

A NORTHAMPTON BOY WITH CONTACTS WITH BLISWORTH, 1911 – 1922

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Leslie John Chambers, June 1908 – April 2005

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I. EARLIEST YEARS I was born in Southampton Road, Far Cotton, Northampton on the first of June 1908. My parents were Jane Chambers and William Chambers, they were married about 1875 as far as I know. We were rather a large family, Alf was the eldest, who I knew of course, but Mum told me pretty frequently that her first born, William had died when he was three years old but of course I never knew him. After Alf came Harold and then Lewis and then Ena, my sister, and then me and after that Eddie who was about two years younger than me, his birthday was in April. Folks will be surprised when I say that I well remember standing in my cot. My cot was in my parents' bedroom and it was made of some sort of metal. I remember standing up and rattling it. My parents' bed was made of some sort of tubular metal with four brass knobs on it on the corners and I could stand in my cot and look down into the street, where I saw the traffic going by, and when I say traffic I mean horses and carts - there was no such thing as motor vehicles. A motor car was a very, very rare thing, it was quite exiting when one went by.

A milkman came every morning (and I think sometimes in the afternoon, but I'm not sure about that) and he had a two wheeled cart, it was a Mr Botser and he lived at the London Road end of Southampton Road and the cans of milk were hanging off this two wheeled cart and he would come to your front door where the jug was already out on the doorstep and he would ladle out the milk that he knew you required. I never saw him write anything down, he knew all his customers and he knew what they wanted. Another visitor was the lamplighter. Fortunately we had a streetlamp outside our house and I could watch the lamplighter who had a large, long pole with a kind of a brass top that had a flame in it and he would poke it through an aperture at the bottom of the lantern of the streetlamp, turn the gas on with a hook and then the gas would ignite. Very much later, years afterwards, us lads used to go round with this man who would let us light lamps, quite an experience for us. I presume that he came round very early in the morning and put them all out again, but I never saw that of course.

Another visitor I remember was the doctor, who came in a horse and trap. I never knew quite why they called it a trap, it was a kind of an open cart with seats each side and I well remember how the shafts, attached to the horse of course, jumped up and down as the doctor got out of the back through a little door. He had a groom with him because the horse wouldn't stand still and the groom was there to drive him on his rounds and wait outside each patient's house. Later on my mother told me that I'd had the measles, but I have quite distinct memories of the doctor hanging his hat on one of these brass knobs and of course, having the measles, that curbed my traffic watching for some time. One of the things I remember most vividly was the huge herds of cattle that used to come down Southampton road, coming in from the country on a Wednesday or a Saturday, and woe betide anyone who left anything outside like a bike or a pram because these cattle would surge through the street and the mess they left behind was indescribable, and later on when they'd been sold

in the cattle market they usually all came back again. Later on when we were on holiday or on a Saturday, sometimes us lads would take over this herd of cattle when it got to the end of Southampton Road and turn them up the Towcester Road while the drovers went into the pub, the Clifton Arms. And we would take these cattle on, up Towcester Road, and usually turn them into Dane's Camp (?) where they would usually stand and graze while we just watched them. When the drovers came up from the pub they took over of course and sometimes they gave us a penny and sometimes they didn't but more often than not we didn't get anything. But the experience of driving these huge beasts and knowing how they responded to stick waving and shouting and arms outstretched stood me in good stead when I got much older and had a small farm and had some beasts of my own.

Another feature of the street in those old times was the number of entertainers that used to come down the street. People would come and walk down the middle of the road and sing, or they'd have a barrel organ and turn the handle and emit music and there was all sorts of things going on, sort of thing. Quite frequently I remember a man who came on such tall stilts that he was almost level with the bedroom windows and singing and he had a hat and you threw pennies up to him from the street and I remember a man with a bear on a chain would you believe! People simply had to get what they could because there was no such thing as Social Security.

I don't remember much about my subsequent cot days, but when I started school that sure does stick in my memory, it's the most vivid memory I have. I started school when I was three, on the day I was three, on my birthday. I remember Ena taking me to school, I didn't know where I was going and I can remember her handing me over to the school teacher, a Miss Tinkler. I remember how nice she smelt when she bent down to speak to me. She put me in a desk against the window and above my head on the windowsill was a glass tank with tadpoles swimming about among a lot of weeds. She gave us a stick which wedged into the back of the desk with a hook on it and a handful of coloured raffia strings and we tied these raffias onto the hook and wove them into a multi-coloured platted sort of ribbon. I can remember taking it home to me mum and being very proud of it. But when we'd been in the classroom for a little while the teacher shouted 'Rest!' and you had to put your arm on the desk and rest your head on it and pretend to go to sleep (or try to go to sleep at any rate). You shut your eyes and did the best you could to take it easy. Later on when I got older I realised of course that this was when the teacher wanted a rest because of us noisy little brats all round her and it gave her a chance to recuperate a bit I think.

I don't remember much about the rest of my infant school days but when I moved up into the older boys school which was kind of next door I can still remember the teachers' names, and what we did - the footballing and the playing and the playground, the cigarette cards, marbles, and exercises we used to have to do, the fights and scraps that we had.....

Across the road from the main school was a building that they called the Cookery, it was where girls learnt cooking and the boys learnt carpentry, and if you were challenged to a fight by one of your school mates it always took place behind the Cookery after school, there used to be a crowd of kids there, all watching two kids having a scrap. I've had some really good hidings round the back there, I wasn't much of a fighter. I'm racing on a bit too fast so we'll go back to my infant days. Sometimes we went for a holiday to my aunt's at Holcot. My Aunt Bella we called her, and she was my mother's sister and she'd been left a widow, her husband had died and left her with seven children all going to school. But even so she still found room for us for a holiday now and then and I remember going one

Christmas - Ena again took me - I was very, very young, but I remember we went on the horse bus from Far Cotton to All Saints and from All Saints to St Matthew's Church, Kingsley on the electric tram. And from then on we walked to Holcot. I remember there was snow on the ground - not much but enough to make it uncomfortable and cold - and a man picked us up in a horse and cart and took us for part of the way. When we arrived at Aunt Bella's house there was no one there.

It was Home Farm where she lived, a small place - small farm but a big house - and a neighbour said that they were at a party at the chapel. So we went up the main street to the chapel and my aunt was giving a party to all the children who went to chapel and in the middle of the room was a huge Christmas tree and the children were singing carols and having games and thoroughly enjoying themselves, it was only oil lamps then of course, there was no other form of lighting. And all the children were given a present off the tree and I remember receiving a kind of stocking thing with a pair of tin scales in it and I believe an orange, and a sugary pig.

Later on we went home to Home Farm. When we went to bed the upstairs was a kind of a huge single floor divided into three compartments with no doors on them. So the girls went to bed first in the furthest compartment, the boys in the middle and the older people, who had to get up first of course, went to bed in the top room at the head of the stairs. I can remember the smell of the thatch and how bitterly cold it was but even so they were very happy days that we had at Aunt Bella's.

When we would stay at my aunt's one summertime I remember we had to fetch water from a well that was about thirty, forty yards from the house. It was a communal well, everybody used it - at least, the houses round about - and I remember going with my aunt to fetch some buckets of water and as we carried them back I pointed out to my aunt that there was a worm at the bottom of the bucket. Her advice to me was "Well, drink from the top".

A year or two later my aunt took on the carriers business from Holcot. Each village - most villages anyway - had what they called a 'carrier' who would carry parcels for you, from the village to Northampton, usually on a Wednesday or a Saturday. And my aunt used to come in with this horse and cart on a Wednesday and she used to put up at The Stag. It was a pub just up Abbot Street and you went into the yard from Abbot Street and it went right through into the market square. I can remember reading, (the first words that I knew!) a notice on the wall and it said 'OSTLER'S BELL' and Ena explained to me that if you wanted some help with your horse you pulled this bell-pull and the man would come and he would unharness your horse and put it in the stables. In the meantime my aunt was unloading the cart and taking produce onto the market, such as brussels and eggs, potatoes, any parcels or anything. I saw her once manhandling a huge mangle off the back of the cart. She was quite a small woman but she got it off the back of the cart somehow, one of those big iron mangles that would take about six men to lift, but she managed it. She was a very determined woman.

So when she started this business we no longer had to catch the tram and walk, we could go and join her in the cart on a Wednesday or a Saturday and she would then take us to Holcot and bring us back on the next market day.

When I was about six I joined a choir at St Mary's church in Far Cotton. I always attended Sunday School, my mum was very religious and she was very proud when I joined the

choir. You couldn't go into the choir straight away because it was full up, so you augmented the choir by sitting in the front row of the church and I think we wore a cassock (but I'm not sure about that). But you attended choir practise and learnt the anthems and hymns that you were going to sing on the Sunday and then, when a choirboy's voice broke (it was usually the top boy who sat in a separate position to the other boys), he left and all the other boys moved up one and that made enough room for more to join at the lower end. So, when the two top boys' voices broke, we were told we were to join the choir at the bottom end. But before you did that the Vicar, Mr Riddle, used to have a little service that admitted you to the choir and on the Friday night after choir practise (the choir practise was in the church, with the organ playing, and so on) us two boys, Stan Lyeman and myself, had to go up to the altar with a cassock on and the Vicar then would bless us and ask the Lord "Help in our religious-----", and so on and he would put a white surplice over your head, drape you with that, and that would make you a full-blown choirboy. But while he was holding this over my head on this Friday night, the lights, which were gas, went halfway down and up again and the Vicar said "That means there's an air-raid" And I never was surpliced and Stan Lyeman who was waiting he wasn't either! And the vicar said to us all, men and boys, "All go home quietly because the Germans are sitting up there in Zeppelins and can hear you talking, so be quiet." So we crept home and when I got home there was Mum and Harold and Lou and Dad and Ena all sitting in the living room because everyone in Northampton knew there was an air-raid approaching because everybody's gas went halfway down and up again. So we sat there and sat there and waited for the bombs to drop, eventually Eddie and I went to bed. At about two o'clock in the morning Harold came and fetched us, and we dressed and went downstairs and sat with the older people and the bombs were dropping. They were very small ones in those days but they were aiming, the Zeppelins, at the railways and the bombs dropped in the Rotherthorpe Road, into a field and over James' End where they killed a lady and her two daughters. One of the bombs didn't go off so we went and looked at it on Sunday, and a soldier with a fixed bayonet and rifle, and a tent was guarding it, I remember, nearby.

II. WAR YEARS, 1914 About this time, if I remember rightly, when the war first started, food was not rationed. And meat certainly wasn't, but the only way you could get the meat that you wanted was to queue, to get there early and queue. And I used to get our family's meat, I think twice a week it was, and I would also bring neighbours', they would give me a list of what they wanted and I would bring their meat as well.- But to get all this I had to queue and I've been there at quarter to four - repeat, quarter to four - and still been at the back end of a long queue. The butcher was a Mr Ewans in St Leonard's Road, at the top end, and he knew every person and every family of his customers. And he, although there was no official rationing, would know what your family required and he would not let you have too much, he rationed it out very fairly. But it was the queuing that took hours and hours and the school that was in Main Road would sometimes send a boy to see how much longer I was to queue before I came to school, because if there was a ninety percent attendance, I think it was, through the month, then you had a half day holiday on the last Friday in the month and the teacher, who was just as eager to get the holiday as we were, would try and mark you present even when you were still in the queue. And sometimes I've been marked present at school when I still got an hour to queue in the queue. We were constantly being urged to grow as much food as we could, mainly vegetables of course, and two half-days a week at school we were allowed (or the teacher used to take us) and teach us gardening on two spare areas of wasteland that were at the Towcester Road end of Southampton Road and Euston Road. I think the petrol station stands on it today and a chapel (at the end of Southampton Road). On part of the land the army had set up food

kitchens, with ovens and rooms of whatnot, because the army were billeted all over Northampton. But we had plots of land on this wasteland and I remember growing some really jolly good crops on it because it was all new land as you might say. I remember growing some particularly nice spring cabbages on it. But of course I was well versed in gardening even at that tender age because my father had an allotment and I always went with him to help on that particular land.

And by the way, the government decided that too many people were spending too much time queuing and not helping with the war effort so everything went on rations, everything. So I no longer had to queue, you could go to the butchers and he would tear the coupons out of your ration book and you'd done the whole job in a few minutes. By this time Far Cotton was occupied by a huge army of soldiers, they were everywhere. In Delapre Park, in tents all over the fields, but mostly they were billeted in the houses. They'd built this food kitchen at the top of Southampton Road as I've mentioned, and every now and then when the soldiers had gone away, the previous lot, an officer would come into the street and mark on the brickwork how many soldiers you were to take. Usually we had six and I think, I don't know for sure, my mother got a shilling a week for each soldier. But each soldier had a straw pallet, that's a mattress sort of thing, and they threw it down in the front room and slept on that using their kitbag as a pillow. My mother was a second mother to them because they were mostly young boys and most of them, I don't know why, seemed to come from Macclesfield. And my mother used to write to their mothers, to some of them, and the wives if they were married, or sweethearts or whatever and assure them that they were being looked after.

As I say she was a second mother, but they were very good companions, I remember having a lot of fun with these soldiers. We used to clean their rifles for them and pull oily rags through and they would give us pennies, but they didn't get much money, I think it was a shilling a day they got. But one of the benefits of having them billeted with us was the food kitchen at the top of the street cooked huge meals for all these soldiers and when a meal was ready a bugler walked down the street sounding 'Come to the Cookhouse Door Boys'. The cookhouse would dispatch a truck loaded with iron pots, dixies they called them, that were absolutely full of meat and dumplings and vegetables - turnips, potatoes, beans - you name it, it was in that pot. And it was all boiling hot and one of these pots was put down on the pavement about every twenty yards and at the call of the bugle the soldiers went into the street - they had a kind of a tin pan thing that hooked on the belt, they could fold it up with the handle - and they used to fill this with, all this wonderful food and bring it into the house and of course we shared it with them. These soldiers used to drill in the street. When the bugle sounded they all had to muster and stand in line and do 'shoulder arms' and 'about turn' and marching up and down, and us kids used to join them at the end of the line. And I learnt quite a lot about how to shoulder arms, when you march you start out with the left foot, and all sorts of manoeuvres that us kids would never have heard of otherwise. They also took over our recreation ground and that was a network of trenches and sandbags, straw-filled sacks that they used for bayonet practise. Sometimes we'd be in the trenches with them while they were drilling and learning the art of stabbing people or whatever they had to do and the officer would suddenly throw a smoke bomb and shout 'Gas!' and the soldiers had to don gasmasks to practise how quickly they could get them on. But I well remember the acrid smell of that smoke because we used to have to climb out of the trenches and run when that came on. It wasn't real gas of course, it was just acrid smoke.

It was a very sad time for everyone. I remember as a small boy, I didn't read the newspaper much, but I can remember the paper coming - I think it was the Mirror or the Sketch or one of those papers - with a huge black edge on every page and inside were thousands and thousands and thousands, lists and lists of men who'd been killed. And the neighbours used to come in with their brown On His Majesty's Service envelopes, they knew what was inside before they opened it. Mrs Carter who lived at the back way to us had four strapping sons, huge men, who worked in the brewery, and every one was killed. I remember my mother, neighbours, weeping in the house.

There used to be lists and lists of ships printed in the paper that had been sunk, and it was only later in the war that the government realised that by printing all this information they were helping the enemy and proving that he was making a good job of what he was trying to do. Even today the memory of those sad times affects me. Twenty thousand men died on one day and I can remember the sadness and weeping that went with the news of that.

III. BLISWORTH About this time - I say 'about this time' but I mean about 1916 - when I was eight, the air-raid I told you about, the Zeppelins, I know that took place in October 1916, so I'm getting my dates a bit mixed up but I'm not quite sure about particular dates - but I got a job at Blisworth doing a man's garden. It was a Mr Stidling (*Mr Steidlin, according to 1911 census* - Ed.) who, I think, used to live near to my parents and they've kept in touch with him and he worked on the railway and was given this job at Blisworth. And he lived in a huge stone building near to the station and his job was to make the gas that lit the station and I believe, the hotel, and also to pump water from the canal reservoirs which were in the gardens to a tank on the roof, so that trains who were on the embankment could draw water from it. Although I never saw any train stop for water the pumps were going all the time so someone was using the water obviously.

Anyway he asked me to go and do the gardens on a Saturday. I went there, there were no buses at the time - some did start after a few weeks and I was able to go on the bus - but at first I walked. I went from Far Cotton to Blisworth, sometimes along the road and sometimes along the arm of the canal that runs from Far Cotton to Blisworth and when, you got off the towpath there it wasn't far from his house. But when I got there, apart from doing the garden, I used to fetch the groceries from Blisworth, Young's' Shop in the High Street and I went along the side of the main canal to get there but I didn't like doing that because of the huge horses that I used to meet that pulled the barges. All barges were horse-pulled then, there were no engines in any of them, they had to have a special barge that took them through the tunnel. But I used to run from one piece of railing to the next piece so that I could get over into the field at the side of the towpath if I saw a horse approaching.

But one day I didn't quite make it and when I got to the bridge, Candle Bridge as they call it, against Chapel Lane, the horse was just appearing under the bridge. I tried to make it to the steep path that leads up to the road but I didn't and the horse, seeing this little boy flying along the tow path with his shopping bag behind him, reared up, hit his head on the underside of the bridge and plunged into the canal! And would you believe it, it still kept on pulling the barge although it was walking along the bottom of the canal. Anyway, I was really frightened, I thought I was the cause of it all and I thought the man would shout at me or something. But anyway, when the barge got to the bridge the man jumped off onto the towpath, ran along and reached and managed to catch hold of the horse's bridle, he led it back the grassy bank and away they went. And he was quick enough doing all that to be able to jump back on the barge again as the cabin end of the barge went by.

But I remember taking a golden sovereign to fetch the groceries and I think the Mr Young who kept the shop then was the present Mr Young's grandfather. I soon learnt how to help make the gas. The gas was made in two retorts, the top one contained coal and it was sealed up with a cast iron lid that was smeared with lime to seal it so that it was quite airtight. The bottom compartment, you built a fire in it, the coal, and the heat of that drove the gas through the top retort and into the gas holder, the gasometer, that stood in the garden. You could assess when gas was needed by looking at the container and seeing how high it stood in the framework in the garden and I soon became quite an expert at this, was quite able to help with making the gas. With regard to hot water you'd got instant hot water from the boiler, and any household water that you wanted you could take a bucket down, put a pipe from the boiler into the bucket of water and turn the stopcock that sent hot steam through the water, through the cold water, and you'd got a bucket of hot water in ten seconds. So the problem of hot water - the only thing, was that you had to carry it up down an iron staircase that was outside the building. When you went upstairs to the living quarters the stairs were outside and it was quite a job carrying a bucket of hot water up those iron stairs. But I used to make it.

One of my enduring memories of Mr Steidlin was that he always prepared a midday meal of course, sometimes while I'd gone to fetch the groceries, but we always had rice pudding after it. Always rice pudding after the meal, and he never had sugar in his rice pudding, he had salt. I used to hate it.

Mr Steidlin was a very kindly man. He had a huge white beard, but he'd always got a laugh and a twinkle in his eye and everything was a joke to him and he was quite good company to be with, you felt quite at home with him. And the sugar and the salt business, in the rice pudding, I never was quite sure whether that was because sugar was on rations or whether it was because he preferred salt.

When a bus started running between Blisworth and Towcester and Northampton I was able on a wet and miserable day to stand at the end of Station Road when I was going home and get on the bus. But this needed careful thinking about because the fare was fourpence and that was half my day's wages. If I'd have gone onto the bus when I was going and onto the bus when I was going home my day's wages would have disappeared and I would be doing it all for nothing. But after a time the lady conductor on the bus got to know me pretty well and she didn't used to charge me. It was a lady conductor because the war was on and women helped on the busses.

But sometimes I rode up with the driver, there was no windscreen on the bus, just a canvas sort of a sheet which the driver could see out of but I couldn't. So the passing scenery went by the door as far as I was concerned. When I did ride with the lady conductor she had a job to do, the bus a very tall open-topped, solid-tyred vehicle that trundled along, you couldn't say it drove! But when it got to the iron bridge - the Lady Bridge at the bottom of Towcester Road hill - he had to pull up and she had to go upstairs and shout to the upstairs passengers to keep their heads down because going under the bridge they would have hit it, and I took over this job. I rather enjoyed it, going up the stairs and shouting "Keep your heads down!" But unfortunately that meant that the bus had got to pull up at the bottom of a very steep hill, and he sometimes couldn't get going again with a load of passengers on and the passengers would be asked to get off and asked to walk up to the top. Now the conductor also had the job of - when he started to move again - she had to get out of the bus

with a long pole with a curved piece of wood on the end, so that she could shove it under the back wheel if he couldn't get underway and was running backwards. And I took over this job as well and I found that this was quite an art because when he started moving you'd got to run behind him shoving this piece of wood under the back wheel in case he couldn't get going, but he always did. I must say he always did, I don't know what would have happened if he'd have run backwards, but when he got to the top of course everyone got back on again and away we went.

Well my mother sometimes came over to Blisworth, occasionally, very occasionally, done a bit of washing or whatnot for this old man. And we got to know the conductor and the driver of the bus very well and sometimes on a Saturday morning when I was going to Blisworth my mother would make them a jug of tea and two cups and I would stand against St Mary's church and I'd wait for the bus to come from Towcester and get on it, with the driver, cuddling this tea. We'd go up to Northampton Town Hall where he turned the bus round, they drank their tea and off we went. I usually went right to Towcester with them, then came back, got off at Station Road and went off and did all my jobs that I had to do. And then in the evening they'd pick me up and I would pick my jug and cups up and got off at Southampton Road.

Miss Lee, the conductress, got very friendly with my mother and she actually used to visit our house in Southampton Road and in the evenings sometimes, when she wasn't on duty, Mum and her would talk about the war and knitting and sewing and all sorts of things. She was a very charming lady.

Meanwhile in the choir, the organist and choirmaster had changed from Mr Bartle to Mr Floyd and the Reverend Robert Riddle had changed to the Reverend Corey, and these two gentlemen decided that I had a quite unique treble voice and suggested that I sang
(FIRST TAPE ENDS)

IV. MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS About this time the town seemed to be full of wounded soldiers, they were very evident anywhere you went in the town because they wore a loose blue uniform which indicated they were wounded. And train loads of stretcher cases were constantly being brought to Castle Station. And we used to go down and stand outside Castle Station and the stretcher cases were loaded into ambulances which were really army lorries which were just being used, taking over from horses, because everything when the war first started was drawn by horses. But these flimsy looking army vehicles used to take the wounded to the various hospitals but most particularly from Castle Station they went to Berrywood hospital which was being used as a casualty station And my brother Harold, who did not pass for the army, he belonged to the medical corps and he was one the helpers at Castle Station who used to help unload the soldiers and load them into the lorries ready to be taken away.

One of my most abiding memories is of the illness that children suffered when I was a boy, and three of my particular playmates died: Alf Young who sat in a twin desk with me always in school, I don't know what they all died of, (his father drove the horse bus that ran from St Mary's Church to the town), and another boy named Stockton who lived in Clinton Road and when he died the whole class marched round to his house and we viewed him as he laid in his coffin. I'd never seen anyone dead before and to see this small boy, in a box, it moved me a great deal; another boy named Bignall who lived in Southampton Road, he

also died when he was about my age at that time and I thought a lot of those three boys very much.

Apart from illness the abiding memory I think, in winter time, was chilblains. I used to have chilblains something dreadful, my hands used to swell and my feet, and I've seen my sister with her hands so swollen that she couldn't get gloves on. And when you think there was no such thing as Wellington boots in those days and when you went to school through the snow your boots and shoes were full of snow when you arrived and if you sat at the back of the class and the teacher stood in front of the fire, which as far as I can remember was the only form of heating, you soon became like a lump of stone, especially your feet. And I'm surprised we even survived the winter let alone manage to learn as well!

Of course it wasn't always winter and we had hot sunny days just as we do today but in the winter the food was short because of the war, we were a bit fortunate there because of the soldiers, but all together it was a pretty grim time and a very sad time. A motor car was a very rare sight and an aeroplane an even more infrequent sight so, when us boys who were playing in a road in Towcester Road saw an aeroplane just above the roof tops and obviously going to land somewhere, we raced towards it which was in the Rothersthorpe Road. We found the plane landed in a field (which was known as the Daisy Field) just beyond the railway bridge in Rothersthorpe Road and in it were two men. The rear one was just getting out, together with a lot of suitcases and off he went. It was a twin-winged aeroplane with wire and struts, it looked a proper flimsy thing, but the pilot in the front of the body of the plane was helmeted and goggled and indicated to us boys to swing the propeller. Well I was much too small for this job so the elder boys they went and they swung the propeller and suddenly it started. And it hit one of the boys on the head and down he went like a log! The pilot taxied across the field and took off and we were left with this boy, blood streaming from his head and obviously unconscious!

We didn't know what to do, there was no such thing as ambulances and a phone, I think the police station was the only place with a phone. And then one boy remembered that Mr Hart who lived in Rothersthorpe Road had got a motor car, I think the only motorcar, the first motor car in Far Cotton, and he went down to him and Mr Hart came up in his car and we lifted this boy into the back of the car and off he went.

Another time I was coming by All Saints church and sitting on the plinth at the bottom of one of the columns was a lady. And as I passed a lump of plaster from between the columns at the top fell down and hit her on the head and down she went! And again I was confronted by someone lying on the floor with blood streaming from their head and I didn't know what to do. Other people came and looked and then the policeman on point duty on the top of Bridge Street he came and he had a good look at her and eventually he went off to Dychurch Lane, which was the central police station then, and came back in about ten minutes with a stretcher on wheels. It was a kind of a canvas thing with a hood like a pram and brown canvas covering and the spectators who were there in some numbers by then lifted the lady into this stretcher thing and the policemen went pushing it towards the hospital.

I tell you these things because at that time there was no such thing as ambulances and if you hurt yourself or were taken ill or anything you either lived or died there was no immediate help, you eventually got some help, but there was nothing very rapid about it. Diphtheria and scarlet fever were very rampant when I was a child and if you contracted these diseases

you had to go to an isolation hospital, which was in Harborough Road (it's still there to this day as far as I know). But they took you there in a cart drawn by a horse which we called the fever cart and it was a kind of a brown, dark brown, varnished vehicle and it was the most forbidding looking thing and if we kids saw it about anywhere in Far Gotten we would follow it to see who the latest victim was. Later, much much later, years later, I was to be taken to that hospital myself with scarlet fever. But by the time I went they'd changed it to a motor vehicle.

Many things that were common in those days you don't see today. For instance, in the short road that runs from Southampton Road and joins Euston Road and St Leonard's Road - it was called Junction Road and they named it after a councillor eventually and called it Haines Road - but in that short street, or road, there was a bakers (Slater's) and then next to that was a butchers (Edward's) and then across the road was a greengrocers (I forget that) and then another butchers, named Ewing, and then a post office and groceries store named Christie's. And the baker who used to have to keep his fires going over the weekend, if you took your Sunday dinner to him in a baking tin, he would bake it for you for thrupence. And when you by there on a Sunday it was the most appetising smell with all these meals cooking.

Next to the bakers was a butcher who used to make faggots in a brick shed at the end of his yard, and on Fridays people would queue with basins to get these hot faggots and they were made of scraps of meat and onions and all sorts of seasoning and things but it smelt very good. But you queued with your basin on a Friday evening and he would fill the basin and in the same shed, across the other side, while you were waiting to have your basin filled, his pony was stabled and you could stroke the pony while you were waiting for your basin. I'm told that if you kept this concoction and let it get cold you could cut it into blocks. But I'm not sure about that because we never actually bought any, but I just used to fetch it for neighbours.

Harold and Lou, my two elder brothers had a cinematograph and they could show films with it, they had about a dozen films. How they came by a cinematograph I don't know, but it was a paraffin lamp and you turned the handle to project the film, and Eddie and myself would invite our school friends round of an evening, some evenings, and we would sit and watch these flickering images that were projected onto a table cloth on the back of the door. Of course Eddie and I saw the same films over and over again but for the different boys who came, well of course it was all a novelty for them. But one night, as I say it was a paraffin lamp that threw the light and the films were made of celluloid, I need hardly tell you what happened next - the whole lot went up in flames! - the box of films as well which stood at the side of the projector, and we were all very lucky to get out of the house and throw the whole flaming inferno onto the garden without the house catching fire. And that was the end of that.

Most children when I was young went to Sunday school, in fact I didn't know anyone who didn't go to Sunday school. One of the things we looked forward to was the Sunday school treat, or tea-party, which took place in the summer of course. And I remember we all went to Blisworth, the big field on the right as you go towards the big stone bridge on the main road, we had that as a tea party. And we all went in a train from Bridge Street station to Blisworth Station and then walked. Another year we went to Delapre Abbey and held the tea party in the park in front of the big house. Another time we went to Forge Farm in Hardingstone and for that we went on wheeled kind of carts that were called brakes I think,

were pulled by two horses and held about twenty children I should think. Another time we went to Franklin's Gardens which was a garden at that time with a lake and flowers and a little zoo, and we had no end of fun playing games and sports and holding races, singing, all a very enjoyable day and to get there we had a fleet of trams that took us from Far Cotton, St Mary's church up to Franklin's Gardens and then later on brought us all back again.

I remember once going along the riverside from South Bridge along the towpath there- and seeing a lot of children being loaded into barges and they were going to a tea party at I think Clifford Hill or Clifford Mill (I've never been there but it's somewhere against Weston) and I think it was the chapel, the local chapel were taking these children. I thought it was rather a novel way of taking children out and they had to sail down the river to this rendezvous sort of thing, Lord knows what would have happened if one of the barges sank, with all these kids on board! But anyway apparently that's how they enjoyed their day.

During the summertime one of the favourite places for us kids was Midsummer Baths on the Bedford Road. The baths were entirely surrounded by grass with a fence all the way round but there was a huge area of grass where you could undress, put your clothes into a pile, no one would touch them, and sometimes on school holidays or weekends when it was hot we would go there and spend all day there, taking some food with us, splashing about in the water and laying on the grass and generally having a good time. There was one man who particularly took an interest in the boys at that time and I hold him in great regard. He was very, very keen on teaching boys to swim and if he saw you splashing about and not swimming or obviously a newcomer or new person to the water he would put his hands under your chin and he would persist with you until you could swim. Sometimes it only took five minutes. Another time it might take half an hour or more. It was Mr Shoemith, he was a solicitor in the town and he went swimming every day - every day, winter and summer, Christmas, every day. And looking back at that time I hold him in great regard because he was so much of a gentleman and looked after the kids very well.

At that time the ladies' bathing pool and the men's were entirely separate, with a fence in-between them. Well, later on, some years later, they took the fence down and made it one big bathing pool. As far as I know the water from the river just ran through the bathing pool and came in one end and went out the other, so it was really just the river water that we were bathing in. Some years later the electricity generating station, which was across the other side of the river, pumped their water which was warm and chlorinated into the pool and that made the bathing much better and safer. But I think eventually the whole bathing system was abandoned because of the unhygienic state of the water, and the town had several bathing places - Paddings Meadow, Kingsthorpe Mill - and most of the time, us boys of an evening would go and just swim in the canal. Going to school along the main road was quite an experience. On the right hand side of Main Road was a huge area of sidings, railway sidings, and they contained hundreds and hundreds of trucks and cattle wagons. You could see men at work loading or unloading. One particular item of loading remains in my mind and that was when men were loading railway lines onto a flat railway truck. There'd be about twenty men standing and a pile of railway lines in front of them and, at a given signal, usually a shout from the foreman, they would bend down, grasp one rail, and slide it up a prepared greasy wooden slope onto the truck. The outlay in manpower must have been enormous because sometime later they prepared the railway track in a shed somewhere and a crane came along and lifted the prepared sections onto the truck, it, must have saved an enormous amount of energy.

Further on you'd see cattle trucks full of cattle - I think they came from Ireland, they were waiting to go to the market - trucks full of coal, stones, bricks, all sorts of things, and opposite the school was the entrance to the engine sheds. You got to these by going over a bridge that took you over the sidings and the men in the engine sheds were there to prepare the trains for running out of Castle station presumably.

But a man who started there as a boy, he started by cleaning the engines and then he became a preparer, you might call him. He oiled the wheels and the moving parts, made sure the boiler was full of water, made sure the tender was full of coal and when the engine was required to haul a train, they lit the fire, got up steam and it was quite a skilled job to get steam up at the times the train was required to pull out the trucks or the carriages or whatever and from then on the man would graduate to become a fireman on a train and then to a driver and that was quite a respected profession, a railway engine driver, quite an elite job.

Anyway we used to go over this bridge sometimes and watch these men on our way to school if we'd got time and the bridge that took you there, as you came back, there was a flight of stairs and there was a large wooden handrail all the way up that had been greased over about a hundred years by these men going to and from work and we used to slide down this wooden handrail. It was great fun, but not realising the danger because there was spiked railings underneath Mr Jones, Gaffer Jones the headmaster, forbid us to go across there or go anywhere on railway property. But one morning we all forgot and over we went and we came back sliding down the handrail as usual, laughing and talking and a yard or so from the bottom Mr Jones was waiting for us with a cane. I can feel that cane across my buttocks now, he cut into my backside and the other boys too. We were lined up and ordered into his office across at the school and we were given a severe lecture on obeying instructions and then we were given six cane strokes on each hand, all of us, I can feel those cuts today, they were painful for days and days. We never went on the bridge anymore.

In Far Cotton a lot of the men worked either on the railway or in the brewery or in the ironstone works in the Rothersthorpe Road and Northampton had several breweries; Phipps' brewery in Bridge Street, the Northampton Brewery Company also in Bridge Street, there was a brewery opposite Castle Station called Mannings and another one called Abington Brewery Company on the Abington Street/Wellingborough Road against Lutterworth Road. So Far Cotton had quite a number of smells, all of its own. When the brewery were doing the malting, as they called it, it sent out a particular sort of smell, a rather pleasant one I found, it was roasting barley, or doing something with it, to change the enzymes into sugar (or the other way round, I'm not quite sure) but when they were doing it it made quite a nice smell. And then the gasworks, they sent their own smell out of sulphur and tar and gas and smoke. There were several foundries in Far Cotton, Rice's and Crown Foundry, and they all emitted their own particular smells and you could tell which way the wind was more or less in Far Cotton by what you were smelling. The ironstone works in Rothersthorpe Road was a huge melting plant that lit up the whole sky at night in Far Cotton and I remember there was a lot of concern during the war that this fiery inferno would guide the Zeppelins to Northampton, and I think they made arrangements for putting the fire out at short notice, but whether they did on that particular night when we were raided I've got no idea. One day Gaffer Jones came round to all the classes in the school and we were all assembled in the playground, it was the eleventh of November 1918. When we were all assembled in the playground Mr Jones said that the war was going to end at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, that morning. And we all stood out in the playground

on that cold November day until St Mary's clock struck eleven and Mr Jones said, "The war is now over" and we all trooped back and resumed our lessons.

I can't remember the exact date or the time or when it was precisely but one day Mr Steidlin, the man at Blisworth, came to our house in Southampton Road and announced that he had retired from the railway and that he was moving up to London and was getting married. It seemed incredible! This old man with a huge white beard getting married! It seemed unbelievable, but that's what he said and eventually he went out the door and we never saw him again, and I never went to his place in Blisworth again. But recently - I'm talking about 1997 now when I'm making this recording - I went along the Station Road and saw that the whole edifice had gone, this huge stone building that supported forty thousand gallons of water on its roof, the reservoir had gone, the gasometer had gone and all I'm left with is the memories. I suppose I'm the only one alive today who has memories of that place - of the errand running, the gas making, the horses along the canalside, the gardening, the riding on the buses the shouting to the people to keep their heads down - it's all memories. My Mum was always in great demand by the neighbours, if anyone was in any sort of distress, someone dying my Mum would sit with them, if they were having a baby she would be there, she helped in all sorts of ways to the neighbours and when you think that she was running a house and a home with a large family and to organise the meals, do the washing, I really appreciate it more today than I did then because it must have been quite a strain on my mum to organise all these activities.

But one thing she always did, she always made her own bread, and she never used yeast. Next door to us was Mr Bruce who worked at the brewery We used to go to the brewery, seek him out - he always looked some gas —(?), but we found him and he'd fill a stone jar that we took with us with stuff that he skimmed off the top of the beer vats. My Mum called it "balm" but whatever it was I don't know, but we used to dip our finger in it as we went home and it tasted like beer to me. But anyway my Mum always used that to make bread. And they charged us a ha'penny for it by the way, the brewery, so that we didn't get it for nothings.

But when the bread was made and the dough was in the tins we (when I say we, it was either me and Eddie cos there were several tins or me and Fred Gooding my particular friend who lived nearby) and we used to have to take it to the bakehouse round the back of St Leonard's Road and we would go the next day and fetch this bread and it had risen to such an extent that it had run down the sides of the tins and you could break this crusty extrusion off and it was absolutely delicious.

Another thing that my mother used in cooking that you never hear of today, the milk man used to save her some special milk that my mother called 'beastings' it was the first milk that was drawn from a cow after the cow had calved and it had some special qualities that my mother prized very highly and she said that it made the best Yorkshire Pudding and I think she was right because they were really nice.

There was no such thing as pasteurised milk in those days, you drank milk straight from the cow, and when I think that we used to drink water straight from a well, we went swimming in the river or in the canal, I wonder that we survived all this hygienic goings on.

The undertaker who carried on his business in Abbey Road, Far Cotton, was a family of three generations named Wright. The very old Mr Wight was an old man with a long white

beard and he always wore a top hat and he could be seen walking about in Far Cotton, his son was a man of about fifty when I was a schoolboy. And then his son Erin was a very special friend of mine, we used to go swimming together. Well, just after the war finished, there was a huge epidemic of influenza which swept across Europe and killed more people than the war (1921 – 2). There was an estimate of twenty million people who died from it over the European continent and I know this Wright family were really busy because they used to do the whole business; they made the coffins and conducted the funeral, which were horses and a hearse then, and everybody was buried in the Towcester Road cemetery and one of the customs that Mr Wright always practised was that when there was a bereavement, in a house he used to come and screw a lump of black wood to your front window frame, it was quite a large piece, and it was to let people know that you'd got a bereavement in the house. And I remember Mr Wright saying that there were so many deaths that he couldn't provide all these pieces of black wood and he had to discontinue doing it.

Another custom was that anyone who died, the parson at the church, the vicar, would toll the bell and it didn't matter whether you went to church, chapel or no denomination at all he would still toll the bell to let people know someone had died. But when this epidemic was on the bell tolled continuously and my mother no longer said "I wonder who's dead today?" because there were so many people dying you couldn't keep track of them all.

At this time, when the war was over, we were asked by the opera house in Guildhall Road - or the vicar was - to supply eight choirboys to act in a play called 'Seven Days Leave' and it was supposed to be sailors and soldiers returning from the war and the village population attending a service round the village war memorial which was painted onto a backcloth with a village street scene behind it'. We were all grouped on the stage and we sang hymns and conducted a kind of memorial service to the fallen comrades. Well when the play was over the curtain came down, remained down for three seconds and then went up again and while it was down for the three seconds we were supposed to all move towards the war memorial and kneel down and bow our heads. Well unfortunately on the first night acting I was on the end of this row of choirboys and the curtain came down on the wrong side of me! And I was on the audience side! I'm sure I heard the audience tittering because I'd made a complete hash of it, or at least I'd stood in the wrong place. But when the curtain went up I was able to go towards the others and kneel down and it all passed off. But you believe me, when it was all over the stage manager came and he was absolutely beside himself with fury - I'd ruined the whole scene, I was a stupid boy, and he used words that I'd never heard of before!

Previous to this, at the rehearsals, he told us boys that we were going to get ten bob for this performance. We weren't quite sure whether it was ten bob between us or ten bob each and we all too polite to ask but as it turned out it was ten bob each so we were rich for a few days after it, but my Mum had most of it.

Going back to my previous years, when I was three years old - I've told you how vivid my memory was about going to school - but I've two other memories of when I was three. One was of sitting on my father's shoulders in Cattle Market Road, I think it was, or The Promenade as they call it, and watching a huge fireworks display and I was told afterwards when I got a bit older it was the coronation of George V, and it was held in Becketts Park which was then called Cow Meadow.

Another time when I was three, and I was at school if I remember right, we were given - or we bought for a penny - a flag on a bit of a stick and we were led to Towcester Road where we stood along the pavement and awaited the arrival of King George and Queen Mary who were due to come down Towcester Road on their way to Althorp house. But of course I didn't know that at the time, all I knew was that I'd got to stand on the pavement and wave at these motors that went by. They were really some of the most magnificent motors that I'd seen at that tender age but I don't remember seeing anything of the king or the queen cos they all went by so fast and we were busy shouting and waving our flags.

One of the highlights of my youth was going to the pictures. They were silent films of course and they always had a pianist or someone playing music continuously while the film was on. I remember particularly Vince Palace which was at the top end of the horse market, it's Bells's shop I believe today, and it was one and a half pence (three ha'pence) to go in and I remember Ena taking me regularly there, sometimes they'd give you a little tiny stick of rock as you came out and sometimes if there was an extraordinary lot of children there they would make you sit two in a seat, either squashing side by side or sit on one another's lap. The excitement of watching Houdini and Pearl White, Fatty Arbuckle was well worth the discomfort. Another picture place was the Pavillion at the All Saints end of Gold Street, that was a regular place to visit for us, that was tuppence to go in. But most of all, the biggest treat of all, was the exchange cinema with its magnificent organ and I used to love to go there because sometimes they had an interlude when the film was not being shown and the man on the organ played selections of music, I used to find that very enjoyable. The Picturedrome, opposite the racecourse, they had a five-piece orchestra and they played and it was well worth listening to and of course the film was being shown at the same time.

Another source of music were the fairs that regularly visited Northampton, there was one that came that used to set up in a field at the back of Southampton Road between Southampton Road and Penrhyn Road, there was a field there and sometimes the fair would be there for a week or so. But more regularly they set up on a piece of wasteland next to the cattle market. There were some huge fairs there where we always went of course - the kids, the coconut shies, brandy-snap stall, roundabouts - and of course they played all sorts of music that would have been enjoyable on its own but each joyride, roundabout, or whatever was playing different music so all it was just a great big jangle of sound.

After the First World War most tradesmen delivered their wares to your door; I mean the baker called daily, the milkman called daily, the butcher would send it if you ordered it, usually with a boy on a bike with a basket in front of his handlebars and if you rang or sent a request to the co-op, Earl's, Kingham's, Sybil's, any those shops would deliver. Different to today when everybody gets a car out and goes and does all the work themselves, and they complain about the disturbance of the atmosphere with car exhaust fumes and whatnot but everybody has to fetch their own groceries today. One service that I would love to see reinstated is the old way of having parcel boys on the trams and buses. There was about a dozen parcel boys dressed in the uniform of the Corporation Transport, in other words black tunic with red piping, and you could give these parcel boys, or any conductor, a parcel - I think up to about thirty pounds in weight - and they would deliver it anywhere in the town, or you could take it to the office that was in the middle of the town - somewhere near where the fish market is now - and these parcel boys would hop on any tram or bus and take it to any destination in Northampton, usually within the hour and I think the maximum cost was sixpence.

Another service that the bus and trams supplied was the late trams - I think from eight o'clock onwards - had a box on the side, on the left hand side of the tram or bus - well it was trams mainly - and you could post letters in there anytime up to the last tram. And they would be taken from the box and posted in the general post office, which I think was in Abingdon.....
(SECOND TAPE ENDS)

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