorable occasion.

### **A Trip to London Airport and Windsor**

I have more memories of another bus journey up the old A30, the main road to London from the West Country.

Passing by Blackbush Airfield is remembered and being told that it was not much further to our destination. Arriving at London Airport (now known as Heathrow) I remember receiving a blue covered guidebook and being led up to the open rooftop viewing gallery. There was only one terminal in those days and far fewer planes. It was the early days of passenger jet airliners with the De Havilland Comet being one of the earliest in the UK. I recall seeing the Elizabethan turbo-prop aircraft which had three tail fins.

From the airport we were taken to the nearby River Thames for a boat trip upstream to get a view of Windsor Castle. This was a new and exciting experience and, although further details elude me, I am sure we had refreshments on the boat!

### **School Maintenance**

The school redecorations and maintenance carried out one spring/summer term brings back happy memories of adventurous playtimes.

We had to vacate the school and take up temporary occupancy (desks, chairs and all) at the Old Rectory opposite St Gregory's Church. My class was placed in a big lounge and lessons continued as normal.

Our playground was the garden which consisted of mostly lawn. Many shrubs, bushes and trees bordered the lawn – an ideal territory for games. During those dry sunny days we spent hours gathering grass

and branches to make dens. Running around the lawn often led to the mound with a sundial. Golden days!

### **Carey Camp**

Carey Camp, Nr Wareham, Dorset was the destination for a most memorable holiday. This educational site, owned by Dorset County Council, was located on the heathland and still functions today. School groups from various parts of the south/southwest camped out in ideal natural surroundings.

In those days very few families (if any) went away on holiday. 'Holidays' were day trips usually to the seaside (Weymouth or Bournemouth). To travel away from home for a week was a real treat and an adventure.

Parents were issued with a set list of personal items to take and, each clutching a small suitcase, we clambered into a furniture van with a half tail-board belonging to Mr Johnston of Walton Elm House. We set off for Wareham, but could only see the sky, trees and tall buildings from the restricted view from the rear of the van! The journey took ages!

We finally arrived at Carey Camp and were greeted by Mr Taylor, the man in charge. A period of instruction and camp rules followed with the issue of blankets, pillows and ground sheets. The importance of making beds and the folding of the same became all too clear in the days that followed. We were then placed six per tent. It was a new experience to be with children from other schools and I do recall there was a school from as far away as Bristol.

After breakfast there was a daily inspection of all tents by Mr Taylor. We all had to individually place our neatly folded bedding upon our groundsheets and stand in a straight line in front of our tents. The team with the best presentation was awarded a flag to be displayed for the day – to this very day I still pride myself in the skill of folding blankets! I am sure we also had our enamelled plates and mugs displayed for inspection. In retrospect this new experience and discipline was good for team and character building.

Meals were taken in an open-sided marquee and organised on a 'school canteen system'. Each tent team was required to take it in turns to assist with the preparation of the main meal. Peeling potatoes for the entire camp, albeit with the use of a hand operated peeling machine, will never be forgotten. Batches of washed potatoes were placed in an abrasive-surfaced drum and, with a closed lid, the device was turned by a handle. After sufficient revolutions the potatoes were, surprisingly, peeled.

Toilet and washroom facilities were very basic, I seem to recall.



Outings and activities were arranged every day. We walked into Wareham taking the road and narrow footpaths through the heath lined with heather and prickly gorse. A warning was given to stick to the footpath to avoid the danger of the likely presence of adders! This we obeyed! Visiting the Norman church on the hill entering the town is remembered. On such a day going to Wareham, a new adventure had been arranged much to our excitement – a boat trip down the river into Poole Harbour. The tall reeds and deep, still water seemed vast compared with the Stour at Marn'ill!

We enjoyed outings to various places of interest on the local, red and white South Dorset Coaches. One outing took us to the brick factory at Sandford, situated on the Poole road just outside Wareham. Again, this was a new experience seeing the whole process of house brickmaking.

Another outing took us to Durdle Door, and although very little is remembered of the day, there was a special moment. During the task to find wildflowers on the steep grassy slopes, I discovered a bright blue/pink flower I had not seen before. I brought this to the attention of a very excited Mr Mitchell. He told me it was a Viper's Bugloss and this was his first sighting of the species. He expressed his thanks and gave me a sixpenny piece (commonly known as a tanner)!

In the evenings back at the camp, there would be time for games – playing in the trees with the children from the other schools and sitting and singing altogether with Mr Taylor, drinking hot cocoa before going to bed. We generally slept well, but one night there was an unforgettable thunderstorm! The lightening and thunder seemed to last for hours with pouring rain. I recall teachers coming to check if we were alright and, fortunately, we didn't get flooded.

Our time at Carey Camp was good fun and a great adventure.

Keith Plowman

