

More Memories of Barlaston
by Ernest J. Hawkins



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Memories of Barlaston which I cherish most of all, are of the characters who have lived in the village over the past 80 years or so. They have left their mark in a way that should never be forgotten, however small their contribution. In my previous book, I mentioned a few, mostly the gentry and businessmen who lived here. There is no doubt that they were the mainstay of village life, but farming and the big estates also found employment for many who never had any need of transport to earn their daily bread.

Other local occupations such as boat builders, cobblers, tanners, blacksmiths, joiners, wheelwrights, butchers, bakers together with other village shops, all provided employment and a contented life for almost everyone. In fact my early life which could only be enjoyed to the full amidst the English scene of a small village before the age of the motorcar and television.

Larger families were taken for granted and most survived on a pittance of a wage, which you would hardly think possible. There was no financial help, such as income support or other benefits that we know of today. I remember the excitement when the first old age pension of 10 shillings, or 50p new money a week came into force (in the early 1920's I believe) "Lloyd George" they called it after its instigator - people had never been so rich! However if a family did fall on very hard times and were not able to carry on it was the workhouse for them, but I never remember any family from Barlaston having to go in. Everyone seemed to look after one another those days with very little fuss.

It was inevitable that the urban sprawl would eventually reach Barlaston due to its proximity to Stoke-on-Trent, the old village would no longer be tranquil, so we all had to learn to live with it, as other villages throughout the country have done. I don't think any of us thought it would be as extensive as it had been.

Before the war, except for the Old Road, Meaford Road and properties alongside the canal, Barlaston was the village at the top of the hill and confined to little more than a square mile, with amenities that were sufficient for the needs of almost everyone who lived there.

We made our own entertainment. There was something going on most days, especially in the evenings - whist drives and dances in the Village Hall or Parish Room as we called it, a reading room and billiards for the men, an amateur dramatic society and choral society. We even had fancy dress balls. I can remember them well; nearly all the villagers took part.

The Village Hall was built in 1912 by public subscription and I believe that many of the local village men helped in its construction.

Dancing was very popular in the village hall and the Wedgwood canteen. Several local bands were engaged, chief of which were Deakin's band from Rough Close and Reg Bassett's band. Most dances went on until 2 am.

Cricket was the most popular sport in the village pre-war and many local people played and they were encouraged by well known local cricketers like Frank and Eustace Edmunds, Harry Waterfield, Stan Bennett, Bob Cliff, Godwin Gregory, Reg Lowe, Harry Morrey, Charlie Harrop and others. After the war came Geoff and Bert Lowe, Garry Gatensbury, John Sargeant, Ken Johnson, Bill Goodwin, Fred Cholerton, Gordon Castles, followed by many others.

We also had our football team, Barlaston United which played in the Longton and District League.

Miss Leah Greateorex, headmistress at the school, was a leading figure in the social life of the village, well respected and liked by all. Not only was she a very good teacher, she also organised dances and concerts in the Village Hall almost every week. She also provided private education when required. Her pupils included Joy and Star Wedgwood in their younger days.



Barlaston and Tittensor Station, as it was called, was a hive of activity before the war and for a time after it. The trains were always on time and there was a good service which was used by many villagers travelling to work in the Potteries. There were about 12 men employed at the station including, Mr. Salmon, the station master, (succeeded later by Charlie Rhead); a clerk; 2 porters; 3

signalmen (my father, Sid Hawkins, Billy Malcolm, and George Hounslow), a ganger, Jess Lovatt and 3 plate layers who looked after the railway line from Stone to Trentham. Jess Lovatt lived in the Dairy House opposite Barlaston Hall and afterwards by the canal behind the "Plume of Feathers".



'Up' Express passing Barlaston signal box and level crossing Jan 1956. The steam

loco is 'Britannia' class 70033 'Charles Dickens'. Worth being held up for in those days

The station was lit by oil lamps and there were coal fires in the waiting rooms. Local farmers brought their milk in churns every day and there were also deliveries of coal, sheep and cattle to the sidings, the livestock being destined for Charlie Harvey's slaughterhouse.



*Charlie Harvey with his wife and mother outside his butcher's shop c. 1930.
Note the poster advertising a Longton and District (soccer) League 'Grand Match' featuring Barlaston United!
With thanks to Mr. R. Hayward*

Extra coal to keep the fires going in the signal box, ticket office and waiting rooms was thrown off by the firemen on the steam trains as they passed through, and it wasn't unknown for coal to disappear from the coal wagons in the sidings under the cover of darkness. I have known coal to appear as if by magic in the school playground overnight to keep the children warm, especially if there was a coal strike on at the time or the winter was severe, which they often were in those days. There was only one large coal fire to heat the whole school. No questions were asked and even our 'Village Bobby' turned a blind eye as he did to many other things that were good for the village, it was a different world!

This same 'Village Bobby' was well respected by all and rather feared by the local children, especially if we dared to ride a bike without a light front and rear. His very presence kept us on the 'straight and narrow' to a large extent.

'Manners Maketh Man' said a large sign over the school door. It was given by Judge Burgis from Highfields who was one of the school managers.

Judge Burgis had a young daughter named Isobel and he used to take her for a walk round the village on a donkey. One day the bus passed them and the conductor on the bus who liked a joke, leaned out of the bus and asked if he was taking his brother for a walk. The 'spur of the moment' ill chosen remark (meant without malice) was reported to the bus company and he was dismissed. The village raised a petition to get him reinstated because he was our favourite conductor, and would do anything for you, even shopping from the town. His name was Arthur and he used to take my father's Sunday dinner down to the signal box (there was a bus

service on a Sunday in those days). The incident was totally out of character and we did get his job back with the petition!



The Duke of York over the years a favoured haunt of many characters mentioned in the text. Was originally Kent's grocers shop (purchased by Elijah Kent 5th Sept 1865) and converted to a 'Beerhouse' on a date between 1865 and 1899. 16 August 1899 'All that Beerhouse known as the Duke of York' then sold to Bents Brewery, and later 24 Aug 1970 to Bass Brewery.

Dick Lovekin and his daughter Nellie were licencees in the 1920's. Before the First World War there was a public house in Malthouse Lane and also one at The Beeches

The last bus journey back to Hanley at 10 pm every night used to stop at 'The Duke' for a pint each for the driver and conductor which was left behind the bar by grateful villagers. Passengers on the bus would wait patiently without any complaint. That was how life was in those days!

Barlaston hit the headlines in 1952 when a murder was committed at 'Estoril' a villa in Station Road. We were invaded by reporters for weeks. The murderer, Leslie Green was a previous employee of the deceased; he eventually gave himself up at Stone Police Station, was tried and hanged - such was the penalty at that time. We had known him well as he came quite often to 'The Duke' where we had a drink with him and a game of darts.



Looking over the Downs Bank in Springtime.

Eli Buxton's Bluebell Farm Cottage was in the valley near to the stream.

Photo JGG

Of all the village characters I knew, one remains in my memory more than most. His name was Eli Buxton and he lived for many years in 'Bluebell Farm Cottage' (now demolished) on the Downs Banks. He was quite harmless I'm sure, but we children were a bit afraid of him. He wasn't very well educated, but he was a wonderful organist in spite of not being able to read a note of music. He used to get us to pump the organ for him in the old Church. People used to come and listen to Eli playing, and sometimes we would tease him for a bit of fun by not pumping enough. There was a weight on it that went up and down according to the amount of wind in the organ. We especially liked to pump the organ for weddings, because we would usually be given half a crown!

Jessie Stevenson was the organist and choirmaster those days, he lived opposite the present Post Office.

The church was always open during the day. Billy Till, the verger, by trade a joiner and coffin maker, used to unlock it every morning and lock it up at night to prevent the tramps from sleeping in there.

Nora Morrey (later Mrs. George Hounslow) was a well-known person in the village. Apart from the choral and dramatic societies which she founded, she did lots of work during the war for members of the Armed Forces from the village. When the war ended she organised a party at The Trentham Gardens Ballroom for all the Army, Navy and Air Force personnel who had been fortunate enough to return to the village.

Mention here should also be made of Molly Holmes, a lifelong Barlaston resident who has devoted much of her time to raising funds for 'Guide Dogs for the Blind' and other worth while charities.

Many of the gardeners in the village were well known characters and included Daddy Richards, Jack Bowers, Joe Holmes, Billy Wright, Mr. Wells, Jack Upton, Sammy Snape, Mr. Fisher, Henry Brassington, Jim Riley, Jack Fairweather, Paul Gregory, Horace Smith who is still with us and can tell tales all day long about the old days. Bill Johnson is another well known local character, now 94, it is always a pleasure to spend an hour with him.

Reg Thompson, a true countryman, farmer and hedge layer was a person we very much miss. He was a regular prize winner at our local horticultural show. His onions were his special pride!

Mr. Kelly, another gardener and his wife and sister used to walk from Hartwell Hall to the well attended evening church service every Sunday in all weathers. Farming used to be an important part of village life. There are only about four farms left now out of the ten or so which used to be in Barlaston. Farmers I remember well are; the Buxtons, Wilson Hart, Leonard Evans, George Jacobs, Billy Pointon, Harry Seabridge, Bert Mountford, Mr. Murby, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Kennerley, Lawrence Foxley and Mr. Pearson.

The farmers and their wives and families used to take part in village activities and church services.

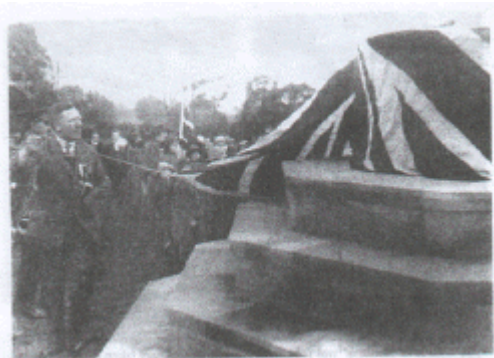
Most of the gardeners and farmers were indeed characters in their own right and their reminiscences of by-gone days were well worth listening to.

Over the years we had many policemen and several different police stations. PC Ansell and PC Benton lived in the first house of Fernbank Cottages. Later PC Putman lived in a semi-detached house next to the Post Office, he died suddenly on the cemetery steps from a heart attack. All the policemen used bicycles to patrol the village. Later the new police station was built in Longton Road and PC Ron Evans was one of the first station officers.

Garden fetes were held at various big houses including Highfields, The Lea, Barlaston Hall, The Upper House, Estoril and Parkfield. There was never any difficulty in recruiting volunteers to help in their success.

Barlaston Wakes was held every year in August on the village green, a colourful occasion and well attended by gypsies in their caravans and always enjoyed by the villagers, especially the children. People came from Longton and the surrounding villages. Like many other villages, we had our own regular visits from tramps, especially in the summertime. The same ones came year after year and we got to know them. We were told by our parents to keep away from them as they were not always able to keep themselves clean. They were mostly men, but we did have one woman who came. They all slept rough in hay barns and under hedges. I can always remember my mother giving them a cheese sandwich and a drink and sometimes old clothes, but she always made them stand outside the gate. Many other villagers did the same. Some of them seemed quite well educated and had hit hard times and we used to feel sorry for them especially when it was raining heavily or bitterly cold. I think most of them stayed in the workhouses in the winter time. The village green was used more pre-war days not only for sport and festivities but also by local farmers who would occasionally tether their horses and cattle to graze. The early bus services were fondly remembered by all the villagers because the bus drivers and conductors were so friendly and well known to everyone and regarded as part of the family life of the village. Nothing was too much trouble for them. They helped children and old people on and off the bus (and with their shopping bags). They would not allow passengers going to Heron Cross or Blurton to get on the bus in Hanley before the Barlaston passengers had got on. Buses were always full in those days and there was a much more frequent service to Heron Cross and Blurton than Barlaston.

Jimmy Whittingham was in charge of the Trent and Mersey Canal from Trentham to Meaford Locks. He kept the towpath in good order, scythed the grass and controlled the fishing. He lived in the lock cottage, (since demolished) at Yockerton, a small hamlet halfway between Barlaston and Trentham along the Old Road where there is now a new estate (Johathon Road).



*William Lowe unveiling Barlaston War Memorial 23 April 1926
With thanks to William's son Bert Lowe and to Barlaston Library*

Another well known local hero was Billy Lowe who lost an arm and an eye in The Great War; his mother was the cook for the Wedgwood family. Billy was given the honour of unveiling the newly built war memorial on Barlaston Green in 1926. At that time it recorded names of 18 Barlaston men who had given their lives for their country in the First World War 1914-1918.

A further seven names were added after World War Two 1939-1945, two of whom were my friends at school, Jimmy Stazaker and Joe Snape. Joe's father, Billy Snape used to drive the horse-drawn mail van daily from Stoke to Barlaston around 1920. Mrs. Dukes had the manual telephone exchange in her front room at the top of Vicarage Lane, followed later by Mrs. Fowell. They were assisted over the years, during the day, by telephone operators including Belle Fisher, Joyce Upton and Marjorie Bowers. There may have been others who I can't remember. Out of hours, Mrs. Dukes (later Mrs. Fowell) took all calls providing 24 hour cover! Very few people had telephones, only the big houses, businessmen and Oram's shop which had a notice outside stating 'You May Telephone from here'.

Mr. Dukes was a local artist. He would often be seen walking round the village with his easel and paints. His favourite scenes were on the Downs Banks and Barlaston Pools and many of his paintings are still in the village.

As there was no National Health Service, everyone paid a few pence a week for medical attention from Dr. Dawes or Dr. Oliver until Dr. Browne came to the village. He started his surgery in Highfield Cottage on the green and later at the top of Station Bank.

The isolation hospital for contagious diseases was at Yarnfield - there seemed to be more such diseases then than there are now.

There used to be a doctor's surgery held twice a week in my present cottage in Queen's Row. It was then occupied by Miss Waltho and her sister, their brother Jack was the doctor's chauffeur. Dr. Dawes always brought a penny bar of chocolate when visiting sick children in the village!



A Christmas card setting of the Downs Bank in Winter

Photo JGG

The Downs Banks was, and still is one of the main attractions of Barlaston. Not so well used these days of the motor car, but nevertheless beautiful, relaxing countryside at its best and now National Trust Property.

When we were children we spent many happy hours roaming amongst the ferns and paddling in the stream. I can remember there used to be trout in that stream. We gathered bilberries and blackberries for jam making and in season mushrooms, chestnuts and watercress were gathered.

There was a nuttery outside the Hall garden wall in the Bedcroft, where we used to gather hazelnuts in the autumn. Pike fishing in the pools in front of the Hall and tench fishing in the pool at the top of the Bedcroft was another pastime we all enjoyed. I never remember being bored, there was always something interesting to do day after day.

Memories of bird song lingers on, but they are seldom heard now. The skylarks, owls, peewits, kingfishers and cuckoos have been obliterated by farm chemicals and vanishing hedgerows, and pollution by motor traffic and tractors. Food tasted much better by far. It was all fresh from the garden and simple in the way it was cooked - no refrigeration in those days! My mother used to make delicious nettle beer and nearly everyone would make their own jam and marmalade and would put eggs in water glass to preserve them when the hens were not laying. During the war Barlaston Hall garden was used for allotments for the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. Surplus vegetables were often distributed free to the villagers whose men had gone to war.

As far as I know, very little has been recorded about life in the village during the six years of the Second World War. I was not hear for most of that time so I can only say what I have since been told.



Church Drive Barlaston (now Queen Mary's Drive) 1960

Photo E. J. Hawkins

The 'Threepenny Bit' house as the lodge at the Longton Road end of Church Drive was called was the headquarters of both the local ARP (Air Raid Precautions section of the local Red Cross).

For the first six months of the war before call-up (April 1940) I was involved with the ARP. We were trained to deal with the general security in the event of enemy air raids. This included ensuring that there was a complete blackout at night, advising people to carry their issued gas masks and how to extinguish incendiary bombs with the issued 'stirrup pump' and buckets of water and sand.

The Red Cross Commandant was Miss Allott and the Barlaston LDV (Local Defence Clunteers) - later The Home Guard was commanded by her brother Bill Allott. The AFS Auxillary Fire Service (later NFS National Fire Service) was commanded by Harold Wright and when founded included George Kent (landlord of the Duke of York), Will Clewes, Billy Clewes, Bill Johnson, Harold Snape and Billy Welton. They trained with a two wheel trailer fire pump which could be towed behind a car. The trailer was kept in the garage of 'The Mount' the home of Mrs. Warner. The only time its services were required in Barlaston, I am told by Bill Johnson, is when a silo caught fire at Billy Pointon's Lea Farm. Bill and another man attended with the pump and put out the fire before the Stone Fire Brigade arrived!

Although Barlaston was on the route German bombers took on the way to Liverpool and Manchester, no bombs were dropped on the village. One bomb did drop in a field near to Hartwell Hall, but little damage was done.

Barlaston Hall had its white stucco finish removed to prevent German planes using it as a marker when seeking Shelton Bar (steelworks). The Michelin Tyre factory and Swynnerton munitions factory.

During the war, the village had an influx of workers who lodged in private houses and worked at Swynnerton and the Bank of England which had been evacuated at Trentham Gardens and Barlaston Hall for the duration of the war. Some of these workers continued to live in the village after the war ended.

I remember the village being cut off by a heavy snowfall early in 1940. Everybody turned out with shovels, there were no snow ploughs and it took several days before bread vans could get through and workers could get to Swynnerton.

A ritual which was accepted as quite normal in my younger days would no doubt be unacceptable today. Mrs. Clewes lived in Fernbank Cottages at the top end of the village, and whenever a birth or death occurred she was immediately called upon to assist. She was trusted to act as a midwife and whenever a death occurred she would often be asked to lay out the body. Whether she received any remuneration for this help I don't know. She may have received some gifts in lieu, like fresh eggs or vegetables.

In those days, when I was very young, there were very few undertakers as we know today except for the gentry or business people who were able to afford them. In the event of a death, for most village people the deceased was left in a coffin in the front room or parlour on two chairs. Neighbours and friends were invited to visit and pay their respects; the coffin would remain open until about half an hour before the funeral. The bier would be fetched from the cemetery chapel, it was like a stretcher on four wheels and the mourners would follow the cortege on foot to the old church and then to the cemetery chapel. The cemetery bell would toll throughout the journey. Sometimes the funeral service would be held in the cemetery chapel, there was an altar and pews in there. I attended the last funeral service in there when I was in my teens. It was for Mr. Fowell, the husband of Martha Fowell of the telephone exchange in Vicarage Lane, he died quite young and left two young children, Harold and Eileen.

Something that may be found eerie and hard to believe is that the cockerels seemed to crow more than usual when there was a death in the village.

Tommy Holmes, the local joiner and wheelwright used to make coffins for most of the village. The verger dug the graves as part of his duties. There were no wreaths, just bunches of flowers from gardens.

Mrs. Mary Wright, now 97 years of age, was the first lady verger we had at the old church, she took over when her husband died - he had been verger, gravedigger and local cobbler for many years. When children were stillborn, I have known the father make the small coffin himself and carry it to the cemetery under his arm or on his shoulders with family and friends following.

Big families were quite normal in those days following the First World War, often living in very small cottages and some of the children were often undernourished because they were very poor. There was no immunisation, so there was a need for the isolation hospital at Yarnfield. Scarlet fever, diphtheria and tuberculosis were rife, as was measles and chickenpox.

The Wedgwood College has always attracted students from all over the country and abroad. Well known speakers have often been there. The Wardens over the years have included Bill Lloyd, Dave Goodman who was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and Mr. Derek Tatton.

There is no doubt that the Wedgwood Factory has put Barlaston on the map since the war and provides a lot of local employment. Visitors come from all over the world and help the local economy a great deal. We were a bit apprehensive about it at first but on the whole it has proved to be an asset to the village in many ways. The only

disadvantage is the volume of traffic it encourages. I doubt whether it would be safe to walk up the drive to the old church now, not that many walk to church these days. Despite all the changes over recent years, Barlaston still retains most of the old character and we all hope and pray that it will always continue to do so.