

THE VILLAGE AND VILLAGE LIFE

The village of West End was vastly different in the mid to late 40's than it is today. It was then essentially rural in nature with buildings dispersed 'ribbon-like' along the major routes. As far as I know there is no evidence of occupation before the 17th Century and no semblance of a nucleated centre like Botley, but rather a vague intensification of buildings around the Parish Hall. The suburban sprawl which was to engulf the village had barely begun. Orchards Way and small groups of council houses in Chapel Close and in Swaythling Road were the forerunners of council developments in the 50's – Midlands, Barnsland and Harefield, whilst private developments in Telegraph Wood foreshadowed the 'Trickets' Estate, opposite the School, and the further intensive infilling which has taken place since.

From my perspective, living in Chalk Hill, the village of West End fanned out along four axes emanating from the junction between High Street, Church Hill, Swaythling Road and Chalk Hill.

Chalk Hill itself was a microcosm of the social structure of the village. At the foot of the hill, on the lower levels, lay a small community of cottages designed for and occupied by working class people. At the top of the hill was a similar collection of 'designer' properties occupied by the more monied classes. Mr and Mrs Russell, the proprietors of the Russell and Bromley Shoe Shop chain, were, for example, in residence there. Between the two groups there was very little, just one reclusive bungalow well hidden behind thick laurel hedges.

West End was clearly a fashionable area for the rich entrepreneurs of Southampton during the 19th Century. Substantial Victorian properties, well concealed behind barriers of laurel with large sweeping drives, were built in Church Hill and Moorhill Road. Those in Church Hill were 'colonial' in style with white rendered walls and green roofed verandas, whilst those in Moorhill Road tended to be more 'classical' in type with imposing front façades. Between the two, at the junction with Cemetery Road lay the Church built in 1890 with generous endowments from the community and beside it was a Church Hall built of wood with a car park in front and Tennis Club courts behind.

Just where Church Hill became Swaythling Road I cannot remember but there was almost a separate community around the junction with Ivy Lane – a knot of

cottages with a Chapel, Bakery (Emmons), the 'Crown and Thistle' Pub and a sweet shop and tobacconists amidst a terrace of cottages opposite. At one time my parents negotiated to buy this shop but backed out before completion. Beyond this, towards Eastleigh, there were a number of 30's built houses set well back from the road culminating in an isolated shop which Stubbs the Newsagent occupied from about 1955 onwards on one side of the road and two 'bays' of council houses opposite where Barnsland Estate was built. This was then open fields. Further down, in a dip where the road veered to the left, stood a garage and beyond open fields and one or two isolated houses before the junction with Allington Lane.

The major axis for development was, however, the High Street – the main route from Swaythling and the A27 to Botley and Curdridge. It began by the New Inn, at the foot of Church Hill and proceeded in the 40's to pass the Belvedere Block Works and Dunsford Garage to the entrance of Hatch Grange. There stood a gatehouse with a garden which stretched to the top of the rise, whilst opposite was a smithy about a small courtyard, a line of terraced cottages and the appropriately named Blacksmith's Arms Pub. As the road flattened out at the top of the hill there was a further detached cottage with a large garden on the right hand side of the road before the Fire Station and the broad access to Orchards Way. On the left was a similar property occupied by the Frays and a terrace of cottages culminating in a small grocery shop on the corner of Chapel Road.

The Parish Hall dominated one end of the High Street. This was a large greyish looking building with a car park at the side adjacent to Chapel Road. Originally used as a School it appeared as if the Hall itself had been added to the rear of a cottage. The façade itself was certainly cottage-like, set back from the road and separated from it by two large trees. The front porch gave access to a narrow corridor with





back and sides to well above the ears. Unfortunately this did not flatter me. My ears

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small rooms either side. One was used as the kitchens. Beyond, on the right, rose a staircase to the upper room which stretched the entire width of the building. This was the meeting room used by various organisations. My father attended Odd Fellow meetings here and for a while he also attended Parish Council meetings having been elected in the early 60's. The main hall was 'T' shaped and could be divided with rigid concertina-type partitions, though it seldom was. It was used for many purposes. It was here that I was wheeled as a baby to attend the weekly clinic and it also functioned as the village library. Four lock-up book shelves at the side of the hall contained the books – one devoted to children's books, one to non-fiction and the remaining two to adult fiction. The hall also served as a base for the Boy's Club and was available for private hire so it housed many social gatherings including my parent's 25th wedding anniversary in 1962.

Next to the Parish Hall, between Chapel Road and Lower New Road, stood a cottage which was converted into the village Post Office some time in the late 50's and beyond a row of terraced cottages preceding the West End Brewery Public House. On one end of this building was, what appeared to be, a dilapidated shop. I can vaguely recall vegetables on sale here, but I particularly remember buying 1d home-made ice lollies there during the summer months and of picking up bags of fallen apples during the Autumn.

Opposite the Parish Hall stood the original Post Office complete with a pillar box and phone box outside. I have been stretching my mind to recall the name of the postmaster who was a happy and jolly chap with a withered left arm. He was certainly a breath of fresh air. Later he was to employ me as a Christmas Postman whilst I was at College. Next to the Post Office, towards Orchards Way, was a narrow lane and, set back, an imposing Police House, the symbol of authority for us youngsters in the village. Occupying a tiny site next to this was a small garage with one or two ancient looking pumps, and besides this, on the opposite corner of Orchard's Way to the Fire Station, was a long single story building which for a while served the village as a Fish and Chip shop. It was later bought by the proprietor of the grocery shop opposite to become the first self-service mini market in the area.

If there was a commercial centre to the village it was Stubbs the Newsagent. Although the proprietor, 'old man Stubbs' was a bit of a misery, his two sons-in-law, Jim Edwards and Bert Misslebrook, brought life and humour to the establishment. The shop sold a wide variety of goods besides newspapers and magazines – sweets, stationery, ice-cream, gifts, jigsaws, toys – all crammed into a small space. I have happy memories of Lyons Maid ice creams, gobstoppers, liquorice sticks, aniseed balls etc. bought here as well as colouring books and comics like the Children's Newspaper and the Eagle. It was to this shop I came most Saturday evenings during the winter to collect the Football Echo for Dad and Uncle Arthur, and it was here that I got my first taste of paid employment when I took on my brother Alan's paper round just before my 13th birthday.

Next to Stubbs was Ron Beale, the barber. For years, as a young boy, I regarded him as the butcher. He was a short back and sides merchant with little patience with young ones and I remember him holding my head in a vice-like grip whilst he shaved

were the first part of my body to reach maturity and by the time I was eight they were of adult size. Ron's unsympathetic treatment made me look ridiculous. Thankfully little boys do not spend too much time gazing into mirrors so he did not dent my ego too badly, and happily, by the time I reached adolescence my head had caught up with my ears! Nonetheless as soon as I had a bike I escaped his clutches and transferred my custom to a hairdresser in New Road, Bitterne. By this time the cost, originally 1/- had inflated to 2/3d or 2/6d. Ron's shop was a converted house at the end of a small terrace. Beyond was a walled yard with large wooden gates and finally a large grocery shop and bakery on the corner of High Street and Upper New Road. I can never remember entering this shop and I believe the bakery did not survive long into the 50's before it closed. Round the corner, however, in one of the half a dozen or so cottages where Bob Moody lived, was a cobbler who we regularly patronised for resoling and heeling boots and shoes.

Beyond the junction with Upper and Lower New Road, towards the school, there was very little. There was an office-type building on the corner of Lower New Road with a garage a little further up whilst opposite there were two, perhaps three, houses set amongst the laurel trees, one of which was occupied by Doctor Bamber, one of the village Doctors. Up the hill and around the corner in Cemetery Road stood a small number of more substantial properties, one of which was occupied by a Dentist and another, a little further up towards the Church by a Doctor who was affiliated to a practice in Bitterne. The remainder of the population of the village was fairly well dispersed. There were a number of 30's built semi-detached properties by the junction of Moorgreen Road with Botley Road, opposite to where the Sportsman Arms was built, and some more extensive infilling in Telegraph Wood, but apart from this, property was strung out along Chapel Road, Moorgreen Road, Telegraph Hill and the top part of Botley Road. The only other commercial activity I can recall is the garages of Barfoot's Princess Coaches and Colliseum Coaches opposite Moorgreen Hospital in Botley Road, the Scaffolding Great Britain house and yard at the foot of Chalk Hill, the Belvedere Block Company near the New Inn and also a thriving Market Garden with a shop which existed at the Moorgreen end of Chapel Road between the bends.

The social life of the village revolved around the meeting places where people gathered – the six Pubs, the two Halls, the Church and Chapels, the Scout Hut and the sports venues – the football pitch at Hatch Grange, the Cricket field in Moorgreen Road and the Tennis Club behind the Church Hall. My personal experience of the swathe of activities on offer is, of course, somewhat limited. I was drawn into the social circle of the Church, the West End Little Theatre Club and the Choral Society. In many ways these were interconnected and reflected the social traits of my parents.

For our family the Church was a focus for social activity. Mum was a regular member of the Mother's Union and as a small boy I can remember garden parties held on the vicarage lawn. She was also on the Church cleaning rota and I would spend time in the school holidays sidling around the Church whilst she swept, dusted and polished. Indeed in my youth I spent a great deal of time in Church. As a member of the Choir between the ages of 9 and 15, I attended choir practice on one evening

each week and sang at three services each Sunday – Sung Eucharist at 9.30am, Matins at 11 and Evensong at 6.30pm. At one stage when I was 14 or 15 there were sufficient choir boys to form a football team and an interested Curate arranged games with other village teams. I recall that for two seasons I marked out the pitch at Hatch Grange, which by that time had been abandoned by the village team, using creosote, brush and string. Beyond this there were Church ‘Socials’. The Social was a popular event in the pre-television age. It comprised a mix of ballroom, old-time, and what they would now call barn dancing with team games like passing balls under the chin from person to person or passing balloons between the knees or keys on string down through the clothes of one person and up through the next. Musical chairs and pass the parcel were also sometimes included, the latter with forfeits rather than prizes which added further to the merriment. Whilst much depended upon the quality of the Master of Ceremonies to organise and maintain pace these were fun evenings. The games and progressive dances like the Gay Gordons, Valetta and St. Bernard Waltz forced people of all ages to mix and produced the common experiences upon which social cohesion is based. So popular were they as a form of entertainment that most organisations ran socials. Some of the best I remember were run by the West End Little Theatre Club where thesbian extrovertism and exhibitionism lessened inhibitions.

In time, as rationing lapsed and food became more plentiful, fashion changed and the Social gave way to the ‘American Supper’ where party food was donated on a bring and share basis and the focus began to shift towards social eating. Also as the first post-war generation of teenagers began to express themselves through the medium of rock and roll and television took hold in the mid to late fifties, social events began to segregate according to age. For the young the ‘hop’ began to dominate the social scene. Adults had great difficulty in understanding the new emerging pop culture and with the pull of the television their interest in and attendance at social events declined sharply.

There were a number of ‘whole village’ events which drew people of all interests and all walks of life. By far the most prominent of these in my youth was the Remembrance Sunday parade. Not only was the afternoon service at the Church packed but there were lengthy parades both to the Church from the New Inn and afterwards down Cemetery Road to the Cenotaph. Almost everyone involved in the war attended bedecked with their medals and there was a contingent of servicemen complete with a bugler who sounded the Last Post after the names of the fallen had been read out in Church. As a choir boy we led the procession to the Cenotaph and watched solemnly as wreaths of poppies were placed by representatives of many organisations. Two minutes silence added to the poignancy. On Remembrance Day itself at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the whole nation stopped for two minutes. So high were emotions so soon after the war that even the traffic stopped on the roads – all to honour the millions who gave their lives for freedom. As the community pulled together during the conflict, so they pulled together to remember the sacrifice and celebrate the victory.

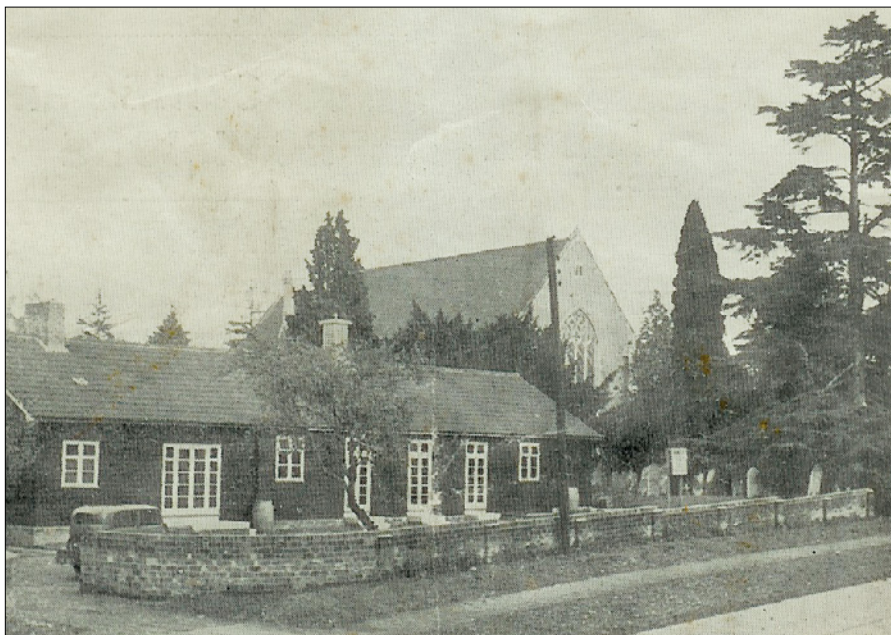
There was only one event of similar impact that I can recall and this must have been a one-off occasion in either 1950 or 1951. This was a village Carnival. I remem-

ber being dressed up as Wee Willie Winkie (typecast even then!) and of riding on a float entered by Mr Woodley the builder. He used his lorry and erected scaffolding on the back to create two tiers. I cannot recall what it was all about, only that I was disappointed at being refused permission to ride on the top deck. I believe the procession assembled at the New Inn and proceeded through the village to Moorgreen.

There were also summer Fetes although I can only remember one organised on a field in the corner of the Wilderness Estate opposite the Church, though there were certainly others. I recall that at this one there was a magician who kept a large number of children spellbound by his tricks and patter. As part of his act he hauled me and a girl out of the audience and performed a mock wedding weaving his magic to produce a bouquet and rings etc. as he went along. I guess the resulting embarrassment imprinted the event on my memory for I was at the age when association with girls was definitely not on and was the root of a lot of silliness.

Jumble Sales, Bazaars and Summer Fairs were part of the routine way of raising money to support local charities and organisations. My parents were members of the local Labour Party and regularly helped to organise Jumble Sales at the Parish Hall. On more than one occasion, before I started my Saturday job, I was hauled in to help man the counters against the initial stampede of bargain hunters. The Church too ran Jumble Sales. I remember that at the end of one the Vicar asked Mum if she would like to take away a bronze statuette which was left unsold at the end. For years she used it at home as a door stop until Alan pointed out that it might have value. It was subsequently sold at a Sotherby's auction for £850! Unfortunately our luck did not run to Rembrandt's in the loft!

As the fifties progressed and the village population exploded the culture inevitably changed. The sense of community and cohesiveness which thrived where everybody knew everyone else and where the gossips kept alive interest in each others affairs slowly ebbed away. In its place began to develop the culture of modern suburbia giving precedence to family privacy and the acquisition of material things. Over time home grown entertainment became all but stifled by television and the sophisticated attractions of the City Centre – Nightclubs, Bars, Restaurants, Ice Rinks, Bowling Alleys, Theatres etc. – all increasingly affordable and increasingly accessible with universal car ownership. Now, half a century later, only a few hard-working and dedicated individuals in the local community carry the torch and organise social events, fairs and fetes for the benefit of others and they have to fight as hard to attract a worthwhile clientele as they do to run the events!



The Church Hall, West End, where Jenny and I stole our first kiss! (January 1961)