

A Whitwell Childhood in the 1930s

Audrey Chiverton was born in Whitwell in the 1920s, and has lived there all her life. She still works at the Museum, and has shared these memories of her childhood in a village that had changed very little in some ways since the 1800s, with most people employed in farm work, and social life centred around the church and chapel, school and village events.

“We lived at Ludbrook, quite a tiny cottage. Father worked on a farm and earned twenty nine shillings a week, out of which the rent was three shillings. We only had oil lamps and candles as there was no electricity at this time.

I remember going up to the shops for groceries; sugar and sweets and so on were put into blue cone-shaped bags. On Good Friday, Dick Dyer used to come round with bags of hot cross buns (really hot) and throw them up to the bedroom window as it was early in the morning, so we ate them sitting on the bed.

We used to have tea in the ‘front room’ on Sundays. The best china came out, and Uncle Arthur used to come down quite often. We would have celery from the garden - crisp and white - or cheese with piccalilli which mother made every year with vegetables from the garden, full of flavour.”



“Auntie Maud lived next door and had the little farm across the road. I remember her with a yoke over her shoulder so that it was easier to carry two buckets of milk at a time across to her dairy.

The cream was taken off and put into a barrel, where she kept turning the handle until it became butter. Then she would use butter pats to shape it into blocks. It was always very cold in there.

There was a field at the top of the garden where we used to have big picnics with friends and family. We sat under the Elm trees and had tables and chairs.

The lane at this time was very pretty, a little trickle of water always running down and in the spring it was yellow with celandines and primroses.”





Audrey , her sister Angela and their parents Florence and Frank Morris, in their Sunday best for a walk. It would have been taken in about 1930.

“We used to go for a walk on Sunday evenings, dressed in our best, and when we got back always had the cold roast meat for supper - my favourite was lamb and mint sauce made from mint grown in the garden. One of the walks took us to Elephant Cave in the Undercliff. It was a long rock that you could walk through. I was always scared but it was nice to come out the other end.

At the end of August we used to have a day on Sandown Beach - us, aunts & cousins. We caught the train to Sandown, and got fish and chips from MacFisheries, and a big bag of buns in Masters shop. Then on to the beach where we ate them out of the paper - fish and chips have never tasted the same since.

One year Auntie Bertha produced some cardboard plates, which was a source of wonder as we had never seen anything like that before.”



“Angela and I went to Sunday School in the Chapel, and once a year there was an outing to Ryde. What excitement!

We both had a money box in the shape of a post box, and the night before we would use scissors to get our pennies out through the slot. Once we each had 5 shillings – unbelievable riches.



We went by charabanc to Ryde and then Mother, Grandma and the Aunts took us over to Portsmouth on the paddle ferry. We would go up to Charlotte Street where we spent our savings and then it was back to Ryde for tea of sandwiches and buns in a Sunday School room before rides in the little boats on the canoe lake, and then the sad sight of the charabanc waiting to take us home.”

Lions and buckets

“We had a well in the garden, and a pump inside the gate. The water was always very cold and crystal clear. There were standpipes in the village in the shape of lions, given by Mr Spindler from Old Park.”

Many homes in Whitwell in the 1920s and 30s had no running water or mains drainage. The well in the picture here, which shows Olive Newington drawing water using a 20 feet long rope, was shared by four cottages in Southford Lane .

Frederick Orchard (one of the schoolboys in the 1918 gardening class shown later) remembers that on Jolliffe’s Farm there was a well just inside the farm gate and they pumped water for the house and into tanks in the yard for the cattle. At the farm, like most houses, the toilet was outside, with the bucket emptied every few days; this was known as the *‘bucket and chuck it’* method.



Plums, salt fish and walnuts

Audrey's memories often feature the food of her childhood – a time before 'food miles' were an issue.

“When I was twelve we moved down the road to Alban Cottage, where Mother grew up. Father loved the garden and dug every spare inch. We always had fresh vegetables, as well as raspberries, gooseberries and blackcurrants, and there was a little orchard with apple and plum trees, so we were really quite self sufficient, which was certainly a bonus later when the war came.

Uncle Arthur would come down to Alban Cottage on Good Friday and he and Father always dug a big plot of the garden and planted potatoes. Our dinner that day was always salt fish, egg sauce, potatoes and mashed parsnips.

At Christmas, Grandmother always got the family together, which was quite easy then because we all lived in the village. We had a wonderful tea, and then went into her front room where there was a big log fire. Grandfather sat by it cracking walnuts with his teeth! We played charades and dressing up and guessing games. When it was time to go, Grandma always asked us to sing the hymn ‘God be with you till we meet again’, and when she died we sang it at her funeral.”



“There was still hardly any traffic around, so when we grew older we children all used to meet up in the evenings to go tracking - putting signs on the road, and sometimes walking through the railway tunnel between Whitwell and St Lawrence.”



Although by the 1930s there were a few private cars with DL number plates, the streets were very quiet. Horses were still used for most deliveries and farm work. The railway was the most important link for families like Audrey's , with Whitwell Station on the West Ventnor line.

The End of Childhood

“When I was thirteen I passed the equivalent of the 11 plus and went to school in Newport, planning to study for the Civil Service when I left school. We travelled by train, changing at Merstone, and it was quite a walk from the station to the school at the top of Church Litten. Then came the war.

During our matriculation exam things were made more difficult by having to get up at night when the sirens went off. We had to run to the underground shelter in the football ground in the middle of our geography exam - put on our honour not to speak to each other and discuss the questions. I managed to pass, but then came another blow. Because of the war the Civil Service exam was cancelled, so we were advised to leave school and find whatever jobs we could.”

Audrey found work at the Ministry of Food in Newport, dealing with ration books and identity cards – but her childhood had ended.

“It meant cycling to Godshill and getting a bus into Newport, which was alright going, but hard work having to pedal all the way home after a tiring day. My lasting memory is of the smell from the honeysuckle in the mornings.”

The Changing Face of Whitwell

These boys at Whitwell School in 1918 were the lucky ones – born too late to be called up to fight in the first world war that had just ended.

There were gardening and drawing classes for the older boys and sewing, knitting and cookery for the girls. This was as well as the usual lessons: reading, arithmetic, history and geography and religious instruction.

Most of these boys were in their final year at the school, ready to leave at 14 and find work. They would have been in their mid thirties in 1939 when the next war was declared.



Back row: Bert Chiverton, Albert Beavis (*Nip*), Ron Williams, Bert Hobbs (*Goosey*), Fred Orchard, Ralph Blake, Fred Coleman, Ridley Russell

Front row: Bert Mew, Bernard Woodford, Arthur Russell (*Jamie*), Ronald Plumley, Alfred Woodford, Fred Russell (*Boley*), Frank Hayles

The Demise of the Old Tithe Barn



The Tithe Barn had stood on the corner of Kemming Road, opposite the church, for hundreds of years, and would have been used to store farm produce from the village.

It gradually fell into disrepair, and was demolished in the late 1930s.

The photograph here shows Will Sheath, Audrey's grandfather, and her uncles Frank and Harry at work taking the barn down. The remains of one wall of the barn can still be seen at the corner of Kemming Road.



Work . . .

The upheaval of the first world war was followed in England by economic depression in the 1920s and 30s. But life and work in Whitwell between the two world wars of the twentieth century was in some ways much the same as it had been for hundreds of years.

Men without a particular trade or profession worked as labourers, like Arthur and William Sheath, Audrey's uncle and grandfather, shown here on a building site. Women would have been fully occupied in the home, cleaning, cooking and feeding the family; there were few careers for them unless they could aim for teaching or the Civil Service.



Blacksmith Ted Atkey at the forge in Whitwell High Street, shoeing a horse for Farmer James Lowe of Southford Farm.

The forge was by the Old Church House in the High Street. The Ebenezer Chapel where Audrey went to Sunday School can be seen in the background here.





Working at Southford Farm in 1940. In front of the threshing machine, from right to left, are Jim Dyer, Will Hunt, and Jacob Saunders, whose daughter Olive is shown in the photograph of the well in Southford Lane .



. . . and play

August 1936: the victorious Whitwell 'Tug of War' team pose for a photograph with the cup. There are some familiar faces here - Audrey's uncles Harry and Arthur Sheath are sitting at the either end of the front row. Next to Harry is Ted Thomson, and in the centre of the back row is Fred Thorne.



May 1937: children in fancy dress for King George VI's Coronation, which was enthusiastically celebrated in the village.

The Hermitage, which still stands on the downs to the east of Whitwell, was built by Michael Hoy, a merchant who traded particularly with Russia. He was a great admirer of that country, and also built the Hoy Monument to honour Czar Alexander 's visit to England in 1814.



The house was a popular place for fetes like the one held in the grounds in 1912 and pictured here. But by the 1930s it had become a Youth Hostel: hiking holidays, a cheap and healthy way to enjoy the countryside, had become hugely popular among young people from towns and cities of England.



Into War Again

In 1939 war was declared, so many people's lives, like Audrey's, changed for ever.

This photograph shows the men of Whitwell Home Guard in 1944.

They would all of course have been well known to Audrey. Some of them were Whitwell schoolboys in 1918 - Arthur Russell is standing, grinning, fourth from the left. Beside him, to his left, is Dick Dyer, who used to throw hot cross buns up to the windows on Good Friday morning.

