

Chailey Common

Reading through the latest additions to the CHOSA web site, I came across an article called 'What Was it For'. It was about trekking across the common from St Martins to St Georges and it triggered off memories for me going back 70 years. I'm an ex-St Georges man and I know that trek like the back of my hand, I know all the ridges, ditches, ruts, dogleg bends, ups and downs and large muddy puddles when it rains.

I can also remember the cottage about half way down on the right-hand side going toward St Martins. I remember seeing the lady standing by gate as we all marched past, more or less in step but probably less than more. We were all shapes and sizes, some on crutches, some wearing callipers, others with braces up to their chins, but we all hobbled along in our designated groups, the slow walkers leading the way.

Before starting off on our daily trek, we all gathered in the playground in squads where we lined up into groups according to our walking speed. "Fast walkers", generally those not on crutches or encumbered with callipers, would be the last group to leave. I think I was in the middle group, so we left after the slow group had gone ahead. Each group was accompanied by a member of staff and I remember our group was in the charge of Mr Keating. He was a great guy, being ex-army, he had a wicked sense of humour and always had us chuckling with his merry quips.

I remember going down the concrete steps from the playground to the gate that led onto the north common. These steps always offered a challenge to some wearing callipers and I had to hold the metal hand rail on the way down. At the bottom on the right was the Liberty Hut, this was a sports hall donated by Patrons from America. It was here that we held our pantomime at the end of the year. The gate was facing us as we reached the bottom and lead straight on to the rough track that took us down to the main road where we crossed into St Martins, about half a mile away from St Georges.



The Steps and The Liberty (1994)

It was war time of course and, on one such summer's day, we had an overhead visit from an unwelcomed guest from across the channel. It happened to be a German Messerschmitt 109, flying low and going like the clappers towards the coast. Some boys said it machine gunned us, but whether it did or not, we all threw ourselves into the bracken or a ditch if one was handy. It was a memorable event that has always stayed with me. The main road was busy at the time, I guess it must have been the rush hour, and it was also said the passing bus was machine gunned. We learned later the plane had been shot down before crossing the coast.

In those days it was totally out of bounds for girls to visit St Georges just as it was for boys to visit St Helens, this was a definite no-no, it was totally out of bounds. Ne'er the twain shall meet, and never did we in my whole eleven years at Chailey, visit the girls' school.

Being resident at St Georges meant we walked across the common twice a day, there and back, summer and winter, to attend classes at St Martins Craft School. As a young lad of six or seven I was introduced to carpentry by Mr Marchant, the head teacher.

As I entered the Llangattock workshop over the door it said "Men Made Here". I had quite a way to go yet to qualify. I think it is now used as a staff common room, and we have our coffee and biscuits there when we arrive on Old Scholars Day but, in my day, I remember it as more as a workshop, with a wooden floor with carpenters' benches, complete with vices, lining both sides of the workshop.

I wasn't a bonnie chap, in fact because of my condition I was puny for my age, nevertheless I was guided to my bench by Mr Marchant who showed me how to put a plank of wood into the vice with the aim being for me to saw the plank down the middle keeping to a pencilled line. He handed me a rip saw, which was for rough cutting but, at the age of six or seven, my tiny wrists had problems sawing to a straight line. The saw wobbled uncontrollably under my guidance and soon I had produced something looking like the Grand Canyon down the middle of a pristine piece of white pine.

Noticing my unnatural ability not to be a natural at sawing planks of wood, and not being deterred, perhaps he thought my skills would lie in planing rough timber into a smooth panel that could be useful sometime in the future.

Having screwed this timber baulk into the vice I was then introduced to the technique of skilfully planing the rough surface smooth with a rather large and heavy carpenter's wooden plane. First, I was shown how to set the blade by tapping the top with a mallet so that the cutting edge just appeared above the surface of the base of the plane, then you just smoothly guided the plane in the same direction as the grain in the wood, job done.

The only problem was that as I struggled to lift this heavy wooden plane it too began wavering about as I tried to guide it towards the work piece which was gripped firmly in the jaws of the vice. Once I had manoeuvred the heavy plane that had now stopped wavering about, I didn't have the strength to make a swift clean stroke across surface of the wood. The plane jumped and juddered along as I gouged grooves out of the wood until a curly chip finally popped up from the blade.

From the look of concern on Mr Marchant's face, I think I had finally convinced him that I was not cut out to be another Michael Angelo in wood, however that was not the end of the story. I did stay long enough to successfully produce a mobile sausage dog on wheels (I suspect very much with help from the stern Mr Marchant) which when painted was considered good enough to go on display with other toys and artefacts from other boys and other departments. But this definitely was the end of my career as a master carpenter.

I think thereafter I spent some time reclining in a bed tilted at odd angles at St Martins Hospital before turning my hand to boot and shoe making. That was where I found myself under the guidance of Mr Holgate in the boot shop where I hand made my own boots to take with me when I left Chailey.

Jack Hayward (1939-1949)