

My Family Tree By John Sydney Poppitt.

Dedicating the following individuals whom have inspired me to believe in my capability to create this digital book.

To our late grandfather, Sydney, for his great legacy.

To Julie & Ian Hawley, for discovering this invaluable manuscript about our grandfather.

To Carole & John Dudley Poppitt for being the most amazing editors.

To the Creatives at Apple Chatswood Chase (Julie, Dan, MJ, Jez, Brendon) & Applecare for their technical support & patience.

To all Poppetts/Poppitts all over the world, this really is for all of you, my brothers & sisters.

Thank you all Ayu & Michael Stanley Poppitt.

“ Here lies Syd, he scribbled he did.”

(Extract from Gravestone)

Rest in Peace.

21st October, 1900 - 17th October, 2004. (4 DAYS Before his 104th Birthday) Born at Newport, Shropshire, England, UK. Died at Burwood, New South Wales, Australia.

MY FAMILY-TREE TOGETHER WITH
MY CHILDHOOD,
EARLY ADOLESCENCE,
AND LATER LIFE

BY JOHN SYDNEY POPPITT.

I first saw the light of day on October the 21st, 1900. It was exactly 95 years, to the day, after Nelson was killed at Trafalgar and three months before Queen Victoria passed away. Incidentally, the Poppitt's, at least on the male side, seem to be rather prone to arriving in this world on memorable dates. My own father, for example, was born on July the 4th, 1866 - American Independence Day, and my grandfather Poppitt first appeared in 1837, the year Victoria came to the throne. My great-grandfather, Joseph Poppitt, was born in 1791. Although, date wise, in a rather different category in that regard, his case too is historically quite memorable, since he was married in 1810, only 5 years after Trafalgar, and 5 years before Waterloo. His first wife, a lass of 18, when they were married, bore him nine children and died at about the age of forty two. Whereupon after a 'decent' interval of two years, at the age of fifty seven, Joseph again escorted a young bride of eighteen 'down' the aisle. After which that prolific old gentleman, sired another ten youngsters, all of whom lived. He departed this world at the ripe old age of eighty seven. He must've been 'quite a man' - there's a portrait, in the possession of one of the family, in oils, I'm told, of him.

My own grandfather, John Poppitt, was the first-born, of the second batch, of this, by modern standards, colossal family. He fathered seven sons (no girls), of which my father was the first born.

After serving an apprenticeship with one of the big London Drapery Stores, my father, James Harry, joined his father, in what, judging from the life-style it provided, must have been a very lucrative small-town drapery business. It was situated in the township of Newport, in Shropshire, where, in the front room, over the shop, I was born.

Grandma Poppitt died 3 days after I had arrived - my parents as newlyweds, had gone to live with those grandparents. It was a situation that continued until my father was forty and I was five, when, as I will later tell, an entirely new chapter, in the life of my own particular family, began to unfold.

For centuries, Newport has been the proud possessor of a *fine old Grammar School*.¹ It had been re-endowed in the 17th century by a William Adams, a local boy, who in Dick Whittington style, had gone to London, made a fortune and become a prominent member of the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers, one of the City Guilds. With monies and lands in the Newport area, this endowment made eighty free places always available to boys in Newport, and within a radius of five miles, thereof – thereafter, the school became known as Adam's Grammar School. Since the Poppitt's have long been an educated family (at least on the male side), *there being no other grammar school nearer than Shrewsbury or Stafford* (both miles away)² it's reasonable to suppose that my great-grandfather, Joseph Poppitt, and *his many sons*³ must have appeared on the Newport School register - my grandfather's seven sons, myself and my own two boys, were certainly all educated there.

1 With public school status

2 Compulsory education first came onto the Statute Book in 1870

3 Grammar Schools were only for boys

Possessing a strong entrepreneurial streak, my father was a typical product of a Victorian, middle-class background. Thus evidently tiring of the obsequious and inhibitive nature of the small-town drapery shop-keeping of those days, coupled with the irksome dominance of a very straitlaced father, he, James Harry, decided to quit the family scene, and strike out in a new business on his own account. All of which restlessness points to the supposition that, even in those days, there was a distinct generation gap.

It seems to me also noteworthy that it was at the age of five, (in 1905 - my birthdays march in step with the years) that I saw my first motorcar. As far as I knew, there were none of these new-fangled contraptions in Newport. However, a cousin of my father's, named Sydney Boyes (after whom I was named), had acquired one of these 'carriages without horses' as they were first deemed to be. Clearly such noisy monstrosities, or so it was supposed, could never become widely used. They were just a 'passing novelty', much on a par with the first experimental stage of powered flight, with those fragile, the box-kite like forerunners of the modern aviation miracles. The moral from all of which, surely, must be, that in the light of the subsequent development along those lines, it can be most unwise, no matter how completely outlandish they may at first appear to be, to ridicule entirely new ideas.

In Newport, my 'papa' used to take me, from a very early age, with him on his bicycle. On such jaunts, a cushion would be doubled over the cross-bar, and with me atop, my feet resting on the upper ends of the front forks, my little hands grasping the handle-bars, and 'papa's' knees pumping up and down on either side of me, we bowled merrily along. It was great fun!

Incidentally, as I will presently explain, the middle-class word 'papa', among others, had much to do with the destruction of my future, early childhood,

happiness. I wasn't aware of it, but my speech must have been noticeably different from that of the boys with whom, later, I found myself having to mix at school - at least, it would have been more grammatical, for example. At that later stage, the word 'papa', for instance, was quite foreign to my new environment. Indeed, it must have sounded particularly 'sissy' to the rough and ready companions with whom I had suddenly found myself. It was in fact, a significant part of a noticeable difference that was the cause, through bullying, of the much fear, and the consequent unhappiness I had to endure for the subsequent five or six years of my young life - a trauma from which I only escaped when I began a secondary education.

Apart from the fact that such traumatic experiences can be bad for the individual, character-wise, in the early formative years, it still remains in my mind as a real nightmare situation - boys can be dreadfully sadistic. In passing, I think that it ought to be recorded that the joy of riding on a bicycle crossbar was something from which, in those far-off days, girls of our class were strongly discouraged. At any age, at that time, they never parted legs even when standing much more astride a bar - with 'nice ladies', such things were simply 'not done' - they were considered to be vulgarly suggestive. As I have long since realised, those bicycling rides of mine must have added fuel to the flames of a sub-conscious jealousy that increasingly had been building up in my sister, Doris. There was only twenty months between us, so I must have stolen her limelight when I arrived. Innocent as I was then of any favouritism towards me, those and doubtless many more partial favours must've fed a growing antipathy, on Doris's part, towards 'dear little brother Sydney'. Although in that day, I being a male child and indeed the only one, such 'special' treatment would have been considered to be a boy's prerogative. About all of which, a happier note will occur later.

But I digress. So, to return to the account of 'papa's' belated foray into an apparently totally different kind of shop keeping. On the face

of it, for someone in middle-life to switch to a means of livelihood from drapery to butchery must seem quite ridiculous - to say nothing of the risk of failure involved. Nevertheless, such a risk apart, the prospective job change-over was not as absurd as at first it may appear. Let me try to explain. Here the Staff side of my family comes into the story. My father's mother, nee Harriet Lockley was a farmer's daughter. Her father and his forebears, farmed LITTLEHALES - Manor Farm for many years. About three miles from Newport, close to the Joe Poppitt territory of Lilleshall, it was six hundred acres - one of the many large farms, of the many on the Shropshire estate of the Dukes of SUTHERLAND. Apart from its vast Shropshire acres, this particular Dukedom also owned, and virtually ruled over, equally vast estates in Staffordshire, and Sutherlandshire, in Scotland. In that 'Golden Age' the Dukes, literally, were reigning princes. In fact so much was one of them revered and admired by his tenant-farmers, on the Salopian Estate, that there is actually a monument on the top of LILLESBALL HILL, expressing appreciation of 'His Grace's' benevolent land lordship, and giving thanks for the *privilege of paying rent*.⁴ But to return to the Poppitt family saga once again. In the far-off days just mentioned, farming and butchery were closely allied. In fact some of my father's uncles, on his mother's side, had been very successful, in either or both. In any case, since they killed their own stock for domestic use, farmers were practically butchers anyway.

In that day, canned goods not then being in vogue, homemade foodstuffs, particularly amongst the relatively isolated farming communities and country folk, generally, were very much the order of the day. Especially did the humble pig, or rather its dead counterpart, pork, figure largely in that other 'Golden Age', namely, that of the widely practiced 'homemade'. What a wealth of delectable by-products stem from the slaughtering of this highly prolific animal - 'the porker'. What prolificacy!

4 i.e., of being his tenants.

Pigs are capable of producing two litters a year, and I have known as many as twenty two come from a single farrowing. Unfortunately, nature only makes milk-supply provision for fourteen at most, sometimes only twelve. Very, very few of the less fortunate are hand reared.

In the old days when a pig was killed, rather insensitively it was said nothing was wasted but the squeal. Now, with the advent of humane-killers, the ancient and awfully barbaric practice of slitting a pigs throat with a long and very sharp knife is no longer allowed - believe me, a dying pigs ear-piercing squeals were not noises for delicate ears. I should know, I grew up around a slaughter house, although, in that day, I too was not a very sensitive soul.

But again I have digressed from the part where 'papa', having decided to change his occupation was looking for a town, other than Newport, in which to try out his very enterprising new venture. So I will continue the story from there.

The town chosen was the county - town of Stafford - only twelve and a half miles from Newport. There James Harry, my dear old 'Dad' armed with his mother's, first rate, home recipes, found affordable low-rented premises (with correspondingly cramped living quarters) in the poorer end of the town. Originally the place had been a dwelling, but to allow the front room to serve as a shop, at an earlier date, the usual house-window facing onto the street had been replaced by a much larger one of plate glass.

With the help of his youngest brother, Frank, a *gifted handyman*⁵ (seventeen years his junior, and still living at home in Newport), the 'Shop' was fitted-out with the necessary goods - display window-base, counter,

5 A born carpenter - a trade, which it would have been too *infra dig* for him to have been allowed to follow.

shelves, meat-rail and hook-fittings, scales, etc. etc.

Obtaining the use of a nearby slaughterhouse, for the first time, ever, my 'Dad' killed pigs. Incidentally, although it may appear to be a matter of small moment, 'Dad' was something I was never able to call my father. In fact, as I grew older, I started to call him 'Guvnor'. Having finally abandoned the word 'papa', nothing else came comfortably to the tongue.

The carcasses of the pigs were duly translated into a wide selection of small goods, i.e. things like sausages, brawn, black-pudding, pork pies (all made according to his mother's splendid recipes), lard, roast pork, etc. etc., together with the various joints of pork. After which, with the name J.H. Poppitt on the signboard above the shop window, he and my mother were in the business of pork butchery. I've included my dear old 'Mum', as a partner in the business, because although, in true Victorian fashion, her name was not included with that of my father's, she was always thereafter, took on the 'lions share' in the preparation of all the 'small goods' - a very messy and laborious undertaking!

Since the only living room was the place where these items were made, it made of our sole living area a spot where, all too frequently, comfortably, there was nowhere even to sit down.

Under those circumstances, we could have no visitors. A state of affairs, that, which suited us very well. In fact, we were much too busy, and too ashamed of our new-found squalid surroundings, to have wanted any. Indeed the socially divisive nature of such reduced living standards has to have been experienced to appreciate to the full the strength of Victorian middle-class snobbery. In effect, it was a two way traffic, not too far removed from the Caste System in India. In that regard, basically, the world over, 'human nature', then and now (although nowadays such class barriers are much more subtly camouflaged), was and is, substantially, the same. In that way, grossly different standards of living still divide families.

But again we seem to have wandered 'off course' in this record of my father's new-found occupation - we must get back to it.

As an idea, this pork butchery-cum-delicatessen-like project was quite good. All of the things on offer were of outstanding quality - nevertheless, almost from the outset the venture was destined to go sadly awry. The trouble was that there was not nearly enough capital - on that account, the experiment lacked so many things. It needed to be in a much more fashionable part of that county - town - in an area wherein quality not price was the main consideration. It called in such an area for a shop furnished with stainless steel fittings, tiled wall and floor covering and suchlike eye-catching refinements. Above all, wherever it was situated, it required cold-storage - something then that was a highly expensive novelty, far beyond our limited means. I say 'our' because from a very early age, with we youngsters, it soon became a case of 'all hands to the pump'.

Due to the same dearth of funds, rents, in a more salubrious part of the town, were entirely prohibitive. But, of all those needs, the lack of cold-storage was the most vital. Unquestionably it was absolutely essential, in those circumstances of limited turnover, to the success of a business dealing in such highly perishable goods, as meat and meat products. Thus, short of adequate freezing facilities, from the start, this very imaginative idea was doomed to failure. As a result, our one-time, reasonably affluent middle class family, albeit was of the more genteel kind, began to know poverty.

Despite our now greatly reduced family circumstances, as the only boy, boys in that day being thought to be rather superior creatures to girls, I, relatively speaking, was still a 'pampered little brat'. For example, when, as the nominal breadwinner, 'Father' enjoyed the privilege of being the only one to be spared an egg for his tea, much to the disgust of my sister, Doris, I was always given the top. She bless her, is still alive, and although badly

crippled with arthritis in her knees, will be ninety years old on February the 16th, 1989.

During those Stafford years, obviously, there was always plenty of meat. It was the things in the way of groceries, clothes and the many other satisfactions of life, anything that cost money, of which we really went short. In that day, bread, at 21/2 pence a loaf, became, for us, almost literally, the staff of life - bread and margarine (the latter at 6 pence a pound) were, more or less, our staple diet. Anyhow, coming of a good sound stock, we all had healthy appetites. In fact, I developed a fondness for bread, which has never left me.

Apropos the 'happier note', which, when referring earlier to the 'daggers-drawn' situation that existed in our early childhood between Doris and I, I promised to reveal later, I'm happy to say that as we reached puberty, we became the best of friends. Indeed, goodness only knows why, but since then I seem rather to have been put on a pedestal.

In 1910, things in Stafford had reached such a low ebb, with us that we were on the verge of bankruptcy. Thus, in that year, in sheer desperation, in order to try to stave-off a complete collapse of the business, my Father took out a loan of twenty pounds from a money lender. At the extortionate rate demanded, for what was practically an unsecured loan that was the final blow to the ill-fated Stafford experiment. At that stage, we were in a hopeless financial situation.

That disaster had dragged on until 1911, when, with my father completely at the end of his financial tether, fortunately, albeit very sadly (especially for we youngsters - he was very fond of us), my Grandfather Poppitt died. Whereupon, having retired from business by selling out, and going to live with one of his sons in London, he was brought back to Newport to be buried in the cemetery there. There is a white marble tombstone, to his memory, and that of his wife, quite near to the entrance gates.

Sad though that loss was to us all, here, in the shape of 'Dads' share of grandpa's estate, was veritable 'manna from Heaven'. However, since it had to be divided seven ways, the portions were not exactly princely.

Nevertheless, this patrimony could not have come at a more needed time. With it, my father, still imbued with a belief that, despite his late ill-success, so good were the things he had striven to sell, so sound the whole idea (after all, food was a much more needed commodity than clothes), that, through them, somewhere, other than Stafford, lay the road to fortune.

Thus, spurred on by this dream of an Eldorado, my Dad scouted about in Shropshire for another place in which again to try his newly adopted trade. Among others, a small country town, memorable in that it rejoiced in the romantic name of Bishops Castle, was canvassed. Finally, Wellington, a sizeable town (very close to the iron works of Ketley and Hadley - themselves adjacent to the South East Shropshire coal and iron ore deposits) was chosen. There, once more (sadly-prophetically, again in the poorer end of a place), the whole ill-starred business gamble was begun all over again.

It began with encouraging success. So much so that an attempt was made to branch-out by opening a few more retail outlets - meantime the first was still doing well - although situated at the top end of the High Street, in a very rough area. To further this ambitious plan, a branch was opened in a side street, off the Town Square, another in Hadley, and one in Ironbridge. These, together with the help of a retail rounds-man, who, driving a horse-drawn vehicle, offered our wares to all and sundry in the outlying country districts - all this, plus a stall in Wellington Market, on the two market days a week. Say what you will about Harry Poppitt he was certainly a trier.

In fact, that entirely different trade-venture was very courageous - one has to remember that, if an enterprise completely failed, there were then no social service payments of any kind to which one could turn for help. The

only recourse, in cases of absolute destitution, lay through the Poor Law. It dates from the reign of the first Elizabeth, and, except for a few minor amendments, has lasted well into my own life time.

Now considered archaic, that law was based on the supposition that success in life depended on hard work and thrift. That was, and still universally is, the climate of public opinion. Although it was thought, and, again, still to some extent is that the 'poor must always be with us', vagabondage was rightly seen' as a dangerous anti-social disease - something that, in the interests of discipline and good order, must be sternly discouraged. Given the will to work and save, it was believed, and, once more, still widely is, that no-one needed, or ever needs to become entirely without a means of support, either in their old, or any other age.

Up to the earlier part of the present century, i.e., in my time, the administration of the Poor Law centred around the prison like complexes, known as workhouses. Huge barrack-like places, they were mostly nothing but glorified public doss-houses, as will later be shown. They are immortalised, in all their horror, in the work of Charles Dickens. Soul-less, abominations, they reflected starkly the state of the public mind in relation to pauperism in Victorian and Edwardian England. For its disciplinary purposes, the Poor Law had long divided the down-and-cuts into two categories

One - The aged and infirm,

Two - Those classified as able bodied.

The latter, judging by the vagrants' one saw on the roads, could have been of any age, or sex - the category 'able-bodied' was evidently not confined to young males. Those in the first grouping, the aged and infirm, were usually housed permanently in a Workhouse - there to await a paupers grave. The second category, the 'able bodied', spent most of the day-light

hours trudging the roads from one Workhouse to the next.

The inmates of a Workhouse were at least assured of a nightly bed in the same place. However, the 'able bodied' were much less fortunate. Allowed to stay during weekdays, for one night only in these institutions, admitted at a set time in the evenings, they were compelled to take a bath and to be deloused, if necessary - turned out the following morning in order to make their way to the following night's lodging. At weekends, these tramps (as, by virtue of their always having to go on foot, from one Workhouse to the next, they had come to be called), would be let in to one of these places on a Saturday night and not released until the following Monday morning. This ensured that those tattered social-outcasts would not be offensive to the sight of respectable' citizen on the Holy Day of the week, particularly the Church-goers.

There were only three Workhouses, of which I had any direct knowledge - one at Stafford, one at Newport, and, also in Shropshire, another in Wellington 12, and 8 miles apart, respectively.

In that day, those 'able bodied' human derelicts were a ubiquitous, nomadic part of the population - a part, whose numbers fluctuated in accordance with the state of the economy. All in all, although so miserably poor, they were a harmless enough part of the general scene.

Whenever those enforced wanderers failed to reach the next Workhouse in time, weather dictating, as it probably often did, they either slept under a haystack or in some old outbuilding practices that, due to the risk of fire it entailed, farmers and others very strongly discouraged. When the weather was especially benign, they must often have slept out under the stars.

To see them, food-wise, through the day, those modern reminders of the ancient penniless mendicant friars, on leaving a Workhouse, were each given a food voucher, to the value of 4 pence - which by the way, since

there were 240 pence to the pound, and now there are only 100p, means that 4 pence were less than 2p of today's pound.

Those food coupons, later in the day, were exchangeable at a specified little general store about halfway, en route to the coming night's official bed.

One of these designated halfway shops was in the Village of Gnosall, only four miles from the Shropshire border. The owner of this shop was a very eccentric old lady named Mrs. Webb - she evidently had been given a franchise for the acceptance of the food tickets - tickets that, in line with the extreme parsimony of the whole Poor Law administration, only ran to a bit of bread, cheese, tea and sugar. Clearly, such meagre rations would need to be supplemented by whatever could be begged or stolen on the way to the next night's sleeping quarters.

Mr Webb, her equally eccentric husband, one whom the Villagers, with that flair they all seem to have for bestowing nick-names, on unusually odd characters, had dubbed Captain (no doubt associating his surname with that of the famous man of that ilk, who swam the English Channel in the 19th century), also lived at the Shop. For anyone sufficiently interested in the local history, it was next door to Bancroft's Bakery (since twice changed hands) in the Wharf Road.

The Captain took no part in his wife's business - he, in an equally dilatory manner, dealt in antiques - housed in a very old cottage, long demolished, opposite the Cowley Road. Actually, although I never saw him in the Shop, a few small antique items had found their way there. For example, very memorably, several Assegais (spears, souvenirs from the Zulu War) used to adorn a wall directly behind the counter. In this Gilbertian scenario, defying the very basics of sound shop keeping, of interest in people, as customers, there was practically none. What little trade there was, believe it or not, was done on an if-I-can-spare-it basis - this, that good soul Mrs. Webb, was

wont to say, on occasion. All in all, it was an ideal place for a vagrant to cash-in his or her food coupon.

Together with the Webb's, senior, lived a daughter and a granddaughter. The daughter, who appeared to be unattached, was a good looking, affable enough creature. The granddaughter was one of those chronological misfits, as it were. She had somehow managed to slip into the full bloom of young womanhood, without benefit of years. The trouble was that it was taking place in an age, when the public would have been scandalised to see a child, who was practically a full grown woman, prancing about in a skirt that barely covered her bottom surreptitiously; no doubt, it would have attracted the glances of many of the males. This, by the way, is only written to illustrate the amazing revolution that has taken place in public opinion, with regard to such things.

In my view, it says much for the simple innocence, and consequent nice mindedness of the Webb's, that they saw nothing wrong with a child being dressed in that way - knowing the youngster only to be a child, they regarded the question of dress-suitability accordingly. Actually, although quite unaware of it, they were years ahead in their attitude to such matters. Anyhow, let's get back to the subject of the Shop.

Apart from being an ideal place for a tramp to cash in his or her food coupon, — what a sharp contrast, this much ridiculed old lady's cheerful acceptance of such trade must have been to that of the professional and very business like grocers in the Village - none of them would have dared or even stooped to have had any dealings with such customers - although, to be quite fair, they would have had little choice - such 'scum', in their shops, would have kept many people out while it was there - after all, it had to be regarded as a form of pollution.

By catering to the simple wants of these social-outcasts, this kindly old Village lady was acting as a Good Samaritan. Indeed, it reminds one very

much of one of the parables of that nature. To add to which, none of those ragged customers could ever have felt out of place in such an atmosphere of goodwill.

Also, knowing Mrs. Webb, as I did, I'm sure she would never have been ungenerous when accepting the food tickets.

Here, aware that to understand the basic reasons for one's actions is difficult, knowing that maybe I have gone overboard with detail in my account of the pauper situation, a situation that, via the tramp population, was such a sorry part of the everyday scene in the first quarter of the Century, I am now of the opinion that my purpose in going to that length could have been two-fold.

The first, and major part of that reason, is that, since those early days of mine, I have become involved in social study – study in which questions of great wealth and extreme poverty continue, as always, to loom very large. Thus a first-hand account of the shocking conditions, which had to be endured by the 'down & outs', in such comparatively recent times, if only by comparison, are thought likely to be of interest to the more modern amongst us, i.e. many of those of the following generations, especially the present more thoughtful of the adolescents.

After all, the contrast between the social service provisions of those early days and those of today is quite revolutionary. It, in fact, constitutes a complete turn-around in public opinion in such matters. Indeed, as lately as that first quarter of the present century, the modern social service provisions were practically non-existent.

What surprises me is that in the face of the stark contrast between the old and the new living standards, although the oldies of my generation must well remember the deprivations and hardships of those times, many of them, often dissatisfied, despite the incomparably higher life-styles we all, more or

less, now enjoy, are often grumbling.

Using some rather quaint old Victorian sarcastic double-talk, my dad would have said of these perennial whinging old discontents amongst us, that 'some people would grumble to be hung'. How can people possibly have such short memories! Personally, speaking, as a pensioner, one whose fortnightly pension cheques are almost his only income, I declare, that I have never found life so satisfying - never was so happy. However, to return to the subject, i.e. the second part of my reason for seemingly going off as it were at a tangent, by intruding into my tale the piece about the work houses, the tramps, etc., in those horrific conditions that the existence of the Poor Laws spawned. To understand the reasons for a great deal of man's activities, it has to be realised that the subconscious mind, in each of us, predetermines the bulk of our behaviour.

Thus it could be that the other reason for my going into some detail in relation to the Poor Law method of handling destitution arose from the fact that a member of my grandma Poppitt's family, himself also a Lockley, actually got into such a condition of absolute poverty - which gives me a sort of vested subconscious-interest in that utterly degrading state. His, that Uncle of my father's, (his Christian name eludes me), was therefore a classical example of what was then regarded as one of the worst skeletons to be found in a middle-class cupboard - a blot on the family escutcheon - one that also put the culprit quite outside the pale of his former well-to-do associates. This particular misfortunate ended his days in a Newport Work House - the town of which formerly he had been one of the leading citizens. By squandering all his money, he had breached the moral code of his class, the criterion of which was the necessity to command a sufficiency of wealth to enable one to maintain those class standards.

Although, to modern eyes, so great has been the outlook-revolution that my account of that snobbish nonsense, nowadays, may appear to be a gross

exaggeration - not a bit of it!

It was precisely like that I started my early years, in the thick of it, so I know it to be absolutely true.

Class consciousness of that kind, formed very early in life, is almost impossible to eradicate. In fact, there are still faint traces of it in me, or were, until comparatively recently. It lingers on, for example, through my reluctance whenever among more affluent acquaintances I have to confess that I am an age pensioner. Thus, although I am now fully aware of the behavioural dominance of the force of habit, that small trace of class bias lingers on within my mind as evidence there of the vestiges, however tiny, of a conflict between snobbery and common sense.

Anyhow, I've certainly come a long way since my earlier days. In those Victorian times, to have had to confess to being an old age pensioner would, for me, have been a matter of acute embarrassment. My sister Doris, on the other hand, dear girl though she is, is still very much of a snob.

Happily *these days, class divisions, as such, are practically extinct*⁶ - Robert Burns' dictum that 'The rank is but the Guinea. Stamp, the man's the gold, for all that', now, appears to have come into its own.

This may be true at a social level, although, there, the power of wealth still predominates. The truth is that man's differences have now dangerously shifted their anti-social emphasis. So whether class barriers still exist or not pales into insignificance beside the political impasse that divides the Communist and non-Communist areas.

But this is probably starting to be rather heavy going for the reader, so, before I begin to destroy any spark of interest, he or she may have found in

6 At least on the surface.

my story, let's get back to that part of it where this particular relation of my father's had become destitute.

Presumably a brother of my Grandma Poppitt (who, by the way, was a cousin of her husband, John Poppitt), Uncle Lockley, at a fairly early age, came into a considerable estate. This he managed to get disentrained. Consequently, suddenly finding himself the possessor of a large amount of capital over which he had complete control, without any previous business experience, he looked around for one likely to further his newly acquired wealth. This would have been in about the middle of the last century - at a time when breweries, on the grand scale that we now know them had not come into being. Then, public houses, almost all privately owned, would *each have brewed its own beer*⁷ - clearly an undertaking much more profitable than if their occupants had been working as agents of a brewery. Malt, as we all know, is an essential ingredient in the manufacture of beer. The production and supply of it had for ages been an exclusive preserve of its makers, the Maltsters. Spirits, i.e. whisky, brandy, gin, and the like, on the other hand, were really lethal when taken to excess. With all of them readily available at a very few shillings a bottle, it was small wonder that they became all too popular with people, such as the professional and shop keeping fraternity, who had more time and money to spend.

For example, my father used to tell, in the case of the latter, of the sons of tradesmen of his generation, who, falling in to the practice of slipping away from behind the counter for a 'quick one, during slack periods, acquired the habit of over indulgence in spirituous liquor, became alcoholics, and died at around forty of cirrhosis of the liver. Barmaids (they having usually been chosen by their sex-appeal) were doubtless an added incentive to the visits of these, much too regular, customers.

⁷ There's one of these 'free houses', a thriving concern, still brewing its own beer, in Sandon Road, Stafford.

Habit is a vital factor in the formation of character, either good or bad. Which, since the kind of home into which one is born, through the habits one is allowed to form there, means that accidents of birth all too often can determine the kind of person, good or bad, one grows to be. In that home regard, now being able to assess the matter much more dispassionately, I realise how lucky we three children – my two sisters and I, were.

Above all, it was a home where, as the saying went, we were gently reared - a place where corporal punishment was definitely out - except when, for the first and last time, ever, doubtless in an experimental mood, being then barely five, I kicked my father on the shins and , for my pains, was awarded a cuff on the ear.

Ours was an upbringing in which Pater (a reminder that Dad was fond of mouthing bits of Latin) took the normal middle- class share.

Nevertheless, it was dear old Mum, the quiet, self-effacing, soul that she was, who had the major influence on our upbringing. Never raising her voice, she always led, never dreamt of trying to drive - she just wasn't made that way. As one would expect, her mother, our grandma, had also been moulded in that way. Needless to say, we three children loved them both very dearly. Mind you, there was nothing angelic about any of us - we were just the normal childhood material of middle-class parents. May was the quiet one - Doris, the 2nd born, and I were the stormy petrels, at that stage we were constantly warring. But, it's in the later years when the parental influence of childhood, either for good or bad reveals itself that one is able better to judge of such things.

Dad, as a true Poppitt, was a highly emotional character - a typical product in fact of that family's Celtic background. As a result of the Welsh part of those former origins, he had a tendency, rather too frequently, to, as they say, fly off the handle.'

'Mind you', as the Welsh are fond of saying, in that peculiar, but rather fascinating lilting accent of theirs, that reminds one of the natives of India - one supposes that in both case the intonation of a native language, other than English, has spilt over into the latter.

Dad wasn't a violent man - just naturally highly geared. I never knew him to engage in fisticuffs - for one thing, although solidly built, he was a little man, and for another, disagreements, at our social level, were more prone to be settled by argument, if only on an agreement-to-differ level, rather than by physical force. This was perhaps just as well, for when very angry he had a very unusual way of doubling back his tongue and biting it, so that the doubled part protruded from his lips - clearly a very dangerous practice, since a sharp blow under his chin might easily have cost him a large slice of chat wagging member. 'Wagging', here is a very significant word, because the Welsh, both talk and sing a lot. By the way, as evidence of the powerful influence of inherited genes on our individual make-up, my sister, Doris, when really aroused as a child, exhibited the same tongue - biting trait - so that, when, as children. She and I came to blows, it was lucky that little boys weren't able to deliver knock-out punches to the point of the chin.

But, to return to my dear old Da (bit of Welsh I believe, but don't quote me). While he liked his glass of beer, I rarely knew him to touch strong liquor - neither was he a womaniser, per se, nevertheless, sex wise, in a sort of chronological way, I and of course my two sisters, did and do, (May has been long dead) owe him a deep debt of gratitude, let me explain.

He, my father, courted my mother for eleven years, before they were married. At the end of chat time, they shot off to Cardiff (South Wales) to be married - there, from the home of his brother in law and his wife's sister - my Aunt Jessie, as sweet a soul as ever breathed.

Now it doesn't need a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that, since his father had been Peoples Warden in the Newport Parish Church of 'St Nicholas' for 38

years, whilst he and all his brothers, perforce, had been regular churchgoers all their young lives, the choice of such a venue points very convincingly to that wedding ceremony having been what is known as a 'shot-gun affair' i.e. a matter of doing the 'right thing' by the girl, by leading her down the aisle.

Now, questions of the morality, or otherwise, of premarital sexual intercourse, apart, had this couple obeyed the taboo, of those days in that regard, then it is reasonable to suppose that they would have married at least ten years earlier. Which means that we three offspring's of that delayed union were given another ten years of life, James Harry and Mum, we should have been (May died, you'll remember), or presently are, very much obliged to you. Incidentally, here, too, in the general attitude to sexual relationships, there has been another revolution, although, in my view, like all the past revolutions, this one, also, has swung much too far to the other extreme.

Because complete revolutions in our outlooks on life can take place in such a relatively short space of time as one's own lifetime, surely, it points to the conclusion that, no matter how long a view (a philosophy, if you like - in my opinion it's a much abused word) has been thought to be sacred it is capable of being reversed within a very few decades. Anyhow, more along those lines later - it's a point of vast sociological importance. At this point, having already mentioned the Newport Parish Church, it seems appropriate to write, in some detail, about the town, itself.

Although a native, I have long been so long and so far away from Newport that I feel sure that I can dwell a little more dispassionately on its parochial nature than hitherto. Situated on the extreme Eastern edge of the County of Shropshire, indeed only a mile and a half from the Staffordshire border, for ages, it has served as a market place of the district for the sale of cattle, sheep, pigs and farm produce generally. There is also evidence here of the

general localising of many industries in the past, in such market townships. It exists, here, or did in my day, in the form of several archways, built to allow merchandise to pass from the main street to industrial premises at the rear. These archways were fitted with grooved iron channels which were designed to enable the stout, heavily laden wagons with their huge iron clad wheels, to pass through without damage to the brick-work, on either side.

One can picture the scene - great loads, drawn by heavy draft horses, or, maybe oxen - the leading pair bending low with the effort, as goaded on by the wagoner' shouts, they once again take up the strain. This after having been brought to a halt in order to make the turn at right-angles necessary to an approach to the archway connecting the main street to the premises beyond.

In the Village of Gnosall I have many times seen a team of those magnificent animals, the heavy draft horses (ten or twelve of them being necessary for the tremendous loads of timber they were hauling) beginning to move from a standing start. The first two were always the prime movers. So, while taking up the pull, in response to the explosive cracks of the long whip of the wagoner, in their efforts to get traction, their bellies would almost touch the ground. The whole thing was a truly inspiring sight - a sight in which animal and man were working in perfect harmony.

Nevertheless, 'only a wagoner' would have been the description of him, by the class, to which I once belonged. But, in all truth, what a man! How many men, in any other occupation could have outdone him in such down-to-earth, manly prowess? It was such a truly magnificent spectacle, that, in my mind's eye, I can see it now.

True to its ancient, old-world character, there is nothing uniform about the houses, or even the levels of the house-tops in Newport. It's High Street, in both respects, is a riot of non-conformity, architecturally - by virtue of their

age, the buildings, there, are a lasting tribute to the builders, who, long since, have passed away- nothing once, was vulgarly un-aesthetic, there.

Alongside my grandfather's shop (it's double-fronted, and right in the town centre on the *right-hand side of the street*)⁸ is one of the aforementioned arched passage-ways from street to rear. It served as an entrance to a flour mill belonging to the Lockley family. It was situated at the back of the shop premises. Clearly, when we were youngsters, my sisters and I, it had not long fallen into disuse. In fact, it had been left all spick and span, almost as though it had been abandoned overnight - as though in sorrow at its passing, and as a monument to its many years of usefulness, its owners and workers felt that to leave it in good order was the least they could do. Actually, although one can't have expected them to have been aware of it, its passing epitomised the beginning of the end of much localised industry the end of a period, when small towns, more or less, had to be economically self-sufficient.

We children weren't allowed to 'run the streets' - they were out of bounds, as playgrounds, for 'nice' boys and girls, so this old mill made a splendid substitute for that forbidden territory.

Between Grandpa's house and the mill was a smaller, well- built home, presumably for the mill manager. While, at the far end of the broad cobbled yard facing the mill, was a fully equipped blacksmith's shop- it had been rented-out and, so, had remained in use.

Imagine the thrill for a boy to be able to stand and watch a blacksmith, clad in a leather apron, sleeves rolled up, exposing arms bulging with muscles, hammering away at a piece of molten metal on the rounded part of an anvil until he had reduced it to a perfectly fitting new iron shoe for a horse that stood patiently by as its new footwear was gradually being wrought

8 Facing towards Upper Bar.

and fitted.

In order to render it malleable, the iron, a fairly short, flat piece, about one and a half inches wide and three quarters of an inch thick, was first brought to a fiery glow by plunging it, with the aid of s huge pair of iron tongs, into the white hot centre of an open coke-fire *a fire that was brought to this necessary white hot state by the use of a very large set of bellows⁹* - These were worked from their side by a long rounded-handle, which, as and when, required, in order to stir a usually slumbering fire into the necessary intense heat, had to be slowly moved up and down. Thus, by a process of repeatedly re-heating the iron by pushing it into the fire, followed by continually hammering it into shape over the rounded part of the anvil, gradually a new horse shoe was made. The making and fitting of horse shoes is a very skilled business. A business, of which, obviously, the fitting is a very important part - horses like humans, need the comfort of well-fitting shoes.

To ensure this, at the stage where the shoe has become so advanced in the making that all that remains is to see that it fits, it has to be tested several times by placing it against the bottom of the hoof. Since this is often done while the iron is still rather hot, the hoof is often seared a little, but quite harmlessly. The result being, a whiff of rather pungent smoke - a smell that is not altogether unpleasant.

The fitting of horse shoes is the most strenuous part of the business. In order to fit each shoe, and finally secure it, the smith has to life the foot from the ground. So that, when the animal to be shod happens to be one of the

9 Now and again, to add marvel to the show, I was allowed to put a small hand to those great bellows, with their equally large handle.

heavy draft type (the heaviest breed, of which, is probably the Shire-horse - they can weigh up to a ton), because when one foot has been lifted, the creature is then only standing on three legs, unless the horse co-operates by allowing its weight mainly to rest on those three, the smith, strong though he might be, could do very little about it. Fortunately, smiths, like lion tamers, have learned to exercise that authority which causes even the 'big cats' to obey. It's true that young horses may at first be a little recalcitrant, but faced by such unquestionable authority, they soon learn to cave-in. The control of their enormous charges, by the elephant boys, is an outstanding example of this submission. Apropos the smell from a horse's hoof when hot iron couches it, my memory is so vivid in that regard that here I should like to enlarge just a little on the subject of the blacksmith and his shop.

Together, over the ages, they have created such an aura of romance that, down the ages, their praises have been often extolled in both song and verse. What wonderful memories are aroused by such thoughts in those, who, like myself, have had the good fortune to have lived in such surroundings as often to have seen a blacksmith at work. As a bit of evidence of the scope of that fascinating skill, I once stood and watched while a broad iron rim was fitted to a wooden cart-wheel.

As every schoolboy, or girl, knows, metal expands under great heat. The huge iron rim was therefore heated in a ring of fire burning on the ground. When it was a red glow, the heavy iron rim was then lifted, by two men, one on either side, with iron tongs and placed over the wooden-wheel. After quickly being doused with water,(to the accompaniment of much hissing, and great clouds of steam- not forgetting the smell, that is given off when water is thrown onto a fire) the iron had so exactly contracted, as to ensure such a firm bond, between wood and iron, as would last out the wheels lifetime. Truly! What an age-old craft the blacksmith's skill adorns. It must almost have been practiced and perfected from the dawn of history - when, having discovered how to make fire and forge metals there from, he

learned to fashion tools.

At this stage, I propose to describe in more detail the town of my birth, Newport.

As was the need, in the old agricultural market-towns, because those centres had to cater for markets for farm animals, etc.

The main street, usually called the High Street, was designed in the shape of a giant ellipse - an ellipse, which, bulging out in the centre to form a huge 'market square', narrows down at either ends in the approaches to the town. In the days of toll gates (barred entrances, in the form of long wooden poles) that were raised only for the purpose of allowing horse drawn vehicles of all descriptions (there were no motor cars in that day) to enter the town on payment of toll - the exits, via such things, one supposes, would have been free.

Although there would have been toll-gates at the side entrances to Newport, of the two at its ends, one was known as Lower Bar. It was situated on the town side of the canal bridge, while the other one at the town's top end, and immediately before the turn-off for Wellington, and was known, also very appropriately, as Upper Bar. Toll bars, having long gone out of use, are no longer remembered. However, in Newport, their existence, for the historically interested, will often be brought to mind by the fact that the Post Office, near the Wellington turn-off is called the Upper Bar Post Office. It seems to be worthy of note, that so wide is the High Street at its centre, that, not only does it encompass a very wide square, but, about halfway down that very wide part, room was found also for a complex of buildings, some of which were dwellings, but now are mostly shops all with the addition of an Hotel, 'The Vaults' a rather superior pub, that fronted the whole block, and stood, four-square, facing the town square, itself.

Beyond this island of buildings, giving further proof of the width of these old

market-town streets, stands the ancient *Church of England Church of ST Nicholas*.¹⁰ Thus, at the point, where High Street has become a broad square, it finds itself obstructed by a complex of Church and buildings. It was therefore compelled to divide the right hand part going down through a rather dingy area, which became known as the Back Street, the left hand part, being more tidy, presumably, remains as a part of the High Street, as possibly does the wide part below the Church, into which, both side streets merge.

The Church itself is railed off, on all sides, by stout iron railings - the iron gates and main entrance face towards the main square.

Incidentally, two of my father's brothers married two sisters, daughters of the proprietor of the Vaults - information, which, although it occurs in passing, probably better belongs to that part of my story where the Poppitt brothers (my father's brothers) come more fully into it.

The rather superior character of 'The Vaults' seems to have been supported by the fact that the old Sir Thomas Boughey, Bart, a local member of the landed gentry, who resided at Aqualace Hall, and to whom, more or less, all and sundry 'knuckled' (to knuckle is obsequiously to touch one's forelock) was known to carouse there from time to time with a few of his more plebeian associates and toadies.

Which 'figures' as the Americans would say - traditionally escaping from their 'ivory-towers', the Aristocracy have always been partial to a bit of 'tap-room' revelry. Because my own two Aunts could have been barmaids, there, they could have been privy to such 'goings on' - who knows!

Anyway, it's better to 'draw a kindly veil' over such long forgotten escapades - all the actors have long departed the scene, anyhow.

¹⁰ Where, I and my two sisters, were baptised.

On the left-hand side of the street (I am still supposing it to be an extension of the High Street), just below the Church, is our (the Poppitt's old school - Adams Grammar School - the place where generations of boys, many with the name Poppitt among them, have striven, despite the odd martinet of a school master, to be boys. All in all, a good school, one of which we late scholars are very proud. Mr Tom Collins taught my father and all his brothers. Now, there was a Headmaster, par excellence, Classical Scholar and a Cambridge half-blue, he was revered by all the pupils (my father was always singing his praises) - he was modelled on the same lines as the famous Dr Arnold of Rugby - he lived to be ninety six and died in a house across the street from the School gates - always 'at home' to boys, old or new.

What a man to model one's own life upon - good-bye 'Mr Chips', could have been said so equally aptly of him at his passing - a passing before which he had managed, so fruitfully, to 'husband out life's taper at the close'.

Such a man reinforces my long-held belief that the true joy of life lies in that which we put into it, not in that, which, ever more strenuously, and, dare I say, catastrophically, the world-over, almost everyone, increasingly, is striving to take from.

John Poppitt, my grandfather, had long been outfitter to the boys at the Grammar School when, at the turn of the Century, a decision was made to make a drastic alteration to the School uniform. Traditionally, up to that time, even the junior boys, i.e. boys as far as the Remove (the stage at which pupils moved up into their two final years, and became seniors) had, like the seniors, all worn mortar-boards. Then, at the junior level, short Eton Jackets went with this, to modern eyes, very outlandish headgear for children. After the Remove, long-tailed coats, in line with the same old tradition, were still the order of the day for the seniors - all the boys wore

long trousers - altogether, it was quite an expensive regalia.

Before the Education Act of 1870 made education compulsory for all, so that the working class had their educational horizons widened, secondary education was the almost exclusive preserve of the middle and upper classes, *at least in England*.¹¹ This meant that the expensive school outfits of the kind worn at Newport, and other public schools, would have been beyond the pockets of working class parents - parents, whose boys, as a part of the broadening of the eligibility, brought about by changing public opinion, generally, or, as in the case of Newport, by its eighty free places, were beginning to be accepted in correspondingly greater numbers.

As a result of which, a cheaper form of school outfit, in the shape of caps and blazers, perforce, came into being in that old school - 'perforce', there is no doubt, since tradition always dies hard. Here, it may be worth mentioning that according to the terms of the original endowment, without any sort of class discrimination, free places, should always have been open to boys within a five mile radius of Newport - an area embracing places as far away as Gnosall on the one side and Donnington on the other.

Incidentally, the opening-up of free places to poorer boys, represents a big milestone in social revolution - secondary education had begun to be made available to the masses. Again, the all-important thing, about it, was that it had taken place in so comparatively short a time - proving, again, as was shown earlier in relation to the Poor Laws, how relatively quickly public opinion could be harnessed up in order to compel radical changes to be made to unfair social conditions.

Books and sportswear were also a drain on the funds of the poorer parents. However, in my day, the former problem had been eased considerably. The school Caretaker ran a very lively business in second hand school text-

11 Scotland had long had a more comprehensive system.

books. They were housed in a little sanctum down some steps into the boiler room - books he had acquired from the boys, as and when no longer needed - either as gifts, or at a few pence each. Since the text books often remained the same year after year, it wasn't often that one couldn't be fitted-up with one, that, costing the seller practically nothing, even with his small profit, was still very much of a bargain.

Wages were very low in those days, so our unorthodox school book-dealer was doing a useful public service. But, I must return to the part where mortar-boards, etc., had to give way to caps, etc.

It must almost, seem unbelievable, these days that mortar-boards, particularly, were once in use, by school boys, in Newport. However, this, I can vouch for. When we were living with Grandpa, at the shop, in Newport, there were still boxes of them in the stock-room, much to his sorrow -with the changeover to caps etc., at the Grammar School, they remained, as unsaleable items. Fascinated with such 'toys', I had no trouble in finding some to fit me - even then, at age five. Being able to play with them was good fun - it was such unusual and, even to a child-mind, impressive headgear. It probably gave rise to the idea that came to me at about the age of eleven or twelve, how good it would be to go on to university, in order, by getting a degree, to earn the right to wear one of these be tasselled emblems of scholastic achievement. They must have been for the boys - who else! The only other possible customers were the masters, themselves, and, judging by the old caps and gowns they always wore, a school outfitter would have had no justification at all for carrying such a big stock - moreover, I certainly wouldn't have been allowed to play with them.

Oddly enough, Grandfather Poppitt, an otherwise very astute business man, had a kink in his business armour, he just couldn't bear to jettison, expensive, unsaleable stock - like Rachel of Old, 'mourning for that which was lost, and would not be comforted', instead of getting rid of such things,

he preferred to be able to grieve over such losses, by hanging onto them.

It was the same with a stock of ostrich feathers - once very popular as trimming for ladies hats, they, too, went completely out of demand - they, too, had been very expensive - they, too had been relegated to the dead-stock museum. But, to return to the subject, i.e., the former, formal, and very expensive school attire. In relation to the Eton-jacket, and long-tail-coat part, I have no actual experience of my own to offer - although quantities of them must also have been left over, they couldn't have been of sufficient interest for me to remember. Nevertheless, I do have strong indirect evidence of their existence, from my father. He, who like all we Poppitt's, was a little chap, and so fairly safe-game, used to tell how, when they were in class, the boy in the seat behind him would torment him by putting his feet into his victim's (my dad's) coat-tail pockets.

The Old School, was, as I have said elsewhere, a C of E¹² establishment. Therefore, on the annual speech-day, the boys were paraded in their particular houses - each house, in charge of a prefect. In detachments, the squads were then marched out through the school gates in order to attend the usual pre-speech-day service, at the Parish Church, a little further up the High Street. Both our sons by then had become prefects - John, the senior by twelve months and twelve days, was a school prefect (a distinction made clear by gold trimmings, to his cap) and Frank was a house prefect, when their mother and I, for the first and only time, decided to attend this particular yearly speech-day, prize giving, and school sports gathering - after all, it was our two boys' final year at school - Frank was leaving at eighteen years, but John went on until he was nineteen - for reasons that, later, will occur.

My wife and I were nearing the school gates, when, coming out far too

12 Church of England

quickly, was a squad of boys, supposedly under marching orders - we only just avoided being swept along with it. Bringing up the rear, nominally in command, but having to run to keep up with his impish charges, was son Frank. It was just an exhibition of youthful high spirits - no doubt, later, lines (prefects having that power) would be meted out to the four in the front rank, making the pace - such a disorderly prank, in the main street, could not be allowed to go unpunished, it would hardly redound to the credit of the public image of A.G.S. I never enquired as to the punishment outcome. I knew it was woe-betide any prefect who let his authority slip - so those little imps of mischief wouldn't escape. After the Church Parade, and prior to the speech-making in the school assembly hall, Mrs. Poppitt and I made our way to the sports field to watch the foot races.

In that day, there were two such fields, both in Audley Avenue¹³ the one, where the races and cricket took place, and the other, on the opposite side of the road, was the football pitch, both near *The Workhouse*. Entering the sports ground we stood, amongst the crowd, awaiting events. Since never before had the wife and I attended one of these gala-days, we were both practically unknown. But, whilst wandering around, we were approached by a gentleman, who, with a smile and outstretched hand, addressing me, said, "Mr Poppitt, I believe". His name I have forgotten - anyhow, he confessed to being one of the School Masters - saying that he had recognised me through Frank. Those old genes, again - they do so tend to keep re-asserting themselves.

At the sports, the last, and major event of the day, was the mile. The starters, then, were all being lined up, when to our surprise, a boy immediately in front of the wife and I, said in a loud voice, "Poppitt will win this, if he doesn't faint", he'd evidently no idea, that, we, his parents, were

13 Then still a very much-used institution.

standing right behind him, and we had no idea that John was such a good runner. Win that race, John Poppitt, in fine style, and with yards to spare, that dark horse, did, for he was the Poppitt to whom the boy was referring - the time, so Frank tells me, was 4.28 minutes, which is not bad, I suppose, for a junior athlete - unpaced and on a grass track.

Both our boys were in the school rugby fifteen, during the three final years of their schooling - for the last two of which, in inter-school competition, they remained unbeaten - but, here, I have a less happy tale to tell.

During the time when our two lads were at school, especially in the early stages, the class-conscious division, between the Head and boarders, and the day boys, especially the Gnosall contingent, was still very marked - the last named were really believed to be beyond redemption - they were indeed the very 'riff-raff'. It was a fixed belief that was very much confirmed when his Headship, driving through Gnosall, 'horror of horrors', saw two of these young 'gentlemen', in caps and Newport school blazers, actually sitting on the edge of the curb. The truth was that, the culprits, John and Frank Poppitt, were sitting there waiting for the shop behind them owned by their farther, to reopen. Needless to say, they were both carpeted by the Head the following morning and given a stern lecture on the all-importance of esprit de corps in relation to the upkeep of the public image of their school. Happily these two 'reprobates' managed, finally, to redeem themselves, if not the reputation of Gnosall, in such matters.

It was a redemption which underlined the great value of sport in ironing out any class prejudice that may then still have been present in public schools such as Newport - schools that had been committed to granting free places - schools, where the day-boys and the boarders came from vastly different home backgrounds.

The facts are that these one-time 'curb-side little urchins', by their prowess on the sports field during the last three years at school, had both added lustre

to the school rugby team, and one of them, John, by proving himself to be an outstanding miler, had been awarded the Victor Ludorum Cup, for the year, thereby both becoming persona-grata to all of their school-fellows, and, however grudgingly, (prejudice, like tradition, dies hard) finally accepted by the Head.

Writing of a former A.G.S. head reminds me that the boys of my generation, and that of my two sons, were rather unlucky in that regard. Mine, J.W. Shuker M.A. the old tyrant, must have been a survivor from the Dickensian era. A Latin, and Biblical Scholar) he had annotated the four Gospels for use in schools - oddly enough, in those works, favouring the New Testament - whereas, with his temperament, one would have expected him to have preferred the God of Wrath, in the Old. Those two subjects were Mr Shuker's only teaching concerns - they were taught in the school library. The roars that came from that quarter during Latin lessons were almost blood-curdling, and could be heard all over the school - some poor little devil must have been making an awful mess of things. Those noises were terrifying in the extreme to a timid boy like me. Indeed, he so scared me when he bellowed in a Latin class that my mind froze-up - no doubt giving him the impression that I was some sort of a halfwit. Anyway, much to my heartfelt relief, I was soon thrown out of that class - one to which I had newly gone,¹⁴ while in the fourth form. Scripture, I could easily manage - it was largely a matter of reciting, parrot fashion, yards and yards of biblical passages - passages learnt, as homework. This, since I was fond of literature, and had a good memory (memory being largely a matter of interest) meant that I was able to get into quieter class-waters whenever we were, caged-up with, John Willy, as, with much fear, he was known by the boys.

14 I had come there from Wellington High, it has to be remembered.

This tyrant, in cap and gown, was always at his worst in the afternoon. Rumour had it, that his wife, as they say 'wore the pants'.

So, judging by his large red nose, and an equally big red face, he must have been in the habit, during lunch, of seeking refuge in the bottle - so was always well primed, as a kind of an antidote to wifely overbearance, to take it out on his pupils. Such things often happen, the most junior clerk, when soundly rated by a very irate senior, has little recourse but to kick the office cat.

The literature class, for me, was quite a different story. From about the age of five or six, beginning with 'Jack the Giant Killer', I graduated to works such as 'Treasure Island', 'Tom Brown's Schooldays', etc. etc., in ever widening succession. In fact, books, and, for many years, now, writing on my own account, have come to be the very breath of life to me.

My early readings were interspersed with some from two very eagerly awaited weekly boys magazines. 'The Magnet' and 'The Gem', both of which confined themselves to tales of the ongoing escapades of boys in The Remove at two separate fictional, public schools. Since when, I have been reading, copiously, both for pleasure and in the interests of study, without cease. I only began seriously to write, after the wife died in 1958 - whereupon, I sold up all the bits and pieces in England, and, in 1959, came to Australia to live.

It was a move, which, despite the tragic circumstances preceding it, was the best thing I ever did. Retiring from shop keeping at a fairly early age, I found myself free - free, entirely to devote myself to that which I had always wanted most to do, namely to write.

Thus, having found writing a perfect form of self expression, I never was more happy.

The bright spot in those Grammar School days was, that, one *Thomas Arthur Dyke, M.A.*,¹⁵ was our literature Master, a subject which naturally embraced history - another of my literary delights. I found his classes the most rewarding part of my whole school life. He, T.A.D., was quite a character. In history lessons, he used to march up and down between the rows of desks, spouting that subject by heart, while we boys, struggling to keep pace with him, were writing it down. I well remember, how, when, catching sight of two boys, with their desk lids up, and their heads down, comparing their fountain pens, he suddenly halted in his stride, and said, very caustically, 'When you two boys have finished discussing the relative merits of those two pens, we'll get on'. On other occasions, he dealt with such inattention, by quietly approaching the offender from the rear, and giving him a gentle tap on the head with a horse-chestnut, which he carried in a corner of his gown, for that very purpose - salutary treatment to which I was never submitted - he and I, Master and pupil, shared a common love in all things of literary worth. With initials such as T.A.D., it is small wonder that he was known to we boys, with affection and respect, as Tadpole. In a succession of classes, the dear man once read to us, Maeterlinck's 'The Bluebird of Happiness' - it was marvellous! Since you have now long left us, Mr Shuker, aware now that for the most part, he most, character wise, we are all mostly the outcome of our environments, I'm sorry if I seem to have been maligning you - to the contrary, what I have said is the absolute truth. Therefore, as an example of your tyrannical reign, I will quote the following little story, always remembering that 'The evil that men do, lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones'. Realising that home surroundings of most of we day-boys, *in the town*,¹⁶ could not be conducive to homework, we were compelled to go back to

15 He also taught John and Frank Poppitt.

16 My family had then returned to live in Newport.

school from 7:30 to 8:30pm each school evening - often one of the resident-prefects among the boarders, would be put in charge of us.

This had happened on an occasion when a pal of mine named Brampton, (we were rarely if ever known by Christian names) had taken a ripe pear with him into the prep-class. After eating it, he had thrown the core across the room at another boy. Anyhow, the prefect,¹⁷ doubtless bent on teaching this 'ill-mannered' town boy a lesson, reported it to the Head. The result was so astonishing an exercise in corporal punishment that, as a story, it would have out-Dickensed, Dickens, himself. The boys had got word of Brampton's misdemeanour of the previous evening, so, when, after prayers, everyone remained in the Assembly Hall, they all knew that a flogging was about to take place.

As Head, and instigator of the whole business, J.W. Shaker M.A., was master of Ceremonies, so to speak. Thus, occupying stage centre, 'The Lord High Executioner', with his staff, on either side of him, all similarly capped and gowned, stood, his cane at the ready - the whole thing, to many of we youngsters, presenting an awesome spectacle. Meanwhile, in order to take up his customary role in the proceedings, the school porter had been called in - the culprit, a lad of much spirit, was standing waiting in the wings, as it were, seemingly, quite unabashed.

The young 'villain' was then made, from the rear, to put his hands over the porters shoulders, as if about to be given a piggy-back - whereupon, grasping the boy's wrists firmly, that gentleman leaned forward so that the 'miscreant's' feet left the ground, thereby exposing a substantial area of the 'wrong doers'' buttocks to the tender mercies of a savagely wielded cane.

How very unnecessary it all was - the boy had actually dared to throw the remains of a pear at one of his mates across, that 'holy of holies' , a

17 'Dressed in a little brief authority'

classroom, so, as is said in one of Gilbert & Sullivan's operas, 'the punishment' had to be made to 'fit the crime'. I can't remember how many lashes ('lashes', after all it was reminiscent of the old penal-colony times) were applied, probably twelve - his Headship, being a firm believer that to spare the rod was to spoil the child, would not have held his fire, that's certain.

The mellow-dramatic spectacle over, Brampton had to leave the scene by the few steps leading to the library door. After passing through, probably to register his contempt for the whole show (he was a boy of about fifteen) our hero' banged the door. To our amazement, the Head didn't yell for him to come back - it just may have begun to dawn on the silly fellow how totally unnecessary to all involved the whole pantomime was.

Now, to round off the school days of the Poppitt's 'major and minor', i.e. John and Frank.

At about the age of thirteen, John had met with a nasty accident in which his right arm had been completely wrenched from its shoulder-socket. It was an accident that made it permanently impossible for him to raise that arm above the shoulder. As a result he became ineligible for entry into the Services - hence his extra year, at school. History having a habit of repeating itself, like mine in the first Great War, the school days of our two sons coincided with the second of those world disasters.

Being unfit for military duties, John was allowed to take a course in Social Science at Nottingham University. Frank, having been in the Air Training Corps at school, was accepted into the Royal Air Force. Happily they both survived the war. I say 'both' because, although John remained a non-combatant, the chances of getting killed in the U.K, during that war were often greater for its civilians than for the troops overseas.

In an earlier part of this story, we had left my father embarked on a second

venture into that fairly late-in-life pork-butchery-cum-delicatessen business dream of his, in the town of Wellington in Shropshire. Arriving, there, when I was not yet eleven, my education, which had already begun to assume a patchwork quilt character, was resumed anew - a patchwork quilt, since, during the time we were living with my grandfather in Newport, at the age of four, I had already attended a small dame-school run by a Miss Raferty for the children of 'gentlefolk', in Stafford Street. After which, at the age of five, for a very few months, I was sent to an establishment, for boys only - run, one supposes, to fill the gap between first school until they were of age at round about eleven to attend the Grammar School. It was owned and presided over by a Mr. Ashmore - later, to be taken over by a Miss Mills, for the complete private-education of girls, girls of the 'better class', only - the High School for girls in Wellington Road had not then been built.

Shortly after I had started at Ashmore, we, the Harry Poppitt family, moved to Stafford, where I was promptly enrolled at the Corporation Street Infants School. It was my first contact with ordinary elementary education, i.e. education that was rate funded. The then headmistress was a Miss Topliss.

As a new arrival, at the age of five, I began this 3rd infant school adventure in the bottom class. I remember that class being so kindergarten as to have a bucket-seat contraption that, suspended from the ceiling, served as a swing - no doubt it was intended to mollify any newcomer, who, scared by the newness of it all, had dissolved into tears.

However, being somewhat of an old campaigner, school-wise, I wasn't the least bit overawed. Indeed, precocious little horror that I evidently was, I seem to remember to have always been waving my hand in the air in order to be first to answer any question that was put to us. For boys and girls, it was then an entirely co-ed situation at both the infant and senior levels. My two sisters also attended.

In the second of those infant classes the knell was rung on the age-old use

of slates,¹⁸ in schools - there, during my stay, they were finally abolished - since they were often spat upon in order to be cleaned, very belatedly, it had been realised that such a practice was highly unhygienic. After leaving the Infant School, we boys and girls were all moved into the 'big' school - an adjoining separate building sharing a common playground with the 'toddlers'.

At the rear of these school buildings, divided by a high wall, an entirely new school for boys only was nearing completion so near, in fact, that in about 6 months we boys all moved in. Although it never occurred to me at the time, it must have seemed most unfair to the girls who were left behind. Although it was only a matter of different premises there is little doubt that a brand new school, for boys only, was a reflection of the time when the education of males was deemed to be more important than that of females - but after all, those were Edwardian days.

Be that as it may, I well remember the pleasure and excitement of moving into such splendidly-new surroundings - there can be little doubt that to be so increasingly-comfortably housed did a great deal for one's keenness to learn, or so I seemed to find. At Corporation Street, in my time there, Mr. Wheeldon, was Head - while the teachers in standards 2 and 5, were Mr. Newman, and Mr. Moss, in that order - standard 2 was as far as I got before we left Stafford for Wellington.

Arriving there, I and my two sisters were sent to Constitution Hill Council School - there, boys and girls were taught separately in halves of the same building. Incidentally, just over the rise of the same hill, was Wellington College, the school in which Robert Morley was a scholar.

In my new school quarters, I began to realise how much higher the teaching

18 Double sided rectangles, of that material, in wooden frames, from which words and figures, made by a slate pencil, could be erased with a damp cloth.

standards had been at Corporation Street - leaving there from standard two, I began, at Wellington in standard four. Thereafter, I was soon in standard seven - the top class in all the elementary schools of that day. To support this belief that, as between the two counties, Shropshire and Staffordshire, educational standards varied considerably, maybe rather immodestly, let me say that, although while at Corporation Street I could only ever manage 3rd or 4th position from the top of the class, at Constitution Hill, I topped it during all the time I was there - rather vainly, maybe, I have kept all those end-of term reports, that prove it.

While still in the Infant School at Corporation Street, I had had my first encounter with a nasty bully. After school, I was standing in an open-fronted bicycle shed (it and the playground were deserted), when I was cornered and grabbed by a boy of about twelve. After holding me prisoner for a minute or so, that young ruffian, before releasing me, spat in my face. It was awful - something that stays in the mind forever - at Stafford, luckily, it was an isolated incident. At Wellington, on the other hand, such bullying got worse. It came from a much bigger boy, and was terrifying in the extreme. Mercifully, it only lasted a few months - the offender must have left the town.

Wellington, being close to the iron works of Horsehay and Ketley, had some very slummy areas, with the usual rough elements. This particular little monster had red flea marks on his neck - obviously he lived in one of those slums - so, developing a very twisted mind, had become sadistically opposed to Sydney, and his like. His was bullying at its very worst - a cat and mouse situation, so terrifying that, in the playground, when on occasion he forced me to square-up to boys bigger than myself, so fierce must have been my fear-inspired mien, that they would back-off.

I hadn't any knowledge of psychology, then, but in those incidents lay an illustration of the power of the instincts, in man's mind, over the

determination of behaviour. It was an example of fear being used to overcome itself, to such an extent, as to replace it, with an overwhelmingly aggressive mood in its victim. All of which, surely must give much food for thought, since it happens all the time in the training of men for war otherwise, because of the naturally greater urge to stay alive, they'd never be able to face the shells, bullets and bayonets, of the enemy. But enough of such nightmarish and sadistic memories- let's get back to more general Poppitt-family history.

The name Poppitt, is a most unusual one - so much so that in the field of genealogy it is what is known as a one-name study, i.e. there are none bearing it outside the family. Like all surnames, there is a reason for its existence - they all stem from trades followed, kinship (as in Tomkinson, for instance) adjacent spots or areas, physical peculiarities, personal attributes, etc., etc. Poppitt for example, derives from the fact that, connected with the coal mining industry for generations in the Rhondda Valley of South Wales, one, or maybe a succession of the family, must have had charge of the poppet-head, the machinery at the top of the pit-shaft, operating the cage that lowers men into the mine, and brings back men and coal to the pit-head.

The name Poppitt, must have been well known in that very old mining area - in fact, in 1985, on my way to a holiday in South Wales, close to the Rhondda Valley, I saw a signpost directing people to Poppitt Sands. I've never been there, but, presumably, it is a small seaside place - probably a spot, where miners of old from that area, the sea being so near, could turn up their trousers, remove their boots and socks and dabble their feet in the briny. Nowadays of course, they'd all go in, bodily.

Anyway, it's still probably a very popular spot - hence the signposting - it may even be a small coastal resort.

In places where it has been for so long well known the name Poppitt

is no longer an open invitation to rhyming ridicule. However, as I found, to my oversensitive continual torment, boys outside those age-old Poppitt-stamping grounds, with whom, later I made contact, latched onto its rhyming possibilities, with what, to my sensitive nature, appeared to be almost fiendish glee. So much so that even quite late in life I have found myself very averse to revealing it.

Happily, my own particular male descendants, unto the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th generation, in England, have all lived in a place 'Gnosall' where our name has been known long enough to become commonplace or, as in the case of the Australian-born members, (Australia is a place of so many mixed races that many such more unusual names abound there) that rhyming abuse of our name is rarely heard or, when it is good humouredly ignored. In fact my grandson, Michael, had lately become so enamoured of its unique character that, joining a genealogical society here in Australia and another in the U.K., he really, as they say, 'went to town', researching in that connection.

Surprise! Surprise! Of all places, the clues, as to the 18th and 19th Century's details of my ancestry, came from the Mormons in Utah - they had all been embodied in one of those modern miracle of miracles, the silicon chip - through it were detailed, not only the date of great-grandfather Joseph's birth, but the names of his two young brides, the dates of the weddings and a list of the 9 and 10 children, respectively, they had born him.

Thanks Michael! It is to your painstaking research that a lot of the accurate detail, in that regard, is now due.

Always, whenever the name Poppitt turned up, in places as far flung as the U.S.A., England, Canada, and here in Australia, taken back far enough, it was found to have come from the one family.

In his research, Michael also uncovered the fact that earlier in the 18th century, doubtless in response to calls from Coalbrookdale, in Southeast Shropshire, for men with coal and iron ore mining experience, *Poppitt's*¹⁹, on their way there, had to find temporary employment in farm work. In that day, ... to travel miles from home was almost an impossible undertaking for working people - travel was the privilege of the few, with time and money to spare. On relatively distant journeys, it would be made by coach. This being so, the inducements, in the form of better wages, etc. must have been very great to deter mine workers and their families to move from the coalfields in the Rhondda Valley, along with all their worldly possessions, to the coalfield, miles away, in Coalbrookdale, in Southeast Shropshire.

As is now known, in that rather remote corner of Shropshire, the Coalbrookdale area, the scent of vast industrial expansion was already in the air. In that area, skilled miners and iron makers were needed and from the nearest available supply, South Wales, by paying the price in wages and conditions, the mine owners, in Shropshire, must have enticed the workers to that need.

With the opening-up of the Americas, and the enormous growth of the British Empire, generally, the demand for raw iron for machinery, tools and iron based products, generally, had started very greatly to exceed supply. Coal, of which there were huge reserves, along with an equal abundance of iron-ore, lay in the Southeast Shropshire area of Coalbrookdale. In a small way, the former had long been mined, and, in the latter, the iron-ore smelted in a foundry there.

In the second half of the 18th Century, Abraham Darby the 1st (there was a succession of Darby's of that first name to come, later), who had been making iron in a foundry at Coalbrookdale, immortalised his memory by

19 Great-Grandfather Joseph Poppitt was born in the Rhondda Valley.

hitting on the idea of using coke instead of charcoal in the smelting of the iron-ore.

Although apparently so simple a device, it was to prove of world shaking importance. By thus making raw iron (the foundation of all heavy industry) available in unlimited quantities, he, Abraham Darby the 1st, had not only begun to meet that which hitherto had been taken to be an insatiable demand, but, since all heavy industry was based on iron, had paved the way to the Industrial Revolution.

The lesson from all of which, surely, is that, just as 'from little acorns, great oaks grow', so, from seemingly small ideas, boundless results can flow.

Because the many Poppitt's, as mining experts and skilled ironworkers, would have been an important part of the work force in Coalbrookdale (evidence, of their number is supported by the fact that the churchyard, there, is studded with tombstones bearing our name), they, too, must have played a not inconsiderable part in an industrial upsurge - a not inconsiderable part in an industrial enterprise that began, completely to determine the subsequent shape of world economic history.

Coalbrookdale is a mere half-mile from the River Severn - a river that from there and much of its upper reaches is navigable to the Bristol Channel. At this particular point, i.e., near to Coalbrookdale, the river narrows to pass through a fairly steep gorge - a gorge that is spanned by an iron bridge. That bridge is world famous as the first, ever, to be made of iron. *It was cast in the foundry at Coalbrookdale²⁰, and put together across the river in about 1779.* It still stands, and although now restricted to the use of pedestrians remains as a magnificent monument to the skill and enterprise of all who took part in its manufacture and erection.

20 An undertaking in which the Poppitt's of that day, necessarily, would have had much to do..

The town of Ironbridge grew up around this first 'miracle in iron'- this forerunner of all the modern steel structures that so sturdily and gracefully span the waters of the world. There is a museum in that town which by the number and variety of its exhibits epitomises the pride the townsfolk now have in the history surrounding their bridge and the town to which it gave its name.

The Bridge, the Town, and the Ironworks are in one of the most beautiful parts of Shropshire. Intending visitors, on reaching Ironbridge from Coalbrookdale, arriving at the river, which runs at right-angles to this approach road, should turn right along a street - the waters edge on the left and houses on the right. Following that street into the open country, where the river is rarely out of sight of the road, about three miles from Ironbridge, the highway branches off to the left over Buildwas bridge - a Severn crossing, that takes its name from the ruins of the Abbey of Buildwas - situated close to the right side of the road almost immediately after one has left the bridge.

Thence, leaving the river far behind, after winding through uphill and heavily wooded country, one reaches the small township of Much Wenlock - Much Wenlock, with its reminders of a medieval and Elizabethan age *in the shape of Abbey ruins, and a fine old Elizabethan courthouse*²¹ - the latter in a remarkable state of preservation - its interior resplendent with wood carving and polished oak furnishings. At the judicial end of the chamber, on the wall, high up above the richly worked oak chairs (the seats of the presiding magistrates), is the coat of arms of the first Elizabeth, its colours so brightly fresh, as to look as though they had been painted yesterday. Standing well above ground, on stout wooden pillars, the courthouse covers an open market place - the building is in such first-rate condition, as to satisfy an antiquarians dream - or so I found it.

21 There are also some 'stocks' and a 'whipping post'

From Much Wenlock, the road continues along Wenlock Edge (a high ridge dominating the Shropshire plain for many miles on either side).ending in a long steep slope at the end of which one is returned to a long-absent-sight of the river, which, arriving at Shrewsbury, and looping itself around three sides of that Ancient Borough (a castle filling the gap in the circle) makes as fine an example of a fortified stronghold of the middle ages as one could wish to see. The castle has been so carefully renovated, or preserved that I am told it now serves as a council chamber, for the borough dignitaries.

However, since this work must be beginning to read like a travel brochure, I'd better leave this particular gem of past and present rural England at its best, and get back to the Poppitt territory at Coalbrookdale.

Coalbrookdale remains as an example, almost unique, of a place where heavy industry did not impinge on the beauties of nature. In which connection, one has to bear in mind that the first of the Darby's would have been trying out his new method of smelting iron-ore in the foundry at Coalbrookdale before the Industrial Revolution, with its horrific spoliation of the landscape, was truly underway.

Coalbrookdale and Ironbridge, respectively, are only five and a half to six miles from Wellington. As I have told earlier, my father once had a shop in Ironbridge, so our business head quarters then being at Wellington, I often went with him in a pony and trap to Iron-bridge.

For the first four miles, the road to Coalbrookdale and Ironbridge is not unduly hilly. From there on, it declines, very steeply, with a sharp right hand turn (these days almost certain to have been considerably straightened out), as it levels out on the valley floor near the approach to these two towns, and the river - a mile and a half, further on.

This very steep drop is known as Jiggers Bank - known thus, because, in order to prevent the very heavy horse-drawn loads of iron-ore coming down

from the surrounding hills running away out of control, the wagoners had to apply stout wooden jigs to the wheels to act as brakes.

By the way, at Dawley, a village about half way to Ironbridge, there is an example of the quaint old names that have come down to us as pub-signs. This particular inn has a picture of a woman holding a black boy with one hand, while, with water from a pump gushing over him, using a scrubbing brush on him with the other, presumably, since the caption over the picture says 'Labour in Vain', with the hope of making him white. Hence the pub is called 'The Labour in Vain'. In the U.K. and Ireland, such odd and amusing signs are often to be found in the villages and towns. But enough of the beauties and idiosyncrasies of the 'Old Country' - let's back to that disjointed education of mine.

It may be remembered that I had reached the top class at Constitution Hill School, and was now eleven - the age at which one sought admission to a secondary school.

Very fortunately, one had just been completed and was about to open in King Street, Wellington. It was designed to allow boys and girls, under one roof, to be taught, separately. The lower half of the building (that nearer to the Railway bridge further down the street) was for girls - the top half, for boys - the two halves being separated (it being of two stories) by an assembly hall, with an art room, above. They were never used jointly, by the boys and girls. Again I was to experience the great satisfaction of entering a brand new school.

Here, I should like to place it on record that, due to the introduction of some first class teaching methods, that particular new 'school-protégé' of the Shropshire Education Authority, in my experience, was (no doubt still is) an absolutely first rate place of learning. Take the teaching there of French, for example. Before we tackled that subject, as such, we spent two whole terms learning, phonetically, the sounds in that language - sounds that, being

alien to our own, are very rarely mastered by schoolboys. As to how well that system paid off, I myself can vouch. Although my French still leaves much to be desired, my accent is so good, that I am often asked if I am of that country. Thus proud as I am of A.G.S. - its long Poppitt tradition - my own all too brief association with it I have to confess that, teaching-wise, Wellington High was superior, for example, when I started at Newport, after leaving form two at the former, I was accepted right away, into form four, at the latter. Nevertheless, A.G.S., in my view, thanks, as I have said earlier, to T.A. Dyke Esq. M.A. far outshone, Wellington High, in the department of literature.

Because I could only get into Wellington High as a fee paying pupil (I flopped-out, at the oral, after passing the written test for a scholarship- I was never any good at 'viva-voce' ordeals), although the fee was only 30/- a term, plus of course school uniform, sportswear, books, etc., business in Wellington finally got so bad, that, after a stay of only eighteen months, my father being no longer able to afford it, my attendance at that school came to an abrupt end. Shortly afterwards, we moved to Newport, there to open still one more pork shop.

By then, funds must have become quite low. So again, perforce, we had to resort to the usual ill fitted parlour type shop, with, I must add, the same disastrous results. Incidentally, it says much for dad's moral fibre that, with apparent equanimity, he was able to brave the ostracism, (beyond now and again the curtest nods of acknowledgement as they passed in the street) of his former middle-class peers. During the latter part of this Newport business failure, the 1st War broke out. In the meantime, father's younger brother, Frank, had managed to get himself a semi-military post, as a barrack warden, in the army training camp, at Brocton, on Cannock Chase. It was a job involving the care and distribution of all the items necessary to the furnishing and maintenance of such a place, e.g. tables, chairs, beds, blankets, cooking utensils, etc., etc. Moreover it was a post that exempted a

relatively young man, like Frank Poppitt, from military service - father had become too old to be called.

Realising that, business-wise, my dad was almost at the end of his tether, Uncle Frank suggested he apply for a similar post, not yet filled, at Rugeley Camp, another army training centre, on the far side of the Chase - Cannock Chase is an area of moorland of about fifty square miles - the Brocton Side was only some five miles from Stafford. Both camps were close to a railway - so it was fairly easy to commute from either by rail (buses had not then come into use) to Stafford, or Gnosall.

My father applied for this post, and was accepted - whereupon, winding-up the almost defunct business in Newport, we all moved to a rented house in the Wharf Road, in Gnosall.

However, while still living in Newport, very much aware of our parlous financial position, I came to the conclusion, that being an increasing burden on the family budget, it was time I left school. Thus, although at the age of about twelve, I had had ideas of going on to University, preferably Oxford, in order to take a degree, I left the Grammar School. Alas for such a dream! Economic circumstances had determined otherwise - pro tem, anyway.

The final decision to quit school was also strengthened by an offer of a job, arranged by Uncle Frank. It was for a temporary clerkship in an Army Service Corps office, on Brocton Camp.

The wage was only seven shillings and sixpence a week, so, when a clerical job with the Army Canteen Organisation turned up at 14/- a week, with board and accommodation, I quickly grasped it - it was at Brocton. Here was new-found wealth, indeed - not only was I able to hand over the bulk of that money to my parents, but was left with ample pocket money to satisfy my meagre wants. I continued to contribute to the family funds in this

way until about eighteen months later, when the money situation at home appeared to warrant its discontinuance.

Conscription had been in force for some time, when, at the age of seventeen and a half, I was faced with a choice of either waiting to be called up for the army, or volunteering for flying duties, in the Royal Air Force. I chose the latter. Such was the class discrimination of that day that, as an ex-public school boy, a commission as a pilot-officer was automatically assured. All that I had to do was to see Mr. Shuker, my recent headmaster, to be given a letter saying that 'John Sydney Poppitt is likely to make a keen and efficient flying-officer', and in a very short time I was on my way to a flying training-wing, for officer cadets, at West Sandling, near Folkestone. I still have that letter, signed J.W. Shuker, M.A. - the 'dear' man!

As I've said before, it's difficult to analyse one's reasons for doing this, or that, in such matters, but I'm fairly certain, although then quite a normal sort of 'patriot' I was not moved, in this step toward a 'pair of wings', by any desire to die for King and Country. First and probably foremost was that, being a very small and shy fellow, and quite unable to attract young females, I had the idea that a pair of pilot's wings on a Royal Air Force blue uniform, might help to compensate for my shyness and lack of inches (I was then 5 feet, 4 1/2 inches - since when I seem to have shrunk a bit) and maybe, work miracles in that very forlorn girl-boy-relationship situation of mine.

There were, of course, other reasons - maybe quite as influential. Officer status, after all, was in keeping with my public school background - pilot officers were also the cynosure of all eyes - flying, especially flying in combat, had such a romantic ring about it. Although they are now believed to have been in the region of at least 50%, casualty rates, for obvious reasons, were never actually stated. As against which the horror of trench warfare was well known - figure-wise, there, the awful toll of maiming's and

death could not be disguised. Also, casualty numbers apart, if one returned safely from a flying combat mission, instead of the continuous inhuman conditions appertaining to life in those entrenched hell-holes, one could always look forward to a hot shower, a good meal, in a well-appointed dining room, and a bed with clean white sheets - plus a nights rest, in comparative safety. To my then great disappointment, just as I was getting to the latter end of my Air Force training, on November 11th, 1918, at 11:00am, the Cadet Wing of which I was a part, was paraded and we were told that the War was over - all activities of a training order would be abandoned, and, as we indeed actually were, all of us would be home for Christmas. It was a situation, which, occupation-wise, left me, as they say 'down under', 'up the creek without a paddle'.

In fact, there was I, without any saleable experience, other than the bit of clerical work, in the only two jobs I had ever had, facing an employment situation in which, due to the wholesale demobilisation of the men and woman from the Services, jobs were at a premium.

Thus in my unskilled state, for me to secure a permanent post was well-nigh impossible. Nevertheless, because military camps did not close down overnight, I was able to get temporary re-employment with the Canteen Organisation, at Brocton Camp, where I had previously worked. it was a job that lasted until the June of 1919, when a circular came to our depot, at Brocton, saying that former male employees, of the N.A.A.F.I. (Navy, Army and Airforce Institutes - originally N.A.C.B., the Navy & Army Canteen Board. In order to recognise the growing importance, of the R.A.F., that arm of the Services was added to its general title) would be eligible for the Canteen Service in France. There although canteens and canteen supplies would still be needed by the occupying forces after the War, compared to the needs of the millions of the fighting forces etc., who were being withdrawn, the demand for such goods was comparatively small. This meant that a vast quantity of canteen stock (things like wines, spirits, tobacco,

cigarettes and a whole range of the other needs of the lace fighting forces, and women's auxiliaries) would have to be gathered in and shipped, via one of the most convenient French ports, to England.

By the way, there was a major stipulation in regard to this overseas employment - it was that one was required to enlist, for its duration, in the Royal Army Service Corps. However, since we would be working as civilians, at civilian rates of pay, and would be subject to no military discipline, as such, it was only a nominal affair, militarily speaking, done, one supposes, to obviate passport, custom, and such like formalities. Moreover, it was a chance to live in France, with a spell of permanent employment, food, accommodation, and clothes, if only a khaki uniform - it was too good to be missed - we were simply to be civilians, in the guise of soldiers.

The French port chosen for the return of all those unwanted stores, was Boulogne Sur Mer, in the Pas de Calais. There, a big depot for canteen supplies had long been in service. It was from there, with the cooperation of the French shipping agencies, that this vast accumulation of unwanted merchandise, railed in from all over France and Belgium, was all shipped back to 'Blighty' - the name by which the U.K. had become so nostalgically known, during the 41/4 years of that horrific conflict, the First Great War. Boulogne being our designated place of work, it was there for which we were bound, when we left Folkestone on July 14th, 1919 - Bastille Day - a national holiday in France, and, for we newcomers, a very memorable occasion. As we entered the harbour, we saw that the ships were all gay with flags and bunting - their sirens had been heard wailing in a cacophony of long-answering-blasts long before we arrived there.

On landing in France, we were taken to some old army huts, along the Rue des Moulins a Vapeur, at the far end of the town - they were to be our living quarters. Luckily, none of this barrack's accommodation was compulsory,

later on, I and a couple of my friends, moved into private and much more congenial quarters. We made two such moves during our stay in France - the first to a rather cramped little room and the second to a more spacious and better furnished apartment, in the aforementioned, Rue des Moulins a Vapeur, which was the home of an amiable, middle-aged, rather plump, French widow, who lived alone. However, her's was an amiability that tended rather quickly to disappear, when either I, or my two flat-sharing friends did anything to offend her rather strict code of rules in relation to boarders. Unfortunately, since neither of my two mates understood a word of French, it was I who had to face the storm of words, in order to try to placate the old dear, when anything went wrong.

The Canteen Depot (our work-place) was at the harbour end of this long 'Steam Mills' street - which is what Moulins a Vapeur means. Understandably, when we arrived as replacements for the existing staff, we were given any old job until those whom we were to replace had been demobilised. For the first few weeks, for example, I was given a job as 'off-sider' to the driver of a Foden steam wagon - delivering coal to army camps, etc., in the district - he drove the wagon (a driver cum stoker necessity) and I humped and delivered the coal. What a job that was!

Anyhow, it was certainly a very novel and down-to-earth experience - one at which I shouldn't, finally, have jibbed so much had I been properly kitted-out for it. However, since it had to be done in ordinary army uniform, without benefit of the scout piece of leather chat a coalman always wears to prevent the lumps of coal sticking into his back, it became too much of an ordeal - especially when, to make matters worse, it rained - one way or another, my uniform, of which I only had one, got in an awful mess - the bags were only of thin sack-cloth!

The upshot was, that in a state of mutiny, I fronted the Officer in charge of the Depot, and told him that my contract had specified clerical work only.

However a clerical job, had just been vacated by one of the old staff, so I was given a new uniform, and that vacancy. It was quite a challenge, as I will explain - once again, I was back to my normal, happy-go-lucky, self.

The goods, coming in by the railway truck load, had to be reconciled, quantitatively, with the invoices for them. It was this, of which I found myself in charge - I continued with it until the end of my stay - everything necessary having then been shipped home. Like all jobs, it had its hassles, but, all in all, it worked out very well - there were a few minor discrepancies, but with the exception of a half million francs worth of cigarettes that once disappeared, they were relatively unimportant - in any case, that loss would doubtless have been settled by the French railways claims department. Now and again (it made a rather exciting break, from the office routine) I was sent onto a vessel in Boulogne docks to check the cargo loaded against the figures of the checker for the French Shipping Company, involved. Happily, there were never any serious differences - the cargo on those occasions, always consisted of wines and spirits - packed in uniform wooden boxes - literally thousands of them - there must have been a lot of alcohol called for in that awful blood-bath - the 1st Great War - no wonder!

Because the counting of the separate loadings had to be done, between the time a large square wooden pallet, (raised from the dockside by a steam derrick, and swung inboard) stacked, evenly, with the boxes, hung briefly in the air, to be gently lowered to the floor of the hold, and the time when the stevedores pounced upon it, when all chances of counting it would have been lost, it had to be done quickly - one couldn't have faced the very voluble wrath of those French workers if they had been held-up for counting purposes. Those 'gentle' men, spoke with a very rough accent (Patois, as it is called), plentifully supplemented with lots of forceful oaths, the meaning of which, at which I could then only guess, but found out much later. Nevertheless, discounting that very rough stuff, the experience of that Boulogne adventure added quite a bit to my school French - for instance, in

the trams and restaurants, etc., once one got the drift of the conversation, it was fairly easy to understand what people were saying - for example, a lady, helping a toddler to negotiate the edge of the pavement saying "va doucement, ma chere", hardly needed an interpreter to explain that she was saying, "go gently, my dear".

When we arrived in France, the exchange rate was 29 francs to the pound - when we left it had risen to 79 francs, to the pound, which meant that we received a slight rise in wages, fairly often. The French Cuisine is world famous, so I was able to indulge a youthful and very healthy appetite in that respect at an absurdly low price: soup, plaiçe, or lemon sole (my favourites - very, very fresh - Boulogne is also a fish port), with two vegetables, desert, a bottle of Graves (a quite respectable white wine) and a cup of coffee, as only the French know how to make it, all for 10 francs, which, latterly, was all for 2/-, in Sterling - with some better class French language, as a background, thrown in. All in all, that stay in France remains as one of the high spots in my memory. However rudimentary, if one has a working knowledge of its language, it makes so much difference to the enjoyment of one's visit to it - one has a feeling of belonging - Vive la France - say I.

The ports on both sides of the English Channel have important medieval histories - therefore Boulogne is no exception. A wonderfully preserved record of those stormy times in the histories of England and France persists in the shape of a walled enclosure of what must have been the original Boulogne. It lies to the West of the town, over the harbour side of the low bridge that divides the town by crossing the stream that flows into the harbour.

The walls of that ancient fortress are so thick that there is actually a carriage-way running on top of them around the old town, with its correspondingly old houses, and narrow streets - when I was there, a part

of that old fortification was in use as a garrison for French soldiers. It was a rare place to indulge an historical imagination.

As one leaves the sea-front, at Boulogne, about a mile to the right, out of the town, along the coast, the road rises sharply onto an extensive plateau, where the French Cliffs overlook those of Folkestone and Dover - more clearly seen in the early morning, as they were when the sun slanting down on them revealed their famous whiteness.

Known as the Camp de Caesar, it is from this commanding vantage point that the Romans and possibly the Normans invaded Britain. It was a glorious Summer's day - I was lying, alone, on the grass up there, looking at the cliffs on the other side (at that point, the Channel is only about twenty miles wide), probably ruminating on all these matters, when, suddenly, a wonderful feeling of joie de vivre (joy of life) stirred within me, the like of which I have never known before, or since - indeed it was so memorable that the memory is still quite green. Although I am far from believing in the occult, I am almost persuaded that that inward-glow was a truly spiritual phenomenon - maybe emanating, from the many hundreds of thousands, who, in order to 'defeat' the latest of those to covet the soil of England , or France, had died on the French side of the Channel. But, back to Earth!

Down the coast, a short distance from Boulogne, is a pretty little seaside resort called, Le Portel. It is, or was, quite un-commercialised - thus never over-crowded - not the sort of place to which the nouveau-riche would ever want to boast of having been. It was reached, on fine days, in summer, by one of those overland, open-carriage miniature-railways and had become a very popular rendezvous for we boys of the Canteen brigade. There I met up with a French family, from Paris, named Laudigeois - it was during the time they were enjoying a month's holiday. The daughter, Renee, was a petite brunette aged eighteen, and since I too was then only eighteen and had a fair smattering of the French language, and was more than usually

anxious to exercise it, we quickly became attracted to each other. I remember we managed a kiss behind an upturned boat, during a game of hide and seek, or some such. How 'innocently' different, in those days, such boy and girl affairs were. Apart from the fact that girls were carefully chaperoned in that day, the idea of coupling up with some young partner, in a bed sharing arrangement (what is now called 'shacking up') rarely ever arose. It seemed to be the accepted mores, of the time, that sexual intercourse, before marriage, was not only to be regarded as a major sin, but as being most unwise - had not time proved that not getting into the clutches of sexual experience before walking together down the aisle was more likely to lead to a long-lasting, happily-married, partnership than did promiscuous premarital indulgence in it something which is equally true of a similar, truly affectionate, de facto relationship. In either case, the wise thing to do would be first to cultivate a firm friendship, in order fully to be able to assess the compatibility, in that atmosphere of mutual love, respect and understanding, for a journey through life, as inseparable partners. Because it is difficult to hurt or let down a true friend, surely, the happiness in such sane joint ventures is almost bound to be increased with the passing years. Never forget, there are many other things more permanently satisfying than sex, as such. Shakespeare puts the matter perfectly, when he causes one of his characters to say: "I could not love thee half so well, loved I not honour more" - wonderful man!

He also extolls the supreme virtue of friendship, in those wonderful lines, in Hamlet:

"The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul, with hoops of steel".

But enough of these guides to 'married bliss' - in any case they're dealt with much more fully in that major work of mine, 'Mankind at the Crossroads, on the Highway to Happiness'. After which two homilies, by first dealing with

the grandparents and their families, i.e., my aunts and uncles, on the staff and distaff sides of the Poppitt family, I'll get back to that family tree.

My Grandfather Poppitt, it may be recalled, was the first born of Great-Grandfather Joseph's second batch of children. True to his Welsh ancestry, he had the typically round face, was in that 5 feet 4 to 6 inch height range, took a fairly large size in hats, and had feet that fitted comfortably into a size 6 in shoes. As was only to be expected, both as a member of his social stratum, and a top-grade gents-outfitter, he was always immaculately turned-out. Out of doors, was always to be seen in a frock-coat, pin-striped trousers, a cravat, a tall silk hat, and kid gloves - unless, of course the weather was inclement, when he either wore an overcoat, or carried, opened, or neatly furled, a smart umbrella. A pillar, as has been stated, of the Parish Church, and a staunch conservative, to boot, altogether, as a leading tradesman in the town, he would have been easily recognised as a typical, middle-class, highly respected citizen of 19th century England.

The said, John Poppitt, my 'Grandpa', as we know, had married a cousin, Harriet Lockley, my 'Grandma'. They, as has also been told, had seven children, all boys.

Incidentally, my grandpa's father, the aforementioned Joseph, and some of his other sons, (John's brothers) came to be, what were known as *Chartermasters*²² - which is to say that renting the pits, from the landowner, in this case, it would have been one or another of the Dukes of Sutherland, (any sort of trade was anathema to the old Aristocracy) employed the miners, and, in true entrepreneurial manner, pocketed the difference.

There therefore, ultimately, must have been no shortage of money on that, the Staff, side of this marriage union. However, be that as it may, it needs to be remembered that John Poppitt was one of nineteen children, so that

22 But that was much later in life

financial help, at the starting of his first business venture, was rather more likely sufficiently to have come from the distaff side of the marriage, John Poppitt's in-laws, the Lockley's.

They certainly had money, and after all John was a nephew, by right of birth. In that day, particularly to try to keep money in families, by suitable marriage arrangements between them, among the middle-class and upper-class, (even more so among the aristocracy) was thought something greatly to be encouraged. Whatever the source of the capital required (it's relatively unimportant, anyway), it enabled Grandpa to launch himself into business, in Newport.

It began in premises in Lower Bar, at the bottom-end of the Town - a part already mentioned, as a rather off-beat area, near the Canal Bridge. Nevertheless, despite its being rather poorly situated, the business began to thrive. Later on, as the double-fronted shop, with roomy residence, etc., described earlier, belonging to the Lockley's, and situated in the middle of the Town-square, became vacant, Grandpa moved his business to that much more promising site.

It proved a very wise move. So much so that it was not long before John Poppitt began to find himself the owner of a very flourishing, small-town, drapery and gents-outfitting establishment. All of which goes to prove that his initial apprenticeship, and subsequent employee-experience, with a drapery house in the nearby city of Worcester, (my father was a child of two, when at the age of twenty nine, his father left that employment to come to Newport, to stare up on his own) must have been first-rate. Indeed, judging by the ultimate life-style it supported, Grandpa's first and only business venture must have become quite a little gold mine. In fact, the John Poppitt house-hold, latterly, became a minor replica of the 'Upstairs, Downstairs' domestic scene that, in serial form, has been so popular on television. Relatively minor, of course, since, in this case, only two domestic

servants were employed - the Poppitt's were never more than fairly well-to-do members of the lower, middle- class. In which connection, also, one has to remember that one didn't need especially to be affluent in Victorian and Edwardian times to be able to employ a servant or two. Indeed, in those days, such employment was only *a very thinly disguised form of slavery*²³. Females then in domestic service had to have impeccable references -were required to 'live in', and so were more or less on tap, work wise, at all hours - mostly for two shillings and sixpence, per week, of seven days. They found their own uniforms (white caps and aprons), were expected to attend Church on Sundays, and were forbidden to encourage 'followers' (males), either in, or within the vicinity of the household. In the more 'kindly situations', they were allowed a half day off, each week - sometimes it would be fortnightly, or monthly - little doubt, in **very shocking cases*²⁴, none at all. It is estimated that there were about three million women in domestic service up to the outbreak of the 1st World War, in 1914. However, given that they were paid such miserable wages, such service was less a sign of wealth, on the part of their employers, than a symbol of 'middle-class superiority'.

As has, also, already been told, we, the Harry Poppitt quintet, lived with Grandpa Poppitt (Grandma died three days after I was born), until I was five. So I well remember the previously mentioned shop, the three storied house, the Mill, etc., at the rear. I also recall that, when the shop hot water heating system had had to be dismantled, for repairs, a golden half sovereign was found lying behind the pipes that ran along the base of the customer side of the counter. Golden Guineas, although they had ceased to be minted, were still around. These 21/- pieces were very fashionably in use as ornamental attachments to gold watch chains - chains that not only

23 In fact, in the vernacular, they were generally referred to as 'slavvies'.

24 They'd have no other home, to which to go.

served to secure a gold or silver timepiece, but greatly added to the general sartorial splendour - particularly to that of the very fancy waistcoats, then in vogue. Grandpa sported one of these guineas, in that way. Thus, as always, very smartly dressed, standing with back to fire, in an elegant dining room, his rather portly stomach well in view, that dear old gentleman presented a picture that was something, which although seen so long ago, remains with me, as an amazingly clear and warm memory.

The house itself, being of three stories, had several bedrooms on the first and second floors. A large one, on the first, was in use as a stockroom - it was there, in fact, that I used to play with those fascinating mortar-boards once worn by boys, at the Grammar School. Grandpa's bedroom, a large one, with a bay window overlooking the main street, was, to my childish fancy, a very princely chamber. A four poster bed, looking very regal, with its bedside valances, and the then equally fashionable bedhead draperies, took pride of place. However the fetish for a use of drapery over every conceivable article of furniture was by no means confined to dressing-up the beds. For example, crochet-work in the form of *Anti-Macassar's*²⁵ was to be seen as head rests on the backs of all the upholstered settees, lounge chairs, etc. They were used to prevent the grease from the hair, natural or otherwise, from spoiling the upholstery.

Since, periodically, (possibly twice a year, during 'Spring cleaning') in addition to the thousand and one daily chores, all that bedside flounced frippery, together with curtains and all the rest of the coverings, had to be taken down, or removed, carefully laundered, and replaced, its small wonder, considerations of prestige and custom, apart, that those who could afford it would have found it quite impossible to maintain the almost sacred dignity of middle-class living standards, without at least one or two servants.

25 So named, because they first came into use, at an earlier date, to prevent the Macassar-oil, applied to pigtailed, from, likewise, ruining the upholstery.

The 'very special' room, in which Grandpa slept, having a bay-window, with its front and sides all over-looking the High Street, provided a first rate vantage point from which to view all that came and went up and down that busy highway.

Water closets had by then come into use in this, the 'better class', part of the Town. The poorer quarters, areas which lay hidden away at the rear of the High Street, and which, in true medieval fashion, were approached by narrow alley ways, were still serviced by those outside, evil smelling, abominations, known in Australia, as 'dunnys'. The Sanitary Cans, beneath their seats, were collected, in the dead of night, by the 'night-soil' men, using horse-drawn carts.

Gas had also arrived in the Town - electricity had still to come. Thus the, long, thin wax 'tapers', immortalised, in that line of Goldsmiths, quoted earlier, were still very much in use - serving to light the gas mantles - occasionally, the pipe or cigar, maybe - although, as I remember, folded strips of paper, torched at an open fire, were usually favoured. In that day, economy, like cleanliness, was next to Godliness. Among the poorer class, and necessarily on the farms and in the villages, candles to bed, and standard oil lamps, below stairs, were the order of the day. As is already known to the reader, I, my wife, and two sons once lived in the village of Gnosall, in Staffordshire. It was a number of years before electricity came to it. So, in order to avoid spilling the hot wax onto the stair carpet, from a very early age, they, our two sons, were told to hold the candlesticks very steadily on their way up the 'wooden hills' (the stairs) to bed. But, once more, I rather digress, so, to return to my memories of my Grandfather and Newport at the turn of the century.

As we have said, behind the 'highly respectable', but false face of Newport, namely that of the shops and houses fronting the High Street, as, throughout the world, in similar old country towns, there was, supposedly - inevitably,

(the poor always being thought to be with us), hidden away, behind the scenes, as it were, always a very seamy side to these main-street facades of old-world charm, facades, which, in relation to the slums they masked were (albeit quite naively, since 'fronts' they truly were) generally referred to as 'The Front Street'.

These particular Newport slums were situated in a part of the Town known as 'The Marsh' - a name, incidentally, that gives a good indication of the kind of land on which these awfully dilapidated shanties had originally been built. They, these wretched hovels, although on a considerably lower level, lay 150 yards, or so, to the rear of High Street - running parallel to it for almost its entire length. In my day (I was then about fifteen - we had returned to Newport to live), along that ill-paved Marsh Street, with all its attendant squalor, one tap at intervals serving a dozen or more houses was the only access to town water the occupants had. I can still see an old hag (reputedly Irish), with matted white hair, dirty old blouse, equally filthy old skirt trailing the ground, sucking at a badly stained old *clay pipe*²⁶. It had a broken off stem - she was drawing water at one of these stanchions - it was raining, and to prevent it getting into the pipe-bowl, it was being kept upside down - the mouth-piece held firmly between toothless gums, she was puffing away. Meanwhile, with that soulless look (the light of life having long gone out of those rheumy old eyes) of hopeless resignation that bespeaks extreme old age and abject poverty, she seemed to be staring, sightlessly, into space. Here, indeed, words fail me - truly to depict that scene is something that is beyond me - it needed to be recorded on canvas - *the sheer pathos of it all, defies description*²⁷. I suppose that picture must have awakened the first faint stirrings in me of a realisation of the awful

26 These pipes were sold for a half penny - youngsters like me used them for blowing soap-bubbles.

27 This wretched creature, once, no doubt, had been a comely lass

disparity in the world, between extreme poverty and great wealth - the first small awakening in me of an awareness of the increasingly desperate need for something to begin, on a universal scale, to be done about it.

Incidentally, the shocking conditions surrounding those hovels, in which the 'have nots' eked out their short brutal lives, may begin to be gauged, as to the state of those 'homes', by the fact that, while living in Wellington, I had learned that the rents of similar slum dwellings were one shilling and six pence, per week - this I know, from one of those tenants, who had the misfortune to be compelled to live in one. Although, to be quite fair, the supply of housing then exceeding demand, well built, brick and tile dwellings could be rented, in working class areas, for 5/- a week - my Uncle Frank once rented a house in Stafford, a double-fronted, 2 bay-windowed, rather more superior home, for only an extra shilling a week. A business friend of mine once told me that, at the turn of the century, he was offered a row of fifteen of these bay-windowed houses for 1,500 pounds - unfortunately, he, then hadn't the money to spare. But, again we seem to have wandered somewhat off course in relation to the Poppitt story, and some of its more memorable environs.

During my boyhood, and adolescence, the High Street in Newport was very solidly paved, with small oblong pieces of granite (*Roman style*²⁸, I guess) a paving that entirely covered that part between the tollbars in the Town. These stone blocks were about eight inches in length and four inches in width - they must still be there, under the present tar-macadam - what an enduring foundation!

Because these stone blocks only began at the town sides of the toll-bars, and the roads beyond were bitumised, since the little shop into which we moved when we returned to Newport from Wellington was very close to

28 The famous Roman 'Watling Street' runs close to Newport

Upper Bar, a point where the metal sets began, there was always a noisy clatter, as the iron-shod wheels of the horse drawn vehicles, moving from the relative silence of the bitumen, made contact with the stone.

I often wonder why comparatively trivial things, like that, remain so indelibly fixed in the mind²⁹. I also clearly remember, how Grandpa liked a 'nightcap', in the shape of a drop of whisky - it would also have been found very useful when entertaining the more intimate of his male cronies. He always kept (would you believe it!) a five gallon barrel, of that powerful fluid³⁰, on a stand in a curtained alcove, at the top of the first flight of stairs. By the way, I recall often dreaming, in those early infant-da ys, of taking wing and flying down them; my memory must go pretty far back, for I also recall having to say a bedside prayer in which were the words 'pity my simplicity' and misconstruing them into 'pretty mice'. I should also add that the whisky barrel had a lock on the tap - a lock, to which, Grandpa alone held a key - he couldn't allow his sons to get too early a liking for such a potent brew³¹ - a liking that, as presently will be recorded, one of them to his eventual complete-undoing, over-much acquired, in later life.

My Mother used to say that I began to talk before I could walk - which I believe is very unusual - unless of course one has had that infantile complaint, called Rickets. People tell me I must have been talking ever since. It's probably the Celt in my blood.

I distinctly remember the hustle and bustle that went on around the bed, when, at the age of two, too shy to say I wanted to go places, I had a major accident there. It was while we were on a visit to London - memory

29 But, of course, the young mind, for reasons already explained, has to be more retentive.

30 It came, I'm told, directly to him from Scotland.

31 Distilled in the Highlands, it came to him straight from Scotland

seems to suggest Auntie Maggie's - I don't recall having been reprimanded - so I must have been very young.

While we were still living with my Grandfather, in Newport, my father, not yet having got into financial deep-water, in Stafford, he, mother, and we three children were still able to enjoy an annual holiday, one of and its Tower which took us to Blackpool It was there, whilst I stood gazing at the marine creatures in the huge glass tanks surrounding the first floor (my parents having moved up to the next) that I became lost - I can still remember my very frightened childish reaction by way of tears. Happily, I was soon restored to the bosom of my family, but the memory is still very clear.

Changing the subject entirely - let's not nurse any illusions, as to the higher state of morality in the Victorian era - the 'Devil and all his works' still lurked about in the undergrowth. The Poppitt household was, it seems, by no means off-limits to his wiles, at least, as far as the young folks were concerned. Years after I was married, my father, with a twinkle in his eye, told me how, with two comely young lassies, as resident maids in the house, his mother, in an attempt strictly to uphold the demanded sexual taboos of that day, had quite a job policing the upstairs corridors during sleeping hours - with what success was never divulged - very properly between father and son, decorum demanded that that answer be left to the imagination. However, despite the relatively harsh restrictions of law and public opinion, in such matters, there can be little doubt that the 'Old Adam' in Man, call it human nature, original sin, or what you will, was then, as ever, always likely to 'rear its ugly head'.

Thanks again to Grandson Michael and his careful research, we are able to come up with the information as to the order in which my father and his six brothers were born. As has already been stated, my father, James Harry, came first. He was followed by Charles John, George, William Arthur,

Bertram, Howard, and Clement Frank (called Frank).

Charles John Poppitt, the second of the seven to arrive, married Margaret, one of the two sisters - daughters of the proprietor of the Vaults Hotel (spoken of earlier) in Newport. Their maiden name was Westwood. She, Margaret (my Auntie Maggie), only had one child, Winifred, which means that offspring from that source was unimportant to a continuance of the name Poppitt.

Before dealing with George Poppitt, the next on the list, it ought to be said, that, in truly middle-class manner, all these Poppitt boys had had a musical education - for example, James Harry, my dad, read music and was quite good on the piano (the beautiful old, 'rosewood Broadwood' family piano came to him after Grandpa died). George played the violin. *Nothing seems to be on record as to George Poppitt's family life*³², he probably had a wife, but of her or any children, nothing is known. However, what certainly is known is that he went to London to study Medicine and was enrolled as a student. Unfortunately, having learned to play the fiddle, he became popular in that regard in the London pubs, and learned to play the fool - becoming a medical drop-out, he died a physical wreck at about 45.

He came to see us once, in Stafford. He'd been trying to eke out a living by taking orders on a door to door basis for a series of comically illustrated books, published by the 'Punch' magazine, featuring 'Mr Punch', in all sorts of amusing situations - one, I remember, on a bicycle, was titled; "Mr Punch, Awheel". We three youngsters found Uncle George *great fun*³³. Time he'd got to us, he'd sobered up - but, prior to that, while combing the district with his wares, having hired a bicycle for the job, he'd then got very

32 It transpires that Uncle George was married, but they only had a daughter.

33 Drink and good nature, often go together.

'tight' (drunk) - sustaining a nasty fall from the machine, he'd had to visit a hospital, where, himself able very accurately to diagnose the damage, he was given treatment for some broken fingers.

When I was still living with Grandpa in Newport (those halcyon days when presents to we youngsters were still quite something), one of my London Aunts and uncles had given me a very nice clockwork train, with a circular track - the only decent toy, thereafter, I ever had - I treasured it for years. Anyhow, I fitted it up on the table. Whereupon Uncle George hit upon the idea of giving a penny to the one who had guessed where the engine would stop each time it had been newly wound.

William Arthur Poppitt was the one who married the other sister, from the Vaults Hotel, in Newport. Between them, he and his wife Ann (my Auntie Annie) reared four children, three boys and a girl.

But enough of those more distant days of early child-hood, now let us re-join the story at the point where back in Gnosall after my overseas Canteen experiences, although armed with £300, the employment situation being as it was, I had had very little option but, jobwise, to throw in my lot with my Father and his hawking business - by which time May had become a chronic invalid and Mum & Dad were no longer young - the business, too, was rather a precarious affair.

When I returned home my parents were still living in the rented accommodation in the Wharf Road. It belonged to a Mr George Bancroft - with it, at the rear, went a field of 2 acres. Stabled in a shed, this, the pony grazed - his name was Tommy - a spiteful little animal, he was over fond of taking a nibble at my arm whenever I got close enough to him. I was never very partial to horses, and he seemed to sense it. I suppose there was in me a bit of that fear that sparks off the aggression in animals of which I have written elsewhere. Anyhow when I bought the motor van Thomas had to go. Incidentally Mr. Bancroft was one of the two village bakers. Wanting the

place we occupied for a married son, for some time, he had been pressing my folks either to buy it or move out - it was becoming unpleasant. The price was £850, which, for my pocket, was too high (my dad had no spare money) - although it was not dear, I needed to look around for something very much cheaper.

I eventually found it in the shape of a four roomed cottage down Radmore Lane in the Shellmore Valley. The Shellmore Valley is a delightfully scenic spot about 2 miles from Gnosall on the Newport side. The cottage was situated at the Valley's lowest, point, a point at which a stream marking the boundary between the Parishes of Gnosall³⁴ and Forton ran down and emptied itself into Aqualate Mere - man-made sheet of water of about 200 acres designed to grace Aqualate Hall and its environs. The Hall was the stately home of the Boughey Baronetcy - home of the Sir Thomas of that ilk mentioned in connection with the Vaults Hotel in the Square in Newport, way back in our story.

The stream running along the side of about $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre of ground and garden was culverted under the road to the side of the house before continuing its course down the Valley. The property belonged to a Mr. Parry and such were, by modern standards, the astoundingly low prices of that day that I bought it for £220 - 40 couples of laying hens, as a kind of goodwill gesture, being included in the deal. The place had only a few yards of frontage to the road. However there was a triangular piece of ground, divided from our land and garden by the stream, belonging to someone else which, if purchased, would have made the whole into a neat square, with an additional road frontage of about 25 yards - the brook running diagonally between the two properties.

This extra piece of ground enclosed, together with its garden, the piled

34 There, ours was the last house in that Parish.

remnants of an old burr-stone 'dwelling' - one similar to those awfully primitive home-made shelters that were to be found scattered about on the one-time Common lands of Great Britain before the harsh supposedly economic necessities of the Land Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th Centuries practically wiped them out. Misshapen hovels of one story, with packed-earth floors, they were divided as to living and sleeping areas by a blanket or some such flimsy a partition. I know of this because there used to be one of these nowadays disgustingly insanitary lairs still in use on one of my rounds. Here I feel I ought to mention that the owner of this extra bit of ground - a piece plenty big enough on which to build a new house with a sizeable garden - wrote saying I could have it for £15. This when we were 4 or 5 years into the Great Depression after the 1st Great War - I hadn't even that, nowadays, piffling amount of money to spare, so I had to turn the offer down. Imagine it, a piece of land in an ideal country setting, with a road frontage of 25 yards, large enough on which to build, the price of which the, Australian equivalent, in those times would have been A\$30.00. Financially, in my youth, they truly were grim days for the vast majority.

The old woman occupying that burr-stone relic of a bygone age was looked after by a Granddaughter, who, with a boy-friend often in attendance was generally there whenever I called. Bed-ridden, with dirty pieces of old linen masking suppurating leg-sores the old lady had that look of utter despair in her sunken rheumy eyes that in an earlier part of this story I have ascribed to that old Irish woman drawing water at the public street-tap in the slum part of Newport.

Long gone into disuse and now swept away there used to be some of these shanties on the Hollies Common in Gnosall when I was young. William Cobbett in that famous survey of the English Countryside, "Rural Rides", written in 1830, must have had much to say about these old home-built dwellings, dotted about the many common-lands of that time.

It was before the full-blast of the Industrial Revolution had struck - before that huge exodus of the country-folk to the Mines and the Mills of the towns. In those days these primitive homes would have been occupied not only by the aged, but by young and able-bodied men and women, people both healthy and happy. Happy because happiness, as has been very wisely said, is largely a state of mind - what one has never had it may be said one can never miss - healthy because they were country dwellers - content, because with access to the grazing right of the commons, which they shared, able to keep a cow or two, some pigs and poultry, etc., to cultivate a big garden, they enjoyed a situation of 'smiling plenty'. Moreover such a scene bred people of sturdy independence - men and women, no matter how rough and ready their manner of dress and speech - beholden to no grand seignior - tasting the simple dignity of true freedom.

But back to the cottage in Radmore Lane. With only two small bedrooms it was much too small - I had to share a bed with my father - May, the other one of my two sisters then living at home, slept with Mother. I suppose this very cramped situation lasted for about three months, for in June, on my arrival in Gnosall from overseas, in the Village War Memorial Institute, I met the girl who very soon after was to become my wife. She, Edith Mildred Friend (Milly) was such a lively little (she stood about 5 feet) bit of young womanhood that it soon became evident that we would be very happy in 'double harness'. Her Mum, Sarah, the dear old soul was also a very remarkable woman. Milly, later 'the wife', was the last of a family of ten - 3 boys & 7 girls - she, Milly, working for a *firm of solicitors*³⁵ in Newport was the only one still living at home. So since by this time 'my sweetheart' and I had become very sure of ourselves, it soon became apparent that she and I ought to get married. Truth to tell, apart from the fondness Milly and I had found for each other the move on my part would

³⁵ The senior partner of which died, would you believe, without leaving a will.

do away with the very over-crowded living conditions at my own parents. Thus after the usual 'Publishing of the Banns', my fiancé and I were joined together in Gnosall Church. What a happy union it proved to be. My wife and all her brothers and sisters were born in Gnosall (the record of the family Friend, goes back in the Parish Church - St. Lawrence - Register of births, deaths and marriages to the time of the first Elizabeth - no doubt long before that, since such 'plebeian' records were not officially kept until round about 1650).

The Gnosall Friends were a family of shoe makers - skilled artisans known as 'Cordwainers' - one of the old father-to-son cottage industries that existed before mass production came into being. Actually although working in their homes, these boot and shoe makers were employed, in the case of Gnosall, by one or other of the leather-factors in Stafford. In those days, I'm told most of them would walk to Stafford (7 miles away) collect the leather and a week later return it in the shape of the finished product - usually managing to complete four pairs of footwear in that time. It is still possible to get hand sewn footwear - my wife never wore anything else to the end of her days. For their industry the workers received five shillings a pair - a return which supplemented with the produce of a large garden kept the more provident ones, like those of the common-dwelling community, content, well fed and housed. The less provident - drawing their pay on a Saturday, were wont to carouse on a Monday (indeed it had come to be known as 'Cobblers Monday') - a practice which, since by it they missed a days work, only served to increase their improvidence.

Although the industrialisation of the shoe industry came late onto the manufacturing scene, its forerunner, the cottage side, didn't peter out until the early part of the present century. My father-in-law whom I never knew (he died in 1916) was in fact still plying his trade up to 1911, when, falling from a damson tree while reaching for the odd plum, he so badly injured himself that he had to take to his bed for the remaining few years of his life.

Allying myself to the Friend family was the best days work I ever did. Sarah friend, nee Hill, had been a widow for 7 years when I came into the family in 1923. Not only did she own a very nice six roomed home, "Newtown House", in the rank Gnosall, but kept a remarkably good table - prior to her marriage she had been a *professional cook*³⁶.

During our brief courting session I'd sampled my future Main-law's culinary delights and were they something, I'll say - especially her pastry: apple pie, gooseberry pie, young rabbit pie (preferably cold), particularly her mince pies- 36 to the pound of flour and as light as thistle down - with a glass of Sherry or Port - what better!

By the way I mustn't give all the praise for cooking to Sarah Friend for among the cooks of her immediate descendants. her daughter-in-law Sally Friend was no mean exponent of the Art of Cuisine - it lives on untarnished, for example in Sally' daughter, Milly if ever you have the good fortune to be a guest at No. 6 Dearnsdale Close, Stafford, the home of Margaret, Milly and Stan__, you'll well understand what I mean. [37](#)

During Sarah Friend's widowhood, the family home in Newtown had missed a man about the house - I well remember how pleased she was when I began to take over the cultivation of the garden. Although not in bad shape (no doubt kept reasonably tidy by son William), it lacked that Johny-on-the-spot attention which I, who was fond of gardening, could give it. For a while I grew vegetables - but later on, well and truly in the fruit a vegetable trade as we then were, it had become evident that such things were, so to say "coals to Newcastle" - whereupon, I turned the garden over to lawns and flower borders. This, much to the delight of my Schoolmaster brother-in-law, Walter Loffill, who, starved of such beauty at home, frequently sang its

36 An expertise that has continued into the 2nd and 3rd generation of her female descendants.

37 The later mentioned, Mr. & Mrs. Talbot.

praises when, as they often did, he his wife Nellie, and their three children (Reg, James (Jim) & Dorothy (Perkins) came from the Potteries, (only 14 miles away) to visit. Indeed since Newtown House was the old Friend home, the place where most of my brothers and sisters in law were born, it 'our home', was always open-house to them all - we always had as much joy from their visits to us as they had in making them. The Friend family was indeed a clan. The three boys were named John (Jack), William (Bill) and James (Jim). The girls were Emily (the first born) the rest, not necessarily strictly in that order, were Susan, Kate, Daisy, Alice, Nellie and my Milly. They're all gone now - I'm 'the last of the Mohicans' so to speak. Indeed at least one of my nieces, Margaret, is already well into her 80's and 'still going strong' - there are quite a few of these 'junior' members in their mid-seventies.

This year 1989, I've just spent five months in England - how good it was to see them all again and how well they looked after me, bless 'em! Jack friend, his wife Sally and their family always entertained my family, Milly, me and our two boys, right royally, over the Christmas break, for years, in Stafford - what memories those festivities evoke. What happy days! We were particularly close!

There were four in Jack & Sally's family, the aforementioned Margaret, her sister, Milly (Mildred Eileen) now married to Stanley Talbot (brother to Gladys - Mrs. Dutton) who with her hubby lives in the same block of flats as I in Waterloo, N.S.W. (29 stories - they're on the 9th floor and I'm on the 1st).

What a small world - at one time Gladys and I lived in the same Village, Gnosall - eleven years younger than me, a friend of my niece, Milly Friend - when they were teenagers together they used to push our two boys, John & Frank, around in a 'push chair' ('stroller' in the Aussie vernacular). Small world indeed - a regular Gnosall-in-Sydney situation - we so enjoy each

other's company - Mr. Dutton (Lawrence) is my Crib-mate - Gladys gives me a friendly arm whenever we're out together in the city. Besides the two girls, there were two boys Jack (John junior) and George - unhappily they have both passed away. Grand lads, both, we were real pals. Jack only made 56 leaving a wife, Pamela (Pam) nee Rose, and a daughter Gillian - Pam's a grand lass and is now a Grandma with two grandchildren, Richard the elder and Johan - a girl of about eight who has a rooted aversion to being kissed- something, since, as I've said, as youngsters, we never were, and about which I also am therefore not too keen.

George went on to be almost 80 - he no doubt would have lasted longer had he not have been badly knocked about at the Co'op shop in Eccleshall (a shop of which he was the manager) after he had returned there in the evening and had surprised some burglars - going from a lighted area to a dark storeroom, and so completely blinded he was brutally assaulted and left to stagger out for help into the Pub, opposite. Fortunately the intruders were later apprehended and were given a well-deserved seven years, a piece.

Prior to going to Eccleshall, George was manager at the Co'op shop in Gnosall. This was in his single days, before he, married Nellie, nee Bray - during which time he lived in the week with us at Newtown House - going to his parents in Stafford at weekends.

On the two days when I was at home in the shop, Monday, & Tuesday, (I didn't start my rounds until Wednesday) I saw George at least at meal times. Equally keen devotees of the ancient game of Cribbage - the cards were kept in an old pewter teapot, and did we enjoy ourselves. Mates though we were, in those games, as befits it, there was no quarter given - just one of those simple pleasures, but how they satisfy!

But once more I am rather pre-empting (a word politicians have become over fond of using) - so to get back to my newly-married state.

On May the 8th, 1924, John Henry Poppitt was born and exactly 12 months and 12 days later, his brother Donald Frank arrived. With memories of my Great-grandfather Joe's remarkable feat of procreation, my dear mother looked at me, on the occasion of this 2nd arrival, very worriedly, asking: 'how many children are you going to have?' As it transpired there was no need for alarm - the Great Depression was well underway - the times were anything but propitious for larger families - we were at full stretch trying to rear two - two it remained.

When our boys were about 3 & 4, 'Granny' Friend died. Along with two other small houses, she owned the place in which we lived - an estate which yielded enough through my wife's share to enable us to find 250 of the £300 needed for us to own it. I was able to take out a mortgage for the £50 required and it was a sign of the economic situation that it took us 3 years to pay it off - I say 'us' rather than 'me' -our living was a remarkably joint effort, always.

Our boys, John and Frank, until they were of secondary school age at 11 went to the Village Infant & Primary Schools. At the secondary school age, John won an open-Scholarship valid at either Newport or Stafford - he chose Newport. Frank didn't get a scholarship, but since Gnosall was adjudged to be within the prescribed 5 mile radius of Newport, anyway, it didn't really matter - he qualified automatically for a free place at A.G.S.

Our two boys were going to school at Newport long before, utterly stupidly, in those days of increasingly-congested highways, the branch line from Stafford to Wellington was torn-up. So in their younger days they commuted to school by rail - latterly, to make the five mile ride on bicycles.

In a previous part of our account we had left our two sons John and Frank Poppitt finished with A.G.S., the former to go to Nottingham University and the latter to the Royal Air Force.

Born in 1925, Frank, of military age in May of 1943, exercising the choice recruits then had, opted for the Air Force he had already been in the School Air Cadet Corps. Remaining in England throughout the remainder of 1943 and almost the whole of 1944, it was while enjoying a Christmas leave of 14 days in 1944, with all of us as usual at Auntie Sally's in Stafford, that Frank, only having spent three days of that leave, received a telegram ordering him to report back immediately to his unit for duty overseas. Initially they hadn't any idea as to where they were going. Although, embarking at Liverpool, it was almost certain they were crossing the Atlantic. Their immediate destination proved to be the Panama Canal - by which time it had become clear (there were some 'Aussies' aboard, too) that they were bound for Australia. Arriving in Sydney, they were posted to Camden, a sizeable town with an adjacent aerodrome - the buildings of that wartime camp are nearly all gone but the runways are still there - it is now used for light civil aircraft and as a gliding centre.

Camden is within easy reach of Sydney - so, naturally, that wonderful city was a Mecca to which those Royal Air Force personnel gravitated on each and every possible occasion - this is where Mabel Nunn and her husband Jack began to come into the picture, particularly Mabel - she it was, who was the dominant half of that partnership - by the use of such a rather unsavoury word as 'dominant' it needs to be realised that what any of us are, character-wise, is largely a matter of our home environment - so sorry Mabel! I was fond of you. I understand that Mr. and Mrs. Nunn had been giving hospitality at their home in Lindfield to Royal Air Force boys for some time. One of these young English chaps, a boy named Eric, having become rather friendly with Thea (the Nunn's younger daughter) was a frequent visitor to the house. On such an occasion it was suggested that the next time he came he bring along a friend - Frank Poppitt was the only one he could persuade, to accept that particular invitation. What a thing is chance! Through that acceptance, Frank met Miss Thea Rhodes Nunn, the young

lady of 19 who was later to become his wife. However knowing next to nothing about Frank's family background (she evidently liked the clean cut look of him in his English Air Force blue, he was obviously a personable young man) Mabel was taking no chances - the younger of her two daughters future happiness was at stake, Eula, the other one, 10 years older, was already safely 'off the shelf'. So, with this vetting in mind, Mabel began to write to my wife, Franks mother, in England. Above all it seemed she needed to be satisfied that we Poppitt's were not Catholics. Satisfying herself in that 'major' regard, Frank must have been given the green light, for soon afterwards we got word from him that he and Thea were engaged. They were still only engaged when, the war having ended, & Frank, having been posted to Egypt, had opted when demobilised to return to Australia rather than to the U.K.

Demobilised in Egypt Frank's unit had had to be re-enlisted there - a necessity almost without precedent - once 'demobbed' they were no longer Air Force personnel and thus no longer entitled to accommodation, pay, food, etc., - they had become civilians. All of which had been brought about by the extra ordinary length of time it was taking their particular ship to arrive from England - it transpired that the vessel had been held-up for eight weeks due to a strike at that end. Finally it turned up and with Frank back again in Australia, he and Thea got married. By all accounts and judging by the photographs, it was quite a sumptuous affair - one that befitted the Nunn's of Lindfield - 'they were not just any bodies' - almost, in fact, on a par with the Poppitt's of Newport or the Hawley's of Manurewa.

But seriously, sarcasm being accepted to be the lowest form of wit, for what it's worth (never forgetting, to quote again the Burnsian maxim: 'The rank is but the guinea stamp, etc.', the Nunn's senior were a minor power in the land - they owned a nice home in Lindfield and a very thriving ironmongery business there. They, too, like the Poppitt's had a very strong entrepreneurial streak - they left behind quite a bit of money - as no doubt

will their son in law, Bob Soutter - married to Eula - Thea's older sister - 10 years her senior. Eula's eldest daughter Jan, for the record, has long been married to Chris Carter who's farming a property of some 20,000 acres close to his father-in-law Bob, who also lives in Gunnedah, N.S.W..

Please don't read any personal bias into any of this - the young Carters, Jan & Chris, although I seem to have lost contact are a very nice down-to-earth couple - years ago I grew particularly fond of Jan. It was before she was married only 30 miles apart, we often exchanged visits - our families spent many lively hours together - nearly thirty years ago now - since when we seem to have lost touch - pity! Friendship, as I seem to be so often saying, is such a very precious thing.

Frank and Thea had two children, Alan and Julie - now long grown up. Alan & Ellen, his wife, a Brisbane girl, have three children - identical twin boys, Adrian and Mark, and a sister Jenna, the youngest.

Alan is working with the C.S.I.R.O. (Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation), a federally funded concern that exists to bring the application of new ideas in Science to the needs of Agriculture, and Industry, generally. Because I profess to believe that such 'know how' relatively is not over important, I perhaps shouldn't have written this, but after all he is a clever chap and we, especially his Dad, are quite proud of him. It certainly will never go to his head. His wife Ellen is also quite 'clued-up' - she holds down a post in the Taxation Department. Julie, Alan's sister, trained as a teacher - now married with three lovely children, (Rebecca (Becky) Emma and James, in that order); dear girl presently, on a part-time basis, she is on call, as and when required, to teach. She's a grand little house keeper, mother and wife. Ian Hawley, her husband is a 'bonza bloke' a New Zealander - teaching I believe in a city Technical College - they live at Umina - 25 miles or so up the coast from Sydney.

In addition to these grandchildren and great grandchildren, 'down under', I

have two grandsons, aged 40 also identical twins, Michael and Philip Poppitt. They're from 'up over' (England). Michael I'm informed is the senior by 10 minutes. Married to an Indonesian girl named Ayu he lives over the Bridge on the North Shore. Philip is a very capable house painter-unmarried, he lives with his Aunt Thea and Uncle Frank in Artarmon on the North Shore, over the same *Harbour Bridge*³⁸. He is in business on his own account.

When I arrived here by ship, (the S.S. ORANJE) from Southampton in March of '59, I went for a time (about 11 years) to live with Frank, Thea and family in Cootamundra. "Coota", for the benefit of my relations in England, is in the south west area of N.S.W., only about 100 miles from Canberra (our Capital seat of the Federal Parliament), which in this country of such vast distances is, so to say, almost next door - we were often there in our "Coota" days.

So much presently for the Australian part of my family - now let's return to the former English scene. After the opening of the W.E.A. Class in Gnosall I began to live in two worlds, as it were - the hectic world of long business hours and the academic world of books and study - it began to exact its toll. Suddenly (not realising the causes - I was burning the candle at both ends) my bowel movements became for a very brief spell, the colour of printers ink. At that time I was young, very active and otherwise very well, so it went away and I thought no more about it - although I was aware that I was pushing myself, work wise, - particularly on a Wednesday, a very heavy day, when, selling mainly fish, I was obliged, starting at 6:00am, to rush around in an endeavour to get to as many customers as possible in time for lunch. Almost invariably I ended the day with a blinding headache, after which I was violently sick. Years afterwards, it was in 1970, when I had

38 Known as the Coathanger, by reason, if only on such a vast scale, of its remarkable likeness to that everyday little item.

gone to help my son in a News agency in Stanmore, Sydney, and by the very nature of that very strenuous employment, (long hours and a minimum of sleep) I had again put myself under excessive strain. Without warning, I haemorrhaged so badly that I was rushed off to hospital, given blood transfusions, and was in intensive care for a week. However that trouble responded to treatment, that is, they didn't have to operate - my good general constitution must again have come to the rescue, so that after a further spell in an ordinary ward, being put on a strict diet, gradually I got back to something like my old self - can now eat almost anything within reason. That was 19 years ago, and, again thanks be, by taking it quietly, while continuing to write and try to propagate my work, I'm reasonably fit again - indeed as I've already said I am finding life very very rich.

Although so many years ago that bowel - trouble of about 1936 was undoubtedly a red-light warning of possibly much more serious trouble to come. All of which bears out my contention that worry not work is the killer - take it quietly - always remembering that, relatively, material wealth is unimportant - after all we can't take any of it with us when we fade out - mostly useless advice when so much modern ill health stems from the stress and worry of the economic systems, especially in the West, the 'Free World'. We are all more or less victims of the economic environment. But enough of John Sydney and his physical troubles - in any case it's only written to try to underline the urgent necessity for mankind to start to adopt the radically different outlook on life that has become the chief burden, in that regard, of another story of his.

At which point I propose to take the reader back again to the Northern Hemisphere - to Gnosall in particular. It may be remembered that it was in 1927 when a W.E.A. branch was started in the Staffordshire Village of Gnosall. In 1928 I was elected into the honorary office of Class Secretary. It was there, in that class, that my ideas of a 'brave new world' began to germinate - let me tell how. But first let me tell what triggered them off.

In 1926, a year before the Gnosall W.E.A. Classes began, a well-known philosopher, the late Professor C.E.M. JOAD, had given a series of talks on that subject over the then infant radio - they were at a popular level. At about the same time he had also published a paperback, 'Philosophy for Everyman' or some such title. Having heard or subsequently read these items, it must have begun to dawn on me that, since the Greeks, i.e. at its inception, Philosophy had been conducting itself on a basis of entirely opposed outlooks on life. Supposedly inevitably Mankind was behaviourally dominated by mainly each-for-itself, i.e. animal urges, the so called human nature or original sin. At the same time it was absurdly believed that in those nonsensical circumstances it was possible for them to cooperate politically or in some other way³⁹ i.e. sufficiently behaviourally each to consider every other, in order to create, via a working democracy, a situation of continuous individual freedom of self-expression for all. This dichotomy patently is the height of absurdity - in that situation, i.e. of an age-old conflict of outlooks on life, there never was, is not, and never can be a true democracy!

In the first three years of the Gnosall Class, as beginners, we browsed about among subjects of more popular appeal - by which time the group had become firmly established. Meanwhile, always at the back of my mind had lain this problem of the absurd conflict of basic outlooks on life that was still masquerading as the only possible guide to life. Thus, no one having any ideas to the contrary, I was able to have my say at the Annual General Meeting when the topic for the following season was always chosen. There, keen to try to unravel our continuing conflict of guides to behaviour I moved and got approval for a three year course in Political Theory. As a result, although entirely unaware of my purpose the Class found itself committed to the very ambitious venture of a three year course of study at Tutorial Class

39 Religion, for example.

level. Ambitious was the word! In a small Village, 12 students, at that the highest level of study, had pledged themselves to a two-thirds attendance for the full three year course. The subject chosen being Political Theory - we really had dived in at the deep end. Fortunately (again as with a brief foray into Economics) we had a very lively tutor - John A. MACK, a Balliol double-first - he too, was able to make the subject sufficiently interesting. Thus, to my blessed relief, we were able to earn the very much more substantial grant from the L.E.A. (Local Education Authority) that the course required-not to have done so, since Oxford would have then had to foot the bill - not only thus was badly letting them down but by putting the Class in very bad odour, jeopardised its existence. Although to me at least this initial attempt at solving our age-old philosophical dilemma proved very interesting it did nothing to secure that purpose. Therefore at the next A.G.M., I proposed and got agreement for another three year course. Again we earned the grant. Actually, in our fairly off-beat Village situation we were never visited by an L.E.A. Inspector. So, reckoning the end to justify the means, although on occasion I had been compelled 'slightly' to falsify the Register, it was never known.

This second three year escapade had been in the bases of Economics. It was conducted by the same London School of Economics Graduate, Professor E.F.M. Durbin. Although it proved very valuable when I came to write the full story, it was a dry-as-dust subject-except, of course to a dedicated 'lunatic' (one mad enough to be searching for the causes and answers to our age-old outlook dilemma), such as I. In fact that 2nd three-year course signalled the end of such ventures in the Gnosall Class. They'd had enough! Later, I myself found it useful. Fortunately for the pursuit of my endeavours, a class in Philosophy was being advertised to take place the following year, at the same three year level, in the County town of Stafford - only 7 miles away. I presently got myself enrolled and, through hail, rain, frost and snow, saw the thing through without missing a meeting. Meantime

the Gnosall Class had reverted to the simpler one-year studies. This adventure into 'Philosophy' (philosophy of the orthodox variety), in terms of that for which I was looking, i.e. an answer to the age-old outlook - dilemma, proved completely unrewarding. All it did was to make more obvious the dichotomy (one which any history of the subject will support), a solution to which was the only object of the three year exercise. I began to realise that, if one existed, the solution, must lie in Psychology. Incidentally, these two separate classes met on different nights, weekly - Gnosall on Mondays and Stafford on Wednesdays. In fact, the necessity to switch to Stafford, and the opportunity to do so, began to appear so providential that had I been less of a rationalist, I might have begun to believe in some divine intervention.

Again fortuitously (so much so that it again savours of the occult), the following year the Stafford Class was advertising another three year series of lectures - this time in Psychology. Dr Lance Jones (Balliol) was the tutor for this and the class in Philosophy. Again I joined. At long last, my persistence began to pay-off. In fact, at the end of that final three years, it had become very clear that the answer to Man's age-old, increasingly fratricidal and potentially genocidal 'inhumanity to man' lay in an understanding, on a world wide scale, of the composition and workings of the behaviour-creating machinery in the human mind. That mechanism, it is all important to the happiness and survival of the Race to realise, is entirely amoral - is substantially common to both animal and man.

Understanding this, and in consequence, beginning to allow Reason to assume its natural role as the controller, through the Force of Habit, of that amoral machinery, given the consistent subscription to a sane (single) outlook on life, an outlook along truly democratic lines, one based on consideration for all others, the way will become wide open to the creation of a maximum of equal individual freedom, via a world-wide democracy - the only possible true-kind.

All of which, for those interested in the deeper aspects of life, prompt me to say that in support of such beliefs, I have written a work, entitled, "Mankind at the Crossroads, on the Highway to Happiness". This work, the outcome of a lot of academic study, is an attempt, by outlining all the basic facts, to create a yardstick, which will enable the reader to think for himself or herself - in fact, it's a guide to living at its best. It is quite short, and, being entirely academic, has no axe to grind. Obtainable, presently, only from the Author, at the address given at the end of this work, priced at A\$7.00 per copy, it is a work that should be in use, as a text-book, for social studies, in all schools.

But, although those things, so basic to the happiness and survival of the human species, necessarily, are of much greater importance, because this present work purports, mainly, to be a record of the lives and times of the Family Poppitt, during the last 7 generations, methinks, I'd better get back to it.

It had taken almost 2 years, to return to England all the different stores that had become surplus to requirements, in France, at the end of the First War. Thus, in June of 1921, I found myself back in the U.K., again - back again with the prospect of finding work (we were about to enter the Great Depression), even more dim than it had been in 1919. However, once more, 'Canteen Service' came to my rescue. It was in the shape of employment, on the same recruitment terms, as hitherto, namely, enlistment in the Royal Army Service Corps, again a purely nominal disciplinary undertaking - one which, in fact, was so loosely binding that we always had power to break-contract, and return home, at any time - one, however, which, since we were given a substantial pay-bonus, at the end of a 2 year contract, nevertheless, kept us all, more or less, anchored to the job. This time it was in Egypt.

The British Army, then, was still in occupation of Egypt, and the Sudan, (it

was in the June of 1921), when we embarked on the 'S.S. ORMUZ', from Southampton, for Alexandria. What a memorable adventure that sea voyage was - very much in the manner of an expensive pleasure cruise. Anyone, who has been in the Mediterranean in June, may know what I mean. After we entered it, going through the two headlands, with Gibraltar on the one side, and Morocco on the other (promontories, known classically as the Pillars of Hercules) - guarding that ancient waterway - only about 20 miles apart. Once through, we hugged the North African Coast, for a long time, enabling me to get my first glimpse of the Arab World, with its flat, whitewashed buildings, and the occasional Mosque, with its tall, slender minarets, and peculiar, large rounded domes.

Although we were about ten miles from the coast, it was amazing, in that extraordinarily clear light, how plain the whole scene was. But, nowadays, travel wise, the World has become such an open oyster, so to speak, that all this has now become quite commonplace. In fact, aren't we in danger of becoming too blasé about such things - indeed, in our search, always for the 'greener grass over the fence', nothing truly satisfies, so that life is gradually losing its savour. But, steady, Sydney, or you'll be in the realms of philosophy, again - which is quite another story!

In the June of which I write, amazingly, it is no exaggeration to say that the Mediterranean Sea was so calm, as to be like a sheet of glass - not a ripple stirred the surface, only the prow of the ship, bisecting 'that huge mill-pond' forward, and the broadening tumult of swirling white-water, from the threshing propellers, disappearing in the distance aft. Otherwise, the almost uncanny stillness of the water was broken only by the odd whale, rising to 'blow', the porpoises leaping from the depths, in perfect semi-circles, seemingly, showily to illustrate their faultless diving skills. The flying fish that, from time to time, left the water in great shoals, as they winged their way over the placid surface for many yards on end - just another novelty that springs to mind. But here I feel I must tell more of 'the good ship' S.S.

ORMUZ.

It may be known that, at the end of the 1st Great War, as a part of reparations, the German Navy, together with the bulk of her merchant fleet, was taken over by the British. The newly named 'ORMUZ' was a part of that take over. It is now a matter of history that, due to the slackness of the authorities, a skeleton German crew, left on those warships, by removing plates from the underwater structure, were able to scuttle them all, in the night - this while they were lying at anchor, in Scapa Row, in Scotland. What a shock that must have been to their captors - the might of Germany's Navy, which had been on show, only the previous day, come the following morning, was nowhere to be seen. What a news headline for the Press that must have been!

The S.S. ORMUZ, category wise, was a different kettle of fish. As a civilian craft, she was confiscated as a part of the German Merchant Marine. However, she was only of 2,000 tons. In fact, she had been the Kaiser's Royal Yacht. Resplendent with a figure-head, a bow sprit, a funnel, that large-yacht-fashion, spread out at the top, like a sailor's bell-bottomed trousers, she was quite something to see - even from the outside.

On the inside, as befitted her Royal function, she was most luxuriously appointed. The interior decor was splendid in the extreme. Oak panelling etc., etc., in all the state rooms. However, in keeping with her Royal purpose, she was only capable of 11 knots. This meant that the normal eleven days from Southampton to Egypt, took us fifteen - calling at Gibraltar, Toulon, Naples and Malta en-route. In such a superb vessel, with such glorious weather, my claim to describe it as 'a pleasant cruise', can be well understood.

The only passengers were ourselves and a number of Naval Officers returning from leave in the U.K, to their ships in Alexandria. Among such a gathering, musical talent abounded, and if one has never listened to a piece

of music from one of the popular Italian Operas, played on string instruments, in the moonlight, with the sea acting as a wonderful sounding-board, I'll say, one has never lived!

In Egypt we were brought back to earth with a bump. For pleasure, one should never go to Egypt, in June - it is high summer - very high! After about a fortnight in billets in Alexandria, well bitten at night with mosquitoes, we were moved to a place called Kantara, on the Suez Canal. It was then a military depot, on the Sinai Desert side of that waterway. Immediately across it, a pontoon-bridge served as a connecting link to the desert itself. The railway to Palestine also began there. It was here that I got my first real taste of desert heat 120° in the shade, on the old scale - so hot that I began to wonder what on Earth, of my own free will, I was doing there. However, I was young, 21, and one soon gets used to such things, moreover, the sun gets less fierce about 4.00 pm, and with the canal only about quarter of a mile away, we were able to take a dip. in the briny on most days. Incidentally, with very primitive fishing gear, an uncooked prawn, a hook, a line and a bit of cork for a float, one was soon yanking out fish (a chubby sort, about 1 1/2 lb each) in sufficient quantities, to fix-up the Mess, with a very tasty meal.

While in Egypt, I was always engaged in clerical work - started in accounts, and ended up as a cashier, in the Canal Zone - a job that gave me a lot of satisfaction, particularly as it meant more pay. It was also notable that, during it, I first made contact with the metric system, and revelled in the ease in which, by shifting the dots, one soon struck a balance - the Egyptian pound was then one £1 & sixpence, in English currency - there were 10 milliemes to the piastre, and 100 piastres to the Egyptian pound. All of which was a little bedevilled, by the few Indian rupees, that came in from a Gurkha Regiment from time to time. Anyway, it added spice to the job. Ishmalia was a small Egyptian town, further down the Canal. It had an N.A.A.F.I. canteen - I got a call from the manager, asking if I could handle

£10 worth of English copper that had accumulated there, and of which he was unable to dispose. Realising that our Bank in Port Said would accept it (they could ship it back to England from there) I agreed to collect it.

Now £10 worth of copper is quite heavy, as will presently be seen. Anyhow, telling the khaki-clad colleague of mine, who had gone along with me to Ishmalia to help carry it, to meet me later at the station there, I set out for the canteen, and picked up the money - it was in a kit bag. Now such a weight, in such a long bag, when slung quickly around a shoulder, creates a lot of centrifugal force - so much so that, when back at the station my mate did just that, it caused him to stagger about, whereupon, he having primed himself with a beer or two, two Military Policemen, wrongly considering him to be drunk, promptly took him in charge. That poor unfortunate had to spend the night in the 'Cooler', (a military police cell). Remonstrate, as I vigorously did, it was all to no avail, but at least, I was allowed to hang onto the cash. That was about the only time, during my four years of masquerade as a soldier, that I, or anyone else I knew, fell foul of the Military Police.

There was, however, another incident of a very different kind that stays firmly in my mind as a part of those far-off Egyptian days. I was in hospital, with a bout of sandfly fever - so the Officer in charge at Kantara, had deputized someone else to do my job. The trips to the bank in Port Said, (that place being about 45 miles by rail from *Kantara*⁴⁰) required to be made, with about E£10,000, each time, about twice a week. My stand-in, the silly fellow, supposedly having taken the money to the bank, on one of those trips, rang from Port Said saying he had been assaulted and robbed on the train. The Officer's reaction was immediately to search the fellow's kit, and there the money was found.

40 Kantara is about halfway along the canal - it's 90 miles long.

There was no prosecution - one certainly did not condemn a Britisher to an Egyptian gaol - the culprit was simply sent home, minus the end-of-contract bonus, and with a rather nasty blemish on his character. Ethical considerations apart, the stupid man would have swindled much more effectively if he had used an accomplice to hide away the loot. After all, E£10,000, or English, was a heck of a lot of 'filthy lucre', in those days - at the then, ultra-sound investment return of only 5% it would have produced, roughly, £10 per week. It certainly, come to think of it, was a rather tempting idea, but somehow, it never even occurred to me - I wouldn't have had the nerve anyway.

It occurs that there is still one other rather notable incident that I ought to relate. It concerns the then Prince of Wales, later, for so brief a spell, to be Edward the Eighth. It was in 1921, aboard the Battleship 'Reknown', he was passing through Port Said on his way home to England after a visit to Australia.

Now at that time, due to the rather fragile nature of the sandy terrain which borders the Suez Canal, ordinary commercial vessels were restricted to round about 30,000 tons. However, the Renown was a monster of 45,000 tons, so that, permission having been given for it to pass through, it had to do so very, very slowly. Despite such precaution, although safely through the Canal when it entered Port Said, so great was the wash it created, that a ship tied-up at the quayside snapped her cable, whereupon the frayed hauser whiplashed across the jetty and took the leg off a very unfortunate man, who happened to be one of the onlookers.

It may also be of interest to say that the canteen, aboard the Renown, needing a replenishment of stores, I was given the privilege of going aboard to oversee its delivery. I was very young then, as I have said, and it was quite a thrill, at that time, to be associated, if only in such a small way,

with such an evidence of Britain's might; *Dei Gra Brit Omn Rex, Ind Imp*⁴¹, it has to be remembered, was still on all our coins. After about 12 months, initially in Kantara, I was transferred to Alexandria. During a leave there I had met the Depot Manager, a Mr. Newton Hinder, and having wanted to get away from the heat and the flies etc., of the Desert, asked for, and was granted the move to that city - he, Mr. Hinder, having the power it seemed to arrange it. Latterly, he and I became great friends - in fact, when later on, we were both moved to the Canteen Depot in Port Said, we two shared a very nicely furnished flat, but that bit belongs to a subsequent part of this story - I mustn't 'jump the gun'.

What a fascinating place is Alexandria. Here the East starts to come alive in all the stark contrasts of its poverty and riches. Still in khaki, the English Canteen Staff, those on contract, of which I was a member, were housed and fed at the N.A.A.F.'s expense in a large house, quite near to the docks - docks, incidentally, to which entry was gained by numbered gates - ours, I remember, was No. 6, or in Arabic, Bab: Sitta. We walked to and from our billet to work each morning - we only worked from 7.00am to 12.00 noon - this to avoid the intense heat of the early afternoon sun. It was a walk that involved our passing through the narrow streets of the old city. At that time it was an amazingly new adventure. Nowadays, with the advent of television, it is so often seen that it would be a waste of time for me to describe it. Suffice it therefore to say, here, that in their long white robes, topped with red fezzes, together with the ladies in their veils, and all that goes on in the workaday world, in those narrow streets, one was looking on a scene that, substantially, was the same as Christ or any of the prophets would have known.

Discounting the abject poverty that went cheek by jowl, with all the

⁴¹ By the Grace of God, King of all British Territories, Emperor of India.

splendour, Egypt never failed to fascinate me. Although the clamour for national independence was starting to arise, at that time, there was no trouble other than the obviously rude remarks of youngsters (not really understood, since they were always mouthed in Arabic), who, now and again, would run alongside the four wheeled pony-drawn vehicles (Gharries, as they were called - open carriages, at that time, there, they were the only form of taxi), in which we loved to ride around - they were a real hangover from Victorian times. The ponies, always two, with a pole between, were generally emaciated specimens - so much so that what savoured of one of the Buster Keeton comedies took place when one of our chaps, before paying the driver, nonchalantly and successfully hooked his hat onto the bony haunch of the nearest of those two animals.

After about six months, tiring of the roomy, well furnished, but giant cockroach-ridden accommodation in that old part of the City, we fairly new arrivals in Egypt applied for and were allowed quarters in a very modern coastal area. It was a newly built block of high-rise flats, looking out over the sea - we were given a whole floor to ourselves - there were about twenty of us. Thus, with a native cook and a couple of servants, who went along with us, we were really sitting pretty.

For me, this very happy situation was only to last about six months. At the end of which time, I and my friend Mr. Newton Hinder, were both moved to Port Said - he to manage the Depot there, and I to deal with the shipping - the bulk of our supplies came through there. In the meantime, I'd opted out of the military side of my contract and become purely a civilian. Our friendship by this time firmly established, Hinder and I agreed to share a well-furnished flat in the main street, in Port Said. An arrangement which went on smoothly for the following six months, when, our contracts ending in June of 1923, I returned by ship to the U.K. Newton leaving to take up a new post with the N.A.A.F.I. in Constantinople. I've long lost touch with that friend - in any case, older than me, he'd be dead by now. Our times

together are some of my happiest memories. He played the piano beautifully - hailing from Clifton, near Bristol he was a boon companion. Back in England again, the old job problem was then worse than ever. Anyhow, while abroad, I had saved what for those days, was a tidy sum, namely £300. Since the end of the war, the job as Barrack Warden, having ended with it, my father had been eking out a living by hawking fish and a few canned goods around the Village of Gnosall and the surrounding district, with a pony and cart. I could see nothing for it but to lend a hand. So scrapping the pony and cart, I bought a second hand van, fitted it up with shelves etc., and with this bit of up-dating to his hawking activities, we were in business as J.H. Poppitt & Son. In addition to his rounds in Gnosall and district, my father had been selling country produce in Stafford Market, since the end of the War - it was to this set-up of long hours, for very poor returns that, all through the years of the Great Depression, between the two Great Wars, I found myself committed. It was a period when, like Mr. Micawber, income of 20/- & 6 pence and expenditure of 20/- meant happiness, while income of 19/6 and expenditure of 20/- spelt misery. By dint of very long hours, much work, and worry, we kept ourselves afloat until, with the advent of the 2nd Great War, ironically enough, we began to make money.

However, the 2nd War ended, we were back in the old 'survival of the fittest' routine - long hours, increasing strain, both for the wife and I (Father had retired at the end of the 2nd War). In 1958 my wife died so, recognising the utter futility of going on slaving in a business in which most of the profit went to tax, I decided to sell out and join that one of my married sons, Frank, who during the war, posted to Australia with the R.A.F., the war ending, had married a Sydney girl, and opted to reside

42 "The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul, with hoops of steel"

there. Mine was a big decision to make, but far and away the best I've ever made. I was 59 - totally fed-up with the sort of business in which I had for so long been flogging myself – moreover (I'd long felt I had a true flair for it) I wanted to write. I was only six years away from a British pension, *and only ten from a full Australian one*⁴³, so living on my bit of capital, in the intervening first six years, I settled down to write.

What to write about?

The answer is quite a story!

As a boy at school, as I have already told, I'd always had an ambition to get to a University. However, my peculiar immediate family loyalties had always prevented it. However, in 1927 there came to Gnosall, from Maidstone in Kent, a Mrs. Brown. That lady had been associated with the Workers Education Association there, and, soon after arriving in Gnosall, canvassed interest and, getting enough support, called together an inaugural meeting and a W.E.A. branch was formed in the Village. That branch, part of the North Staffs W.E.A. district, was harnessed to the Extra Mural Department of the University of Oxford.

The old ambition, to get access to University training, recurring in me, I became a founder member of that Village class. The following year, Mrs Brown became pregnant, so, she having to vacate the office of Secretary to the class, I, as a reward for my obvious keenness, was voted into the post, It lasted 12 years – in fact, until the class petered out with the start of the 2nd Great War. Suffice it here to say it is all written out in that book of mine -Mankind at the Crossroads, on the Highway to Happiness of which I spoke earlier. That work, although it is a major breakthrough in the field of Philosophy and the dependent Social Sciences, may never take off in my

⁴³ One qualifies for a full Australia state pension, after 10 years of residence, with nothing to pay.

time, but oh the joy of writing it! I never was so happy - surely it's in the spirit of our aspirations, that we all truly live. My goal is nothing less than a brotherhood of man, via a long-overdue linkage of Science to Morality - the Science of Anthropology, and its corollary, the Theory of Evolution. All of which more properly belongs to that particular other work, so before I drift too far away from the more mundane Poppitt story, let me get back to it.

The two Poppitt brothers, they who married the two sisters; daughters of the proprietor of the Vaults Hotel in Newport (since closed), a Mr. Westwood and his wife, girls named Margaret and Annie Margaret married Charles and Annie, William. After we left Newport, i.e. my family, The Harry Poppitt quintet, in 1905, for reasons already gone into, the London part of our family had so drifted apart that I never saw my Aunt Margaret (Maggie) or Uncle Charles, again. However, while on my way to a billet in North London, when, an Air Force cadet, I was on my way to the Flying Training Camp at Sandling near Folkestone, I did call to see Uncle William, Aunt Annie and their family of three children - they were living at 33 Raffle Road, Cricklewood (how good can a young memory be), and I shared a meal with them.

As is well known, there are two sides to every family - the Staff, or Parental-male, and the Distaff, or Parental-female. Let's continue with the former first. In that regard, I have already generally dealt with my Grandfather Joseph Poppitt, and his two marriages, with the fact that he sired a total of 19 children- 9 and 10 in that order. I have also said that my Grandfather, John Poppitt, was the first born of the 2nd batch. He, John Poppitt, sired seven sons (no daughters), of which my own father, James Harry, was the first to arrive.

Clement Frank (called Frank) was the youngest - 17 years younger than my Father, he too has already received mention. The remainder, not necessarily quite in that order, were William, George, Charles, Herbert (Bert), and

Howard.

Snobbery is often a two way traffic, so that, when I visited Uncle William and family, subconsciously, I was attempting, supposing my just having gained officer cadet status to justify a re-entry into the more financially successful part of the Victorian Poppitt Brigade - an inversion of the whole snob nonsense, if ever there was one - one of which we, of the Harry Poppitt contingent, must then have been very guilty. Years later, when approaching his 80's, my father, having long been a widower, took his courage in both hands and, uninvited, went to visit the most affluent of the London Poppitt brigade, Charles and Howard. They were in business trading as C & H Poppitt with premises in Great Castle Street, Piccadilly, and Glasgow. They dealt exclusively (it was known as the 'Mantle' Trade) in ladies jackets and furs, as manufacturers and wholesalers - very extensive indeed, with 'similar' homes, friends and business acquaintances to match. I quizzed my father as to how he had been received, on his return, (he stayed a week), but couldn't get anything out of him except that he had had to pose as a market gardener, in rather an unusually big way. Unable to 'let the side down', James Harry must have gone along with the whole stupid charade. The remnants of the old Victorian days had evidently stayed with him to the end - habits of mind persist.

Excuse me dear reader, but what a lot of 'bloody' nonsense, value wise, that sort of thing truly is. Let's once again remind ourselves of Robbie Burns famous lines, *"The rank is but the guinea stamp, the man's the gold, for all that"* It's only fair to say that Uncle William and his family, never having become so afflicted with this greater affluence, never got bitten with this bug of superiority - it was mainly distance and in our own case, lack of time and funds, that kept us apart. Indeed, much later, Uncle William as I have already recounted, paid us a visit in Gnosall - so he and his family of that day can be absolved of much of such divisive family nonsense. Of the other two brothers, George and Herbert (Bert), except that as has already been

told George became a medical drop-out, nothing more is known by me, or my family - they simply passed out of our ken.

So much for the Staff side of things - now let's have a look at the Distaff part. Let me say at once *there was no snobbish nonsense there*⁴⁴ .

My Grandfather on my Mother's side, John Casewell, was a veterinarian. One of that skilled body of animal doctors who, following a father-to-son tradition, very successfully, without benefit of University training, kept the farm animals of the United Kingdom in fairly good shape, throughout the ages. His son, William Thomas, followed in his father's footsteps. However, after an apprenticeship with his father on the more practical side, William had learnt so much from it that gaining admittance to the Edinburgh University College of Veterinary Science, he gained 1st class honours during three years only, of a normal five year course. After which, with M.R.C.V.S. behind his name, he spent the first two or three years of his career in Tropical Africa.

Returning home (he lived, and was born, as were the rest of his brothers and sisters, in Islington, a tiny hamlet just inside the Staffordshire border - only one and a half miles from Newport) William set up practice in St. Mary's Street in Newport, in a house and surgery next door to the Victoria Hotel. Unfortunately, his matrimonial affairs went sadly awry. A very eligible young bachelor when he came to town, he was falsely persuaded by a Newport girl that she was pregnant. He married the girl and discovered that he had been duped. Trouble followed, and after a short cat-and-dog existence, they parted. Later on, he contracted Tuberculosis, and died at about forty.

The Casewell's were a Shropshire family. John, my 'Grandad'⁴⁵, took to

44 Veterinary practices too much down to earth.

45 No 'Grandpa' language.

wife, Jane Oakley, my 'Grandma' - she was as upright and kindly a soul as ever lived. They produced seven children; 4 girls and 3 boys, of whom my Mother, Annie Maria, was the eldest. Next came Louise, William, Ada, Harry, Jessica and Percy, again more or less. in that order. I do know that my Mother and Louise (my Aunt Lou) were born in the same year - Mum in January, and Louise in November 1865, which, considering the gestation period was still only 9 months, was pretty slick work. Some of them clearly didn't waste much time after marriage, but then, of course, there wouldn't be many of the modern distractions, and contraceptive measures would then have been practically unknown.

*Aunt Lou never married*⁴⁶, she courted Tom Elkes, my Godfather, for years, but he was never able to get her to the altar and finally it fizzled out. She, like so many spinsters, stayed at home. She acted as dispenser for her father, until he died. All the family, with the exception of Uncle Percy who was much the youngest, having grown up and got married, left only Grandad, Grandma and Aunt Lou and him at home. In 1900 they moved house and went to Cowley in Gnosall - there to become tenants of Squire Morris Eyton of Wood Eaton Manor. With the house went seventeen acres of pasture. This enabled them to keep about 8 milking cows, suckle calves, and rear a few young cattle. It was a task that Aunt Lou was well equipped also to handle. She hand-milked all the cows, there were no milking machines. Separating the cream from the milk - *it was churned into butter once a week*⁴⁷ - she was a prize winning butter maker. Skimmed milk called for pigs to dispose of it. Thus breeding sows were always kept - the progeny being marketed as soon as they were weaned, at about 8 weeks old.

46 Born in November, 1865, she lived until July 1966 - 100 years, 8 months. Like her brother William, she too must have learnt a lot. I never knew her to call in a vet when she finally ran the home on her own.

47 I've spent many an hour turning the handle of that end-over-end machine.

Naturally hens were always about, who, as their habit was, tended to encroach on the back door. The collie dogs, beautiful specimens (my Aunt took prizes with them at the shows), jealous of what they took to be their special territory, from time to time would see them off by sailing into them - when, squawking loudly, they would try to take to the air in all directions. The lesson never learned, and soon the hens, as cheeky as ever, would be back again when the whole noisy performance would be repeated all over again.

We, the Harry Poppitt family, never lived very far from Gnosall. So, living in towns as we did, we spent all of our holidays at Cowley. In any case, there was never any money for the normal holiday - week at the sea. But who would not be satisfied with a spell at Cowley as a youngster, especially a boy. I thought it marvellous - there was so much to do and see. Grandad had a big garden, well stocked with soft fruits like strawberries, raspberries, black currants etc., etc. He was a rather stern looking old man, but underneath he was gentle. He must have loved youngsters, for we had free rein to the fruit in the garden, although, come to think of it, there were some pears, peaches and apricots trained against a sunny wall, that we had grown to respect as taboo.

In "*The seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness*", the orchard was the place to which I generally hurried, first. Most of the apples and pears were well beyond my reach, but a short stick deftly thrown would always bring one or two of my favourites to the ground. As I grew older, I learned to make and set rabbit-wires - rabbits have a habit of keeping to well-trodden runs, as they move about. I always set these in the hedges between the fields. One day I spotted a hare in a field bordered by one of these trap-sown divisions and, getting behind *this fine big specimen*⁴⁸. I got him racing towards it.

48 Aunt Lou was a pretty good cook - her jugged hare, always with red-currant jelly, was one of her specialities - classed as 'game', always needed to be hung a bit, before home cooking.

He'd gone at such a speed into one of the snares that, when I got to the hedge, he was hanging down into the ditch on the other side, lifeless, with a broken neck, he could never even have felt it - death would have been instantaneous. The Cowley house then was ivy covered on two sides - this made a proper haven for sparrows and their nests. I possessed an air gun, but rarely ever did I succeed in shooting one - with their tight little feathers, the noisy little blighters were armour plated - airgun pellets simply bounced harmlessly off. However, on the dark winter nights, combing the ivy and the haystack, with a wooden frame covered with netting, a hurricane lantern behind, we had a lot more success as, dazzled by the light, they flew into the mesh. None of us had any qualms about this wholesale slaughter - they multiplied so quickly and were a real pest in the garden. Now and again they would even turn out the swallows from their nests under the eaves. There they advertised their presence by the untidy bits of hay that protruded from the nest - swallows are wonderfully tidy nest builders, never any trace of the soft lining to be seen from the outside of their homes. I remember these nest-robbing vandals used to annoy Grandad very much - spotting one of these sparrow-tenanted mud-built nests, he would take a long rake and scrape the whole thing down. After all, he loved his garden, and they, the sparrows, were an awful nuisance at seed time and harvest.

Nothing much is known about the former Casewell home at Islington - all that remains is a photograph of a fairly substantial house with Grandad standing in the doorway. Incidentally, the Hamlet of Islington is a part of the Parish of Forton - Forton being the village about 3/4 of a mile further across the border into Staffordshire. As far as I know, my Casewell Grandparents would have gone to the Islington homestead, as newly-weds. I do know that all their seven children were born there, and would have been baptised in the Forton Parish Church. All, except Percy would have been long married before the move to Cowley was made in 1900.

With the exception of Louise, who like her father, was very plain, the other

three sisters were very good looking, especially Jessie. She it was who was the sister in law and her husband to whom my own father and mother went to be married in Cardiff. Jessie's husband, Harry Harrison was the much spoilt youngest son of a family owning a chain of butchers' shops there. He, my Uncle Harry, turned out to be a ne'er-do-well - one never able to keep a home together for long, so that from time to time Aunt Jessie and her three boys were spread out among the females of the Casewell family - her sisters - especially us.

Many years ahead, when the two sons of Aunt Jessie remaining in England had become grown men (both never married), a house was rented in King Street, Wellington and the two boys lived there with their mother - she was well into her 80's when she died. Later on their father was allowed back into the home - the two boys, now men, were able to exercise the necessary control over that wayward character that he had for so long lacked. Thus, although living together more or less separately, a relatively peaceful atmosphere obtained, and, for the last few years of her life, our dear Aunt Jessie knew the quiet content she so richly deserved. Why do nice girls get such awful husbands, and vice versa. For the answer, I recommend Sydney's aforesaid book.

The Harrison boys were named Harry, Charles and Wilfred - arriving in that order. Actually for a time at Wellington - we had all three and their mother living with us latterly we had only two - Harry and Wilfred plus, of course, their Mum. Charles was sent to Aunt Lou for a spell at Cowley and from there to Aunt Ada, who meantime had moved to a small country town (nearer to Shrewsbury and the Shropshire centre) named Wem. In the March of 1914 we were still in Wellington, when Harry Harrison Jnr, a lad of 17, enticed with the prospect of a month's camp in the following August, joined the 4th Territorial Battalion of The Kings Shropshire Light Infantry.

Aunt Ada had had three sons, Leo, Jack and Frank in that order - unhappily

Leo was drowned in the Canal at Newport. Jack the 2nd born never saw service - he'd a groggy heart. Frank his younger brother (they were both living in WEM with their mother) also attracted by the prospect of a month's 'holiday' at the annual Camp in the following August also joined the Shropshire Regiment in the March of 1914. The two cousins duly made that Camp on August the 1st, 1914. On August the 4th of that fateful year, the 1st Great War broke out. Shortly afterwards the 4th K.S.L.I Battalion was paraded in that camp, volunteers for duty overseas were called for en-masse, the Regiment responded to the call. Very soon afterwards, they were sent out (for the most part raw untrained recruits) to India, as replacements for the Regular Army men on Garrison duty there - trained soldiers, who were so desperately needed on the Western Front. The month's 'holiday' lasted for almost 5 years - my two cousins and the rest who came back left in 1914 and returned after they were finally demobilised in 1919. Harry had been wounded, but Frank returned unscathed - he was lucky! The 4th Shropshires were brought back in the winter of 1917 (one of the worst on record), from Garrison duty in Hong Kong (they had been posted there, from India) to the horror of the trenches in France and Belgium - they'd been in India and the Far East for over three years.

Although relatively very peaceful, during Harry's tour of duty in India, an Indian regiment had mutinied. The mutineers, disarmed and made prisoners, were sent under armed guard to a concentration camp in Australia - our Harry was a member of that escort company. He thus had visited Aussie land - a foretaste which would no doubt account for the fact that, exercising its known fatal attraction to visitors, as it does, as soon as he was released from the Army, availing himself of a £10 passage, he was soon permanently here, 'Downunder'

There are a couple of incidents that seem to stand out during Harry Casewell Harrison's military service, service in which he never got beyond

the rank of Lance Corporal - a rank which entitled him to wear a single stripe. The first and by far the most important of these two episodes was that in which, while 'going over the top', in an attack on German lines, he was badly wounded. As has been so often seen on film, when advancing into a hail of machine-gun fire, the troops are trained, rather hopelessly, to try to minimise the risk of being hit, by running a few yards forward and then flinging themselves to the ground in a prone position. It was while actually falling into one of these horizontal positions that Harry was hit in the chin by a bullet, which, ricocheting off his jaw, was only prevented from penetrating his heart by a spoon and a pay book, etc., that he always carried in his left hand breast pocket. What a thing is chance! Just imagine the split second difference between a bullet entering the top of a head and one going through the jaw in such circumstances. It was the difference between certain death and life for our cousin.

The other incident in Harry's soldiering days, although it must have been acutely embarrassing at the time, was much less serious in its consequences. It took place while this cousin of mine was going back off leave from France - before he was wounded. In those days, men on leave took with them their rifles and bayonets, their entrenching tools and all the other indispensable necessities for 'life' in the trenches it weighed about 90lbs.

It was on Euston Station in London, when 'our hero', Harry, loaded down with all this gear, waiting for his train to France, was approached by a young woman with a baby - would he hold the baby for a moment was the question asked. A reasonable request, normally, one may agree. Anyhow, Harry must have thought it so - the only trouble was that, on this occasion, the woman never came back - he, quite literally, was left 'holding the baby'. I don't know whether that is the origin of that expression - it might well have been - it's so long ago. Cousin Harry missed his train - he could hardly have taken the baby along. Anyway, he'd a cast iron excuse in the shape of a baby, so the R.T.O. (Railway Transport Officer) no doubt some; what put

out by such an unusual situation, would have had to have made the necessary extension to Harry's leave pass occasioned by the ensuing very long delay - an alteration that would keep him out of trouble back in France on an A.W.O.L (absent without leave) charge. But enough of those war days of 1914-18 - what a shocking blot on the story of man both they and those of the 2nd Great War, were. The wars to end all wars! Ye Gods! The human species still masquerades under the Generic title of homo-sapiens 'sapiens'! I ask you?

Earlier on we were dealing with a profligate character, name of Harry Harrison (our Uncle Harry). Being of the middle class of that period, he was never a wife beater just a spineless individual who was content to let the rest of his wife's sisters, for almost all of his married life, keep a roof over the heads of his family. For example, she, Aunt Jessie, (the dear gentle selfless soul) was with us during all the time we were in Wellington - she and the two boys Harry and Wilfred. Now Aunt Ada was made of sterner stuff - she was much more a woman of the world - there was evidently a strong streak of her father in her, as, too, there was in Louise. She, Ada, had married an Ernest Heath - but they had separated before we three Poppitt youngsters were born. Why? We children were never told - such things were never spoken of before us - in fact we never saw him, so he only existed for us as a name.

However, being a woman of spirit and enterprise, left to fend for herself and the remaining two boys, armed with Grandma Poppitt's pork recipes, she, Aunt Ada, opened a little delicatessen shop, similar to ours, in Newport. For a time it was quite a success (incidentally, it was during this time that her first son, Leo, was drowned) - then 'enter the villain' in the shape of George Henry Dawes. George Henry was the blacksmith spoken of earlier who rented the Smithy at the back of my Grandpa Poppitt's premises. He was, as one would expect, being a blacksmith, a big, burly fellow. A likeable rogue - his broad face exuded good fellowship - very

popular with both men and women - very fond of children but with a rather coarse unpleasantly sadistic streak in that regard, as witness the trick, recounted earlier, when he persuaded me that a piece of very hot iron, gone black, was fit to touch. Very much at home in a pub, he, G.H.D, was very much a womaniser.

The good looking young woman, my unattached Aunt Ada, seemed to be there for the plucking - George evidently brought all his amorous expertise to bear for they were soon involved in an open liaison. However, morality was still in the grip of the Victorian era - very straitlaced little Newport was grossly affronted, so that it was not long before customers began to ostracise what had been a very thriving little business and Mrs Ernest Heath was soon facing bankruptcy. At that time, Mr Dawes, himself, went bankrupt - certainly not for breach of public morals - people who need a blacksmith wouldn't have cared two hoots about the moral fibre of the smith. No, his was just due to the accumulation of debt from spendthrift habits. His wife was just an ineffectual little creature who had absolutely no influence over her husband's behaviour.

In this hopeless financial situation, *the Dawes and the Heaths* moved to Wem⁴⁹ - there trading as Dawes & Heath, they opened up a double fronted shop right opposite the Church in the High Street. George Dawes, since he was an undischarged bankrupt, would have been trading illegally under his own name, the 'artful dodger' simply used his only son Harry's initials in front of the name Dawes over the shop-front. There completely vindicating my Father's faith in the quality of the goods they were also offering, the shop in Wem prospered. Starting without capital, or at least very little of it, they managed to get sufficient funds in a rather dubious way. There are two separate firms (or at least there then were) of auctioneers in

49 His wife went along too.

Shrewsbury - it after all is an important agricultural centre. So, availing himself of the usual week's credit customers were allowed, our George would buy himself a large batch of pigs on credit from the one firm and draw a fairly hefty sum of money, by selling them under the hammer in the pens of the other on the same day. Actually one supposes there was nothing illegal about it *the only risk was that of either or both firms finding out*⁵⁰. This never occurred, so not only was Mr. Dawes able to get hold of a substantial amount of desperately needed cash, but in the process, buying and selling in such large quantities (fortunate in the fact that pigs were sold at sufficiently later times in the 2nd sale yard he was using) not only was he getting the money he needed but was building himself up a very useful fund of credit worthiness. He was indeed an 'artful dodger' - my dear old Dad would never had thought of it, much less have had the courage to carry it through. Even so there are very few market towns supporting the two separate firms - selling similar stock at sufficiently different hours, to make such a practice as this possible. The situation in Shrewsbury Auction was simply tailor made for our George - it certainly worked.

Subsequently, so well did the shop do that soon they were able to turn the living quarters that went with it into a small-goods factory and move into a roomy house at the rear. Indeed so much did the whole thing prosper (much to my Father's envy - he was still struggling to make ends meet in Wellington, we must remember) that later Mr Dawes was also running a farm with a substantial herd of milking cows etc., - at least nominally his. As I have said, George D was fond of youngsters, and such things being a two way traffic, they of him - he was always generous to a fault. Wem being only 15 miles away, we often went as a family in the pony and governess cart we then had, to that lovely spot on Sundays.

About that time I had learnt to ride a bike (I was then eleven) and money at

50 Was minimal - they were competitors.

that stage not being too short (it was in the early days of the Wellington business-venture, when things were looking more rosy) the 'Guvnor' bought me a second hand machine for 30/-. I don't remember there being any protest from Doris, about such obvious favouritism - she'd probably got reconciled to it by then. The possession of that bicycle was probably the most wonderful thing in my life to that date, Sydney a wheel - suddenly I was as free to move about as the birds. My first great adventure was a ride to Wem - all 15 miles of it - during which in a boost of over confidence, trying to ride without holding the handle-bars, I was suddenly pitched a head onto the road when the front wheel sort of jack knifed. There was no tar-macadam in that day - not on country roads, anyway. The result was that wearing shorts, as I was, I gravel-rashed my knees, not to mention the palms of both hands - the lesson was certainly salutary - it's an experiment I've forsworn ever since.

I don't think Doris ever went to stay at Wem on her own. I believe young as she was she had a sort of female intuition in relation to the womanising proclivities of the aforesaid George Henry. However, my sister May was quite a different character - young, shy and knowing practically nothing of sex and its pitfalls for the youthful males or females (even the word sex was outside our childish vocabulary - never heard it said when we were young) she, May, asked for and was given permission to go for a week, to stay with the G Dawes 'family'. During that time, she being only 15, George D had had carnal knowledge of her - later on she became pregnant. This was in 1912, when the penalty for such things was seven years hard labour. On being informed of it, Aunt Ada was soon over to Wellington to try to get the whole thing hushed up. Anxious, in typical Victorian fashion, to keep it all sub-rosa, my Father agreed to the child, a little girl, being accepted into our family as another sister of mine - the birth certificate, which I have since seen, was forged accordingly. In fact years later that child, now 75, made herself known to my father in Gnosall - armed with that certificate - anxious

to establish her relationship - supposing him to be her legitimate parent. Naturally, aware of the whole sordid business, firmly but kindly, I soon put the matter to rights - she certainly was not my sister, and he, my father, could never have been accused of incest. That girl (Hilda Evans - she was fostered out) is now accepted into the folds of the family's Poppitt and Friend, my wife's maiden name. Hilda never married and now keeps house for an old clergyman near to Wolverhampton. She is now particularly friendly with two nieces of mine on my wife's side - stays with them from time to time in Stafford for a week at a stretch. I've seen her in 1975-'85 and '89 when visiting the 'Old Country'. All of which illustrates how full-circle the wheel has gone in relation to illegitimacy and a lot more of that archaic Victorian nonsense. Although I must confess that the pendulum in that regard, in my opinion, has, may I repeat, now gone a lot too far in the other direction i.e. the direction of licence. But again that belongs to that other story of mine, of which I have already made mention, viz: 'Mankind at the Crossroads on the Highway to Happiness'.

I've no faith in divine wrath, but retribution came to George Dawes - he died slowly and painfully of pneumonia, at about 50 - penicillin was not yet.

Now let me get back to my Cowley memories. Both the Casewell Grandparents had died in 1914 - Grandma in the March and Grandad in the June. What a good solid down-to-earth couple they were - no excessive emotional displays there, in fact, may I repeat, my own mother never kissed us - likewise I can never remember any of her sisters or brothers doing so - the same went for Grandma - as for Grandad, it was right out of the question. There was a sort of entirely emotionally-undemonstrative state of domestic harmony in that household - none of the present day noisy and too often violent bickering - something in that relatively unemotional regard has certainly gone from life.

My mother was of course out of that environment, and, as I believe I have

said earlier, a gentler creature there never was - but with tremendous courage and determination when what she saw as right was in jeopardy. She too, like Aunt Jessie had a hard married life - was also more than deserving of something better. Thanks Mum! How blessed we youngsters all were. Incidentally Grandad's passing only three months after Grandma seems to speak volumes for the deep love they had for each other - apart, life lost its savour.

The death of my Casewell Grandparents left Aunt Lou alone coping very capably as ever with the small farm at Cowley - soon to be joined by a lad of my own age named Jack Hawkins. He, Jack, was the son of a Mrs Hawkins, a married woman with whom my Uncle William, the Vet, had gone away when his marriage broke down. Again a family was split up - Jack the eldest finding permanent refuge with our Miss Louise Casewell - an excellent arrangement since Jack was a good milker, could dig and plant the big garden and now that her father was gone, be generally man about the house, even at 15. He stayed with my Aunt at Cowley, until about 1924 when she, deciding to retire, moved to a house in Wem to be near her sister, Ada. Then, securing the tenancy, Jack, without payment was allowed to take over the small farm, with all stock and equipment as 'a going concern'. At this point Jack got married - his young bride joining him at Cowley. Incidentally Jack and I were the best of pals - we actually joined the Air Force at about the same time and were partially trained pilot-officers when the 1st War ended - much too abruptly I might add for our flying ambitions - they were cut short as I have already said, equally abruptly.

By the way, there didn't seem to be anything very unfair about Jack being given the Cowley farm, the whole thing being handed to him on a plate, so to say. After all, he had worked for Aunt Lou for 9 years with very little recompense but clothes, food, and a little pocket money. True it was I loved the old family home and would dearly have liked to live there. However, one has to be practical - I was no farmer - had not the experience with

animals and the land generally that Jack had, so that he seemed the right person for it.

He might have been but unfortunately his tenancy coincided with the Great Depression which was increasingly getting under way - thus he found himself unable to meet his rent.

Much has been said and written about the landed aristocracy, their right to own so much land but it has to be known that as landlords, rent wise, traditionally (as witness the aforesaid monument at Lilleshall) they were always benevolent in times of depression to their tenant farmers. The trouble with Jack's 17 acres was that outside war-time it was much too small to be made to pay. Miss Casewell, my Aunt, after losing her parents early in 1914, had reaped the benefit of farming during the years of scarcity and high prices of the 1st War. Come the worsening economy and by about 1928, unable to make ends meet Jack and his wife were obliged to leave Cowley. Jack's skill as a milker (by hand of course - as I have said machines were not yet in) got him a job on a farm where there was a big herd of dairy cows - animals that had to be milked in time for the milk trains, seven days a week - very hard work. Meantime friend Jack was still looking for a less demanding and possibly better paid job. Thanks greatly to his locally known prowess on the cricket field (he was a fast bowler and on one very memorable occasion took all 10 wickets in a single match - the teams competing were always no mean exponents of the game) he soon got one.

The old Grammar School at Brewood (a sizeable township about 5 miles from Gnosall) specialised in Agricultural Science and the teaching of Agricultural practice generally. As a working background a small farm owned and administered by the local education authority was kept. Its farm manager having retired, Jack applied for the job - it is almost certain that aware of his skill on the cricket field, the Headmaster and the rest of the interviewing committee decided that he was exactly the right man for the

job - a job with which went a nice house and garden and a more than average wage. He was his own boss - thus profit not being the dominating factor so long as he conscientiously did it, it promised to be a very congenial job for life - indeed so it proved. Thus Jack not only found himself congenial occupation but was able in the Brewood cricket team over the years to help win it widespread renown - in a game he truly loved. His wife kept the score book for that club for years - in fact until Jack's retirement. He at my age, is still alive but she has passed on.

I have written about the little farm at Cowley and the place it has in my memory, so now to complete that memory, I must write about the house itself. It may be, scheduled as an ancient monument, I'm not sure, but by virtue of its age and *special architectural features*⁵¹ it certainly deserves to be. It was built in 1620, of the 3 inch bricks then in vogue, on a foundation of great stone slabs. Originally a big oblong building, within which in addition to the 2 great cellars that extend across the whole width of it, there are two large rooms on the ground floor - one with an inglenook fireplace with benches on either side - the whole serving as a dining cum general living room - the other facing the road on that end, making-do as a lounge, or as it was always referred to when we were young, the 'front room' a place very rarely used and in consequence a place that seemed bereft of animation - no-one had time to sit around - there was always too much to be done.

Within the same oblong structure, at the back of it, was an entrance to a lobby and cloak room - a staircase, parallel to that original outside rear-wall, led to the three bedrooms on its first floor - some idea of the thickness of the walls can be gauged by the depth of the small recess (built to give

51 There was a Priest-hole cunningly incorporated in the brickwork of the great square chimney, between the 2 attics.

light to the stairway through the outside wall) in which pewter candlesticks, with their slotted grooves allowing the candle to be pushed further up as it burned down - oil lamps, yes, but no electricity in that day - Cowley dwellers and Gnosalites generally must wait until 1927 for that 'luxury'. The ablution facilities were also 'primitive' in the extreme. Apart from the usual daily sluice, shirts and vests off being optional with the males and that only in summer about the females in that connection, I could only hazard a guess. However, both in the Poppitt and the Casewell clans I was never aware of any unpleasant body-odour the bathtub at Cowley was one of those enamelled hip-style high-backed arrangements - a complete body-wash was usually indulged once a week - either on a Friday or a Saturday night.

Incidentally, when I was married and lived in Newtown House, Gnosall, Friday was always bath-night. Then a long zinc bath, with handles at either end, already in place on the rug before the kitchen fire, was half-filled with hot water. We then took turns - mother or I first - the boys following, never as I remember in any regular bathing order. The water, with a 'mind your toes', was frequently hotted up from a big kettle, kept hot, finally emptied away down the drain in the yard outside. This was always the boys' job - now and again one or other of them would tilt the thing so that most of the weight went to the other end - it was all good fun - our two lads had a happy boyhood. But we were dealing with the old house at Cowley - so let's back to it.

Hand washing, before meals for we youngsters was something else. In the yard by the back door, a yard enclosed by a wall about a yard high, there stood in one corner close to the outside wash-house door, a very big old tub into which drained the rainwater from the wash-house roof. In the wash-house itself was a big stone sink, with a hand bowl always to hand. Thus when one wanted to wash one's hands one simply took the hand bowl and ladled out some water from the big tub (all of 56 gallons it was reputed to

hold). In the Summer with every *half bowl of water*⁵² one never failed to get a quantity of mosquito larvae and some wriggling very small red worms -the species I still 'wot not of'. Such 'life' never bothered we youngsters - in any case, it was a life in which they soon began to lose an interest once the carbolic soap began to assert itself. What precious memories!

Such things make the mod-con washing facilities seem too much over-contrived by comparison. *Soap and soft rain water - as my Aunt Louise would say, a face paid for such a wash.*⁵³ In those days, she would have had much that was derogatory to say about all modern cosmetics, had they then been in general use. Say what you will of those far-off times - most country folk lived to a very ripe old age - sometimes finding time 'to stand and stare'. Miss Casewell, our Aunt Lou, herself was born in 1865 and died in the June of 1966 - remember!

But again we digress. So now let's continue to the top of the stairs. On the left up three stairs through a side door, is a huge bedroom. It's a part of the later addition to the first building - it extends over a big back kitchen, with a large dairy down three steps at its far end. The whole block runs almost the entire length of the original building. Because there was rarely any fire in the back kitchen this bedroom, the only floor covering for which was linoleum and a single bed-side rug, was extremely cold on a winters night - so cold indeed that euphemistically we children always referred to it as 'The Barn'. I don't believe I have spoken yet of Grandma and the copper warming-pan, although it seems to have fallen into disuse when she was gone. A few red-hot cinders were placed in it from the kitchen fire downstairs - the pan was

52 Soft water was scarce, i.e. rainwater. There was a pump in the yard.

53 I am, as I may have said, now in my 90th year - a few days ago, quite seriously, I was adjudged to be at least 58!

pushed between the sheets and the sheer delight of snuggling down into a warm cosy bed on a frosty night almost baffles description. They talk of paradise in the hereafter but I reckon experiences on earth of that sort must come very close to it. These copper bed-warming relics of a bygone age, no longer used, but kept brightly polished, now sometimes adorn the walls of modern homes - they are much sought after. Jack Hawkins and I have shared that bed in that room many times. We were rare pals - he taught me how to make and set wire snares for rabbits. He also kept a couple of ferrets - the blessed things scared me stiff but he handled them like kittens - that's a thing - animals, especially carnivorous ones, can smell fear and the reaction to fear being aggression people displaying it are more likely to get bitten - just a bit of psychology thrown in for good measure.

However, precious as are the memories of it, I begin to feel that I have dwelt sufficiently long on this dear old family retreat at Cowley in Gnosall. No doubt 'distance' (in this case, time-wise) often 'lends enhancement to the view'.

Thus suffice it now to say that after Jack Hawkins and his wife left Cowley in the mid-twenties the place had known several more tenants. Finally (*sold when the Morris Eyton Estate went under the hammer*⁵⁴) it passed into the hands of one of the local G.P.'s, a Dr Jack Wassall. He and his family lived there for many years, but quite recently have parted with it and gone to reside elsewhere. During the time they were in residence at Cowley they must have spent a lot of money modernising the interior by fitting it out with all 'mod cons', as the Estate Agents would say. When I was in Gnosall in '85, Mrs Wassall (one of my former customers in the Village) very kindly took me on a sort of conducted tour of the place. All the old oak, as to stairs, floors etc., had been very highly polished. In addition to which (to relapse into the jargon of Real Estate) the usual offices were a gleam with

54 To mention the price would be somewhat obscene.

stainless steel fittings and up-to-date sanitary ware. All of which, to me, with my treasured memories of its former down-to-earth old-world charm, seemed to be a rather blatant form of sacrilege. Thus, while the polished old oak was a delight to see, to me, with my nostalgic view of the old house as I had once known it, the newly installed modern plumbing seemed so alien to that old picture as to be an aesthetic offence - one on a par with the inclusion of Italianate marble-masonry among grey sandstone headstones in a medieval church setting. But then again I may be biased - I, too, am a bit of an old relic - one who looks askance at much in the present that masquerades as progress - after all, may I remind the reader, I was born in the reign of Victoria. Values have certainly greatly changed, but that is a subject that I do not intend to embark upon here, much as it is one very dear to my heart. In that regard again I would refer the reader to my life-work, the aforesaid *'Let's Start a Democracy or Mankind at the Crossroads'*⁵⁵, for guidance. I often think how these revolutionary changes in custom, manners, mien and voice, never dreamt of by the forerunners of my peers, when I was young, would have shocked those old stalwarts could they but have seen them - so much of the grace and dignity of old appears to have gone out of living. How (in connection with that regressive drift towards more and more material satisfaction) apt to the present scene are those words of Goldsmith, in which, in that celebrated work of his 'The Deserted Village' he wrote "where wealth accumulates and men decay - princes and lords may flourish or may fade, a breath can make them as a breath has made".

And now, methinks - since after all this saga was only intended to put my present descendants into the picture in relation to things past concerning our forebears - things that naturally are beyond their ken - at this point I believe the time has come to put down my pen and wish you all good health,

55 Its alternative title.

happiness, and a very fond farewell.

Finally, to those who may find the time and patience to read this story, let me say, if they only get half the pleasure from reading it, as I have had by writing it, then we shall all have shared a little more happiness - happiness shared is happiness doubled, don't forget!

SYDNEY POPPITT

AUTHOR OF "ALPHABET OF FREEDOM"

AND "MANKIND AT THE CROSSROADS

ON THE HIGHWAY TO HAPPINESS"

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