

B T (Before Television)

Many of the younger generation alive today cannot know of the time when television was not available in every household but there are still quite a few of us left who can remember those days. The youngsters may ask us "Whatever did you do?" "Life must have been very boring." To this charge the older group will tell you that there was much to do and life was never boring. Life is only boring and empty if you allow it to be so and in the days before television our lives were full and very active.

Radios were available (in those days we called such a device a 'Wireless') and the BBC broadcast for most of the day so that those who possessed a wireless could keep up with the home and world news. In our household we did not have a wireless but we did take a daily newspaper. Most families owned a piano and very many of the children took piano lessons and the daily practise usually would last an hour. The four children in our family were taught to read, write and do simple arithmetic prior to starting school at the age of four and we were encouraged to read books such as Arthur Mee's Childrens Encyclopaedia. These ten volumes contained a wealth of information and I still have a set which I often refer to.

As there was no mains electricity connected to the cottage, the only lighting was provided by a paraffin oil lamp which produced a good light but not really good enough for reading. Those who didn't have mains electricity could power their wireless sets from an accumulator. This lead acid device which produced six volts for the valve heaters (very heavy current users) had to be charged up before use. Most people had a spare one ready for the time when the one being used needed recharging. This was then disconnected, the fully charged one connected and the discharged one was then taken to a local shop for recharging. This would take a couple of days and cost a penny or two. The High Tension required by the wireless was supplied from a large dry cell battery. A dry cell battery was used because the High Tension required by the wireless was very low current. Quite a complicated system! Soon all households were connected to the mains electricity supply and oil lamps, accumulators and batteries were dispensed with. We did keep a small supply of candles though as there were many electrical failures in the early days.

Most boys in Dinton joined the Boy Scout movement on reaching the age of eleven. This troop was known as the 1st Cuddington and was very popular and boys from Cuddington and Stone were encouraged to join and some did. When I joined in 1946 the troop was lead by Miss Read (from Cuddington), straight from the army, stood for no nonsense and maintained a firm discipline. She was assisted by Mr. May whose wife ran the Dinton Post Office and shop. These two stalwarts gave us a great service and taught us much with such enthusiasm! The scouts would meet once a week in the scout hut throughout the year and there was some weekend camping away from Dinton and at least one week's camping during the school summer holidays. The boys were taught basic cookery, knots of course and a good deal of the time was spent on learning about the countryside. These lessons were very valuable especially in later adult life.

In our family we would have a 'concert' on most Saturday evenings with each member contributing. Three of us could play the piano, Dad could play the recorder/penny whistle/ocarina and piccolo, my elder sister could play the melodeon (a small piano accordion) and of course we could all sing! Eventually our father allowed us to have a wireless and with the coming of Dick Barton, Special Agent, Paul Temple, and the Palm Court orchestra our weekly concerts ceased completely although my daily piano practise did not. Our avid reading continued especially as there were now electric lights in every room in the cottage. Stamp collecting was very popular and small packets of foreign stamps were available in abundance from Woolworths in Aylesbury.

During the summer months the children would play outside in the street or go climbing trees in the woods and Biggin spinney. We all had whips and tops which were really good fun when the road was smooth but was spoilt when the roadmen came and resurfaced it. We then had to abandon whips and tops until the road became smooth again. This could take a considerable time as there was very little traffic. In Dinton there were only about four or five cars and the odd lorry! There were 'wide' games and 'tracking' learned from the scouts to be played and of course 'Tin Can Tommy' (a very popular road game).

After the war swings and seesaws were erected in the cricket field and during the long summer holiday from school there were nature walks organised by one of the Dinton school teachers and I'm sure that she did it out of the kindness of her heart without pay. She taught us how to recognize every kind of tree, wild flower and butterfly that we could find. Most families had a 'truck'. This was made from an old set of pram wheels with the front set of wheels manoeuvrable to allow some steering. On these trucks we would go 'wooding' i.e. collecting dead branches from the woods and spinneys to be sawn into logs and stored for the winter fuel. This activity occupied a good deal of time and effort during the summer holidays but was considered good fun and very worthwhile.

Gathering blackberries from the hedgerows for mother to make jam and pies; picking rose hips for rose hip syrup all took up a great deal of time. Some Sunday mornings we would get up very early and go to the fields to collect a few wild mushrooms for breakfast. To me Sunday was the dreary day of the week. We were required to dress in our Sunday best and there would be no play or climbing in the woods. Neither cricket nor football was allowed in the cricket field. We had to attend Church or Chapel for the morning/afternoon and evening service. (At least our parents knew where we were!) We were not allowed to read comics, only 'approved' books such as the Bible or informative books. As we got older Dad did relax these rules and even allowed us to play cards (no gambling though). He even agreed that we could go to the cinema on a Sunday evening!

The Dinton boys organised a youth football team and played on a pitch in the cricket field against other nearby village boy's teams on Saturday afternoons. As most of us possessed a bicycle we would cycle to the other villages and would carry the boys who hadn't a bike on our crossbars keeping a sharp look out for the local policeman! On wet and wintry days we would often go to a friend's home to talk, swap stamps or play the piano. Our parents encouraged these meetings and usually provided the odd snack. Going out in the dark held no fears for most of us as we knew no dangers! Everyone in the village knew everyone else and there were no strangers in those days.

Attending senior school brought homework which took up an hour or so each evening and there were Saturday morning pictures at the Odeon in Aylesbury although my music lesson with Miss Nunn was at the same time. During the year we were all expected to help in our father's garden and allotment. This time was well spent as it taught us a great deal of knowledge of plants and how to produce food for the table. Holidays away from home were few and far between, money was short and couldn't be spared for such luxuries but there were outings organized by the Chapel, a day trip to Wicksteed Park near Kettering every year which we would all look forward to. Scout camps also provided the boys with a week away from home. At the scout camp everyone had to do his bit and help with the daily cooking and cleaning chores and it was great fun! Each day was completely full and action packed!

Earning pocket money was a priority and most of us carried out odd jobs after school and at the weekends. One good source was to hang around outside the Post Office on a bicycle waiting for a telegram to be delivered and during harvest time the farmers would give us small jobs to do.

'Bored', who was bored? No television, so what, we were too busy, there was so much to do. I do watch television and enjoy some of it but those days before television were great, informative, and most of our leisure was self generated, never boring. Money is now more plentiful, the need to gather in the winter fuel has gone; growing vegetables in gardens and allotments have diminished considerably. Playing in the street is frowned upon and of course dangerous with the manifold increase in traffic. Climbing trees, probably forbidden by health and safety! Oh dear. Never mind, switch the television on.

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