

Living Memories of Geoff Stables

interviewed by John Neall -2011

I was born in 1951 at home in our little council bungalow on Wong Lane. Nurse Hawkesworth and Dr. Coutts-Wood were in attendance. Ours was the end bungalow next door to the farm. Hens pecked and old machines threshed over the wall, and it was ideal.

The word 'ideal' sums up my childhood in Tickhill, and another apt word is 'freedom.' Wong Lane in those days was very narrow and days could pass without the sight of a vehicle. The first ice-cream vendor I remember calling was horse-drawn and I recall often seeing a man resembling Lord Kitchener in leather gaiters leading shire horses around 'Woods Corner.' We played cricket and football in the lane, marbles on the pavement, built dens in the hedgerow and waged war against armies of red ants.

The road was only half of the width it is now and beyond the hedge that ran along its length, where the huge estate stands now was a vast cornfield. It stretched seemingly miles to a far horizon of bushes and trees where billowing clouds of steam could be seen from the colliery trains.

My brother, Phil, and friends from the bungalows were the children who shared my little world in those early years. Three lanes cut through the fields, Vineyard, Greystone and the larger Wilsic. We walked, cycled, nested, climbed and explored. We were totally free and happy. The only passing danger as we saw it was Mr. Shipley, the farmer as we played in his long grass on the Wong fields. With television still in its infancy life was lived outdoors whenever we could, summer and winter.

Some of my earliest memories besides life on 'the lane' are of school. Phil was already at school and so I toddled after him and Mum twice a day along Tithes Lane. I was desperate to start and remember begging to be left long before I was old enough. I do still remember running up to school on my first day, past the candle factory, not even pausing to look down at its sunken door where older children said snakes could be seen. I stood staring into the little yard and eventually my eyes met those of Mrs. Speight. She wore a long red 'mac' and bending down with her huge 'mac' open, smiled an invitation. I ran straight at her and lost myself in the folds of her coat and a welcoming cuddle. I also remember being draped in that red 'mac' sitting on a tiny pastel painted chair whilst my shorts dried on the fireguard before the huge smelly stove. Friends were impatiently asking if I was coming to play yet and I kept answering "soon" without the slightest embarrassment. The stoves were a feature of every classroom and a late chute after chute of acrid, hissing coke, glowing red as they melted the ice on our tiny milk bottles. Mrs. Speight gave us all a warm and secure start in her miniscule classroom. How could she fail? She had a Victorian rocking horse in there, a climbing frame beside her door and a bright red 'mac'!

Our second teacher was the headmaster's first wife, Mrs. Rice. She was very effective, but had a totally different style. Our days began in two straight lines with our hands raised as if in surrender. She walked slowly in her brown corduroy suit up and down the lines scrutinising our hands 'front and back' before we were allowed up the three steps into her room. I remember being petrified standing in a corner with Gillian Burton because we had coloured in the hem of our printed angel's dress before being told to start.

What a joy to be released into the playground to ride our imaginary ponies or play in the tyres. To our delight the surface of the playground was littered with rubber tyres from all sorts of cars and some that seemed so huge we thought they came from tractors. We often raced each other up and down the yard batting them along like

hoops. On other occasions we built battle ships or forts using them. We were banned from them for a week or two once when somebody decided one made an effective latrine.

Our final infant teacher was Little Miss Haddock (who later became the second Mrs Rice). She was an amazing teacher who made all aspects of learning a joy. On hot afternoons she would lead us off over the football field and across the meadows beyond bordering Common Lane. We were even allowed to climb the crab apple tree and 'Sam' Langford always climbed highest.

On another memorable hot summer afternoon she allowed Brian Kilvington (Killa) to bring his guinea pig to school. We all sat on the warm tarmac in front of the timber temporary classroom (which remained temporary for years). We sat in a wide circle, but with our knees touching so that the little creature had the freedom to race around its human paddock. The enduring memory is of Little Miss Haddock disappearing under her classroom crawling in pursuit of the guinea pig that one piece of the human fence let through! The epitome of understanding, 'L.M.H.' didn't waste time inspecting hands in her line, but let a group of us boys out of the line to tie up our imaginary ponies behind the classroom.

She appeared to be the typical little spinster teacher who eventually married later in life. In my adult years, when she was Amy Rice and I too was a teacher, we were great friends and I learned that she had had a most extraordinary life involving experimentation as a young teacher for the 1944 Education Act, suffering the loss of her fiancé who was the navigator on a pathfinder bomber late in the war and adventures whilst living in Australia including fleeing bush fires.

As we moved up into the juniors our teacher was 'Big Miss Haddock' Amy's sister. 'Big School' and therefore 'Big Miss Haddock.' Another excellent teacher, but we were in the Big School now and the days of imaginary ponies were behind us. The run of teachers who were little in stature but big in terms of character continued with the feisty Miss Tattersall who in my memory was always swathed in her huge college scarf. In her class we tuned in to the radio to witness Yuri Gagarin circling the earth and hear tales of her little black rabbit getting stuck in the teapot. J.3 was shared between Mrs Stewardson whose demeanour was very much kindly great aunt and Miss Bolam who was a serial leg-slapper and didn't seem to reign long.

All too soon it was J.4 and life in the little black hut. Our final teacher was Mr. Hilton, our hero. Initially he saved us from Mrs Bentham who kept on making comebacks from retirement and who as legend had it, had pulled out a lock of Buster Barker's hair and made him use it as a bookmark! Though I'm sure the story wasn't true, tales like it and his introducing football to the school made him into Superman. We at last had a school team and a green and white kit that the two Miss Haddocks even sewed numbers on.

Ascension Day during my time in the junior school was marked by an old tradition. If you were a member of the church choir or one of the lucky few chosen by lot from the J.4 class you were included. The whole school was assembled on the playground whilst the chosen band marched off towards St Mary's, eyes fixed on the tower. The first time I took part had me gripped by mixed emotions, fear perhaps taking the edge over excitement. We entered the small door at the foot of the church tower and entering into the gloom we snaked our way slowly up the stone spiral. I remember on the more uneven sections feeling my way up with my hands on all fours. When at last we were up and out of the trap door into the light we were treated to amazing views of our village. We then all packed the side facing school and after waving to all our miniature friends far beneath us, it was time to sing. We had to sing at the top of our lungs and the strains of 'Jesus Christ is risen today' were actually heard far below.

Another treasured memory of life in J4 was when we marched off weekly to 'The Gardens.' This was our school allotment at the top of the Wong field, across the lane and on towards what is now the industrial estate. We lined up beyond the popular trees to receive a spade, fork or hoe from Mr Hilton and sometimes Mr Rice. Later we marched back down with Mr Rice laden with produce. After crossing Wong Lane came the best bit. We all stood in a row at the top of the field, the church and the school way before us. We then raced down the 'Wong' hurdling over cowpats (if we were lucky) on our way, touched the playground wall and sprinted back up to Mr Hilton.

On the day we left school we were allowed to bring games and toys to school. 'Charlie' Marsden brought his tape recorder and Willy Wilcox and myself joined him recording our versions of 'Love Me Do' and 'I Remember You' whilst Paul Wrigley did his impression of Albert Steptoe. There was a huge lump in my throat saying goodbye to Mr Hilton and walking through the gates for the last time. I had been looking forward to going to Maltby Grammar School, but at that moment I would have cheerfully signed up for four more years in the juniors. (And I probably would now!).

In the late 1950's Sunday mornings found me seated in the choir stalls of St. Mary's listening to Canon Cook. A name that often cropped up was Miss Garnett, and usually it was associated with 'thank yous.' Thank you for the altar flowers and especially an annual thank you for the loan of her gardens at West Garth for the staging of the garden fete.

As children, we loved the chance to glimpse behind the high walls of the 'Big House,' romp around the vast gardens, shop for 'white elephants' etc. on the stalls and have a dip in the bran tub or roll old wooden balls at old wooden skittles. The other side of all this was that we had to dance around the maypole to Mrs Turner's instructions and Mrs Hume's piano. On one occasion I even got a starring role as 'bell boy' to Cynthia Turner's 'May Queen.' The photographs of me in pale blue silk, lace around my neck and buckled shoes would have been an easy source of blackmail had I ever been famous.

West Garth was the 'Big House' and Miss Garnett to my young mind a sort of mythical figure; so much so that when as a young married couple we were in the process of buying our first property from Mary Garnett (by then Mrs Saville) the prospect of being invited round to West Garth for drinks was still a bit daunting. We 'scrubbed up' after a days decorating looking at our best to be met by Mary and Bryan dad in shorts and jeans! So began a friendship of many years and involving us moving into a second of her properties in the old buildings to the rear of West Garth.

Mary was full of stories about life at West Garth in the old days when it was owned by her wine merchant father and serviced by a full staff of servants and gardeners. She told us how she and her brother had designed the present brick fireplace in our sitting room which covered over an original much older fireplace in handmade bricks. They had it built so that they could sit together on raised steps either side of the old hearth. At that time the building was empty and used as a place to play and keep pet rabbits. I must say that the idea of exposing the older fireplace had a strong appeal for us, but the thought of those two children sitting by the fire, one of whom lost his life as a young bomber pilot in 1944 was too much for us. 'Bunny' Garnett's name remains on the war memorial, and his fireplace remains part of our house's ongoing history.

Sundays were still 'special' as I grew up in the 1950's. We were always dressed in our Sunday best and the little time we had for play was confined to our own garden. For a number of years we had a punishing routine as we attended morning Sunday School, went straight on to singing in the choir at morning service, went back to Sunday School after lunch and made the often dark and scary journey to church again for Evensong.

In 1962 Phil and I were made 'leading choirboys.' This gave us the honour of wearing a medal around our necks and carrying the cross down the aisle at the head of the choir in procession. At first it was frightening to stand alone facing the altar and having to judge the right time to turn and lead the choir back down to the vestry with just enough hymn to spare. The very first time I carried the cross gave me the greatest trauma of my young life. That morning I scooted up the side aisle happily with my medal round my neck for the first time, through the little Laughton Chapel to collect the cross from its holder. The cross stood at the end of the choir stalls, its shaft resting in a hole in the floor and the upper shaft rested behind a thin metal hinge, decorative, and bright shiny yellow. Bright, shiny and metal as far as I was concerned meant GOLD. It was designed to simply pull upwards using a small knob, thus releasing the shaft but for some unknown reason it looked to me in my haste as if you pulled it outwards. So I pulled and finding it stiff PULLED again! To my horror the soft metal ripped and I held the little GOLD 'handle and hinge' in my shaking hand. I was terrified. First of Mr. Burchby the choir master, but even more terrified of the fact that this was not just a precious GOLD handle but it was in church and therefore GOD'S GOLDEN HANDLE AND HINGE! Too frightened to own up I spent the next hour and a quarter of the service quaking as I stupidly left the cross balancing unsupported in the hole and I was desperate every time I felt the merest draught.

At the next choir practice Mr Burchby wanted to see Phil and myself, but before he could say a word I began sobbing and 'rawping'! All I can say is that Mr. Jack Burchby turned out to be one of the most compassionate men I've ever met, and he even told me that it had been stiff for quite some time. I was forgiven by Mr Burchby and hopefully by God too.

What made my childhood seem golden was a set of great friends. Killa, Dilly, Charlie, Anny and Monty were at the core of the group. By the time we were top juniors all our spare time was spent together as FREEDOM really kicked in. Adventures all over Tickhill now, safe cycle rides to Roche Abbey, and of course lots of football and cricket. But the greatest stroke of luck was that Dilly's granddad and Uncle Derek farmed at Castle Fields. That gave us all sorts of opportunities for games on haystacks, in barns, around the old fish pond and scary descents into the ice house shinning along a thin branch. As the farm adjoined the castle moat it opened up a chance for all kinds of exploration.

The 'gang' always met on days off, sitting on the steps of the Buttercross deciding what to do. What amuses me fifty years on is that invariably another 'gang' several generations older would be making their own plans on the seat outside Darfield House at the same time. Tid Barnet and Spot, Herbert and Big Bill all clad in flat caps (except Spot), and Cyril Saxton would often as not, be standing in a gang of his own not too far away. So many groups of all ages must have met in these same venues for centuries.

The first of the Stables family to live permanently in the village was Michael who married Hannah Ellis in 1807. His older brother was already married to Hannah's sister who moved to Barnborough to become part of a large Stables family, owning and farming land. It may be wishful thinking but another link could be made to my family and the West Garth Farm as it was then. Michael was the youngest of a large family in Barnborough and therefore had the least prospects and as the owner of West Garth also farmed in Barnborough at the time, I don't think it too fanciful that one farmer may have done another a favour in providing his friend's youngest son with work. If so he could easily have resided in our house, as our home was more than likely used to house farm workers at the time.

Many generations of our family have now lived in Tickhill and I hope loved it as much as I do. Children have become parents themselves and walked their own families through favourite haunts, Water Lane and across the Castle Fields etc. as we did. It leaves a warm feeling to know our pleasures have all been enjoyed by the gener-

ations that went before. But history also turns upside down events too and I often think of James Stables who in Victorian times left his home family and village aboard the carrier's van bound for the Doncaster Union Work House where he died. Every imagined reason for the event ends in sadness.

The Tickhill that I grew up in was not very different to the one my father roamed in the 1920's and 30's. The shops were largely centred where they are now, though uses and names have changed. Taylors is the only shop that remains in the same ownership from my childhood. It was popular even then despite having competition from other grocers on West Gate and North Gate as well as Jarvis' wonderfully old fashioned shop with its mahogany counters, glass cabinets having an array of loose biscuits and wonderful crusty bread. The fishmonger /greengrocer was Fanthorpes and another Jarvis' shop was the drapers where my swimming trunks were bought for school swimming lessons at Maltby open air swimming pool when I was 10.

From our bungalow Phil and myself occasionally ran an errand round the farm corner and down the narrow little 'Paynes Passage' to Fred Payne's shop. We would simply hand the money up onto the counter. Words weren't necessary as everything that needed to be said was written on the list that the coins were wrapped in.

At Barber Jack's we were offered a 'film star's' cut or a 'footballer's cut' which both turned out to be short back and sides. We sat elevated on a wooden board set over the chair the men used whilst his little 'combine harvester' or 'bluebird' hummed over our heads. It was fascinating to hear your hair sizzle on his little corner fire place when he cleaned up his floor.

Central to my childhood of course were my parents. My dad taught locally at Rossington and Bawtry Mayflower Junior Schools. He met my mum during the war. He was a keen footballer and cricketer in his young days but most of all he was a country man who in his youth and early career helped out on local farms in the school holidays. When he took us walking he knew every plant in the hedgerow and could identify every nest by the materials of which it was made. Likewise he could recognise every bird by both sight and song. Mum was a traditional housewife, originally from Lancashire. Between them they gave us a secure childhood in comfortable houses on Wong Lane and later Beech Avenue.

Tickhill has lost some of the beautiful places we walked as a family in the 1950s and 1960s. Stocks Meadows and especially areas around Common Lane and Wong Lane are greatly missed. Many buildings of interest were destroyed in the 1960s that would have been treasured had they survived just another 10 or 20 years.

Having said that, I think the Tickhill of today is a better place in many ways. Shops and facilities have improved, and new people have added to the value of the place.

What we have now is an attractive town which provides enough shops to make us almost self-sufficient whilst still retaining country walks and its historic charm. Tickhill was the setting for a golden childhood, and remains a very pleasant and practical place to live today.