



## Memories of Abinger by William Kerr

... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive

The civil parish of Abinger contains an area of some ten square miles extending in a mile-wide strip from the North Downs escarpment to the Sussex border, including the villages of Abinger Hammer and Abinger Common and the hamlets of Sutton and Abinger Bottom, fringing on the northern slopes of Leith Hill, with its pinewoods, scrub birch, gorse, bracken and heather which flourish on the acid soil of the greensand. Cultivation was mainly confined to the more fertile soil of the valley watered by the Tillingbourne, noted for its water-cress beds, but there was some small-scale mixed farming providing dairy and poultry products for the local markets in marginal areas on the higher ground.

In the early years of the present century [20th] this rural economy was to a great extent supported by the owners of large estates in the neighbourhood, prominent among whom were Evelyns of Wotton, which family had been in possession of the Manor of Abinger for some three hundred years, as well as owning a large tract of land, mostly woodland, which included practically the whole parish of Wotton.

As a result of improved communications with London, brought about by the extensions of the railway system during the reign of Queen Victoria, a new type of wealthy resident appeared in these more remote parts of the Surrey country-side, men who had become rich on the great expansion of trade which took place when Britain, in possession of a great empire, had become the financial centre of the world.

London business-men and well-to-do members of the professions began to buy up substantial portions of land, much of it neglected woodland, on which to build for themselves and their families country houses of ample proportions with gardens and pleasure grounds to provide healthy recreation during such time as they could spare from their business and professional pursuits.

These houses were well-staffed with indoor and outdoor staff for most of whom accommodation was provided either in the house or, for married couples, in estate cottages. Thus, the gentry in increasing

numbers began to dominate the life of these rural areas, and during the first decade of the present century there was little change in the shape of the social structure to disturb their equanimity. Class distinctions were preserved and humbler folk accepted their subordinate position without complaint, glad to accept such employment as was offered at wages often as low as twelve or fifteen shillings a week, alleviated for some who were able to rent a cottage for perhaps a tenth of their weekly wage. Most were reasonably happy under employers inclined to benevolent treatment of their servants, and the healthy country life had its advantages.

Few men of the labouring or artisan classes had far to go to their place of work, normally within walking distance short cycle ride from where they lived, so that the demand for public transport was virtually nonexistent. Occasional small parties going on outings would be able to hire a wagonette, and the gentry of course had their horses and carriages, so it was the horse that still provided the motive power for practically all means of transport and for work on the farms. But by the end of the decade other forms of transport, based on the newly-developed internal combustion engine, were to appear in increasing numbers to disturb the peace of the country-side, the most portentous for future generations being the aeroplane, its coming heralded by a Frenchman named Bleriot when he crossed the Strait of Dover in his tiny fragile 'flying machine' and continued next day, navigating by following the railway line through Kent and Surrey, eventually to finish his aerial journey at Brooklands near Weybridge, and so provide some of the people living along his route with a glimpse of what was to go on record as a great historic event.

But it was the motorcar that within a few years was to have its effect on the habits of country folk. At first only the gentry could afford the cost of buying and running these costly motorcars as they needed the services of a skilled driver-mechanic to cope with running repairs, mending punctures, frequent occurrence in those days, and even starting the engine with its primitive ignition and control devices.

This brought to the scene a new class of private servant, the chauffeurs, men who were able in most cases to command much higher wage than that paid

to the coachmen they were beginning to replace. The situation gave rise to friction between the motorists and the horse and carriage folk, the former, sometimes arrogantly, asserting their claim to a freer use of the roads and lanes to the discomfort of the humble pedestrians and other road users, scaring the horses and increasing the risk of accidents.

But long after acquiring their motorcars the gentry were still retaining their horses and carriages for more leisurely journeys or perhaps because they felt that the motorcar was not yet a very reliable means of getting from one place to another in a given time.

Another class of motorist, more often owner-driver enthusiasts, began to appear, especially at weekends and on public holidays, attracted by the scenery and pine-scented air of the Surrey Hills, the men dressed in tweeds or leather jackets and caps and wearing goggles, the women-folk heavily veiled to protect their faces from the wind and clouds of dust, as few roads in those days had tarred surfaces and many lanes were little more than sandy tracks.

Cycling was also very popular and club outings increased the number of road users but in flocks cyclists tended to keep to main roads and avoid the hilly areas and lesser byways.

The first motor vehicle for public hire to appear in the village was due to the enterprise of a man named Joseph Harrison who had established a successful business as a builder at Abinger Common [Skelmorlie, now Glebe Gate] and had extended his activities to provide other services such as a smithy and the repair of farm implements. He also operated a horse-cab and wagonette hire service, and it was to augment these facilities that he acquired what must have been one of the earliest Ford "Tin Lizzies" to be imported into this country, which he ran as a motor-cab at fixed charges for the benefit of people needing speedier conveyance to the railway stations or on other urgent business. This led later to the purchase of an early form of mini-bus with which he provided a regular (one or twice weekly) bus service for parties of housewives and others to go on shopping trips to Dorking.

The village had only one shop, which was also the Post Office in those days, selling a limited range of groceries, sweets and other confectionery, and various oddments, so that the ordinary cottage folk were much dependent on the services of tradesmen

rather superior type of salesman with his pony and trap, or perhaps a larger vehicle containing his stock of tea and coffee, drapery or boots and shoes for sale.

These men, providing such personal service, were, on the whole, welcome visitors and established a friendly relationship with their customers, an attitude sadly absent in the frigid atmosphere of a modern supermarket but still surviving precariously among the small traders in some country towns. The village school at Abinger had been built some forty years before the turn of the century and consisted of a single classroom, adjoining which was a small cottage residence for the master, a playground, leading to the earth closet privies at the far end, and beyond these a garden area extending down to a dense spruce plantation. Farther to the east were the richly variegated woods of Wotton and to the west a view over open farm land and across the Tilling valley to the North Downs, a scene to be recalled with nostalgic yearning in later years but little thought of by the children who knew no other environment at that time of life. The Education Act of 1902 had resulted in the school being taken over by the Surrey County Council, who decided it should be known as Upper Abinger School, a decision that induced some resentment among the people of Abinger Hammer who felt that it implied a lower status for their own school, but at least it seemed a better choice than Abinger Common School.

The County authorities seem to have been unfortunate in their choice of a master as, after about four years in the post, he was found guilty of what might be described as scandalous behaviour and summarily dismissed. It was clearly necessary then to find a successor who would restore morale, and in appointing John Gardiner the authorities could hardly chosen a better man. It could be said of him that he was dedicated to the task of literally putting the fear of God into the mind of every child he taught. John Gardiner been born to Irish parents who had migrated to Wales and had settled in the town of Haverford West. His parents were and remained staunch Catholics, and John naturally was baptized and confirmed in the Catholic faith, eventually becoming a server in the local church. Judging from the aptitudes displayed and his achievements in later life it is clear that he was a boy of above average intelligence and had benefitted from a good education in the school he attended. Just what occupation he followed after leaving

the great distress of his parents and the Catholic priest he renounced his adherence to their faith and, after all attempts at reconciliation failed, left his home to seek a means of earning his living elsewhere. He eventually found employment as a pupil teacher, graduating by stages until he had acquired sufficient qualifications to apply for the post of schoolmaster.

By the time he arrived in Abinger he was already married to a demure little Welsh lady who was also qualified to teach, confining her attention to the infant class. Between them they undertook the task of giving an elementary education to some eighty or more children ranging in age from five to fourteen, the infants accommodated in a small area curtained off at one end, the older children crowded together on bench desks in the main part of that gloomy classroom.

Officially they were graded as standards one to seven but in practice were formed into groups of convenient size for teaching purposes according to the level reached in particular subjects, and for some activities such as handwork, drawing or choral singing the whole school, apart from infants, could join in together.

The achievement of satisfactory results under these conditions was a tribute to the versatility and agile mind of the master. Not until the numbers attending the school passed the hundred mark did the authorities embark on a rebuilding scheme provided an extra classroom, improved natural light, larger windows, and better cloakroom facilities. One day in the late spring of the year 1908 my father took me to have my name put on the school register, and my first impression of John Gardiner obtained on that occasion is still clear in my memory. We were shown into the little school house for the interview and seated facing a tall desk to answer his questions. I remember his features, dark hair and piercing eyes, a certain sternness of manner which, I was to learn later, denoted a predilection for strict discipline that applied not only in the school but also in his private life. His sober garb comprised the black jacket and waistcoat and the striped grey trousers which, with a morning coat and top hat for formal occasions in those days distinguished the professional class male.

In all things John Gardiner was a perfectionist and demanded at least a striving for perfection in the work of those he taught. In his unrelenting efforts to produce the desired result he relied much on the use

troublesome boys brought angry parents to the school in protest.

Morning assembly usually took place, weather permitting in the playground, where the children would line up for inspection to check that they all had clean hands and faces, boots and shoes polished and hair and clothing tidy. The first hour in school was devoted to religious instruction enlivened by the singing of choruses from "Golden Bells". It was John Gardiner's aim to make every child familiar with the Bible from beginning to end and the method used was to get each child in turn to read aloud one or two verses from the allotted portion, this reading marathon beginning with the Book of Genesis and onwards through all the Biblical writings considered suitable for the minds of young children.

In retrospect one is inclined to doubt whether this was an effective method as I feel now that most of the children regarded it all as an irksome task, but John Gardiner was a fundamentalist with a sceptical regard for the doctrinal teaching methods of the Established Church. There were, of course, other influences at work in the parish. Many of the children attended Sunday School, run by some very good and able teachers under the patronage of the Rector, and a fair number of the boys spent a few years as members of the Church Choir, so that Anglican beliefs permeated their religious thinking, encouraging them to continue as Church members throughout their later years.

But it must be conceded that, perhaps through the force of personality, John Gardiner left his mark in helping them to shape the characters of the children who passed through his hands at Abinger Village School.

Education in the village school of that period concentrated on the basic subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic supplemented by elementary botany and some handcraft subjects such as gardening for boys and needlework for girls, appropriate to the needs of rural life.

It was pleasant to remember some enjoyable and instructive nature walks with John Gardiner and an occasion when he took a party of boys out on to a local farm for a practical 'arithmetic' lesson, using a surveyor's chain for measuring land areas to give them a clear mental picture of what a ten-rod plot or an acre of arable looked like. In the classroom he put special emphasis on good handwriting using his own

and woe betide the child found holding his pen carelessly in other than the correct manner.

For reading and recitation the younger children used usual elementary 'primers', but for the older ones John Gardiner was partial to the poetry of Milton, Wordsworth and some Tennyson and Thomas Gray; and the prose of John Bunyan and Charles Dickens. He did attempt an introduction to Shakespeare in a tentative effort to produce *The Merchant of Venice* as a school play but soon discovered that the words that the great playwright had put into the mouths of rich and sophisticated Venetian merchants of the sixteenth century were utterly incomprehensible to the bumpkins he had chosen for the parts, so the attempt was abandoned and public performances henceforth limited to choral singing, recitations, tableaux and group participation in pageants. One boy who showed talent in these activities was Tom Harrison and who later became friendly with E.M. Forster when the author came to live in the Manor House at Abinger. With much help and encouragement from E.M. Forster and from Ralph Vaughan Williams, Tom played a leading part in organising and producing pageants on a more ambitious scale in later years and had much to do with promoting the Abinger Medieval Fair which has since become a popular annual event.

History was another subject in the curriculum, to be learned in the junior groups by reciting the names of kings and queens and the dates of great events in England, relieved for the senior children by lessons on the benefits derived from the Reformation, with special reference to the period of the Civil War and the establishing of the Commonwealth for which John Gardiner seemed to regard Oliver Cromwell as one of the greatest heroes in English history, naming his own son Oliver to mark his respect for the man who challenged the divine right of Kings.

John Gardiner attached considerable importance to achieving a good attendance record for the school, and photographs have survived showing groups of children who had gained recognition for having never been absent or never late for a whole year. Epidemics of the usual childish diseases, including diphtheria, a greater danger to life at that time, occurred with regularity that meant closing the school for short periods at least once a year. Overcrowding in classroom helped to spread infection but the master did his best to reduce the risk by the use of an antiseptic ejected into the air by means of a contraption he devised for the purpose

a dose from the spray, administered orally. There was no doctor resident in Abinger, the nearest being located some miles away, which created some difficulty in emergency cases, especially as telephone communication was virtually non-existent, and not until some years later did the services of a resident District Nurse become available in the village. Water supply was another problem as the only sources were wells or, in some outlying areas, the nearest brook, all bearing the risk of contamination. When a typhoid epidemic struck a number of Surrey villages the number of deaths resulting so alarmed the authorities that they carried out an investigation into all water sources in the affected areas, sealed off contaminated wells and put into immediate effect schemes for mains water supplies to all villages not already so provided.

For the majority of the children the journey to school meant a walk of a mile or more and bringing sandwiches for their mid-day meal, usually consumed in the playground but in bad weather eaten at their desks in the classroom. For a month or two during cold weather in winter this diet would be supplemented by milk or soup, made hot in a cauldron on the top of the schoolroom heating stove.

On fine days during autumn and winter the older boys would spend the mealbreak playing such games as 'hare and hounds' in and about near-by copses, and in summer they would practise cricket in a field that a friendly farmer permitted to be used for this purpose, all of which enabled them to expend their surplus energy in a healthy manner. There was some occasional bullying by one or two of the bigger boys, anxious to gain advantage over boys less physically strong, and horseplay sometimes resulted in injuries better avoided, but on the whole the standard of behavior was good, and the hooliganism prevalent in today's society quite unknown in that rural community.

In December 1913 John Gardiner decided to accept an offer of promotion and to leave Abinger to take up an appointment as headmaster of a much larger elementary school in Guildford. The termination of his seven years of service in Abinger was marked by a special school concert which was attended by the school managers together with a number of the gentry and village notables, as well as the parents of the children then at school. The programme consisted of choral singing and this included patriotic songs with a few of the master's Welsh favourites such as "Land of my Fathers" and "Men of

member states of the British Empire, with a dignified Britannia, resplendent in shining (papier maché) armour and enthroned at the centre of the group, the whole gathering joining in the singing of "Land of Hope and Glory".

**William Kerr** - some notes by his sister, Mrs Mollie Dewdney [1988].

*Kerr attended the school from 1908. Received a scholarship to the Guildford Technical School. Became an electrical engineer. Became head boy and matriculated at the age of fifteen. He was*

*employed by the British Thomson Houston Company in Rugby - a firm make turbines and elevators, etc., and employing 12,000 men in Rugby, Birmingham and Coventry. He started in the screw room in 1915 and worked his way up the ladder to be promoted to Head Office in London. He married a Rugby girl in 1931 and settled in Button, travelling to London every day. At the outbreak of the Second World War he moved to Dorking with his wife and three small daughters to be in a safe place. He became a valuable member of St Paul's Church and later moved to Betchworth. He is now dead.*

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