

CHARLES BERNARD DODWELL BEM, b. 1913

Age concern?

In yonder years when my husband Ted was young, fit and well, he was to be found in SS Peter & Paul churchyard every Saturday in the growing season, mowing the grass, cleaning out the gutters and killing offending weeds growing out of masonry in the Church tower. (The latter demanded a good head for heights, and occasionally the powerful strength of George Fenemore holding onto his legs while he hung from the top of the tower squirting weed killer on the offending growth.)

Word of his activities must have spread as far as Devon where an Old Deddingtonian picked up the phone, introduced himself to Ted mentioning that both his parents were buried in the churchyard: 'Would Ted be kind enough to occasionally place flowers on their grave?' From that day onwards Bernard Dodwell sent his contribution for flowers, which Ted bought and took to his parents' grave. Ted is now well past the churchyard mowing, cleaning and tower-climbing age, and Bernard has put his 90th birthday behind him. Both men occasionally bemoan their aches and pains which must have prompted Bernard to forward to Ted a poem, entitled 'I'm Fine Thank You'. Bernard may be over 90 but his sense of humour hasn't deserted him, nor has his excellent memory of his childhood in 1920s Deddington. These fascinating tales, beautifully written in long hand, are now in my possession, together with Bernard's permission to publish anything relevant to Deddington. With what great love and joy he remembers his youth.

There is nothing the matter with me
I'm as healthy as I can be
I have arthritis in both my knees
And when I talk, I talk with a wheeze
My pulse is weak, my blood is thin
But I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in.

Arch supports I have for my feet,
Or I wouldn't be able to be on the street,
Sleep is denied me night after night,
But every morning I find I'm all right.
My memory is failing, my head's in a spin,
But I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in.

The moral is this, as my tale I unfold,
That for you and me who are growing old,
It's better to say 'I'm fine', with a grin,
Than to let folks know the shape we are in.

Old age is golden, I've heard it said,
But sometimes I wonder as I get into bed,
With my ears in a drawer, my teeth in a cup,
My eyes on the table until I wake up.
Ere sleep overtakes me I say to myself,
'Is there anything else I could lay on the shelf?'

I get up each morning and dust off my wits,
And pick up the paper and read the Obits,
If my name is still missing, I know I'm not dead,
So I have a good breakfast and go back to bed.

Eighty and more years have passed since Bernard roamed the streets, lanes and fields of this Parish. I wonder how many parishioners remember some of the places and people and incidents he describes so vividly in his memoirs. (I know Ron Canning's memory stretches nearly as far back and I thank him for helping me digest Bernard's notes.)

Bernard well remembers Mr Bletsoe, owner of 'the long farm house' on New Street with extensive stabling for hunting horses. And how could Bernard forget Mr Hall who started up the first garage and counted Prince Edward, the then Prince of Wales, as one of his customers? Meeting the Prince on Banbury Station to drive him to Mr Bletsoe's stables, Mr Hall reputedly felt it necessary to apologise for his Ford car to which the Prince replied he would enjoy a trip in a 'Ford Tin Lizzie'.

Politics too occupied the minds of Bernard and his pals way back in the 1920s. He recalls a 'historic incident' when the white pony of Mr Compton, a dyed-in-the-wool Liberal, greengrocer & fishmonger, was painted with zebra-like blue stripes after the Tories won an election. Bernard does not reveal the names of the culprits but simply mentions that the Police searched his parents' back yard but found no 'blue brushes'.

Villain or cherub, like many young boys and lads in Deddington, Bernard and his brother Geoff attended Sunday School regularly and were members of the Church choir, the latter commitment occasionally resulting in invitations from Major (Capt?) Holford [Cotton-Risley] who lived in a 'property with a pillared entrance and park like garden' (now Deddington Manor) and who took the boys on a trip to Gloucester Cathedral.

Bernard's earliest memory is of his father arriving home from France in uniform, riding in a wagonette and bringing a goat to provide milk for the family.

It is December 1920, Bernard, aged 7 and a bit, is off to Banbury with his father and mother to do some Christmas shopping. Into Deddington Market Square trundles the horse-drawn carrier cart with room for 10 people, all of whom line up again after shopping in the town for the return journey. They are now heavily laden with parcels and at the bottom of Deddington hill the driver stops, looks around for extra horse power and puts a patiently waiting nag into traces with his cart horse to help pull up hill. But today, with some extra sacks of food on board, even two horses struggle and strain, and men and boys on board are bidden to dismount and walk, but are allowed to mount again for the straight run into Deddington. In those days only the three Deddington doctors and a builder owned motor vehicles and petrol was sold from 2-gallon cans in Holliday's shop.

Bernard tells us that his father, Bernard George, manager of a butcher's shop in Oxford, lived in digs during the week, cycling home at weekends. When he found similar employment in Banbury he cycled to work daily. His mother, Mary Ann, née Bishop, the eldest of 10 children, found work in Deddington with the Bowler family looking after their sons until her marriage. His grandparents lived in cottages in the Tchure which were connected to his uncle Richard Dodwell's Bakery and Butcher shops and his aunt Daisy lived in Pretoria House with her husband Percy who ran his building business from a spacious yard behind the house.

Throughout his idyllic boyhood Bernard was surrounded by his loving family. With uncle Richard he delivered bread and cakes by horse and cart and remembers being pampered by customers with tea and crumpets. Bernard

writes how much he enjoyed spending school holidays with his farming relatives in the area. He already felt useful helping with hay-making, cherry-picking, harvesting the corn and mushrooming. The reward for his efforts culminated in exciting trips into Banbury with uncles and aunts, stabling the horse in The Buck & Bell, selling butter, eggs, fruit or mushrooms and ending the day with a well-earned drink (port for aunts and uncles) in The Buck & Bell. All field work on these farms was done with horses until about 1929 when Fordson tractors arrived on the scene. Throughout Bernard's boyhood horses clip-clopped through Deddington and were regular customers at Mr Tibbetts' smithy where the eagerly gaping boys were allowed to blow the long arm of the fire-draught to roar up the fuel.

'From Deddington School I passed an examination to the Banbury County School, as did Elsie, daughter of the local blacksmith. We both received travel passes to go by train from Adderbury station, via Kings Sutton, to Banbury. In all weather we 'biked' to Adderbury station until at the age of 14 our train passes were withdrawn and we 'biked' all the way from Deddington to Banbury and back! On wet days we were allowed to dry out in the school's furnace room and miss morning assembly. The school was in Marlborough House, Marlborough Street where at the corner with High Street was a cake and ice-cream shop where in break time we could buy Banbury cakes, Chelsea buns and cream sodas. Besides our usual curriculum we were taught French and German, algebra and geometry. Sports included cross-country running.

I enrolled in the School's Cadet Corps run by Mr Bannard who, as an ex-Army PT instructor, trained us to a very high standard. I remember well when our Corps was entered into a competition at London's Earls Court Exhibition and ended up the winning team. What a great home-coming it was when we were met at Banbury station by a jubilant reception committee. The Cadets' summer camps were usually at Dawlish in Devon, but one year my age group was able to travel to France. We camped in the Army barracks in Dunkirk where morning parades were supported by a Cadet Unit of the 'Green Howards' Boys' Band. From Dunkirk we toured WWI battlefields, visited 'Hill 60', Mennen Gate, Zeebrugge and Bruges.'

Bernard ends his Cadet Corps memories with the following sentence, his great pride still uppermost in the recollection of the event over 70 years ago. 'In uniform of a camp bugler I sounded the Last Post and Reveille at the Deddington War Memorial only 50 or so yards away from where my parents are now buried.'

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Last month Bernard shared with us memories of his school days, in particular his fond recollections of exciting days spent in the school's Cadet Corps. He continues: 'Aged 16, in 1929 I passed a written exam to join the Royal Air Force. A lot of us Deddington youngsters spent time at their camp in Upper Heyford and were greatly inspired by the airmen and their flying machines. It was therefore a great disappointment for me when, on being sent to Halton Camp in Buckinghamshire, I was failed entrance due to poor eyesight.' To overcome this sad failure Bernard worked hard on his uncle's farm, until a year later he was offered the position of second assistant to Mr Unsworth-Jones, late of Clifton, now manager of a large poultry farm near Chester. His first duty was to learn to drive. He was given the early morning and late night job of driving the owner of the farm to the railway station and working for the rest of the day in the large Army sheds which held many hundreds of chickens, 'layers' named Wyandotte, Rhode Island Reds or Light Sussex breeds. After two years' hard work Bernard allowed himself a break, left his job and

went on a 14-day cruise on a P+O Liner sailing to the North African Coast and returning via Malta, Monte Carlo and Gibraltar. Back in England he tried again to enlist, this time at the Queen's Barracks in Guildford. Much to his surprise he passed his medical but disappointingly the Regiment (no name given) was closed for recruiting for a while and his dream of an overseas posting to India or China shattered.

So back to poultry farming he went, then to seasonal work at hop-picking, then to selling Walls ice cream in Oxford and Bicester. Finally, on his uncle's advice, he applied for and succeeded in getting a job with R. Silcock & Sons Ltd of Liverpool (manufacturers of cattle, pig and poultry food) with whom, after two years, he was promoted to full agent and stayed in the firm for 38 years.

It took the event of war for him to fulfil his fervent wish to join the Services and travel abroad! Bernard served for six years in the Royal Observer Corps, reaching the rank of Company Sergeant Major, and earning a Mention in Dispatches for distinguished service with the First and Eighth Armies. After his retirement from Silcocks, Bernard served for another 16 years as senior usher at Barnstable Crown and Magistrates' Courts and was awarded the British Empire Medal in recognition of his unfailing regularity and punctuality in this service. Now over 90 and a widower, he lives in Devon but in his dreams he wanders through the streets of his home town of Deddington, his accurate memory guiding his steps.

Ruth Johnson, 2005