Lakenheath County Primary School, 1945 to 1955.

By Robert Rolph

My first days at school followed the Easter holidays in 1945. The infant's teacher, whose name escapes me was a lovely, kind lady to us young new beginners at school. There were camp beds in the classroom and we were all invited to have a short afternoon sleep. For entertainment, a table top was removed to reveal sand for the children to play in.

In 1942, a canteen had been opened in the school, so school dinners were available, cooked on site by local ladies. Good wholesome meals of fresh vegetables and whatever meat was available in the war years. I always enjoyed the desserts covered with custard poured from a large metal jug. For a while I did the short walk to number 21 Wings Road and had lunch at the home of my aunt and uncle. Another supplement to our diet, a government scheme I believe, was a 1/2 pint of full cream milk daily. I can still picture the crates of half pint glass bottles standing outside the school, with their silver foil tops raised about an inch with the frozen cream in the cold winter months. At other times of year, the bluetits and other birds would Peck through the foil and enjoy the cream.

The school day began in the playground. The whistle would be blown by a teacher and we all lined up in regimental fashion near the school wall and marched in for assembly where Mr Jack Mann accompanied our hymn singing on the piano.

I read in the Lakenheath School centenary poem that in between 1897 and 1900, nine dozen slates were purchased with slate pencils. The slates had a wooden surround to help prevent breakage. Maybe they were some of the same slates we had to write on until we progressed to ink pots and pens to dip for writing.

In 1949, there was a great invention, the ballpoint pen, or Biro as it was commonly known. I can remember my father sending an order by post for such a pen. It was maroon and quite fat, costing £5:00 a lot of money at that time. At first, cheques signed with the biro were not accepted. Before I left school, a few of the pupils were using biros.

There were scripture lessons, usually led by Mr. Dent, the headmaster, who was a lay reader in the church; in a period of interregnum at Saint Mary's, he conducted many of the services. He was also a bell ringer and brought method ringing to Lakenheath.

Mr. Dent and his wife lived in the schoolhouse attached to the school. He was a keen gardener and we had one of the best school gardens in West Suffolk, growing much of the veg for the cook house. Mr. Dent offered the gardening boys one shilling (5p) if they could find him a piece of couch grass root, 1 yard long (twitch locally). A good ploy to keep the garden clean. I cannot remember anyone receiving the shilling. Many of the shrubs, still near the front of the school, were planted by the boys at that time.

Both Mr. Dent and Mr. Mann were keen on sport and football fans. In the winter months the older boys marched down to the Nest football field in Wings Road for football practice and the same in summer for cricket. The school had a very strong football team in these years. We travelled around several Suffolk schools by coach to play against their teams. In 1947, it was recorded that over 200 spectators travelled by coach from Lakenheath to Bury St Edmunds to witness Lakenheath Lads, win the cup against Elmswell and I believe, a year or two later, they were runners up for the trophy. I know one boy who certainly had no wish to pass his 11 plus exams and lose the chance of playing football for Lakenheath school.

He did not pass and was a brilliantly fast centre forward and despite missing the opportunity of further education, did extremely well in his work and made quite a name for himself. When the girls played netball against Brandon, the outcome was not so good. They lost six goals to 14.

The older girls, I believe, had domestic science lessons and were taken by coach to Stanton School near Bury St Edmunds for cooking lessons, usually involving cabbage I'm told; they then had the pleasure of eating the meal which they had prepared.

In the late 1940's, a building was erected in the playground to be used for woodwork lessons for the older boys (these were known as HORSA buildings used to extend school capacity as school leaving age rose). The teacher for this subject changed a few times, but some good work was carried out with large pieces of furniture produced by some of the lads.

In the spring of 1952, the top class was treated with a trip to Windsor and we were disappointed at not seeing the Queen. I also remember trips to London Zoo, Kew Gardens, the Tower of London and the Crown jewels, with the trip along the Thames to Hampton Court Palace. On one of these visits we travelled by train.

The heating in school was in the form of an iron, cylindrical, coal burning stoves with a smoke pipe straight through the classroom ceiling. I can remember steaming youngsters standing by the stove to dry out after a fall in the wet playground. There was usually a large pile of coal in a corner of the playground. One lad, who would have been recognized as having a health issue today, would hurl coal lumps in every direction when he had 'one of those days'. Several of the pupils would have been labelled with certain conditions today, but we were all thrown in together and managed to survive and mostly found a place to fit in with society.

In 1944, the year before I started school, a wireless (radio) was purchased, bought with the proceeds of salvage collections throughout the year, giving us pupils at Lakenheath the opportunity to hear broadcasts for schools. I cannot remember how often we heard these broadcasts.

I have re-read the school centenary poem to jog my memory on dates and events. This poem was written by Mr. Wally Hebden, a very popular headmaster in the 1970's. In his time at Lakenheath, he managed to reform Lakenheath Silver Band (short of musicians again now). Sadly Wally did not live to be an old man, but I understand that his name will be preserved at the new school at Station Road. The last verse of his poem reads:

"And now at last, a silent prayer to the heaven way up high.

Together we ask of thee, O Lord, never to let our school die.

Please let the children sing with Glee and learn to play their part.

For while our village has our school, it will always have a heart."