

# *A SHEVINGTON BOYHOOD*

*By Maurice Allen*

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## PREFACE

Living as we do in the age of the motor car, radio, television, and news satellites, and being bombarded at least twice each day, by national and international news items, it is hard to realize that some of our older residents had reached manhood before the arrival in the village of the first modern miracles.

News of the outside world being scanty, and often days or weeks old, local news was the main topic of conversation,, and was often delivered with the speakers own observations and comments. In this manner was some of the better items of local history handed down.

Thinking on these lines, I realised that the last generation of these 'story tellers' was, as they would say, becoming 'thin on the ground'.

This booklet is written, not so much as a history of Shevington, but as their history of Shevington, much, I hope, as they tell it.

## CHAPTER 1

### SHEVINTON IN 1887

In the glorious summer of 1887, Shevington, along with countless other parishes in the country, celebrated Queen Victoria's golden Jubilee. The date was June 21st. Other events of this period, unrelated, and often unreported, were destined to have a far greater impact on the life of the parish, in the years to follow.

Earlier that month a group of businessmen had met in London to form the Roburite Explosives Company. The new company held licenses to make 'Roburite', an explosive invented by the German chemist Dr. Carl Roth, and which he had patented the previous year.

Around that same time, a Cornish tin miner named Blight, on hearing that miners were in great demand in the rich Wigan coalfield, decided to leave his native Cornwall, and along with his family, join the migration to the north. His son William, a clever lad, had already passed the examination to become a 'Certified' teacher. The family found and settled in a house at Ince.

The new Parish Church of St. Anne's being built on the Shevington to Wigan highway, was nearing completion, and was duly consecrated the following year.

Work was proceeding in the laying of water mains to the parish, and in 1895 Edward Ball Esq. Chairman of the Parish Council, turned on the tap and filled a golden goblet, from which he drank the first piped water to be delivered to Shevington. The goblet suitably inscribed was presented to him, and a set of 'silver spoons, individually inscribed E and S.B, were presented to his good lady, to mark the occasion. The spoons still remain in the family, but sadly the goblet was stolen in a burglary a few years ago

Coal mining, in the numerous small collieries in the parish, which had been the occupation of the majority, was largely closing down, and there was much poverty.

Situated on the western fringe of the Wigan coalfield, and where geological faults had caused the outcropping of many coal seams, the area was now scarred by many old mine workings. Many of these were simply shafts which had been sunk to the coal seam. The coal at the bottom of the shaft, and in the immediate area was extracted, and the mine then abandoned. These were known as 'Bell' pits, and this is possibly why the ponds we boys fished in summer and skated on in winter were known by name, i.e. Black Pits, etc.

There was however, one deep mine working in Shevington in the nineteenth century. It was in Shevington Lane, approximately three hundred yards north of Broad o'th' Lane, and owned by J. Taylor & Co., Shevington's older residents refer to it as 'Tillywers', probably a dialect corruption of Tayleur. One of the older families remember that an uncle of theirs was killed in this mine. There is a recorded report of an explosion at this colliery in 1861, in which the colliery is named the 'Prince Albert'. Ten miners were killed and five seriously injured in the explosion. The names, ages, and addresses of the victims are listed, and all those who died were from

either the 'Barracks' or Broad o'th' Lane. Amongst those who died were James Ashcroft aged 47, and his two sons, aged 15 years and 13 years. A boy of 12 years of age also died in this explosion.

The large house (now demolished) which stood across the road from the colliery, and later known as 'Shevington Hall', was the home of the colliery manager. The authentic Shevington Hall, known as the 'Old Hall', stood alongside the dirt road leading from Miles Lane to Calico Wood Farm.

The 'Prince Albert' or 'Tillywers' closed down in 1877. Many of the miners found work in the other deep mines beyond the parish boundary at the 'John Pit', 'Taylor Pit', and 'Giants Hall'. The records of St. Anne's Parish Church a few years later, show that though the occupation of 'collier' was in the majority there were now, brickmakers, linoleum workers, chemical workers, and at least one unusual occupation of 'dog-keeper'.

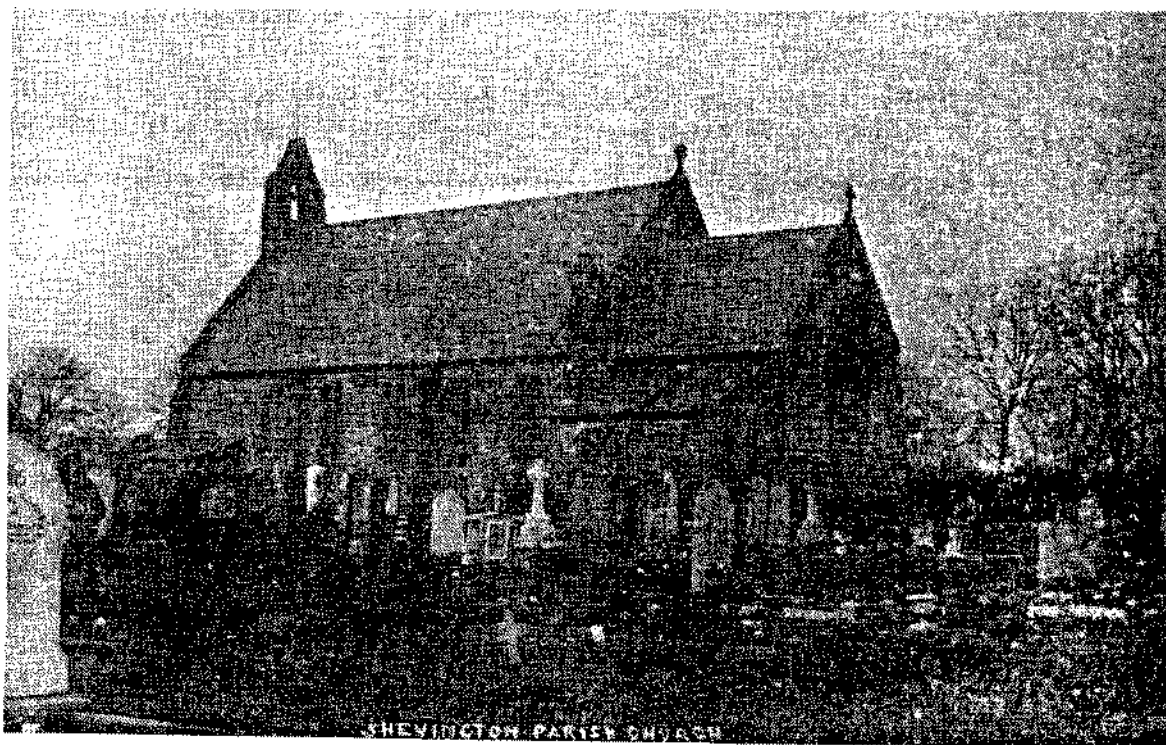
'Tillywers' chimney, a local landmark, 12 ft. square at the base, and 144 ft. high, was felled in April 1927, in what was then claimed to be a world record time. From entering the site to the fall of the chimney; 59 minutes.

## CHAPTER 2

### SHEVINGTON BECOMES A PARISH

When looking through the 'Register of Baptisms' at St. Anne's Church. I was for a time, puzzled by the date of the first entry, which was for January 5th 1873. This was approximately five years before the church was built. It was only when my mother's name was recorded in 1886 that I began to understand. My mother had always said that she had been baptized at Crooke, at the 'Chapel of Ease'. The register had apparently been brought from the building at Crooke to maintain the continuity.

The new church of St. Anne's was consecrated in 1888, and the first vicar was the Revd. Alex Richardson.



He made his home in the large house in Shevington Lane, which had previously been occupied by the colliery manager. Parsons at that time, it would appear, had a more comfortable life style. House servants and gardener were employed. The late Mrs. Bentham who had been 'in service' at the 'Hall' could tell of the long hours of hard work needed to keep the household running smoothly. Her favourite story was of old Jack Bunk, who amongst his other duties, had to assist with the washing on Monday morning each week. Even if the dirty clothes were piled up to the ceiling when he arrived, he would not complain. Should anyone bring only a handkerchief after he had started work, he would complain for the remainder of the day.

The Revd. A. Richardson saw the new church become an established part of village life, but sadly did not live to see the new century dawn. He died on 28th December 1899.

The arrival of the new vicar, the Revd. George Blagden Hopkins in 1900 was signalled by a change of houses. The family of the late vicar moved to a house in

Gathurst Lane, and a Mr. Dixon, a cotton mill manager came to live at the 'Hall'. The new vicar took up residence in a large rambling house, in its own grounds, in Gathurst Lane, the 'Vicarage'.

I can speak from memory of the Revd. Hopkins from my position as a choir boy from 1924 until he retired in 1928. The recent television series of 'Barchester Towers' was a very good reminder of the country parson's dress of those days. The round hat and long black coat and cravat.

We were for some reason, very reluctant to talk to him, although this may have been due to the fact that we were often told to 'speak only when you're spoken to'. The older people in the village appeared to get on well enough with him, so that it may have been boyhood impressions. The vicar employed a gardener / handyman, one of whose many duties was to drive the pony and trap taking the vicar on his visits around the parish. This was later changed for a car, one of the earlier ones to be seen in the village. The family obviously believed in progress, for there are many amusing stories told of Mrs. Hopkins' exploits on the new fangled motor scooter which she acquired.

The highlights of the Church year to us were the annual choir trip to Blackpool, the Sunday School Treat, and the 'Walking' day. The 'Treat' after the procession around the parish, being a cup of tea, a sandwich, and a bun, after which the different age groups took part in races for a small prize. In the evening, the Crooke Band played for dancing until dusk. Of great interest on 'Walking' day were the decorated lorries, on which the younger children rode. There was a keen rivalry between the Shevington and Standish Lower Ground sections of the parish. The Shevington turnout was usually Dan Balls (farmers), and the Lower Ground (Wigan Coal & Iron Co.) turnout. On Friday evening the lorries were scrubbed and polished, usually having been recently painted. Saturday morning the horses were washed and groomed, the harness brightly polished and the brasses cleaned. To see them later in the day, the small children on the decorated lorry, and the big shire horse, harness gleaming, brasses polished, plumes dancing, and the chains jingling, was something to remember.

The Revd. George Blagden Hopkins retired in 1928, and the new vicar the Revd. H.S. Crabtree began his ministry in the parish. Comparatively young, a bachelor, and a very keen sportsman, our new vicar was a very different kettle of fish. An oar on the wall of the garage at the vicarage was testimony to one of his university accomplishments. We soon learned that he was a very good tennis player, and a fearless player on the football field. When he turned up to play for the village soccer team wearing a hooped rugby jersey, it was agreed that here was a man who wouldn't shirk physical contact. This was soon confirmed, and then changed to, 'He'll kick at anything above the grass'. One drawback, insofar as his team mates were concerned, was the need to restrain their language. There was one memorable occasion, when one of his team mates, after being the victim of a hard tackle, was telling his opponent in no uncertain terms, what to expect should he come in again like that. The vicar intervened by saying, 'Now now Jack there's no need for that', to

which Jack, still seething, and unthinking, replied, "It's aw reet for yo vicar, its not your bloody shins he's porrin". The vicar's favourite sport, without doubt, was tennis. A good player himself, his interest was such, that for very many years his summer holiday was spent in officiating as umpire at the Wimbledon championships.

An amiable, easy going man, his one great difficulty was in leaving his bed in the morning. This, and a tendency to forgetfulness, meant that any event arranged for the morning was always a bit dicey. It was always possible that he would arrive late, or you may even have to go down to the vicarage and rouse him.

He rode his motor bike, and later drove his car, much as he played his football, vigorously. It was a common sight to see him come chugging up Gathurst Lane, with 'Jack', his large dog, bounding along the footpath in giant strides, about ten or fifteen yards in the rear.

His sister Connie lived with him at the vicarage, and was his constant helper in the affairs of the parish.

The Revd. H.S. Crabtree retired in 1964.

Our present vicar we all know. Sufficient to say that his cheerful personality, and enthusiasm, soon swept away some of the cobwebs that had begun to gather.

## CHAPTER 3

### EARLY SCHOOLING IN THE VILLAGE

The young William Blight, having settled in Wigan, had met, courted, and married a Shropshire lass, whose family had also been lured to Wigan, by the then booming industries.

Shortly after the birth of their first child, Helen, he applied for, and obtained the position of headmaster of the Broad o'th' Lane, Infant and Mixed School at Shevington.

He arrived, one dark December evening, with his wife, and child in arms, at Gathurst station. Waiting to meet him on the platform was Mr. Cunliffe, one of the school managers. Mr Cunliffe led them from the station to the Navigation inn, where they then went down the steps to the canal towpath. They along the towpath beyond Dean Lock, where a halt was made while Mr Cunliffe pushed at the bar of the swing bridge, to cross the canal. The track, now led under the railway arch, to a farm house and buildings, which to Mr. Blight at that moment appeared to be set in the middle of a forest. He was to say many years later, that if there was any one moment, when he doubted the wisdom of coming to Shevington, this was it. The year was 1892.

The Blights stayed with the Cunliffe family until the school had been thoroughly cleaned, aired, and heated and then moved in.

The house occupied one end of the Infant school, a small passage separating this from the more recently built 'Mixed' school.

There was a lot of hard work to be done before he was to see the school operating in the way he had planned. Previously, the school had been open, more or less when the headmaster chose. A complete syllabus for the whole school had to be prepared, and suitable Pupil Teachers appointed. The system of classes and standards he then set, were in use until his retirement. They were as follows, Standards one and two = Class Four, Standards three and four = Class Three, Standards five and six = Class Two, Standards seven and ex seven = Class One.

The log book kept by Mr. Blight make interesting reading, and gives a more or less day by day account of school life in the early part of the twentieth century. An early entry shows that the staff at that time was

William. Blight, Headmaster  
Jane Rimmer (Assistant Teacher)  
Mary Cunliffe (First Year Pupil Teacher)  
Elizabeth Stringfellow (Probationer)  
Mrs Regan (Infants Teacher)

The scholars, usually about 120 in number were mostly from the Shevington parish, plus a few from Appley Bridge, whose attendance was checked by the School Attendance Officer from the Orrell and Upholland district. The S.A.O. for Shevington parish was Mr. Rigby and for Upholland Mr. Scrivener. These



officers called at the school to collect the names of absentees, and Mr. Blight duly noted in the log each time the S.A.O. called at the school. Knowing Mr. Blight, and reading between the lines, I am left with the impression that Mr. Blight was far from happy about the attendance of Mr. Rigby the Shevington S.A.O.

Especially on reading at a later date: "Mr. Scrivener called at school this morning Whilst he was here Mr. Richardson our recently appointed S.A.O. for Shevington arrived. I had the pleasure of introducing them to each other'. Written with relish I suspect.

Attendances at school were often dependant on the weather. This is not to be wondered at, when you consider that there were practically no footpaths- and roads as we know them non existent. Entries, such as: "There was a heavy downpour of rain about 8.30 a.m, this morning. Attendances. Only about two thirds of the scholars". Or, almost every winter: "A heavy downfall of snow during the night. Only a few scholars arrived. Sent them home and closed school". On more than one occasion the school was closed for more than -a week because the roads were impassable. Sickness too was a major cause. Almost every year there appeared to be an epidemic of either measles, chicken pox or scarlet fever. (When checking the St. Anne's Church 'Register of Burials' a few days later, I was not surprised to find that often corresponding to these dates, there was a much higher than usual 'records of burials' of young children between the ages of one and five years).

School holidays were often at the discretion of the Board of Managers, whose clerk, or as Mr. Blight always refers to him in the log, the Correspondent, would arrive at the school and say that, "Holidays start today. Two weeks". Either a day or sometimes half a day's holiday was given for 'Wigan Fair', 'Tradesmans' holiday, and a one day holiday was given to celebrate the end of the 'Boer War'.

An earlier entry in the log says, "A rumour circulated this morning that General Roberts had taken possession of Pretoria. When the children left the school at dinner time, they formed a procession, and marched around the village singing patriotic songs and waving flags. They did not return until 3.30 p.m."

The schools 'Board of Managers' was at that time chaired by A.J. Martland Esq., and members included Geo. Fairhurst, Ed. Fairhurst, W. Liptrot, Rev. G. Blagden Hopkins, John Stringfellow. Other entries in the log note that the school had not been cleaned properly, that farmers were using boys labour illegally, that senior classes were instructed in the filling up of census forms, that a new fire range had replaced the dilapidated stove, and that one morning at 7.45 a.m. a workman had found the caretaker lying at the roadside. Mr. Blight opened the school and lit the fires that morning.

At least once each week one of the school managers would call in to check the attendance register, and to see the scholars at prayers and the scripture lesson. He would sign the log book to this effect.

An item at this time notes that the school has passed from the Local School Board to the Lancashire County Council.

The estimate of costs for the year were:

To Books, Stationery, and apparatus	£ 29.00
Furniture and Repairs thereto	6.00
Fuel, Light, and Cleaning	26.00
Wear and Tear	5.00
New Piano	17.00
Total	£ 83.00

Entries like 'the children wrote a sentence from a Sunlight Soap wrapper' perhaps give an indication of the lack of books etc.

Mr. Blight set an examination for each standard half yearly and the standards progress was commented on. The School's Inspectors were now regular visitors, and their reports speak of the crowded conditions in which the children had to work. Cloakroom and toilet facilities were inadequate, and the schoolyard muddy. One inspector complains more than once that music was not taught by notes. At that time the school didn't appear to have a piano in which case learning to sing by note wouldn't be easy. Mr. Blight's teaching was more concerned with the three Rs and what he considered to be the more useful subjects, sewing, needlework etc. The Lanes Education Committee had now appointed a Sgt., Major Wright as Drill Inspector. He found the schoolyard, too shall, very muddy, and quite unsuitable for marching. On at least one occasion, he took drill inspection in the lane, outside the school.

A timber and glass partition had been erected, dividing the big room, and had much improved teaching conditions. The school was becoming overcrowded, and children living outside the parish could not be accepted. The children of three families, who were of the Catholic faith, had left because the Priest had said that they must attend a Catholic school. Miss Agues Lyon, who had joined the teaching staff a few years previously, left to get married. New appointments were Miss Blight and Miss Ormesher. The scholars and staff had said Goodbye to Thomas, Mary, and Maggie Ball, who were to embark the same afternoon at Liverpool, for Vancouver Island, Canada.

The 1914-1918 war saw the introduction of daylight saving, potato picking holidays, and National Registration Forms.

Disciplinary measures included detention after school, and caning for more serious offences, such as insubordination or truancy. These occasions are noted in the log, but are surprisingly very infrequent.



Mr Blight and the class of 1910

## CHAPTER 4

### BOYHOOD IN BROAD O'TH'LANE

Our house in Broad o'th'Lane was numbered forty five. This always seemed rather odd to me, as there were only seventeen houses, one shop, and the 'Plough and Harrow' in Broad o'th'Lane. Short of high rise flats, there was no way that another twenty six houses could be fitted into what little space was left. I don't believe that the Authority who so numbered the houses, and who had named our school in Miles Lane, Broad o'th'Lane Council School, could possibly have foreseen the advent of high rise flats. On the other hand, houses in Shevington Lane built to form three sides of a square, were known, logically enough as 'The Barracks'. In Gathurst Lane, a square, bounded on one side by the George and Dragon' Inn, by cottages on the opposite side, and at one end by a communal wash-house we knew as the 'Gaffy Yard'. A name which also had me puzzled.

Shevington Hall stood on the site in Shevington Lane now occupied by Fern Close, the parkland and grounds bordered by Old Lane, Shevington Lane and Church Lane. The original Shevington Hall, known to us as the 'Old Hall' was about sixty yards or so down the cart track leading to Calico Wood Farm. Now demolished, at that time, it consisted of a few outbuildings, and two "olde worlde" type cottages. In one of these lived and worked old Harry Daines, the basket weaver. Standing on each of the roads leading into the village were the four farms. At the end of Church Lane, Harry Hilton's "Club House" farm. In Gathurst Lane, John Hilton's "Highfield" farm. In Shevington Lane, Mr. Ainscough's "Paradise" farm, and in Miles Lane, Mrs. Ball's "Naylor's" farm. There were footpaths only where the occasional' houses stood. The grass verges on each side of the roads were intersected by channels, cut by the roadman, to drain the water into the ditches. These ditches were the root cause of many spankings for arriving home from school with wet feet.

Number forty five was typical of the village houses. Living room and back kitchen downstairs, two bedrooms upstairs. Should the house have an added small brick extension in use as a pantry, or the occupants use the living room as a parlour, they were almost considered upper class. The small back yard and open toilet, often had to meet the needs of two families. Large families being in the majority, many anxious moments were often spent waiting for a vacancy.

Furnishing of the houses was more functional than decorative. Flagged floors in the living room and back kitchen, covered in the living room by linoleum, with a pegged cloth rug at the hearth. In the back kitchen, either bare flags or covered by a square of coconut matting. A six drawer dresser, or perhaps a cheffonier, an extending table, four chairs, a pair of rocking chairs, and a wooden form to seat three or four at the table was about average. Sometimes the luxury of a sofa, and often a wooden cradle with rockers, and attached to the cradle, a length of string, by means of which you could rock the baby from wherever in the room you could find a seat. All the cooking and baking was on the open 'Yorkshire' range in the living room, the weekly wash being done in the back kitchen. Here a brick built, coal fired boiler, or failing this, a huge two handled pan on the living room fire, provided the hot water to fill the two

wooden washing tubs. A rubbing board, a clothes dolly, and a wooden roller mangle completed the equipment. Attached to the ceiling in the living room, four wooden rails in iron brackets, raised and lowered by means of a rope and small pulleys, was used for wet weather clothes drying and airing.

My first vivid memory, and I would be about four years old, is of being seated on the coalman's lorry. We were coming up Gathurst Lane when the works hooters, and the colliery and mill whistles sounded. Mr. Hooton stopped the horse, jumped down from the lorry, removed his can, and stood at attention, until the whistles sounded again. It was the first 'Armistice Day', later to be known as 'Remembrance Day'. Many years later I asked my mother how I came to be on the coalman's lorry. The explanation was quite simple. It was washing day and the coalman had taken me on his morning round, so that she would have one child less to contend with. This she said was common practice. If, when he called, the lady of the house was finding it difficult to cope with her housework and the children, the coalman, or the milkman, would take one or more of the children along on the morning round. The coal-man must have been the village's first unofficial, unpaid, black faced child minder.

Whenever any of the mothers left the house on some errand, or to pick blackberries, or to collect firewood in the nearby woods, she would usually take along some of the neighbours' children as well as her own.

We loved to collect firewood with Mrs. Gore. She had a soft Irish brogue, and made us laugh a lot. She told us stories about lions and tigers in Calico Wood and how, if a lion should appear, she would run so fast that we wouldn't be able to see her backside for dust. All the old village jingles she taught us to chant, such as: "The keepers coming, keepers coming down t'copse side, Hide thee lad, hide thee lad, its Owd Bob Brown" She was too the village's voluntary District Nurse and sick visitor. I don't know how many gallons of gruel she must have made and served to her sick friends and neighbours.

### SCHOOL DAYS

Aged five, we were, one Monday morning, placed in the charge of our elder brothers or sisters, for the short journeys to school. Some went eagerly, some reluctantly, and some protesting noisily. I can still see my younger brother, heels dug in, my elder sister holding one hand, her school friend the other, being dragged, protesting violently, down Miles Lane. Once there however, he, like most, settled down quickly.

Broad o'th' Lane Council School comprised two separate buildings, the big school and the little school. The little school, stone built, was the village's first school. An inscribed tablet on the face of the building, explains its origin and purpose. "this building for pious study and learning, was built by voluntary contributions in the year of our Lord 1814". A single storey building, at the west end of which was the caretaker's cottage, occupied at that time by Mrs. (Minnie) Beech, At the opposite end the school entrance and cloakroom, where each morning our teacher Mrs. Martlew would check that our hands, faces, ears and neck: were newly washed, and our clogs brightly polished. Above the washbasin, a large mirror, and above the

mirror printed in large letters, the question, "Am I clean and tidy?" The first objective of our education appeared to be to instil order and discipline. The main body of the building was taken up by desks and chairs arranged in two separate groups. The first group of smaller chairs and tables for the beginners, taught by Mrs. Martlew, whose duty of introducing us to school and its discipline was carried out without compromise. At the end of the first year you were expected to have increased enough in size as well as knowledge to fill the larger chairs in the second group. At this end of the room a large open coal fire, surrounded by a brass topped fireguard. Across the chimney breast, above the fire, in letters a foot high, the one word 'SMILE', This one word, summed up for me, the difference between our new teacher and headmistress, Mrs. Regan, and Mrs. Martlew. Mrs. Regan's sweet natured and pleasant manner being a sharp contrast to the rather severe manner of our previous teacher. My lasting memory of my own first day at school is of being seated next to a boy who was wearing a new green corduroy suit. Corduroy suits of those days had a peculiar and very potent odour!

It would almost seem that when our 'big school' was built there was only one plan available. Schools of that period are almost identical. A large main room, with the boys' entrance and cloakrooms at one end, and girls' entrance and cloakrooms at the other end. The main room could be divided by pulling across a heavy, large wood and glass screen. Halfway along the back wall a door gave access to a room approximately half the size of the main room. Long wooden desks with form attached, seated about ten pupils. Were you to be seated at the end of the row you were in constant danger of being quietly pushed off onto the floor! Along the top of the desks, circular holes housed the ink wells, and an indentation prevented your pen or pencil from falling off the desk. Pencils had replaced the slate and chalks used in the little school and central heating pipes and radiators the open fire.

After morning prayers, the screen was pulled across and we joined our various classes. Each class contained two standards. Beginners in Miss Boardman's class of Standards one and two, to Miss Cunliffe's class of Standards three and four, Miss Blight's class of Standards five and six, and ending in Mr. Blight's the headmaster's class of Standard seven and seven plus. One year was spent in each standard, at the end of which, had you made the desired progress, you moved up to the next. Failing, meant that you were held back until you did. Emphasis was on the three Rs, and though our education was not as sophisticated or varied as to day, I can't recall any one of my contemporaries being unable to read or write when they left school.

Miss Boardman I recall as being rather handy with the ruler across our knuckles if we talked in class. Miss Cunliffe, very patient, whose beautiful copper plate, hand writing was an example we longed to emulate and Miss Blight whenever I hear the songs, 'Ye Banks and Braes', 'Barbara Allen', 'Annie Laurie', and for the nature rambles, which were an escape from the classroom.

Mr. 'Billy' Blight our headmaster, a small, neat looking man, with a brisk approach to everything, inspired confidence. A well respected Magistrate and local Councillor, in school he was firm but fair, tolerant of most things bar idleness and bad manners.

He had the unenviable job of explaining to many who didn't want to know, the mysteries of algebra, geometry etc. The order and discipline begun in the little school was maintained, though as boys grew older and bigger, the misdemeanours were more frequent. A rap across the knuckles was often sufficient, though the cane, administered by the 'headmaster in varying degrees, was far from uncommon. I was caned only once, and this may help to explain the degrees. For ignoring the school bell when engrossed in the marbles game of 'Chuckie', we each received one stroke.

My last year or so was spent in the new school, which had been built on the adjoining land, enclosing a grass quadrangle. It contained an assembly room, separate classrooms, headmaster's study, storerooms, bigger cloakrooms, and more washbowls, two seater desks with lockers, and a blackboard the full length of one wall was luxury indeed. Mr. Moore the new headmaster, who had been a Captain in the 'Great War', was rumoured to be very strict on discipline, administered with a strong left hand.

The 'victim' who eventually verified this did have the dubious satisfaction of being an object of interest for a while. Our new head, on the other hand became very popular by introducing more sporting activities and physical training. We staged school concerts, etc., to kit out a school football team, bought and installed a wireless set, etc. My father's query as to where they would find enough children to fill such a big school, has proved to be very unprophetic.



A family school photograph

## BOYHOOD PASTIMES

Out of school hours our pastimes were the usual ones of those days. In summer we went bird nesting, spent days in the woods building dens, making bows and arrows, damming the stream in John Pit wood for a bathing pool and bathing in the nude. Or tickling trout in the same stream, yes, there were trout in the stream at that time. In winter we played, 'Trust' or 'Skilly' round the entries and yards, and tic tac on the cottage windows. It was easy to escape when the door opened, as there was no street lighting. Our football pitch was Broad o'th Lane, Shevington Lane end one goal, Gathurst Lane end the other. Our racing circuit, start at the finger post, round Church Lane, Old Lane, and down Shevington Lane back to the finger post. An occasional raid on- the orchard at Shevington Hall was usually followed by a visit to our homes by Davie the manservant and gardener, who of course knew most of us. The next day we could be seen struggling up the driveway to the Hall, led by Tommy the ringleader of most of our escapades, who would be telling us not to be so b----- soft. Amazingly, Tommy grew up to be a very quiet, reserved and honest man. A stern lecture from Mr. Dixon, and always the promise that should we come and ask, we could have all the windfalls of apples and pears. The trouble was, that this was not half so exciting, and that Davies in return would require that we swept the long driveway clear of leaves.

Weekends and holidays, most of us spent at the farms, and especially at Mrs. Ball's, 'Naylors Farm'. No doubt we were useful. We could muck out stables, shippens, pig sty's, run errands, deliver milk, and most odd jobs around the farmyard. Most of us learned how to milk, to build a haycock that would turn the rain, to load hay on the hay lorry, to stock the corn, or to make and tie a sheaf of corn. Long summer days were spent "minding" the cows pasturing on the golf course. A single strand of round wire around each green was no deterrent. I grew to believe that cows have a sense of humour, for should you be absent for a few minutes, on your return, you would invariably find a few cowpats, plopped strategically around the pin. I came to realise in later years, that, though we were useful, our main reason for being there was in order that Mrs. Ball could feed us well. This was the time of the 1926 miners' strike and the subsequent depression, and our families were hand hit. So long as we were working for our food it wasn't charity, and our parents' pride was unhurt. And how well we were fed. We would be at the farm by seven each morning. A cup of tea before milking, and then a breakfast of bacon and eggs. In summer if you were 'minding' the cows, one of the girls would arrive soon after twelve with a basket containing your dinner. At four p.m. you would round up the cows, and back to the farm for milking, and after milking, into the farmhouse for tea. When haymaking or harvesting, or working in the fields, in between meal times, there were the farmers' version of tea breaks, known as 'baggin time'. This itself was almost a meal. In the evening when all the chores were done, we would play around the stackyard. When it was time for home, Mrs. Ball would appear at the farmhouse door with a plate piled high with home made fruit loaf, slices of about one inch thick and spread liberally with home churned butter. The memory of that scene still makes my mouth water. In winter time we helped to riddle and bag

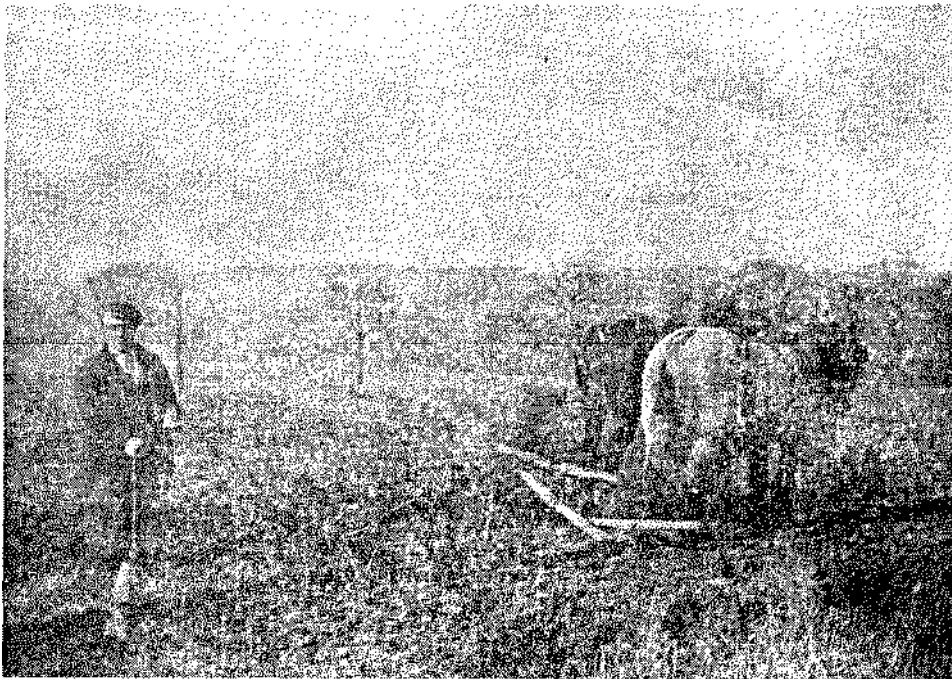


potatoes, chop hay or turnips for fodder and bed down the animals, and having finished we would sit in the boiler house, absorbing the appetising smell of small potatoes (chats) boiling for the next day's meal for the pigs. Fished from the boiler and sprinkled with salt, they made a nice hot supper before leaving for home. Mrs. Ball and her family in their way taught us many things besides hard work and a few skills. I well remember the constant advice of this farming family, "Do well at your schooling, and you will be able to earn your living with your jacket on". Good advice, but hard to appreciate, when your one ambition is to leave school, and be grown up.



Milking; Time at Paradise Farm

The Richardson Family with farm workers in the early years of this century.



FARMING IN SHEVINGTON

Joe Ball in the 1920's

## CHAPTER 5

### LOCAL INDUSTRY

In the Golden Jubilee year, so far as I am aware, there were, apart from the mines, and farms, only two other main sources of employment in the parish. These were the Glue Works, known locally as the "Bone Hole", and the brickworks. Both of these were at the Appley Bridge end of the parish.

Until its recent closure the glue works, or to give it the correct title, "The Grove Chemical Works", provided regular employment for both men and girls. By its very nature, the process of turning animal bones etc, into glue and other by products, was a very unsavoury occupation. Here however, probably more than in any other works, the advances of technology during the twentieth century, vastly improved working conditions, and the environment. From being a maggot and rat infested place of work, modern pest control, improved working methods etc, brought conditions of work to a very much higher standard. The amazing thing is that despite the adverse working conditions, and the hard work, you could never wish to see a bonnier lot of lasses, than the 'Bone Hole' girls.

The Brick Works, largely managed and supervised by the Hall family, and adjacent to the Glue works, was almost exclusively male labour. The clay, dug out by spade, from the area around Finch Mill House, and extending to just short of Broad Riding Lane, was carried by way of a bogie tramway to the works. By far the greater part of its products went to the Southport area.

Although the original Roburite Works, completed in 1888, alongside Gathurst station, was in Orrell, an iron bridge, spanning the river Douglas and the canal, led to the extension, and later, transfer of the works into the Shevington parish.

In 1913 the Roburite Company and Ammonal Explosives Ltd., merged to become the Roburite and Ammonal Explosives Co. Ltd.

When the first world war started, Roburite and Ammonal Ltd., was immediately engaged. Capacity was expanded and new staff trained. Thousands of tons of Military Ammonal, and modified explosives containing T.N.T. and Ammonium Nitrate were produced. The factory's products were used when the Messines Ridge near Ypres was blown up and when Zeebrugge Mole was mined.

On the 15th April-1916 an explosion occurred at the factory, which caused the death of two employees. The blast blew out the windows in Shevington and Crooke, and caused a wave of panic to sweep the area. Years later the older people would tell you where they were, and what they were doing, when the Roburite 'went up'. Apparently most of the villagers ran from their houses, leaving everything, and made for the open fields on the Standish side of the village. Old Sammy Hodgkinson when asked later if he had left the village, replied, "No, but t'wife set off like a hare up Shevington Lane. I let her get about a hundred yards, then shouted, 'What about the purse? That stopped her dead in her tracks. When she came back, I asked her where they were all gooin'. 'In t'fields', she said. I towed her, her'd be just as safe in t'back garden, and theer at least, if her did get killed, I wouldn't have as far to carry her".

Some idea of the force of the blast can be gathered by the account of a then ten or eleven year old boy. He was in the farmyard at Naylor's Farm, and at the edge of the yard there was piled a cart load of ashes. This is least a mile from the works. He says that he saw a huge plume of smoke and fire, and the pile of ashes lifted about a yard or so into the air and then settled down again.

It is pleasing to note that despite another world war, and many thousands of tons of manufacture, this was the only occasion when lives were lost in this manner, due largely to the accent placed on safety.

A detachment of soldiers was stationed at the works during the first world war, the works' 'Home Guard' company during the second world war, on security duties.

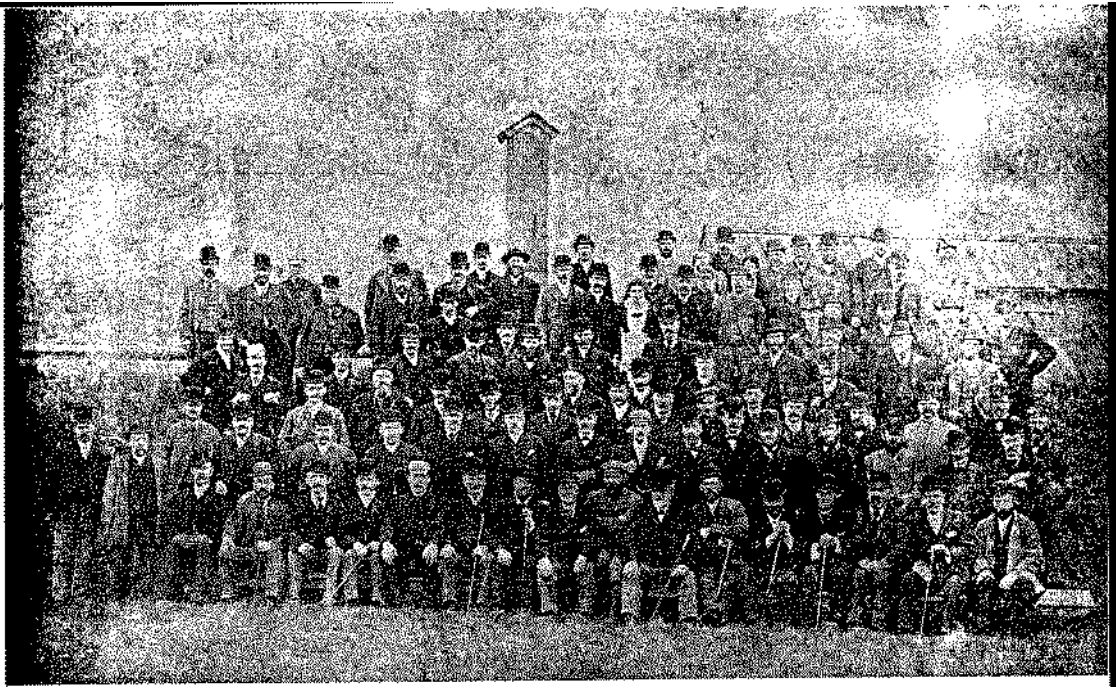
Concentration and rationalisation of the explosives industry in the nineteen twenties, culminated when Roburite and Ammonal became part of the Imperial Chemical Industries complex, making commercial explosives for the mining, quarrying, and civil engineering industries.

The second world war saw a rapid expansion in production. The Shevington factory built during 1941-42 meant that at that time the works employed between 500 and 600 people, many on three shift working. In addition to manufacturing explosives, there were the military commitments of filling hand grenades, high explosive bombs and the Blacker Bombards etc.

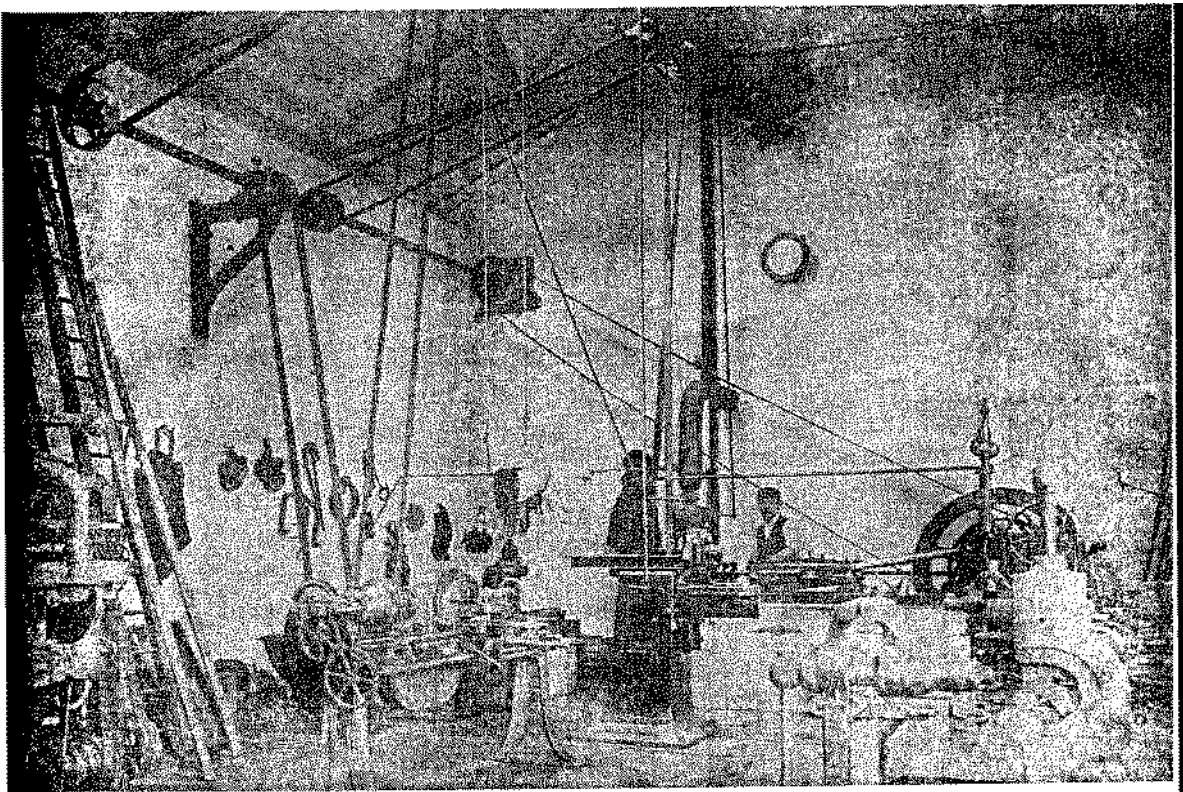
Readjustment at the end of the war reduced the number of workers drastically. The name of Roburite and Ammonal had been changed in 1941 and this was now part of the Nobel Division of I.C.I.

The Roburite works has always been able to change with circumstances. This ability was never more necessary than now, and this fact, amongst many others, may help to carry the works, and its employees through these very difficult times.

There was one other cottage industry which for many years provided employment for a few of the people of the area, mostly young people learning the trade. Harry Daines the basketmaker worked from his cottage at the 'Old Hall'. He was an old man when I was a boy, but he still made baskets to order. As most working people, except the miner: carried their lunch to work in a basket, there was still a small demand for them. You could tell a person's occupation by their lunch basket. A factory girls' basket would hang on her arm, and the lid was in two hinged halves. A man who worked on the railway had the biggest basket it carried more coal home. Old Harry must have taught the trade to a large number of people in his time. They had to start learning by stripping the 'twigs' for a few pence per day. The incentive scheme of this particular job they tell me, was that the girl who had stripped most twigs at the end of the week, was awarded a few sweets.



Workers & Staff - Robert Works around 1900



ROBURITE WORKS

The "Power House" in the early part of this century

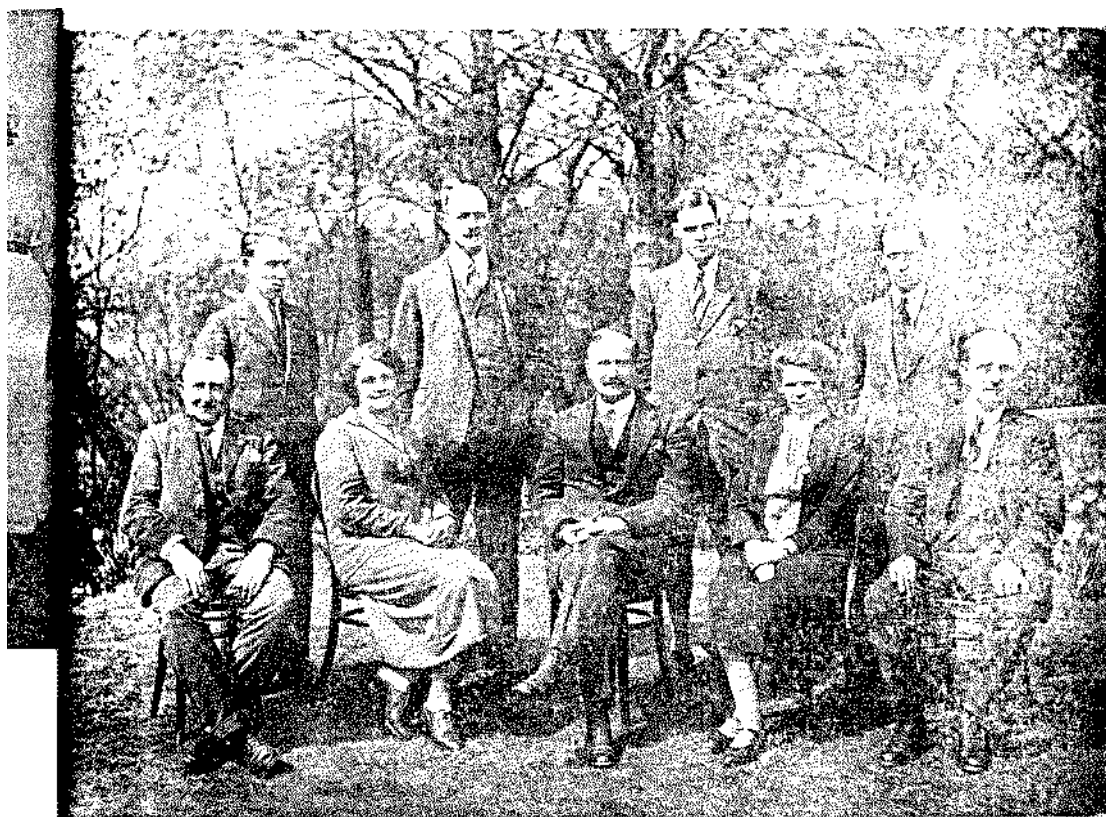




Roburite ladies relax during the first world war



Handmaking paper cartridge cases at Roburite Works during the 1914-18 war



ROBURITE WORKS COUNCIL 1926



Harry Daines and his basketweavers in the 1890's

## CHAPTER 6

### VILLAGE LIFE DURING THE GENERAL STRIKE

The strike in 1926 brought a period of severe hardship to the village, the effects of which were to last for many years. Several factors collectively helped to ease the suffering. Though the majority of the menfolk were miners, the total, compared with the mining towns was small. Living in the countryside created opportunities of providing for the family. Most families had gardens for vegetables, or hen pens. There were rabbits, hares, wood pigeons etc., which occasionally found their way to the most deserving cases. Above all was a caring community.

During the first five weeks, the miners had received a few shillings of union strike pay, then union funds were exhausted. There followed what was to most miners wives the humiliation of the 'relief'. This meant a walk, usually with the children, by the footpath through the fields to Standish, where a few shillings were doled out, on the understanding that every penny would be repaid when work was resumed. Today, to have the top of your dad's boiled egg may sound like a joke, but in large families like ours you even had to wait your turn. It was a time when you only ate to ease the hunger pains, and food was prized more for its ability to fill you up, than its nutritional value. An occasional Saturday tea time treat were Parkinsons Tea Biscuits, about 3 inches diameter by  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch thick, which tasted like sawdust, but being very light in weight, you got a lot in half a pound, and they filled you up. Or for a penny, you could get an enamel cup full of treacle from the barrel at John Hilton's farm, treacle that otherwise was used in the provender fed to the cattle. The red letter days to we children, were the days when we gathered in the yard at the Plough with our basins for the pea soup. This was cooked in the large washing boiler in the washhouse, the landlady and some of the village ladies doing the cooking and serving. In large families like ours we each took borne our filled basin, where it was emptied into one large dish, and then shared among all the family.

One redeeming feature of 1926 was its long hot summer, though it didn't do much to help the miners' case, except that they were able to occupy themselves outdoors. This they did by picking coal on the local, colliery tips, or working their own small mines. With their knowledge of mines and mining, they knew exactly where a seam of coal outcropped, or was just below the surface. One of the largest in the area was at Beech Walks in Standish, though some of the villagers had dug down to a seam in John Pit wood, which they for some reason had named the 'Strawberry' mine. The coal dug from these small holes was sold to any willing buyers, often from the towns. In these places it was necessary to work a night shift or else mount a guard against marauders. At one period an easier way to get coal was hit upon. Motor lorries laden with coal were beginning to pass through the village, coming from Orrell and heading towards Standish. A road block was placed in Gathurst Lane, extending from the gable end of John Hilton's barn across the road to the hedgeway. This consisted of the six foot wide solid stone roller from the cricket field, minus the handles, and a contraption they called the 'iron man'. This was a machine, towed behind the steam road roller, and used for



digging up the road. About five feet long and four wide, it was of solid iron construction, and must have weighed about three tons. When the lorries arrived, the men promptly unloaded them and sent them back empty. When police from Wigan eventually arrived, there was no sign of the road block, but there was a good quantity of coal on offer in the village.

Many and various were the ways employed to combat the inevitable boredom. Organised walks to Southport and back, swimming in the canal, football matches, wrestling matches, fishing in local ponds or the canal.

Sometimes there was casual work, gardening, or odd jobs, haymaking or hoeing turnips on the farms. I remember my father getting a very welcome spell of work, on what is now Prince's Park down Gathurst Lane. His work was to dig out the clay from the field across the valley, load it into an iron bogey, push the loaded bogey to the edge of the valley and empty it into the valley. This is the manner in which the access road into Prince's Park was built. Hard work indeed, but the money was needed.

A few people in the village had fortunately been able to carry on working, mostly on short time. These were usually colliery men from the management side, or who worked at the Roburite works, or the works and quarries at Appley Bridge. In most cases these, and some of the local farmers and business people, plus some of the professional people, were the ones who did much to alleviate the hardship.

Long after the strike had ended, and on through the depression of the early nineteen thirties, this was much the way the village coped. It took another war to put an end to the weekly visits of the relief man, doctors man, club man, scotchmen etc., collecting their sixpence per week against the outstanding debts.

One last lingering memory of the 1926 miners' strike is of the drought which came with the long hot summer. Water was severely rationed and water was carried from a spring in Mill Dam Wood, and from Dickie's spout in Shevington Vale. Then, for the first and only time, I saw a woman carrying two pails of water attached to a yoke fitted across her shoulders.

Road Haulage in the  
1920s

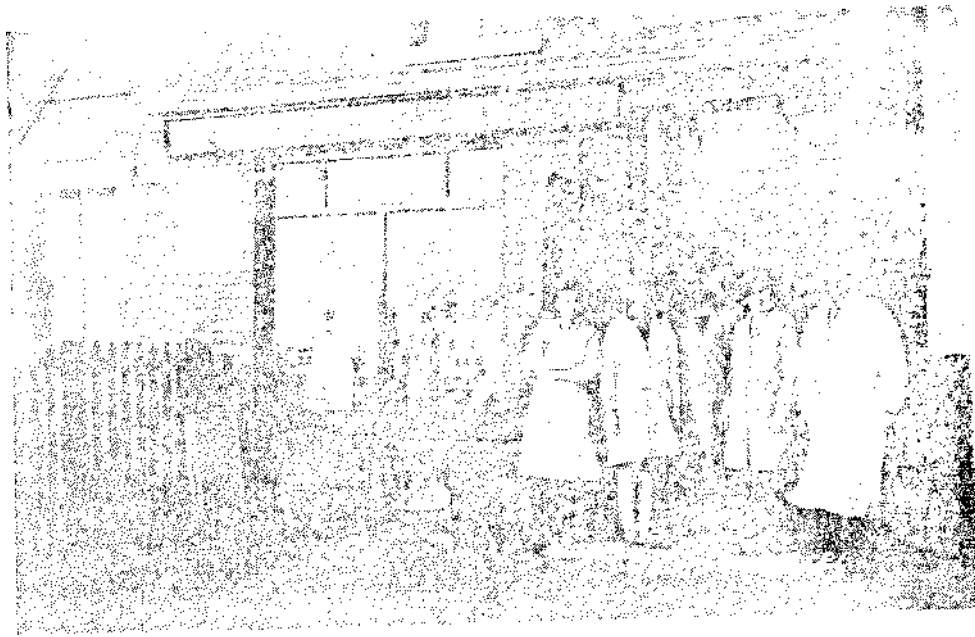




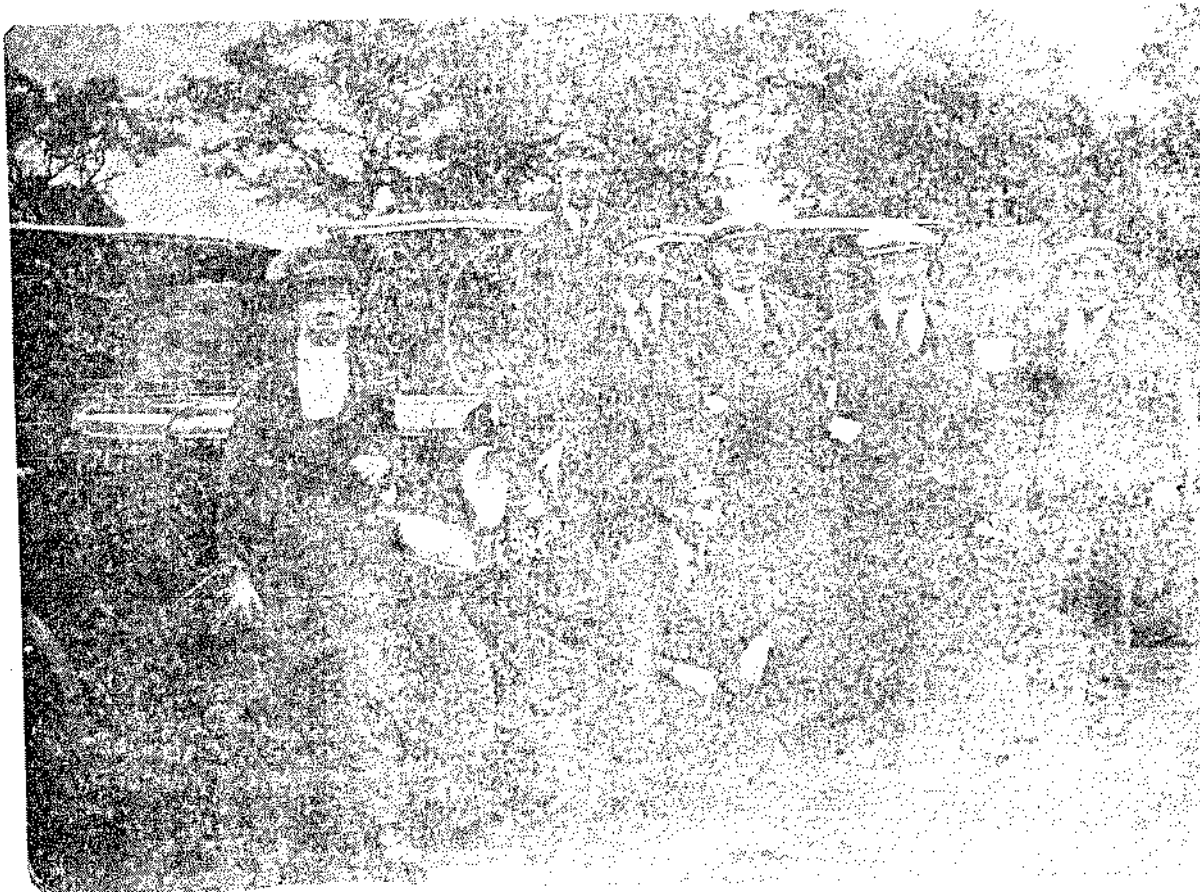
The Ball family farming in the 1920's



Council road repairs in the 1920's



The village shop, Mr Aspinall, family and staff around 1900



Ball and Yates, drivers and staff around 1930

## CHAPTER 7

### LEISURE AND SOCIAL LIFE

The social life of Shevington at the turn of the century was no doubt, centred on the three alehouses in the village, the 'Plough and Harrow' in Broad o'th' Dane, the 'Victoria Inn' in Miles Lane, and the 'George and Dragon' in Gathurst Lane. You could apparently get a drink at almost any time from 6.00 a.m. each day. The Victoria and the George and Dragon each had a bowling green which would help to pass the summer evenings away pleasantly, Dominoes and a Ring Board, and Shove Ha'penny the winter evenings. The ladies' evenings were spent, if they were not patching or darning, either knitting, crocheting or doing embroidery.

The Good Friday holiday was the one that is most talked of by the older residents. This was celebrated for as long as they can recall, on what they always refer to as the 'Picnic' field. This field was adjacent to the farm buildings at Gathurst Hall farm, and especially at the time when William Liptrot farmed there. The Crooke Brass Band would play on the field for dancing; there would be side shows and stalls, at the 'Navigation Inn' nearby. My old friends of course only remember the nice days.



Crooke Brass Band around the 1920s

The ones who could afford, could take the train to Southport, or to the Tea Gardens at Parbold.

The Tyrer family kept the 'Plough and Harrow' when it was decided to take it down and build a new and modern hotel. The rear and a gable end of the row of four houses in Broad o'th' Lane are built from the stonework salvaged from the old Plough, and there was for many years, where the new car park now is, a heap of round cobble stones, there would be at least about fifty tons, which were used as hardcore in the construction of Manor Road. The layout of the new hotel was a complete break from the old traditional alehouse. To the query as to how the huge copings, and window sills, were raised to that height, which I posed to many of the old people, the answer was always the same, "Ajax carried them up on his shoulder". Ajax they said was a big Irishman employed on the site. Knowing their capacity for leg pulling, I am not convinced. The date stone on the 'Plough and Harrow' is 1905 AD.



Mrs. Martha Tyrer Landlady of the old original 'Plough & Harrow' and popular village figure for many years

There appears to have been little change in the social life of the village until the end of the first world war. You must remember that Shevington still had neither gas or electric lighting. The local was still the most popular pastime, and men still went on the 'spree'.

It may have been that the ones who were returning home had decided that Shevington was a dull place, compared with what they had seen on their travels. John Bentham for instance, who in later years was the school caretaker, had seen service in India, and had taken part in the Siege of Ladysmith in the Boer war. Whatever the reason, things seemed to liven up in the village. There were now the dances held in the school buildings. At the Plough there was a Billiard Table, and a piano for a sing song on Saturday and Sunday evenings. You could travel from Gathurst by train to Wigan to see the pictures. The cricket team played in summer the field in Gathurst Lane, and the away fixtures games usually meant a trip by wagonette to Rufford or Eccleceston. Such trips were usually the opportunity for a leisurely journey home with a call at many of the alehouses en route. There were too the wagonette trips to the 'Hell Hob' (Red Lion) at Mawdsley, which were very popular.

A major change occurred in the 1920's when the 'Recreation' field was bought. Fund raising activities plus interest free loans etc., enabled the field to be bought and the

Parish Room built. A dispute over the title and administration, after its completion, was to result in its not enjoying the full support of the locals. It did however, mean that there were regular Whist Drive and Dance nights each Saturday, the occasional concert, etc.

The 'Victoria Inn' had by this time closed, being used as a residence only by Mr. & Mrs. Bill Ellison. The 'George and Dragon' too was very soon to cease as an inn, and the 'Plough and Harrow' was most definitely the focal point of village entertainment.

Here, involuntarily, and unconsciously, a complete social class structure of the village was practised. On entering at the front door of the hotel, a door on the right led to the tap room or vault. This room had a tiled floor, wooden tables, stools and forms, and two or three brass spittoons on the floor, with the bar counter along one side of the room. The normal dress here was flat cap, muffler and clogs. From the lobby, through the swing door, and beyond the bar on the right was a smaller room known as the 'middle kitchen'. Here were similar wooden tables etc., but the dress was usually collar and tie and black shoes. Across from the bar was the 'Commercial' where the dominating features were the billiard table, and in the corner a piano. The seating was upholstered. The dress was collar and tie. Another door from the bar area led to the parlour or 'best room'. Here the furnishings included pictures and a vase of flowers in the window and a carpet on the floor. Dress here was Sunday best, for this room was normally only in use on Saturday or Sunday.

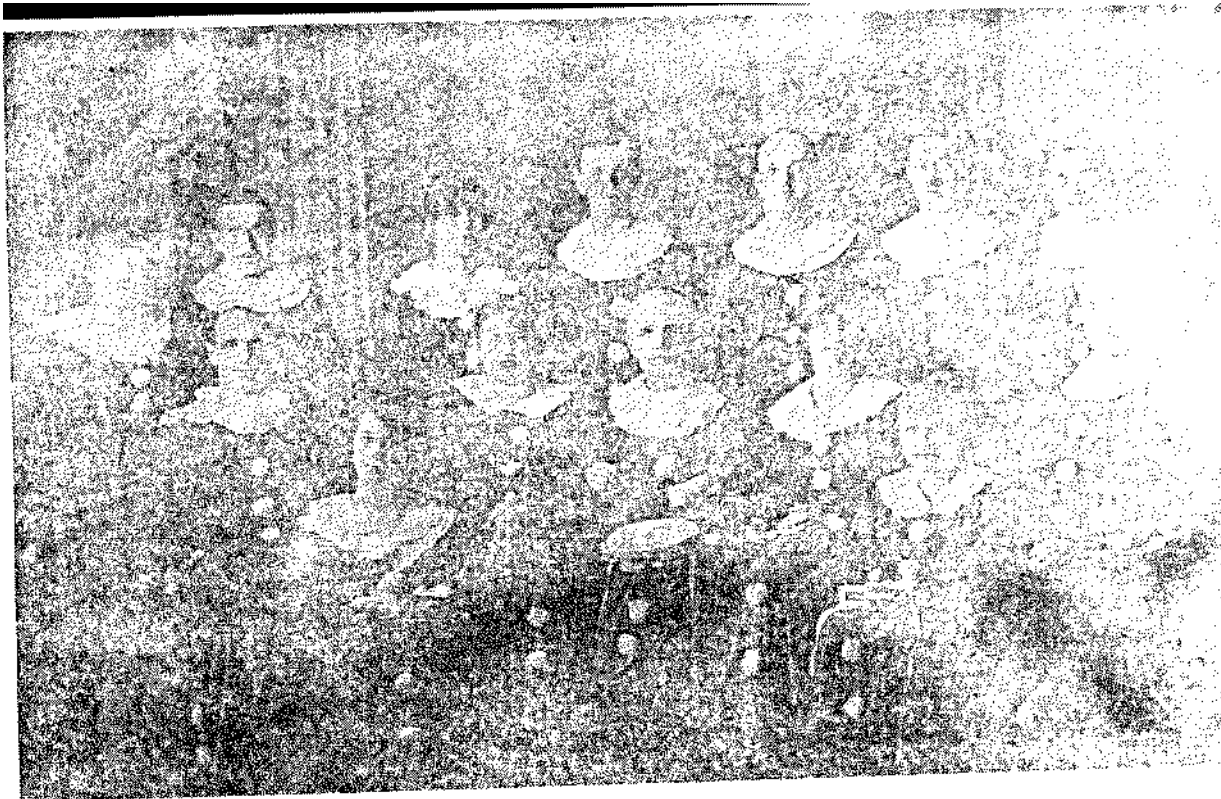
In the vault were the miners, labourers etc., and in the middle kitchen the colliery firemen or deputies, works foreman, tradesmen etc. The Commercial during the week was the venue for the clerks, insurance agents etc. At week ends the billiard table top was covered and used as a large table with stools placed alongside to seat the customers, and the room became the 'Singing' room. The parlour was used at the week-end by the men who took their wives out for a drink, or as one of my old friends said, "the men who took other men's wives out for a drink".

This voluntary segregation did not seem to apply on Saturday or Sunday nights when the piano was in use. Space does not allow to tell of the many and varied characters who enlivened the evening in the different rooms, or the Singing Room at the week end. The vault was especially, the source of much wry humour and caustic wit, which was at its best on the occasions when the almost legendary, John and Joe Bush paid a visit.

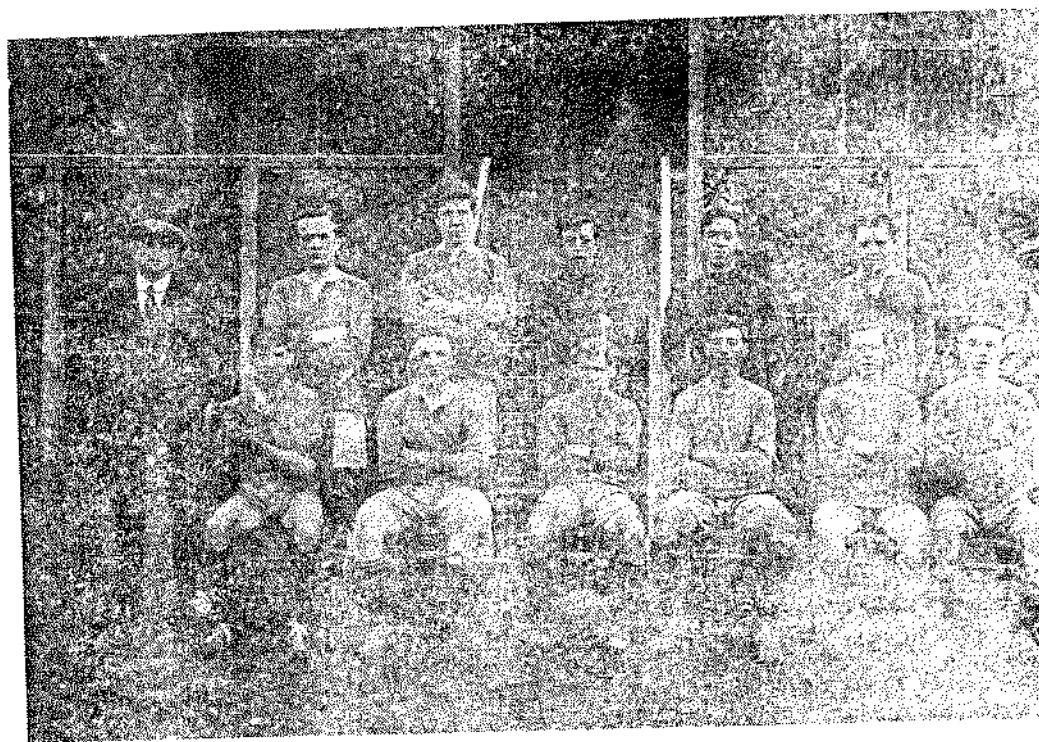
Old Kit must surely have been one of the pioneers of Women's Lib. A very regular occupant of a seat in the middle kitchen, she played dominoes, backed the horses, and smoked her 'woodbines', along with the rest of the customers.

Amongst the many characters which come readily to mind are, Tom Houghton (Little Buckie), David (Daff) Osborne, Uncle Jim Cheetham (Slippy), Jimmy Stopforth (Edgar) and the billiard playing trio of Samny Hodgkinson, Isiah Brown, and Harry Ball (the waterman).





Shevington Vale Concert Party approximately 1920



The village football team of 1922

## CHAPTER 8

### PROMINENT CITIZENS OF SHEVINGTON

#### EDWARD BALL

First and foremost among the many who worked to fashion the future life of Shevington was, to my mind, Mr. Edward Ball. Born at Wood Fold , Standish. The young Edward Ball married Miss Sarah Read and settled in the Whitehall Farm, Shevington. Even though large families were not unusual in those days, fourteen children does seem rather remarkable. Four of them died in infancy, and the remaining nine sons and a daughter were all brought up on the farm.

Without the help of his grown up sons, it would, I am sure, have been imporsille to spend the time needed to attend to all the public dates he carried out. Amongst these many duties were, Overseer for Shevington (30 years), Guardian of the Poor Law for Shevington (27 years), Chairman of the Wigan Board of Guardians (twice), Chairman of the Wigan Rural District Council (ten years), a member of the Wigan Assessment Committee, and the Shevington School Board, and a Justice of the Peace. He is described by a writer of that time as one of the “sturdy ones engaged in agriculture, who at the same time have devoted their leisure hours and energies for the common good.” A note in Mr Blight’s School log in 1914 is an indication of the respect for, and high regard in which Edward Ball was held. It reads, “Closed school for half an hour today, for funeral of a prominent and well respected gentleman. The scholar and staff lines up at each side of the lane outside the school, as the cortege passed” . A

worth man indeed.



Mr. & Mrs. Edward Ball of Whitehall Farm



## WILLIAM BRIGHT

Having myself, like thousands more, spent the better part of my school life under the watchful eye of Mr. 'Billy' Blight, I can appreciate the influence his teaching must have had on the vast majority in this respect. His out of school hours were mostly spent in service to the community, as well as being a Justice of the Peace, he served on the Wigan Assessment Committee, on the Parish Council, and still found time to be a Local Preacher.

## MR. LYON

Although Mr. Lyon lived the greater part of his life in Gathurst Lane, he is perhaps best remembered as the headmaster of Crooke School. Born at Bickerstaffe in 1860, he was first a Pupil Teacher, who after spending two years at Chester Training College, qualified as a Certificated Teacher.

When away from his work of teaching, he was prominent in the public life of the Shevington parish, serving on numerous committees. He was Vicar's Warden of St. Anne's Church for six years, was active in the affairs of the Independent Order of Oddfellows, the Freemasons, and the Economic Building Society, Chairman of Shevington Parish Council and member of Parochial and Sanitary Committees. He was a keen cricketer, and was the recipient of a bat, for topping the averages of the local cricket club.

He was largely responsible for securing the land near the village centre for use as a recreation ground.

## ROBERT INWARD RANDALL

Robert Inward Randall began his working life learning to be a cobbler, working for like Hesketh at Appley Bridge, but left in 1908 to join the Liverpool police. The Liverpool Police Strike of 1919 was responsible for his leaving the force, and knowing the man one can easily understand why. A big hearty man, with a very direct manner of speaking, he would not tolerate injustice. He had too, what I would describe as a robust sense of humour. This, I must confess, is perhaps why I can still recall the first occasion we met. At the time, he had resumed his earlier trade, and was working from a small outhouse in Gathurst Lane. I had been sent down to ('have a capple on mi clog') have a new piece of leather at the toe cap. We had to stay in the shop while the work was done, for I had only one pair of clogs. A man came in to collect a shoe, which had been patched. Examining the shoe the man asked "Will it stick Bob", and back came the answer. "Of course it will stick; it'll stick like shit to a blanket". In future years he was to enliven many a dull council meeting.

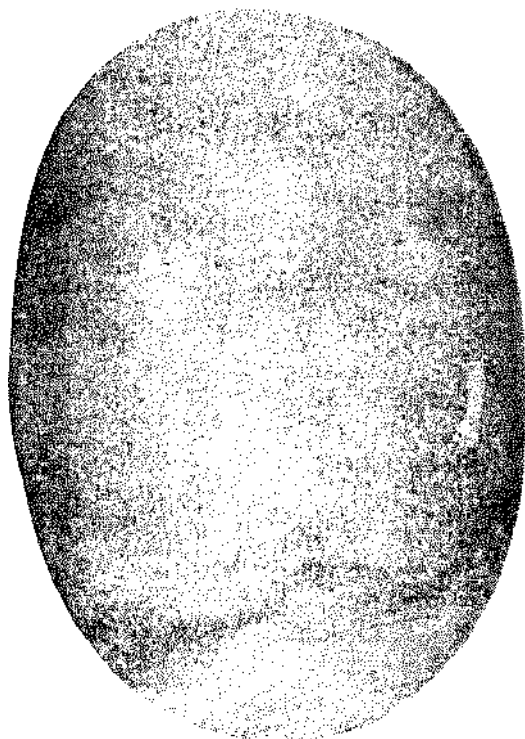
He served for twenty one years on the Wigan Rural District Council, many of these in the post war period, when the whole area saw a massive increase in population, due largely to the influx of the former inner city people whose homes had been destroyed or damaged in the war. I shall always remember his passionate wish to keep 'Shevington Hall' and the parkland totally free of housing development. Although the council were not wholly successful, the area they were able to save, makes this a very

pleasant central area of the parish.

These and many others, and in many different ways, were prepared to give of their time and energies, to foster and maintain their village community.



John Bentham  
veteran of the Boer War



Mr and Mrs 'Sammy' Hodgkinson  
and niece

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*My thanks to the Revd. G. Dewhurst, St. Anne's Church, Mr. Brown, Headmaster of Shevington Junior School and to Mr. R. Mason, Headmaster, Mrs. LM. Mogg, and the staff of Shevington High School for their invaluable help in the production of this booklet.*

*My thanks especially to the many friends who provided photographs, and helped me in any way, to make its writing a very enjoyable experience.*

*Mr. D.B. Kernahan, Works Manager, I.C.I. Roburite Works.*

*Wigan Leisure department for their help in reproducing the photographs.*

*Mr. C. Pym for the cover illustration.*

*Shevington Resources Department for their typing and printing, and especially to Mrs. J. Pollen for help and advice on production of this booklet.*

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