



## Linda's School Days.

*By Linda Neve*

### **Good-bye Etchingam C of E Primary School on School Hill (Burgh Hill)**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015, 150 years of Etchingam Church of England Primary School, sited on School Hill, ended as the gates were closed for the final time. Throughout that time, I wonder how many children passed through those gates and what lifestyles and careers they had after they left.

From my own personal family knowledge, my Grandmother, Isobel Mewett (nee Payne) attended in the 1880's. She was one of 13 children and I can only assume that they, at some time also attended. At that time Isobel would have been living at Borders Farm and then later Park Farm. Unfortunately I was only 5 when she passed away, and so never got to know what school days were like for her.

The only piece of information I did gain about her was from the late Mr Lionel Dengate who had some old school records showing who had won a money prize for Best Attendance for the whole School Year; my Grandmother had received second prize, just behind a girl who had been absent one day less than her.

In 1919 my mother, Mrs Marjorie Mewett (nee Weston) followed her five sisters and one brother there. By the time she first attended, her eldest sister Irene had left as she was 14. At that time most pupils stayed at the Primary School until they were 14. How different from today to have such an age range under one roof. The children were taught English, Arithmetic, History and some Geography and as the girls got older they were taught cookery and basic household skills. Cookery classes took place at the Old Village Hall later on.

My mother enjoyed her school days but there was one Mistress who was quite harsh and who would bring out her tingley stick to give them an occasional whack. On one occasion Aunt Floss was due to receive it, but before the Mistress had time to hit her with it, she grabbed it from her hands and broke it up. This resulted in my Grandfather having to go to the school to apologise.

There were no school meals at that time, so at lunch time they would all run home for their food and then time it carefully on the return journey so as not to be caught out by the steam train at the gates and be made late for afternoon lessons.

My eldest brother, Brian Mewett was the next person of my family to attend in 1945. Life at that time was starting to have major changes with the arrival home of fathers not seen for several years, at the end of the Second World War. Most of the pupils would have lived in the village at that time and probably got to know of someone who was not returning home.

By this time, in the late 1940's there were Grammar Schools, and my brother passed his 11+ and gained a place at Bexhill Grammar.

In 1951 my twin brothers John and Peter started school, and as they were Identical, the Infants' Teacher, Miss Ellis (later Mrs Cockerell) asked my mother to stitch a J or a P on to their clothing so she could tell them apart. At that time you stayed in Standard 1 until you were 8, in the Little Room, and Standard 2 until you were 11 in the Big Room. Then in 1953 I joined my brothers at the school.

I remember starting to learn to count on an Abacus (Counting Frame ) and we also had to learn our letters and how to write them. On the walls of the Little Room was a frieze made up showing A for Apple etc. At that time there were not the Nursery or Playgroups there are today, so everyone had to learn the basic things from the start.

The school at this time was naturally very different structurally than it is today. At that time the toilets were all outside in the little courtyard, where conkers and sycamore 'helicopters' could be found, to be played with from the trees overhanging from St. Patricks Garden or Nutwood as it is known today. Handwashing was done in a little room at the side where only cold water was available together with the famous red Lifebuoy soap, that we got to accept as part of school life. Playtime was always great fun with the boys playing football and the girls skipping or playing Hopscotch or everyone joining in a game of chasing or What's the time Mr Wolf?

On one occasion, at lunch time the boys were playing football when the ball was kicked into the road. Derek Coffee ran out to get it but didn't see Eileen Eastwood coming down the hill on her bicycle and unfortunately she ended up going over the handlebars, but thankfully she was not seriously hurt. At that time Eileen lived in a cottage up the hill and had been returning to her work at the Post Office after lunch break.

Everyday the famous little Third of a pint bottles of milk were delivered and then given out at morning break by the milk monitor, together with a drinking straw. By then the school lunches were being delivered from Robertsbridge each day and served to us by Mrs Cornwall and Mrs Weller, both of them living in the village.

During one's primary school days, the school Doctor would check you over at least twice and there was also the school Dentist who made periodic visits together with the Nurse who checked your hair for nits and also your finger nails to see who was biting them.

When you had to move up to the Big Room one wondered what awaited you. Gone now were the days of being given a Smartie and a star for your good work. Of course it involved starting to use a pen and ink whereas before you used a pencil.

Most of the time I was in the Big Room, Miss Bingham was the Headmistress. She loved music and could play the piano. Every week we listened to a programme on the radio called 'Music and Movement', and with the song sheets that came with the programme we all used to join in the singing. Later, percussion instruments were bought which included a drum, cymbals, casternets and triangles which we all had a chance to play or at least try to. Throughout all those years I loved the different subjects she taught us, especially mental arithmetic on a Friday afternoon. She would give us a test and as soon as you had answered three questions correctly, you could go home early. It would never be allowed today, but as mothers very rarely met you from school you could go home a few minutes earlier. I remember running along the level as fast as I could to see how far I got before the next person came along,

In 1958 major work was done on the school and throughout that year builders would always be about starting it. This was to give the school an Office, inside toilets, a cloakroom and new little room plus the luxury of a kitchen that would supply school dinners on the premises. For some reason we didn't

break up for the Summer Holiday until August that year and it was the first and only time that I celebrated my Birthday on August 7th at school and was given a fountain pen to celebrate it.

How lovely it was to return at the start of Autumn Term with these new facilities. It is a standing joke between myself and two girl friends that on the first morning back we ran all the way to school so that we could be the first to use the new toilets! The best thing was also the new kitchen that provided us with lovely meals cooked by Mrs Perry and helped served by Mrs Osbourne. Gone was the dreaded spaghetti pie and macaroni from Robertsbridge, which as a result, my twin brother John has never touched spaghetti or macaroni to this day!

I was very sad the day I left Etchingham School and had to move on, but I will never forget my school days there. Between 1975 and 1991 my four sons, Stephen, Paul, David and Matthew attended and in the time since I left there, again naturally there had been more changes. There was now a school uniform comprising of grey trousers for the boys and grey skirt for the girls together with bottle green jumpers and white blouses and a green and yellow striped tie.

At the bottom of the Playground, where there had been a large tree which we were allowed to sit under in the Summer to do our lessons, was a swimming pool. Also a third classroom had been added in the form of a Portacabin. The Infants were taught by Mrs Austin and Miss Salvage, then later, Mrs Russell taught the Intermediates in the Portacabin, Mr Ferley and later Mr Durrant taught the top class. With the introduction of Calculators, these were allowed to be used in lessons. Gone also were the desks that we used, replaced by tables and chairs where at least four pupils could sit around. My sons too, enjoyed their time there and I as a Parent, loved the Concerts that were put on by them.

During this time the school took over the cottage attached to it, which was the Caretakers home in my day, and various uses were made of the extra rooms. Little did I know that a Fifth Generation of my family would attend the school but in 2007, Paul's eldest son Thomas and later Louis in 2011 became that Fifth Generation to attend.

During the time I have picked Thomas and Louis up from school it has changed again. There are far more pupils coming now a days from outside the village, and a lot more vehicles being used, so walking home down School Hill has often felt like taking your life in your hands, to avoid the passing traffic.

With the extra land that has been acquired there has been room for extra classrooms, and the once 'Big Room' has been used as the Hall. The children have been so lucky to have covered wooden seating areas in the Playground and also the Garden, together with a small piece of land for some football nets. School work for them has been so different from that of my day, with the introduction of Computers.

In the Summer of 2014, the swimming pool had to be removed to accommodate Playgroup as it had to vacate the Village Hall site. It will seem very strange to me, not to hear the children playing and shouting especially from my house on a windy day, as the sound carried very well.

To me, the Old School will always hold special memories and I await to see what its fate will be. Yesterday, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2015, my Husband Nigel, my youngest son Matthew and I walked up to Parsonage Croft for the first time, to view the new school. Our first impression was how modern it looked and this will take a time to get used to. We were impressed though by the playing areas that the children will be able to enjoy.

As I looked at that building I couldn't help wondering if there will ever be anyone, like me that in the future will be able to say 'I have had five generations of my family go to this school'

I wish everyone that works or are pupils at the new school all the happiness that I had in my school days at the 'old school on the hill'.

Linda Neve (nee Mewett)

