

A Bradwell Childhood

Recalled by Joan Mary Ashton, born 1920 and compiled by her daughter Christine Skerrow

A young girl at home

This was a village childhood with no TV, washing machines or other electrical gadgets, and wirelesses were rare. There were few motor cars, plain food and very little money. Instead of spring interior mattresses ours were filled with feathers or fragrant straw. Central heating and bathrooms were for the well-off, and a long zinc bath hanging on a nail on the house wall at the back door was the only alternative to 'up as far as possible, down as far as possible' washes in a bowl. I still remember sitting in the cooling water, petrified with fright, watching a tiny mouse who had just emerged from the fireplace!

Tea consisted of a plate holding a potted meat sandwich, a piece of buttered teacake, and a choice of lemon curd or jam tart or mince pie, washed down by a cup of 'urn tea'. The copper tea urns, polished to improbable brilliance as were their brass taps, were ranged at the ends of the trestle tables which marched down the room. Enthusiastic ladies were lavish in their use of Brasso and a strong hint of this pungent cleaner always flavoured the tea. Sometimes the tea was accompanied by a saucer of red or green jelly made in an enormous panchion, but this treat, though much appreciated, was not expected.

After tea, there was prize-giving - exciting piles of books were neatly assembled on a table and Mrs. Donald handed each book to the vicar who announced the name of the lucky winner. The child would advance, shyly or not according to temperament, and clutching the book, would retreat to a corner and begin reading. They were pre-TV children!

Games were the next item on the programme- we sang:

'Oranges and lemons say the bells of St. Clement

I owe you five farthings say the bells of St. Martins

Here comes a candle to light you to bed

And here is a chopper to chop off your head

Chop! Chop! Chop!'

Here, two teachers who had made an archway with joined hands, under which the children were passing in a state of mounting tension, brought their hands down sharply on the head of the hapless child who happened to be underneath, and he or she would be OUT! The game went on till only one child was left. The lucky winner would be sent to Father Christmas, otherwise Mr Benjamin Shirt of rosy face and benevolent appearance, to receive a nobbly hard little bag of boiled sweets from the large Minto tin under his arm.

After all this, **Christmas**. The scent of evergreens and beeswax candles and oh! the sound of carols - carols...

The progression through the church year

Yet- there were such joys in our lives, most of them in our family connected with the steady progression of church festivals, each with their own traditions of food and clothes- each with their own smells and sounds. In everything I did, and everywhere I went, I was aware of the great stretch of sky over the valley in all its variations of blues, whites, pinks, greys and even black as the seasons succeeded each other. And over all, Bradwell Edge: invisible behind a shifting curtain of rain, golden with bracken, or covered in snow, which turned to pink icing at sunset: a sight never to be forgotten in moonlight.

Even the austerity of **Lent** had **Shrove Tuesday** and pancakes to start it off. Is it still, I wonder, a one-upmanship game to boast of the number of pancakes eaten at school the next day? Some schoolmates couldn't possibly have been telling the truth- it would have been physically impossible!

A little custom at **Easter** itself- on the Monday I think- was to have a bottle of water, in which Mint Imperials, Aniseed balls, Dolly Mixtures etc were placed and vigorously shaken to dissolve the sweets. This was very difficult and took all day. The awful brew was called SHAKKIN and we had a length of string round the neck of the bottle which was long enough to go round our necks and let us raise it to our lips to drink- and to give it another good shakkin! Mint sweets were absolutely necessary- the mixture was quite revolting without them. Friends would taste each other's brew, and if they were well supplied with ingredients, would kindly supplement a mixture considered to be substandard. I wonder if the custom had as its roots the need to purge our systems of the results of gorging on the rich food of Easter?

Whitsuntide meant white dresses of broderie anglaise or flower-embroidered voile (bought by the yard from Shirts) , and our straw hats with the murderous elastic cutting into our little chins. Naughty boys used to twang the elastic and it really hurt. We used to examine each other's dresses to see what flowers we had and I remember one dress which had bluebells on it in white! Great expertise with the needle meant my white dresses lasted for years, let down and let out.

For **Wakes** week, the hats were re-trimmed, which in some years meant another visit to Shirt's shop. We were taken upstairs by Miss Agnes Middleton, the efficient lady assistant, who opened a large chest to reveal the glory that lay within. All kinds of artificial blooms - daisies, roses, forget-me-nots and some species unknown to botany! Choosing was terribly difficult and took a long time. Expensive new trimmings couldn't be afforded every year, and I only remember two such exciting visits. On these occasions our outfits were completed by openwork socks and white shoes. Oh, the lovely feeling of putting on newly whitened canvas shoes, dried outside in the sun, giving off their special smell, stiff with blanco, and *warm*. The first thing we did next was to bang our feet hard on the ground to see the patiently applied whitener come off in powdery clouds. We may have been dressed in pure shining white, but we weren't saints!

At **Harvest**, we would go up New Road on the way to the Edge to gather hips to thread on cotton, for hanging like beautiful red and orange necklaces over the gas brackets in Church. The eagle lectern always held a bunch of grapes in his beak, and around his neck would be a delicate lovely, wreath of Virginia creeper just turning to its autumn red. Along the window sills, and anywhere else they would fit, were precariously balanced polished pears, apples and oranges. The font was a wonderful place for marrows and scrubbed potatoes, and the placing of a prize vegetable - savoy cabbage or swede - on the edge of the pulpit was a cause of much mirth and apprehension combined as we speculated hopefully on what might happen. What if the vicar got carried away in his sermon and banged the edge of the pulpit to emphasise a particularly deeply felt effort to ensure our salvation...what if... . Fruit and flowers scented the air, and we sang especially joyful hymns: The Sower went forth Sowing, The Seed in Secret Slept (with hissing and occasional shrill whistling from badly fitting dentures) and my own prime favourite- To Thee, O Lord our Hearts we raise, with Hymns of Adoration...

The main event in **Advent** was the 'Christmas Tree' - the name we gave to the Christmas party at the Church School. An immensely tall tree from a farmer in Abney would be erected in the corner of the church schoolroom and would be lit by real, hazardous candles! The vicar, Mr Donald, a very tall man with Orkney ancestry, lit them one by one with a taper attached to a long stick, and then the other lights were turned out. The oohs and aahs as the full glory became visible must have nearly blown them out again!

A little girl and her Grandma in the 1920s

Little grandma Ashton played a big part in my life. She often took me to meetings of the Mother's Union, in the upstairs drawing room in Bradwell vicarage. Once past the antlers and other trophies downstairs, the most frightening ordeal was provided by the stuffed tiger rugs on the landings. Passing the snarling heads with awful bared teeth tested a little girl's nervous system to the breaking point, and Grandma's little hand was clutched hard. Sunday afternoon at Grandma Ashton's was a very peaceful time- grownups would be having their lie-downs in bed upstairs, the table was cleared of the Sunday dinner, the washing-up was done, and silence would descend.

Little Grandma used to light a candle, then an orange would be peeled and divided up, set on a small plate and put with the candle and the Bible on the table. Grandma would pull up her old Windsor armchair with its thin paisley patterned cushion and sit herself down with a sigh- at last! She was a frail little soul and an old her bent back showed the osteoporosis which has come down to her granddaughter and great-granddaughter.

There she would sit, open her Bible and help herself to her treat- a segment of orange. I don't think her eyesight was very good- hence the need for a candle, and the Bible had very small print. The room filled with the smell of apples baking for tea in dishes on top of the range, slowly mingling their juices with a little brown sugar to make an delectable amber syrup, to which I surreptitiously helped myself with a spoon. Grandma was kind enough to ignore this, but I'm sure she knew.

Alas! The end of peace was too soon heralded by the sound of feet above- the family was awake and tea must be prepared. There was a dish of spring onions, lettuce, watercress, and tomato slices with a sprinkle of sugar and vinegar, and a plate of very thin bread and butter. It was Sunday tea, and standards had to be maintained. Then there was always a white 'shape' (a blancmange made in a wondrously shaped mould- I was always mystified by how all the pillars and shapes of every kind had got on to the pudding). The meal ended with fruit cake or maybe jam or lemon-curd tarts, and the great tea pot full of very strong tea, which I didn't like, was drained. Tarts and cakes were the products of another domestic fixture, the Friday baking

The family would 'side' the pots and then would come the getting ready for Evensong. My face would suffer an assault from a flannel well daubed with green 'Comfort' soap (a misnomer- and I can still smell it!) a penny for collection and a clean hanky would be slipped into my pocket, my unruly red mop would be brushed into order, and Grandma would then put on her hat and coat. The putting on of the hat was a matter of great interest, and no small admiration, to the child observing it! Great cruel steel hatpins would be drawn from the pincushion where they were kept and then, to my horror, one would be firmly pushed STRAIGHT THROUGH POOR GRANDMA'S HEAD! The wondrous bravery she exhibited- not a single cry of pain, not a tear would be shed! It left me speechless with admiration for the stoicism of grownups.

I don't know what promoted the only deviation from this routine that I remember, but once, on a very sunny summer evening, we loitered behind for quite a while after the family had set off for church, and when I asked Grandma why she said nothing, with a very mischievous twinkle in her eye. Then we set off- but up Hugh Lane! My puzzlement increased to a terrible pitch. 'We're going to the Sermons. You'll like all the singing, I know' said Grandma. So that was my very first experience of this wonderful village event. I recall the rustle of well-starched white blouses as the ladies of the choir obediently stood as Isaac Hall (village poet and choirmaster) raised his hands. The small orchestra, and the organ, played an introduction. And then...what volume! What dedication! The singing and playing! It was my first exposure to the unfamiliar anthems, solos, and hymn tunes. I was transfixed. After the treat was over, Grandma seemed to be in a

hurry. Soon we were off down to the Church, there to mingle innocently with the outgoing crowd. I was adjured not to tell anyone where we'd been and I never have- until now!

Shirt's shop in the 1920s and 30s.

In this village institution, you could have a suit tailored, buy boots and shoes, stockings, socks, underwear, hats, gloves, cloth by the yard, haberdashery, curtaining and stair carpets! The shop was on two floors and upstairs was just as fascinating. There were two very lady-like assistants, Miss Middleton with a very stern hairstyle, and Miss Wragg, a Sunday school teacher- a gentle girl with her hair in fashionable 'earphones' - (plaits wound into a fat circle over each ear- rather like Princess Leia in the first Star Wars film!). Miss Middleton was a Methodist and Miss Wragg was Anglican, but ecumenical peace reigned in the shop. Benjamin Shirt, the head of the business was a somewhat red-faced stout individual who usually wore a tape measure round his neck, for he had the tailoring Dept under his expert control! Bill, his son, was a very natty figure always attired in a beautiful suit, and watching his deft fingers wrap your purchase in crisp new brown paper, secured with string and with a neat loop for carrying, was a joy. As we grew, our shoes got tighter and tighter, until the only thing was to go to Shirts for another pair. The very refined Miss Frances Middleton with a cut glass accent served me:

"Now, Joan, what saize do you take?"

"Mother says a size 4, please."

"Saize 4!"

"Yes, Miss Middleton."

"Surely NOT. How old are you? Tray a saize less. Aim sure you don't need a saize 4"

So saying, she seized my foot and literally screwed it into a size 3- it was agonizing, and I said it hurt.

"Stand up, Joan and walk across the floor, and it will soon be plenty big enough", said Miss Middleton..

I was in awe of her- she was a grownup and in those days they were always right: however, pain overcomes fear and I declared the saize three too small. I won, but I've never forgotten the disapproval on her face!

She wasn't being unkind- she just subscribed to the strange idea, common in those days, that females should aim for a small foot. Beauty was worth the suffering!

Bradwell church choir trip to Blackpool, 1930s on Wakes Monday.

I don't recall a single choir trip when it wasn't sunny. Grandma would say 'Wakes Monday, Joan, and not a cloud in the sky!' We had to start off extremely early, no later than 6.30am. I would make my way down to the bridge, where a small crowd of choir members with relatives and friends were assembled waiting for the 'chara'.

While we were waiting, Mr Freddie Middleton (known as Freddy Fish) would appear from the direction of the Lumb pushing a handcart laden with fruit to sell to us for refreshment on the journey. In a rather harsh nasal tone with a transatlantic twang (he had spent, so I heard, some of his earlier years in Canada, where he suffered from frostbite in his feet) he shouted 'Oranges like wine! All the way from Palestine!' as he drummed up his trade.

The chara was supplied by Hancock's Motors- a big blue low-slung vehicle, well upholstered and very springy- just right for the long journey to the magic of sea and sand and Blackpool tower. It was equipped with the luxury of a wireless- though why something positively wretched

with wires was so called I could never understand. So the journey was punctuated with music: not too early, as people needed a bit of peace and quiet to wake up. As we passed through the foreign parts of Manchester the Morning Service would be broadcast. The BBC singers at the time were few in number and they sang unaccompanied, so the choir obligingly enriched the performance by putting in the tenor and bass- an improvement indeed! On these trips I was looked after by my Uncle George, the youngest of father's brothers and named by me Uncle Boy as he seemed so young. What a lovely time we had! A visit to the wonders of the Tower, lunch at Booths café on the seafront (I always chose pineapple sponge for pudding and never tasted anything so delicious), the joys of real golden sand, hunting for pebbles and shells, a visit to the Pleasure Beach where I went down the helter-skelter on a mat, and all too soon it was time to go and wait for our conveyance- it was time to go home!

The grownups were all weary- leaning back in their seats to catch a little nap, but I never felt the least bit tired. As the sunny day faded and the dark began to fall, someone would start a verse of 'Jesus shall reign' or some other well loved hymn, voices would take up the tune or put in the harmony, and the bus would fill with music. Why did the journey back always seem to take far less time than when outward bound? It was a very simple day by the reckoning of today's children, but magical enough to stay in my mind, clear and sharp for seventy years.

Music in Bradwell.

As well as the band, there were several other musical activities in this gifted community.

The C of E School was blessed for many post-war years by an extremely gifted headmaster, Alfred Harvey, whose love of music, plus his ability to train children to sing, and sing beautifully, conveyed itself to his pupils, and the school was rarely without music being practised. People used to come up the stony drive and lean against the wall at the bottom of the playground to listen to us! We sang some of the best choral music ever written, and were accompanied on the piano by the very talented teacher Miss Jenny Hancock.

Every year around Harvest, (1st Sunday in October) the church school would sing at evensong. Mr Harvey taught us some lovely anthems and he wrote beautiful descants to the hymns. The regular choir was of course in place, and Nell Shirt, church organist and talented sister of Jenny, was on the precious Brindley organ for the actual evensong, psalms, canticles, round which the school contribution was fitted. Musical pleasure and entertainment were of the highest order. The church was filled to bursting point- it was a glorious event, and a lovely lifelong memory.

We didn't only sing at school, we danced- traditional country dancing and even ballroom! On winter Friday afternoons, the folding screens would be opened so that the schoolroom was one big space. The boys stood at one end of the room, girls at the other, and you can imagine the giggling and guffawing as the hobbledehoys advanced upon the girls and, trained by the headmaster, asked politely "May I have this dance?". The mirth this caused was infectious but Miss Hancock would hastily strike up on the piano, a 20s piece (I can remember one she played to this day, called 'Tired Hands. A waltz'). We didn't get to be much good at ballroom, and the waltz, I seem to remember, was as far as we went!

The Choral Society was very well supported by its members, most of whom had physically demanding daily jobs to do, and formed the backbone of many musical events throughout the year. A small group, centred round Bill Shirt and his wife Nell, would meet regularly to practise for the annual **Buxton Festival of Music** and the church school used to be involved. One year, I was included in the singing games, and for some years in the choir. We would go to school on Saturday to practise our part songs for Buxton. I also took part in the country dancing which I really loved. The stage at the Winter gardens was a high one with a sheer drop to the floor, and my set always seemed to take the outside of the stage, next to the perilous edge, so I danced in

fear and trembling of falling over! Jenny was a brilliant accompanist and this contributed to our successes, I feel certain. Bradwell C of E was considered a menace by other competitors, as it carried away more than its share of banners and praise from the adjudicators. The school proudly displayed the banners won at the festival.

The Anniversary Sermons in the Nonconformist churches were always wonderfully uplifting occasions. If the local folk couldn't hear the hearty singing as far away as Brough, it was considered a disgrace. The serried ranks of singers, led by Mr Isaac Hall the choirmaster, and accompanied by a small orchestra of stringed instruments plus the organ, were a sight to behold. 'Seated one day at the Organ' and excerpts from Messiah, would be performed with no small degree of artistry and musical taste. Hymns such as 'These Things shall be' were taken up by the congregation and lustily rendered, and after a particularly affecting piece, impromptu utterances of 'God bless them' would break out in the large congregation. An occasion which once experienced was never to be forgotten!

Hospital Sunday - a fundraising event as there was no NHS in those days, was the occasion for united church and chapel choirs and took place in the Bethlehem Methodist chapel in Hugh Lane. A goodly amount was collected, and 'silver collection only' was required from those who wished to sit in the gallery. It was the era of the silver threepenny bit, fortunately!

Toast, Bradda jam and shirt broth.

The difficult business of laundry is, in my opinion, a topic unjustly neglected by historians, considering the time and effort involved! In the 1920s, laundry was done the hard way: in stone sinks and zinc dolly tubs, agitated with dolly pegs and poshers, or rubbed against a corrugated copper washboard. Water was squeezed out with muscle wrenching mangles with wooden rollers (beware long hair!) and the still dripping washing was pegged out on clothes lines. In icy weather, the wet clothes froze and mother would call out to warn us as she staggered in with a pile of frozen shirts, their arms stiffly out at right angles. Skin contact with hard frozen cloth could be painful! When it was wet, then began the misery of indoor drying of clothes and bedding for four children and two adults, on huge wooden clothes horses in front of the fire, steaming away and taking all the warmth, leaving the rest of the room clammy and comfortless.

We weren't supposed to get under the clothes horses to enjoy the fire, but if we were very lucky, when we came home from school on a wet cold day, I (as the oldest girl) might be given toast to make in front of the 'good fire' being enjoyed by the sheets! It was really cosy inside the imagined tent, with a pile of stale bread balanced on the breadboard, the margarine or butter dish, and the toasting fork with HMS Victory on the handle. How delicious the toast was- what I got of it, with my brothers' and sister's eager hands reaching in through the sheets! Toast was even more delicious spread with treacle, then known as Bradda jam. At Mr. Bradwell's shop in the Town the treacle was kept in the barrel it was delivered in. You took your own jar and waited for ages for the thick black liquid to slowly fill it up. Mr. Bradwell was very partial to pint mugs of strong tea, so the wait would be punctuated by the sound of hearty swigs, followed by 'Ah' and a smacking of lips!

The heat of the Yorkshire range, like that of the Aga today, was used in many ways: it heated a big oven, it dried and aired clothes on a brass rail above, and as well as the fire, all that hot metal acted like a radiator to warm the room. The kettle sang on a trivet which swivelled it nearer the flames, and pans sat simmering on the wide bar in front. Some days, we would come home to find the huge iron 'Daddy pan' sitting on the bar, and great was the disappointment if it turned

out to be, not one of Mum's wonderful steamed puddings, but 'shirt broth' as she called Dad's working shirts boiling away.

Some laundry was special! There was always a great laundering, starching and ironing by wives and daughters before the church festivals, and Mum did an extra one belonging to a choir-man who was a bachelor. Surplices seemed to have no end when you were ironing them! And in those days before Clean Air Acts- if there was one black spot in the air, just one in the entire universe- that speck would land right in the middle of the shining white expanse, just as you thought you'd finished! Of course, I had to help Mum with the surplice ironing, when I grew big enough to use the heavy flat irons which were heated on the range. It was worth it for the lovely fragrance of the freshly washed and ironed cotton which wafted to the noses of the congregation as the men processed at Easter, singing 'Praise oh Praise our God and King'.

After I married in 1940, I moved into a little old cottage which we were glad to get in the middle of the war. Laundry was achieved with one cold tap, one gas ring and a set pot boiler. This was a huge copper container set in a brickwork support, with a fire under it which sent out clouds of smoke plus soot particles when it was lit early on washday morning. The pot had to be filled with buckets from the cold tap. If the clothes boiled over, the fire would be put out with a great hissing and yet more soot specks. Then it all had to be mopped up and the fire relit before going on! Later, just in time for the nappies, I rose to the heights of a tube to siphon the water, and the installation of gas to heat the set pot- what refinement!

I believe that the physical hard work of the old days was the cause of much ill health in middle life. On the other hand, to turn back as you went into the house and see lines of clean washing, so hardly achieved, blowing in sun and air (if you were lucky with the weather and the wind wasn't coming, dust-laden, from the quarries!) was a particularly satisfying experience which I still remember.

JOAN MARY JOYCE: 1-1-20 to 14-10-08

Joan was born on The Hills, elder daughter of Charles Bradwell Ashton and his wife Mary. She trained as a pupil-teacher at the Church School, then married engineer John Hall in 1940. Over the next quarter century Joan put in spells of supply teaching at the Church School, served on the PCC, and was organist at St. Barnabas Church in the late 1960s. Two years after John died she married Robert Joyce, Vicar of Hathersage. After being widowed for the second time, Joan moved to the East Riding of Yorkshire to be near her daughter Christine, and died there in October 2008.

About 8 years ago, Joan began to suffer from memory loss due to a series of small strokes. As her awareness of the recent past faded, memories of her youth in Bradwell intensified and became even more precious. Eventually she spent much of her time convinced, not unhappily, that she was in her beloved village. Readers of 'After Seth' will have been able to share some of Joan's vivid and humorous recollections, thanks to her cousin David Wilson who preserved the letters which she wrote to him. Joan never knew about the book, but would have been delighted to have contributed - she was a Bradwell woman through and through.

From the *Bradwell News* December 2008.

