

2 TO BE A FARMER'S BOY

After the First World War the government decided to split the farmland to create smallholdings for ex-servicemen to live on and to make a living. Dad applied for one. It was at a village called Chalk near Gravesend, It was four miles from where we lived.

Our address was, Orchard Poultry Farm, 67. Castle Lane, Chalk, Gravesend, Kent. Dad borrowed a horse and cart from Mr Osbourne the Green grocer to move a lot of the things, the rabbits hutches, chickens shed, Scamps kennel and all the odds and ends. All the furniture, pots and pans and all the house hold things were taken by Carter Paterson. I went with the Horse and Cart with Dad and Scamp and Jeans cat.

The houses were built in 1919. There wasn't any hot water. If you wanted a bath you had to light the copper, fill it full of water and boil it. When it was hot you had to put the water into the bath. The toilet was a bucket toilet that had to be emptied each day and what a job that was. One of the first jobs Dad had to do was to put in a flush toilet and a hot water geyser (I think it was the first one to be installed in Castle Lane). There was a barn to keep things in, apple trees in the garden and a plot of land at the back to grow vegetables. Down the bottom of the lane there was a large orchard full of apples, pears, plum and damsons trees, and a large field of marshland to keep cattle on. We kept chickens in the orchard so we had to get another dog to look after the orchard. His name was Gyp.

There were 18 houses in Castle Lane. Eight of these were small holdings (these all had running water laid on, electric lights and bucket toilets but the rhubarb tasted nice.) Starting at the top of the lane on the right hand on the corner of the junction of Castle Lane and Rochester Road was a pub called The Lisle Castle. Then on right were two small holdings. Mr and Mrs Osbourne lived in one, his son and his family lived next door. Opposite there were two more small holdings. Mr and Mrs Crouch and their son Ray lived in the first one. Next door lived their other son Stan with his wife and two daughters Maureen and Cynthia. Further down the lane on the right there were another two small holdings. In the first one lived Mr and Mrs Harrison and their two children Gordon and Nora. Next door lived Mr and Mrs Scudder. Then further down the lane there were two more small holdings. In the first lived Mr and Mrs Loft. Most of their family was grown except a girl called Marjorie who was same age as me. We lived in the next one.

Across the road there were four bungalows (these only had gas lighting). In the first lived Mrs Fisher. Next to her lived Mr Mrs Flanagan. They had four children, Bert, Sid, Doreen and Cathy. Next door to them lived Mr and Mrs Williams and their five daughters and a son. Edina, Joyce, Alma, Irene, Gwen and Bill. Next to them Mr and Mrs Pointers and two children Winnie and Victor who drove the threshing machine. Opposite, Golf Cottages. These had gas lights. There was no water in the Cottages, only one tap in the yard and two toilet buckets for four cottages Mr and Mrs Goldup lived in the first one. Next door lived, Mr Henry Hall, then Mrs King, and Molly. She was younger than me. Mr and Mrs Kervanners and their daughters, Dolly, Ivy and Gladys, lived next door.

Further down the lane were Fillborough Cottages. These had no gas or electric lights. They had to use oil lamps or candles for lighting and a fire for cooking on. One tap in the yard for water. When the weather was cold and the taps froze they came to our house for a bucket of water. They had four bucket toilets. In the first Cottage lived Mr and Mrs Andrews and their two sons Bernard and Len. Next door to them lived Mr and Mrs Dalton their daughter Edie and her son Leslie. He became one of my best friends. Next door to them lived Mr and Mrs Worsefold. They had no children. Down the lane on the left hand corner was a very large house called Fillborough House. Mr and Mrs Grout lived there. They had plenty of money. They were the owners of Fillborough Cottages they had hot and cold running water, indoor flush toilets, electric lights and a telephone. I can't remember ever having a conversation with them, the so called upper class.

Opposite was our orchard and marshland. This was Lower Higham Road. Turn left towards Chalk Village and on the left hand side of the road five hundred yards down you would come to a thatched farm house called 'Readers'. This is a very old farm I think it was built in the sixteenth century. Carved into a wooden beam over the very large fire place is a family motto 'MAY READERS RENDER RICHES WITH RIGHTOUSNESS'. Mr and Mrs Grewcock lived there. They had three children, Ernie, Marjorie who was a friend of Jean, and Alan who was one of my best friends. Mr Grewcock only had one leg. I think he lost the other leg in an accident in his youth, but it didn't stop him from doing anything. He could ride a bike and climb a ladder to pick the fruit in from trees in his Orchard. He made and sold ladders to the other farmers

for fruit picking. He sold firewood and logs. In later years he turned one of the rooms in the house into a shop and café.

The next houses you came to were two bungalows. In the first one lived Mr and Mrs Coves with their three sons Leslie, Bryan and Michael. Next door lived their cousins Mr and Mrs Hill with their two daughters. Then another bungalow where Mr and Mrs Hooe lived with their daughters.

Carry on for another three quarters of a mile along the road and you came to Chalk Village. There was a lane with four cottages then a cow shed, on the other side of the road was Edwards farm then another row of cottages, then you came to the centre of the village, on one side of the road Chalk school and a pub 'The Lord Nelson'. Across the road Granny Stone had a shop a row of houses and the village Post Office. Mrs Patterson was the Postmistress. Some more modern houses, and then, a lane that led to Macleens farm and dairy. Across the road on the corner stood Chalk Village Forge and Blacksmiths and the pub 'The White Hart'. Just after we moved to Chalk, they built a row of shops opposite the school.

We all had a job to do I had to look after the chickens. 'Bob don't forget let the chickens out, feed them and make sure they have got clean water. Let Gyp off his chain and feed him.' 'Yes Mum.' This was before I left home for school each day. After school I would help collect the eggs, and go off playing with the dogs and Peter, or with Les and Alan. What tricks we got up to fishing in the ditches on the marshes. I was always falling in the ditches, getting wet and muddy, tearing my clothes climbing trees, bird nesting. I can't remember Peter getting dirty or tearing his clothes. He would be doing the same things as I was. I must have been careless he was always so nice and tidy.

If I looked out of our bedroom window and I could see all the way over the marshes to the river and all the way to Shellness in Essex. In the summer you would be woken up by the cry of sea gulls. You would look out of the window and see Mr Loft ploughing his field with his horse. What a fine sight that was, all the sea gull flying all around after the worms.

We made a raft and decided to sail it along the ditch. We all got aboard and it went straight to the bottom and we were up to our waists in water. More trouble. One day we were out on the marshes looking for wild duck nests when Leslie Dalton came and joined us with his cousin Ron Vann and his two sisters. We had a great time together. I didn't know then how often our paths would cross, and in such strange places, what adventures we would share together and that we would be friends for life. We used to get the wheels off an old pram and an orange box and make a motor barrow and have races down the lane. Our mothers used to go mad because they had no brakes. The only way to stop was to run into the hedge. How we never hurt ourselves I'll never know but life was carefree and fun.

There were no street lighting past Chalk Village and in the winter it used to get very dark and dismal. Of a night we used to hide in the bushes and make moaning noises and jump out and frighten the girls. They used to scream and run but they liked us to chase them. They used to get their own back on us. They would wait until we were alone and then they would chase us and throw water over us. In the winter they would ambush us and if they caught you they would hold you down and fill your trousers with snow or water. happy days, all good fun.

We had to go to Chalk Church every Sunday. The church was at the top of the next lane towards Rochester 'Church Lane'. Jean, Peter and Leslie were all in the choir. e Ron and I were bad singers we had to pump the church organ. This was ok no one could see us. We used to make the choir laugh and Ron would pull out a packet of Woodbines and we would be puffing away behind the organ. Someone would tell the verger and he would come and give us a clip round the ear and join us for a fag! Choir practice was held at the Vicarage at Chalk. I didn't have to go to choir practice so all us lads would climb the trees outside in the dark and sing dirty songs. Auntie Mary had a Canary up the leg of her draws. 'Bob stop singing dirty songs about Auntie Mary or I'll tell Mum.' Mary was the name of her elder sister.

One day the weather was bad. Mum was down in the orchard collecting the eggs the chickens had laid. Peter decided to give a film show with his film projector. There were no wall plugs in those days. You had to plug in to the electric light socket in the ceiling. 'I'll plug it in Peter.' Take off your shoes before you climb up on the table Bob ' 'Yes Jean.' I climbed onto the polished table to remove the bulb. I plugged in the wire lead from the film projector when I slipped on the polished table. To stop myself falling off the table I grabbed hold of the wire and I pulled the plug out of the ceiling rose. All the lights went out. There was such a bang when the lights fused. I thought the house had blown up. I was terrified. I ran all the way to the

orchard in my socks in the rain. When we returned to the house Peter had repaired the fuses and all the lights were back on. Clever clogs.

At the side of the orchard was a pathway called The Landway. This led to the railway, over the canal, across the rifle range to the sea wall. We used to go for walks along the sea wall to Shone Mead Fort. This was a battery of guns guarding the estuary of the Thames. There was always something to do and mischief to get up to. The sun was always shining “happy days.”

There was Mr Jones the road sweeper. His job was to keep the roads clean and repaired. He would sweep up the grit off the road into heaps and if he found any holes in the road he would make a fire and boil the tar he had in his barrow, mix it with the grit and fill the holes. He kept all the hedges trimmed and neat and all the ditches and drains cleared. I believe he was Peggy Stones Granddad. He lived in a cottage near the Lion Garage. He knew everyone in the village. I used to meet him on my way to school each day. ‘Good Morning Mr Jones, nice day.’ ‘Good Morning Bob let’s hope it doesn’t rain.’ He would pull out his watch and say ‘You better hurry up. It’s ten minutes to nine or you’ll have Gaffer Austin after you.’

Every three years the council workmen would come round and tar the roads. There would be a tar wagon. This was a horse drawn tank with a fire boiling the tar. This ran out of taps onto the road followed by a cart full of sand and grit and a gang of men spreading it with shovels, followed by a Steam roller. All the kids would follow it as the smell of tar was supposed to be good for bad throats.