

Reminiscences of Ewelme in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ewelme News, Apr-May 2006, June-July 2006,
Aug-Sept 2006, Oct-Nov 2006.

Boyhood memories. of Derek Robinson of Ewelme, in the 1950s and 1960s

Derek Robinson, who now lives in Cambridgeshire, has kindly submitted his memories of growing up in Ewelme in the '50s and '60s. To older villagers his story will revive memories of half a century ago. For some it provides a glimpse of past residents who once called their own houses 'home'. For the rest, we have a glimpse into a slower and less sophisticated period of time, when the pace of life for many was largely controlled by the speed that could be achieved from a bicycle.

"My father and mother, Christopher and Elsie, moved to Ewelme around 1946, taking up residence in what is now named 'Days Cottage' located next to the Greyhound Inn. At that time this house was rather small because it was divided into two dwellings. Rent was paid to the landlord Mr Bill Edwards, of Fords Farm, at the rate of 10 Shillings (50 Pence) per week. My brother Charles was born in late 1946 and I was born in 1948. My father had a farming background during the War, and for several years after the War the Oxfordshire County Council employed him in farming. The rare luxury of a Ford Popular Estate van was provided for the necessary mobility. Part of his role involved utilisation of ex-German prisoners of War to assist local farmers. This continued for several years after the War until they were eventually repatriated to Germany. During this time they made friends with some of the local community, including my parents. My brother Charles remembers in particular Carl and Werner, (I was too young to remember them before they returned to Germany), but I still have one of the many wooden toys which they made for us using a fretsaw.



When we lived in [Days Cottage] the large open coal/log fire in the kitchen normally provided heating and a regular source of hot water from large, blackened kettles. We could roast nuts and bake potatoes and I remember watching the ever-changing patterns and shapes as the fire burned. Bath night was once a week and it was always an argument as to who would be first into the hot water. Lots of hot water was prepared and the tin bath, which would normally hang against the wall from the nail outside, was brought into the kitchen and positioned sideways by the fire for warmth. It was not unusual, if wood was being burnt, for it to spit the occasional hot ember into the bath, hitting the occupant! We had an outside bucket toilet halfway down the garden, which had a positive benefit to the rhubarb plot. At night we used the infamous chamber pot.

Washing facilities were in another small building immediately outside the back door, as also was the larder. When in need of a haircut our mother would walk us 2 miles to Benson village, where Stan Blissett had his shop next door to what is now the Somerfields supermarket. Alternatively, she would call in Charles Smith from Green Lane, he would use manual clippers and was always joking. The weekly washing was traditionally done on a Monday or Tuesday and it was frowned upon to deviate. To perform this task my mother used a large electric water boiler, scrubbing board, mangle and washing line, and of course a dry windy day.

In the other part [of Days Cottage] lived our neighbour, Tom Mooring, who was an old soldier. He took a liking to me and would show me his Cavalry uniform and medals. I remember him introducing me to my first cup of Oxo. When Tom departed our next neighbours were Mr Crocket who was a National Serviceman at RAF Benson and his wife. When they left Mr and Mrs Fry became our neighbours. Throughout this period our other neighbour [in 'The Cottage' now occupied by Mrs Barbara Rosier] was the very elderly Mrs Hedges and her son Horace who worked on Lower Farm. My mother was also a home help for Mrs Hedges. As youngsters we all get up to some form of mischief or fun and I recall the gas masks and Mrs Hedges incident. In the bottom of my mother's Wardrobe there were two Second World War gas masks. One was of these was full face with long convoluted breathing hose which terminated into a waist level filter box – it looked absolutely ghastly. The other was the full-face mask with filter. Unfortunately, my brother and his friend Colin Hutchins, then aged no more than 7, decided that 80-year-old Mrs Hedges might be amused to see them wearing these masks, so after putting them on, they knocked on her front door. When Mrs Hedges eventually answered, rather than seeing the amusing side, she was frightened. My mother had to rush round to calm her down with a small glass of brandy. The gas masks were soon disposed of.



Another incident involved Mrs Winifred King's milk float. Mrs King, who lived at 1 Forge Cottages, delivered the Winfield Dairy milk to the school end of the village. The means of transport for delivery was a three-wheeled battery powered milk float, which was walked rather than driven. Walking whilst holding the steering handle, she could control the direction and speed of the single front wheel. Speed was dependent on how hard she squeezed the control lever. To us youngsters this was fascinating, we all wanted to have a go. Mrs King was also a highly sociable lady and would have long conversations on her rounds and sometimes a cup of tea in customer's houses. Having spotted the ideal opportunity when Mrs King was in Mrs Hedges' cottage, Colin and my 7 yr old brother Charles, had a quick squeeze on the handle moving the float forward a few feet. They then dared me to have a go (aged 5). Unfortunately, I squeezed too hard and the float veered to the left and up against the wall of the house causing the float to lean to the right. Some milk bottles fell and smashed as they hit the road. Mrs King rushed out - but we

had gone. She suspected who had done it - though I don't think I was top of the list. Thankfully apart from the spilt milk and glass there was no damage and Mrs King continued with her round.

Air Raid shelters were located between our cottage and the Greyhound Inn, and my father put these, along with other purpose-built huts, to good use for his considerable stock of chickens. Halfway down the garden he also kept some pigs. Not surprisingly rats were a problem and were dealt with by traps or by Mr Cleverley, from the Greyhound Inn, with his rifle. My father would always sell lots of chickens for Christmas and would employ people to pluck them in readiness. I remember Tom Heather (the Church Organist) who lived in the Inglenook Cottage, [now The Coach House] at the other side of the Greyhound, arriving every Christmas Eve to collect his chicken, he would sit and chat and enjoy mince pies and a glass of wine.

As the farming situation gradually changed in the years after the War my father's work with Oxfordshire Council came to an end, requiring the return of the 'company' van. He subsequently took employment with the Pressed Steel Car body manufacturing company at Cowley, Oxford. By working nightshifts, he was able to maintain the chicken stocks but the pigs were discontinued. When 'cycling back from work early in the mornings he would often pick mushrooms from fields for our breakfast.

Like most boys we loved to climb trees, and at the top of Days Lane, on the bend, is an old oak tree we called the Round Table. Once able to climb this very broad tree, several of us could sit together in a circle as if around a table. As today, we could overlook much of that end of the village, though subsequently Dutch Elm Disease took away many of the elm trees which lined the Lane, including those which previously blocked the view to the School and Church. Another popular pastime was to build small trucks or "carts". These were assembled using the front and rear wheels/axles from the large prams of the early 1950's era, attached to a wooden base plank steered by a pivoting front cross plank with wheels. Wooden sides were attached to the base plank, which formed the seat. Improvisation was very much the order of the day. Most of these trucks were bodged and it wasn't unusual for wheels to fall off and wood splinters were a common problem.



In the 1950's televisions were expensive and very few people owned one but it was to my good luck that Mrs Alice Harwood, who lived further down the High Street, had a set. One day she passed me sitting on the wall outside the Greyhound and invited me to go and watch her television. This became a regular arrangement, and I would watch Children's Hour showing such programmes as "The Lone Ranger", "Whirly Birds", "Rin-Tin-Tin" and "The Cisco Kid". Although televisions were rare, almost everyone had a radio. I remember Mrs Barkuss who lived in the cottages opposite Mr Heather [now East /West Cottages]. Her house had not been wired up with electrics and she still used oil lights. She had a very old wireless, and to power this she used accumulators. In order to recharge these accumulators, she would carry them to Benson Village where Mr Vaughn, who ran the garage in Benson Village, would exchange them with those from the previous week.

And then there were the lions in the Reading Room! An early memory is of a very small Circus coming to the village with live lions. Part of the Reading Room was divided by a cage-like barrier with the small audience packed into the remaining area. The lions entered from cages positioned adjacent to what was the Rifle Range and the ringmaster was dressed like a cowboy.

Horace Hedges, our neighbour, worked for the Orpwood's at Lower Farm [the area with agricultural buildings, now converted, off Chaucer Court] and he introduced me as a youngster, to farming - including milking cows. There were only three cows remaining on the farm during what I now believe was the period of transfer from Orpwood's to the Chamberlains. Anyway, I was shown that when the gate opened at milking time the cows knew the way to the milking sheds [the building with the corrugated tin roof that abuts the road to the left of Fields End's gate], and when arriving there would also position themselves at the exact milking point within the shed. I was then shown how to milk by hand into a bucket and how the farm cats would appreciate a carefully aimed squirt in their direction. Gradually, getting to grips with this I accidentally pulled a wart on the teat of the cow I was milking. With this the cow kicked hard and I was propelled from the milking stool. This did not discourage me. This milk would then be taken to Mr Orpwood's immediately adjacent farmhouse [now Fields End]. The lady there showed me how to make butter.

On one occasion after School, I arrived at the farm wanting to help with the milking. However, Horace had not arrived, and the cows were waiting to be let out. [They grazed in the fields behind the houses in the High Street, to the left of the bridleway alongside The Hyde]. Keen to please, I opened the gate and let the cows make their well-rehearsed journey to the milking stables less than ¼ mile away. I followed slowly on my 'cycle but unfortunately, when within yards of the stables, they detoured into the village and scattered either up the hill or down to beyond the Post Office. When Horace did arrive, we rounded the animals up on our bikes. Thankfully, the roads were quiet in those times and no damage was done.

My farming interest continued for many years. I enjoyed helping during harvesting, potato picking and sugar beating, and when I grew older, I would go out on the tractor with Horace, who taught me how to plough. I also learnt how to drive a tractor with a trailer - including reversing into a barn. (The tractor concerned was a Fordson Major which used petrol and paraffin – this was designated TPO. In reality this meant that to start the engine, which incidentally was by means of a starting handle, you opened the petrol tap to the carburettor. Once the engine started and became warm you would close the petrol tap whilst opening the paraffin tap. I can only assume that this was caused by fuel availability problems before or during the war).



After a day's ploughing the tractors were refuelled in an area approximately opposite the old wooden barn building which is now converted into two dwellings – North and South Barn, off Chaucer Court. I recall that the fuel tanks were underground, and we would hand-pump the fuel. From there, the tractors would be parked in the cart sheds directly opposite the house built for Miss Doris Chamberlain [The Hyde]. It was important to remember to remove the tall and very hot exhaust, as this would otherwise impact on the roof edge of the shed. I received a massive blister doing this when there was a hole in my glove. [Photo of young Derek on the tractor attached, driving out of the cart shed]. On two occasions I remember going with Mr Fred Chamberlain

and his farm workers on their annual excursion to the Smithfield Agriculture Show at Earls Court London. After one of these I produced a painting showing exhibits of the show - this was displayed in the School.

I attended Ewelme School when Mr Coles was headmaster, and Miss Coombes was my first teacher, I remember her as being young and very attractive. Nature Walks were part of our education and after a lengthy period up and around Ewelme Common we would draw, paint and describe what we had seen. As a junior I was member of the percussion band and what a racket we used to make – it must have been difficult to keep a straight face as a listener. School milk was delivered by Mrs King, and in winter it would become frozen. We would bring it inside and place by the coke stoves to thaw out before mid-morning milk break. The coke stoves were regularly topped up by the teacher, and were guarded as they would glow red. As today, School Church service was held every Friday morning. The routine daily assembly was triggered to the sound of the 'Ting Tang Bell' and took place on first floor of the main building. Listening to School Radio broadcasts was also part of our education. On some evenings Mr Coles would set up his projector to show films, which were watched by village folk before television was a feature of every home. In the 1950's and 60's the ASTRA cinema at RAF Benson was used by village folk. When I was still quite young and small, James Busby used to take me there riding cross bar on his cycle - it was much cheaper than the Wallingford Cinema and more convenient in the evenings.

Maypole dancing was a standing tradition for the School and would often be a feature of the frequent village fetes. Ewelme Fetes were always well supported by village folk – 'Bowling for the Pig' was incredibly popular. This was a cross between ten pin bowling and skittles. The skittles were widely spaced for difficulty - top scores were incredibly rare. As youngsters we would sit on the straw bales which half enclosed around the skittles ready to return the balls and reset the skittles. There would hardly be a gap between participants. I don't know what the winners did with the pig. One fete in Lord Somervell's Garden (The Old Rectory) was opened by the very shapely and attractive actress

known as Sabrina - I would estimate this took place around 1953-54. Other venues for Fetes were, Mr and Mrs Rowse's Gardens [Saffron House] and the Manor.

During the early days at Ewelme Primary School my academic progress was somewhat static. Up until the age of nine I failed to realise the importance of learning and would not be told. However, a long period away from School and my 'farming' activities suddenly followed. On my ninth birthday in 1957 I was taken into hospital with Osteomyelitis in the left hip. I was hospitalised for 6 months. My father would visit by cycling to the Winfield (now called Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital, Oxford). I was 7 months away from School, but the realisation that I was well behind my friends educationally kick-started me. At this point I could hardly read or write. But with full encouragement from the School, I made good progress.

And then in 1958 or 1959 we moved into the 'modern' era, from Days Cottage to a newly built council house at Hampden Way. This provided the much-needed space my family required, and the luxury of flush toilets and a bathroom - though my memories of life in the High Street are good.

When we moved from Days Cottage in the High Street to our Council House at No 16 Hampden Way, Horace Hedges, our neighbour became our lodger. His mother Lily, who died in May 1957, had needed a lot of attention. My mother was "home help" for Mrs Hedges and would often take me next door with her. I remember her constantly shouting instructions and banging her walking stick - she must have been very hard work for Horace and I suspect this may have prevented him having a social life until his later years. I suppose that in many ways Horace started a new life when he moved into our third bedroom. I remember helping clear all the possessions from Horace's High Street home. Virtually everything was disposed of into the "John Passey" lorry waiting outside. I and the Passey children were bringing down all the belongings from the upstairs attics which must have been forgotten for years. In hindsight some of this must have been collectors' material. He told many stories of his School days (mentioning Mr Quixley), the War, and his days in the Home Guard with characters such as Stan Cutler and Fred Harwood. Farming was his life, and he would tell me all about using horses to plough, the coming of steam engines and tractors. I continued to help Horace on the farms, though this declined as my interest towards aviation increased and my education became top of the agenda. Before we got TV, the Langsley family at No 2 Martyns Way would invite Horace up to watch television on some evenings. I would sometimes go along with him on Fridays and remember watching Emergency Ward Ten. We eventually got television, and Horace particularly "The Crazy Gang". However, sometime after this Horace's life was about to drastically change. Nobby and Martha Brae at number 23 had a WRAAF Lodger called Peggy who was leaving the RAF. The two of them took a liking to one another, started courting and married. They rented a small caravan which stood in the grounds of the old Rouse's Honey Factory [now Kings Acre] on the High Street. I remember seeing Horace arrive at Hampden Way with his tractor and trailer and loading all of Peggy's belongings for the move to the caravan. Horace must have been over 40 and Peggy was not particularly young. Horace subsequently fathered his first child. Then they moved away to the Wantage area and then on to Surrey.

As a teenager I would 'cycle for miles and miles around the villages to see my friends and also to enjoy the countryside. The roads were much quieter than today, and I made regular journeys to Benson and Wallingford (to bring home fish & chips home in thick paper wrapping). I would also venture out to Abingdon. Whilst these distances aren't great, it must be pointed out the typical 'cycle was heavy and had the classic Sturmey-Archer three speed, but they were robust. Racing 'cycles were expensive. It might sound crazy now, but I never locked my 'cycle as people had respect for the property of others and vandalism was rare. A familiar site was seeing the Benson Village Policeman 'cycling through Ewelme, a Dixon of Dock Green style Policeman. I can still remember Mr Nash when he was the Benson Policeman, he was very sociable. It might seem petty now, but to be caught riding a pushbike at night without lights would result in a summons and mention in the local newspaper. Sometimes a Police chase would ensue and the offender, if young, could easily out 'cycle the Policeman.

In the early 1960's I took on paper rounds for extra pocket money. The Post Office opposite Kings Pool was run by Mr and Mrs Harris and provided the village newspaper paper delivery. Initially I delivered in the lower village east of the post office, in addition, the upper round to the Council houses. I was paid 9/11d (approx 50p) per week for both rounds. Later on I took on the evening Oxford Mail paper round. This round would start when the van dropped papers at my house 18:30 weekdays or 19:30 on Saturdays in the football season when the Sports Mail would be included. I had the additional burden of collecting the paper money on Saturday mornings and evenings. This was good in many ways because I got to know many of the people in the village and would often have lengthy conversations. One of my Oxford Mail customers was Mrs King, the retired milk lady. She always had interesting things to tell me. I felt tempted more than once to admit the milk float incident of many years previous though had a sneaking suspicion that she probably knew. I would earn approx £2 per week from the Oxford Mail paper round. The Post Office also stocked stationary and toys. I purchased virtually all of the Match Box series of toys there, and kept them, as new, in their boxes - if I still had them today they would be worth a small fortune.

Chalklin's Grocery Store was located at the bottom of Rabbits Hill [now The Old Pottery]. I will always remember Mrs Chalklin, with a cigarette permanently in her mouth as she served, and jotting down in pencil the prices for totting up. In my early days I can remember my mother using the ration books for food items still in short supply after the War. Many of the villagers used paraffin to fuel their heaters and "Chalklin's" was the local supplier. In those days its proximity to the Cloisters was important. [Fred] Greenways Stores was a much larger grocery store but located halfway down the village [now Quiet Waters]. I remember this when it was run by Mr and Mrs Johnson – and standards were high. Even though RAF Benson had its NAAFI grocery shop, many of the RAF families would also shop at this Store. Village shops all abided by strict opening times normally 08:00 to 17:00 with a one-hour lunch break, and on Wednesday afternoon they would be closed and all day on Sunday's. Next door to the Shepherd's Hut was the Village Bakery owned and run by Mr Charlie Cutler. Fresh bread or cakes could be purchased either over the counter or via Mr Cutler's delivery service. I can still remember bread still being warm when it was sliced. At that time sliced bread was new and convenient, but I remember conversations where villagers expressed their dislike of this, Charlie Cutler's bread tasted much better. In later years I remember Mr Cherry taking on the village bakery, but as time rolled on, sadly it ceased to exist.

My friends used to catch trout from the stream opposite the Shepherd's Hut. They were using a technique of probing under the bank edges, which caused the fish to swim out rapidly and into their nets. To my amazement over 24 trout were caught in a very short space of time, and then released, unharmed. Trout were a common sight at Kings Pond, particularly under the bridge entrance to the Manor. A large variety of small fish could also be caught including sticklebacks. On one occasion whilst looking for fish under the footbridge bridge by Mrs Poupart's Chapel [now the site of Suffolk House] I saw what I believe to be an otter, it swam rapidly downstream and out of sight. I would invite a second opinion on this from people familiar with wildlife in the early 1950's (perhaps Gerald Smith may have seen one during his many hours working on the water cress beds). One of my friends also claimed to have seen an otter or something very similar. From my earliest memories in the early 1950's and into the 1960's the Water Cress Beds were always maintained in an absolute immaculate condition. They were a showpiece - and water cress was in demand. The beds would be shuttered by wooden boards and extending from Kings Pool to just below the Shepherds Hut. I believe the business was run by a Mr Smith from Watlington, who himself a cress worker, used local village workforce.

I became a member of the Church Choir in the late 1960's. Rev Thomas was the Rector and members of the choir included: Amy Reeves (voice like Cleo Lane), John Reeves, Tony and David Reeves, all the Harwoods and Winfield families, Christine Gilbey, Christine Reason, Cynthia Winfield, Frank Godden, the daughter of Mr & Mrs Noel Smith, Geoff and Josephine Hutchins and Peggy and Christine Cox. Our old neighbour, Mr Tom Heather was the organist. Practice was every Friday evening at 19:30, Church services Sunday 11:00-12:00 and evenings 18:00-19:00. Because we all now had television, we would be concerned if the Sunday evening service was likely to overrun past 19:00. The additional time to change and run home could make us late for choice programmes such

as *Sea Hunt* and *The London Palladium*. Wedding services were a frequent requirement for the choir and Christmas Carol singing took us into many of the big houses in the area. The Church choir would always go to Butlins holiday camp every September, these were memorable occasions and well attended – I went on two or three times. [Photo attached].



Butlins in 1960. Derek (face hidden behind brother Charles) and the Harwood Family

I also became a novice Bell Ringer. Training and practice was held on Thursday evenings and the bells would be rung during the ½ hour before Sunday morning and evening services. Additionally, we rang for weddings and peels, which could go on for several hours. Richard Baker and Reginald Tuckwell were key members. Bell ringing outings were frequent, usually organised by Richard Baker and were well attended by members and families. I feel sure that some of the villagers will remember the outings to Weston-Super-Mare, Mid-Wales and Shanklin on the Isle of Wight where we used the steam railway from Ryde to Shanklin. I believe Horace also came go on a "Bell Ringing" outing though I am not totally sure if it was to the Isle of Wight or Portsmouth/Southsea. I am fairly sure that with Horace I went around Portsmouth Harbour on a boat trip to see the many Royal Navy ships. Of these ships I have photos (Brownie 120 Camera) of the last Battleship HMS Vanguard, Aircraft Carriers and HMS Sheffield. This would have been approx 1959-60. Perhaps someone can remember.

Severe weather was experienced throughout the UK in the early 1960's and Ewelme was temporarily cut off by snowdrifts. We could not get to school at Watlington for at least two weeks. The snow was deep and hard packed on the roads in Ewelme. Winters were generally much colder than now and snow could be relied upon virtually every winter. On the roads leading out to Watlington and Wallingford snow fences were erected to control drifting in strong winds.

My interest switched from farming to aircraft soon after starting secondary School. One of my leisure activities was to fly free-flight diesel-engine powered model aircraft from Ewelme Common, which was absolutely ideal. Unfortunately, I lost one of my aircraft on its second flight, it was eventually found in an orchard by Green Lane – it had my address. The final flight for one particular was landing in a pig field beyond the Common. When I finally got to it the pigs had trampled and were eating it. I did recover the engine.

Derek's camera was the catalyst that turned his attention away from farming to aeroplanes - leading to his eventual career in the Royal Air Force. Many readers of a certain age will also remember with fondness the aircraft he has seen and photographed.

"I was always keen on photography. My first 35 mm camera with handheld light meter solved the previous camera shake and exposure problems and enabled me to photograph aircraft at close

quarters – in flight. I spent many hours taking photographs of aircraft landing at RAF Benson. This was 1963 and unfortunately the most interesting period for aviation at RAF Benson had passed. In the period 1950 to 1960 the RAF Ferry Wing Squadron was based there and virtually every type of aircraft, either in service or coming into service, was delivered to the Squadrons via Benson. In addition, it was a Royal Navy Voluntary Reserve base and so all current Navy aircraft could be seen there. I remember when very young seeing the last of the wartime photo-reconnaissance Spitfires and Mosquitoes flying in the circuit over Ewelme. When at Ewelme School and seeing the aircraft in the circuit I quickly learnt to identify them with help from my RAF school friends. It was not uncommon in the early 1950's to hear the sound barrier broken over land, and when this happened, we all ran round the playground shouting "they've broken the sand barrier'" – we only 5 or 6 then!



Photo of Argosy taken by Derek Robinson

In those days' aircraft crashes were not uncommon. I remember seeing a Sea Fury [The Naval Spitfire] on its belly in a field close to the Shepherds Hut – it had very little damage. In the late 1960's a Supermarine Swift FR 5 overran the runway, also near the Shepherds Hut. It left broken undercarriage parts in the road, its pointed nose was embedded into the field across from the stream and its tail angled towards the sky. There were unfortunately a number of less fortunate accidents where pilots were killed around the locality.

The 'Battle of Britain at Home Open Day' was always held in September. A noteworthy part of the show would be a Martin Baker Ejection Seat demonstration in which a dummy was ejected from an aircraft at low level and surprisingly close to the crowd. A Meteor was usually used and on one occasion a Hunter which were based at the Martin Baker test airfield only 3 miles away at Chalgrove.

A list of aircraft seen flying in the circuit or based at RAF Benson would include - Spitfire, Mosquito, Chipmunk, Lancaster, Lincoln, Anson, Valetta, Viking and Heron of The Queens Flight, Dove, Devon, Hastings, Beverley, Argosy, Varsity, Venom, Vampire, Meteor, Swift, Hunter, Canberra, Javelin, Shackleton, Sea Hawk, Attacker, Sea Fury, Comet, Beverley, piston & jet Provost and Neptune."

I effectively left Ewelme in April 1965 when I joined the RAF as an Apprentice at RAF Halton. I served at various RAF Stations in the UK with detachments overseas during those 30 years. I have since worked in Civil Aviation and the MOD. I now live in St Ives near Cambridge. Visits to see my parents (now deceased) and old friends have been regular over the years, and even now, visiting Ewelme is 'special.'"

Ewelme Village Archive