

VILLAGE LIFE BETWEEN THE WAR YEARS

By longstanding Codsall resident, Jack Taylor

INTRODUCTION

Jack Taylor was born in Wood Road, Codsall in March 1918 and has lived most of his life in the village. He's now 82 and living in Perton. His wife Betty, who died last year, was a founder member of Codsall Dramatic Society and a well-known actress. Both Mr and Mrs Taylor threw themselves into village life.

Jack served on the parish and district councils for many years and was a member of the committee responsible for the building of the village hall. He was also a member of the Codsall Men's TOC H – set up in the village in 1929.

He restarted the 1st Codsall scout troop after the Second World War. He and Betty served on the arts festival committee for many years – retiring from it in the mid 1990s.

This account was based on a series of tape-recorded interviews carried out with Jack in 1995. It has never previously been published until now (April 2001).

We hope to have a picture of Jack to place on the site shortly.

Jack Taylor . . .

I was born at Ventnor House, Wood Road, Codsall, which is the first of the tall houses before the Shrubbery. I was born in the front room in March 1918, not long before the end of the First World War. I was born into a house where there was no electricity and no sewage, but we were privileged to have a septic pit, so we were a little bit better off than the people in the road who had to use pails.

In Wood Road every Friday night the 'pan' man would come to empty the pails. The houses had an outside lavatory, with a wooden seat. There was a hole in the seat with the pan underneath. When they emptied the pans they put some disinfectant inside and then put them back under the seat. They were then emptied into larger pans on a horse-drawn dray. On Friday night we were never allowed out because the 'pan' man was coming.

The Richards family were responsible for doing all of this work. They used to live at the Stock-ings Farm (as distinct from Stockings House). This is the farm where Mike Burton now has his riding stables. At the time when I was a boy it was a farm and they had all the land around The Stockings. The sewage was taken there and spread out onto the fields around the farm. That went on until the deep sewer came into the village.

The sewers were built by a firm called Withers, from Bilston. This is where the name Withers Road in Bilbrook comes from. The man responsible made so much money from building the sewers that he became a builder afterwards, building most of the houses in Bilbrook. When the sewers were laid they were very deep, and of course they were installed without any mechanical help. It was all done by shovel, spade and pick. As a small boy I remember watching these men digging the sewers. They used to mark a stretch out, making sure they marked exactly the stretch they had to dig, and the section another group had to dig, so no-one worked on another man's part. In this way they went on, road by road, right through the village. This would have been about 1925 to 1927. It obviously took a very long time to complete the whole of the village.

At that time they had a night watchman, who had his night watchman's box with a brazier in front of it. It was his job to put all the red lights into position at night and clean the lamps during the day. He was there all night to make sure that no-one interfered with the workings. A pumping station was built in Moatbrook Lane near to Wood Road, presumably to pump the sewage up the hill.

There was no electric light; most of the houses had gas. There were gas brackets in all of the rooms, including the bedrooms. We had a gas chandelier in the lounge. That was switched on by a pump contraption by the door. We had an early radio. My elder brother had one of those children's kits to build a crystal set. There were earphones with it and a piece of wire that you moved up and down the crystal to see if you could hear anything. You picked up any sound then you told everyone to come and listen. The "cat's whisker" they were called.

The early radios were run by accumulators. They were filled with acid and you had to take them to Harveys to be recharged. They looked like little glass jars, filled with the acid, with handles to carry them. Inside were partitions lined with lead. When you picked them up you could hear the acid slopping around inside. It wasn't very long before they became electric – I suppose that was when the electricity came into the village.

When the electricity was put into the houses we had two little pin sockets, not the three pin ones that we have today. There was no earth connection in at that time. When they wired Ventnor House the wires were not sunk into the plaster they just put the wiring straight down the walls. It took a long time to connect everyone and either the landlord or the home owner had to pay for the installation, so not everyone could afford to have electricity. Externally at first they used overhead wires. These have since been replaced by underground cables. There was no street lighting at all. It was wonderful when the electricity came because it wasn't long before we had street lights. It was black

without them, particularly during the winter. There were a few cars, but everyone was used to walking. When we went to the doctors from Wood Road, we had to walk up into the village and then down Oaken Lanes to Dr Burd's house. You would see him one day and he would tell you to return the next, by which time he had made up your medicine and it would be inside a cupboard outside his front door waiting for collection. I suppose we had to pay for it because medicine wasn't free in those days. The doctor was responsible for pre-scribing and dispensing the medicines. There was no taking the prescription along to the chemist. There was a dentist, by the name of Mr Lewis, in The Firs (where the Conservative Club is now). He had a surgery there and another in Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton. I don't remember going to The Firs, but I do remember going to see Mr Lewis in Waterloo Road. There were no buses to Wolverhampton, so you had to catch the train. The buses came to Codsall before I started school. They turned around in The Square, which was nothing like it is now. There was a cottage there with iron railings round it where the statue of the Lone Singer is now. The road up to the Church went straight past it.

The pubs were privately owned, they were not owned by the breweries. The Malpass family owned the Crown. Miss Malpass was married to Frank Spencer, the butcher. They didn't live at the Crown. They lived at the first house on the right of Wood Road, before the new development of council houses and Malpass Gardens. Hence the name, it was named after the Malpasses at the Crown. Old Mrs Spencer was a Malpass, so the two families were related. The village was so small that everyone knew everyone else.

There were four shops. Spencers, the butchers, with its front open to the roof, summer and winter. Mrs Spencer always wore a long black dress. She was always at the desk and everything was booked. You didn't pay cash for anything. All the meat was hanging up in the shop itself and old man Spencer was there with his steel hanging around his belt. There was another fellow called Walker who worked there as well.

Next door to them was York's. After Mr York died it became Stockton's. It had a wooden floor, scrubbed white, wooden counters, sides of bacon and casks of



F Spencer, butcher, Codsall Square (1935)

butter. On the other corner was Harvey's. It was a bit of a down-market store compared to Yorks, and they sold everything. You bought your paraffin from there and everything else you could possibly want. When you went there for paraffin you had to take your can with you, of course we used a lot in those days as many people had a paraffin stove. Old Harvey would come out of his shop and go round to a shed at the back, turn the paraffin on, serve it, and then go straight back into the shop. I'm not sure whether he ever washed his hands between customers.

Harvey also owned the blacksmith's shop and he was the undertaker as well. The blacksmith's was situated where Smithy Motors used to be. A kitchen shop now occupies the site. Working at the Smiths was a man called Cooper. He used to live near us in Wood Road. He lived in a slightly bigger house and in the early days he had a car, so I think he was doing pretty well. He was a wheelwright and coffin maker. If there was a death in the village, Cooper used to go out and measure up the body

make the coffin and Harvey would hire the horse-drawn hearse. Cooper would then turn out in his dark coat and top hat and walk in front of the hearse up to the Church. The body would have been laid out by Mrs Medlicott who lived in one of the little cottages in Church Road on the right-hand side. The nurse was Nurse Maybury. She used to ride around on a high bicycle, with a basket on the front, with her cap and uniform. She must have been the midwife as well. There were Friendly Societies in the village which looked after the people in need. they would pay a weekly subscription.

Down the road, where the Washeteria is now, was Blanton's. Behind the shop was Blanton's Tea Rooms, housed in a First World War wooden hut. This was probably the largest meeting place in the village. It was terribly cold. The draught used to come up through the floor. It eventually burnt down. Round the Bull was a sandstone wall. Later they opened the land up for a car park.

There was a Post Office in the village, run by Mr Fletcher. He lived in the house behind what is now the doctor's surgery in Church Road (the first house in Church Road, where Sir Charles Wheeler was born). If you look at the end wall of that house you will see a mark where there has obviously been the roof of an adjoining house, and that was the Post Office. I remember that Mr Fletcher always wore breeches and he was deaf, so when you went into the Post Office you had to shout to let him know what you wanted.

Illidge was the Postman. He had a red cycle and a deer-stalkers hat, with flaps that came down at the front and the back, presumably to stop the water from going down his neck. There was a cobbler up Church Road. This was Mrs Cockerill's father. His working place was a shed set back, but not quite behind, the Parish Rooms. He was Mr Jones and this was where Mrs Cockerill was born. You had to sit there for what seemed hours whilst he repaired your shoes. He was also the verger at the Church. The only assembly room, except for Blanton's Tea Room, was the Parish Room in Church Road. Of course Church Road was cobbled in those days. The cobbles are still there underneath the Tarmac. At the top of the hill was the Co-op and at one time there was a little fish shop in Church Road, but this seemed to come and go.

As there were hardly any cars in the village, there was no garage. The first garage belonged to Harper. This was situated just past where the Village Hall and police station are now. You turned into



The former Harpers Garage in Wolverhampton Road, Codsall. (1935)

it and the pumps were on the side of the drive. Bill Brindley, an ex-Grammar lad, started because his mother owned the site at the corner of Wolverhampton Road and Duck Lane. She had a sweet shop there and he joined her. Then his mother suggested they install a petrol pump, which they did. She would serve in the sweet shop and pop out to serve petrol, until she decided that they ought to put up a shed in order to carry out vehicle repairs. That was how their garage started.

If you walked around the village in those days there were very few houses compared with today.

The council houses in Station Road were there. They were the first ones to be built in the village. They would have been new at that time. Very nice houses they are too, much bigger than the normal council houses today. Broadway wasn't there. The Wheel and Chillington Estates had not been built.

Chapel Lane was a very narrow lane. Alcock, who supplied the fuel, was there in the Station yard, where he had a hut. He lived at the top of Chapel Lane where a few houses were built right at the top. The Chapel, which gave the road its name, was there on the corner of Chapel Lane and Broad-way. If you look you will see that the two houses right on the corner are newer than the rest. They are built on land once occupied by the chapel. The others were built by Brotherton, the builder.

Miss Loveridge lived in the Mount and across the road was Wilkes's farm, which was called Roseville Farm. The weight near the statue of the Lone Singer came from Roseville. It was used when the threshing machine came. I think it was used to hold the engine down or something. May Cox, who owned the farm, gave it to the village.

My family were distantly related to the Bentleys, who kept the Wheel. One of the Miss Bentleys married Harry Wilkes, whose family had kept the farm for a very long time. There were three Wilkes girls about the same age as myself and my friends, so we used to go and play on the farmland. Much later, when the Village Hall was built on this land, there was a problem with the high water table especially underneath the stage and I learnt that the building had been erected on the site of a pool which had been filled in by Mr Wilkes and consequently forgotten. Harry Wilkes died very early, he was only in his forties. After his death Mrs Wilkes could not keep up the farm, so she let it and mov-ed into Gorsty Lea, which also belonged to them, until another property owned by them, the Mill House, became vacant and she moved there. Their land extended right down to Moatbrook at Gun-stone, the Mill itself and some of the land in Mill Lane, besides all the land on which the Chillington estate was built.

When Gorsty Lea was sold the garage started there. The house had a very large garden and an orchard. The husband of the woman who bought it was in the Fire Service. This was just after the Second World War. He put up some petrol pumps and this was how the garage came to be built in what was once the garden of Gorsty Lea House. The Wheel also took a large section of their garden for their car-park. The field on the other side of the Wheel belonged to the Mount - Mount Field. That was a lovely house with a beautiful garden.

Codsall House was another of the large houses in the centre of the village. Roger Carr lived there. He started the cubs in Codsall. We used to meet in Blanton's Tea Rooms, but a lot of our time was spent in the outbuildings or in the grounds of Flemmynge House, where Joan Twentymen lived. The Twentymans always dressed in evening dress for dinner. Roger Carr, at Codsall House, came from the family who owned the Wolverhampton Steam Laundry, a very important business in the days before people had washing machines. His father lived at Wheatstone Park. When Roger died Codsall House was bought by Seisdon District Council which converted it into Social Security Offices. To collect your ration books and orange juice you had to go round to what had been the back entrance to the old kitchen.

There were several milkman who used to come around the village with their pails and measures. When they came you went out with your jug and the person delivering the milk would weigh out a pint or a half pint, whatever you wanted, into your jug. It would be milk straight from the cow, not processed in any way.

I remember the bus service starting. The buses had solid tyres. They were Tilling Stevens buses. I remember the name because as a child, like many others, I was interested in vehicles. They used to shake like mad. I think they were green. Eventually we had a modern bus with a door in the middle, instead of at the end. It cost 5d to travel into town and I think they came every half an hour. The last bus wasn't all that late at night and of course without any street lights the village was very dark. When there were street lights they were turned out at about 10pm.



The former post office and general stores run by Mr Harvey (1935)

I remember Werskett, the Gaskell's coachman. He drove the brougham, beautifully painted black, with a beautiful black horse which pranced with high steps. The harness was burnished until it shone. At ten o'clock every morning Werskett used to come down into the village dressed in his uniform with his top hat in order to collect the groceries for Pendrell Hall. He used to go into Harvey's shop, tethering his horse to a hook in the wall, in order to pick up the groceries which had been ordered. The whole turn-out was absolutely immaculate.

The early telephone exchange was in Wood Road, in one of the semi-detached houses on the right hand side. The exchange was in the front room of the house. I remember Mr Woods looked after the telephone at night and a lady, who I think became Mrs Wood, was in charge during the day. It was a long drawn out process to make a call because they didn't always answer straight away. Sometimes she would come on and say, "Wait a moment I'm busy." Then you would have to wait until she got through to your number and got back to you. If you wanted to make a call at night you rattled the bar to wake Mr. Wood up. Sometimes when you made contact with Mrs Wood during the day she would tell you that it wasn't any use trying to get hold of a certain person because she had seen that person go up the road with their best hat on, so they must have been going to town. Or else the person you wanted was already on the phone talking to someone else so then she would tell you she would put you through when they had finished. You needed a lot of patience to make a telephone call but you got there in the end. Of course to begin with very few people had phones. Dr Burd and the Spencers had single figure numbers. Then they went into twenties and into the thirties.

Leisure Activities

There was a tennis club at Codsall Wood in Whitehouse Lane. It only had one tennis court. Saturday afternoons were always spent there and the ladies made the tea. After the war there was the Ex-Servicemen's Club in Wood Road and in my day there were tennis courts there too. All the young people were in the tennis club. On Saturdays and Sundays we would run tournaments. We each put in a shilling, drew the name of a partner out of a hat and whoever won would buy the drinks in the evening with the winnings, although the ladies were never allowed to have anything other than beer or lemonade.

Warner's Field was used for all sorts of village activities, for example the crowning of the May Queen, Fetes, St. Nicholas's School Sports Days. The field was situated on the right-hand side of Church Road. Warner's House was a very large house on the opposite side of the road. At the entrance to the field was a semi-circular passing place. There were lovely trees in the field, particularly Tettenhall (Tetnall) Dick pear trees. At one time they were everywhere. There are still some around, for instance in the Vicarage Garden and around the Council Offices. The footpath which went up to the Church went through the field, coming down into the village next to Blanton's Tea Rooms. The

Warners owned Copes' Wine Lodge in Wolverhampton.

There was another footpath which went across the Village Hall field as a short cut to Sandy Lane. When the land was changed into a playing field it disappeared.

The British Legion had an annual fete, which later became a gymkhana. That was held in various locations. Of course there was never any problem about car parking because everyone always walked it.

Bakers' Nurseries

It is no exaggeration to say that Bakers ran the village: with the Bakers' bell. It was run by Mr Moody, the manager. If you wanted a job he was the person you had to see. The bell was situated on the top of the building, rather like a school bell. It rang at seven o'clock in the morning for the start of work, again at 8.30 for breakfast; one o'clock for lunch and again an hour later for the return to work. Finally it went at 5.30 for the finish of work. Everyone could hear the bell in the village and they all listened out for it. Bakers was a very big business. It produced the Russell lupins and famous delphiniums. They employed most of the girls in the village, either on the land or in the offices. There seemed to be hundreds of them. They filled the station at night, especially when they were sending their plants and seeds on the train. They had their own horses and carts before they changed to lorryes and vans. The nursery fields by the Horns at Boningale were filled with lupins. It was a regular thing to go there in the lupin season to view the acres of different-coloured lupins. They were absolutely beautiful.

The Bakers' land went right down to Moatbrook. There was a great deal of agricultural land in and around the village. There was Wilkes's Farm on the Wolverhampton Road and small holdings down Bilbrook Road, Sandy Lane, and there were three in Elliotts Lane. Henry Porteous had one of them. He kept pigs and poultry and did very well. They were developed to accommodate soldiers after the First World War. Duckers and Dukes had small holdings where Codsall Middle School and the Cath-olic School have now been built. Next to the station there were cattle pens where the cattle were loaded up ramps into the trains.