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To be a Baker's Boy

(A Memory of Wheathampstead in 1939)

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23 Gustard Wood

When WW2 broke out in September **1939** I was living at the parental home in **Blackmore End**, but I attended a school in **London**. Plans were in place for the school's evacuation, but I was not part of them as Hertfordshire was considered to be a 'safe' area. So there was I, sixteen and a bit, looking for a job (or another school - no thank you!). I had been promised a position at Vauxhall Motors from January **1940**; but that left four months in which to occupy myself and keep out of trouble.

To the relief of my mother I received an offer from **Les Hall**, one of the two bakers then in the village (the other being **Garretts**). We had become his customers when **L.G.Hall** took over the business of **F.W.Cobb** (in **1936** I believe). The deal was to help on the delivery round, not as an employee in the strict sense of the word, more as a conscripted volunteer. So I found myself working long hours, in all weathers, for a 'token' payment of **five shillings** (25p) for a six-day week. But I didn't mind. The doughnuts were free!

In those days, before Supermarkets and mass car ownership, food shopping worked in reverse; tradesmen did the visiting. (Either that or go out of business). **Les Hall** had two basic 'rounds'. The centre of the village was supplied from what can only be described as an electric perambulator. This was in the hands of **John Desborough** from **Kimpton**, a *real* employee. Often wondered how many miles he walked each week.

The other round was covered by **Les** himself (after having been up since 3 a.m. baking the bread!) in a van, with me alongside. We started off about 7 a.m., making the first calls in Marford Road (beyond Necton Road) and down Sheepcote Lane. Then the route went: Cromer Hyde (where we had a rendezvous with the Letchworth Bacon van to take on pork pies), Lemsford, Nup End, Old Knebworth,

then back to base to replenish supplies, via the old Great North Road and the western fringes of Welwyn Garden City. With the van re-loaded it was up to Amwell, then back through the village and north to Gustard Wood, Blackmore End (where I had a ten minute lunch break), Mackerye End, Lea Valley estate, Cherry Trees, Marshall's Heath, The Folly, and finally the houses along Lower Luton Road. Mind you, we did split the round during the week - covering segments of it on alternate days. But every Saturday it was the Full Monty - and I was lucky to get home before 8 or 9 p.m.

Despite the small financial reward I obtained a lot of pleasure from getting to know customers - and listening to **Les** chatting away in his soft, leisurely Gloucestershire brogue. And there was adventure, too (though not always appreciated as such at the time). This coincided with Prince joining the organisation. As petrol was in short supply **Les** decided to cover the nearer parts of the round by alternative means of transport. He managed to acquire the two-wheeled baker's trap previously owned by **Mr Sibley**, who had been a baker up at **Gustard Wood** some years previously. And between the shafts of the said trap (with some difficulty) went Prince.

There's no denying that he was a magnificent equine specimen. But he was a *hunter* and, as such, considered pulling a trap associated with *commerce* to be way beneath his dignity. So he proceeded to try to dislodge the appendage by unleashing all the considerable power stored within his rear quarters. This performance generally took about five minutes, and when he appeared to have settled down we felt confident enough to load up and set out on our way.

All was fine as we trotted through streets with houses; it was in the country lanes that the trouble started. Being a hunter, Prince's training taught him that there was only one thing to do with a hedge; *jump over it!* Which is what he attempted to do as soon as we started up Lamer Lane. Between us, **Les** and I managed to keep the rig in one piece and on the road. But we never dared leave Prince unsupervised; one of us always had to stay aboard, with reins in hand. This didn't do a lot for our productivity, with only one person at a time being able to make deliveries. Anyway, we persevered. Through a mixture of kindness, coaxing and rich Gloucestershire expletives Prince's behaviour gradually improved. *We thought.*

The day came when we decided that it would be safe to risk leaving him on his own while we both made deliveries. (Though I was never allowed to go to the house where dwelled the lady of ample proportions who was most unselfish about sharing her charms. That call was strictly reserved. But I digress). It was a Saturday, and we had reached the Lea Valley estate after a relatively tranquil journey. **Les** went to the first house. I went next door. Prince spotted his chance - and went off like a rocket! The tailboard of the trap dropped down, and the contents shot out: loaves of bread, bags of

flour, cakes, pork pies - and eggs - were scattered all along Manor Road. What a catastrophe!

But there was more to come (or go!). Where Manor Road crossed Castle Rise there was a lamp post. This fitted perfectly in the space between the wheel and the body of the trap. Result: one nearside wheel ripped from its axle; one trap dragged down the road on its side; one Council lamp post horizontal on the ground; one broken pipe discharging the supply of gas destined for the said lamp all over the Lea valley. It was fortunate that Marshall's Way was a cul-de-sac, otherwise the debacle could have gone on for miles! Replacement supplies were brought up hurriedly in the van by **Charlie Bloodworth**, a relative of **Mrs Hall**, who helped in the bakehouse. How the damage was paid for I have no idea; I only hope that **Les** was adequately insured!

Not surprisingly Prince was made redundant, reverting to the role to which he was more accustomed; he was often to be seen being ridden by **Mrs Hall**. The trap probably ended up as kindling for the bread oven. Les bought a smaller, more economical, van. I went on to a 'proper' job- *with a rise of £1.00 a week* - but used to come back to help out over Easter and Christmas, until I went into the R A F. Then, shortly afterwards, **Les** himself joined up - as a catering officer in the army. No doubt he decided that he needed a spot of rest! **Mrs Hall**, and the aforementioned **Charlie**, carried on running the business while he was away.

After the war we renewed our friendship and frequently played golf together. **Les** was always good company, and very well respected - as testified by the numbers who filled St Helens to capacity at his funeral. Although the money could have been slightly better I thoroughly enjoyed my days as a Baker's Boy - but declined **Les's** invitation to enter the business with him full time. I can't imagine any occupation with a worse mix of hard work and unsocial hours.

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