

***As a boy, Bob Williams lived in 'Llandogo' in Patricxbourne Road, now 'The Dacha'. His father was the chief officer of the Bridge – Blean Rural District Council. During the war Bob trained as fighter pilot, and afterwards became manager of Kent Concrete Products. He was a keen cine enthusiast, who converted a shed in the garden into a small cinema. He took considerable footage of life in, and sights of, the village of Bridge. In this interview, approaching the age of 90, he read the first chapter of a small collection of his memories of Bridge, which he had printed.***

Recollections of life in a village in the 20's and 30's reveal a framework and way of life long since gone. The village was surrounded by 3 large country homes and estates, which gave employment to the villagers on the land and in domestic service and looked to the shops and businesses of the village to cater for their requirements. Consequently the village had 3 grocers, 2 butchers, 2 bakers, 1 saddler, 1 cycle shop, 1 chemist, 1 dairy, 2 coal merchants, 1 taxi, 1 motor garage, 2 laundries, 2 builders, 2 barbers, 1 forge, 3 barbers, 1 livery stable, 2 sweet shops, 1 draper and 1 newsagents. There was one railway station situated about 1 mile from the village surrounded by cornfields.

To cater for the needs of the village there was 1 doctor, 1 nurse, 1 school, 1 fire brigade, 1 post office and telephone exchange, 1 women's institute, 1 mothers union 1 boys club, 1 tennis club, 1 football club, 1 cricket club and 1 British legion. It also had one workhouse, which also contained offices for the clerk to the guardians and local rural district council, the rating officer and a highways officer. The latter two were housed in adjacent offices sharing one telephone through a hatch in the wall.

Perhaps unique to the village tradesmen, helped by the owners of the estates, created a gas works to cater for the village lighting and cooking needs. Within this framework was a wonderful cast of characters, which gave the village its strong identity. One of these was a man in charge of the gas works. He lived in a small cottage adjacent to the coke oven and was also the fitter of gases installation and maintenance. He had a slight speech impediment and was named affectionately 'Eleven Benches'. This came about when he was heard to be mumbling a word as he walked through the village to his workshop to obtain 11 inches of pipe. Many of the ceilings in the village were blackened with the soot and the gas mantels. This was due to the increase in the gas supply as the pressure reduced from 11 inches was at the pub. After closing time he would return to the gas works stoke up, which increased the pressure causing the gas flames to blacken the ceilings. Nicknames for the tradesmen were also accepted as normal in those bygone days. The chemist joined a group of pharmacists known as UCAL and from then onwards he was known as old UCAL. The owner of the cycle shop and member of the fire brigade was well known for smashing windows when they arrived at a fire and for that he was known as bruiser. One of the bakers had a habit of puffing as he walked through the village delivering bread and was known as 'old blow hard'.

Although the village had a strong parish council, the real village parliament was held daily in the saddlers shop when men and boys assembled to discuss all and sundry as they watched the saddler repairing a harness or a pair of boots. The premises were full of saddles, harnesses and large sheets of leather, which filled the air with the smell of the horse world. An annual ritual was the Christmas dinner at the workhouse when people from the village would serve a meal with one of the local butchers carving a large piece of beef. Another ritual was in connection with the voluntary fire brigade, which was stationed behind one of the pubs. The alarm for a fire was a maroon sent up from the station. The large bang was unmistakably loud and fireman would rush to the fire station followed by many villagers wishing to see them depart. On one occasion a fireman responsible for lighting a maroon was concerned over the delay in its launch. He foolishly looked down the chimney with a fatal result as it took off. His death was signified by the tolling of the church bell which was another ritual performed by the verger when there was a death in the village.

The vicar was an ancient old codger who was suffering from memory loss. At one church meeting he insisted that a certain lady should do the catering at a forthcoming event, forgetting the fact that he had buried her the week before. There was a well supported Anglican Church and Methodist Chapel with choirs supported by the same boys, who received one penny for every attendance. The boys club was very active and a bit mischievous at times when many hectic games in many fields and yards surrounded the village. On one occasion a large stock of surplus army caps was discovered in a bargain basement of a department store in Canterbury. They were purchased by the boys and an army was formed and a retired army sergeant was brought into action to drill them. Little did they know that in a few years they would be involved in the real thing. The village doctor was always so well cast for the community of characters. For he suffered with a nervous laugh which was not always appreciated when he was telling a sick person that their days were numbered.

The small Nailbourne river ran through the centre of the village. This was put to good use in many ways. There was a sheep dip, one of the laundries used the river water and every day one of the bakers could be seen dipping a large mop in the river for swilling out his oven after baking.

The fetes, the flower shows, the needle cricket and football matches were food for a full programme of recreation and for heated discussion in the saddlers shop afterwards. These and the characters of the village all sowed the raw material for the annual school concert. The concert was always a sell out and comics such as the Boaters family winning all the prizes in their Christmas draw also went down well. The village family were generally hard on any form of pomposity and expressed their feeling with pointed sarcasm. On one occasion, a young lady who fancied herself issued invitations for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party, with the added note that cut glass would be preferred. In no time at all a sack of broken glass was left on her doorstep. It was, perhaps, that the village family aspect marked out village life at that time. One was a member of one's own family and a member of the village family at the same time. It was a privilege to have been part of it.