

Memories of Life at the Cottage, Bletsoe, During the 1914-18 War

By OLIVE LAWSON JOHNSTON

THE COTTAGE WAS rambling old place with many little steps up and down in the passages. I believe it was the old inn before the Falcon was built, and there was supposed to be a secret passage up to the castle possibly starting under the room we called the pram room and coming up on the south side of the bridge over the moat at the castle. Many years later than the period I am writing about I was having a gate erected and when the workmen made the hole for the gatepost, they came upon some brickwork which we thought might be the passage.

The household staff included Mr and Mrs Surridge - he looked after the cows and pony and all outdoor chores and Mrs Surridge did the cooking. They and their daughter Lucy slept in a tiny room behind a curtain which concealed it from a passage leading to the dairy, down to the cellar, and to a double glass door to the garden. I cannot imagine how they managed, and as far as I know they never complained. Then there was a small back stairs leading to two rooms occupied by the schoolroom maid Winnie Boozie and the parlour-maid Augusta. Another passage led to a very large bathroom where the store cupboard was kept. My mother doled out soap, sugar and other supplies each week: all weighed out because of the necessity to ration things in short supply. On one occasion we had a very large tin of honey which was so hard it had to be softened in a hot bath before it could be spooned into small jars. Returning along the passage, a wooden partition had been built to enclose a tiny room occupied by my mother's sister Miss Emily St John who lived with us. Next door was the nursery and leading from there the night nursery where my brother Hugh slept with the Nurse ('nanny Stevens') and beyond again a small room for the nursery-maid Letty. Beyond that were the stairs down to the pram room and the door to the yard.

Later, when my sister Pearl was born she slept with the nurse and Hugh with the nursery-maid. Opposite the nursery was my mother's and father's room. He was working in London all the week and came down for the weekends. Under their room we had to practise the piano before breakfast and if we made mistakes we heard a knocking on the floor above and my mother's voice 'time, Olive, time!' or 'Enid, don't scuttle!'

The top floor consisted of two rooms, one of them divided to make a small one for me and a larger one for my sisters Beau (now Lady Pitman) and Enid (Mrs McCorquodale). Across the tiny landing was a large room occupied by our Governess Miss Grace Pay in the term time and my brother (Lord Luke) in the holidays.

Mr John Northwood did the garden and shared the outdoor duties with Surridge. He lived with Mrs Northwood and their two sons Joe, called 'Laddie' and Jack in a cottage in the row up the small road from the war memorial (which was not there then of course) which led to the top row of cottages above the allotments where the post office was. The gate at the top of the road led into our top field where we so much enjoyed making hay in summer. Tea in a nest of hay was great fun: we wore large straw hats and if it was very hot we put cabbage leaves in the crown to keep us cool - we also had pretty, frilly sun bonnets. The hay was cut with a scythe and tossed and raked into lines by hand, with everyone helping. In the autumn we used to walk through that field and up to Wigney Wood to gather branches of spindle berries with their pretty little pink lanterns.

We were very happy and healthy despite the national shortage of good food. I think the main reasons were that we were nearly self-supporting with good fresh home-grown food, and we all enjoyed helping with the chores both in and out of doors. We used oil lamps and candles, and later these included one lamp that had to be pumped occasionally. We were all scared of it and when it began to make whistling noises we gradually disappeared from the room on some pretext, until the last one had to cope. The other lamps had to be trimmed and refilled with paraffin daily: there was a special little room for this purpose. The wick had to have the carbon rubbed off with paper then pinched to a fine knife edge at the top and the ends bent inwards so that when lit the flame was a round arc to the centre. If the ends were bent outwards the flame smoked the glass, and the glass had to be cleaned with a duster wrapped round a mop or wooden spoon. It took quite a long time as everyone had a small lamp with a handle to carry about with them as well as the larger ones in the living rooms, and out of doors hurricane-lamps and candle lanterns were used. Water had to be pumped by hand. There was one pump outside for the stable and outdoor uses and another pump inside for filling the tanks in the house - this had to be done several times a day and we all took a turn.

We had our own cows and we learnt to milk and make our own butter, all taking a turn with the huge tub churn, which made 7 or 8 pounds a week, used for all purposes, including cooking. The cream was skimmed off the milk which was poured into large flat pans to set after the milking and we also made cream cheese. I used to

enjoy looking after the poultry and we always had fresh eggs and chickens to eat when they were too old to lay. We raised our own chicks in coops under broody hens, and of course we preserved eggs in water-glass to use in the non-laying season. There were hutches of Belgian hares looked after by the nursery party which were very prolific and provided many meals. The garden provided a great variety of vegetables. My aunt and mother had a great deal to do there and both had special gardening outfits much shorter than the skirts they usually wore and with large pockets for tools. The tomatoes in the greenhouse were my duty. There were two peach trees on the garden wall which produced very large fruit, and cucumbers and melons in the frame. When the cucumbers formed we used to put lamp glasses on them to make them grow straight. Another frame contained the most beautifully scented large violets. The orchard gave us a big supply of apples, pears, and plums. We stored apples and pears in the cellar, and bottled and made jam of the plums and soft fruit - those of us who did not take sugar in our tea saved it for jam-making! We had a big damson tree from which we made delicious damson cheese, two large fig trees on the stable wall and grapes in the greenhouse. We kept bees and when they swarmed there was great excitement: we had to beat tins together and make a clasy noise to try and prevent them flying away before a skip could be produced to knock them into. There was a gate in the wall at the top of the garden with a trellis arch of roses which was a favourite place for the swarms to settle.

A photograph taken at Melchbourne before the 1914-18 War, showing the author's mother, sister Enid and brother Hugh on Brian the donkey.

We had to buy on ration coupons some food that we could not grow ourselves and this sometimes came by the carrier, Mr Valentine, who came from Riseley collecting lists from people along the route to Bedford and returning with the parcels. His waggon was a very high one with a black canvas roof rather like the pictures of those used by the Boers in South Africa, open in front with a high seat for the driver, benches inside for any passengers and a canvas curtain open behind. My mother loved answering advertisements for gadgets. On one occasion she bought a bread-making machine, which as far as I can remember was rather like the butter churn and was worked with a handle. I don't think we understood the instructions, as the first result was a waxy loaf with holes like gruyere cheese - we thought it was so nice that we never bothered to find out what went wrong and continued to make it that way.

We had a donkey called Brian who we drove in a small trap. He had a dreadful habit of suddenly putting his head down and sniffing the road (that was our warning!), he then lay down in the shafts and it was very difficult to get him up. On one occasion we had to take him through floods at Radwell, so we unbuckled the reins and I walked holding one end on the high footbridge and our wonderful schoolroom maid held the other and paddled in the very cold water and we coaxed him through. His braying used to resound through the village and we used to hear him sometimes when we were in church at the far end of the village. We had a red roan pony 'Midget' who we drove in the big black trap, and later a bigger pony 'Billy' who I used to drive into Bedford - six miles each way - to our dancing class. I think we stabled him at the Swan Inn near the bridge, then we had lunch at the 'Green Parrot', a small restaurant opposite John Bunyan's statue on the west side of St Peter's Green. We had to go down steps inside the door and it was very dark inside: you could see people's feet walking along the pavement half way up the window. We then went to Miss Nancy Harding's dancing class at the Crofton Rooms in St Cuthbert's Street. Once when we were returning home, Billy had 'staggers' just before we reached Clapham, so we went to the farm by the church, left him, and borrowed their milk-round pony on condition that they had him back for the next morning's round. We started off but could not persuade the pony to pass the places where he delivered milk. We had to lead him and when we got to the top of Milton Hill we hoped he would trot, but no, he had never been so far before. It was a very slow journey and much walking and pulling for me. On our arrival home we told Surridge the pony must be taken straight back so the farmer could do his rounds in the morning - I don't remember hearing if Surridge had more success than we had. Later we had a Shetland pony 'Mary Ann' who was driven by the nursery party in the small trap.

We used to visit the postmistress, Miss Polly Green, who was always so kind and welcoming. She wore small steel-rimmed spectacles and when she looked at us she used to throw her head back and try to look underneath them. The post office was always very stuffy, and we found it almost impossible to breathe so we kept the door open. Miss Green was the village organist and on Sundays she wore a black toque and a tight black suit with a panel attached to the skirt that hung down behind the organ seat like a bird's tail. My mother and aunt played the organ sometimes and we used to like pumping the air in for them. Aunt Emily was a bit nervous when

playing for a service so one of us sat beside her to pull out stops or put our feet on the pedal notes at (we hoped) the right moment!

We sang in the church choir which was led by Miss Hetty Clever and we wore large boater hats with broad black bands. Lucy Surridge also sang in the choir and the men were Mr Northwood, Mr Ingles and Miss Green's brother who had the farm on the other side of the village opposite the allotments. Mr Curtis was the vergier and lived at the end of the row next to the rectory where he worked as gardener to the Rev Percy Underhill. Mr Campion and his two daughters Miss Louise and Miss Emily lived at the Castle. Mr and Mrs Scott and their two daughters lived at the Mill House in Sharnbrook but joined in all the activities at Bletsoe, their daughters pairing up with my two sisters. My father and Mr Scott were the two churchwardens, and I taught in the Sunday School each Sunday morning.

We used to give concerts for charity. The rector, Mr Scott, my mother and I sang quartets, and my brother who had a lovely boy's voice sang solo all dressed up in his Eton suit and stiff collar - I don't think he enjoyed it! My mother and I acted duologues, I recited, and we all dressed up and sang topical songs, 'Keep the home fires burning' or 'Let the great big world keep turning' songs from Chou Chin Chow, and many others. Miss Pay, our governess, had a very strong voice and played all the latest tunes. We acted little plays at the concerts and on one occasion my father stood outside the window of the village school where all the entertainments took place and was supposed to beat a large tin to make I thunder' for one of the plays. He must have missed his cue as the racket came at the wrong moment but it all added to the merriment of amateur shows.

Several old customs were still observed in the village. On Plough Monday the village boys blacked their faces and came round to the houses after dark. The first time, my brother had rather a shock when he answered the door bell and saw black faces peeping through the glass in the door. On 1 May the village girls, dressed in white with wreaths of flowers in their hair and hoops decorated with flowers, came and sang a song - all I can remember of it was that it started 'May day, May day, it is May day' - and on 5 November the boys came round dressed up, bringing a guy. At Christmas we all went singing carols.

My mother had a stocking knitting machine. Between each stocking or sock she knitted 3 to 4 inches of cotton so they were all attached like sausages: my job was to cut them apart, splice the toes and finish off the top rib. We also teased out sphagnum moss and filled swabs for the hospitals. We sometimes heard the droning of the German Zeppelins as they came over from the east coast on their way to bomb London, and hoped our father was safe.

My confirmation, in March 1918, was a great occasion. I drove in an open carriage with my mother and the Rev and Mrs Underhill into St Paul's, Bedford, wearing lily new white dress and veil. In the church the whole of one side was filled with girls, all dressed in white and on the other side were the boys in khaki from the barracks. Bishop Jacobs of St Albans officiated and after the service all my family gathered in the Embankment Hotel for tea. I had many presents of prayer books, and my mother's eldest brother (Lord St John) who could not come gave me a large framed picture of The Good Shepherd. Where-ever my home has been since it has always hung in my bedroom.

On 11 November 1918, when we heard that the armistice had been signed, we dropped our lesson books and rushed up to the Church to join in the ringing of the bells.