

Early life story at Landrake by Ray Roberts

I was born in 1940 at Wotton Cross near Landrake, a village known as Larrick by the local adults. Father worked as a horseman on Wotton Farm for Ernest Tamblyn. As the war was still on in my early days father and my older brother, Tracy, dug an air raid shelter for the family over the hedge at the top of our long garden where, beside an oak tree, there was a grass bank alongside the road, which was known as Shirley's Road. There were seven of us at the time, one brother and three sisters, Elsie, Violet and Doreen – who was always called Deano, plus father and mother, Tracy and Lilian.

This grassy bank was wide enough for a large pit to be dug and was covered with galvanised steel sheets piled up with earth. The idea was that if the Germans bombed our house, we would be safe in the shelter. It was said that the only sound to be heard whilst we were all in there during the night was a sucking sound made by me sucking my dummy. Luckily no bombs were dropped on the house but looking towards Plymouth during the hours of darkness I can remember seeing searchlights that were waving to and fro over the city seeking the German planes.

Father told us that during the war a bomb landed on one of the fields at Wotton and when the army came to deal with it father was working down ground with a harrow and two horses at the top of the field. He told us that as soon as the army lorry arrived beside the bomb, one of the soldiers started making sandwiches and a large urn of tea. After a while a soldier came up to where father was working and told him to hold the horses heads as they were going to blow up the bomb, which they did. And then father went back to work.

I have since been told by Martin Tamblyn of Holwood farm, near Blunts, that his father told him that one of the soldiers who dealt with the bomb had the glass on his wristwatch broken by a small piece of shrapnel from the explosion. After the war, when I was seven or eight (19447 – 1948) I can remember a light aircraft landing on a field called Church Meadow beside Penlynher bungalow and I later learnt that it was an Auster aircraft that was on an observation flight.

My earliest recollection of cart horses is from when I was about three years old and my father called in home to collect something that he had forgotten to take that morning and he brought a pair of horses with him. These were Clydesdale-cross and not Shires although most people call these big horses Shires, and some of their names were, Madam, Punch, Flower, Violet and Hector. Anyway, whilst father was indoors taking to mother, I went out and wrapped my arms around the front leg of one of them. This made the mare look down in surprise and dad had to rescue me before the horse walked off with me as a passenger.

As soon as I was old enough to walk a fair distance, I was taken by my older brother and sisters on long walks across the fields and through the woods. My brother, Eric was three years

younger than me so it was a few years before he was old enough to join us. We would look at rabbits and birds and would pick a bunch of wild flowers to take home.

I can remember my first day at Landrake School where the teacher for us infants was Miss Churchward. Anyway, at lunchtime I was walked home by one of my sisters to have lunch and after eating I was right out into the garden to play thinking, incorrectly, that the school day was over. However, I was soon on the way back to school to join my new classmates.

During my boyhood, in common with nearly all the boys in the village we walked in groups looking at nature. We collected frogspawn during late February and March and there were several ponds around the village, all of which were in farmers fields. One was near Wisewandra where Stuart Delbridge lived and another was near Lantallack where Vivien Garrett lived. The frog spawn was collected in a large jam jar that had a rim on the top which allowed us to tie some string around it, very tightly, to make a carrying handle. At home the spawn was kept in a large sweet jar about eighteen inches high which we would get from the village shop and we collected pond weeds to go into the water for when the tiny frogs hatched out. Every day we checked the jar to see when the frogs grew legs. Front legs were the first to appear followed by the back legs and then the tail would be ingested into the body so the tiny amphibian would be a model of an adult frog.

Just up the lane from our house, towards Wotton Farm, there was Rogers' field which had a deep pond in the corner with just a wooden post and wire fence around it. I can't remember any frog spawn in the water but we used to pull out the clumps of water weeds and find newts in it. These were taken home and kept in a trough of some kind. Of course, newts being water-based lizards; they had legs so they were always walking away. This pond provided drinking water for the fat bullocks that were kept in the field.

Mr Rogers was some kind of cattle dealer who also owned a butchers shop in the village. Mr Snell who lived here in Quethiock in a large house that was once the village pub, the Masons Arms, was also a cattle dealer. Mr Snell used to call over at the school at kick - out time and tell me and Eric and the Alford boys to get ready half an hour before the usual time we left for school in the morning and he would pick us up and drive us several fields away so we could move his bullocks from a field along the Blunts road into a different field. I think he would give us a few pence each, never more than a three-penny bit, but of course our boots would have traces of cow dung on them and we still had to go into school.

We also collected wild birds' eggs which we kept in a large flat box with a layer of fine sawdust on the bottom into which we would place the eggs with a small paper label to identify the different species. During the school summer holidays we spent every day walking around field and through woodland as well as looking in the road hedges for different nests but we only collected one egg of each bird plus an extra one to be used as 'swaps' with other kids. There were usually five of us on these forays, me, my brother Eric, Maurice Tamblyn from the farm and Tony and Roger Alford from Skelton Park just down the road towards Pillaton. We carried the eggs home in a tin filled with grass so they wouldn't be broken. The egg of the Buzzard

was the largest we collected, apart from a Goose which doesn't count as it is a domestic bird and I think the Long-Tailed tit was the smallest egg that we collected. I don't think we ever found a Cuckoo's egg even though that egg was always on our minds for finding one of them would have been a highlight. Thankfully, at least from the bird's point of view, egg collecting has been illegal now for many years.

Sometimes our egg hunting forays would take us to a field called Blackymash where there was a fair bit of 'beach' alongside the River Lynher and downstream there was a small island in the middle of the water. We would catch small eels about three to four inches long and small big-headed fish that were hiding underneath the round rocks on the river bed. On the opposite bank of the river the land was owned by the Renfree farmers who had a lot of horses of the riding kind. They probably had cart horses as well and were probably the first to have a 'modern' tractor like a Ferguson T20 tractor.

This tractor, designed by Irishman Harry Ferguson was unique as it sported hydraulic link arms on the rear which could be connected to a small trailer, called a link box, a plough, mower and even a circular saw. I think every tractor in the world uses this hydraulic attachment system which was Ferguson's patent. Ironically, I think Harry Ferguson died penniless in his native country.

It's odd that I ended up living in Quethiock village which is just over a couple of miles from Wotton Cross where was a travelling shop that came once a week. This ex-army lorry with a tarpaulin canopy over the back, that was filled with groceries, was owned by Gene Harris who also owned the shop in Quethiock. A man came with him called Blacky as he had to unload coal for customers and paraffin for our oil lamps.

Back then the quarry near Holwood farm - Holwood Quarry - was producing stone for building purposes and every morning of the working days, I think it might have been around half past seven, the 'quarry lorry' would go past Wotton Cross taking quarry men who were riding in the back of the lorry under a framed canopy, to work from Landrake. These men even carried a milk churn full of water on the lorry for drinking at the quarry. The noise of the lorry passing the house would wake us children up so it was time to get dressed and have our breakfast before walking to school.

I can remember a man riding a cycle would stop and ask mother if she wanted any knives or scissors sharpened. Mother would hand over her carving knife and this man would place his cycle on its stand and a thin belt was looped around a pulley on the back wheel and around another pulley on a small grinding stone on the handle bars, so when he pedalled his bike the belt turned the grinder and he would sharpen the knife. He would turn up, unannounced, about every six months.

Orange Billy

Occasionally we boys would go down to the quarry and walk around where the rubbish stone that was no good for construction was thrown down a tip in the hilly field next to the quarry. We would search through the stones until we found one with some 'gold' in it which was really, unknown to us, iron pyrites. We would try to chisel out this golden substance with our pocket knives but all we ever collected was a small amount of grit.

We had no television back then and probably the only entertainment on the 'wireless' or radio for children was *Dick Barton - Special Agent* at 6.15 each weekday evening. Then it was *The Archers*, a program for grownups that came on the Light Programme afterwards. *Way out West* was a Country and Western programme produced if I remember correctly by Earl Stanley Gardener, or was it Guy Kingsley Pointer? for Sunday mornings after the omnibus edition of the *Archers* which was introduced by Tom Forest. I think mother would listen to *Mrs Dales Diary* during the afternoons if the wireless accumulator has enough juice in it. The two-volt accumulator was a lead acid battery that supplemented the two dry batteries, a one and half volt unit in the same cardboard case as a 120 volts battery. I think it was connected to the radio by means of a four-pin plug. If I remember correctly, father or older brother Tracey would drop the accumulator into Notter Bridge Garage for charging up, on his way to work at Trematon and me and Eric, my younger brother, would collect it on the way home from Sunday School which meant we had to walk down Ducky Lane to the garage and then come up Frenchmen's Lane. The radio was fitted into a large wooden radio cabinet which had a large dial on the front marked out in metres for the long and medium wavebands.

Frenchman's Lane was the road opposite our house at the cross roads and was, hundreds of years ago, so named after some French pirates came up to Notter Bridge by boat where the river began to be tidal and they were chased up the narrow lane that went up to Wotton Cross. Some were caught and it was said that a farmer, either in Wotton or Talvans Farm took a bullock out into the lane, poured tar over its back and set alight to it. The animal got upset of course and charged through the lane killing several Frenchmen. A couple escaped and travelled across country to a manor near Trerulefoot where they were caught. The manor house was then named Catchfrench and is still there today.

We kids got our first taste of television on Coronation Day down at the village pub, the Bullers Arms. Beside the back door of the pub was what was called the pigeon hole, a small door about eighteen inches square which when opened gave access to the public bar. So, anyone could knock of the door and the barman would open it and serve maybe a bottle of beer or cider or even cigarettes and nobody in the bar drinking were able to see who was doing the buying.

Anyway, on Coronation Day the landlord brought his television, one of probably only two sets in the village - Mr Menhenick had the first one I think, down into the bar so his customers could watch the live broadcast. One of the kids discovered that the pigeon hole was open and the television, probably no bigger than fourteen-inch screen, was visible from the pigeon hole so it wasn't long before about twenty of us were all pushing and shoving to get a view of the

screen. However, when we went back in the evening to watch some more telly we were told to bugger-off.

This pigeon hole was where we took any empty beer bottles that we found in the dumps, along the lanes and even in people's back yards. The pub landlord would give us a couple of pence each bottle which was quickly carried across the road to the village Co-op to purchase crisps or ice creams. We found that cattle 'drench' which was basically medicine for cows came in bottles very similar to beer bottles but no matter how much we scrubbed the drench bottles the landlord always knew they weren't beer bottles.

All the children in Larrick went to Sunday school. There were three in the village, ours was the Methodist Church, and then there was the Anglican Church and another one which may have been the Methodist North Church, now a dwelling house on the road near Home Park. In fact, our Methodist Church is now a dwelling house and a new church was built some years ago in the grounds. Once a year in the summer we had a Sunday School Anniversary for which we practiced the songs for many weeks leading up to it. Then on the anniversary day we had to do three performances, morning, afternoon and evening. This evening service was always a 'full house' with seats filling the aisles. Then the following Tuesday after school we had sports and then tea in the field beside the Methodist Church. Afterwards there was another performance in the church. These performances were when the lucky kids got their new clothes.

Then there was the Sunday School Trip in the summer when about five of Deeble's coaches would come into Landrake on a Sunday and take us Methodist children and our parents up the Torquay for the day. This was about the only time we visited the beach and mother always made pasties for our lunch and apple pasties for 'pudding'. We would go into the sea wearing our swimming suits, not trunks back then, and then later we would walk around the town looking at the shops. Sometimes we would have our family photograph taken by a photographer in the street who would use a large wooden boxed camera which developed the picture whilst we waited.

Another thing we all did during the summer was to pull out of the hedge any yellow flowered Ragwort we came across. This plant was dangerous to horses and cattle so before it killed off the animals, we killed off the plants by laying them on the road. Nowadays Cornwall Council workers would pull up the flowers growing beside the main roads around Liskeard. Two men and a lorry and I don't think either of them ever saw a cow or horse walking the main road on their own. In fact, cattle are not even driven along the road nowadays so there is no way they could eat a stem full of ragwort leaves. I have been told by several farmers that cattle and horses will not eat the plant whilst it is growing. But, when the hay field that contains ragwort is cut and bailed then fed to animals, they eat it, not knowing what it is as it is dry.

During dry weather and grass in the meadow was short, after school Eric and I had to take our four cows out into Shirley's Road which went from the crossroads towards Blunts, where they used to eat the vegetation on the hedges before they were pared back by Cornwall County

Council workers Arky Olver and Ennis Barrett who would send word to dad when they knew they would be coming our way - they knew what we used to do with the cows. There was hardly any traffic on that road then.

We were lucky enough to have a teacher, Mr Scales, who was interested in nature so once a week during the summer months he took the whole class up the lane opposite the school, across the fields and down to the River Lynher. The whole class of thirty odd kids would spend the afternoon there finding and identifying different plants and flowers, especially those that grew along the river edge as they were different from the ones we usually noticed in the woods and fields. Birds were also observed and identified.

This is something that no longer happens, one teacher in charge of over thirty pupils and, of course when we went home with legs and boots covered in mud to say nothing of the cuts and bruises, we sometimes collected, there were no complaints from our parents or claims like there are nowadays. Each child looked after themselves and their classmates and we were all glad to get out and about.

With my brothers and sisters and with mother in charge the hazel nut collecting in the Autumn was a science as we were only allowed to pick nuts that were 'slipshell' as they were all stored in a small hessian sack that was hung on a beam on the kitchen ceiling and kept until Christmas. Those that were not 'slipshell', meaning they had to be picked from their husks using finger nails, would rot as they were not ripe. These were eaten in the field. Sweet chestnuts were also collected but these had to be eaten within a couple of weeks as they soon went bad. It appears our climate was too wet for these English chestnuts unlike the Spanish variety which would keep for months.

Collecting wild food such as nuts and mushrooms was essential to our way of life. We relied on the mushrooms to be part of our meals after our mother fried them in dripping. In those days there seemed to be hundreds of mushrooms around the fields on the farm where we lived. Hazel nuts were the same, if we collected none to keep, we had none at Christmas apart from one coconut mother would buy at the village shop. Before we ate this nut, father would make a hole in the hard shell to drain out the coconut milk inside. This was collected in a cup and passed around for us all to have a drink of this sweet liquid.

Blackberries were also picked and after they were washed mother would store them in Kilner jars to be used when she made blackberry or apple and blackberry pie. Blackberry jelly was also producing in the kitchen that, like most other cottages at the time, only had a black stove.

Our daily meat would be either salted pork from the trundle or rabbit meat. Rabbits would be caught by 'rabbiting' which involved placing a small net over all the rabbit holes in a field hedge, both sides of course and putting the ferret into one of the holes. As the ferret travelled through the network of tunnels the rabbits would try to escape but were caught in the net at the entrance to the warren. We also set gin traps - now illegal - to catch the rabbits which had to be released from the trap which caught them by the leg and killed by wringing their necks. The

animal would be roasted whole or cut up and fried, as well as being cut into small pieces and stewed. In fact, most of our evening meals consisted of rabbit or pork.

Rabbits were an important source of meat as it supplemented the supply of pork from the 'trundle' which was basically half a wooden beer barrel into which pieces of the cut-up pig were placed between layers of salt which preserved the meat. Mother would take the piece of meat out of the trundle the night before it was needed, placing it in a pan of water overnight. This removed some of the salt before it was cooked. Throughout its rather short life the pig was kept in a 'pig sty' and fed kitchen leftovers and corn. Usually the animal acquired a name and when the road hedges were covered in Hogweed, which we called Builder, we would pick armfuls of the stalks and leaves to throw into the pig sty. As it helped the pig to gain weight this is probably how it got its nickname.

The first job Eric and I had to do when we got home from school and after we changed our clothes was to clean out the cow's house which was attached to our living house. This is where father milked our four cows twice a day. Once before he went to work and then again after he came home from work, before he ate his tea. The milk was collected in a churn and after mother had taken enough for the house the churn was placed on the 'milk stand' beside the road alongside the milk churns from Tamblyn's farm and the Alford's small holding. The 'milk lorry' driven by Mr Jane who lived at Blunts, collected all the milk from the surrounding farms and took it to Dawes Creamery down beside the ferry in Saltash where it was pasteurised and bottled. Every month we received the 'milk cheque' from the creamery. We had two fields, Wotton Cross meadow and Three Corners. I can remember that Mr Jane had an artificial leg.

We had no electricity in the house so the main light for the kitchen was a pressurised Aladdin paraffin lamp and we had candles in candle sticks which were saucer shaped pieces of metal with a handle and a small upright pipe in the centre for holding the candle. Water had to be pumped up from the well out the front of the house. In the cow's house there were two taps connected to pipe work which ran up into the hay loft above the cow's house where there were two large water tanks, one tank for each of the two houses - ours and next door. So, water that was pumped up into these tanks fed taps in ours and next doors kitchens and the outdoor toilets.

Every few years the washers in the water pump, which was situated down in the well needed replacing so somebody, usually Violet or Doreen's husband, Sam or Les, was lowered down on a rope to replace the washers which were usually cut from old leather boot. The drains from the toilets ran beneath the road into a field farmed by Jim Pote of Talvans Farm and occasionally the 'cess pit' had to be uncovered and dipped out with a bucket.

The Robert Geffery School at Landrake took children of all ages. So, you went as an infant and left at fifteen unless you passed the Eleven Plus exam and went to Grammar School in Saltash. I can remember some youngsters were evacuees and with their parents lived in old railway carriages and wooden hut beside the River Lynher at Notter Bridge. Nobody seemed to take any notice of the way these families had to live back then but just imagine a family living in a hut with only one door and one window.

Every Monday evening Mr Hicks would bring his sixteen-millimetre film projector and screen to the Robert Geffery Hall in the village and shown films for about three hours. The program started with a short travelogue type film and then there was a ten-minute episode of Captain Silver, William Tell or Superman starring George Reeves. Then the Golemont British News for ten minutes and then the ninety-minute feature film was show. That was when we became familiar with John Wayne, Wild Bill Hickock and Lex Barker as Tarzan. Elizabeth Taylor was in the first colour film that I remember, National Velvet. When he stopped the projector to load a new reel which were quite large in diameter, Mr Hicks would walk up to the front of hall with his diary in his hand and read up what films he had booked for the coming weeks. This would sometimes bring a cheer from the kids.

It is ironic but on the screen Superman star, George Reeves, would be shot at and the bullets would bounce off his chest but in reality, George was killed by a shot from a gun. I don't think it was ever proved if he committed suicide or whether he was murdered. He was, however, type cast as Superman and when he appeared on screen in a cowboy film all the kids in the audience would shout "It's Superman" So when the Superman series ended George was out of work although he did appear in Gone With The Wind and one of two brothers who both fancied Scarlet O'Hara.

In fact, I think the whole village used to attend the showings with all the children having to sit up the front. Mrs Chubb was standing beside the stage waiting for the signal from Mr Hicks in the back of the hall, that everybody was in and she would turn off the hall lights to the cheering of all the kids. Sometimes we used to get a lift home with Mr and Mrs Sparks who lived down beside the strawberry gardens near Notter Bridge, in their Morris Eight with all us four in the back.

Back in 1953 when I was thirteen fathers took a job with Percy Walters at Furselow Farm between Blunts and Clapper Bridge, so we left Landrake parish.