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'Tis in my memory lock'd,
And you yourself shall keep the key of it.

Hamlet (I.iii)

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Memories of a Puttenham Girl

MARINA BUTLER

CONTENTS

CHAPTER FOUR

Puttenham Past

When I was young, we knew everyone in the village and nobody locked their doors. If you wanted to go and see old Mrs Buckle, you went to see old Mrs Buckle – you just walked in. It was a different life altogether.

There were five shops and a blacksmiths in the village, so we were completely self-sufficient. You could buy everything you wanted, food-wise, locally and if we needed anything else – material, say – my mother would go into Guildford, perhaps once a year, to stock up.

Children had freedom that would be unheard of today; we spent most of our time outside and

we all helped with the harvest. Everyone went to church and all the children were in the choir; the organ had to be pumped by hand in those days. And if a friend got married and you were a bridesmaid – with a new dress, with all the smocking across the top – that would be the excitement of the year. Everyone would go up to the church to watch; yes, a wedding could keep the village going for weeks. It was a life of simple pleasures.

School

I started school just before I was five and could already read because Barbara had taught me. We stayed at Puttenham School until the age of 14, then for our last year we joined a larger school in Milford and left when we were 15.

The school had three classrooms – for infants, juniors and seniors – each with a great open fire surrounded by an old iron guard. When I was a little older, my mother started cleaning the school and she had to go very early in the morning to light the fires; if I was up, I was dragged down

to help. Children were given little bottles of milk which were put around the fire to warm and I did hate warm milk. In the winter, when it was icy, all the little cardboard tops would pop off where the milk had frozen.

The day always started with assembly in the main hall and if you had been very well-behaved the day before you could choose a hymn; that was quite an honour. Then, all the inkwells had to be filled up in our wooden desks. Lots of us girls had long plaits in those days and if you were unlucky, and had a naughty boy behind, you might find your plaits were dipped in the inkwell and you'd get ink everywhere. The boys also used to screw up bits of blotting paper, dip them in the inkwells and flick them up at the ceiling with a catapult – boys always seemed to have a catapult to hand.

Jimmy Housden was the headmaster when I started school and, gosh, he was cruel. He would cane the boys, while girls were rapped over the knuckles with the hard, wooden grip of a blackboard duster. It was barbaric really, but we all did as we were told – you didn't dare not.

I hadn't been at school long when I first felt the pain of that duster. The toilets at school were all outside in a block – they weren't flush toilets and the smell was terrible, but they did have toilet rolls. Well, at home, we only had squares of toilet paper and a roll was quite a novelty to a curious five-year-old. I thought that I'd undo it to see how much was on there, but then, of course, I couldn't roll it back. Oh, I got into terrible trouble for that crime!

Thankfully, Mr Housden left and was replaced by lovely Miss Sycamore. She came from a big girls' school, I believe, and had a broader outlook on life. She opened our eyes to the world and taught us about different countries and interesting books. We studied *Pandora's Box* and *Pilgrims' Progress* and we went to see Shakespeare once. I remember being spellbound by some of the lessons. For my last year, I had Jean Ford, who would become the head teacher at the school for decades and teach both my sons. She had just returned from teaching in Germany and she made us all learn 'Silent Night' in German.

There were no library books like you have nowadays. If you had a book you looked at it in school, it didn't come home. I particularly remember learning the rivers of the British Isles; in my mind's eye I can still see that map and I can still name all my rivers. In those days, the mantra was that children should be out, rather than in, whenever possible so we had gardening lessons, lots of nature walks and many of our lessons were outside.

For May Day, we would always dance around the maypole. After church, the May Queen and her two attendants would be taken back to school on a donkey and cart, where St George would fight the Dragon to save her. We also used to celebrate Empire Day – that's not something you hear of nowadays.

The school had no facilities for cookery or woodwork, so those lessons were taught in Farnham. It's hard to believe, but to get there we would walk up from school to the Hog's Back, catch the bus into Farnham and walk up Castle Street, where the boys would go off to woodwork

and us girls would go off to our cookery lessons. Not one teacher or adult accompanied us! Then we'd come home on the bus with our cooking slopping around in a china pot. If you'd made an Irish stew, that was quite a challenge.

The friendships I made at school have lasted my entire life. Sylvia, Jean and Phyllis made up my gang of girls. Jean and Phyllis died when they were quite young, in their 50s, but I still chat to Sylvia regularly. Ann and Douglas are lifelong friends too – Douglas was in my class – and they, too, met at school all those years ago. Then there's Cilla. I've known Cilla since she was a dot, as she is a few years younger than me and was also born in the village. When she started school she was classed as 'lively' and so I was asked to look after her. We've been best friends ever since and she still lives down the road. Snowy Wyath (we've always called him Snowy and I don't know why because his name's Roy) is another one who was born in the village and still lives in the village. He's a lot younger than me, I think in his 70s – a mere spring chicken. Me, Cilla and Snowy are the last of our generation

Taken at Milford School, 1949

to have lived in the village our entire lives – but, perhaps, there will be others to come.

Shops on The Street

At the end of a school day, Sylvia, Jean, Cilla and I would amble home together, probably pausing by the pond to tumble somersaults around the railings – all the children loved doing that. The pond was at the corner of School Lane, opposite where the old post office was when I was tiny and next to the barn belonging to Mr Gill, the builder. It's long gone now. Looking up The Street towards the pub and the church, you'd find the new post office, run by Mrs Hobbs, which later became a bed shop.

When I was growing up, Mr and Mrs Edwards ran the pub and it was the hub of the village. There was a pool table in there and always a big fire. Village pubs didn't serve food in those days; it was a drinking pub, where people went to chat and play games like darts, pool, dominoes or shove ha'penny. People had a habit of calling

in for a drink on their way from work, whatever the state of their clothes. The pub changed when a new landlord took over, who wouldn't allow people inside in their dirty work clothes. It caused a terrible upset. I think this landlord started doing the food, so the pool table went to make room for more tables.

Turning right on to The Street, us girls would walk up and sit in the big tree by the forge, opposite the little alleyway that went up to the allotments. It's been turned into a house now and you'd never know it had ever been a forge. The tree was so old that all its middle had gone, and we loved to sit in that hole and watch the horses being shod. How long it took us to get home from school I don't know!

'Let's go and say hello to Mrs Stay,' someone might add. Mr and Mrs Stay ran the baker's, further up, and we knew that if we popped our heads around the door Mrs Stay might share something out and we'd have a little treat to eat the rest of the way home. The baker's had an old curved bell over the door that went 'clang, clang,

The baker's shop, run by Mr and Mrs Stay, on the left

The newsagent's in 1959

Photograph courtesy of the Puttenham and Wanborough History Society (Jack and Margaret Saunders' postcard collection)

clang' as you went in and, oh, the smell! They baked the bread in a little bakery by the side which is now a separate house. It was a very special shop.

The first banana I ever had was from the baker's – Mrs Stay saved it for me. All the shops were rather multifunctional and overlapped in what they sold. When I met Philip, his family hadn't long moved into the village so his mum went into the baker's and asked Mrs Stay what sort of family we were for her Philip to be getting involved with.

Moving on, we'd walk past Mr Hurcombe's butcher shop on the right, with his slaughterhouse in the barn at the side, now used by the village history society; and finally, past the newspaper shop and the grocery shop – the last shop in the village to close.

Old-fashioned fun

In the summer, you disappeared in the morning and only came home when you were hungry. We always played outside and made our own

amusements, because there weren't elaborate toys as such. If you had a swing in the garden, it was only an old rope in a tree, and if you wanted a slide, you went and cut the bank down a bit up at the top and made a slide down the slope with a tray.

There's a band of pure sand that runs along the front of the house – at the back it gradually turns to clay – and there used to be a natural sandpit down the road, where the council had excavated the sand. We used to be gone for hours playing in that. The sand was put on the road in the summer when the tar was melting, and in the winter if there was ice. The pit had ledges all around where the sand martins used to nest – they're talking about renovating it now to bring the sand martins back.

When I was perhaps nine or ten, we used to walk to Cuttmill for a swim with some older ones. You always cut your feet on all the old rubbish that was thrown in there, and sometimes you'd come out with a leech sticking to your leg, but that was always a good afternoon out, to walk to Cuttmill, have a swim and walk home again.

We all had our favourite older people and we used to go visiting to see if they wanted any shopping – sometimes you might get a penny when you got back. We were little scavengers and always looked out for empty beer or lemonade bottles because you could get money for returning them to the shop. We also got paid two and sixpence for being in the church choir if there was a wedding.

Helping with the harvest

When you got home from school, there was usually a little job for you to do, and at harvest time there were many. During the corn harvest, we would help to stook the hay – farmers didn't bale hay in those days, they bundled it up into stooks, which had to be stood up. You'd take a big knob stick with you in case a rabbit ran out. You always came out of a harvest field with a couple of rabbits for tea.

Once the stooks were taken away, we went gleaning, to collect grain for the chicken. It was hard work because you had to walk up and down

the fields, bent over the whole time, but if you spotted a little pile of grain that had dropped out of the stooks – gold dust! Wheat or barley, any grain – that was gleaning; we spent hours at it. And of course there was foraging to do: for blackberries, rosehips and sloes.

In October, we had a week off from school to help pick the potatoes. The tractor would dig up a row and we would follow along with big baskets and collect the potatoes. We got paid for that. Before the field was ploughed over again, us kids were sent up to the fields with a wheelbarrow, to see if there were any odd potatoes that had been missed. You can't imagine asking children coming home from school to do that now, can you?

The hops

The hop garden behind my house has always been farmed by Hampton Estate, but there used to be many more hop fields around, owned by different farmers, including Mr Marshall in the middle of the village.

The hops connect you to the seasons, unlike any other crop. In February, when there seems to be no sign of life, the farmers start stringing. That's still done by hand, exactly as it has always been done. The men go out with a huge ball of string on their back and a great big pole to guide the string from hooks in the ground up to the wires – down, catch; up, catch! It's slow and laborious work – they haven't discovered a way to do that with a machine yet.

Around mid-March, the hops start to shoot and when the stems are long enough the hop trainers come in. Each hop is twisted around a string to start its journey upwards; that's also still done by hand. It used to be done twice to catch any strays, but now they have to make their own way up after one twiddle.

By the summer, the fields are towering walls of green and the deer come in; they don't eat the hops, they like the shade and the privacy. Then, in late August, the harvesting starts.

The hop harvest used to be quite a village event. Hop pickers arrived from London and would set up camp in the old sheds that were at the end of

Dark Lane. When I was a little girl, calves were reared in the sheds and when it was hop-picking time they'd empty the barns, give them a quick lime wash, and the pickers would live there for the duration of the harvest. They brought everything they needed with them – saucepans, the lot.

The men would pull a bine down, lay it over the basket and the women and children would pick it as quick as lightning. They were paid by the bushel, so the workers would put their arms in the deep baskets and fluff up the flowers to increase the volume. Way back, the pickers used to be paid in hop tokens, not money, which they could spend in the local shops.

The hop-picker children had a tendency to help themselves to all your eggs – and our chicken were at the bottom of the garden next to the hop fields, so we had to be careful – and they'd have the plums off your tree, too; anything ripe. Luckily we had a damson tree and that ripens later.

Local women and children did pick as well, but I don't suppose there were enough people to do the work. There's only a certain amount of time

in which to pick the flowers, otherwise they start to go brown and it's too late, they've gone over.

The harvest was a long event in those days, it used to go on for about four or five weeks. Last year, the whole thing was over in a fortnight, all mechanically harvested. It's changed even in the last few years, because youngsters used to have to stand in the back of the trailers and pull the bines in once they were cut, but even they're not needed now. Two tractor drivers pick the lot in a fortnight.

In late summer, the whole village would be full of the rich smell of drying hops. Oh, it's a lovely smell, always strongest in the evening. When I was little, the hops were still dried in the old hop kilns by the church – they're houses now. But electricity made oast houses redundant and the old cow sheds were knocked down to make way for two big barns, housing a machine that picked the flowers off the bines and an electric dryer. We always knew when the dryers were boosted in the barn, because it made our lights flicker in the evenings.

The smell of drying hops has gone from Puttenham now. About four years ago, Hampton

Estate knocked down the two barns and built houses in their place. A new, high-tech hop-drying machine has been built outside the village in the private estate. It's funny to think that I remember such a fuss in the village when they said the cowsheds were to be pulled down, and another huge fuss decades later when they proposed knocking down the hop barns to build houses. Now, people moving into the village would never know there have ever been any barns there at all, and will never know the smell of drying hops.

A lifetime of change

All the shops are gone now – I don't think we'll ever live like that again. Once the first supermarket opened and we started to do all of our shopping in one place, we spoiled it. Supermarkets were the downfall of villages. It was our own fault. Similarly, we've lost the buses we relied on and now have no choice but to drive. They assume everyone has a car, but as you get older you can't necessarily keep driving and then you're stuck – the youngsters too.

Is it progress? I'm not sure. Supermarket food is not the same. When the village shops were open, if someone had too much produce in their garden, the shops would sell it for them. So, if you didn't have fresh runner beans that day, you could pop down to the shop and know they were probably local. The land's not managed, just left. There used to be men for hedging, men for ditching; the wood at the top of the hop field was always coppiced, now all the trees are covered in ivy to the top and will die.

The village is nothing like it used to be, but it's a good job – we wouldn't want to live like that now. It's easy to remember the sunny days and forget when you were freezing to death. The old days weren't always good.

We've still got our church, the school, the pub, and we've still got the hops – they are my focal point now. Most important of all, lovely new people have moved into the village in recent years, who send their children to the school and want to get involved with village activities. The hop fields have been expanded, and many people go

hop training now because the foreign workers who used to do that job haven't been here since Brexit – local people were asked to help out.

One afternoon a month, Cilla and I go up to the Tower Café in the church, for a cake and a chat. Couples come with babies and they have books up there you can borrow, now the mobile library has stopped. It's lovely. So we're very lucky – we've still got a village feeling, where some villages haven't.

The hop gardens in the 1920s, shortly before my parents moved to the village

Photograph courtesy of the Puttenham and Wanborough History Society (Jack and Margaret Saunders' postcard collection)

The hop garden in April 2022, showing the eight houses built by Mr Smallpiece for his farm workers in 1935.