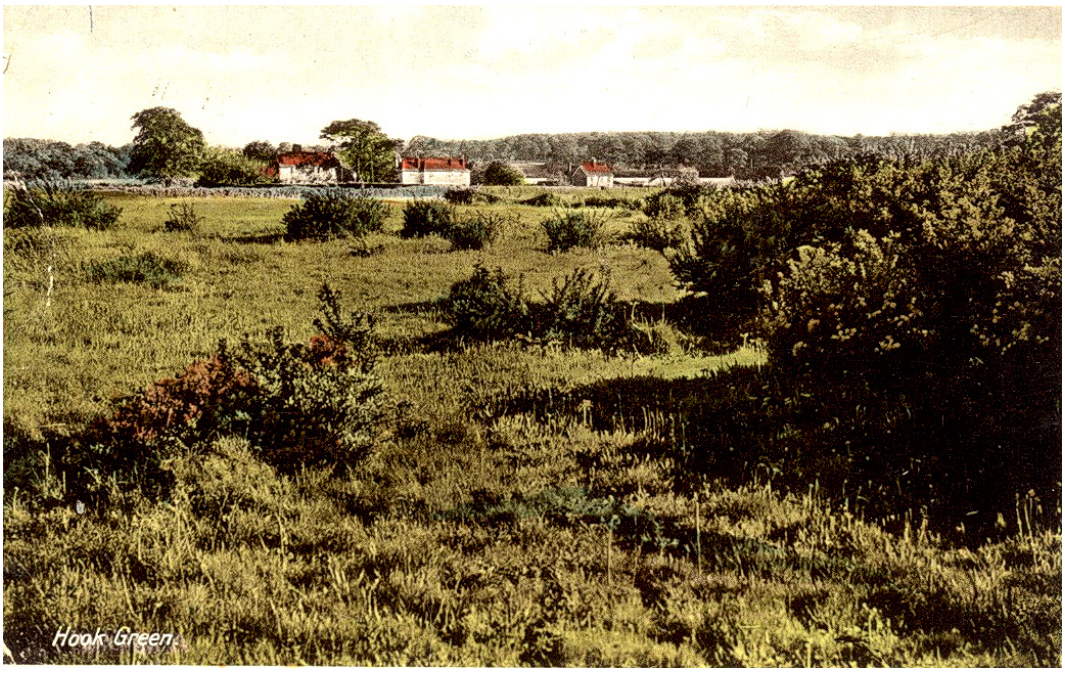
Life at Hook Green, Kent, from 1939 to 1949.

Whilst writing my memories at the beginning of the 21st century about "Wartime Kent" covering episodes about the war from 1939 until 1945, I realised that things have changed so much in the past 70 years that I ought to write more about the way of life back then. With luck, someone in the distant future might be interested.

This is not a chronological narrative, but just a collection of memories, although some attempt is made to indicate the approximate times involved. Please accept my apologies if not everything appears to be very coherent. Not all the "facts" are necessarily true, as memory can play tricks, but hopefully there are not too many glaring errors.



Hook Green from near the old PO and Stores, looking towards Free Heath.
This is from a picture post card taken about 1938.

As children we had the run of this common, and the smaller area in front of the Elephant's Head, as well as the fields and woods all around. Boys would be tree climbing, birds' nesting in season, building huts in the woods both on the ground and up in the branches of suitable trees, and playing various games, including cricket and football.

Hook Green in the 1930s and 1940s was very rural indeed, and a way of life which had been largely unchanged for centuries was on the brink of a sudden alteration in so many ways. Horses had not been replaced with tractors on many farms, cows were milked by hand into buckets, most farms were mixed, with some arable and some meadows for grazing and hay-making, hops were picked by hand, and hardly anybody had a car. Shopping was mostly done locally, the school was in the village rather than miles away in a town, and working time was five and a half days, usually 48 hours a week with one or two weeks holiday a year, plus Bank Holidays on Easter Monday, Whit Monday, the first Monday in August, and finally Christmas and Boxing Days.

We had no gas or electricity at Hook Green, so we burnt coal and wood. The latter was not expensive, but chestnut, a common wood, was not a good idea, as it spit and sputtered so much that a screen was essential in front of the fire to stop burning embers setting light to the place. Ash was the best wood for burning, even when fairly green. Most wood needs to be stored for a year or two to dry out properly, protected from the rain.

Many people now, in 2009, have not much idea of how a fire should be lit, nor realize how much dust was caused in a house by clearing the grate every morning before laying the fire and lighting it. Cold and frosty mornings in those days were …. cold and frosty. People born into our centrally-heated population of today do not appreciate how recently all our present labour-saving comforts have become available. Burning coal and wood produced soot in the chimney, so they had to be swept at least once a year. There were probably chimney sweeps available at a price, but many folk, including us, swept our own. Dad had a set of drain rods, and a chimney-sweep's brush, but after several years it came off, and became stuck in the living-room chimney. The only way to get it out was to push it out the top of the chimney with a bunch of holly twigs tied to the drain rods. From thence, holly replaced the brush successfully, as the brush was past its use-by date.

No electricity meant no vacuum cleaners, so all floors had to be swept using a broom and a dustpan-and-brush, a tedious and not very efficient cleaning method.

For kindling wood, necessary in fair quantities, any old wooden boxes would be chopped up finely, or short logs placed grain-upwards on a chopping block and split with either a small axe or a bill-hook, a skill we had to learn by the age of eight or nine. (Health and Safety?!) One of our chores as children was to go into the woods on Bayham estate where the woodmen had been working, and collect the chips of wood produced when cutting down trees. These were put into sacks, and Tony and I found that putting the top of the sack over our foreheads, Eskimo style, was the easiest way to carry a heavy load.

In the summer much of the cooking was on primus stoves, so my mother had to first get the stoves going before a meal could be prepared. In the colder months the old kitchen range was used, burning wood or coal. For cooking, coal was better. How she managed with four boys and father and herself to feed, I shall never know. Luckily she was a remarkably placid person, very intelligent, and coped with everything life threw at her.

This was the type of Primus stove we used. Firstly one had to check that the tank had enough paraffin in it, then pour metholated spirits in the little cup, light it with a match, wait a few minutes while the meths heated the top section, then just before the meths ran out, pump to get pressure, forcing hot paraffin gas into the burner at the top, and with luck the stove was ready to use. All this before cooking or even just to make a cup of tea during the summer months!

The only room which was heated was the kitchen/dining/living room, and with no electricity, only paraffin lamps and candles could be used. We used a type of "Aladdin" lamp with an incandescent mantle, similar to those used on the old gas lamps. The light was probably about the equivalent of a 100 watt electric bulb. The oil lamp flared up at the least provocation, and seventy years later I still slide a table cloth over the table without flapping, as that caused the lamp suspended over the table to flare up and blacken the mantle, requiring it to be turned right down until the soot was burnt off. If the blackening was bad, this could take several minutes at a very reduced flame.

The PO and Stores
in 1940, on the right.

To go anywhere in the house after dark we either groped around or took a small torch, but batteries were not easy to get, and were expensive, so we mostly put up with going around in total blackness. Candles blew out too easily. In the winter it was cold anywhere but in the one room.. Stone hot water bottles helped, put into the beds a little while before bedtime, but they were not very friendly things to cuddle. We always had the bedroom windows open, winter and summer "because it was healthy". Despite the wonderful "Jack Frost" patterns we had all over the inside of the windows in the mornings, I am not sure it was so good for us! In winter time dressing was done in the bed as far as possible.

Beautiful "Jack Frost" patterns on a window.
Something centrally-heated children miss out on.

Washing day on Monday meant pumping water out of the well, carrying it to the copper, lighting two primus stoves and putting them underneath. (Many people were still using the old copper with a faggot fire). We used the well water as it was soft, using less of the precious soap ration. It was also useful in keeping the level of the water in the well down. After heavy rain it sometimes overflowed into the cellar, so by using the water via the hand-pump (just outside on the north wall of the house), dampness was reduced inside the cellar. A couple of two-gallon buckets were used to carry the water indoors.

Mum then had to do all the washing using a scrubbing board (for the six of us) by hand, ringing out as much of the water as possible before passing it through the hand-operated mangle, then hanging them on the lines in the garden to dry. On wet days, a clothes horse in front of the fire had to be used in the living room.

Then came the ironing of course – not so easy when you have no electricity, necessitating the use of old-fashioned flat-irons. In winter they could be heated up on the hob of the kitchen range, but in summer it was back to the Primus stove. In either case, one iron would be heating whilst the other was in use.

To continue the description of what would now be considered primitive living conditions, almost everyone had a "privy", as it was usually called, down the end of the garden. Only the Elephant's Head, Park Cottage, and ourselves, had flush loos, as far as I know, right up to about 1960. No wonder the cottage gardens were so productive! "Night soil" was dug in by the man of the house on a regular basis, when the bucket was full enough. Newspaper was always available, cut into squares and threaded onto a piece of string, hanging on a convenient nail.

We were lucky not to have to go outside for the toilet, but it was in a draughty and unheated outhouse attached to the building. One did not linger there on a cold winter's day! One of our outhouses was always referred to as "The Stable", and there was still an iron ring on the outside of one of the door jambs for hitching horses to.

Talking of convenient nails, about 1952 a friend living at Neil's cottage, reputed to be the oldest house in Lamberhurst parish, decided to bang a six-inch nail into a wall to hang his coat on. A few days later the fellow living next door said "Thanks for the nail, Bob, it is just right for hanging my coat on". The ancient oaken dividing wall must have been quite thin in that spot. The next door neighbour was a very pleasant fellow who had been a German POW, and after the war had married a local girl and settled down happily, as a fair number did. There was another we knew living at Sandhurst, Kent, in the 1970s.

Neil's Cottage was one place that relied on a well for water, and we used to love to drink newly-raised water straight out of the bucket, using a tatty old metal mug. It was lovely water, and very cooling on a hot summer's day. During a gale, the cottage creaked and groaned occasionally as its ancient timbers moved like a wooden ship at sea, and the same happened for a couple of days afterwards, as everything settled back down again.

Because the farming was "organic" as we now call it, with no pesticides or herbicides used, bird life was prolific. There were some patches of gorse bushes on the green in front of our house, lots of small shrubs, and hedges around all the fields, and in spring and early summer the dawn chorus was amazing. If only we had had tape recorders in those days.

At dawn one by one the various birds would start singing, until it was an incredible sound, all singing their hearts out. We had linnets, thrushes, blackbirds, robins, chaffinches, gold finches, bullfinches, gold crests, starlings, wood pigeons, doves, wrens and cuckoos, to name some of them. In late spring there were nightingales some distance away from home, probably further away over the green and in Apps Wood. We always had a few house martins building their nests under the eaves on the north wall of the house, and listened when in bed to their soft twittering in the early morning. They had two and sometimes three broods each year, the earlier chicks which had fledged helping their parents to feed the later broods.

One very notable bird which was to be heard sometimes was the nightjar, quite close in front of our house. Several times I mentioned to my parents that there was a nightjar making its distinctive call during the previous night, but got only a minor response. When I was older I realised why – they couldn't hear all the fantastic higher frequencies (harmonics) that they produced. It is hard to describe the sound as heard by a very young person with sharp hearing, including frequencies up to about 16 kHz. Our response to sound gets progressively worse as we grow older, the higher frequencies progressively disappearing. Two books to which I referred only speak of "churring " sounds, and abundant changes of pitch when the bird turns its head from side to side. These are most inadequate descriptions, (written by adults!).

At night we had plenty of barn owls (screech owls) flying silently along the hedgerows, and when we were cycling along the lanes quietly, it was not uncommon to have one quite close, a ghostly white object flying at about the same speed as us. Tawny owls were plentiful, with their very distinct "twit twoo" call. This is not made by one bird, apparently, but the first "twit" note is made by one, and the "twoo" by its mate, answering. Little owls were also seen a lot. They are often around during the day as well as at night. Their call, a couple of short down-going "kyew kyew" notes was a common sound.

Birds' nesting was one of our hobbies during the spring and early summer, and our collection of eggs were extensive. Only one or perhaps two eggs were taken at a time, and we disturbed the nests as little as possible.

I still have the wooden box which housed my collection, the eggs long since gone (in 2009), but the list of birds is still visible on the inside of the lid:
"Swan, pheasant, carrion crow, wood pigeon, mallard, moorhen, jackdaw, starling, (then three illegible ones), blackbird, thrush, wren, nuthatch, tree sparrow, chaffinch, house martin, partridge, long tailed tit, spotted flycatcher, yellow wagtail, mistle thrush, brown linnet, hedge sparrow, swallow, tawny owl, little owl, gold crested wren, woodlark, robin, rook, plover, coot, dove, whitethroat, duck, bullfinch, garden warbler, and cuckoo."

Nearly all were ones that I found, with perhaps a few obtained as "swaps". It does show how many birds were relatively common then; unfortunately many are rare sights now. Kingfishers were often seen whilst we were quietly fishing, and some nested in a bank by the river below Bayham church. Their nest holes were too small and long for us to reach to get any eggs, though. I once saw a fledgling come out of a nest and fall straight into the water. It struggled and would have drowned, so I caught it and after admiring its beautiful colouring, placed it safely on the bank near the nest.

The school and crossroads from outside the first Bull Lane Cottage, looking towards the Elephant's Head and the road to Lamberhurst, taken some time about 1935.

The nearest part of the school was the living quarters of the teacher, and the school was the further building. The school had been built by the Camdens of Bayham Abbey for the local children, and when my brother and I went there in 1939 we were all in one class of about 30 children. Miss Hile ("Old Gert") was the only teacher, living next door with her sister. Miss Hile had the reputation that no one ever left the school without the "Three Rs", reading, writing and 'rithmatic. I believe she had gone to the school herself as a child, stayed on as a "monitor" and eventually became the teacher. (No lefty Teacher Training for her). She maintained discipline effortlessly, and although teaching children of different ages and abilities, she did a good job with us all. Each week she even held Sunday Schools there.

We had Janet Ann, the daughter of some good friends in Wandsworth staying with us in 1940, as an evacuee. She was younger than us, and having been brought up in a pub, was at 3½ quite a strong character, although tiny for her age. Seeing my brother Tony and I go off to school each day, she decided she wanted to go as well. My mother had a word with Miss Hile, with the result that Janet came along too. I think the arrangement was completely unofficial, but probably Miss Hile thought that one more would not make much difference.

During the winter at the 11am break, each child had a hot Horlicks drink made with milk, prepared by Miss Hile's sister, who then had about 30 mugs to wash and dry. Summer time we had a couple of Horlicks tablets handed to us. Milk was presumably not available in the usual one third pint bottles for schools, because we were too far away from any town. Funnily enough, I have no recollection of what milk all the other people at Hook Green used, though there was no milkman delivering there during the 1940s as far as I know.

Everybody knew everybody else in the area, and a stranger wandering around would be conspicuous. This did not apply to service personnel, of course, as they were conspicuous anyway. At the top of the lane to the shop-cum-Post Office gypsies often spent a night or two before being asked to move on by the local policeman. Our constable lived at Lamberhurst Down in a police house, on the right just before reaching the "Swan", and was a very familiar sight pottering around on his large (and heavy) police bike.

Amongst his many duties was the watching of sheep being dipped, accounting for the movement of pigs and sheep, and control of firearms. He knew us all, and no doubt was watchful of those locals who were likely to stretch the law a little.

Many people in those days had a 4-10 or 12-bore shotgun. We were slightly different, as during the war a friend who lived in London belonged to a shooting club which had been destroyed by the bombing. Out of the debris they had recovered an old .303 service rifle which had been sleeved and rebored to .22 size. It was a vintage 1900 style, single breech loader with a curved slide to load each bullet, and a handle under the butt to self-eject the spent cartridge case. It had a long barrel, and was almost too heavy for us to carry, but its adjustable open sight was very well designed. We had a licence for it, in Dad's name, though he never used it. Tony and I marked out with sticks the distance down the side of Skence Wood in an arable field going west from home, where we would lie in wait for rabbits. When one appeared we knew fairly accurately how far away it was by our markers, and setting the sights for that distance, we usually scored a direct hit, killing it instantaneously. If near enough, the head was the favourite target, as it caused less damage.

Dad, a corporal in the Home Guard, had a .303 Lee Enfield rifle at home which on one occasion I borrowed, having scrounged a few rounds of ammunition from some soldiers, but it was not a success. It was too powerful, and did too much damage to a rabbit. How free we were in those days - about twelve years old, and using a rifle. But I was in the Army Cadet Force, at school, and had used rifles and bren guns there.

We knew how to paunch and skin a rabbit, and drawing and plucking chickens was a chore shared by us boys with Mother. Feathers seemed to get everywhere! Chickens then tasted quite differently to the bland ones one gets these days, as they were hung for two or three days before drawing, as were game birds such as pheasants and partridges.

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About 1944 or 1945 there was a working party of Italian POWs clearing the river from below Little Bayham along past Winbridge and Bayham church and onward downstream. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, pulling old tree trunks and debris out of the water, sawing off overhanging branches and so on. They had a guard in the form of one bored squaddy with a rifle, (probably without any ammunition). There was very little likelyhood of any of them wanting to leave a life where they were relatively well fed and housed. They did not have to work particularly hard, and the authorities were no doubt pleased to find something to occupy the POWs time with which was of some use to the neighbourhood, helping the water flow down the river to reduce flooding in winter. Occasionally water did cross the road at Winbridge and down in the middle of Lamberhurst, but only by a few inches and was never a big problem.

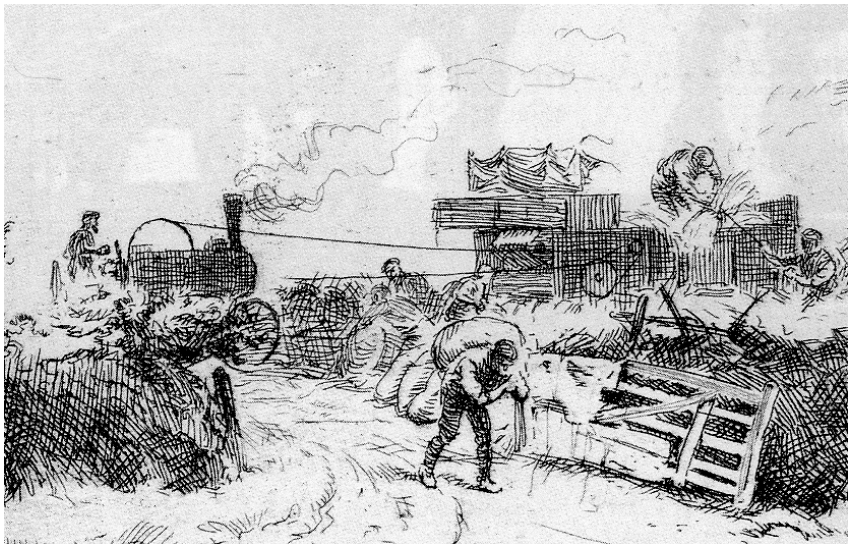
Reaping of wheat, oats or barley was done mostly by tractor. I think the farmers who only had horses used to borrow a tractor and driver from some one else. They used a fairly standard cutter, two multiple blades operated from a power take-off or perhaps driven from the cutter wheels, with a binder attached behind it. This took the loose corn stalks and shuffled them up together, then tied binder twine around each sheaf as soon as it got up to size, and ejected it onto the ground. Men and boys would follow, picking up the sheaves and stacking about a dozen of them together to form stooks, with the ears of grain upwards to dry in the sun (hopefully).

A headland was first cut round the outside of the field, then they worked inwards, always in the same direction in a wide spiral. As the uncut centre area became smaller and smaller the rabbits which had been sheltering in the corn started to make a break for it. As they appeared, several men would have shotguns at the ready, and take a shot at the fast-moving target. Fortunately most of the them used 4-10s, less powerful than the 12-bore guns, so when we lads happened to be in the direction of fire, albeit some distance away, it was not unusual to have some of the shot come our way. We wore shorts, as all boys did in those days until the age of thirteen or fourteen, and the pellets certainly made our legs sting for a few minutes. No one took any notice of it, as it all seemed quite normal and acceptable. We knew it could happen, but also knew that we were unlikely to suffer.

After perhaps a week or two, the corn in the stooks had dried, so it was taken to the farmyard with a horse and cart. We used to help by leading the horse, getting a ride back in the wagon from the farm when it was empty. The sheaves were made into a stack in the farmyard, the men pitching each one to the man making the stack, which was a skilled job. It would take about a day to cart and stack the corn, and the top of the stack was then thatched with some old straw to make it all watertight, and the result could be very presentable.

At some time during the winter the harvest would be threshed. For centuries this was done by using flails on a barn floor, but one of the first uses of steam traction engines on the farm was to tow threshing machines to a farm, and then providing the motive power to operate them. At Hoathley Farm in the winter of 1940 or 1941 my brother Stan, waiting to be called up into the RAF, was working at the farm. I remember them unhooking the threshing machine from the traction engine, lining up the two at the correct distance and alignment, then getting the broad leather drive belt over the large flywheel of the engine and the driven wheel of the thresher.

Once enough water was in the boiler and the steam was up to pressure, the driver started the engine slowly, and checked that the belt was correctly functioning, then opened up a little more, and threshing could begin. Each sheaf was pitchforked in turn from the top of the stack down to a man on the ground, who pitchforked it on to one standing by the input chute, who cut the twine and fed the straw into the thresher. This took more skill than meets the eye. They had a long day ahead of them, so the men had to use the minimum effort moving the sheaves with their pitchforks, and there were two potentially dangerous spikes on each, which could do serious harm to anyone who was too near.



Part of one of George Soper's country scenes.
The traction engine is much smaller than those we used to see in the 1940s,
but the threshing machine is much the same.

Chaff was ejected out of a hole on the side of the threshing machine, the wheat, barley or oats poured down into a sack below the machine, and the straw was ejected at the back. There was no stopping – if the sack was full, it had to be very smartly taken down and replaced with an empty one. The chaff was not much of a problem, as a broom easily cleared it away, but the straw accumulated quickly and meant continuous work for somebody to carry it away.

I was intrigued by the belt, as it seemed to defy common sense to have both the driving wheel (the flywheel of the traction engine) and the driven wheel on the thresher slightly domed. It was discovered many years ago that the belt would be self-centreing with that arrangement, but it certainly looked wrong. The traction engines were almost all made by a firm in Strood, near Rochester, called Aveling and Porter.

All this work, reaping, stooking, carting, stacking and threshing was labour intensive, needing many men to carry out the tasks. It is assumed these days that one man on a combine harvester is doing wonderfully well, accomplishing so much work in such a short time. However, he is supported by geologists looking for oil deposits, men drilling and extracting the oil, staff building and operating refinery plant, tanker drivers carrying oil around, men in drawing offices designing combine harvesters, miners digging up iron ore, works extracting steel and other materials, people in steel works making the raw materials, machinists producing the parts to make tractors and threshers …. and so on.

It is NOT one man doing all that work, by any stretch of the imagination.

One very old custom which has now disappeared was gleaning. I only remember being involved in it once, in a field towards Clay Hill, on the back road to Pembury. There were about a dozen of us stooping down, picking up ears of wheat which had been dropped when reaping and carting it. Presumably the farmer was happy for us to be there gleaning, but I have no idea how we got to know of it. Dad was a temporary postman for several years during the war. So many men had been called up that there were always vacancies to be filled by whosoever could be persuaded to take them. He knew many people because of his rounds, and maybe that was when he heard of the field being reaped, and the gleaning afterwards. The wheat was taken home and used to feed the chickens.

One of the local postmen was Mr Charlie Powell, who was a tank driver on D-Day. After he came back from the war he mentioned that he found it very frightening to drive his tank off the end of the landing-craft ramp into deep water, and using a propeller, drive (or sail?) to shore. They had big buoyancy balloons around the tank so that it floated, but as he said, a German with a machine gun could have sunk them easily. As it was they got ashore safely, but he lost several tanks in the next few days, and once was the only one of the crew to get out alive.

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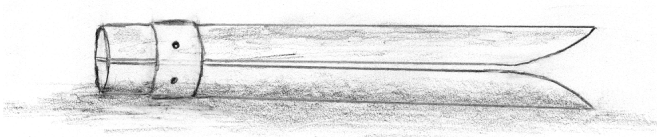
Gypsies.

Although we often had gypsies camping in their little painted caravans a hundred yards away from us, with their horses grazing the grass, front legs hobbled, we never had the slightest problem with them. They had a reputation for stealing, but it seemed to be ill founded. They used to use the buses to get into Tunbridge Wells, with huge baskets full of produce. They knew where to pick wild daffodils (disappeared now due to intensive farming), primroses and violets, and in the late autumn heather, and took bundles to hawk from house to house in the town, or sit waiting for people to buy from them.

One gypsy woman, about 30 years old, was a magnificent person. Not beautiful in the accepted sense maybe, but tall, well-built, tanned, and with a wonderful bearing. She always seemed to have a child suckling, and took no notice on the bus of other passengers while she did so, like all of the younger gypsy women. The children all thrived! We heard that she was often a model for artists, which was not surprising. One problem with our gypsies was their smell. Once they were on the bus it was all-pervading. It must have had a large percentage of wood smoke in its composition, as they cooked out of doors on an open fire. It is likely that they never had a bath from one year to the next, and possibly did not even wash.

They made clothes pegs from pieces of wood about three quarters of an inch in diameter, split and one end of each half chamfered, bound with iron from old tins, fixed with small nails.



Sketch of a home-made gypsy clothes peg.

All the materials, except the small nails, were found by the wayside. Old tins were cut open and beaten flat, then cut into strips for binding the two halves together after the wood was split and hand-whittled to shape. The gypsies sat for hours making them around the camp fire. An American woman who lived in England in the 1960s, near Westerham, had a gypsy come to her door to sell some. She was so taken with them that she bought a quantity of them and sent them to friends in the USA.

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Whilst in the shop late one winter afternoon an elderly man, Mr Watts I think his name was, arrived as usual for his baccy. He worked at Hoathley by himself in a small sand pit, probably for the Bayham estate, cutting out sand and sifting it for building purposes. Being outside all day he needed plenty of clothes to keep warm, and in the winter habitually wore two old coats, both held together with strings instead of buttons. On this occasion I watched as he came into the shop, and looked at our clock, which my parents tried to keep on fairly good time for the benefit of their customers.

He usually checked his old pocket watch against our clock, but it seems that it had stopped working. I saw him undo several strings for his top coat, then labouriously untie several more on the one underneath, then with a struggle, finally hauled out a big alarm clock, and reset it to the correct time. The same procedure was then followed in reverse, taking several more minutes. I looked at Mum, who had also been watching his antics, and we both had to restrain our laughter until he had gone.

Another old inhabitant was Mr Fuller who lived with his wife at 1 Bull Lane Cottages. He had for many years gone out of the house at 7am, returned for lunch at noon until 1pm, then was back out until 5pm. After he retired his wife expected him to carry on doing the same, and he accepted it, though we suspected it was not his choice. He would be in his outhouse behind the cottage in warm weather, but on very cold days in the winter he used to come over to the shop and sit for hours, as there was a fire going in there. Mum, who did most of the serving, used to let him sit there, leaving him when there were no customers, and he was quite a fixture. He never gave any trouble, chatted to anyone that came in, and he was no doubt pleased to be able to keep warm.

Bayham Church

The vicar I remember was quite a young man, the Rev Willis, with a family of two girls.

Bayham Church ~ 1940.

This picture in an old book "Footpaths of the Kent-Sussex Border" by Joseph Braddock, 1947, brings back wonderful childhood memories. Tony and I sang in the choir in the little church from about 1939 until 1944. I still remember particularly the evening services, when the setting sun would shine through the colourful stained-glass windows. My first "public speaking" was reading the lesson at a service in the church. Whether anybody could hear me (aged about 10) is anyone's guess.

The church stood on a bank, almost certainly artificial, below which there was a short area of level ground and then the little River Teise, with a wooden bridge over it, and a small weir, creating a deeper pool upstream. We used to swim in that pool, the girls changing behind the bole of a large oak tree which stood beside the river.

The bank in front of the church faced south, and in the summer there were lots of grasshoppers in the grass. Catching a few of them, we would take them into church at choir practice, release them, and have fun watching where they hopped to. What the cleaners thought we do not know – perhaps they thought they found their own way in?

If memory serves correctly, as choir boys we received 6d (about 2 ½ p) for attending a choir practice, and about 9d (about 4p) for a service, which normally would be at 11am and 4pm for evensong.

Each boy took it in turns to ring the bells. For five minutes it was 1-2-3-2-1, continuously repeated , then five minutes a single bell tolled every five seconds, then back to 1-2-3-2-1 for five minutes, just before the service started. It was not a difficult task, as the bell ropes were made off at the bottom, and one just pulled the appropriate rope about six inches towards you, which struck the bell.

Going down to the little Bayham Church, especially in the evenings during the week, for choir practice, meant a walk of about three quarters of a mile each way and if it was a moonless and overcast night it would be in complete darkness. After a while, once our eyes became adjusted to the pitch black, we could see outlines of the trees against the sky and knowing the countryside intimately we knew where we were, and could follow the gravel pathway to the church reasonably well.

Winter evenings during the war were often extremely dark. In the south east of England nowadays no one has the experience of almost total darkness, as we did then. The blackout meant that there were no street lights in any of the towns, and all lights in houses were supposed to have been prevented from showing outside - a law which was generally very well obeyed by the vast majority of folk, even if it was mainly for their own safety.

On cold winter's nights with very clear conditions we used to see many meteors streaking across the sky. It is estimated that several tons of "debris" falls to earth every 24 hours, most of the particles only the size of a grain of sand. But they travel at tens of thousands of miles an hour, and as they hit the earth's upper atmosphere they burn up, creating a bright arc across the sky. These we sometimes saw at a rate of half a dozen in a few minutes. This is now impossible with today's polluted skies, unfortunately obscuring all but the brightest of them.

How on earth the drivers of motor vehicles could see enough to keep on the roads, let alone find their way on those dark nights I do not know. They were allowed only a glimmer of light from heavily-screened headlights and it must have been a slow and tortuous journey if they had to go any distance under those conditions. Again the blackout laws as they applied to car headlights was adhered to because of the chance that an enemy aircraft would see any brighter lights and drop bombs, or perhaps machine-gun the source of the light.

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An evacuee lived with the Crocomb family at the small farm on the right as you approach the top of Clapper's Hill towards Hoathley. One day I was walking down Bull Lane, and just at the top of the hill heard cries coming from a dirty stagnant pond up the bank on the left. There was a large tree trunk which had fallen from the bank across part of the pond, at a fair angle downwards into the water. The trunk was slippery, but as there was often a moorhen's nest just within reach at the bottom of it, we knew that we could get down to get some eggs and back up, as long as we were careful.

In the water at the end of the trunk was this boy, up to his waist, and sinking fast into the slimy, muddy water. Hurriedly crawling down the tree trunk I managed to catch his hand, and with a lot of heaving got him onto the trunk and up to the pond bank. He stank !! Telling him to go home straight away, he disappeared, and I carried on to the river to do a some fishing.

I thought little of it, and probably had forgotten the incident by the time I got home. Later in life I realised that it was an extremely lucky chance that I was walking down Bull Lane just at the right time. Had I been a few minutes earlier or later, he would have sunk without trace, and as it was a fairly remote pond, hidden by trees, no-one would have thought of looking for him there.

In 1998 I wrote to Eileen Crocomb, (a Post Office telephone operator, and then switchboard supervisor), who was then living near Wadhurst, and had a reply, which included the following:

"I think the evacuee that you rescued from that horrible pond was Morris Davies. At one time we had three boys, Morris (the eldest) Mervyn and Elwyn, plus their mother. She soon got fed up with living in the country and went back to the East End to join her husband, taking two of the children with her. My mother agreed to keep Morris, as he expressed a wish to remain."

" He wasn't really a bad lad, but just seemed to be accident prone and given to exploring new territory. He wouldn't listen when he was asked not to leave our land without telling someone where he was going. I remember he once cut his hand badly on a bottle he found somewhere on his wanderings, and Dad had to rush him down to the doctor to have it stitched."

" I wasn't at home at the time of the pond incident, because the P.O. had started sending me out to places like Uckfield and Heathfield for two months at a time. I do remember my mother telling me about this apparition who arrived home jet black and stinking. I also seem to remember that all his clothes were piled on a bonfire when he was bathed. I believe it took several baths to finally rid him of that awful smell. Undoubtedly he owed his life to the fact that you heard his cries, and managed to pull him out. We would never have known where he had gone. He did come back to see us once after the war, but we never heard from him again." (His clothes must have been in a very state to have been burnt, as they were rationed, and hard to replace.)

I had reminded Eileen that I used to collect milk from her father and mother later in the war, instead of from Hook Green Farm, and the geese that greeted me as I went in.

She continued "I do remember you calling for the milk, and the geese in the field by the pond. They were wonderful watch-dogs, but could be rather aggressive at times !"

In fact, they did not give much trouble. They made a lot of noise with their cackling, and had very rough beaks, but were not able to break the skin. Though they often attacked, clutching at clothes and hands, they did no harm, and could be brushed aside gently.

Food was rationed, of course, as was clothing, Petrol for anything but essential travel was severely limited (not that many people had cars or motorcycles in those days)

Dad grew all our vegetables, and the big greenhouse he built at the back of the house was full of tomato plants every year. Mum and Dad sold loads of tomatoes to hop-pickers during the season, making a handsome profit on them. We had a large garden, plus one allotment over the other side of the green, by the road towards Free Heath, where the soil was surprisingly sandy, and another allotment behind Bayham Forge, at Little Bayham. Tony and I had to spend a couple of hours gardening at one place or another before we could go out to play at weekends and school holidays. This gave me an interest in gardening which stayed with me.

We grew lots of green vegetables: cabbages, Brussels sprouts and kale. Root crops were carrots, parsnip, turnips, onions, shallots and celery, the latter being fertilised with soot from the chimney. Swedes were looked down upon for some reason – we considered them to be cattle feed, but no doubt we did eat some at times. The winters were much harder in the 1940s than now, so towards the end of the winter vegetables could become scarce. We never bought vegetables – the nearest greengrocer was in Tunbridge Wells.

Swedes were stored in "clamps" by the side of the fields where they had been grown, in a pile about three feet high, perhaps six feet wide and up to twenty feet long, covered with straw to keep the frost off. One end was opened when swedes were required for the cattle or sheep and covered over again. By the end of the winter the whole of the clamp would have been used up.

Flowers were not ignored, and Mum, being very fond of them, had them indoors, including on the counter in the shop whenever possible. Dad had a side-line making flower sprays and bouquets for weddings, and wreaths for funerals, and used as many home-grown flowers in them as possible. On occasion, particularly in the winter, he would motor-cycle up to Covent Garden market very early in the morning to buy flowers for special orders.

Part of a picture by George Soper. This was a familiar scene to us in the 1940s. Mr Woollett had a horse and cart, and I remember helping by leading it around as the men loaded the cart with hay.

The big farm horses were a very attractive part of life in those days. The farm worker responsible for them would be up very early in the morning to attend to them and they always took precedence over other jobs when they finished work for the day. They were often magnificent animals, powerful yet gentle. In the hop gardens on a couple of occasions we saw little toddlers, just about able to crawl, move away from the bin into which their mother was engrossed in picking hops, and go right up to a horse's hooves as it stood with a part-load of hops in the wagon. Mother almost had hysterics, but realised that making a lot of noise would frighten the horse, so would slowly move over to it and take the baby away. The horses seemed to know that the baby was there, and stayed completely still.

Hoathley Farm had several big working horses. One called Captain was often in a field near the bridge at the bottom of Clappers Hill, and could be enticed over to the five-barred gate with an apple. Once he was there, a couple of us got onto his huge wide back, at which he ambled slowly back across the field to some small trees with overhanging branches. He knew he could get underneath the branches, and knew that we couldn't. We climbed into the trees as we were swept off his back, returned to the gate, offered another apple, and repeated the process.

Horses needed shoeing and the forge at Little Bayham was much in demand for the estate horses and for those of the farms round about. Someone, usually the keeper of the horse, would hold its head while the blacksmith took the horse's hoof onto his knee, removed remains of the old shoe, including the nails, cleaned up the hoof with a coarse file, and offered up a new shoe blank, checking if it was about the right size. The shoe would then be heated to red hot, bellows being used to increase the heat, then it was beaten to about the correct shape on the anvil, and checked on the horse. If needed, more shaping was done, then with the shoe a dull red, burnt onto the hoof briefly, giving a tight fit, the burning hoof giving off a very distinctive smell. The horse could not feel anything, as the blacksmith worked quickly, and was certainly not going to risk a hefty kick. The nails would then be hammered in, and the protruding ends, which came out of the side of the hoof, burred over. This was one of the many every-day occurrences which nowadays hardly any one has the opportunity to watch.

Another job for blacksmiths was the rebuilding of wagon wheels. Once the iron rim had worn down, it had to be replaced. Next to Lamberhurst school was a blacksmith, and I do wonder if they timed the final act in their repertoire especially for us children. We had a break at 11am, and it seemed that they often put a new iron tyre on a wooden cartwheel just at the right time for us to watch. The wheel was placed on a circular iron plate permanently set in the ground outside the forge, with a large hole in it to take the wheel centre. The iron band was heated up nearby in a faggot fire until it was red hot, then two or three men with long-handled pincers grabbed it, and quickly took it over the wheel, and placed it over the rim. Smoke poured up, but another man was ready with buckets of water, immediately quenching any flames. The metal band contracted as it cooled, gripping the wheel tightly.

Most farms still had working horses, and their manure was ideal for encouraging the growth of mushrooms. The arable fields in which they grazed were natural pastures, not having been ploughed and sown with grass seed as happens now, so fungi of various descriptions grew undisturbed. There were certain fields, particularly one behind the Elephant's Head, which were good for picking mushrooms.

I often used to go there during the autumn at about 7am, wearing wellington boots, and searched up and down, my footsteps clearly visible in the dew-laden grass, so it was easy to avoid going over the same patch twice. The little "button" mushrooms were our favourite. If left, they grew larger, but their flavour was not as good. There were also puff-balls which were edible, but had to be picked when they were young, or the inside became a dark powder, and as the name suggests, puffed this powder (the spores) out with the slightest of squeezes. We also ate "parasols", which stood up to six inches high, with a speckled brown top, and later in the season "blueits". The latter had the best taste of all. They had a slightly blue top, a little shiny, and grew in the woods and shaws. Part way down Pullen's Hill, opposite Park Cottage was one of the best places for those.

Once the U-boats started sinking hundreds our merchant ships, food rationing was tight, though there is evidence that the population was more healthy then than now. There was certainly no obesity! Sometimes we had only a baked potato and onion for our main meal, but usually there were rabbits, pigeons, the odd pheasant (which unaccountably was found dead, but still very fresh!) and some fish. We probably fared better in the country than those in the towns. Everyone kept chickens, fed mostly on scraps, so eggs were a main-stay, and the hens were eaten at the end of their laying life. Called "broiler hens" they were sometimes as tough as old boots, and had to be boiled before roasting. But in those days "Waste not, want not" was very appropriate.

Milk was rationed in the towns, but we had plenty, as on Hook Green Farm, a quarter of a mile from us, they had several dozen milking cows. My brother Tony and I used to take it in turns to walk there with a small tin can with a lid, to collect four pints of lovely full-cream milk. We earned a halfpenny a day for doing the chore - 3½d a week. (1½p). The milk was very fresh – straight from the hand-milked cows, into the strainer (to get rid of bits of straw and hay) and into a large churn, from whence it was ladled with a pint scoop into our can. No pasteurisation, and it was wonderful. I haven't tasted real milk like that for many years! It cost about 3d (1p) a pint.

My younger brother and I would go after moorhen eggs on the ponds around about. We never took all the eggs, leaving one or two, returning a few days later when the hen would have relaid her clutch, and again take some of them. They were not much smaller than a pullet's egg, and had a nice rich yolk. Plovers nested down Bull Lane, in the field on the right, which in those days was ploughed, and they made their nests of small scrapings in the earth. Walking carefully up and down one could with luck spot the well-camouflaged eggs without treading on them. They were very good eating.

Refrigerators were not in any homes until the 1950s, and were not common until the 1960s, so food had to be kept somehow. On very hot sultry days it was common practice during the evening to boil any milk we had, and keep it in a cool spot for the night with a muslin cover over it. Standing it in a bucket of cold water was also one way to help delay it going off.

Talking of refrigerators reminds me of an incident in the early 1950s when a salesman called into our shop and went into a long patter about the benefits which we would have if he provided ice-cream to sell in the shop, with a refrigerator on hire from his firm. Dad let him carry on for a while, then having caught the salesman's attention slowly raised his eyes upwards to the oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling. The man's expression was worth the time listening to him, Dad thought.

The original Bayham Abbey was Premonstratensian, built in the early 1200s, now a very attractive ruin by the little River Teise. We used to play around the ruins as boys, and if we climbed on the walls often got chased off by old Herbert Ingerfield, who lived at Hook Green, though he was not active enough to catch us.

Quoting "Footpaths of the Kent-Sussex Border":-

"... one Herbert Ingerfield, who has just retired after being in the service of the Camden family for seventy-six years, from the age of nine to eighty-five, and who was custodian of Bayham Abbey for fifty years". He must have known every inch of those ruins.

At the Dissolution the local peasants, so the story goes, had such a high regard for the monks, that they painted their faces and drove out the commissioners and replaced the brotherhood. This was not successful in the long term, and the monks lost their abbey for good soon afterwards.

Looking at a website on the Bayham Abbey ruins (in 2009) I found it very amusing that it said, in bold type, that for teachers taking school children around "You are responsible for conducting the necessary Risk Assessment". We used to climb over much of the ruins, in particular the north gate, where there was an apex of stonework, some of it loose, which was the big "dare" to go up and over. We assessed the risk, decided it WAS very risky, and then climbed up and over, taking great care!

The North Gate, Little Lake and "Merry Bridge" at Bayham Abbey.
This was the stone apex over the gateway that we used to climb over.
What a lovely area we had around Hook Green!

Much later, we found that Lord Camden (John Charles Pratt) sometimes saw us down there, and watched us from the "big house" with binoculars, in case one of us fell, in which case he could have called for help.

This lake was probably created by the monks for their fish supply, as it was artificial, but built a very long time ago. There were sluice gates on the downstream side of the bridge which held the water back, but could be released during flood times. During the summer this was one of the places we used to swim, though the water lilies which grew there were a little troublesome. The water was about eight feet deep in the middle.

It was a good place for fishing, and I landed quite a few pike of up to five pounds in the winter. It abounded with roach, perch and other fish, some of which were big enough to eat, though not so tasty as pike or the brown trout which we caught in the river.

On one occasion we were fishing down at the Little Lake and came across a pike of around five pounds which was marooned in shallow water. We went into the water (and mud!) and scooped it up onto the bank, taking care not to get too near its jaws and the very sharp teeth. It presumably went after some prey and somehow overshot and found itself in the shallow water and couldn't swim out again. It was very nice baked in the oven and basted with dripping.

Lord Camden was very interested in his gardens, including the water gardens at the bottom end of the Big Lake. We often saw him there, pottering around with his oldest clothes on, and occasionally strangers would chat with him, thinking he was the gardener. We doffed our caps to him, as one used to do, and he would acknowledge with a nod and a smile.

There was a pump in the water gardens, some way down in a pit, which pumped lake water up to behind the mansion, where it was filtered and treated, for use in the house. It was a very clever Victorian invention, using the flow of water to operate. Somehow it allowed the water to run down freely for a few seconds, then a valve would close (or open?) and with a distinct "thump" it operated, sending more water up the hill.

I have a copy of a brochure from G H Hughes, M.I.Mech.E. of 97 Queen Victoria St., London, whose telephone number was City 4541, which dates it to around the early 1900s.

Of interest is the list in the brochure of water required per day:

For each person		25	gallons
,,	,, horse	15	,,
,,	,, 2.wheeled carriage	8	,,
,,	,, 4 wheeled carriage	15	,,
,,	,, cattle	8	,,
,,	,, sheep and pigs	1	,,
,,	,, gardens about	0¼	,, per sq. yd.

It looks as if those in the "big house" had their carriages washed on a daily basis.

One of these was still operating at Bedgebury in the 1970s, with its characteristic thump.

The estate in earlier days was self-sufficient for most things, including electricity, which was supplied from a generator at Little Bayham, almost opposite the forge. The fairly tall large building which housed it might still be there, on the right going towards Tunbridge Wells about 50 yards past the forge (now a garage). Later on the mains electricity for the mansion came underground from the Pembury direction, I believe.

During the 1940s we had free access to anywhere on the estate, and on no occasion was I ever asked to leave a field or wood. We all knew the importance of keeping gates closed, or leaving them open if we found them like that. Fences and hedges were respected, and we either crawled underneath them, or found a small gap to get through. We knew most of the gaps, so normally made a bee-line for them as we crossed a meadow. We walked around the edges of any ploughed and sown fields.

Having free access was of benefit to the farmers sometimes, as we knew how to pull a sheep back onto its feet if it had somehow got onto its back. They are unable to right themselves without help, and if we found one in that predicament, it was soon on its feet again. Sheep also occasionally managed to get their heads stuck between spiles of a fence, and again we would free them.

With a doubling of the young population due to evacuees from towns living with the country folk, our classes at school were very crowded, and facilities much over-used. I can still visualise a poor young woman at Lamberhurst who cooked a midday meal on a large old-fashioned coal-fired range for possibly 120 children, in a small hall up on the bank opposite the school, slightly down the hill to the village. As far as I remember she was alone there, hot and flustered, and always seemed to burn the custard. For the rest of my life I have enjoyed the taste of burnt custard – not that I get it very often.

That hall had an electric light switch by the side of the door into the kitchen with no cover, exposing the wiring and contacts. Whilst queuing up for our meal, it was a "dare" to touch the live terminal. We received a shock, but as there was no earth connection anywhere nearby, it was not severe. In the 1990s I mentioned this to the local historian in Lamberhurst, John Moon, (who sadly passed away at a relatively young age) and he said that the same switch was there many years later, and that they used to have the same "dare". It had no doubt been handed down by generations of children.

We had lots of games which now seem to be extinct. Marbles had their season, though I do not remember the time of year, and for weeks we would be playing during breaks, either in the road outside the school or along a little area behind an iron fence alongside the front of the school. The boy who last won a round threw the first marble of a game, then the other would try to throw a marble to touch the first one. If he hit it, both were his, and if he missed, the other boy had a turn, and so on, until one of them hit the original marble, and claimed all those on the ground. They came in a fairly standard size of all colours, some of the most attractive having a swirl of coloured glass inside them. Scarlet ones seemed to have been the most favoured.

Another game was with played with "Cigarette" cards. These were at that time given away in cigarette packets, and as almost all adult men smoked, were readily available in large numbers. (In the 1980s onwards, they became quite valuable, especially if in complete sets). Two boys would play together, the first casting one down with a flick, the idea being to get it some distance away to make it harder. Then taking turns, cards were flicked towards the first one, until one covered part of it. Whoever flicked that card won all those on the ground.

Naturally, playing conkers was a favourite game in the Autumn, and no thought was given to the fact that you might get hit. We often were, of course, either by pieces flying off a losing conker, or quite often by a badly-aimed blow from the opposing player.

At a certain time of the year, probably in the summer, hoops became the "in" thing. They were made of iron by local blacksmiths, of all sizes and thickness of iron, and boys with a short stick, with a nail driven in to it near the end, would guide the hoop along the road. There were two ways to keep the hoop rolling, one by swiping the hoop with the stick, and the other by gently guiding the hoop by pushing with the stick and the protruding nail. The girls seemed to stick to skipping, very proficiently and hop-scotch.

Football was often played in our lunchtimes, unbelievably in the lane outside the school. It is a steep hill, and those playing downwards had a big advantage! The goals were a couple of coats or pullovers placed a few feet apart on the lane surface. There was so little traffic that we hardly ever had to move them. We all wore boots with hobnails in the soles, and kicking the ball (often only an old tennis ball) meant that many of the hobnails were kicked out as well. Tony and I used to pick some of them up, take them home, and Dad would use them to replace those we had lost. He had two different size cobbler's lasts onto which he placed a boot to hammer in the hobnails, some with one spike, the larger ones with three. The latter were used on the rear of the heel.

During the early 1940s bearded old "Deafy" Boorman used to keep a couple of goats tethered on the green at Lamberhurst Down. We were not very fond of him, as he seemed to treat the goats rather roughly. They were probably not there for long, perhaps only for a few days at a time. Whether he had any right to keep them on the green was of some doubt, but as he had a nasty temper, maybe no one was inclined to argue with him.

In 1940, when we took the 78 bus from Hook Green to Lamberhurst Down, we walked down Town Hill on the way to school. Each day there was a tall thin man of about 40 who also got off the bus at the Downs, and used to stride down in front of us, his trousers much too short for him, at "half mast". He always tried to go in as straight a line as possible, cutting all the corners to reduce the distance, being in the middle of the road some of the time, gradually changing from one side of the road to the other. Luckily there was very little traffic to impede his route. We naturally called him "Old Cut Corner".

Partway down Town Hill, on the left just before the sharp left-hand corner was Ernie Gurr's butchers' shop. He beat the wartime petrol ration problem with his little two-wheeled gig pulled by a high-stepping pony, and was a common sight around the area, including Hook Green. He kept up a good speed with his outfit, as it was very lightly built, and both the gig and the pony were kept smart and gleaming. It was possible that Ernie could not read or write, as he never kept any notes, but if someone owed him 3s 6½d, he would remember. As he passed us children, we would call out "Hi Ernie", and he always acknowledged with a smile and a wave. I think he had no children of his own, but doted on a lad, possibly a nephew, who was born with Down's syndrome, who very often accompanied him on his rounds, sitting smiling by Ernie's side.

Another delightful character worked as a roundsman for Avard's the bakers. He might have been an Avard, but I do not recollect ever hearing his surname. Arthur always seemed to be cheerful, and although in those days children addressed most adults as Mr X or Mrs Y, Arthur was one of the exceptions, and always greeted us when we met him in the village.

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We had more cold weather then, and snow was with us for a lot longer. The winters of 1940 and 1947 are the two I remember most. In 1940 skating on the Big Lake was possible for some time, and although we had no ice skates, enjoyed long slides along the ice, whilst the more fortunate grown-ups were showing off their skating prowess.

Our usual tobogganing hill was to the left going down Bull Lane from Hook Green. At times there would be a couple of dozen of us, mostly with home-made sledges, some with no metal runners, but ice formed on the wood and enabled us to get up some good speeds. We used to build ramps of snow about three quarters of the way down the hill, trodden down hard, and steer onto them, getting an extra thrill as the sledge leapt into the air for a short distance. After a few hours in the snow, on returning home it was really painful, as our hands, not well protected by icy home-made woollen gloves, started to thaw out.

Another hill which was good for our winter sports was near Neil's Cottage, a short hill but very steep. Even without snow, on a frosty day we had fun using small lengths of corrugated iron to sit on, with the front bent over to hook our toes into. Being flat and presenting a fairly large area to the ground, we sped down the hill at a satisfying speed.

During the severe weather in 1947 two adult swans and several cygnets were often in the centre of the Little Lake, the only part relatively free of ice. We were saddened a few days later to see that one of the cygnets had not moved fast enough, and had been trapped by the ice and frozen to death.

I was cycling the seven and a half miles to and fro to school (at the far end of Tunbridge Wells) during that winter, and for nearly three months there was snow and ice most of the way. Gritting and salt were not used on country roads, and I came off my bike on many occasions, several times bending a peddle spindle. However, the forge was handy en route, and I could stop there on the way home, unscrew the peddle, borrow a long piece of iron tubing, and straighten it successfully. Dad often borrowed tools from the forge, and was amazed that amongst all the clutter that was around everywhere, either Otto Bassett or Charlie Boorman knew exactly where they last put the implement in question, and found it immediately for him.

School in those days for me included Saturday morning, and during the Rugger season I played for all the school teams in turn - the under fourteens, the under fifteens and both the second and first fifteens, so it was a full six-day week. If the match against another school was away, it meant getting back home well after dark in mid-winter. I started work at the end of 1947, and brother Tony was quite upset when I was on a five-day week, and he still had to go to school on Saturday mornings.

None of our leisure activities were supervised by adults, and we were left much to our own devices. Several of us decided that we would like to build a boat, and that the timber from an old shepherd's hut in a field near Winbridge might be useable. Looking back, it was a shame that we completed the decay of something belonging to the past. It was substantially built with a tiny stove in it, and being mounted on iron wheels it could be moved by a horse. It had been allowed to gradually fall apart and rot had set in.

It was all a good idea, but when we tried to build a boat, an appreciation of the difficulties set in, and the project was abandoned fairly quickly. Our vivid imaginations stretched our limited abilities beyond breaking point. The wood was probably used in making a fire somewhere out of the way, which was one of the things we were adept at.

Many country boys broke limbs at some time or another, the collar bone being one of the most common, when they tried to use a 12-bore shotgun, but did not hold the butt firmly enough to withstand the recoil. Arms and legs were vulnerable, and one of our friends managed to break an arm swinging on a low branch of a horse chestnut down Bull Lane. He said afterwards that he knew he had broken it, but being by himself did not know what to do, and remembers shouting to himself "Bugger, bugger" which presumably enabled him to let off steam.

When wandering the countryside we sometimes drank straight out of the river, which was not exactly the cleanest water, but none of us seemed to suffer. On more than one occasion I remember being hungry whilst fishing, and having caught a few roach and perch, lighting a fire, and cooking them in an old tin found in a hedgerow.

We ate "pig-nuts", found just under the surface mostly in woods. The plant looked rather like a small cow parsley, and had small swellings on its roots which were edible and had a pleasant nutty taste. I had no idea what the real name was for them until using the internet in 2009! They were Conopodium Majus. The internet says they can be dug up using a trowel, and wash them in water. (We used sticks, and just wiped most of the dirt off them.) In spring the young hawthorn leaves could be eaten (called "bread and cheese" for some reason).

The river, though small, provided us with various games. One was to start upstream, often at the Sheepwash just below Bayham forge, each boy floating a piece of wood a foot or so long down stream, prodding it with long poles if it got jammed on an obstruction. Fishing was enjoyed in the summer. We always observed the close seasons, catching small brown trout in the river in the summer and pike and other coarse fish in the ponds and lakes in the winter. Swimming was good fun in warm weather, and we had the choice of the Little Lake by the "Merry Bridge", the river below the church, or a pool fifty yards above the Iron Bridge near Furnace Mill, on the way to Lamberhurst.

At Hoathley, near the small sand pit to the west of the farm, we had an itinerant charcoal-burner working for a couple of weeks, probably in the spring. Timber which had been cut in the local woods was already on site for him. He built a circular construction of the timber, which was upright in the middle and leaning inwards progressively towards the outside. The wood was fairly small, up to about three inches in diameter and six feet long. The whole mound was then covered in turfs cut from the nearby field, leaving one small area uncovered which was where he started a fire. Once well alight, the opening was almost covered with turf and the wood allowed to smoulder slowly, turning the wood into charcoal. As the low fire progressed, turfs were moved from one area to the next, enough air being allowed into the stack to keep it smouldering, but not enough to break into a flame, until it had converted all the wood into charcoal. This took perhaps a week, constant attention being required to maintain the correct conditions. The charcoal was used in the four-kiln oasthouse at Hoathley for the fires at ground level, for drying hops.

The old fellow lived all the time he was burning in a home-made shelter of bats of wood covered in straw and turf a few yards away from his charge. As far as I remember, we saw him from a respectable distance, probably saying hello to him, but that was all. Although not afraid of him, we did not approach him closely whilst he was there.

A charcoal burner building his stack of cord wood prior to covering with turf and burning.

Our radio sets were, of necessity, battery-operated, with a two-volt rechargeable "accumulator" for the directly-heated valve cathodes, and a 120 volt dry battery for the "HT" (High Tension) anode supply. The HT batteries were quite expensive, hence listening to the radio was very selective, The accumulators, single-cell lead-acid batteries about six inches tall by three inches square were taken up to Little Bayham, where for a small fee they were recharged at the old estate power station. Everyone had two of the accumulators, one in use and the other one away to be charged. We seldom missed the news at 6pm during the war to find out how the various campaigns were progressing, and at 8pm on Thursdays, Tommy Handley and his half-hour show "ITMA" (Its That Man Again) was a favourite. There was no TV of course. (Weren't we lucky!!)

At a remote site on the side of the common was the "Thatched Cottage", now (in 2009) approached down the lane past the old shop and Apps Cottage, then turning left. The old cottage appears to have been knocked down and rebuilt. Up to 1955 at least, the only way to get there was by a footpath which led in front of the shop, tuning right at the corner of the garden, and following along fairly near the edge of the common. An elderly woman, Mrs Foster lived there with a grown-up son in the 1940s. The walls of the cottage were very thick – possibly about eighteen inches - and might have been made of beaten earth and clay. Several of us used to go around carol singing in aid of the Red Cross just before Christmas, and dear old Mrs Foster was always so happy to see us that we were invited in for a mince pie and a glass of milk or lemonade. We would then sing one or two more carols for her before departing.

Going straight down the shop lane and past Apps Cottage there was a gate leading to a drover's track, with hedges on both sides, finishing at another gate into a small field which looked across to the corner of Skence Wood. On the left just before the second gate, level with the thatched cottage, was a small but very deep square pond, lined with stone. It might have once been a sheep-dip, and seemed to be man-made. We used to catch common newts and also the attractive crested newts there. Using a stick cut out of a hedgerow, tying a short length of string to it, and on the other end an earthworm, our improvised fishing rod was always quickly successful. No hooks were necessary. The newts would fight for the worm, one grabbing it in their jaws, and it was simple to pull the line out of the water with the newt firmly on the end. Once ashore they mostly let go of the worm, but a quick shake would release them. They are amphibians, so no harm came to them. We kept them in a container, counting them before letting them go and setting off back home.

All of us boys habitually carried a pen knife with us, and my left index finger still bears witness to my early attempts at using one – the scar still shows after over seventy years.

Grass snakes, slow worms and lizards were common, the former often being seen swimming in the lakes and ponds when we were fishing. Adders were not common. Slow worms are legless lizards, up to a foot long, sometimes known as "smooth snakes". They are dark brown-grey with small mouths and a blunt tail end, and like grass snakes are completely harmless. They can be found under a log or large stone, and we often kept one as a "pet" for a few hours, as they would stay in a coat pocket, perhaps happy to be in a warm place.

Sometimes visitors would come to see us via Wadhurst and Cousley Wood, and although we did warn them of the intricacies of the network of lanes at Free Heath, they invariably got lost. Every small field had a lane around it, and to make matters worse, one signpost said "Hook Green - 1 Mile" and the next one "Hook Green - 1¼ miles. During the war, signposts had all been taken down to make it more difficult for the anticipated German invasion forces to find their way, and when replaced after the war the two must have been juxtapositioned.

At the crossroads near the school we often had a council steam roller parked for a day or two if they were working on the roads in the area. In those days it was the practice to spread hot tar on a road using big yard brooms, and then scatter small crushed pebbles over the tar, using men armed with shovels. The steam roller then went over the rather untidy and uneven mess in an attempt to smooth things down and to make the pebbles stick to the tar, not usually very effectively. In hot weather the tar stuck to tyres, including those on bikes, and could be most annoying.

An Aveling and Porter steam roller with its proud Invicta symbol. These were built in Strood, Kent, and were much used in England and abroad for road works.

(Picture from a book by J M Preston)

Despite being left in the open wherever the workmen were using it, they were never vandalized. One thing which has changed very much for the worse since the 1940s is the level of petty crime. We hardly bothered to lock doors, and most people, if they did lock up when leaving, left their keys somewhere near the house. Ours was under a brick just outside the side door. All our friends and acquaintances knew it was there, but all the time we lived at Hook Green, we had no burglaries. The same went for the safety of our bikes – no locks were used, and even if left in the middle of Tunbridge Wells, I never heard of anyone loosing a bike. (The same went for our motorcycles in the 1950s. I used to leave my overcoat, crash helmet and gloves on the saddle, the motorbike was unlocked, and there was never anything stolen, even when left for several hours. What has happened to our honesty?)

This could go on and on, so I will not tax your patience any longer and will call a halt.
If you have read as far as this, my thanks.

Life was very different in the 1940s, more so because Hook Green was behind the times.
But it was a wonderful place to be brought up in, for which I am very grateful.

Robert Geoffrey Dancy November 2009.