

OIL LAMP AND CANDLE by PHYLLIS GASTON

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INTRODUCTION by Muriel Brooks

In the run-up to the year 2000 Don and Sue Workman who lived then at Cricketty Mill on the stream below Nash End had the great idea of issuing blank cardboard frames to householders in the parish of Bisley-with-Lypiatt, asking people to put within them whatever encapsulated the experience of living here. (*Getting Into the Spirit: portraits of Bisley Parish 1998*) There was an exhibition in Thomas Keble School of the resulting 'portraits', and it won some national publicity as there were some notable entries. One was created by Phyllis Gaston.

Phyllis, for a lot of us, was herself representative of life in our hilltop village. Her family – expansive at the beginning of the twentieth century but reduced locally to just her 100 years later – was typical of this splendid part of Gloucestershire. At one point the Gastons were in the Red Lion, an 'important village house' built by Stroud Brewery; but in 1926, when Phyllis was born, she and her brother lived with their parents in the house called Hill Top opposite the driveway entrance of St Elizabeth's. Mr Gaston was the gardener and factotum who replaced Mr Phipps, the original man-of-all-work at the orphanage, so Phyllis in her passage through Eastcombe Primary School and Stroud High School – and St Augustine's Church and Girl Guides and the Women's Institute and the British Legion and many other organizations – had constant contact with the ideals of service and discipline and hard work that characterized her. Of course, she was also famous for sending village hall gatherings home legless after sampling her home-made wines...

When, in the 1960s, the building in the centre of Eastcombe of some aggressively modern houses was forced through, Phyllis left the village (reputedly in a state of high dudgeon) for a bungalow opposite Bussage village hall. Eastcombe was, however, still central to her life and she wanted to take part in its portrayal for the millennium exhibition. She told me that she would not produce a work of art but wanted to put some of her writing in the frame – but could not face the job of typing it up. I, Muriel Brooks, offered to do this, and eventually she simply stuck two essays in the cardboard frame. One was Phyllis's memory of the catastrophic results of freezing rain during the winter of 1940, and the other described the notorious winter of '47, by which time she was a cowgirl at Upper Nash End Farm.

Soon afterwards, with other helpers, Phyllis expanded her work and produced her wonderful memoir called *Oil Lamp and Candle* which described life in Eastcombe in the 1930s and '40s. This sold out quickly – perhaps helped by a full-page interview published in the *Stroud News and Journal* – but was soon reprinted for Stroud Museum. Some copies may be available over the internet. I have made efforts (without success) to find out who holds the copyright, as Phyllis died a good few years ago now; but after consulting the Museum decided to reproduce here the sections relevant to the study of the history of Eastcombe. If anyone tells me with good reason that I should not, then I will willingly remove the material from this website. As it is, however, I will publish it in the knowledge that Phyllis herself would have been delighted.

The 21st April 1999 *SNMJ* interview was entitled 'A fascinating life', and Phyllis was quoted as saying, 'Every morning I wake up I thank God that I live here.' I guess quite a lot of us here in the 21st century still do that. Essence of Phyllis in her own words follows...

THE ICE OF 1940

It only lasted about two weeks, but it is etched upon my memory, for it was unique, it was spectacular, and it was devastating.

It began on the last Saturday of January. It had been raining all day and as we walked home from our Sunday School Party we noticed ice particles forming on the road. There was a bitterly cold south-east wind blowing and you would have expected it to be snowing instead of raining. No one but no one could have foretold what it would be like the next morning. Rain and freezing had gone on for most of the night. First, we could not get out of the back door. Peering out of the window we realized that everything was encased in ice.

The clipped yews by the front gate looked as if an inch-thick, made-to-measure glass dome had been placed over them. The chicken wire in our paddock, only tiny holes showed through the mesh. Paths and roads were covered in ice one inch thick. Icicles, feet long, hung from everything. Electric and telephone wires encased in inch-thick ice were snapping everywhere, very dangerous if you went anywhere near. As each one broke there was a very audible ping and the wire snaked about as it fell. Branches of trees were crashing all over the place from the weight of the ice. Regarding the latter, it is amazing how nature has the capacity to repair itself when damaged. Looking down the Chalford road, all the branches from the east side of the trees in the recreation ground were stripped away almost to their trunks. Yet, after a number of years, those trees had regained their symmetry. Cameras were few and far then so, unfortunately, few pictures were taken. The Stroud Museum had one of the signpost at Fourways crossroads showing icicles from its fingers to the ground.

On that Sunday morning my father had to get out of the front door and go round to the back door and break the ice with a hammer before the door could be opened, same with the chicken houses. He had to take an axe to the clipped yews to allow any roosting birds to escape. Sadly, many birds perished as their feet were iced to the trees where they perched, rendering movement impossible.

My brother and I donned our skates and skated up to Bisley to take a pair of shoes to Mr Lardner for repair. He was more than surprised to see us! Has anyone else skated that road, I wonder? All the telephone poles along the way had broken off about four feet from the ground with broken, tangled, ice-covered wires everywhere. We found that between us we could slide these poles over the ice to the side of the road fairly easily.

People tried to walk on the verges to avoid the roads, but each blade of grass was an upturned icicle, pinching your feet, particularly the instep – you soon gave up! 'Creepers' were the best answer for those that had them, but even these could be uncomfortable.

On the Saturday night came another unexpected twist. A foot and a half of snow came down. It did offer a little purchase for those who had to move about – though little else.

Our parents agreed that school was not on the agenda. So we and other villagers spent time hauling the broken branches from the recreation ground home on our sledges for valuable firewood. The rest of the day we spent sledging. We discovered that the Old Hill, then a yellow road [ie, unsurfaced stone], with its smooth ice-covering and the snow on top made a marvellous sledging run. Skill, plus luck, to negotiate the left fork at the bottom and you could run right down to Swilley bridge! Super! Someone told our parents next day – hey ho – oops – not so super. We got a right rollicking! Irresponsible, lack of thought for others who had to get up from Bismore, we got the lot and I suppose we probably deserved it! We were told in no uncertain terms that if we could do that then we could go to school. So on the next day (Wednesday) to school we had to go. Schools rarely closed in those days, whatever the weather. We were going to the Downfield schools then. Teachers when appointed to the village schools either bought or rented a house in the village. There was nothing to freeze up (we were still in the wooden-seats-with-loo-buckets-under era). Schools were closed for the lunch period (no school dinners then) so there was no reason not to open them.

To get to Downfield we had to ride our bicycles to Brownshill, leaving them in Grandpa's shed, and walk (run most days) down the station banks to catch the railcar at Brimscombe station. It was a hairy journey to Brownshill and we were daft enough to take our bikes with us – they were a natural extension of our bodies in those days! This day they were useless. Most of the station banks had to be done on our backsides and we crossed the road to the station. It was utterly deserted. We found the stationmaster who informed us that no trains, railcars, or buses had run since the weekend! A few single-decker buses had just started running up to Chalford and he suggested we catch one of these. Everybody in those days used public transport to get to work and six passed us choc-a-bloc full. We crossed the road and caught one of them on the way up so that we could be on it when it came back. That had to be the one that we could have got on if we had stayed where we were!

Got to school by mid-morning, only to find that half the pupils and a lot of the staff were out. We were left mostly alone to do private study. At 3.30 we were sent home as the buses were being taken off after 4pm. A slight thaw during the day and now freezing hard again caused more problems. The station banks were a nightmare. One step up and three or four back. At last, Grandma's – she was renowned for keeping a 'good table'. My brother was already there, having caught an earlier bus, and Gran filled us with pancakes covered with golden syrup – nectar in the days of food rationing!

A cup of tea and we started for home, with those blessed bikes. Of course. Ruts, slips, and plodding through the snow, it took ages to get as far as The Ram Inn. The thaw earlier had loosened some of the ice on the tree branches and large lumps were falling off. One such, from the pines overhanging the road from the (then) Vicarage grounds landed on my brother's head and that did it. He sat down in the snow at the roadside and refused to budge. I had to desert him and go on, if only to get home and get my father to fetch him. Luckily Father loomed out of the darkness by the Co-op (now Windwhistle) looking for us. He was very relieved to see me and asked if I had seen my brother. I told him where he was and he went to collect him. It was a complete turn-about from the previous day, when he declared that on no account were we going to school next day! We said nothing, just looked at each other and grinned, thinking of the lovely sledging we would get on the morrow! We took care only to use banks however!

It was almost two months before telephone and electricity was restored. For us ordinary folk it was 'no big deal', only high income folk could afford phones and it was only three years before that we had electricity into the village anyway. It was only used for lighting then, it hadn't got round to being a power source. So the oil lamps were dug out and we carried on!

THE SNOW OF 1947

It was by far the worst winter of my lifetime. Over Christmas and for a couple of weeks after, we had exceptionally hard frosts with bitter east winds. Toadsmoor Lake froze over and then the snow arrived to put an end to our skating on it. It just helped the ducks to remain upright!

I was in the Women's Land Army at the time and working at Nash End farm, a five-minute cycle ride from my home at Hill Top, Eastcombe, along the road towards Bisley. Very few vehicles were around then so road-clearing and gritting were hardly on the agenda.

As the snow got deeper I still persisted with my bike; my pride would have been dented otherwise! It became a joke at the farm. Pride comes before a fall, however – several in my case. A blizzard had raged all night and when I set off in the pitch darkness at 5.45am I hadn't got a clue what lay ahead. Whilst the road ran eastwards I could just struggle along, but when just beyond the quarry the road bent towards the north to Westfield barn I hit the first real drift. I had to throw the bike over it, get over the wall, and get back over it past the drift to rescue the bike. That process had to be repeated twice more but I refused to abandon the bike. Then it was eastwards again and I managed to struggle to the farm. I popped the bike in its shed, just inside the front yard gate, and took my very belated place in the milking shed. There the bike stayed for the next month.

Roads were deteriorating fast, deep ruts and frozen lumpy snow in between making it impossible for delivery vans to get to hilltop villages, and the bus had long since ceased to come up. The conditions eased, and one Friday the bus came up and waited by the recreation ground instead of attempting to go round to Brownshill and Chalford Hill. Six of us decided to go down on the eight o'clock bus to the Ball in the Sub Rooms in Stroud. Decked in our finery we set out, having asked Brian Beavis to collect us at midnight. It was good to 'let our back hair down' after being isolated for so long. We came out to find Brian there but along with another fall of snow. Halfway up the Vatch Lane we were outside the taxi, pushing it! Didn't do much for our ankle-length ballgowns. We got back in near the top of the hill, dropped off four by the church, rounded the corner by the village green, and shot right into

the middle of it! Only the two of us to push now, so we decided to walk the rest! Struggling to the farm at 5.45 next morning I rather regretted our shenanigans of the night before.

The following Tuesday the worst blizzard of the lot started and didn't let up for 24 hours. The bus service to Bisley had been running since the Friday but on that Wednesday one got stuck in the drift at Stancombe corner and by the next morning had disappeared from sight under the snow! The herdsman was afraid that if I went home that night I wouldn't get back in the morning. He suggested that I stayed the night, but when he said I would find it reasonably comfortable sleeping in the hay in the forestall, that did it. I felt that if he couldn't offer me a bed in the farmhouse, or an armchair even, I was going home. Later I wished I hadn't!! It was 10pm when we got the chores done and I set off. I was in real difficulty when I got to Westfield barn, the drift was mountainous. I got over into the field to skirt round it. In the blizzard and darkness I judged it wrong and got back over too soon, ending up chest deep in snow. It was frightening – I wished I was in the cows' forestall. At least they were safe and warm. Frantically digging with my hands it took me ages to dig myself out. Exhausted I staggered across the field towards the quarry, coming down towards the road via a narrow path alongside it, praying I wouldn't slip into it. If I had, there was no way I would have got out. I staggered into the house at midnight. My mother went to heat up my meal and I promptly fell asleep in the chair by the fire. She woke me up to eat and I was sitting there in a pool of water. My clothes whilst in the drift had frozen solid and were now thawing out – I was too exhausted and weak, both physically and mentally, to care.

I gave the elements best next morning and waited for daylight before setting out. It was an awful journey, even if it had at last stopped snowing. I stared at the drift by Westfield barn with incredulity, so deep that only the telephone wires were visible coming from the pole somewhere in its midst. That evening my father said that only two people had left the village that day, myself and Vera Davis. She got halfway down the Chalford road and was forced to give up. The men had got together to try to dig the village out. Many people had to get into their lofts and dig out the snow that had got into them to prevent the ceilings falling. It gave us an awful problem at the farm. The snow found its way into the buildings, under the eaves, under the slates, and through holes that previously you never knew were there! We spent hours blocking up these points with sacking, newspapers, straw, anything to hand. The cold was intense. One really cold morning I put the thermometer on the outside of the cowshed to check how cold it was. It was filled with red-coloured mercury [alcohol?] and was in the teeth of the easterly gale. The mercury dropped straight to the bottom, the bulb broke, and it spilled out, staining the snow like a drop of blood. The herdsman wasn't happy, I had broken the only thermometer they had on the farm. The radio said that night that Cheltenham had had over 32 degrees of frost, so our thermometer had been telling the truth.

Food and fuel were causing problems, not to mention water. Workman's bakery at Chalford Hill managed to get bread to Bisley with a horse and sledge. Well into March when the thaw set in a bulldozer went to work on the roads, working round the clock. Nash End Lane was another matter: narrow with high hedges, snow compacted 17 feet deep. The bulldozer couldn't operate. The Council eventually dug it out by carving it like huge blocks of salt, loading a trailer, towing it out and stacking it on the verges on the Oakridge road. It was the end of May before it all disappeared. Snow was still in the quarry beside the Pike in June.

Incidentally, there are two farms at Nash End: Nash End farm and Lower Nash End farm – both at that time owned by the Misses Wilby and Dobson. They lived in the farmhouse at Lower Nash End with Miss Eddy who kept house and ran the kennels, situated near the bottom of the first field on the left-hand side of Nash End lane. Gladys Adams did most of the farm work down there and looked after the chickens housed in the rickyard at the top farm. In the top farm lived the herdsman and his wife, together with his son Donny who helped him, and a younger schoolboy son. My job was to help them with the herd and look after the calves. The herdsman had only arrived a month before the winter set in, and having come from Devon found it a cultural shock! Their dialect, though attractive, was like a foreign

language to me, and I was forever begging their pardon. Donny had more brawn than brains then and was always thinking of ways to increase productivity, with sometimes awful results!

If you saw a mini-strawrick advancing round the yard with a pair of legs sticking out at the bottom, it would be Donny. We could collect the same amount in two journeys quicker overall. After the Fire Service had been (see below) the herdsman decided that Donny should give the milking equipment a 'birthday clean'! Donny decided to stoke the boiler up fully with coke, that was OK, but he also hung the shovel over the safety arm. This was a device that lay across the safety valve on top of the boiler so that if pressure built up too high the valve would push up the arm to allow the excess steam to escape. No way do you ever interfere with it. He went off and then forgot all about it. It was always a dark room, the only light coming in from the open doorway. I went to attend to my calves and spotted the pressure gauge looking peculiar. Peering more closely I realized the gauge was three times higher than it should have been. I searched madly for the shovel to shovel the fire out, then noticed where it was. I raced round to the herdsman who told me to shovel the fire out! Hurrying back I threw myself at a 12-foot drift to get into the spare tool shed, behind it... grabbed one and scrambled back through the drift just in time to see Donny dashing into the boiler house. Silly boy grabbed the shovel off the arm. He came out quick, the steam quicker. It filled the boiler house (my poor calves), it filled the adjoining young bull's pen – the half-door being open – it filled the front yard and went down over the road. It seemed to go on for ever and didn't do much for the bolts holding the top of the boiler on. Donny, surrounded by steam, was standing in the yard, shovel in hand, and a very sheepish grin on his face. I rushed in to the calves. Thankfully they were OK though very damp, their coats had protected them. The young bull looked scared to death!

The calves were my responsibility. During that winter 24 were born and I was only too grateful that at the end of the freeze-up 22 were still alive. Newly born ones were taken straight into the boiler house at three days old where we had made several small pens and I did my best to nurture them there.

It was important to keep the boiler going to keep them warm and when the water problems started I resorted to putting buckets of snow round it to melt. Net gain about three inches of water! The only water I took out was to warm the milk for the calves and to make gruel for the older ones. Washing dairy equipment was stopped – it didn't matter, it was freezing all the time, no bugs could survive, and in any case the milk lorry couldn't get to us to collect it, so most of it was going down the drain.

Older calves would be transferred to a set of pigsties round in another yard. The times I had to dig out a track to get to them – it was all so time-consuming. The night of the worst blizzard I dug out a track ready, went and prepared the gruel, and the snow had all blown back in again. Whilst doing this my lovely Tilley lantern – it gave a super light – got blown over and broken and I had nothing. The calves were four to a pigsty and I had to hope I had given each one a feed, but in that darkness I could have 'dosed' one twice at the expense of another.

There were three yearlings in the second field down the lane on the left-hand side, which I used to tend twice a day. The lane had filled up with snow at the first blizzard so there was no hope of getting them up to the farm. They did have an open-fronted shed as a shelter of a sort. The day of the worst blizzard it was after lunch before I could get round to them. Decided to take straw bedding first to make some sort of trail. Staggering across the first field, the gale trying to wrest the straw from the sacking on my back, and getting over by the (by now) invisible gate at the bottom of the field into the lane was bad enough but I had to go a few yards before I could climb the gate into their field. I spread the straw on the shed floor and they started to eat it. I told them I was coming back with hay but they didn't listen! To stop the snow getting into my wellington boots I used to tie the legs of my overalls over the outside of them but it didn't help too much now it was this deep. I got back with hay and then the worst journey of all had to be done. Water. I put it in a lidded milking pail, but had to

hold it up above the snow level and that was awful to do. They ended up getting about half a bucket between them. I consoled myself that they could at least lick some snow if they were that desperate. Three journeys and it was already dark, my face raw from the driving snow. Everything took so long to do. We were working 11, 12 hours a day quite often and it was tiring. How were other farmers coping, particularly with sheep? Heaven knows.

Water, a crucial requirement, was becoming a problem. No mains water then, our supply was pumped up from the stream at Lower Nash End, and stored in a 400-gallon tank in the roof of the barn. The frost had got so far into the ground that the pipe had frozen. Because of the snow we had to keep the cows in all the time and we were carrying water to them in buckets twice a day, another time-consuming effort. A fully lactating cow can drink 30-odd gallons a day.

Milk yields had dropped quite a lot anyway as the cow cake had run out days before and no one could get to us with deliveries. We dared not open the mangold clamp, the frost would have run straight through it. We stopped washing dairy equipment to help. A plea was made to the Fire Service for help, but meantime what to do? There was a hand-pump in the wash-house. But that was rusted and useless. There had to be a tank for this somewhere and we searched the floor for the tank cover. No luck. Then a possible answer came to me. This building was joined on at right-angles to the boiler house and both backed on to the Money Tump field. That angle was fenced across with barbed wire and filled with stinging nettles. We had a similar system at home and our tank cover was outside the kitchen window. The herdsman was sceptical – he hadn't been there long enough to realize the corner was fenced off. We trooped round to look – the whole corner was fenced off with snow up to the eaves of the buildings and no wire or nettles could be seen! However, next day he decided we would have to take a chance and dig the corner out. Chores done and we started, it took an awful long time, and I was worrying all the time whether I had put him on a wild-goose chase. He wouldn't be very happy if I had. First the wire was exposed and then eventually – eureka – we spied what could be a tank cover. We dug away the nettle roots and there it was, about four feet long with two rusty rings in it. It took an enormous heave to upend it and the smell came out and hit us. Stagnant water of years, jet black in colour, but it was pretty full. Darkness was on us and with all the chores to do it would have to wait till morning. The cows had nothing to drink that day. With luck some sort of water would be dispensed next day. Luckily no cow would go hungry as we had plenty of hay in the Dutch barn in the rickyard.

Next day, chores done, we focused on watering the animals. Ropes were attached to two buckets, an old tin bath was placed by the wire, and a track dug up through the rickyard and the gate, then across to the tank. Would they drink it? I took a bucket to one of them and it vanished in seconds. So we took them in small batches round to the tank – first time they had seen daylight for a month – and started pulling up buckets of the foul water into the bath. We couldn't keep up with the demand! Problem solved – *pro tem*. We carried buckets to the two young bulls and young stock and they all drank it with equal relish! Ugh!

A few days later the Fire Service managed to get to us and filled the tank in the barn. Great – apart from one thing – the downpipe had frozen and we couldn't get it out! Nothing was easy in 1947 – we were lurching from one crisis to another. We had to get a long length of hosepipe, set the long ladder to the tank, and pop the end of the pipe into the tank. Every churn we could rustle up was placed under, ready. It took an almighty suck to draw the water down and we directed it into the churns. When filled we had to pull out the hosepipe to stop the flow from the tank. The barn, a large building, had a very wide opening in the middle (to take a trailer in, if necessary) and the wind used to whistle straight through, and so the floor became a skating rink! We then had to carry the churns across the front yard and then the cowyard and transfer the water to buckets to give to the cows. Then back to the barn to repeat the filling up process.

The cows were not the only problem. Being a Women's Land Army member I normally could have nothing to do with the kennels on the farm, but that winter

circumstances involved me on a couple of occasions that I couldn't avoid, and certainly didn't expect.

Miss Wilby, Miss Dobson and Miss Eddy had gone off to Switzerland to ski. Hindsight – they could have done it here! Miss Eddy had arranged with the herdsman's schoolboy son to feed and clean out the dogs in her absence and apparently he was well trained in what he had to do. The lad seemed to be doing whatever he had to do and everyone was too preoccupied to worry about it. Several weeks into the awful weather, Gladys Adams became suspicious that all was not well and visited the kennels. She was appalled by what she saw. The dogs were terribly thin, several had mange, and one old dog was very ill. It transpired that the dogmeat suppliers couldn't deliver, all they were getting was cooked potatoes, and these were frozen anyway. She put in an urgent call to the vet. He could only get from Stroud to Brimscombe in his car and from there he walked up to the kennels. He put the old dog down immediately and did what he could to treat the others. He told Gladys he would ring Ormond Eales, the suppliers from Gloucester, and make sure that they delivered meat to him that afternoon and that she and I must go down that evening and fetch it. Neither of us felt very enamoured at the prospect and neither was the herdsman when I told him I would have to go home at 5.30. It did occur to me that it was partly his fault as possibly he should have checked on what his son was doing, and this might have been avoided.

Gladys joined me at home at 6pm and we walked down the valley and caught the 7pm railcar into Stroud. As we were getting off the driver came to say that he was taking the car off as the tracks were icing up too much, especially the points. That was all we needed, it meant walking all the way to Nash End with the meat. We picked it up at the vet's – a sack each, with 50lb [about 2Kg] in each. We decided to take the Stroud Hill route via Bisley, thus getting the hill over first and distance-wise very little in it.

Up by the Co-op we bought a hot dog from a van. When the van-man discovered what we were doing he commented we would be glad we had that hot dog as we wouldn't see Nash End this side of midnight! How prophetic that turned out to be. Fifty pounds doesn't seem an awful lot but when you had to struggle with the roads in the state they were in, it soon weighed a ton. Deep ruts and great lumps of compacted ice, we staggered all over the place, we couldn't use the grass verge as it was too deeply buried in snow. We stopped frequently to get our breath back. A couple of things in our favour: a full moon lit our way and the wind dropped a bit. The frost, however, was intense. Some way up the hill we decided to shed some of our load, and later when we reached the Lord's Stone we shed some more. We now had about 40lb each on our backs. The local foxes must have been surprised to find joints of horsemeat for supper that night. Wildlife must have been having a terrible time.

We had the night entirely to ourselves after leaving the van-man. Quite right too. Anyone with a grain of common sense would have been tucked up in bed with their hotwater bottles. No electric blankets then. We passed the still-buried bus at Stancombe and on into Bisley. Nearing Nash End we heard the clock strike midnight. With great relief we dumped the sacks down, for the last time, on the kennels' kitchen floor and made our separate ways home to bed.

One very cold but sunny Sunday morning Gladys and I were having a word in the yard, when the lad came rushing in and shouting that the kennels were on fire. We grabbed sacks and the fire extinguisher from the barn and rushed to the kennels.

It was a wooden building, sectioned off into several compartments, with a kitchen/foodstore at the end, a walkway along the front with a door at each end. First we let the dogs out, their first journey out for weeks. They were still recovering from their earlier trauma, but some were still happy to pick a fight. They had to get on with it!

The flames were licking round the roof edge and Gladys got up there to stifle them with the sacks while I went inside with the fire extinguisher. It took a long while, but eventually we got it out between us. When it was safe we opened the doors to let the wind blow through and get rid of the choking smoke and smell. It was charred and blackened

inside, not to mention all the foam as well. Donny and his dad appeared and sorted the dogs out and the youngster was hovering in the background shaking like a leaf. It turned out he had been having an illicit smoke and had caught the straw alight! His father was none too happy – neither were we, as a matter of fact.

We cleared out all the straw and foam, put in fresh straw and returned the dogs to their by now blackened domicile. Thank heavens we didn't have to call the Fire Brigade. Thankfully, they had bailed us out with water a while before and wouldn't have relished a second visit. In any case, by the time they would have arrived they would have been looking at a heap of ash. Home to a very late lunch and now all the chores to be done after. What time would we finish tonight? My father asked me if I had been chimney sweeping. I looked in the mirror...!

When, at last, the water ran again into the tank in the cowyard, the herdsman suggested I take the two bulls to it, and we would give them a good clean out. All we had been doing for weeks was push fresh straw in on top, and now they were standing on a good three-foot layer of manure. I put the pole on the old boy and took him to the tank, and he drank his fill. He was as good as gold and I put him back in his pen. I went round to the younger bull's pen to find the herdsman coming out with him on a rope, and he handed him over to me. I went to put the pole on him and was told not to bother as he would be all right. He was coming up to 15 months old, he hadn't been out for weeks, he was already getting randy, and instinct told me he should be on the pole. However, I led him round to the tank – he didn't want to know. He could see the cows in the sheds across the yard and he had no interest in water! I shoved his head in it, but no way would he drink so I led him back to his pen. It was a low shed with a beam across the eaves and standing on three feet of dung he wasn't far from it. I was tying him up to his ring with one hand and holding him with the other. Next thing I knew he had hooked me with his horns and over the beam. I went bashing into the wall at the other end. My back hurt and I was winded. At this point the herdsman returned, realized what had happened and held the door open for me to crawl out. He then lost his wool completely, grabbed the boiler shovel and beat the poor bull with it. Gasping for breath I begged him to stop. He's not going to do that to you, was his response, and gave him some more. I felt so sorry for that poor animal. I blamed myself for not insisting that I used the pole. It couldn't have happened then. I cried for him all the way home to lunch. 1947 had got everybody down.

EASTCOMBE AND BISMORE WHEN I WAS A KID

Where did I learn to skate? In the meadow on the Hawkley side of Bismore Bridge, known to us locals as Swilley Bridge. Looking at it now you would think that was impossible. A lot of the fields flanking the stream are in a poor state and this worries me. Years ago a number of small farmers took care of these fields and, as a result, they were properly husbanded. Bismore Farm, Sheephouse and Daniels Farm each had a small herd of cows and each blade of grass was precious. Two of them supplied milk to Eastcombe households and the other took his to the railway station to go on the 'milk train'. The fields were grazed or mown for hay and any invasive weeds or scrub soon skimmed off. Buttercups, daisies, primroses and cowslips remained and, on the Lower Common, orchids. Follow the valley down from Bisley. You have a field at the bottom of Lower Nash End farm in quite good condition. Then on to my favourite field past Cricketty Mill. This is reasonable enough though a lot more bushes are there and a tangle of nettles at the end. Next the field past Hawkley Wood, much more neglected, especially near the stream. Wild snowdrops were prevalent here. Thence to the meadow, very much neglected. I can remember seeing old Mr Freebury scything it for hay and there wasn't a weed in sight. The end near the bridge flooded most winters. We had hard frosts – our winters were colder then – and it would freeze over, enough to bear our weight. Our parents never worried about our skating there. If the ice gave way, we only had a foot or so to fall. My father acquired the skates by accident. He could never have afforded to buy

them. He bought a job lot from a house sale thinking the large box was full of tools. When he got it home he found at the bottom several pairs of skates with boots attached.

Passing on from the Swilley Bridge, this once grassy bank is now almost entirely given over to bushes and scrub. Near Cutham's Stile [the flat old monolith that forms a stepping stone for the public footpath across the brook] stones could still be seen from the tumbledown cottage, scene of the 19th-century brutal murder. Walk up that footpath and it forks near the top [not now], both paths emerging on to the track from the Lower Common. The enclosed triangular piece on which cows used to graze is now impenetrable [not now]. On the other side of the path, that bank is now inaccessible due to stinging nettles and brambles.

Then we come to the Lower Common which belonged to Daniel's Farm, now known as Rodways. It is sad to see a wire fence on both sides of the cart track. Then it was grazed. It did unfortunately carry the redwater bug so an eye had to be kept on the cows in this respect. Apart from the grass and the aforementioned flowers, the only trees were holly, quite a number of them. Some holly was cut by Mr Godwin each year and sold to a shop in Stroud at Christmas time as a small part of the farm's income. As you enter the common now, a large portion of the lower side has gone to scrub. We used to walk all the way along the bottom of the bank to the lake. Not now. The topside is going the same way but latterly some 'repair' work appears to be taking place. At the top of this bank near the Lager bend on the Vatch lane was a stile with a path leading down to the gate at the Toadsmoor end of the common. It was in regular use then and ought to be on the definitive map [of public footpaths]. My fear is that from the Swilley down, the whole valley may go to scrub. [Things have changed greatly since Phyllis died – she may or may not have pleased by recent developments – but I have included this whole passage as it provides a snapshot at a particular time (the end of the 20th century).] The wood on the other side is not as well cared for as it was then. Several paths we used are impassable. It was more open then with an abundance of hazel bushes over it. On the other side of the hairpin bend was a large grass clearing and water never ran on the actual track as now. Some alterations in the Ferris Court area I feel are responsible for this. The Old Hill was a yellow road and cars were becoming more affordable for the well off. Car trials were put on from time to time, the route being marked out with handful of red or blue powder either on the road or on the trees. The area was a favoured route for this purpose and, depending on which direction they were taking, we kids would quickly station ourselves on the Old Hill or up near the hairpin bend. A number of the cars would inevitably get stuck at these points and need a push. Our reward was sixpence a time, a lucrative interlude as many of us had only one penny pocket money per week.

To go back to the farms: you would see Mr Willie Andrews and Mr Bill Godwin carrying their milk to the farm gates using yokes. Mr Andrews went on to deliver to his customers and Mrs Godwin took over to deliver theirs. Each had a pint and a half-pint measure on a bracket inside the lidded pail and 'dibbed out' the milk straight into the householders' jugs. Mr Godwin originally farmed Bismore, but when Mrs Rodway of Daniel's Farm was widowed he took over the management of her farm and gave up Bismore, living with his sister at Fieldholme. War came and farming became very important in order to feed the nation and save on imports. Before school in the morning I used to run round the village delivering newspapers and on Saturdays, after this was done, I would meet Mrs Rodway at the farm gate and help deliver the milk. It was delivered twice daily and I often helped in the evenings.

In the interests of economy, on the 6pm news on the radio, it was announced that hats need no longer be worn in church. Mrs Harry Roberts who used to sing in the church choir came rushing out, very irate, to tell us that she had just spent 'nineteen and bloody elevenpence on a new one.' Mrs Rodway and I were helpless with laughter.

Love blossomed on the farm and Mr Godwin and Mrs Rodway decided to marry. He was a deacon at the chapel and the pastor, Mr Johnson, was officiating. I was among those invited and we couldn't believe our ears when Mr Godwin was asked if he would take Mrs

Rodway to be his lawful wedded wife and he replied, 'That is what I have come here for.' I continued to help at the farm on Saturday afternoons and school holidays.

Mr Godwin taught me to ride Strawberry, a lovely pony. His two working horses had to go periodically for shoeing. They were far too big for a saddle but he would put on the bridle, heave me up on its back, and I would ride it over to Bisley to Mr Davis's smithy by the Wells. He was a lovely man and it always fascinated me to watch him at work. He would then heave me up and I would ride back to Eastcombe, straddled across its back. I always felt quite 'bandy' for a bit after I got off. Incidentally, Mr Davis's anvil can still be seen from the roadside just above the Wells. His son, John, has embedded it into the boundary wall of the site with a commemorative plaque to his father's memory.

Mr Godwin decided it was time for Dick, over 30 years old, to go into retirement, so he purchased a replacement. One morning he asked me to go down to the Lower Common and collect the two working horses. They were down on the bank just above the lake. A stream flowed through the withy bed and along in front of, and parallel to, the lake. For animals on the common, this was their watering hole, keeping them from the lake. It was a very long dry spring and the stream had dried up. Finding the two I wanted, I shooed them homewards, following behind. I heard Dick whinnying loudly. It persisted and I was prompted to go back. To my horror he was out in the mud at the end of the lake. He had gone to get a drink but the water had receded. Trying to get out of it, he was only blundering further into the bog. It was up to his knees and now he couldn't move. Directly across the lake I noticed Mr Sollars of 'The Ramblers' working with another chap and I rushed round to them as I hadn't a clue what to do but knew it would have to be done quick. 'Your legs are younger than ours,' they said, 'so rush up to Bob Bingle's, he's up in the workshop at the top, and ask him for his pulleys and come back with them quick.' That meant rushing up to Vatch Lane and over the stile opposite, up through the wood and then up across to the workshop. It is no longer there. Giving me the pulleys, Bob said he would go over and get Mr Godwin. I got back to the lake and poor Dick was now in halfway up his body. Mr Sollars and his mate were there with crawling boards and were fixing the pulleys to a tree. Bob and Mr Godwin arrived and he asked me to go back up to the farm to help Mrs Godwin with the milk delivery. We were both on tenterhooks all the way round, particularly because I had overheard one of them say it looked hopeless. Back to the farm and to our great relief, there were Mr Godwin and Dick, both looking in an awful mess, covered in a greeny, muddy slime. Mr Godwin had had to go out to him on the crawling boards but by now Dick was in too deep for him to get the chains down under his body. So initially he had to be eased up by his neck until Mr Godwin could get the chains under his body and they could winch him out. We washed Dick down and in spite of his awful ordeal, he lived several more years in happy retirement. That afternoon we went down and put a barbed wire fence all along the between the lake and the dried-up stream. Mrs Godwin told me that some years earlier they had lost a Jersey cow in there.

She also told me about an accident which Mr Magor, headmaster of Bisley school, experienced and which involved the lake. He used to help out in the parish and often came over to Eastcombe to take services at St Augustine's. He had a limp, one leg being slightly shorter than the other. He was one of the few car owners and going down Vatch Lane one day he lost control on the Lager bend, dropped on to the field below, ran down the grass and amazingly went through the hedge where a low branch of the oak tree went through the car. This lifted the roof off and the now unconscious Mr Magor was thrown out. The car then broke out in flames and went on into the lake, which put the fire out. Hence his limp and an incredible escape. Mrs Godwin showed me a box of pencils and rubbers, etc, which they had picked up around the oak tree.

Halfway down the bank was the workshop where old Mr Rodway cut corks. He was Mrs Godwin's first husband's father and lived at the farm; she had her own widowed father there too. Mr Rodway was the last to ply his trade in the West of England: mechanization was taking over.

Another humorous story that may be worth the telling: delivering milk to Mrs Gardiner one day, the poor soul came to the door in an awful state. A seamstress, she took in work making clothes and doing alterations if required. Alterations were usually only taken to her if it was too difficult for customers to do themselves. When struggling with one awful job, she got het up and made some strident comments about it, not realizing her seven-year-old was in earshot. The customer had just come to collect the garment and the youngster piped up with 'Our Mum do say she wished these people would do their blooming old tack themselves.' Out of the mouths of babes...

We roamed the banks and the woods around the valley. The Swilley was a particular magnet. We were always clambering down there. When we were small enough, we used to leave our shoes and socks on the side of the stream and, bending double, would go through the tunnel, emerging into the meadow on the other side of the bridge. Coming back through one day my shoes and socks had slipped into the water. My mother demanded to know why my feet were so wet when I got home and the truth had to come out. I was in deep trouble and forbidden to do it again. When brother appeared later he was told the same. He wasn't bothered as he was too big to do it any more.

We experimented with smoking traveller's joy. You cut off a piece between two nodes from the thicker branches which had died and gone brown as these have holes running right through. It was awful stuff actually and burnt our tongues. Pity it didn't burn my fingers too, I might not have become addicted to the weed.

We spent a lot of time in the recreation ground, rec for short, playing cricket, rounders and other games. The swings were the only piece of play equipment on it then. We lay out of sight in the long grass – it would only get cut once a year – the start of the slippery slope? We played I-urkey on the tin and Cannon by the school and on the village green respectively (the cemetery being a super hiding place) and Whistle or hollow or we shall not follow. As the fashion came round and the shop stocked the wherewithal we played marbles, whipping tops, fives, skipping and yo-yo. Bored? We never knew the word, let alone used it.

In springtime, straight after school, we went down the Bismore banks or the Lower Common to gather first primroses and violets, then cowslips and then bluebells from Frithwood. We took them to two dear old ladies who lived at 'Glen View'. Everyone saved their shoe boxes for them. They would line them with greaseproof paper and fill them with flowers, sprinkle over some water and wrap them in brown paper tied up with string. They took them to the Post Office to catch the 6pm collection, postage sixpence per box, and they were delivered in London's East End first thing next morning. The grateful letters that came from some of the children there made it all worth while; for some these were the only flowers they ever saw.

Our picking made absolutely no difference to the profusion of the flowers the year following. I submit, it is not the picking of the flowers that is destroying them today, but the pesticides and herbicides that are the perpetrators of such awful deeds. Our bird population has declined alarmingly. When I was young, yellowhammers were in abundance over the Accommodation Lane and also near the top of Vatch Lane. Their cousin, the corn bunting, nested in the quarry beside the Bisley road. Plovers were in those fields, too. Now they have all gone, as have the skylarks across Manor Farm, now that habitat has been taken away. Hedges have been taken out to deprive wild life further. I don't believe today's children have even heard of, let alone seen, a glow worm. Very sad. The sight of them, dotted about in the grass verges, particularly either side of Vatch Lane, when their phosphorescent light was 'switched on'... This was to attract males at dusk on a summer evening and was magical to us. Grasshoppers are fast dying out too, partly because a favourite haunt, Manor Farm fields, has been taken away. As you walked across those fields on August/September evenings, they rose in a shower, jumping away almost from under your feet. A few are still to be seen and heard in the grass headlands of Brownhill allotments, thank goodness. Farmers then could really claim they were looking after our countryside. That surely no longer pertains today. [Sad that

Phyllis did not live to applaud the green initiatives that exist now.]

SCHOOL

We started school at four or five years old and Eastcombe school was very much the same now as then. Main differences are internal. The dividing wall between infants and the top class can no longer be raised or lowered and class 2 has been extended a little into the top class. Most importantly the toilets have gone inside. The outside ones we had, had wooden seats with buckets under and the caretaker, Mrs Minchin, carried those buckets home to empty them. She lived in what is now called Covilon but it was two dwellings then. With teachers living in or near the village and nothing to freeze up, the school was rarely if ever closed for weather. No school dinners then in village schools, they were closed in the lunch hour. Mums were always around to receive their children, no 'latch-key' kids then, and heaven help you if you played truant! Mr Bick, the School Attendance Officer, called frequently and if any pupils were missing without a reason, he was straight off to their houses!

Miss Rogers took the infant class and guided us through our early years. The three Rs were the main focus. A lot of work was done on the blackboard and small individual slates. Paper and books were limited and not readily available so walls were not adorned as now. We chanted the tables in unison, until they were indelibly and forever stored in our brains. We went up as far as 12 x 12. This equalled a gross, a standard unit of measure where quantities were concerned. Similarly with the alphabet and linking letters to form words. Poor writing would earn a rap on the knuckles. Discipline was very tight, a cane was available but, luckily, rarely used. Miss Heslett, the Headmistress, preferred a slipper thank goodness! I can see her now with her hair in a bun, pince-nez spectacles and wielding a tuning fork for singing. When she left she was replaced by Miss Smith.

We were taken for walks along the lanes to identify the wildflowers and pots of these adorned the window sills. I liked Friday afternoons in the Infants, not just the prospect of the weekend ahead (a week to us kids seemed to go on forever) but she gave us each a cushion to put our heads on to sleep. Boys being boys (girls too for that matter) they got into scrapes and landed in trouble. The Limb of the Law would come down like a ton of bricks. Miss Smith lived in Church House and they played one of their pranks at Hallowe'en. They pinched some nice fat swedes from Mr Andrews's field (houses are on it now) along Fidges Lane and cut them out to make some horrific facial shapes. They put in lighted candles and waved them about from the field quite close to the back of her house. It scared her so much she fainted. Next day the local bobby (based in Bisley) arrived in school and suspects were lined up, brother with them, in front of the class until confessions were extracted. The parents were visited and punishments handed out. On another occasion we came out from Evensong: it was pouring with rain and we girls overheard what the lads (all choir members) were planning to do. Much later my brother arrived home, soaking wet, and burbling on about having walked all round Bussage, Brownhill, Frithwood, etc. I knew he was telling porkies but stayed quiet. Next morning my father heard a commotion in the road and went to investigate. There was poor Mr Ernie Tanner sprawled across the heavy wooden gates from Mrs Bond's house next door, which had been placed across the road. In the rain and dark he had ridden his cycle straight into them. Father helped him in and gave him tea and then helped him home to repair his wounds. It soon became apparent that every gate that could be lifted off in the village had been. For the next few days, for the only time in my life, I'd got my brother where I wanted. He was afraid I might let on. However, Mr Bobby arrived in school and the truth was winkled out. Confessions, punishments, and apologies to householders followed. A cousin of mine got into very hot water when he threw a stone at the bottom end of Mr Chamberlin's tank, I recall. It ruptured the tank, standing right by his back door, and flooded his kitchen as a result. We girls mainly confined our misdemeanours to scrogging apples, plenty at home but others tasted better.

'Whitegates' suffered rather a lot and the owner rigged up a trip wire round his eating

apple tree linked to a bucket on the wall. As Ruby, Peggy and I approached, so the bucket fell off and we scarpered fast, over the wall into Vatch Lane and over into Daniels Farm. When I saw him coming through our garden gate next morning I was scared to death. He had only come to purchase a battery, to my great relief, but I heard him telling Mum about his bit of bad luck the night before.

When we reached the age of ten, scholarship year, my parents sent us to Chalford Hill School. Miss Mills taught that class and if anyone was likely to get you through the exam, she was. My brother went on to the Central School and I followed a year later to the High School. Mum took in washing to help with the expenses, but it seems to me that those then responsible for education offered more help than now. Fewer of course were taking advantage of higher education then. If you didn't go to Downfield you stayed on till you were 14 and then left to go to work. My mother bought the material from Johnson & Johnson, George Street (sole suppliers) to make our uniforms and was reimbursed. Black woollen stockings were part of the uniform except for forms Lower and Upper Three when grey knee-length socks could be worn. The year I reached Lower Four a revolution took place and the black woolly ones were replaced by fawn lisle, much to our relief. It even made headlines in the *Stroud News*.

School dinners were provided as were three quarterly railway passes per year. We had to catch the railcar which left Chalford station at 8am and did not leave Downfield until 4.40 in the evening. To get to Brimscombe station we cycled over to Brownshill, leaving our bikes in Grandpa's shed, sometimes he had as many as six in there. We then made our way down the station banks to Brimscombe. It was a long day away from home. It would not be tolerated today but we knew no other and accepted it as normal.

Mains water was not available in a lot of the villages so if we wished we could have two baths a week at school, much preferred to the tin bath in front of the kitchen fire. Two years later the war started and we had to share the school with Edgbaston High who were evacuated to Stroud. We then started at 8am and went straight through to 1pm, then Edgbaston took over.

I left at 17 to join the Land Army in 1942 and was accepted for a year's agricultural course in 1947/8 at Bicton College, South Devon, with the WLA's blessing...

CHURCH AND CHAPEL

Every child automatically went to Sunday School, either in the Baptist Chapel or St Augustine's C of E. The nuns at the Orphanage did a lot of work in connection with the church, Sister Perpetua running the Sunday School. You wore warm clothes in the winter. Churches were poorly heated then. Ours had a tortoise stove which, even if well stoked up with coke by caretaker Mrs Birt, couldn't really heat the place. Mr Piper, our parish priest – we were in Bisley parish – was elderly but cycled over to Eastcombe in all winds and weathers. He liaised a lot with the Orphanage; they were his right hand in church affairs. He also had to cope with a wheelchair-bound wife and if she was coming to a service in Eastcombe he would hire a taxi. He never failed to visit the sick and called on each household once per year. He always timed his visit to us on Derby Day so that he could have a cup of tea with my mother and listen to the race on the radio. He was a gentle fellow and always got on well with us children. His birthday was on Primrose Day, 19 April, and Ruby and I used to pick a bunch of primroses and walk over to the vicarage at Bisley on that day. He was always touched by this and gave us tea and cake before we came home.

He did tend to be a bit absent-minded and sometimes forgot to come and take the six of us being prepared for confirmation. There was a large table in the vestry and we had concealed a pair of table tennis bats, net and ball. We would get them out and play on the table with a lookout at the door in case he turned up.

We were confirmed in Bisley church, This was a first for parishes – the first time the Bishop took a confirmation service outside of Gloucester Cathedral [not according to Frances Deacon – see *As I Remember*]. It was Bishop Addenbrook, a former Vicar of Chalford, so my

maternal grandfather and two others who sang in that choir made the journey to meet him. The six of us were taken over by taxi, but our parents, uncles, aunts, Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and All walked. When the Bishop spotted the Chalford trio he broke from the recessional walk to the vestry and threw his arms round all three. We now had to go to Communion Service every other Sunday morning. The one service I shall never forget was when a tramp came in. He was very ragged, poor chap, and didn't smell too wholesome and when he knelt at the altar you saw his bare feet through his soles. Actual pieces of bread were dispensed then and when the vicar offered the chalice to the tramp, he grabbed it and started tipping it down wholesale with the vicar struggling to retrieve it.

The last Saturday in January was our Sunday School party. This took place in the Church Hall and was one of our highlights. Jelly and blancmange, sandwiches (most likely to be made with paste) and cream buns were provided by a group of parents, Mum included, with the usual crackers. We played games such as Pass the Parcel, Here We Come Gathering Nuts in May, and Musical Chairs. Then we were each given a present and prizes were dispensed to those who qualified, mainly for regular attendance. Your first one was a prayer book, the next year a Bible, and after that it was a book of your choice. Sister Perpetua acquired these prizes and presents and they were good ones, but where she acquired the funds from we never knew. It was noted that just before Christmas, Sunday School numbers would increase and then fall away a bit after the party.

We put on a series of tableaux at Christmas with the choir singing the appropriate carols. We wore the beautiful costumes Sister Perpetua had sent down from the Home at Ham Common. The other highlight was the Dressing of Bisley Wells, though for us on a wet day it was not quite so high! On Ascension Day those of us who were church Sunday School were given the afternoon off school, much to the chagrin of the chapel scholars. Mr Andrews and his employee, Mr Freebury, would collect us on two flat-bedded carts and take us over to Bisley. We formed up in the school yard and processed down to the wells, headed by the vicar, the choir, the banners and the wreath bearers for a service of thanksgiving to God for His precious gift of water. The wreaths were placed and then we placed our floral offerings – mainly bluebells, it was their season – on the lower level. We then returned to the school for the 'bunfight' and thence to the Rec for sports before Mr Andrews and Mr Freebury came to take us home.

As far as the chapel was concerned, of course, I was merely an outsider, occasionally looking in. Their pastor was Mr Johnson, who cared for his flock as much as we CofEs were cared for. They certainly had their own back on us on Whit Monday with sway boats, tea, sports etc in the triangular field opposite St Mary's, now built over. Some of us went to their anniversary services, in which they performed their party pieces dressed immaculately in pretty hats and dresses.

THE ORPHANAGE

Now known as St Elizabeth's, the site was very different when I was young and took in all the land between the cemetery and what is now Bracelands. Three nuns were responsible for the 14-16 girls who lived there. It belonged to the Sisters of Mercy at Ham Common, London, who also had Homes at Margate and Clevedon. The not-so-strong girls were sent to Eastcombe as the country air helped them a lot.

My father tended the gardens, having to provide as much food as possible for the house, and looked after the chickens, not forgetting Kit the horse. The chickens were housed in the building now known as The Paddocks, and a lot of the eggs over and above the needs of the Home he took to a confectioner in the High Street in Stroud. This provided some income for the Home. What is now the Coach House was Kit's stable in one half and in the other her food, bedding, and the trap. Her field took in The Lindens and the Digbys' bungalow and some of The Paddocks garden. The rest was fenced off for the chickens.

The girls were adequately looked after by the nuns but understandably they envied us

our freedom. Their discipline was extremely strict. Their uniforms were made by Miss Masters, children's nurse, and they were well dressed. Food was adequate but bread served for tea had either butter or jam on it, never both. Water was supplied from a well sunk in the area near the back door, which had a wide concrete circle round it. Kit would be linked to the pump and had to walk round the circle for an hour a day to pump the water up into a tank at the top of the house. Some help was hired from the village for some jobs such as cooking and cleaning and the older girls helped too. Laundry was done in an outbuilding across from the back door. It was of course all washed by hand then and after rinsing, it was mangled, ready for drying. On a hot day I don't know how the Sisters did that job in their thick serge habits. Once a week my father used to drive into Stroud with Kit in the trap to deliver the eggs and pick up supplies for the Home. Stroud was very different then, you could take the trap to almost any shop. The Home had quite an impact on the village. Apart from running the Home, the Sisters would visit the sick and often took them meals. It was also the HQ for the 1st Eastcombe Guides with Miss Masters as the Guide Captain.

THE SCOUTS AND THE GUIDES

Gender precluded me from the Scouts so I was only an onlooker! My brother was one. Mr Pilling [who lived in Bismore at what is now called Honeyhill] started the troop and was their scoutmaster. The boys acquired many skills from him and I enjoyed one week of peace when my brother went off for a week's camp under canvas. They always seemed to enjoy it.

The Guides were started by Miss Masters, the children's nurse at the Orphanage. We met in the large playroom there and the girls at the Home were Guides too. In fact the first six were all Home girls. You started in the Robin Patrol and transferred to one of the other three when you were older. The meetings were always interesting and fun.

We went off tracking [trekking?] and to the field between Hawkley and Cricketty Mill, complete with billy cans for a picnic. We lit our fires – that one about rubbing two boy scouts together didn't work – and brewed up tea. The water came from the stream; it would be frowned upon now, especially after we had been paddling in it. Then we did our cooking; our 'dampers' were something else. When you are young, you have strong stomachs, thank goodness. On fine meeting nights in the summer we played cricket or rounders either in the field belonging to the Home or in the Rec. Miss Isla Woodcock would invite us to their home, Lypiatt Manor, on occasion. She would very proudly show us round that beautiful mansion, regaling us with wonderful stories. She specially showed us the small room where Guy Fawkes hatched his infamous plot and we read the commemorative caption on the wall. She then plied us with a scrumptious tea before we returned to Eastcombe.

Each year we went away to camp under canvas for a week. The worst one was Borth, not because of the place, we were halfway up the hill overlooking the town, but the weather. It rained and rained. Everything got wet in spite of our efforts to keep everything off the ground. We had to dig trenches round the tents after a bit to take the water as it drained off them. No sleeping bags then, palliasses were used. You would take with you two hessian sacks cur open and joined together, leaving the top open. You took them to the farm on site and filled them up with straw – your mattress – which was then placed on a groundsheet. We had bell tents and whilst lying in bed you could watch a batch of earwigs crawling round the top of the tent pole. Latrines were a bit primitive too! The best camp was at Lee Abbey near Lynton. It was up on the edge of Exmoor with brilliant sunshine every day. Scouts were camped in a clearing in the woods below and we shared one another's campfires. A visit to Lynmouth via the mountain railway intrigued us and a visit to the Doone Valley was quite significant to me as I had just read *Lorna Doone*. On the last night, each tent had to do a party piece and we decided on doing 'Clementine' with actions. As the old man I borrowed trousers and hat from the farmer. Apart from being too big, you can guess what they looked like after he had been wearing them for weeks. To see Nancy Lindsay sprawled in a wet piece of boggy ground scooping up the muddy water in a tin mug and doing the 'blowing bubbles

might fine' bit with it will stay with me forever! I had to scabble the clothes back to the farmer so that he had them for next morning's milking!

THE WI

The Women's Institute was formed in 1933 and they met in the Reading Room at Berwick House initially. My mother was a founder member. A year or so later their own hut was built, down at the bottom of the village on land donated by Uncle Ernie Smith, his wife also being a WI founder member. Mrs Munden [the doctor's wife] and Mrs Pilling [Honeyhill] alternated as President and Secretary for a number of years, supported by an enthusiastic committee.

Mrs Pilling formed an excellent choir which gave concerts in the village and they took part in events further afield, often returning with a certificate if it was a competitive one. A drama group was formed. Their productions were always popular in the village. It was through this that I became a member. They wanted some youngsters for one particular effort and the minimum age was 16 at the time, so they passed a byelaw making it 12!

They did, or got done, some good things in the village such as getting the phone box put in and badgering the council to improve the roads and services. Mrs Munden formed a youth club and we played table tennis, darts, bagatelle, etc. In the war they made umpteen pounds of jam with sugar supplied by the Food Office which was taken to the local Co-op to be sold 'on the ration'. WI husbands were a great help and always supportive.

Each 5th November the WI organized a village bonfire in the Rec and Mr Andrews and Mr Godwin brought loads of hedge cuttings from their farms and villagers took the opportunity to get rid of any burnable unwanted items such as mattresses. There was a competition for the best guy and so several of those also stoked the fire. We kids used to scrape up dead leaves by the sackful and put them on.

On the first Saturday in January the WI gave a party for all the village children in the Church Hall. This was similar in form to the Sunday School except there were only presents and not prizes, unless you won one in a game and, as Father Christmas was still around, he gave out the presents. As you left you were given a bag of sweets and an orange. Today these things may not sound very much, but to us kids in days of few luxuries, they were very acceptable.

The husbands were called upon to help at the annual fête in Dr and Mrs Munden's garden at The Triangle. This was always a popular event, not least because of its lovely setting. Not officially meeting in August, Mrs Pilling would invite us down to their house in Bismore now known as 'Honeyhill'. Mr Pilling would have a good fire going in the wood beyond the house with chestnuts roasting. They plied us with food and we had a good sing-song and some party pieces as well. No one thought anything about the hill to be climbed back to the village – it was normal then. Mrs Pilling started the Group Carol Evenings and this was taken up by other County Groups. Soon after the summer, group meetings were started, and both have gone on ever since.

THE BRITISH LEGION

The British Legion was formed soon after World War I and their HQ was a hut on land beside Troops Hill, partly where 'the monstrosity' now is. It was a converted chicken house and I feel sure it came from the Barrington Estate [the Haunted House] at Nether Lypiatt. Viscount Barrington later donated a Challenge Cup to be awarded at their annual flower show. The hut contained a full-sized billiard table and they held weekly whist drives to raise funds.

Their annual flower show was quite a big affair and was held in the field where Bracelands now is. A lot of work was put into the preparation. Large hessian screens were put up round the perimeter to prevent gatecrashers and as you couldn't see in, you would have to pay to find out what was going on. My dad was one of the organizers. If you needed to leave the ground, intending to return, the back of your hand would be stamped with indelible ink – so we kids were always popping in and out to see who could get the most stampings. The Flower Show was held in a large marquee and included a children's class for

wildflowers. I made sure I picked a very varied bunch to get a prize, which was all of sixpence, fourpence or tuppence, depending on your placing. There was a fancy dress show, knock knee competition for the men, and best pair of ankles for the ladies. There were lots of sideshows including a coconut shy and bowling for a live pig. I could further supplement my pocket money in the children's sports. The Challenge Cup was last won by Mr Bembridge just before World War II and it stood on his mantelpiece until he died, when his wife kindly donated it to the much more recently formed Garden Club.

DAD'S ARMY

The Home Guard was formed nationally during World War II to help protect the country in case of invasion. It was made up of men past calling-up age and those who were in 'reserved occupations', ie agricultural workers and the Bevin Boys (those who worked in the coal mines). Eastcombe HG was formed and run by Mr Laverton, an ex-army officer who lived at The Triangle, and they immediately commandeered the church hall (in essence the village hall) as their HQ. This was a corrugated-iron-clad wooden building, and in rather a dilapidated state. In fact, you didn't really need to use the door; you could walk in through a hole in the end of it! This was soon repaired for safe use. When the expected invasion was imminent they manned a pillbox over by Accommodation Lane on a rota basis 24 hours a day. Outside our gate and at other entrances to the village, concrete, square-shaped pillars about three feet high were constructed on both sides of the road. To one of them was attached a telephone pole on a swivel so that it could be placed across the road to block off intruders. The men were regularly trained and went off on exercises – some due to age and diminishing strength were not so agile as others! What they lacked in that department they made up for in enthusiasm and, for all their shortcomings, if 'Jerry' had appeared they would have given him a jolly good run for his money. Luckily for us all, Hitler decided at the last minute to turn his attention elsewhere and some of the pressure was taken off.

FOOD AND DRINK

Diets were not very varied in those days as very little processed foods were available. Most people grew their own vegetables and kept a few chickens. Main meals were mainly meat, or some sort of meat offal, with two veg, whichever was in season in the garden. Puddings were quite varied and often of a much stodgier nature, such as steamed pudding, pastries, and jam roly-poly, with custard or milk pudding (rice, tapioca, sago, etc). I loved them! And don't remember many people who were overweight as a result.

Breakfasts for children were mostly cereals with milk. Choice of cereals was limited - porridge, shredded wheat, and cornflakes. Adults often had a cooked breakfast. Not so much toast was eaten as this had to be done on an open fire and required red coals.

Tea was usually bread and butter and jam with home-made cake to follow. On high days (Sundays and bank holidays) there might be fruit and cream or evaporated milk. Sometimes jellies and blancmanges were made. Most people had supper, which varied. With adults it usually contained cheese, often with a raw onion. Pickles (home-made) were a popular accompaniment. At least we were eating wholesome food.

Meat was beef, mutton or pork, chicken was a luxury and was eaten at Christmas dinner and possibly at Easter. The chickens one kept, when their egg-laying days were over, were eaten, but had to be boiled slowly over a long period or they would be extremely tough.

In winter we kids were given a dessertspoon of cod liver oil in malt at breakfast time – nice. Every other Friday night we had to take a teaspoon of syrup of figs – horrible! The pinching pains round your tummy that often ensued were not nice and you often had to scoot for the loo next morning. We were told we had to be as clean inside as we were outside! The only redeeming feature of that was that we were given a sugared almond after taking it, to take the taste away. In a hot summer spell we had to take a teaspoon of brimstone and treacle – not too bad – it was supposed to keep our blood cool so that we didn't get heat bumps!

Tea was the main drink and has always been my favourite tippie. Making a pot of tea – no teabags then – was both a science and an art! A lot of discussion about the way to make a good cup took place. The teapot had to be really well warmed, then a teaspoon of tea per person and one for the pot were put in and on the stroke of the kettle coming to the boil the water was added. It was left to infuse for a while before pouring and the milk had to be put into the cup first. Now I am perfectly happy to dunk a teabag when necessary. I wonder what all the fuss was about. Coffee as we now know it was not available then and so very little was drunk. Well-off people would percolate ground coffee, expensive stuff, but for most of us it was Camp coffee, a liquid in a bottle and not very popular compared with tea. It was good when making a coffee cake! Other drinks used were Horlicks (mainly for mid-morning) and cocoa (mainly for bedtime). Very little wine was drunk, except for that which people made themselves. Men mainly drank beer but mostly at the local pub. It was considered 'common' for women to go into a pub in those days! Very little liquid of an intoxicating nature was consumed in the home except perhaps at Christmas time.

HEALTH

There was no National Health Service then and a lot of people put up with illness and aches and pains because they could not afford doctor's fees. You were covered for any treatments at Stroud Hospital if you joined the 'penny in the pound' scheme. Each year Mother used to send me along to Miss Wallace at Beech House with our contribution. You put in a penny for each £1 earned through the year. Apart from this, the hospital was mainly funded by local benefactors. Our doctor, Dr Munden, was the only practitioner in the village and was on call virtually all day and every day of the year except when on holiday, when a locum would be called in. His surgery at The Triangle was heated by a 'Tortoise' stove and the small waiting room seats were not comfortable as compared to today. Medication was usually in liquid form and tasted horrible. A bit of 'kidology' here, I think – the impression was that it had to be horrible to do you any good. It varied in colour depending on the ailment but was never blue. Blue was for poisons.

Various illnesses broke out in epidemics: measles, German measles, chicken pox, and mumps. Diphtheria and scarlet fever were the most feared but becoming less frequent, probably because you were taken to an isolation hospital. Tuberculosis was usually a killer, but some survived after months of bedrest and then had to spend their nights in a shed in the garden. Only much later, when mass screening and the drug streptomycin was introduced, was it finally defeated. TT testing of cattle and pasteurization of milk were other safeguards. If one of your siblings caught one of these ailments, you would have to stay at home in quarantine. I can't remember whether it was for two or three weeks, but I know I had to stay at home when a cousin of mine, staying with us, developed mumps and at the end of her infectious period, my brother came out with it and I had to stay in on his behalf, but luckily I never caught it myself.

A doctor visited the school occasionally and examined each pupil. Polio was another disease which often proved fatal. This was brought home to us when Dr Munden's army officer son contracted it when in Egypt and died as a result. Cancers were referred to as growths and the word 'cancer' struck fear into people's hearts as effective treatments were unavailable. I feel sure my mother would not have died at 56 if she had developed it today.

Life span was shorter then and retired folk's pensions were 10 shillings per week, very difficult to live on. Old and sick people were cared for by their families. What nursing homes there were, were far beyond the ordinary family's means. My paternal grandparents lived at the Red Lion and were cared for by their daughters. Grandmother was bedridden for some time before she died and if we kids were playing in the road, we could hear her moaning in pain in her bedroom above. My maternal grandparents came to live with us when they could no longer live in their home, Victory Cottage at Brownhill. Bless them, they were wonderful grandparents to us kids, financing such things as our school hymn books, hockey sticks, etc.

Grandmother had developed dementia and time of day or where she was meant nothing to her. We had to tie the gate to stop her wandering off and Mum needed eyes in the back of her head. On one occasion when she wandered off, Mum was alerted by a neighbour's lad who came rushing round to say, 'Mrs Gaston, your old 'oman's got out.' Another time the Chalford policeman picked her up in his car and, not knowing she had come to us, took her back to Victory Cottage. Such was life in those days. If you really had no one to care for you, it meant the Workhouse. These were awful places on the whole. If you were a couple taken in, you would be parted at the door and not see one another again. Our nearest was part way up Stroud Hill. You tried to avoid having to go there at all costs. Unfortunately I cannot remember who it was who told me this, but it is worth retelling as it is such a lovely story. One of our forebears really could not cope with his old dad any longer and was forced to arrange for him to go there. He couldn't afford any form of transport so carried him on his back. A lot of people had to walk to Stroud in those days and the route taken was via Bismore, Ferris Court and Stroud Hill. He carried his dad down to Bismore and up through the wood. Whilst pausing there for a rest he looked at him and felt conscience stricken with what he was doing to the old boy and turned round and carried him home again.

If you were mentally ill, your family had to cope unless you were a real danger to yourself; then it was the Asylum. Eastcombe had its share of 'odd' people; some were just eccentric, others were mentally ill. We kids could be cruel and in our ignorance we tended to taunt them. One, known by everyone as 'Queen Bess', lived opposite to The Triangle and even on the hottest days wore long, thick clothes. We taunted her, knowing full well she would chase us with her black umbrella which she always carried. She put a dozen eggs under a broody hen and not having done it before, she got Mrs Godwin to check the nest each day. Twenty-one days later eleven eggs hatched and Mrs Godwin told her to destroy the other one as it was infertile. Next morning when dibbing out her milk in the kitchen, I asked if I could hear a chicken cheeping. 'You can,' she said. 'Mrs Godwin told me it was no good so I took it to bed with me last night and it hatched out.' There it was in a shoebox.

Another lady near us lived alone and at times was as mad as a March hare. For 24 hours she would bang on a piece of corrugated tin and sleep for us neighbours was impossible. The local PC would go and talk to her but he had no power to do more. Then there were Freddie and Annie, brother and sister, living at The Laurels. Annie was fairly sensible but her sight was awful. Freddie had a terrible squint and, to use the phraseology of the time, was tuppence short of a shilling. They could not possibly work and relied on parish relief of five shillings a week. If you met Freddie, his preamble would be 'Do oo know ower Annie? Ower Annie is my sister, ower Annie is.' He had a mania for collecting wood, probably because they could not afford fuel. Villagers made sure the spars on their gates were well fixed as Freddie always ran his hands over them as he passed by and if one was loose, it went home with him. He was always collecting wood in the local spinneys and woods. How much they actually burned, one could not be sure because when the house had to be cleared after they had died, it was stocked up to the eyebrows. He was down the woods one day and had several bundles neatly tied up. We horrible kids waited till he went off for more, then threw them over the swilley and hid in the bushes to await his return. Bent double, he was peering all over the place saying, 'I knowed they was thur just now 'cos I zeed 'em' and muttering in disappointment went off with just the one bundle. We thought it was great fun, when we should have been ashamed of ourselves.

LEISURE

Apart from the leisure activities already touched upon, there was a thriving football club and also a cricket club. Leslie Roberts was a leading light doing a lot of admin work. He worked hard in the village in other respects too, being church secretary for many years and later also becoming Sunday School superintendent. He was a very respected member of the community.

Occasional charabang outings were arranged, mainly to Weston but also to Bournemouth or Weymouth. On one of the British Legion ones we had a good day and there was always a singsong on the way home. The chaps asked the driver to stop for some of the men to get out, to do what men usually get out of a bus to do. He pulled up alongside a grass verge and Gunner was first out into the dark – and vanished straight down into a field feet below. To our amusement, a request was made for any safety pins the women could muster from their handbags as his trousers were ripped from top to bottom. He got quite a cheer when he got back on the bus.

Whist drives were always well supported: some 'addicts' would go to one somewhere in the area almost every night of the week, whilst we younger element went to the local dances, or hops as they were known. For those in Eastcombe Hall the nearby spinney was made good use of! We walked to the one in Bisley WI Hall nearly every Saturday night. On more than one occasion four of us came home on one motorbike. My parents would have had a fit had they known and yes, it was quite a work of art to get on; it had to be done in precise order. We waited too until we got to the Bisley Back Road in case the 'Limb of the Law' was lurking.

Gardening for some took up a lot of leisure time as it was necessary to grow as many vegetables as possible to save having to find the money to buy them. Also, chickens were kept and some had a pig. When eggs were in surplus in summer they were preserved in pots in isinglass and used for baking in the winter. Hours of work were longer, leaving some very little time for leisure and with very little mechanical aid, work was much harder and tiring. Public transport was poor and villagers' time would not allow them to go too far afield. In spite of this I think we were happier then. It was not a rat race as now and people were more at ease with themselves. No one kept up with the Joneses. If you couldn't afford it, you didn't have it and that was that.

SERVICES AND/OR LACK OF THEM

Water was perhaps the most critical to cope with. Most dwellings had tanks into which rainwater from the roof drained. Some of them had underground tanks with pumps placed near the sinks. These, in dry weather, needed supplementing. The lower part of the village relied on the spring. It was used for drinking and when one family member fell foul of typhus, it was blamed on that supply. A notice was put up to advise people to boil it first. It wasn't funny either carrying buckets up Spring Hill as a number of people did. Others had wells. There was one at Woodview from which Mrs Juggins would collect water for the WI hut. Those living near the Green got it from the cottage opposite The Lamb. Those living up our road had the right to use the one in St Christopher's. When water was first brought to the village, a stop tap was set up opposite the school, and there the mains stopped. It was 1948/49 before a full supply was available and came via the reservoir built at Westfield Barn. Gas eventually arrived in the village in 1938 and electricity followed a year later. It didn't take much for a power cut to happen, either. Prior to this, wood and coal provided heat and oil lamps and candles provided light. Your wash-house or kitchen would have a brick-built copper with a large iron bowl inside, and with a fireplace under, in which to boil your whites. I can remember my mother slicing slivers from a block of carbolic soap into the copper to produce a lather for the laundry. Then Persil washing powder came on to the market – a great boon. A 'bluebag' was added to the rinsing water to make the washing whiter (Reckitts were the manufacturers). A lot of things, eg collars and tablecloths, were also starched.

Baths were taken in tin tubs before the fire, or you did a halfway up and a halfway down job. Most loos were out in the garden and depending where they were located, some had to put on their outdoor clothes if it was raining. Ours was attached to the house and you hopped out of the back door and into that door but I can still recall snow blowing in under the door as you sat there, and sometimes it was necessary to sweep out the snow first. Originally newspapers would be cut into squares and hung on a piece of string for a certain function and

then Izal squares came in to the shops. The box claimed that they had been impregnated with anti-bug deterrent but I can't remember the actual term used [wasn't it 'germicide'?]

[Phyllis does not mention the mains sewer because it did not arrive (through the valley from Bisley and onwards) until the early 1950s, and indeed there are still a few houses in the village on septic tanks or cesspits.]

The shop-cum-post-office supplied everything from food and sweets to household items, shoes, wellies, clothes and paraffin. You name it, it was there. Mrs Bond, our next-door neighbour, bless her, and her son Bill, owned the shop and remained open until well into the evening. The Co-op, halfway between Eastcombe and Bussage, was a good shop but mainly supplied foodstuffs. My mother split our shopping between the two. You enrolled as a member, were presented with a 'divi book' and 2 shillings was credited to it for every £1 spent. My mother always stocked up with coal when prices were cheaper in summer and the dividends were usually sufficient to cover this. Should a member die, a grant of £20 was paid out for funeral expenses. Bread was delivered by the Co-op in a covered horse-drawn cart, and also your shopping if you did not wish to carry it yourself. That arrived, wrapped up in brown paper parcels, tied up with string that was saved for wrapping other things such as Christmas presents. Friday was fish day and the fish man came round with goods displayed on a flatbed cart. A tinker came annually to sharpen knives, scissors, etc, and a rag-and-bone man came round periodically. The council came weekly to collect your rubbish and they picked up your bins from your back door, and returned them.

There were numerous quarries of varying sizes about, the stone having been used to build our lovely Cotswold stone cottages. Apart from the large one along the Bisley road, there was one on the right-hand side as you enter Accommodation Lane, another at the junction of the blue road and the Chalford road at Fourways crossroads, and one behind Hampton View, not to mention the large one at Bingle's wood mill. A lot of these were the recipients of our rubbish and wisps of smoke rose up. If that stopped, the council men put more matches to them to ensure they burnt on.

Funerals were quite different then: curtains were pulled by all the relatives, in respect, and mourning went on for a month. There was usually a lady in the village who was versed in 'laying out'. She was called, the doctor was called in order that a death certificate could be issued, and also the undertaker. He came and measured the body for the coffin and came back later to lay the corpse in it; and he would collect it on funeral day. If you wished, when making your wishes clear in readiness, you could ask people you knew to be one of your bearers, otherwise the undertaker would bring them. Mourners would walk behind the hearse to the church or chapel and, if you were chapel, you would be laid to rest in the cemetery opposite. If you were church, you would be laid to rest in the Bisley cemetery. Only the immediate family went back to the house, but everyone made a special point of attending that place of worship the following Sunday evening. You purchased your plot if you wished in the chapel cemetery. When we were clearing my father's things we came across a receipt for ten shillings for the plot and half-a-crown for the marking stone with initials engraved on it.

Phyllis's final section refers to three years she spent in the Women's Land Army at Charlton Farm in Somerset, which she described as 'very enjoyable' – worth reading of course, but not relevant to Eastcombe so not reproduced here.