

# MEMORIES OF THE MELBURYS

**Y**ou know the way; it's the same as we went yesterday, going to chapel - only go on past there up the street. The school is beyond the church." My mother slung the satchel over my shoulder. "Your lunch is in there, and a note to the headmistress." She straightened my cap. "On your way! It's a good school - you'll do alright there. You will probably pick up a Dorset dialect but never mind. You will also learn to take care of yourself." Small comfort to an eight-year-old with a mile to walk across lonely parkland to a school he had never seen - an alien place where he knew not a soul.

My mother was right in her predictions. It was the last that caught up on me first. As a 'chapel boy' it seemed that I was a form of low life which needed to be taught its place. My classmates found that I was not too well disposed to the idea and brought pressure to bear. After three or four weeks of this I finally fought my chief tormentor, leaving both

of us with the scars of battle and laying the foundation for a firm friendship with him and his peers. But that's another story.

It was indeed a good school in those mid-twenties years. Its headmistress, Miss Rintoul, regularly expected - and got - several 'eleven plus' places each year without in any way failing the rest of her pupils. I cannot remember a single child who left without at least a working knowledge of the 'three Rs' and a wholesome approach to living.

The school was stone built and 'L' shaped. The 'big room' was high, with broad eaves beneath which a large colony of house martins nested each year. The upper classes - the eights to fourteens - worked there, divided by the simple expedient of facing half the desks towards each end. One large Tortoise coke stove kept us warm and boiled the kettles for the 'lunch children' to make cocoa at mid-day. There must have been some eighty of us there taught by two

teachers. The 'tinies' were in the other wing of the building - some fifty of them with a teacher and a helper usually.

It was a church school visited by the rector, the Revd. Blaitwaite, who certainly had nothing against 'chapel boys.' A keen naturalist, he was only too ready to encourage me and several others who had the beginnings of that same interest. While I was there the village hall was built in the next field. Some of us boys got quite filthy helping unload the first consignment of bricks.

The school was at Melbury Osmond, the largest of the Melburys, all of which were included in and surrounded by the Ilchester Estate. The village was just one street, winding up the hill from the brook which flowed along the road to the church, school and hall at the top. The houses and cottages straggled along each side of this street and were mostly

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occupied by people who worked for, or had some connection with, the estate. About half way up was the village shop serving an incredible number of our daily needs - post office, newsagent, grocer, hardware sundries and, most important, sweets of the kinds beloved by us school kids - when we had enough spare pocket money for them!

Two sisters, the Misses Watts, kept the shop - a friendly couple who were never too busy to serve us youngsters. I would go in there on my way home from school to collect our newspaper. On Saturdays I would have to make a special journey to fetch it. Behind the shop their brother ran the bakery.

Beside the brook stood the chapel, a rather plain building inside and out, where I would often go three times on a Sunday - two services and Sunday school. Being of the persuasion of the

Plymouth Brethren, it had no minister but among its elders were some really memorable characters, mostly bearing one or other of the surnames: Childs, Pitcher or Peach, other than which you would be almost certainly a 'furriner.'

We lived in Melbury Sampford - not a village at all in the real sense. Melbury House, the great mansion which was said to have a window for each day of the year, was the heart of it. Within its grounds was the small but charming church from which a wild garden valley ran down to our farmstead, for my father was tenant of the home farm there. The stream flowing out from a large lake ran beside our house and gave me endless hours of adventure. It was a wonderful haunt for a boy.

The Earl of Ilchester and his family were not residing in the great house then. Its upkeep was proving too difficult in those years between the wars and they lived at Summer Lodge in nearby Evershot. They took a great interest

in the well-being of the villages though and the countess was a welcome visitor to the school, her friendly personality making her well loved. The cottages in Melbury Osmond were mostly occupied by craftsmen who worked in the estate yard - the quite extensive workshops from which most of the maintenance work emanated for the farms and houses on the properties.

Melbury Bubb had no real links with the other two Melburys, being right on the other side of Bubb Down and reached only by devious roads. A mansion had graced its western slopes but report has it that a former Earl of Ilchester was so peeved at it for being in sight of his mansion that he bought it and levelled it to the ground. The entrance gate and various bits of foundation were still there among the undergrowth. I went through the village the other day and didn't see a soul. I wonder - are the Pitchers, the Childs and the Peaches still there, or are they all 'furriners'? ●

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