

Growing up in Wellow

Childhood Memories by Andrew Fussell, son of Rev. L. W. Fussell, Vicar at St. Julians from 1944 to 1959.

I count myself privileged to have been born in the beautiful city of Bath. There are few cities in Europe to compare with it. Rich in graceful Georgian architecture it also retains remnants of its important Roman past. When I was eleven months old the family moved six miles south of Bath to the village of Wellow where my father had been appointed vicar.

Wellow was an idyllic village in which to grow up. My earliest memories of childhood include walks taken with my mother and Michael when Julian was a baby in a pram. I would have been three at the time. I was much the same age when Julian contracted pneumonia as a baby and for several days it was touch and go whether he would live. His illness and my own near miss in the river Stour are powerful reminders of the fragility of life.

In the following five years, before I went to school, I remember my life being full of fun and adventure, occasionally interrupted by mishap. An example of the latter occurred one Sunday afternoon when I ought to have been at Sunday School. I had made a fuss about attending and instead played with Michael in the large vicarage garden. We had made a bow and arrows and when Michael's turn to fire came, he aimed at me! I was struck painfully in the middle of my knee and I collapsed on the ground like a French knight pierced by the arrow of an English archer at Agincourt. A hasty visit to the doctor led to heavy bandaging and an instruction to keep my leg up for two weeks to dispel water on the knee. When I think about it now, it is quite remarkable that I wasn't accidentally shot by Michael with a gun too, for when he was about ten years old, he was given an air rifle. Maybe I escaped this fate because I armed myself with an air pistol, bought with my own pocket money, at a gun shop in Bath! I must have been about eight at the time.

Most of the time, however, life was good. I made friends with a boy called Hugh who lived a hundred yards away along the village street. He was the same age as me and remarkably we shared the same birthday too. This enabled us to have joint birthday parties in our early years. His parents were well-to-do and when the party was at Hugh's house we were sometimes entertained by a conjuror. I found the magic tricks performed fascinating and would love to have become a magician myself.

Wellow vicarage, where I grew up before leaving for boarding school was a very large Georgian building. Its frontage on the roadside was nothing special to look at. The other side, facing south, was quite another matter. Wisteria clung to its majestic façade and cascaded over large sash windows set in mellow Bath stone. A large lawn, studded with mature trees, sloped gently away from the building. Stone steps led through an archway at its southern edge leading to a level lawn in which large rose beds had been created. The upper garden was entirely enclosed by a high stone wall which not only ensured privacy but also provided backing for herbaceous borders. The lower garden was protected by high laurel and yew hedges. There was

much garden maintenance to be done and with no gardener to undertake it, the task fell principally to my mother.

The main rooms of the house faced south over a tranquil valley. Dairy cattle grazed on the hillside opposite. All was peaceful and calm with one slight exception. The Somerset and Dorset railway line passed nearby. It didn't have a visible presence from the house or garden, but it was audible without being intrusive. The laboured puffing of the occasional train struggling up the last stretch of gradient from the Midford valley became music to my ears. More exciting was the sound of the Pines Express, a much longer train altogether and pulled by two Castle class locomotives. It carried passengers at weekends on day excursions to the seaside at Bournemouth.

Wellow vicarage was built for the local parson in the days when he would have been a man of private means, supplemented by a small stipend and substantial income from glebe lands. It was a three storey building of many rooms, with an extensive cellar and outbuildings providing stabling for horses and carriages, together with hayloft and tack room. It was a house built with servants in mind. All the main rooms had bell-pulls which were linked to an "alarm" system in the scullery, so that the parson and his family could summon a servant without effort. Every room had a fireplace, including the bedrooms. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it must have been quite comfortable even in winter.

When I moved there with the family in 1944, circumstances were very different. My father's only source of income was a meagre stipend. The days of domestic servants had largely passed and in any case, it was a struggle for my father to feed his own growing family let alone pay wages for help in the house. The cost of fuel was such that only on very cold winter evenings was a fire lit in the sitting room. Thus, spacious and gracious as the vicarage was, the temperature from Autumn to Spring was decidedly chilly and often bitterly cold. I remember the long winter of 1947 when snow lay deep on the ground for six weeks or more. My father lit small paraffin lamps at strategic points in the house to try to stop water pipes from freezing and bursting. He also bought himself a brass blow torch for the same purpose. Outside the snow lay in a dry blanket over the countryside. The lanes were impassable and where the snow had drifted it was six or seven feet deep, right up to the top of the hedges. The village was effectively cut off until the railway track was made passable again.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Wellow was predominantly a working class community. There were ten farms in the area, five of which were right in the heart of the village. All these farms required labour, to a greater or lesser extent, for agricultural mechanisation had hardly begun. I can clearly recall that Glebe Farm, next to the vicarage, was still using a horse called Dobbin for ploughing and harvesting in my early years. The railway provided another source of employment. The station master, porters and signaller all lived in the village as did a number of gangers. School leavers and younger men who wanted to earn better wages headed for the North Somerset coalfield at Radstock. There they worked the notoriously narrow seams hewing coal in claustrophobic and dangerous conditions. They would return at the end of the working day smothered in coal dust, their faces blackened beyond

recognition. The other main employer was the admiralty at Bath. I never really understood what those who worked there did but they were essentially civil servants and together with a solicitor and architect, formed the middle class element of the village.

Looking back now I can see that Wellow was very much a "model" village. It had a post office-cum-general store and newsagents. Another small shop was a confectioner and tobacconist. The pub, called the New Inn, also had a petrol pump for anyone needing fuel, though few people in the community were car owners. Every week the village was visited by a fishmonger selling fresh fish from the back of a van. A fruit and vegetable van called regularly as did one selling paraffin and a limited range of hardware. Occasionally a group of gypsies would pass through selling wooden clothes pegs. Once a week a doctor from Radstock held a surgery at the vicarage. There was also a village school with separate infants' and juniors' sections.

In addition the village had a resident policeman, a post lady, a taxi service, a coal merchant, a shepherd, a hurdle maker, a cobbler, two road sweepers and, in my early days, even an undertaker. I still have a vivid picture in my mind of funeral processions passing through the village. Attired in morning dress complete with black top hat, the undertaker would walk slowly in front of the hearse as it travelled the one mile distance from the church to the public cemetery. A straggle of mourners would follow behind, passers-by would raise their caps and workers would momentarily down their tools as a sign of respect when the cortège passed.

The spiritual needs of villagers were well catered for too. The fourteenth century parish church of St. Julian provided a place of worship for Anglicans. Non-Conformists attended a chapel and Roman Catholics met from time to time in a converted outbuilding at Church Farm to celebrate Mass which was led by a monk from nearby Downside Abbey.

From an early age I sang in the church choir and as my father was vicar, church going featured prominently in the rhythm of my life. Indeed on Sundays an atmosphere of peace and calm descended on the whole village and valley. Apart from milking of the dairy herds, all farming activities ceased. Many families made their way to one or other of the places of worship. Even the regular train service stopped. By lunchtime, the smell of Sunday roasts seeped out from many of the cottages in the High Street as families gathered together to share a meal.

St. Julian's had a peal of six bells and one of the early church restoration tasks of my father was to have the rotten timbers in the bell chamber replaced and the bells themselves retuned. The lowering of the bells from the church tower made an impressive spectacle. They were loaded two by two onto flatbed trucks and transported to the great bell foundry at Whitechapel in London. When they were eventually returned and rehung a chiming frame was installed in the ringing chamber. This made it possible for one person to ring each bell in turn and so play tunes. As a small boy I enjoyed this responsibility, ascending the tower alone, tensioning the chiming ropes and then playing hymn tunes of my choice for midweek services.

During daylight hours the church was left unlocked for visitors and at dusk I was often sent across the road to padlock the building and make it secure for the night. On one occasion I made my way through the churchyard when the light was fading fast. Feeling somewhat scared I decided not to open the church door to check whether there was anyone inside. I simply locked up and ran home quickly. An hour or so later a passer-by heard shouting and banging from within. Fortunately the visitors saw the funny side of what had happened!

1952 was a significant year in both the life of the village and the family. When my father was appointed vicar of Wellow he inherited a church building that had suffered from years of neglect. Its ancient oak timbers in tower and nave were infested with death watch beetle. The lead covered roof needed replacing and the old pipe organ wheezed asthmatically out of tune. The church clock was silent and the bells had not been rung for years. To say it was in need of repair is an understatement. In truth, it needed rescuing. In today's terms (2018) the cost of this undertaking was equivalent to about £500,000. The task of raising this huge sum of money in a village with a population of less than four hundred fell to my father.

Aged just thirty he set about this challenge with the energy and determination of a young man. Church fetes alone could never raise the sum of money required even in a hundred years. So he turned his mind to all sorts of fund raising enterprises and developed relationships with as many potential benefactors and sources of grant as possible. Labouring day and night, he carried out research so that he could write a book about the village and the place of the church at its heart, entitled *Via Old England*. All proceeds from the sale of this publication went towards the restoration fund.

Eight years on, the service of thanksgiving and dedication in honour of the rescue and repair of St. Julian's was fixed for 11th October. However, the restoration of the beautiful medieval church had come at a high price not only in monetary terms but also as far as my father's health was concerned. In July he collapsed and was rushed into hospital where he remained for the best part of two and a half months. A long period of convalescence followed. He was unable to return to full-time duty until well into the following year, though he did manage to be present at the service on October 11th. This event was attended by the "great and the good" including a clutch of clerical dignitaries consisting of bishops, archdeacons and the Dean of Westminster. Also in attendance was Herbert Morrison, Speaker of the House of Commons at the time, providing a link with the founder of St. Julian's in the fourteenth century, Sir Thomas Hungerford, the very first Speaker. My father was still a very sick man. I clearly remember how pale, ill, exhausted and thin he looked. Now aged 38 he had taken on the appearance of an old man.

I have no idea what sick pay arrangements there were at that time for members of the clergy unable to work. Very little I suspect because during the Christmas holiday I accompanied my mother on a coal scavenging trip. Equipped with sacks we walked alongside the railway track picking up coal which had fallen from the tenders of passing locomotives as firemen shovelled coal into the engines' hungry furnaces. As this was almost certainly an illegal activity, I can only assume that the vicarage coal

shed was empty and we would otherwise have faced an even colder winter than usual.

Early in June 1953, Wellow, like villages up and down the country, celebrated the coronation of the new queen, Elizabeth II. It provided the community with a welcome if temporary opportunity to throw off the restrictions and austerity of post-war Britain and simply have a good time. Houses hung Union Jacks from their windows, bunting was draped across the high street and arrangements were made for young and old to feast and celebrate. Games were organised during the day and fancy dress and best decorated bicycle competitions were held. A massive tea was laid on for children in the village hall where everyone was presented with a coronation mug. In the evening adults feasted at trestle tables set up in the village square. Anyone aged eighteen or over was offered a free pint of beer or cider dispensed from barrels provided by the pub. Doubtless many people went on to down much more than a pint as the evening wore on!

Given that all this took place in June, I can only imagine that a national holiday had been declared, otherwise I would have been away at St. George's rather than at home. I think this was the occasion when my brother Michael and I were fetched from Amberley for the weekend by an elderly farmer named George Phillips. He drove what was by our family standards a rather grand car, probably a Rover or Wolsey. As he drove south along the A46, he sat low in the driving seat and puffed on a big cigar filling the car with clouds of strong smelling smoke. From time to time he would turn his head to us in the back seats and enquire, "you alright my sonners?" After fifteen miles or so Michael was definitely not "alright" and a hasty stop had to be made for him to be sick on the roadside verge.

The coronation of 1953 was the first time I ever watched television. Only two or three families in the village were wealthy enough to own a TV set. We were fortunate to be invited by another farmer, farmer Knight, to join him and his wife to view the spectacle. In those days broadcasts were in black and white and television screens were tiny, no more than ten inches by eight. Nevertheless, it was an amazing experience to watch the ceremony that was taking place at Westminster Abbey in London, from deep in the Somerset countryside.

I was really fortunate to grow up in the countryside. I loved the freedom it offered. Before I went away to boarding school I roamed the fields, explored the woods and played by the village brook. I soon knew everyone and everyone knew me. I felt safe, secure and content. A lot of the time I was accompanied by my friend Hugh. We collected watercress, dammed streams, cut hazel sticks from hedgerows, baited the local bull and went scrumping. We rode on tractors when they replaced horsepower, played in hay barns and hayricks and cycled the lanes and doubtless made a nuisance of ourselves from time to time.

In due course the time came for me to go to school. The village school was a nineteenth century building only about three hundred yards from the vicarage. I remember my first day quite well. My teacher was a really kind lady called Miss Montague. Her classroom was really old fashioned by today's standards. Desks were arranged in long rows on ascending levels running the full length of the room.

The teacher had a table at “ground level” where there was another large table at which I was stationed throughout my first day. It was a little daunting with the rest of the class looking down on me from their elevated position, but on the whole I was happy enough playing with plasticine and making model tractors. Apart from a clock on the wall, the only other feature of the classroom was a large black stove with flue pipe. It turned out to be the only source of heating when winter came.

I don't remember much else about my early schooldays except for a few random things. For example, we always seemed to be having medical inspections. Someone would come and listen to our chests, check our hair for nits and measure our heights. Strangely most of us would be told that we had one leg longer than the other! As far as learning was concerned, I seemed to master reading, writing and counting easily and quickly.

Then it was all change. I can't have been at the village school for more than one and a half years before I was told that I was to move to a school called St. George's at Midsomer Norton. Midsomer Norton was a small town three stops along the Somerset and Dorset railway line west of Wellow. It meant that each school day was now to begin and end with an unaccompanied railway journey. I was just six and a half years old at the time. I can't imagine that I made this journey without some sort of preparation or dummy run, for it included a walk from Midsomer Norton station to St. George's of about three quarters of a mile. What I do remember is that the journey on the first day of term was not without incident, if not drama. I travelled in a compartment alone and when the train arrived at my destination, I found that I was too short to reach the handle on the outside of the carriage to open it. Fortunately the station master spotted my panic and predicament and prevented me from being whisked away further down the line.

To solve this problem it was arranged that in future I would travel in the guard's van with the guard. This turned out to be a lot of fun. Gradually I got to know the different guards on the route and they were generally very kind to me. On the outward journey the guard's van would be loaded with mail bags, bicycles, baskets of racing pigeons and occasionally a goat or two. However, on the return journey it was usually empty and in the large space available, my favourite guards would make a football out of brown parcel paper tied up with string so that we could have a game as the train trundled along the line back to Wellow.

The Rectory, taken by Andrew aged about 8 years, with his Brownie camera

