

A BOYHOOD IN DAMERHAM



AS REMEMBERED BY BILLY INGS

I was born in 1930 at Coote Cottage on the High Street of Damerham on the very same day as John Tiller, son of Dora and Charlie, who was the local cobbler just up the street from us. My mother, Ethel (nee Phillips) was in service for the Coote family at West Park and my father Fred Ings, was a plasterer by trade before the second world war, during which he was seconded to the Forestry Service, cutting pit props for the war effort, until his death in 1941. My grandmother, who died a few months before I was born, was Annie Phillips, the local midwife for over 20 years up until 1924, delivering most of the babies in Damerham during that time, and some in the surrounding villages. (I still have her Register of Cases which is a much treasured heirloom - two of the later babies she delivered were John Hockey, who I idolised as a boy and Edith Tiller the first child of Dora and Charlie, who used to take John and myself to school when we were very young.) My uncle, Bert Phillips, lived with us in the other half of Coote Cottage. He had been wounded at Gallipoli during the First World War, being shot through the leg and shoulder. He spent a year at Netley Hospital but was disabled for the rest of his life, although for many years he acted as Caretaker of the Village Hall. He was a familiar sight in the High Street sitting out on the bench in front of his house,

chatting with "Baker" Bud (the local village Baker) Andy Edwards, Charlie Jerrard and



Andy Edwards, Ernie Penny, Uncle Bert and Myrtle at the front of Coote Cottage

Tommy Dyer (in his wheel-chair) and for many years he was accompanied by his brown and white springer spaniel, Myrtle. I spent many hours sitting on the grass listening to all the stories they had to tell. In later years, a Notice Board was erected in Bert's front garden where all the activities of the village would be publicised - including the all-important selection of the weekend's cricket team!

Much of my childhood at home was spent with Uncle Bert - he was a 'dab-hand' at draughts (Bill Manston and Sid Read spent many hours in serious concentration with him over the draught-board!) He also taught me to play cribbage - getting me down from my room to make up a foursome with the soldiers who were billeted in his front room during the war. Another form of entertainment was, of course, the wireless. It seemed to take him ages to get it tuned in and I remember him listening avidly to the wartime gardener, Mr. Middleton. Most of my childhood memories in Damerham are of the war years, but I do remember the outbreak of scarlet fever during the thirties which affected many in the village. Some

children were sent off to the isolation wards, but, for some reason, my sisters, Molly and Margaret, and myself remained at home confined to our bedroom for many weeks. I remember the burning of bed linen and mattresses which was necessary to contain the spread of such a contagious disease.

As small boy growing up in the thirties, most of our time was spent playing in the fields catching rabbits and tickling the trout in the little River Allen which flowed along the bottom of our garden. Although this would now be thought of as poaching, Dr. Brown, who owned the fishing rights, usually turned a blind eye and, in the summer, when the river dried up towards Martin, we would take a tin bath up and collect the stranded trout and carry them all the way down to the spring in Butler's meadow, above the Mill, which never dried up. On one occasion Cyril Hooper and I were lucky enough to see two salmon spawning in the shallows of the River Allen below Jimmy Lush's farm, near Back Lane Bridge. We watched fascinated as the hen salmon dug a hole in the gravel with her tail, laid her eggs and the male salmon fertilised them. Unfortunately we never ever saw salmon in the river at Damerham again. Then we used to collect plovers' eggs from their nests, scratched out in the bare earth of the fields. The plover hens would lay four eggs each but if we found the eggs with their pointed ends touching in the centre of the nest, we would never take them as this meant that the hen was sitting. Sundays were pretty busy in those days. Books were presented every Christmas by the Sunday Schools and the better the attendance during the year, the better book one received! So we regularly attended the Methodist Sunday School in the High Street in the mornings, the Baptist

Sunday School at Greenbank in the afternoons and then Evensong at St. George's Church in the evening. Our local vicar was the Rev. Henry Moule. He had been a missionary in China and his sermons contained many fascinating stories of his times abroad.

I remember an old man, Davy Vallance, who lived in a hut at the top of New Road. He used to walk down to the Compasses for a pint or two and on the way home he would often fall asleep in the hedgerow, whereupon us boys would creep up and tie his bootlaces together and then hide in the bushes and wait for him to wake up!. There was a black and white dog called Dinky who befriended him and spent much of his time between his own home with Tommy Bedford (down by the watercress beds) and Davy Vallance's shack at the top of New Road. Dinky was a natural rabbit catcher and Bill Langford, the local Roadsman, would often collect Dinky and take him off rabbiting, working the hedgerows from Court Wood up to the top of Browns Lane.

When the second World War started, I remember my Mother crying, as thousands of other Mothers must have done, as she listened to the wireless - but to us young boys in the village it was an exciting time!

Although there was rationing, there were plenty of rabbits to be had ... there was no myxomatosis in those days! At harvest time, the binder would reap the corn in ever decreasing circles and when the last little island of corn remained, the fleeing rabbits were seized upon by eager village lads and taken home to be distributed among our neighbours along the street. Most village folk grew their own vegetables and fruit and kept a few chickens and many, like ourselves, also

had a couple of pigs. These were fed almost entirely on household and garden scraps. We had an old hand pump in the garden which supplied all our water right up until the fifties when we were connected to the mains. Even then my Mother was reluctant to give up the pure spring water from the well.

The washing was done in the outhouse, where a fire was lit under the boiler, and it was a pretty lengthy business. The fire under the boiler was also used to heat the water for the weekly bath, the hot water being carried into the kitchen to fill the bath by the fire. I remember my sisters always had their bath first and I was last in, being the only boy and usually rather grubbier than the girls! My mother cooked with two paraffin oil burners over which was placed a large square oven for baking. This, too, was in use well into the fifties and I when I look back I wonder just how she managed to cook such splendid meals. Of course, having no running water, there were the inevitable outside toilets, ('dunniguns', 'thunderboxes' and 'khazies' - there were many different names accorded to them!) The main problem was that the buckets beneath the wooden seats had to be emptied and I recall many a frosty morning having to dig large holes in the frozen earth in distant parts of the garden! This was made much worse during the time when there were an extra four soldiers billeted in Uncle Bert's front room!!!

In the early forties, evacuees from Portsmouth began arriving in the village and this meant overcrowding in the village school. However, from our point of view, this had its up-side, as a system was devised whereby the village children went to school in the mornings and the evacuees in the afternoons (or vice-versa). After the

evacuation of Dunkirk, soldiers too were billeted in the village, four of them in Uncle Bert's front room. One of these was 'Johnny' Johnson, a sergeant with the Royal Artillery.



Soldiers who were billeted in Damerham

He later became a spotter pilot and was then stationed at Larkhill. He often used to come to visit us, landing his little Auster plane in Park field, just off Back Lane, (which is now known as West Park Lane) where Uncle Bert would stand guard while Johnny and his pupil came in for a cup of tea!

During the winter after Dunkirk, the Royal Tank Corps were stationed around Damerham for a short while. About eight tanks were parked in the Estate Yard opposite our house (where Nelson Bush later built his bungalow). One icy morning one of the tanks was coming down onto the road from the yard and as he went to turn up towards the Memorial, the tank lost its traction and skidded on the ice. It slid very slowly straight across the road, flattening the picket fence and coming to a halt only inches from the front of our house. Undeterred by this little mishap and intent on warming up his vehicle, the driver hoisted me up into the tank and took me for a spin. I think we went over the bridge, along Back Lane and then back down the High Street but as I was down inside the tank (in case an Officer were to see me!) I couldn't see a thing! How I wished I could

have been up on top looking out of the turret so that everyone could see me! Some time later, one dark night, I was woken by the rumble of tanks. I crept down the stairs and out into the wood by our house and watched incredulously as the long convoy of the Guards Armoured Division came over the bridge heading for Cranborne. In those days the War Memorial was positioned on a small island at the cross-roads at the top of the High Street.

However, as I watched, hidden among the trees, a Churchill tank headed the wrong way up the High Street, and, attempting to get back on track, skidded across the island and struck the War Memorial, demolishing the



War Memorial as it was.

Cross and pillar before continuing on its way. The Memorial was later repositioned to its present location next to the Village Hall. Another wartime incident which everybody remembers was, of course, the day the ammunition dump blew up. The dump was sited along the Martin road about half a mile

from the village, stretching left towards the top of New Road, amongst a belt of trees. I was off school on that day (being infectious with measles!) and was playing with John Ingram on our home-built trolley carts, and as we came down Pound Lane, there was a tremendous explosion. We looked up over the bank and saw a huge mushroom of smoke (very like the filmed images of the atom bomb explosions). A minute or so later, the debris started falling, littering the fields and hedgerows all around us. Many windows in the village houses were broken and ceilings cracked and the front window of old Dick Rogers' shop (at the bottom of Back Lane, near the Compasses) was completely demolished.

Being a small village, there was no air-raid siren in Damerham, but we were well served by the local postman, Walt Russell. A phone call would be received at the Post Office and Walt would ride his bicycle from one end of the village to the other giving short blasts on his whistle to warn of impending danger. Inevitably, by the time he returned to the Post Office, the danger would be passed and then he would have to cycle all the way round again - giving LONG blasts of his whistle to sound the All-clear !!

Quite early in the war my father, Bill Manston and Charlie Shearing were cutting pit props up in Knoll Wood, when they heard a plane crash into the trees. It was foggy, and the plane did not catch fire so it took them some time to locate the wreckage of the Blackburn Skua with its nose embedded into the ground right up to the cockpit. They were unable to revive the pilot. I went up the following day to see the plane and all that remained in the cockpit was the hat of a Fleet Air Arm Pilot.

On one occasion, on my way to school with John Tiller, we heard the loud whine of a Halifax and looking up, we saw the plane with tow-rope trailing, heading towards Cranborne. We looked back over the Church and saw the wing of the Horsa Glider, which it had jettisoned, disappearing over the trees towards Fordingbridge. Minutes later, we heard the loud 'thud' of fuel tanks exploding as the Halifax belly-flopped and turned over in the fields opposite Stapleton Farm. John and I decided to go and find the glider and, as we headed along the lane, we met the two glider pilots running down Church Hill, having crash-landed their glider at the old Brickyard near Sandleheath. They were desperately trying to get to where the Halifax had come down and we directed them across the fields towards Stapleton. After we had trekked to Brickhill and 'inspected' the glider, which we found with its nose shattered by the impact of the wooded area around the brickyard, we walked back to Damerham and collected our bikes. We then rode over to Stapleton to see the Halifax. By the time we arrived there, the firemen had just finished damping down the remains of the burnt-out bomber. The rear-gunner had escaped with just minor injuries and two or three others survived but were badly burned and had been taken into Mrs. Hockey's farmhouse, but the remaining crew had perished. As John and I cycled home down the hill, the fire engine which was behind us returning to Fordingbridge, cast a rear wheel which 'overtook' the fire engine and then passed right between our two bicycles! We were very fortunate not to have been hit! The following day when we returned to school, our absence had not gone unnoticed but, as so many of us had been missing from class that

afternoon, "the telling-off" was fairly mild! It must have been a very difficult time for our teachers, Miss Tiller, Miss Barnes (and Mr. Derman, the evacuees' teacher), to maintain discipline and keep us concentrating on our work when there were so many distractions. As we sat in our classroom, we could often hear the drone of Liberators and Fortresses going out on, or returning from, a raid, and I regularly put up my hand to go outside to the toilet. Miss Barnes would smile indulgently and say "All right, Billy, you can go." and on my return she would invariably ask "And what were they?" !

On another occasion, we were standing on the bridge at Damerham when we saw a Halifax (again with the tow-line trailing) swooping down over the Church and as we waited and watched for the glider which must have broken loose, we saw a mass of dust and debris in the distance towards Butlers Farm at Mill End. We ran down through the meadows and saw a Hamilcar Glider which had crash-landed in a field but then careered into the trees. It had been loaded with concrete ballast to compensate for the weight of a tank, which was its intended load, and the ballast had smashed through the glider, down over the bank and into the roadway. The pilots had been taken into the farmhouse but were very badly injured.

Then, of course, the Americans came to Damerham! Firstly at West Park House which was commandeered as their headquarters, and then in the woods all around the area which were packed with Nissen huts. Then, as even more arrived, they were billeted in the village houses and once more Uncle Bert's front room was bristling with servicemen. "Crossways" was commandeered and used as Officer's quarters

and the village hall was taken over as the Mess and general amenity hall. The village lads were made very welcome in the Mess and I took full advantage of their generosity, sampling all the different fruit juices, fried chicken and the best chilli I have ever tasted! Meanwhile, my Mother was able to supplement her meagre widow's pension by doing the washing for the Officers at "Crossways". Only later, when I grew up, did I come to appreciate just how hard she must have worked!

One summer's day in 1943 I was out on the front lawn listening as usual to the old men reminiscing, when a group of about 40 Flying Fortresses came into view. They were returning to base after a raid over Germany, many of them with damaged wings and tail planes, some with propellers feathered and engines smoking. As we watched in silence, hoping and praying that they would all make it safely home, we were startled by the impact of a belt of 50 calibre ammunition crashing onto the tarmac road right in front of Coote Cottage. This had been jettisoned by one of the planes trying to maintain enough height to reach base. Other ammunition was found that day by Arthur Lush as he was harvesting - so once again, we were very lucky to have escaped injury.

Just before Christmas, I remember the Americans came down to the school with their trucks and we were all ferried up to West Park House for a grand Christmas party. There was an abundance of chocolate and ICE CREAM which was something of a rare treat for most of us village children, and I'm afraid some of us probably over-indulged in their hospitality. When we got home, I was very sick!!

Early in June 1944 on our way home from school, we noticed a lot of activity on the cricket field. On further inspection, we found that the whole area around the cricket pitch and the surrounding fields was packed solid with row upon row of 'Duck' Amphibian Trucks. The following morning they were all gone and later, as the news of the D-Day landings filtered through, their presence in the village became clear!

In the Spring of 1945 the war (and my village boy-hood) was over. A procession had been arranged to march down through the village to the cricket field for the main celebration. Only the band, for some reason, didn't turn up! I was hastily 'press-ganged' by Mr. Lush and Mr. Hibberd to lead the parade, armed only with my ATC brass bugle! We marched from the cart shed at North End down to Cornpits at South End and then bank to the cricket field, with me playing the only four marches which I knew, over and over again. By the time we reached the field my lips were numb - but it was a day to remember! I left school at the age of 14 and went to work as an apprentice at East Mills Motor Works in Fordingbridge, cycling back and forth to work every day. I played cricket for Damerham from the age of 16. In those days we had a coach to take us to away matches as few people owned cars and this meant that the spare seats could be taken by supporters, so it was always a good social occasion. Arthur Lush (also known as 'Brusher' and invariably sporting a peaked cap!) did a wonderful job as Secretary, organising and filling the coaches and then having to cancel everything if it rained (there were very few phones in those days, so it meant cycling round to everybody!) And, of course, organising teas for the home games and

likewise cancelling these if the game was off!



Damerham Supporters, Bournemouth in the '50s
He was ably supported in this unenviable task by our much respected captain, Bert Shepherd who knew the game of cricket 'inside out'. When I came home from my National Service in the R.A.F. I became Captain and it was only then that I appreciated the amount of work that was done behind the scenes. In those days, Damerham could hold their own against any cricket team in the area.

This photo of the team was taken at Somerley Park on 7th July, 1951, I remember it especially as it was my 21st birthday and we beat Somerley (now known as Ellingham), myself taking a hat-trick! There was quite some celebrating back at the Compasses that night.



At about that time, I started playing tennis on the two courts behind the Roberts' Garage on the edge of the cricket field. It was there that I met my future wife, Helen who