

Memories of growing up in Streatley in the 1920s and 1930s



John William (Jack) Hill (25 November 1921-7 August 2009) was born and bred in Streatley and recorded the memories of his childhood just before he died. The recollections have been transcribed by Jenny Boler, his daughter, and her husband John.

I was born in 1921 at the Mill Cottage, Streatley. However, I have no memory of life there. My parents at the time were lodging with my grandfather, who was the mill carter. I have no idea when we moved from the mill to 6 High Street; at any rate it was before the mill burnt down in 1926.

Life as I remember it in my young days was more or less living in a feudal system. Morrell's brewery of Oxford owned the High Street and most of the area around. My first memory is that Mrs GH Morrell lived in the big house in the High Street. As most of the cottages were owned by Morrell's, tenants were chosen by residents of the big house. Generally speaking, parents with one child were put in cottages in the High Street; those with more than one child went up The Coombe.



Streatley High Street in the 1920s showing numbers 6-8 on the right [GSLHS collection]

Numbers 6, 7 and 8 High Street were once used for stabling the horses for the stage coach route from London to Bristol/Bath. The coach stopped for the night at The Bull hotel, the horses were stabled at 6,7 and 8 High Street, the upstairs being used to house the horsemen for the night. Underneath number six was a cellar where the hay and straw were stored. The cellar is still there today. In the garden was a well. As far as I know it is still there.

In my earlier days I recall my father worked as a gardener at Cleeve Court. The house was built on stilts as the river flooded regularly. At the time the house was owned by Lord Craigavon who was the prime minister for Northern Ireland. When he visited he also brought with him armed body guards. Nothing much has changed over the years. A chauffeur was in residence on the estate. He lived above the garage. If I recall correctly you had to climb a ladder fixed to the wall to reach the living quarters. There was a trap door at the top of the ladder. The estate kept cows and the walled garden had a potting shed raised from the ground. I am not certain what happened to the cows and other livestock when the floods came, but the estate workers had to travel around by boat.

*Mrs Emily Alicia Morrell
in her carriage [GSLHS
collection]*

Mrs Morrell used to travel around in a horse-drawn carriage, complete with footmen. If passed on the road it was expected that men and boys doff their caps whereas women curtsied. At Christmas all the tenants were called to



the Reading Room, now called the Morrell Room, to receive a gift personally from Mrs Morrell. If I recall correctly it consisted of a piece of beef and, I believe, a bag of sugar; this continued until 1937. Mrs Morrell died in 1938.

Although more or less a feudal village it did have its advantages. Most of the tenants worked on the estate or in the big house as footmen, butlers, maids, etc. There were farm workers, gardeners and managing the shooting estate. The slump of 1929 passed us by. Most of the menfolk had allotments. These were where the sewage works are now. The estate ran its own sewage pipes, etc. Cottages in the High Street mostly had water laid on. In the case of 6, 7 and 8 High Street the tap was communal, outside. The flush toilets were in the wash-houses; not so good on a dark winter's night. This must be where the 'guzunder' [chamber pot] came into play.

Morrell's arranged a garbage collection weekly for the central area of the village, by horse and cart, the rubbish being dumped in the farm area which is now part of The Swan hotel grounds. I recall as a boy often going there looking for something worthwhile.

The church played a large part in the village life. I was in the choir, which meant attending services on Sunday morning and evening plus, of course, choir practice during weekday evenings. I belonged to the Scouts; this was run by Rear Admiral Collins. Meetings used to be held in a hut just above the old school. He taught us swimming in the Thames; also the usual scouting activities, including playing ‘puddock’ on an area just above Smallbone’s timber yard. We also went on manoeuvres on Streatley Hill, often at night.

Right: Jack Hill having fun on a see-saw, his mother Trixie 2nd from right [Jenny Boler]

Below left: Jack and a friend in Wallingford Grammar School uniform c.1933 [Jenny Boler]

If I remember [correctly] there was a working men’s club in the Morrell Room. It had a billiards table. When there were plays or shows the stage was created over the top of the table. There was also a library in the room at one time.



I was lucky enough to pass the 11-plus and go to Wallingford Grammar School: train from Goring station to Cholsey and, hence, the Bunk line to Wallingford. Sport or detention on school days and also Saturdays frequently meant missing a Bunk train. Then a walk along the track from Wallingford to Cholsey was called for.

The village has changed a little but not too much. The Swan hotel is still there, although considerably expanded. In the old days it suffered from flooding in the winter months. This shut the bars but as the water dropped the public bar, facing the road, was accessible by planks. The pub, in common with The Bull hotel, shut at 10pm, starting a rush across the bridge to Goring, where the pubs were open till 10.30pm.

Behind The Swan was Morrell’s farm. I recall horses and cows stabled there. In Church Lane was a wooden hut used as a bicycle storage place for the benefit of church-goers.

Beyond the church were three small cottages, then the allotments which housed the sewage works in the centre. Further on was the recreation ground, where cricket was played. I do recall at one stage that football was also played there.

Along the Vicarage Lane there was a bowling green; later it moved to the top of the recreation

ground. In the cottages at the lower end of the High Street was a dressmaking shop owned by a Miss Pocock. A number of local girls served as apprentices there. My father told me there used to be a post office somewhere there, but this was before my time.

Mrs GH Morrell lived in the big house, now split into three. [As already noted] a large number of her tenants also worked for the estate. A bell, now in the Morrell Room, was rung every weekday morning at 8 o'clock to start work and again at 1pm to break for lunch. It was also rung again: I cannot remember whether it was at 2pm or 5pm. Above the house there was a brick wall bordering the grounds. This has since been demolished and two houses built there – the only change in the High Street that I can recall. The grounds of Streatley House were often used for the annual British Legion fête and also for royal occasions such as the 1935 King George V Silver Jubilee.

The thatched cottage was owned by the local shoe repairer, Mr WH Perry. His workshop had a window opening on to the street. As I lived opposite I often stood on the ledge looking in. He sold sweets and some cigarettes.

In the next house lived Rear Admiral Collins. Further up the High Street lived Mr Henry. He was responsible for game keeping in the woods. Right at the top, was Wells store, a general store. They also ran a bakery. Bread was delivered by horse power, usually by a Mr Cook. The store was run by three sisters, generally known as Faith, Hope and Charity.

Above 6, 7 and 8 High Street was the police house which had a cellar underneath and next door lived the district nurse.

At the top of the High Street, where Pound Cottages are now, was a long open space, later used by Smallbone's timber yard to dump their sawdust. There used to be a red apple tree in the open space; the apples were very sour.

At the top of the High Street, was the doctor's house, opposite The Bull hotel, which had a bottle-and-jug section. Next to the hotel was Jacob's garage, then Smallbone's yard. Further along the road, at the entrance to Green Hill, there was a house at the bottom where Mrs Roland used to sell sweets and drinks to the many people climbing the hill. Twenty aniseed balls cost one [old] penny. Sundays and bank holidays in particular disgorged hundreds of people from Reading by steamer. They used to return later by rail.

In the late 1930s I used to go caddying at the golf course, usually at 2/6d for a round. I also used to go beating in the woods. We were paid but also had lunch, which was a bottle of beer and bread and cheese.

During the week we had the muffin man and French onion sellers. My mother told me that if any of the important people living in the street were ill, straw was put on the road to deaden the noise of the horses' hooves.

All in all, I have fond memories of childhood days in Streatley up to the war. I then left Streatley to serve in the RAF, returning again at the end of the war.