

Wargrave Local History Society

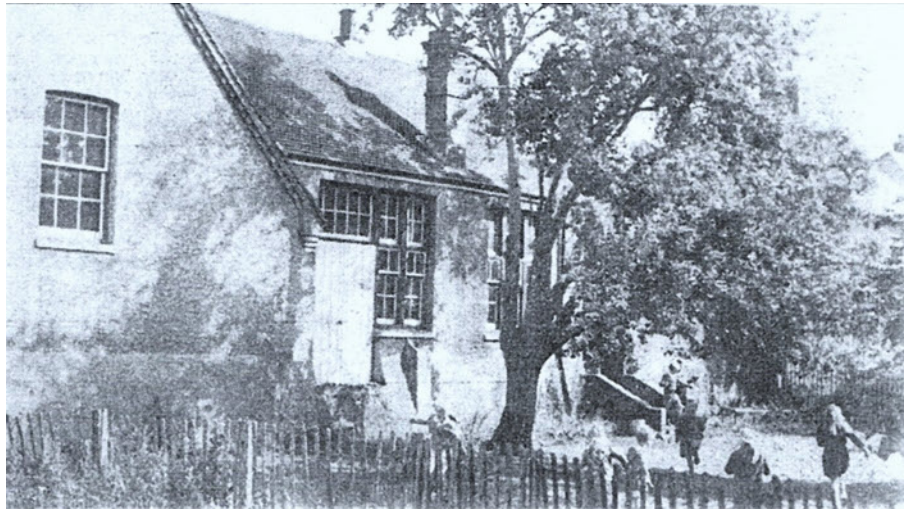
Latest News - December 2023

Reminiscences of Wargrave (1950 - 1969) - Di Evans

In December, Di Evans (nee Ladd) shared her “Reminiscences of Wargrave” of the 1950s and 1960s with a capacity audience. She began by asking “Are you sitting comfortably?” – from the “Listen With Mother” children’s radio programme with Daphne Oxenford - as she recalled her time growing up in the village. It was a time when, as a poem “Back in the Day” recalled, schools employed nurses to examine for nits, doctors made house calls, and police walked the beat, whilst mobiles were things you hung from the ceiling ... “back in the days of the tanner and bob”.

She had been born and spent her early years less than 200 yards from where she stood to recall the Wargrave of over half a century ago. Her grandad had been a local carrier, using a horse and cart, her father was a handyman working in Henley, whilst her brother - several years older than her, also worked in the village, whilst other family members also lived in Wargrave. They were all special to her - her brother being especially supportive when her father died when she was aged just 9.

Her earliest clear memories were from when she joined the infant school. This was then in an old Victorian building in Victoria Road (*right*) which had just 2 classrooms. There was no electricity, the lighting was by gas mantles, whilst the toilets were in an outside block (the boys’ one not even having a roof!). A paraffin heater in classroom 1 and an open fire in classroom 2 gave minimal heating, although the latter was useful to thaw out the bottles of milk in winter. The large windows reached down close to the classroom floor without a safety gate, so on hot summer days it was not unknown for boys to jump out into the sand pit below in the shade of a pear tree.



There were two full-time teachers. Mrs Holloway seemed ‘ancient’ to the pupils, but was patient with them. The other class was taken by Miss Downs, the headteacher, who was of ‘similar age’, with her hair in a bun, and strict - pupils might feel the imprint of her hands if they mis-behaved! Teaching took place using slates and chalk, whilst there was an abacus for number work, and magnetic letters for spelling lessons. Outside, the playground was largely an uneven surface, but if the girls had some chalk they would set out a grid for hop-scotch, whilst near the Victoria Road fence was a small garden, where they could grow flowers.

School dinners were cooked and served at the junior school, so the pupils who did not go home for their meal were taken there in crocodile style each lunchtime, the school cook, Mrs Reeves, cycling from Sonning each day. Puddings were especially enjoyed when served with copious amounts of custard or chocolate sauce!

One particular incident that Di recalled was in February of 1952. Miss Downs heard from a pupil, Derek Webb, who had been home for dinner that he had heard on the radio of the death of George VI, so she called the pupils together and asked him to tell them what he had heard. He stood in short trousers, ram-rod straight,

and said "The King's dead". The children were then sent home early that day, all the parents and neighbours being in silent mode for the rest of the day.

Later that year, Di moved to the junior school, where she remembered teachers Miss Smythe, Miss Lewis, Miss Gwen Hall and headmaster Freddie Mann, who she considered was a 'great bloke', and very fair, although if necessary he would use the cane. There was a bigger playground at the junior school, but for sports activities the pupils were taken to the village recreation ground. The slope of School Hill, though, made an excellent sledge run in the winter - there being few cars around then, and they would find it difficult to get up the hill in icy conditions. For swimming lessons, they would travel in one of Butler's Coaches to the basic open air Martin's Pool at Waltham St Lawrence.

Di was able to show several class pictures from her time at these schools, but soon after one of them she became a patient at the Red Cross hospital at Taplow, becoming very ill with childhood diseases including whooping-cough, which were virulent that summer. Following her time at the junior school, she moved on to (what was then known as) the Wargrave Piggott Senior School, which Di described as a good well organised school. It was an enormous change - pupils wore a uniform, and there were other subjects, such as domestic science, needlework, on the timetable, and a proper gymnasium! A highlight of school life was a 5-day tour which went to either Somerset or to Kent - where they stayed at Herne Bay. Travel and accommodation were all included in the cost of £25. Di commented that she was enormously thankful to all of her teachers - 99% of her memories of time there were good, with the other 1% being when slapped on the leg!

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II took place early in Di's time at the junior school, and she recalled being taken in one of Butler's Coaches to London - probably her first visit to the city - to see the decorations put up for the event. When the coach reached The Mall, the driver stopped, fully opened the sun roof, and asked if the 3 children on board would like to sit on the roof to view the decorations as they travelled the length of The Mall - each child's father hanging on to their legs !!!

The Ladd family lived in Recreation Road, where there were then 10 houses, and she could name the occupiers in the 1950s and 60s, many of them keeping chickens as a source of eggs. Other needs such as paraffin or coal were provided by mobile salesmen, there was a baker who came from Henley, whilst logs could be bought every Friday from Pelhams who came from Hurst and also operated a fairground during the summer. It was said that the muffin man would regularly walk from Reading to sell his wares in the village, whilst if shoes needed repair, a card with a large 'C' was put in the window for Mr Crocker to know to collect, repair and return them. The window cleaner would travel around with his equipment on a bicycle, and the 'onion Johnny', who came from France, would also use a bike to bring his produce to sell on the doorstep.

In the 1950s and 60s, the village could provide for most day-to-day needs. Di remembered Dr John McCrea, who had a surgery at his home in School Lane, and following his retirement, the surgery moved to be in Church Street at Tree Tops, Dr Black's house. Lucy Jones was the receptionist there, whilst Nurse Wood, the District Nurse, lived in Blakes Lane at Hare Hatch. No appointments were needed, as patients were called in from the waiting room in turn, or the doctor made home visits in those days. For other needs, there was a wide variety of shops available in the 1950s and 60s. In the village High Street, for example, there were two grocers, a fishmonger, a butcher, an antique shop, an outfitters and drapery shop, two dairies, a post office, 2 banks, 2 garages, whilst there was another butcher's, a dairy and a post office, amongst other shops and a garage in Victoria Road - none of those shops are to be found there now.



The Victoria Dairy delivery van. The driver is Alf Ladd, Di Evans' brother

Wednesdays were 'early closing day in Wargrave, whilst at 1pm the hooter at Warner's brick works at Knowl Hill signalled the start of the lunch break for village workers. In those days, shops did not open on Sundays, but an exception was made for Stringers in the High Street (related to Di by marriage), who could open for an hour at lunchtime to sell ice creams - few people having a refrigerator then. Next door to Norman Bird's garage in Victoria Road, his brother Harold ran a very efficient taxi service, for which bookings could be made by telephoning Vera on Wargrave 96, whilst at the end of Hamilton Road was the Wargrave Laundry, run by the Watts family. With Easterlings, the builders, also being undertakers, it really was "from the cradle to grave", and Wargravians only needed to go to Henley or Reading for large or unusual items.



Wargrave Mixed Hockey team, 1963-4

host to the athlete Mary Rand, who won the gold medal in the long jump at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, and the long-distance runner Bruce Tulloh both training in and around the village (Bruce living just off Dark Lane for a while).

Other social events took place in the Woodclyffe Hall - from village pantomimes, a Darby and Joan Club, jumble sales, or village raffles. At one of the latter, Di's Dad bought a ticket in her name. It came out of the hat, so he chose the prize for her, and she still has that (unopened) bottle of whisky, "kept for special occasions!" Elsewhere in the village there was a strong Brownie and Guide organisation for the girls, whilst the Wargrave branch of the Royal British Legion had a strong Women's Section.

Di has more to reveal about village life at that time, so we hope she will return to tell us more about it and her time as one of the operators at the Wargrave telephone exchange. As is our custom at this time of year, refreshments of festive fare prepared by one of our members, Wendy Smith, were greatly enjoyed during the evening.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk

Di also recalled other activities that took place in the village. There was a well-supported Bowls Club (which still exists) at the Recreation Ground, and in 1961 another sport was introduced there with the founding of a mixed Hockey Club. In Coronation Year (1953), a children's playground was also added to the Recreation Ground facilities. As - the area under the swings and roundabouts etc being of coke ash or concrete - not nice to land on if a child fell off the swings etc! The Recreation Ground was also the site of the annual village flower show - which included a handicrafts section. It was also host to the Czech Tennis Team, who stayed in Wargrave for the Wimbledon tournament, Jan Kodeš winning the men's championship in 1973. Wargrave was also