

**Memories of my life 1920 - 46**  
**Barlaston School and Village**  
**by Ernest J. Hawkins**

After being encouraged by several Barlaston residents, both young and old, to record my own personal memories of the village from my early days, I have at last decided to put pen to paper and do my best to oblige.

As time passes, the memories of long ago tend to diminish, some dwell in the mind more vividly and longer than others, some pleasant and others not so pleasant, that's life as we all know it from personal experience.

My earliest recollections, although naturally a bit vague, were of the days just after the First World War - not about the war - but the Spanish 'Flu' epidemic, which I have learnt since, claimed more lives than the war did. From what I've been told since by my mother and father, I came close to becoming one of its victims. I recall I was very ill in bed with a fire in the bedroom and constant attention day and night. I would be about four years old. I was what they called in those days, a 'delicate child'. However I survived without much damage except for congestion of the lungs and slight rupture for which I wore a truss for several years.

To get back to facts. I was born in 1916 in the Cricket Field Cottage at the time of the Battle of the Somme in France, and after the trauma I have just described of my early years, I commenced my education at Barlaston School at the age of five. My schoolteacher was Miss Hall, and I progressed over the years to my next teacher Miss Leech and finished with the headmistress Miss Greatorex until I left school at the age of 14 in 1930.

Nothing dramatic happened during my school years. We were taught the Three R's and taught well. We never attained great levels in education like algebra, but we did touch on geometry, but never properly mastered it. However we did have a good religious upbringing combined with good manners. Miss Greatorex was very strict, the cane was always to hand, but she was also a kind woman for whom we all had great respect. She was the sister of the village blacksmith, Bill Greatorex, (whose smithy was in Malt House Lane) and she never married.

Before proceeding any further I have feelings of remorse at not having mentioned my mother and father and elder brother Reg, but truly I couldn't have had better. My father was a signalman at Barlaston station for 47 years and my mother was a cook in private service in the village at The Beeches. In her earlier days she had worked in the kitchens at Trentham Hall for the Duchess of Sutherland.

They never had much money to spare but there was always a good table and they were very thrifty. Happy days which I shall never forget.



*Barlaston Station and Signal Cabin in the 1920's. Station staff and Sid Hawkins signalman*

Back to my schooldays and the outstanding events during that period of my life. Each day was an adventure and never the same or boring. Subjects were predominantly - Reading, Writing and Arithmetic but other interesting diversions were part of the

curriculum. The boys were taught gardening, we had allotments at the back of the school and competition was keen. There were two boys to each allotment. My partner was Reg Pointon the farmer's son from Barlaston Lea Farm.

The girls were taught things like needlework, cooking and general housework. Sport was encouraged on the village green and we had competitive teams in both football and cricket, the girls played rounders and tennis. Nature and countryside activities were high on the list, we were quite often taken on nature walks over the Downs Banks.

One morning every week we had a visit from the vicar Mr. Peate for religious instruction. Mr. Peate was a typical country vicar who rode a horse and was a fine shot. His favourite targets were rooks. There were several rookeries in the village at Highfields and on the Station Bank and Rookery Lane, Meaford (by the modern power station).

Various other events were looked forward to during the year one of which was the Hunt, which met at the Plume of Feathers several times a year. The Boxing Day Hunt was always the most popular and always well attended.

Barlaston Wakes was held during the summer when sports and other activities went on all day and ended with a dance in the Parish Room which went on until 2 am in the morning.

Barlaston was always a popular destination for schoolchildren from the Potteries, and on most Saturdays, trains and canal boats came loaded with children and their parents for a day in the country. The focal point was the village green where sports were organised. Our own local village children used to take part and join in the fun. Sometimes we were banned because we were much fitter than their children and were winning too many of the prizes. Teas were organised for them in the Parish Room. A tea room was also built behind Russell's Bakery which was situated behind the present (2001) Post Office, and quite a few villagers used to do a roaring trade in pots of tea.

Oram's shop used to take their horse and wagon down, loaded with oranges and apples and sweets. There were Okey Pokey carts, from the Potteries selling delicious ice-cream. They were drawn by donkeys which were allowed to graze on the Green and seemed to enjoy the day as much as we did. There was very little motor traffic those days and I never remember any child getting hurt. We had a village policeman, but he seldom had any trouble to deal with - maybe the odd drunk to guide home, or a poacher who wasn't smart enough to avoid being caught when pursuing his trade.

Another annual event which we all looked forward to was the school trip to Rhyl by train. All very exciting! A wonderful un-forgettable day enjoyed by all. Not that everything went without incident on these outings. I remember one trip we made minus one boy. Vincent Harvey the butcher's son was missing on the return trip from Rhyl and there was panic! I can't recollect how it was eventually resolved, but he was back at school next day and all was well.

Other school activities were school plays and concerts. We once performed a 'League of Nations Play' in the Victoria Hall, Hanley and other venues. Miss Star Wedgwood was our producer. It was our moment of fame, but the League of Nations did survive despite all our efforts! Another war started - more of which later.

As opposed to this day and age of radio and television, there was no such thing then, other than an odd crystal set with headphones. We had our first such set about 1925 and it could only receive the local station - Stoke 2LO. John Snagg was the announcer.

We were quite happy with our lot - we could play hopscotch and roll bowlers (iron hoops) down the road quite safely. We made huts in the woods, went fishing - no charge in those days and fishing clubs were never thought of. Every day was an adventure, rain didn't bother us much, there were always farm buildings or someone's shed to play in. In wintertime there was more snow in those days and we used to spend hours tobogganing down to the pools in front of The Hall and on the Downs Banks.

There were activities after school, especially round Christmas time. We walked miles with lanterns, carol singing. I remember going to Hartwell Hall apart from all the other big houses in the village, we were given mince pies, lemonade and sweets. I can't remember receiving money and we never expected any.

Church Services and Sunday School in our best clothes was a ritual we enjoyed, but we weren't allowed to play outside on Sundays - just walks with our parents on Sunday afternoons. In the summertime especially, everyone was out in their Sunday best. The only game that was allowed to be played on Sunday - was bowls by the men at 'The Plume of Feathers'.

The Village Bonfire night was another exciting time. I remember the Oram brothers used to put a free display on by the shop.

We had Boy Scouts, the Scoutmaster was Jack Berry - The Hall chauffeur, and our HQ was in the basement at Barlaston Hall. There were also Girl Guides, led by Miss Joy and Miss Starr (Wedgwood) whose HQ was at Barlaston Lea, the home of the Wedgwood family. We used to camp on the Downs for about a week during the summer school holidays down by Ainsworth's farm, where the (Meaford) power station was built. Our parents brought food out to us during the day for us to prepare on our open camp fire. At night they joined us for a sing-song around the fire.

We had an occasional visit from a man with a magic lantern who put on a silent picture show in the Parish Room. We always looked forward to the day that he came.

Another exciting event enjoyed by the local children, was the annual visit of the threshing machine at local farms in the Autumn. We chased mice and rats and the odd rabbit as they raced away to the safety of the hedgerows.

Frank Edmunds had the first valve radio with loudspeaker in the village, and we were allowed to stand outside his home, next to the Parish Room to listen to it.

The school managers took an active part in the running and the welfare of the school and the welfare of the school and all the children were known to them almost personally. Most of the gentry were involved, most notably in my mind were Mrs. Warner from The Mount, Judge Burgis from Highfield, Mr. Paddock from Hartwell Hall and the Wedgwood family from The Lea. Mrs. Warner had a library at The Mount where we could borrow books to encourage reading. They took a keen interest in all that went on both in school, outside activities and social occasions. They were invariably present on special occasions such as the Christmas Party, when they were used to put silver threepenny bits in the Christmas Pudding. We were always warned to be careful not to swallow them. The excitement when we found one was out of this world! The ingredients of the pudding were contributed by parents, and the head boy and girl followed by a chosen few marched down to Mrs. Pointon's at the Lea Farm, where she cooked it in a boiler. It was a ceremony long gone I'm afraid.

Education was very personal, not regimented like it is these days. All children walked to school - some quite long distances - in all weathers. Apart from the attendance officer from Stafford and the school dentist no one ever came near from one year to the next.

In those times we had no pavements or road lighting - for there was no electricity or gas, and only oil lamps and candles in the home until about 1926.

There was also no plumbed water to our cottages - only one outside tap by Oram's shop for five Cricket Field Cottages and one tap at the rear to serve five of the Queen's Row Cottages. Before we went to school on Mondays, we had to carry the water in buckets for 'washing day'.

There were occasional scares when a contagious illness struck - such as scarlet fever or diphtheria and we were warned to keep away from the home of those affected without much fuss. Saying the conditions we lived in, although clean, were most unhygienic with closets and ashpits to mention only two, it was remarkable what a strong and healthy lot we were. Most of the small cottages in the village were full of happy children and all the illnesses were passed over without much fuss, it was just a fact of life which we accepted. I can't recollect a child dying or having a serious accident when I was at school. Occasionally a child would faint and it was usually attributed to malnutrition if they come from a very poor family.

Dr. Dawes and Dr. Oliver, both from Longton, held a surgery in a cottage in Queen's Row every Tuesday and Friday from 2 pm to 4 pm. They had their names on a brass plate at the front.

I have now lived in this same property for a number of years.



*Queen's Row, Barlaston in the 1920's*

### **1930 - 40**

The recession in 1930 following the 1926 General Strike wasn't the best of times to leave school and look for a job. After a while I eventually found employment as a Garden Boy at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Wedgwood at 'The Lea', which was off The Green, Barlaston (near to the present new Parish Church).

My wages were eight shillings a week, which included daily duties like stoking the boilers, cleaning boots and shoes, gardening, watering the greenhouses and washing cars etc., and working every other weekend.

After two years I moved to another job at 'The Oaklands' where my wage doubled to sixteen shillings a week with similar conditions as 'The Lea'.

I stayed there until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, and I was conscripted into the army in April 1940 for the duration of the war until 1946 (more of which later).

The years between 1930 and 1940 were as you might say filled with work and pleasure and I can only describe them as being as near Paradise as one could wish.

We didn't have much money but every day was an adventure which stays in my memory to this day.

We played football and cricket, we danced until the early hours, went to the cinema on Saturday night - usually 'The Regent' in Hanley where we would often queue in Piccadilly for two hours to get in - sometimes in the rain! Life was good.

I was blessed with a good home life, as most of us were in those days. Food was good and we grew our own vegetables. Some had their own pigs and chickens. Bread was baked in the village by George Hill in Kents Row and he delivered it daily by horse and cart and afterwards by a Morris Cowley van. He and his wife also accommodated The District Bank in their cottage - open one afternoon a week, the bank clerk used to carry the money in a bag up from the station with complete safety.

Jack Matthews kept the newsagents and tuck shop by the station. He traded from a small wooden hut. He delivered the daily papers and kept all his customers up to date with the local village gossip while delivering them. The hut was replaced by a new house/shop and is now (2001) converted into a house.

We were fortunate in having Oram's shop at the top end of the village. They were two brothers, Sid and Ted and each had a horse and flat wagon on which they delivered fruit and vegetables daily round Trentham, Blurton and Cocknage. Fresh dairy produce, bacon and cheese etc. was also carried. Their horses, named Dolly and Dick always knew where to stop at their regular customers. Oram's also employed a gardener named Mr. Barnett who grew fresh produce in the Old Hall Gardens behind Queen's Row, for sale in the shop. The shop itself was an old army hut from the First World War. It cost only £80. It had two petrol pumps at the front, Shell and Pratts, which you had to operate by winding a handle. There were very few cars on the road before the war (WW2), only the gentry and rich business men could afford to run them. I remember Orams buying a new Morris Minor two-seater with a dicky seat for £100. They took us for a ride in it round the Cross Lanes.

Miss Sylvester kept a shop on the corner of Malthouse Lane mostly selling sweets for the children, but she and her sister also had a tea garden to cater for visitors from The Potteries, who came to Barlaston on the train for a day in the country. Charlie Harvey was the village butcher. He built the shop occupied by Mayfair Cleaners (near the Plume of Feathers). He slaughtered his animals down the Canal Side where Brookhouse Drive is now. The cattle used to come by train to Barlaston station and were driven down to the slaughterhouse by drovers.

I don't think much has been recorded about the prominent local families living in Barlaston in those days so I would like to mention some of them. There is no doubt that the village was well supported by them, and they were benefactors to the poor of the parish who had so much to thank them for - they were always willing to help when required to do so. They also never failed to take an interest in village life and help where they were able to. Well known local people included: Mr. Paddock, Mr. Dickson, Mr. Bullock, Mr. Wedgwood, Mrs. Warner, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Adams, Judge Burgis, Frank Edmunds, Mr. Chambers, Wilson Hart, Dr. Gill, Dr. Browne, Miss Greatorex, Freda Beardmore, Mr. Mowatt, Mr. Allot, Nora Morrey..... please forgive me for the good people I must have left out - there were many more who deserved to be mentioned.

Unfortunately when word got around that the sewerage works (Strongford), the power station (Meaford) and the Wedgwood factory were all coming to Barlaston many of the gentry departed en masse and very little more was heard of them. We were left with a village surrounded by housing estates and a general deterioration of village life. Gone was the Paradise we enjoyed before the war, and we learned to live with the chaos of traffic and poor train and bus services of this modern age.

The first bus service to Barlaston was run by Brookfields of Longton, around 1925. The driver was Len Gregory who lived in the village and the sole route of this green coloured bus was between Barlaston and Longton. Afterwards the Dorothy (blue) bus took over with a service to Hanley. Then Stoke Motors and Potteries Electric Traction Company took over the route. You could set your watch by the buses in those days, always on time!

Many things are of course much better today - a more affluent society enjoying the luxuries of better wages, more holidays, television, motor cars and the benefits of 'Cradle to the Grave' bestowed on us all by the National Health Service, not to mention the system of benefits and allowances which were unheard of pre-war.

We have been fortunate in enjoying the friendship and company of many good people and characters - 'The Salt of the Earth' as you might truly say. I hope to recount their exploits and achievements in another chapter of life leading to the present time.

Before that however I should mention the Bible Class held every Sunday afternoon at the home of Henry Johnson, the Upper House. It was for men only and was attended by the faithful few regularly at 2 pm. It was held in the study and Mr. Johnson took the service with the occasional guest speaker. Mr. Russell, the village grocer played the organ. There was also a library where we could borrow books whenever we wished. Henry Johnson also supplied the equipment for the Bible Class cricket team. The cricket ground was by the drive leading up to the Upper House and was maintained by the gardening staff. Many of us played for the Bible Class team and the Barlaston village team even though there was friendly rivalry between the two. The games were always played in good spirit. The outbreak of war in 1939 put a stop to it as it did many other activities.

Father Murray was a very likeable character who was in charge of the Retreat House at Barlaston Hall. Garden fetes were held there in the summertime.

The Bank of England were accommodated in the Hall during the Second World War.

The vicars of the parish in my time were: The Reverends Peate, Freeman and Davies - all following the Reverend Oliver who had the first motor car in Barlaston and lived at the top of Malthouse Lane.



*The Church of St. John the Baptist c. 1920*

The decline of the Church is one of the sad sides of present day life. Many things are blamed for the decline in church attendance, chief of which appears to be television and the motor car. At a local level the loss of our old church in its idyllic setting was a deciding factor for many of my age in abandoning a way of life to which we had become accustomed over decades. We had contributed so much both physically and financially over the years. We were told that the church was unsafe, but never remember being consulted for our views. It was a sore point which still rankles to this day. We could not understand why the Hall, next door to the church could be saved by underpinning, but not the church - and if Moddershall church could be moved brick by brick and rebuilt adjacent to its original site

- why couldn't ours? It seems safe enough now.

I still attend regularly and say my prayers there - even if it is often outside! The old church with its now silent 15th century bell tower, holds many happy memories for me as it does for many other old parishioners and its abandonment caused much sadness and still does to this day.

The cemetery chapel has also been abandoned. I remember when a bier was used to convey the coffin from the church to the cemetery and the cemetery chapel bell used to toll during the journey.

As you would expect in a country village, farming was the mainstay of the community. The Buxton family were prominent and they all had big families whose descendants are still around today.

The Harvest Festival service in the old church was an occasion for the local farmers and gardeners, who attended without fail. Not so today I'm afraid, admitted there are not so many farmers and gardeners but nevertheless the present day Harvest Festival services are nothing compared to days gone by.

They say old soldiers never die, but the annual Remembrance Day Service proves that statement to be false by the poor turnout these days. There are not so many of us left to remember those who fell in the Great War and the Second World War - not even a parade which used to be led with pride by Colonel Dickson.

Amongst other pre-war sporting activities in Barlaston was the local football club - Barlaston United FC. We played where Brookfield Drive is now (opposite the Health Centre). All village lads, some from Tittensor and we enjoyed it although we never won much in the way of trophies!

Barlaston Cricket Club was in its prime before the war, again mostly village lads and wonderful times were enjoyed by both players and spectators. We didn't take sport as seriously as they do today - all friendly matches with surrounding villages on Saturday and knock out competitions organised by Bent's Brewery in the evenings - helped by barrels of good ale from Stone. Nearly all the village came to watch and enjoy the cricket matches. They also enjoyed the sandwiches and home made cakes supplied by the cricketer's wives!

All the village activities were financed by whist drives and dances held regularly in the Parish Room (Village Hall). No shortage of helpers and we used to dance until two o'clock in the morning - except on Saturday.

Bowling was popular at the old Plume of Feathers, it was the only sport that was allowed on Sundays. The bowling green was laid by Bent's Brewery in about 1926 after they had bought the land from Charlie Harvey, the local butcher (he may have given them the land - I'm not sure). My father, Sid Hawkins and Charlie Harvey were involved in it from its beginning, as were many others, too numerous to mention - all very enthusiastic to get the club established. The earliest bowling green in Barlaston (some years before the war) was at the Duke of York on the site of the current car park.

I could go on about my beloved Barlaston, but would rather close before my ramblings bore readers who may find them of little interest in this age of computers, internet, televisions and motor cars.