

## Dedham Vale Society

### Article 3 : Dedham, Seventy Years Ago

*The final part of the late Roger Freeman's account of life in Dedham.*

In the village, the major shopping emporium was also the post office on the opposite side of the street to where it is now, and it was kept by Mr and Mrs Ray. Mr Ray was another one of the characters. He was known as Shaver Ray. Once again, the villagers had given him a nickname but I can't tell you how that came about. He had everything in that emporium. If you wanted it, he'd got it. For years, when there was a shortage during the war, people would come from miles around because they had heard that you could probably get it at Ray's in Dedham. He had been in the First World War in the Horse, in the Cavalry, and all he could talk about was the last cavalry charge that he was in. He could be a terrible bore because once you had got him talking, he wouldn't stop, and I have been in that shop and seen people waiting to be served while dear old Shaver rattled on about his experiences with this that and the other. He purchased, in large quantities, the most extraordinary items in that you wondered how he would ever sell the stuff. I can recall being in there and he was accosted by some woman who wanted to ask him about something or other and I recall him saying "I can't stop now madam, I have just got a consignment of chamber pots coming in", and he rushed out the back of the store. Out of curiosity I went out to the back and there weren't just a few chamber pots, there were two or three boxes of chamber pots. How the devil he thought he was going to sell them – I don't know, I was just amazed. But that was just typical of Shaver, he was a wonderful character.

We also had Evan's the butcher, well known of course, and Spearings, high class grocers who delivered far and wide in the area and were really good. Certainly looked up to – very sad to see them go, but the family decided it had got to go. One of the sons built a house up beside The Lamb at Lamb Corner. I lived on Lamb Corner which, as I understand it, was once a group of little thatched houses in the middle of the Birch Wood and, certainly, maps I have seen show that the Birch Wood extended from the A12/Ipswich road, right the way down and around Lamb Corner. It was felled mostly during the Napoleonic Wars when, once again, we had a food shortage. But the story goes that during Henry VIII's purge of the monasteries a group of monks found this little place where there was spring water and they built houses and settled there, but because of possible persecution, they made their chapel in, what became known as, Monk's Farm, in other words, they went through Monks' Lane to this dwelling up off Coles Oak Lane and there they had their little chapel. The names, certainly, illustrate the religious connection, (Monk's Lane and the Lamb Inn, of course, the Holy Lamb) but all this hamlet was then within the wood.

I mentioned this source of spring water. When I was a lad, my father actually pumped water into his house from that spring. But, everybody else living at that corner, all labourers and artisans at that time, bucketed their water home; this was the water that they washed in and drank. A pipe came out into the road ditch – it was known locally as the poop. I can still, in my mind's eye, see people struggling down the road with two buckets of water and down Monk's Lane. Some people had wells but the majority bucketed their water down from that poop and it was there until Colchester Borough Council decided that it was unhygienic and closed it down but it never gave any illness to anybody. Probably helped them because it might have had a few bugs in it!

At Lamb Corner was a carpenter's shop where most of the coffins for the churchyard were made by Mr Denny the builder. He had several houses around the village. A nice man, no family, but he carried-out most of the building work within the village and this was his main work shop. I can remember going there as a lad to get cigarette cards from the men because, in those days, nearly every labourer smoked. Most kids collected them and it was one of the main hobbies apart from bird's eggs in the Spring. It's probably a good thing that you don't see boys in the fields now!

Kids used to amuse themselves by going around the hedgerows and cutting out sticks to make catapults or pop guns; the countryside was a source of entertainment for young children. They were everywhere most of them trespassing and they would hide up. I have trespassed many times myself on other people's farms but kids lived in the countryside. It was hard on the birds because we all collected eggs. We got up to all sorts of tricks in the fields and hedgerows; today you never see any kids because they have got computer games and what have you. There is a sad element in this because I think kids were all the better for it. Occasionally you do still see the odd kid come down this lane but very, very rarely.

The Vicar, ah yes. Back in the 30s the Reverend Given Wilson was the vicar and, in those days, you tipped your hat to him - he was looked up to. But, again, this was true of most villages. The vicar held sway as probably one of the most important people within the village. People were far more religious and went to church far more regularly. Certainly, in those days, the church was pretty well attended and this was before we got an influx of people from Colchester and elsewhere who liked to be seen worshipping in Dedham Church. I know that sounds rather cruel but its a fact. This was probably brought about by the Reverend Johnston in post war years. He had been a journalist and had a view of brightening the church. He introduced a passion play and was a great man who could see that we needed to brighten a church to encourage people to go.

But going back to Given Wilson; he was a bachelor and I recall that on the last day of the year, every year, he would walk all the footpaths. I have seen that old boy, who was quite short, battling shoulder high through a field of frozen marrow-stem kale which was grown for cattle fodder and, probably about 4ft high. He must have got soaked as he struggled along one of the footpaths that ran across the field from Rye Farm down to the village!

He was somewhat of a tartar I suppose. He really didn't have much to do with the choirboys: I don't think he had a lot of time for them really, but the honest truth is that I never got to know the man very well. He would soon tell you that your cassock was not on properly but, that was more of a command than conversation.

The village organist was Brian Hix, a fine organist but a man who had no discipline with the choirboys. He invariably had a drip on the end of his nose, summer or winter, and I remember because he used the back of his hand to wipe his nose and sometimes the front of his hand and then he would get hold of you by the ear if you misbehaved yourself. He was a nice man though, a very nice man. He did piano tuition lessons in the village but we boys could get round him because a lot of the hymns in choir practice were quite boring and we'd say "Please Mr Hix will you play the Trumpet Voluntary"? We knew that he loved playing the Trumpet Voluntary and that was quite a piece of music. And we knew that when Brian Hix was playing the Trumpet Voluntary we could muck about unseen because he concentrated on his music. We were a horrible lot. A horrible lot.

Hewitt at Lower Park was a benefactor of the village. (The Hewitt Hall). A religious man. I can't remember whether he had religious orders or not but you certainly doffed you hat to the family because they had provided the hall. There was certainly a pecking order in this village way back then, no doubt about it.

The garages in the village. There was Cottee's Garage run by old man Cottee and of course, Joe Cottee who was away in the war. They ran a Taxi service and were the main source of petrol fuel during the war. They handled the rations for people who had rations, my father having a ration as a farmer for business purposes.

The other village garage and also the main taxi business was run by Jim Howe, an old rogue really. He lived at the little house and garage which is where that very expensive mansion has recently been built, just as you go down from the Mill, from the village, on the right hand side. The garage and garage house were turned into a restaurant called The Mallard run by an Australian couple for many years and then, as you know, it was knocked down and this vast mansion was built. They were the only two garages within the village, as far as I can remember.

The Mill was a thriving concern and a very good enterprise. Harold Clover was a pretty shrewd businessman and he ran that mill very efficiently. Harold, I think, was way up in the Home Guard during the war and the Home Guard in Dedham. The officers were usually people of some influence even if they had no military training and I always thought it was a bit unfair because this was the class pecking order. You had people in the Home Guard who had been soldiers and had military experience who did not have any NCO or officer rank whereas their administrators, their officers, were people who were simply picked because they were people of some importance in the village. As I said, the old class distinction thing coming into play.

But Dedham Mill handled local wheat and produce and, in fact, we sold a good deal of our stuff there for many years, post war as well, and it became a very efficient mill.

In the village, as mentioned before, we had a baker, butcher and what have you. Many of these little shops had people who worked elsewhere because I don't think that some of them could provide enough income to keep just the shopkeeper.

Air raid wardens, yes. We had air raid wardens. My father was appointed as an auxiliary fire serviceman, given a steel helmet and a stirrup pump. He never had cause to use it. These sort of appointments were doled out by the Ministry of Defence, early in the war. Nearly every able bodied man had some sort of additional duty to his occupation perhaps the fire service or maybe as an air raid warden.

Some of them were in occupations such as the Royal Observer Corps. Mr Chesterfield, who was a poultry farmer in Coles Oak Lane, was in the Royal Observer Corps throughout the war. They reported enemy aircraft and his posting was at the headquarters in Colchester.

The Royal Observer Corps post, for this area, was up on the hill above Lawford, where all those houses have been built on the approach down to the station and, I believe, the underground bunker that was built after the war is still there. I was in the Observer Corps after the war. But, the old boys who used to keep the Observer Corps post were drawn from all walks of life.

The chief observer was a headmaster called Hughes, from Lawford School.

Well, when I first joined in 1950 which was the time of the Korean War, he said to me "Young man. I just think I ought to let you know that there are things that go on here that are not in the book. You will see that the boys use binoculars on things that they shouldn't use them on". These old devils were spying on some poor, unfortunate woman who lived on a houseboat down at Brantham and she used to sunbathe on the far side, the river side, where she thought she wouldn't be seen!