

## Childhood Memories of the 1950's - Chris Gibson

Born in 1945 I grew up living at home with my parents in Bridge Street, Howden-le-Wear and attended the village primary school.

I was privileged to live in premises that included a hardware retail shop to the front and joiners workshop upstairs and to the rear. The business was a long standing one which my great grandfather had established in the mid 1800's as cabinet maker, wheelwright, cartwright and undertaker. It changed over the years and when I lived there, dad ran the joinery business and carried on the funeral undertaking. At that time he employed three men, John Longstaff, Steve Baker and Allan Potts, one was an older experienced craftsman who passed on his skills to the younger men and apprentices. It was like one big happy family as I knew all the men who were very kind to me and showed me how to use the various tools of the trade. The workshop and wood-yard were my playgrounds and much of my childhood was spent with the workmen watching what was going on and learning valuable practical lessons which I have never forgotten. The joiners shop was an exciting place for a young lad. There was a huge circular saw in the centre driven by an electric motor and long, unguarded drive belt – which sometimes snapped and went flying across the workshop ( little regard to 'health & safety' then.) Also there was a huge open fireplace where all the shavings, sawdust and timber off-cuts were burnt, there was always an abundance of fresh wood shavings and sawdust in the workshop and the smell of new wood was everywhere. This blazing fire kept the workshop warm in Winter and heated the glue kettle for the woodworking. The fire attracted local men who would often drop in for a chat and to get warmed through on cold days. There was a hand operated mortice machine and later an electric planer but most of the joinery work was still done by hand, planes of all descriptions moulded timber into whatever size and shape was required, all the finer cutting was done using hand saws and chisels. Every Friday afternoon the workmen assembled at their benches to fill in time sheets for the week and dad would hand out their wage packets. They also spent time then to maintain their tools as saws, chisels and plane blades all had to be sharpened ready for the next week. I watched and learned from all this activity. As my father was also

the village undertaker, the sight of a coffin in the workshop held no fear to me I was used to seeing the boxes taking shape from flat planks of elm or oak timber and watched how they were finely assembled then finished off with beeswax polish and ornate handles. The interiors were also carefully lined with wadding and silk trim finally an inscribed name plate would be attached to the lid. All other work was put on hold when a funeral was to arrange as it always had priority. There was also a glass bench where sheets of glass could be cut to size. I learned, from an early age, how to measure in feet and inches and to cut glass using a diamond tipped cutter. Across the backstreet was a woodshed where long lengths of timber were dry stored and seasoned and next to it a garage, with blacksmith's forge at the far end. Sometimes an ex-army wagon appeared in the wood-yard to have a new wooden body or floor fitted and farmers still brought their carts and machinery to be repaired, in fact we had great fun bowling metal cart tyres down the backstreet. Using the blacksmith's forge, complete with hand bellows, anvil and large assortment of hammers and tools to fashion any iron work required – the tyres were heated in the forge then placed over a new or repaired wooden cart wheel and buckets of water thrown over, as the metal cooled, it contracted onto the wheel rim tightening up all the joints and became firmly fixed in place. I remember one local agricultural contractor, Jack Bradwell, who occasionally called to make use of our blacksmith's forge. He was a huge, corpulent, gruff man with dark whiskers and, was then, the only man I ever heard swearing in my presence and I was terrified of him. As I grew older I got to know him better and really he was a gentle giant and very kind only his brusque manner and appearance had initially scared me.

I had the run of the wood-yard and my mates and I built camps out of old off cuts of wood, corrugated iron or asbestos sheets -Yes. *ASBESTOS!* No-one was aware of the dangers in those days and asbestos was a common building material for roofs, farm buildings and garages. Before leaving the workshop, many of the finished items such as doors, gates and window frames were painted with pink, lead primer – now banned because of the toxic lead, or with coal tar creosote which dad collected from Bankfoot Coke Works at Crook and

stored up the wood-yard in a 50 gallon drum – creosote is also now a banned substance.

Dad was privileged to own an old pre-war Morris car which was used both for business and pleasure. A trailer was attached for business use until, in 1955, he bought a new Ford Van. It had windows cut in the sides and wooden roof rails to carry ladders and long lengths of timber. I often travelled with him when he visited jobs to check on progress or to estimate prices for work. I got to know most of the local farms and farmers as they were good customers. Sometimes dad would take my friends with us and this made me quite popular with the local lads who were keen to play with me – especially when we had a ride in the car or had a good ‘camp’ up the wood yard. I only had a ‘tanner’ 6d. pocket money in those days and when I was old enough, about 10 years old, I made extra money by chopping firewood sticks on the workshop floor with a sharp axe – still have the scars on my fingers to prove it. Every Friday evening Dad cut up old lengths of timber and off-cuts on the circular saw and I knelt on an old sack and chopped the short lengths into sticks which I sold for a ‘bob’, 1 shilling, a bag which I delivered to local customers on my three-wheeler bike. Many houses had open coal fires and they needed sticks as kindling so I had no trouble selling my bags of sticks to a few selected customers. Some customers got ‘big’ bags for half a crown, 2/6d. In due course I managed to save sufficient money to buy a new, blue, Raleigh racer bike with drop handlebars and Sturmey Archer Gears – my pride and joy in 1958.

Many people still used paraffin for lamps and heaters so mam, who looked after the hardware shop, always had a ready supply of oil for sale, which she carried across the back-yard in metal buckets from a 500 gallon tank in the coalhouse. Customers brought their own cans or bottles to be filled by the pint or gallon, poured out using measures which the Weights and Measures Officer regularly checked for accuracy, they also checked the shop scales and weights. The front shop sold all kinds of hardware including nails, screws, tacks, wallpaper, paste, paint putty, light bulbs and candles. Large books of wall paper patterns were lent out to people who borrowed the samples to check at home before making a choice. An order might be placed and about a week later the rolls of

wallpaper would arrive for the customer to collect – most room walls were papered in the 1950's.

The wood-yard adjoined the busy main railway line between Bishop Auckland and Crook where the tracks passed through a deep cutting up a steep incline. Occasionally, the undergrowth caught fire from hot cinders and ash from passing steam engines and if the flames crept too close to the fence and woodsheds Dad and the workmen would beat out the fire using shovels or planks of wood. If the buildings were not threatened the blaze was allowed to burn itself out as this was a natural way of controlling the inflammable materials and actually prevented further trouble for a while. At home, I'd lie in bed and listen to the sash window frames rattling as the steam trains passed by – there was no double-glazing in those days. Apart from the passenger trains, most freight consisted of coal or coke from the local coal mines and Bankfoot Coke Works at Crook or heavy ore for iron works at Tow Law and Consett.

Sometimes the gradient proved too much and a struggling engine would stall on the incline, then the guard would run back down the track and place detonators on the lines to warn any following traffic, I used to hear the explosions as the detonators were triggered. This happened only occasionally and usually on foggy nights when it was difficult to see the signals. It was not uncommon for an engine and loaded trucks to run away on the steep downhill gradient, then, the driver would continuously sound the whistle as a warning as the train sped through Beechburn Station. The driver and guard generally managed to slow the train down on level tracks before reaching Wear Valley Junction. The railway embankment from our garden was officially out of bounds – 40 shilling penalty for trespass, but we managed to gather wild strawberries which grew there despite the fires and sometimes we even dared to venture onto the track to place an old copper halfpenny on the line. As a train passed over, the coin was squashed flat, made bigger, and in our eyes, became a penny!

Local coal mines still operated at North Bitchburn and at Hargill where in the late 1950's a first attempt at open-cast mining was made by Edgar Lawson. Unfortunately in the process many of the mining archaeology features were obliterated as old workings were un-covered. Some excellent examples of early

Bell Pits and drifts were lost also, as the land was never properly reinstated and left undrained with poor top soil, it became a barren wasteland. The sites of mining activity provided us lads with readymade adventure play-grounds where we explored the many old workings, pit heaps and ponds, despite dire warnings from our elders about the dangers of such places we still went there and learned how the miners worked to get the coal and fireclay which was used to produce bricks, salt-glazed sanitary pipes, fire-backs and many other things fired in the circular coal fired kilns. My grandfather had been a miner. He told me about his work and introduced me to the operation of the Carbide Lamp and warned of the dangers associated with underground work. He died in 1955 after suffering from pneumoconiosis a common miner's lung disease brought on by breathing coal dust and foul air in the pits. There was no compensation for industrial disease in those days. However, we were able to visit these places and watch the men working there, no-one bothered to chase us away unless a boss came round. Fireclay from the mines was particularly good for making fire bricks for furnace linings so nearly every colliery had kilns for firing the clay. Another familiar sound of the 1950's was that of the local colliery/brickyard buzzers which could be heard signifying the change of shifts. Each site had a slightly different sound and buzzers could be heard from Beechburn Colliery, Slotburn, Greenhead and Crook. They also sounded on New Year's Eve at midnight to welcome in the New Year.

A local stream, Beechburn Beck, ran close by the village, unfortunately in the 1950's it was heavily polluted with waste water and chemicals from Crook Coke Ovens and as it ran relatively warm, heavy fogs/smogs were produced which hung around in the valley for ages when the weather was cold and calm. On finer days we often played by Blackie Beck as it was called. There was no wild-life in the water, it was too polluted but we had great fun daring each other to jump or swing over on a rope. At one point the stream disappeared through a double brick-lined tunnel under the colliery brickyard site and it was a great adventure to see how far we dare go into these dark culverts.

We spent much of our time playing outdoors and exploring the countryside, thereby learning first-hand about nature and the changing seasons. In Spring-

time we found frog spawn and newts in the pit ponds and birds' nests in the hedges and bushes while in Autumn we collected wild blackberries – we called them brambles, for gran to bake delicious bramble pies. There was great rivalry between the boys at school, playing 'conkers' with horse chestnuts knocked down from the trees around the village. Everyone had a favourite recipe for hardening the chestnuts, some soaked them in vinegar or baked them in the oven. There was little traffic on the roads and we walked for miles exploring our local area. Everyone seemed to know each other, our village was a close knit community and people had time to spend together. There were many different groups, clubs and societies meeting in one or other of the public halls in the village. Our family were Methodists and I was expected to wear best clothes and attend Chapel and Sunday-School every Sunday. I remember with trepidation having annually, to stand up in front of a packed congregation at the Anniversary to recite a poem or scripture reading. Nevertheless they were happy days as much of our family social life revolved round Chapel activities and I made many good friends; in fact when older, I met my future wife there at the Youth Club.

People didn't travel about so much in the 1950's few had cars so public transport was widely used. If need be, the United motor bus service took passengers to Crook or Bishop Auckland and the Heatherbell bus to Weardale and the train carried people further afield from Beechburn for Howden-le-Wear Station. I recall travelling with my grandfather and grandmother for Summer holidays to stay in boarding houses at Saltburn or Redcar – the journey through Shildon Tunnel always a notable event as everyone rushed to close the carriage windows before the steam and smoke from the engine came into the carriage compartments. The sound or sight of an aeroplane was a rare occasion, the sky was not criss-crossed with vapour trails like today as jet power had not been widely developed for passenger planes and foreign holidays were unheard of – we made do with trips to the seaside.

Working horses were common sights, still in widespread use on the farms and for delivering groceries, fish, meat, milk, coal etc. and by the Rag and Bone man collecting scrap and the scavenger man cleaning out the netty earth closets.

Most of the back streets were too narrow for motor lorries so horses and carts were ideal for this work. Our village milk man was Ronnie Elliott, a dairy farmer at Hargill and friend of the family. As a young boy I sometimes got up early and accompanied him on his round. Rattling, noisy, metal crates holding glass bottles of milk were loaded onto the horse-drawn milk float and full bottles replaced the empties left on people's doorsteps. The horse, Bobby, knew the regular route and every stop. If the chat went on too long, which it often did, Bobby would move on to the next stop without Ronnie. After he had finished the milk round, the horse was rested for a while then in the afternoon would be harnessed to the muck cart, hay bogie, hay rake, or harrows for whatever farm work was required at the time. Although tractors were around, there were no tractors on Hargill Farm in the 1950's. I spent some time at the farm and watched them hand milking the dairy cows, cooling the milk before pouring it into churns which were collected from the farm gate by a Milk Marketing Board lorry. In return pasteurised bottled milk was delivered to the farm in metal crates to be distributed round the village.

Another highlight of the year was Bonfire Night 5<sup>th</sup> November when gangs of lads would rival each other to build the best and biggest bonfire. This usually started early in September or October when any old wood, furniture, tyres, etc. would be collected, fireworks would appear on sale in the village shops. My mother sold them from her hardware shop so I often had a ready supply of 'penny bangers.' From an early age I was used to lighting matches and fireworks oblivious to the associated dangers. Much to the annoyance of older folk young people set off fireworks in the streets and it was classed as mischief – now it is seen as very antisocial and unacceptable but there was more tolerance in those days. We played games such as Knocki-Nine-Doors or Blockie in the streets, in Winter-time we sledged down Hargill Road, Bitchburn Bank and Rumby Hill with little danger from passing traffic and no parked cars in the streets. We kicked balls around, threw stones at targets, put lighted papers in house down-comer pipes to make 'buzzers' as the hot air rose out of the rainwater hopper-heads. As miners still needed a supply for their acetylene lamps, Calcium Carbide was available at the Coop Store or Garage. If we could

acquire some of this we soon discovered that, when mixed with water, it made an awful stench and was an effective explosive gas. Consequently young lads would throw it into outside netty toilets to surprise some unsuspecting occupant. Carbide dropped into a street drain with a lighted match thrown in also produced quite a bang - all tricks played in our village in the 1950's.

Our village was relatively self-sufficient in 1950's, a variety of shops sold all the essentials – general dealers, groceries, greengroceries, butchers, fishmongers, fish and chip shop, hardware, post office, garage/petrol station where 3 pumps dispensed Regular, Super and Super-plus Regent petrol over the pavement to cars parked at the roadside, newsagents and tobacconist, haberdashers, cobblers, barbers, hairdressers, bakery & confectioners, four public houses and a popular Workmen's Club, British Workmen's Hall with Reading Room, Snooker & Billiard tables where men relaxed, and an upstairs cinema where we enjoyed all the latest cowboy westerns, war films and cartoons mostly in black and white, a technicolour film was a rare treat. It cost sixpence in the stalls and 1/6 for a double seat at the back where the courting couples sat.

Religion played a large part in many people's lives. There were two Methodist Chapels – Trinity and Primitive plus, a Church of England Church of St. Mary's, all with adjoining schoolrooms and assembly halls. There was also a Spiritualist's meeting hall which we were rather afraid of. The WI had a designated hall where, every day at lunchtime, un-escorted schoolchildren crossed over the road to eat their school dinners – there were no school crossing patrols in those days. Dressed in my school clothes of corduroy short trousers, matching zip-up jerkin top, hand knitted woolly jumper by mam or gran, and hob-nailed boots bought from the local cobbler – the more metal studs and cleats in the soles the better to slide on the school playground. I walked or ran un-accompanied to Howden School in Hargill Road which had two infant classes Miss Norwood and Miss Heslop's, three junior classes Miss Gardiner, Mr Graham and Mr Savage. Mr Moore was the strict headmaster. The cane was regularly employed to encourage good behaviour, discipline and best work. I got the stick quite often for untidy work as I had difficulty controlling the dip in pen and ink; the pen nib was forever getting crossed or picked up bits of fluff or paper which made blots



on the page. What a life! We had all our worldly school possessions in a shoe box under the metal framed desk where two people sat side by side on tip-up seats. Every morning we had a small bottle of milk to drink through a straw, often frozen in Winter or sour in hot weather. It was a privilege to be chosen as milk monitor or ink monitor giving out bottles or topping up the desk ink wells. We were taught the basics of numeracy and literacy, aiming, I was led to believe, to pass the Eleven Plus Examination and gain a place at Wolsingham Grammar School. I remember we had a long one and a half hour lunchbreak when we regularly left the schoolyard and ventured further afield to play; on one occasion a few friends and I went down to the Blackie Beck and one of the boys fell into deep water. He submerged and was only saved by the air trapped in his leather jacket. We grabbed him out of the water and frantically tried to dry his clothes by wringing them out and swinging them around our heads, nevertheless he remained soaking wet when the bell rang at 1-30pm and we returned to school. He sat all afternoon in lessons and no teacher noticed his wet clothes despite an increasing pool of water under his desk - a narrow escape from drowning which was a fairly regular occurrence in the local pit ponds, especially in Winter-time when thin ice broke.

Our family was, I suppose, relatively well off because, when Dad returned from War Service in 1946, he inherited his father's business and moved into the house adjoining the shop premises. My grandmother, a very 'Victorian' lady, invariably dressed in black, lived with us occupying a front sitting room and upstairs bedroom while sharing the other facilities. I suppose I had great respect for her and was a little apprehensive in her company. I always knocked on her room door before entering and was on best behaviour when she was around. I had my own bedroom but there was no heating and in Winter it was freezing cold with jack frost ice patterns on the insides of the window panes, If I was lucky I might be given a rubber or pot/stone hot water bottle to take the chill off the bed. I blamed these conditions for frequent bouts of chest infection and pneumonia which I endured throughout the 1950's. The usual relief was to slap hot kaolin poultices on my chest and back and have Vick inhalers to help breathing. When I was really ill the family doctor from Crook would call at the

house to sometimes administer injections of penicillin and cough medicine, all the while confined to my bed in the damp, cold bedroom with nothing to do but look at copies of the Dandy, Beano and Eagle comics or read Rupert Books. Sometimes the District Nurse would call round on her bicycle but she was more interested in babies as she was also the village mid-wife.

There was no TV until 1953 for the Queen's Coronation. About that time large H or X-shaped TV aerials began to appear on people's chimney stacks, until then we only had a valve radio in the kitchen to listen to BBC programmes. There was no central heating in our house. The only source of heat was from open coal fires in the two downstairs rooms. The kitchen fire also heated water in a back boiler for the upstairs bathroom but it was very inefficient and the water never got very hot in the tank. It was bath night for the family every Friday evening when the fire damper would be opened and, if we were lucky, we may have sufficient water for a warm bath in a cold room. We had the luxury of a cold, dark, outside Water Closet in the back yard and had to go outside every time we needed to use the facility where we 'pulled the chain' to flush the lavatory – this was not very pleasant on wet cold dark nights so in every bedroom there was a chamber pot for emergencies. In the depths of Winter the water pipes often froze up and dad had to try and thaw them without bursting them. A small paraffin Tilly lamp was placed in the outside toilet to try and prevent this. We had the flushing toilet but many homes in the village still had Earth Ash Closets which were cleaned out every week by the council men. Mam did most of the cooking in metal pans on the open fire but she did have a small electric cooker in the back kitchen for oven cooking. There was also a small Hoover washing machine with hand operated mangle, she also had a Hoover vacuum cleaner but preferred to use an old Ewbank carpet sweeper on the floors – proddy mats were taken outside and shaken in the back street. There was never any alcohol in our house as my parents were strict Methodists and teetotal however, every fortnight Fentimans would deliver gallon stone jars of Ginger Beer and bottles of lemonade, at the same time collecting the empty bottles and jars to be re-used. Perhaps as a result of wartime austerity we had few luxuries at home, the house was dimly lit by low wattage electric light bulbs

and meals were home cooked, very basic but adequate. No takeaways except the fish and chip shop next door.

Our house was one of the few with a telephone as it was a necessity to receive calls regarding funeral work as dad was often called out during the night to attend to such matters. The original number was Crook 82 and for a while in the 1950's we had to share a line with the local bakery shop. This was not ideal as either side could overhear each other's conversations if they picked up the receiver. Village people quite often would request to use the phone in an emergency to call the doctors or talk to relatives and my mam and dad were happy to oblige. At first, to call a number, we had to speak to the operator at Crook exchange and request a connection. Eventually as the GPO installed more cables underground, the phone line became our own again and dialling numbers became more widespread.

For the first time, during the 1950's many of the side-streets and by-ways in our village were properly surfaced by the council steamroller with men spreading tarmacadam and chippings. I knew the steamroller driver, Mr Jarrett, and watched him at work as his machine gouged out the old surface using a metal spike at the back then rolled the new road surface level and flat with the heavy front roller and rear wheels. When more water was needed for the boiler, a hose would be attached to the nearest fire hydrant and water loaded into a tank at the back of the steam roller. Water was also sprayed onto the roller and wheels to prevent wet tar and chippings from sticking on.

It was a decade of change as people who had survived the war tried to make better lives for themselves and their families. Home living conditions improved and in our village the council developed a new housing estate to replace the demolished rows of condemned sub-standard colliery houses. For a while my Uncle Willy, who had a false leg following a mining accident, was the night watchman on the new housing site and I used to help him put out the red warning paraffin lamps along the road sides and stoke up the brazier outside his cabin. New families moved into these new spacious council houses and for the first time, I was aware of strangers in the village. By today's standards, some

families were quite poor and had little money to spend on new clothes or luxuries. Some children were not very clean and lack of hygiene commonly led to infections and infestations of head lice – not surprising really as many homes still only had a cold water tap in the scullery. In fact there were a few outlying properties not connected to a mains supply of either water or electricity where the water was still collected from a spring or well and carried home in buckets. I can still remember wartime ration coupons being used to buy certain items and there were few sweets for the children but things did gradually improve during the 1950's. Apart from Bakelite, plastic items were rare commodities and not widely available in 1950's. People were keen to modernise when they could afford to and were eager to acquire the latest domestic appliances, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, cookers, fridges, electric kettles, irons, toasters etc. Not many had a fridge so food was bought fresh locally as and when required and stored in the pantry cupboard. Shop customers were served over the counter. Very few items were pre-packed so most things had to be weighed out in stones, pounds and ounces on the shop scales or measured in yards, feet and inches, liquids were measured out in gallons, quarts and pints. In homes, old ash closets were rapidly being replaced with WC's and hot water systems introduced into new bathrooms and kitchens.

The TV age had dawned and this revolutionised people's leisure time. People became more mobile, travelling greater distances as car ownership increased. Old industries based on coal mining were disappearing and new opportunities for employment presented themselves as factory estates were developed. The hub of our village was the junction of High Street and Bridge Street, adjacent to the high stone railway bridge which carried the road over the deep railway cutting. Part of the bridge wall accommodated a Gents urinal – demolished when the bridge was dismantled. People congregated and passed the time of day there around a public seat which was well used and as children we had great fun walking the bridge parapet dodging the smoke and steam from passing engines. Older people still refer to this part of the village as the 'bridge' which has long since disappeared and the area landscaped. Overall I had a very

happy childhood in the 1950's and can still recall those long, carefree days at home in Howden-le-Wear, a typical small County Durham coal mining village.

I must have enjoyed living there because I am still there to this day in 2017.