Stanton Parish History Recording Project

Personal Reminiscences File:- PR005

A SPECIAL PLACE – SHROPSHIRE INTERLUDE written by Irene Wyatt who was Headmistress of Stanton School for 3 to 4 years in the early 1950's including over the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953.

At the end of the second World War, after teaching in war torn Bristol, I decided to escape to the quiet of the countryside for a time to forget the devastation which had taken place during the war years.

Having studied numerous advertisements I applied for a post as headmistress of a remote school in the wilds of Shropshire, surrounded by the peace of farming country. However, although delightful, it was far from peaceful as I hope to prove.

The interview for the post was interesting and the panel consisted of the vicar of the parish, the wife of the owner of the manor, and several school managers who were farmers.

The Manor house had at one time been the home of Mary Webb whose books are well known for their vivid descriptions of rural Shropshire.

The village was in a quiet spot in an area between two main roads and well away from the noise of traffic. We could see the Wrekin in the distance and discovered that Wales with its wonderful scenery was within easy reach. The village had been mentioned in the Domesday Book and seemed to be a peaceful haven.

I was conducted round the school house which was very old and decorated in very sober colours. One bedroom even had a navy blue ceiling and all the paintwork was dark green or brown. There was no electricity and at the back of the house was a 'lean to' with large cylinders of calor gas for heating and cooking.

I was offered the post, and as my husband had obtained an interesting job in Shrewsbury I accepted and settled down to village life.

The first challenge during the summer holiday was to brighten up the house both inside and outside. Alas the lady of the manor would only allow grey front doors and all the tenant farms and cottages owned by the squire were a dull grey, and I was not allowed to have a cream front door...

One farmer's wife on returning from her honeymoon asked to have the farm gates painted white, but this request was firmly refused.

The children in the school were delightful – so much less sophisticated than the children I had taught in Bristol during the war. There was an infant's department and juniors to the age of eleven.

As I had been a Biology lecturer in my previous town post it was fascinating to have the open countryside round us and children who were only too anxious to bring me interesting specimens for our Nature Study. They scoured the fields for all the natural ingredients which ancient people had used to dye their bodies and their clothes. One mother complained that her son got up early in the morning a burned a good saucepan making yellow dye from onion skins. Fortunately she saw the humorous side of this!

The children also haunted the farms at shearing time ready to pounce on pieces of dirty wool which the farmer had rejected. This was brought to the school and washed. A wealthy lady who sometimes visited the village bought us a spinning wheel and we were able to spin the wool and do some simple weaving.

Life in the school, as you will have gathered, was fascinating but some aspects of village life were extraordinary and in some cases very amusing.

We were allocated the schoolhouse pew in the Church. This was a wise move as the Sunday school children were sitting in the pews in front of us, and this helped to keep order during the service.

The lady of the manor always went to the communion rail first and at the time we felt we were in a feudal backwater. All of this happened in the early fifties. The vicar took Assembly in the school on Friday mornings but if there was a race meeting in the area he was absent Church Services were not well attended but one has to remember that the owners of small farms have to do extra work on Sunday if they are to give their em-

ployees time off.

I remember one snowy Sunday when we were the only members of the congregation present apart from the vicar and the organist. To our relief the vicar announced that it would not be a choral service and we were spared the ordeal of singing a duet in the empty Church. After a few prayers, and a reading, we returned to the school house in company with the vicar and the organist and had coffee and mince pies in our kitchen.

On days when there was a shoot at the manor there was always a brace of pheasants hanging on the kitchen doorknob when I went in from school at the end of the day, and when the nearby farmers killed a pig there was always a joint of pork for the school house. At first we were doubtful about accepting these gifts but we would have given quite the wrong impression and offend the farmers if we had refused them. The first primroses and violets were also brought to our door and any injured animals which needed help.

We were still in the village at the time of the Coronation. As we had no electricity we could not watch television and we waited until the evening to visit one of the farms where they generated their own electricity, to see the ceremony. We were very busy during that day as I was organising a meal for the elderly people and my husband was in charge of the sports for the children.

Christmas at the village school was wonderful. The children wrote their own Nativity Play which was peppered with Shropshire expressions. We managed to have a Christmas tree and every child had a present. During the year I was able to raise this money by giving handicraft lectures to local Women's Institutes. We always invited the lady of the manor and her little girl but they did not accept and we felt that the poor child lived in rather a lonely vacuum at the manor.

On the day of the Christmas celebrations my husband returned at lunchtime and remained hidden in the house until it was time for him to don the Father Christmas outfit and arrive at the door to distribute the presents from the tree.

The village was in hunting country, and on one memorable day the main door of the school was left open accidently and all the hounds came streaming through the school. The excitement was intense and fortunately the hounds behaved very well and seemed to enjoy the company of the children until the hunt arrived and removed them. We all wondered what happened to the fox. After this of course there were some awkward questions on my view on hunting in general, and I am sure the lady of the manor, who no doubt heard my views, was not impressed.

I have only mentioned the school house in passing, but as I said before it was very old and in my opinion had a rather gloomy atmosphere of its own. I always had an open mind about ghosts but my husband did not believe such nonsense. Alas he was the one who discovered we had a ghost. We kept the matter to ourselves as it would have been unwise to cause distress to any future occupants of the house. However, we did try to find out some of the history of the house and discovered that a number of unhappy events had taken place there. The next headmistress left after one year and we wondered what her experience had been.

It was fascinating living in such an unspoiled part of the country after working in town schools. I shall never forget the delightful children in that remote village or the kindness and cooperation of the parents and their help in all our projects.

However the time came to move on to something more challenging and we left our Shropshire friends with regret for a new life in Sheffield where we returned to city life with renewed vigour but with very happy memories of the 'Special Place' in Shropshire which we had enjoyed to the full.