

22 • Down Memory Lane

As a young lad, at the end of the last century, Major Brown lived with his family for several happy years at the farmhouse at Mussenden.

Extract from Parish Magazine 1903

“The Jumble Sale realised £14 2s 2d and no expenses. At 6 o'clock, Friday, July 10, the eager crowd gathered at the door of the Infant School. No one was admitted without a ticket (cost 3d) previously purchased from one of the district visitors, and arrangements and rules were made to try and insure that each person should obtain at least some useful article. Some of our visitors are not strictly honest, and all the stalls will have to be carefully watched another year. Also, ladies who read these pages, please do save us at least one skirt. If you could only see the disappointment upon the faces of our visitors when they reach the skirt stall and find everything is sold, you would be sorry for us. We allow no one to have more than one skirt, and no one to purchase for a neighbour; and we do our best to help those who really need the clothes most to get them; but if the clothes are not there? We had a really splendid supply of men's clothes, thanks chiefly to the kind inhabitants of Franks, Mr G B Rasbleigh, and Mr Johnson. To all contributors we say our annual very earnest “Thank you very much.” ”

Until 1908, when it was tarmaced, the surface of the playground of the South School was earth covered in cinders from the coke stoves in the classrooms. Drill or PE was often held in the roadway when the playground was too muddy.

In his youth, in the 1910/20s, Ralph Rogers recollected having great fun in his canoe on the river which was much deeper than it is today. It was particularly good on the mill pond of the old flour mill (now gone) which was a short distance down river from Court Lodge.

Ron Cronk told us about the aerodrome that was to the west of the A225, between Franks Lane and Netherways, during the First World War. He also remembered, at that time, going up to the searchlight station at Riseley where the soldiers would allow him and other boys to sit in their seats and look through their field glasses.

It is recorded in the South School log book that the children were taken to Farningham Road station to line the platform to see the train bearing the body of Nurse Edith Cavell pass by on 13th May 1919.

Ray Knowler said that in the 1920s there were only two cars in New Road that he knew of - Major Brown had one and Mr Saunders had the other. Mr Saunders' car was a “Bean” and it was like a bath on wheels. Mr Knowler also remembered as a boy riding his cart down New Road with his friends. One thing that he was very proud of was that his cart was the only one with an actual steering wheel! He also recalled that local man Reg Sampson used to join in by helping the boys pull their carts back up the hill.

Elsie Nicholls of Jubilee Cottage, Station Road remembered the original village hall when it was not much more than a large hut with the stage at the opposite end from where it is now. She said it was put up by the landlord of The Jolly Millers and his helpers and was known by the local ladies as “tickle belly hall”.

Spencer Gentry recollected that his father, Charles, was a very popular MC at the Saturday night dances at the old village hall before the First World War. Ron Ludlow told us that he was MC at a dance he organised for the village girls and soldiers stationed up Ship Lane in 1941. The band was The Rhythmic Dance Band which was, he said, “the best in Dartford”.

Wally Millen reminisced about the time in the 1920s when Belaid, possibly a Tuareg, whom the family had met on holiday in Algeria, visited his father in Horton Kirby. Belaid amazed everyone who saw him walking through the village in his flowing arab clothes and must have caused quite a stir by learning to play croquet on Westminster Fields with the Girls Friendly Society and Miss Rosa Keddell!

Wally also said that a horse-riding display by Cossacks took place in the village on 11th November 1939 in the Vineyard Field where the school now stands.

Kay Maggs recalled the time when there was a gas explosion in Ash Tree House, The Street. The cook was badly burnt and the kitchen, where the explosion occurred, was damaged. She also told the story of how straw was laid in the road when the owner of Ash Tree House was very ill in order that the clatter from the horses and carts did not disturb him.

Kay Maggs also told us about old Mrs Sewell who always wore black and who walked across the fields from her home on the Dartford Road to every church service. When she died she left her house, "The Rudlands" to the church. Her father, Mr Rudland, was an artist.

Jack Skinner had lots to tell about the forge in Horton Kirby. He remembered Edgar Hall was the vet and Tommy Hall was also the sexton. The forge building, which had three stables, was demolished in the 1950s but the large concrete block outside, which helped people mount and dismount, was there for a good many years after. In the stables there were stocks for use with horses who kicked too much!

One horse called Dobby who worked on the farm at the top of Stack Lane would be brought down to the forge by the farmworkers when they stopped for their lunch at 3 o'clock. When the blacksmith had finished with him he would be sent back with a nosebag to find his own way home.

On the waste ground by the forge now used as a car park, the blacksmith used to lay out all the repaired farm implements and farmers would collect them from there.

Diane Connell's grandfather was Mr T Hall who was Parish Clerk to St Mary's in the 1920s. She told us that the forge was in the possession of the Hall family from 1780 to 1945. Where the double gates into the garden of Forge House now stand, was the entrance to the stables and the entrance to the forge was nearer to where the postbox is now. Before the outbuildings were demolished the Allotment Society met there.

Many will remember the football rivalry between South Darenth and Horton Kirby when arguments would often result in an impromptu

challenge between "Horton and Sally" (Sally Darn being the nickname for South Darenth). These matches frequently came to an abrupt end when the owner of the ball realised he was on the losing side!

Remembering how all the children would walk to the woods at the top of School Lane on Mothering Sunday inspired Peter Flewin to write poetry!

*Along the "Parish Road" we'd wander
Stopping on the way
To gather up in scented bunches
Violets for our Mother's "Day"*

Ron Ludlow was the Co-op milkman for 14 years before the War. Whenever anyone paid him for their milk he had to write out a "paper cheque" and twice a year customers would go to the South Darenth shop to collect their divi.

Jack Skinner told us that during the War there was an ARP station (a small hut covered with sandbags) on the corner opposite The Bull, Horton Kirby where those on duty would shelter until needed to go and put out incendiaries.

Joan Evenden (nee Swan) living with her family in 55 School Lane remembers being bombed out of their house and having to walk round Horton Kirby trying to find a bed for the night. They were finally put up by the lady in The White House. Joan and her family had been in the air raid shelter whilst her next door neighbours were still indoors. "People said to us afterwards that if we had been in the house we would probably have been killed but if our neighbours had been in their shelter they would have been killed because of the way the bomb came down", she said.

During the War the villages took in evacuees from London. It was probably these children who had to be dipped in a bath of "pink stuff" which several people remembered was in Avenue House.

Barry Mungeam told us that his father, Frank, farmed with Fred Ward, the land to the south of the railway embankment. Later Frank Mungeam on his own took on the tenancy of Franks Farm until the early 1950s. Barry remembered that Morris Wheeler's daughter was keen on opera and she could often be heard singing arias in the grounds of Franks Hall.

He also remembered with great affection the Paper Mill outing to Margate every year. The platform at Farningham Road was so small that people had to wait for the first two carriages to be filled before the train would shunt along so that the next carriages could be filled. South Darenth was like a ghost town on the day of the outing because so many people from the village worked in the Mill. Dinner was in Dreamland and the whole day was paid for by the Mill.

Alan Brooks who lived in The Street, remembered that Mr Bates, who lived in the cottage next to the Post Office, used to give 6d to every child he saw on a Saturday morning.

Elsie Kellett remembered that in the wintertime at the South School, Mr Rolph and Mr Huggett, the caretaker, used to get to school by 7.30 am in order to defrost the toilets with a blow lamp so that the children would not have to be sent home. She also recalled that the houses of St Andrew, St David, St George and St Patrick were introduced at the new school in 1965.

Janet Carpenter remembered as a young girl joining all the other village children in running down to the Paper Mill whenever the fire bell went in order to watch the men coming down the rope which was attached to the outside of the building.

Edward Millward told how Dr Duncan Whittaker of the White House, Horton Kirby had been the psychiatrist who defended Ruth Ellis, the last woman to hang in Britain.

When Mary Martin first opened her hairdressing business, her customers had to “walk the plank”, as she had started trading whilst building works were still being carried out. As late as 1966, the two cottages behind the shop, one of which was the home of the postlady, were rented out for 16/6d per week including rates.

Malcolm Green reminded us that the meadow opposite the village hall had, after gravel extraction, been filled with huge chunks of polystyrene which often rose to the surface during periods of flooding. These pieces were so large that local children would use them as boats which, when finished with, would often float off down the river and end up in Dartford!

Linda Green added that one year, on the Saturday of the Village Fete, the polystyrene caught fire. Dense clouds of acrid smoke filled the air but luckily they were not blown towards the fete ground.

Julie Neill had happy childhood memories of visiting Holmesdale (now Rashleigh Lodge) after school for art lessons. Sir Edward Bligh lived at Holmesdale and his housekeeper, Miss Hall, gave the art lessons to 4 or 5 children from the village. They used to paint a bowl of fruit and could eat the arrangement at the end of the lesson - although on occasions it had seen better days and the offer was declined! The children's paintings used to be exhibited at the Court Lodge Farm fair.

Julie remembered being allowed to take Sir Edward his tea and during the summer he would sometimes come and play with the children in the garden. They were allowed the run of the house and enjoyed exploring the secret tunnels rumoured to lead to Franks Hall.

Ann English recalled an incident at a Parish Council meeting in the late 1970s which highlighted the amazing patience of one resident. Frank Reynolds who lived in Black Cottage complained about problems caused by the sewerage vent pipe opposite his house at the bottom of Bull Hill. He explained that Council workmen had cut off 7 feet from the top of it and ever since there had been a terrible smell coming from it. Eric Ovenden, then District Councillor, could not recall hearing about this work being necessary. On being asked when this had happened, Frank Reynolds replied that it had been done in 1935!

According to Audrey Gee, former warden of the School Lane Field Centre, a popular visit for the children during the 1970s was to the mixed farm at North Downs Approved School. A particular favourite was the milking parlour where they watched the milk flow along pipes into a glass container before going on to the storage tank for cooling. The children were always surprised to feel how warm the milk had made the glass.

Eileen Perrin, who lived in East Hill at the time, recalled the day when the Co-op was raided. This was at lunchtime on 3rd March 1977 when the shop was closed for shelf filling and only she and Joan Bird, the manageress, were in the building. Two men, one with a cosh and the other with a gun walked in, tied them both up and took the money. Neither was hurt but it was a frightening experience and Mrs Perrin told us she felt very insecure for a long time afterwards.



*North Downs in the 1960s
Photograph courtesy of Kitty Wheatley*