

Joyce Curry

(January 2017)

I was born in 1923 in a cottage in Cherry Tree Lane, just by the bridge over the Lea. My father William Canning (known as Billy) worked as a gardener on the Aldwickbury estate; that was huge at that time, it's a golf course now. It was a tied house so, when my father died when I was five, we had to move to one of a row of five or six cottages in East Lane in Wheathampstead.

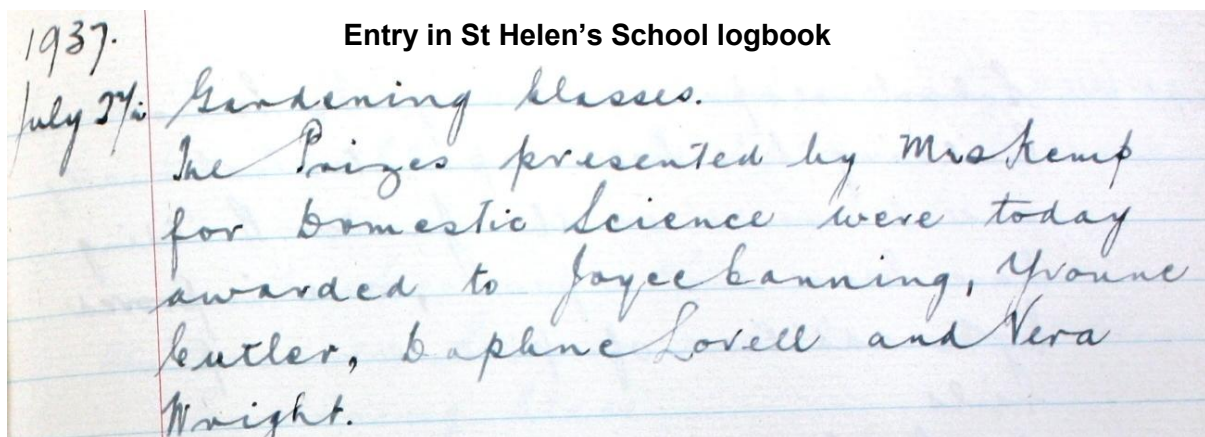
I started at St Helen's School in September 1928, when I was just five. My brother Stanley started there a year later. Being so small at the time, I have a vivid memory of the classroom having very high windows so you couldn't see out. Miss Young was head teacher of the Infants School. She lived in the big red brick house opposite the school; it is still there though it has been modernised. She was strict; we had to mind our Ps and Qs and always do the right thing. I remember that she used to bring her niece Mavis into school with her. She was adult but very small and she could not be left at home on her own. She had a little desk at the front of the room next to Miss Young and used to help with things like handing out the pencils and she played games with the children in the playground. She was a nice little person.

After a year, I moved up to Miss Warren's class. She lived on the Marford Road. She was more lenient than Miss Young. Then, after another year, I went up to Miss Crawley's class.

The Senior School had just been built on the other side of the road and I went on there when I was eight. There has been a lot more building there since then; I think the present school must be about the fourth one on that site.

In the Infants' School, the emphasis was very much on the three Rs – Reading, Writing and Arithmetic – but there were different subjects in the Senior School. There was Science, which was taught in a special room. It wasn't a proper laboratory but there was specialist equipment such as Bunsen burners and a specialist science teacher. We had lessons in history and geography too and there was a Practical Centre in two prefab buildings separate from the main school building. The girls did cookery and laundry on one side and the boys did metalwork and woodwork on the other, and gardening in the school grounds.

I remember some of the grand ladies of the village who used to visit the school. Mrs Kemp of Mackerye End was rather the 'Lady of the Manor' and visited quite often, driving through the village in a big car; I think maybe she was some kind of inspector. Certainly everything had to be just right when she was in school. She sometimes gave out the prizes at the end of the summer term; I remember winning the Domestic Science prize when I was 14.



The prize was a pair of book-ends, each with a model of a girl reading a book.

Among the other regular visitors were Lady Beach-Thomas and Miss Robins, who lived in the house at the top end of Rose Lane that is now The Dell. And of course the rector visited every day for prayers. First it was the Reverend Mr Baird-Smith, who christened me, and later it was the Reverend Roe. I remember too that, once a year, some people came to school to offer free shoes to the poorer children. Some of their parents accepted them but others were too proud.

Mr Housden was headmaster all the time that I was at school. He was very strict; he used the cane on the boys though not on us girls. They had to stand outside his door when they were in trouble. I remember one time that I and two of my friends had got hold of some lipstick from somewhere and were putting it on in front of the window of the sweet shop that used to be next to the Walnut Tree pub in Church Street. We turned round and there was Mr Housden! We were terrified and quickly rubbed off the lipstick. I think he probably didn't notice. Anyway, he never mentioned it.

We moved to Lea Valley Cottages when I was eight years old. That's the row of twelve white cottages on the right hand side of Lower Luton Road as you go out of the village. They were council houses then but they are all privately owned now. Lower Luton Road was very narrow in those days.

I used to walk to school with my friend Joan Parkins. We went over Newbridge, then through a gate and over the railway line (we knew the train times and you could hear them coming anyway) or through a tunnel under the line. Then we walked up the hill across what was then the open fields of Bury Farm, opposite Bury Farm Cottages. The fields were full of cows and very muddy in the winter, as was the farmyard which we walked through. The big farmhouse was on one side and a lot of barns and sheds on the other. Mr Throssell the farmer was a jolly man, robust and rosy-cheeked. He had a dairy business with his brother-in-law Mr Parkins who lived in one of a pair of cottages further along the Lower Luton Road that has since been pulled down. He used to deliver milk in the village.

There were other farms in the village, though Town Farm, opposite The Swan, wasn't a working farm at that time. There were often cows in the High Street on their way to be milked.

Next to The Swan, on the corner with Church Street, was Collins Antiques. Mr Collins had bought the conservatory from a big house that was being demolished at Gustard Wood and used it to display his stock. He had a van with 'Collins Antiques' painted on the side, with the address and a stamp so it looked like an envelope. He used to collect new stock from the station.

There were many different shops and pubs in the village and nearby. My mother took me and my brother to have our hair cut at Mr Latchford's barber shop, where the WI shop is now. The Latchfords lived in a cottage behind the shop.

Of course, the trains were running then. We often went on the train to visit our grandma at Ayot or to go to Luton for shopping. My uncle, my mother's brother, was an engine driver; we used to wave to him when he passed by at lunchtime – we always knew when his train was due. His name was Robert Butterfield but he was known as Herbert. He lived in Hatfield. I've visited the old station platform since they restored it; I think it's lovely.