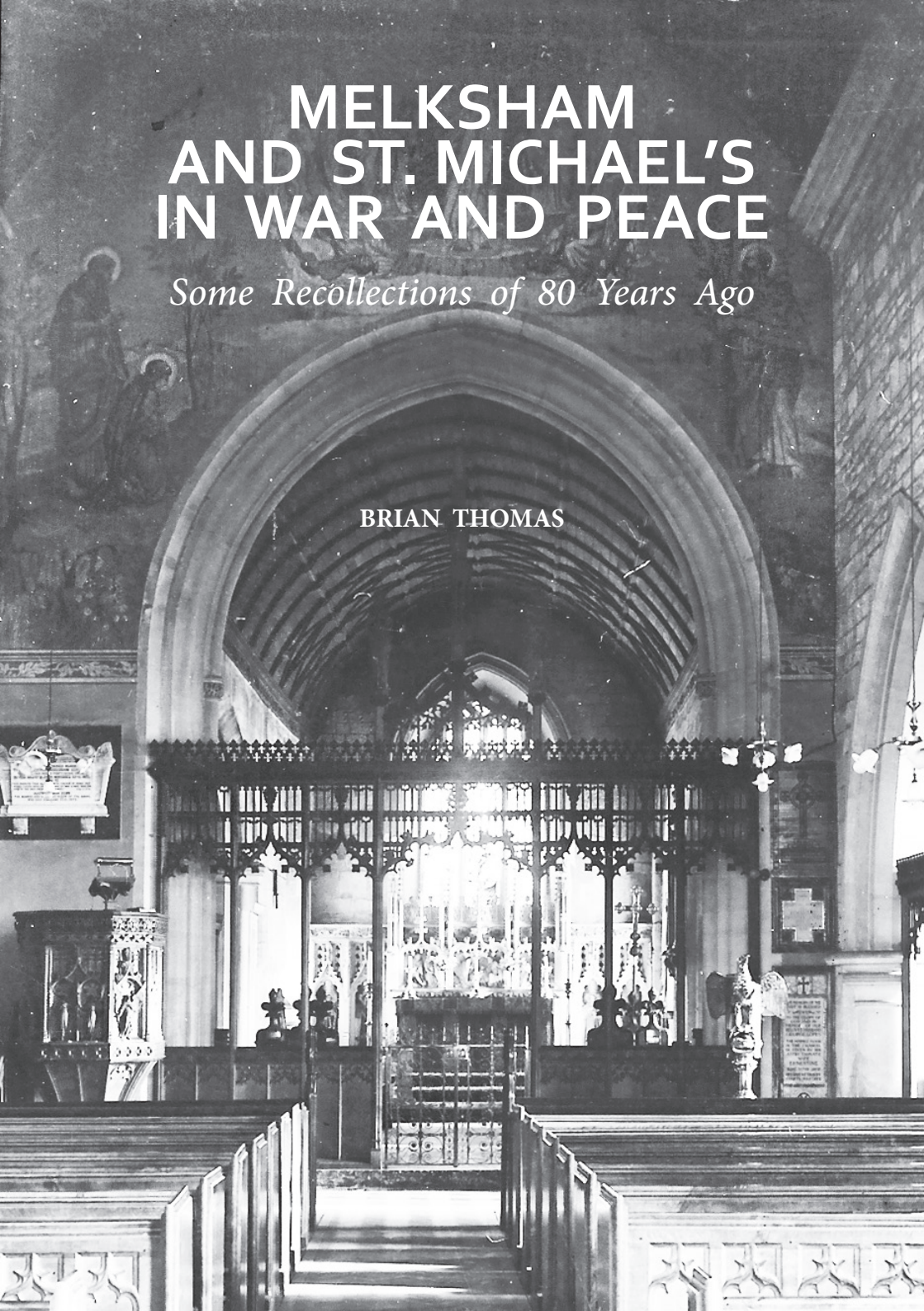


MELKSHAM AND ST. MICHAEL'S IN WAR AND PEACE

Some Recollections of 80 Years Ago

BRIAN THOMAS



ON THE COVERS:

Front - Interior of St. Michael's and All Angels
Church, Melksham, Wiltshire, England

Back - Melksham War Memorial, commemorating
those who served in WWI and WWII

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1

CHURCH AND CHOIR IN WORLD WAR II

Although we huddled under the stairs while Bath was burning, and two bombs fell near the railway line at Beanacre, St Michael's was spared. The Church then looked much as it does now, and apart from the wooden screen which muffled some of the choir's best efforts, it was popular with worshippers and clergy alike. Our wartime Bishop, the likeable Neville Lovett (widely known as the Sailors' Bishop¹), arrived in Salisbury in 1936, stayed for ten years and paid us frequent visits. Melksham, he once said in a sermon in 1944, was a place where people still went to church. As Bishop he was able and conscientious, but the Christian tone of both town and parish was set by our Vicar, Frank Harold Sangster, a man of rare calibre. His old black car, like his Homburg hat, was a

¹ Dr Neville Lovett was Bishop of Portsmouth before he came to Salisbury.



Standing in front of St. Michael's & All Angels Church, Melksham in 1935, are (from left) Rev. Charles F. Webster, BA - curate; John E. T. Phillips, MA - curate; Rev. Frank Harold Sangster, MA - vicar; Rev. P. M. Barry, MA - curate.



St Michael's Church Choir, 1944, on the day of the choir's first BBC broadcast. The photo was taken on the altar steps and faces west, showing both chancel and nave. Apart from the choristers, it features their Musical Director, Organist and Choirmaster, Jack Arlett (wearing glasses, conducting); and just visible on the extreme right is the Assistant Organist, Kenneth Long, from the Royal Air Force camp at Bowerhill, RAF Melksham.

familiar sight in the town. Everyone seemed to know its registration number (KME 97) and its owner was loved by all. His curates were popular too. Two subsequently became bishops, while a third, Cyril Witcomb, returned as Vicar at a later date. Tragically, a fourth, Amyas Shaw, went down with his ship.

Those of us who were privileged to sing in the choir (although we didn't always see it quite in that way) enjoyed a first class musical and theological training. Our organist and choirmaster, 'Jack' Arlett, who commuted, it seemed, almost daily from Trowbridge, was a talented musician and a firm (but fair) disciplinarian. "There are only two essentials in singing", he used to say, "breathing, and minding your own business." The choir

in 1942 numbered 27 boys and 13 men, but our ranks were frequently strengthened by some splendid singers from the RAF Camp in Bowerhill.² No girls were allowed to join. “They can’t breathe properly”, Arlett solemnly declared. Meticulous about diction himself, he did not, however, always get his way. Responding to one choirman’s notorious failure to aspirate correctly, which produced such gems as “H’unto h’us h’a Son h’is born”, Arlett’s exasperated reprimand, “There’s no ‘h’ in it, Mr Bushell!”, merely provoked the response, “H’is that so?”

Choir practice and rehearsals seemed relentless, but “pay day” did much to boost morale. Three shillings (15p) a quarter for each boy chorister went surprisingly far in those days, while weddings and funerals rated “double”. (The men went unpaid.) Mastery of Arlett’s repertoire could easily secure one a choral scholarship to Cambridge, but his musical tastes were not always those of the congregation. The BBC, however, approved and we broadcast twice - once in 1943 and on the occasion of our 1944 Harvest Festival. Both broadcasts went out on the BBC’s West of England Home Service, but it was decided additionally to commemorate the Harvest Festival on one of those heavy 78 rpm bakelite discs which had to be played on rather primitive gramophones. Among the choristers familiar Melksham surnames were much in evidence : Abrams, Adams, Barnes, Bushell, Chivers, Clark, Cooper, Davis, Elkins, Fricker, Gerrish, Giddings, Grabham, Greenman, Harbour, Helps, Legg, Maslen, Price, Slade, Snook, Stevens and Vincent are among some which readily spring to mind.

Few in the choir could forget the War, however hard we tried. To prevent people from stumbling in the “blackout”, *Evensong* in winter was switched from 6.30 to 3 p.m. The Verger, George Hill, who had a considerable sense of humour, once startled the congregation by shouting “Lighten Our Darkness!” when the lights failed suddenly during an air raid, while a quick-witted visiting prelate, interrupted towards the end of his sermon by the sound of air raid sirens, announced as the final hymn, “Foolish men, why will ye scatter, like a crowd of frightened sheep ?” Unsurprisingly, no one left for the air raid shelter on that occasion. Nonetheless the relentless bombing of Bath and Bristol by the *Luftwaffe* from mid-

² It was the RAF who provided St Michael’s Church with its Assistant Organist, Kenneth Long, whose radical musical tastes admirably complemented those of Mr Arlett.

September 1940 until well into 1941 caused us in Melksham considerable distress, which would have been greater but for the censorship imposed by the BBC.

No choral singing in German of some of Luther's splendid hymns was permitted after 1941, a ban which had rather mixed results. While "*Nun danket alle Gott*" became "Now thank we all our God" with little damage to its rhythm, "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" fared ill indeed. Most of the hymns we sang were the traditional favourites, but their lyrics were not always clear to the youngest. "No goblin nor foul fiend"³ was a



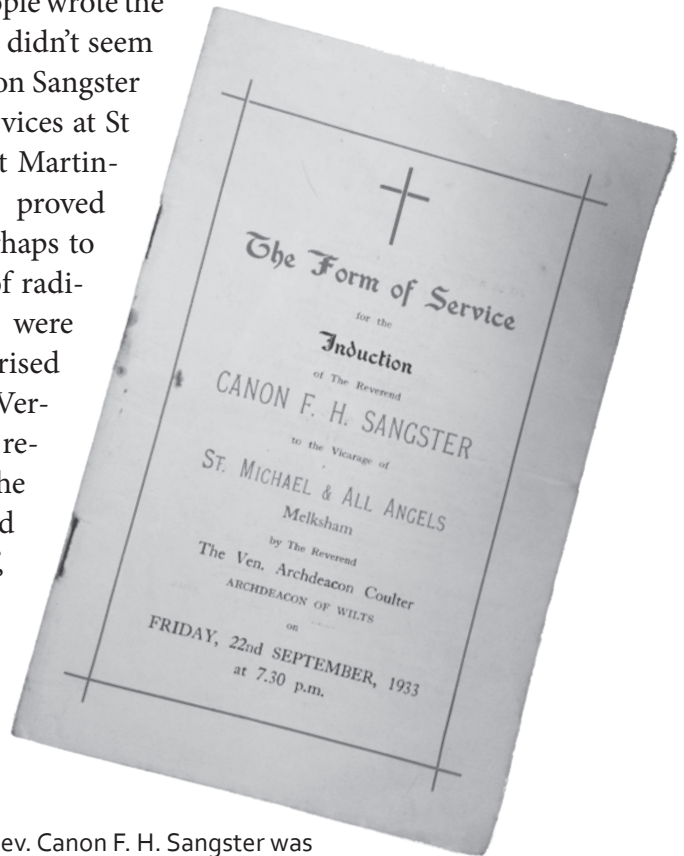
St. Michael's and All Angels Church in 1935

line which puzzled many, and for a time I readily accepted a Lowbourn School classmate's suggestion that "fiend" was a misprint for "friend" and sang accordingly. Anthems, mostly by Stanford and S.S.Wesley, together with parts of Handel's *Messiah* and Maunder's *Olivet to Calvary*, were also standard fare; and, by a superb coincidence, a firm favourite, *The Strife is O'er*, was chosen for what proved to be the last Sunday of the War.

Theologically, St Michael's in those days could be termed Liberal Prot-

3 From the third verse of John Bunyan's hymn, "Who would true valour see"... The relevant line reads: "No goblin nor foul fiend can daunt his spirit."

estant, and the men's Bible Class, which met in the small hall adjoining the Vicarage in Canon Square, felt free to debate Bishop Barnes's controversial *Rise of Christianity* without restraint. Published in 1947, the book sold well at W.H.Smith's, which stood at the corner of High Street and Church Street. There was nothing of the vacuous 'Alpha'-style fundamentalism which some congregations have to endure nowadays. Most of us knew, and if we didn't we were soon taught, that Matthew's birth stories had no real historical basis, that Luke was ten years out in his dating of Christ's birth, and that three people wrote the book of Isaiah, but that didn't seem to bother anyone.⁴ Canon Sangster aimed to model the services at St Michael's on those at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and this proved acceptable to most. Perhaps to meet any accusations of radicalism, Bible readings were always from the Authorised or the Revised (1885) Versions, and the prayers reflected this approach. The idea that God should be addressed as "you", rather than "thee", would have been unthinkable.



The Form of Service: The Rev. Canon F. H. Sangster was inducted to the vicarage on 22nd September, 1933.

4 Most Anglican clergy in those days used Peake's *Commentary on the Bible*, which struck a reasonable balance between the more fundamentalist commentaries and the radicalism of Canon Cheyne's *Encyclopædia Biblica*. Bishop Barnes's book was attacked for its radicalism within months of publication by Sir Frederic Kenyon in his *The Bible and Modern Scholarship* (1948).



United Dairies was formed in 1917 when Wiltshire United Dairies, Metropolitan and Great Western Dairies, and the Dairy Supply Company merged to consolidate resources during WWI. By the early 1950s, United Dairies had become the UK's largest dairy products company. In 1959, it merged with Cow & Gate to form Unigate. The dairying side of Unigate's business was sold in 2000 to Dairy Crest.



2

INTERLUDE MELKSHAM: ITS NAME AND DIALECT

Local literature, travel books and tourist guides have long associated the name ‘Melksham’ with ‘milk’¹. Because, historically, milk has played such a prominent role in West Wiltshire’s economy “Melksham” = “milk town” seemed a reasonable equation, especially when placed beside the word for “milk” in three related languages: *melok* in Old Frisian, *meolc* in Old English and *melk* in Dutch. But in philology things are rarely what they seem. The *ham* in Melksham, meaning “a small but inhabited settlement”, as in *hamlet* and its better known derivative *home*, presents no problem. The trouble comes with the letter ‘s’. If the town’s name were *Melkham* instead of Melksham, “milk town” would be a justified inference. The name ‘Swindon’, for example, rightly denotes the importance of swine in that town’s early economy, but the name is Swindon, not ‘Swinsdon’. Swine are the producers, not the product, but in the case of Melksham milk is the product, not the producer.

To get round this difficulty one expert in the old Anglo-Saxon and Celtic languages believes that the name is derived from the Frisian *milac*

1 Frank R. Heath and R.L.P. Jowitt in their *Guide to Wiltshire* (7th edn, 1949) suggest that the name Melksham is derived from the Old English *meolc* (milk) and *ham* (farm or homestead), whereas Martyn Whittock in his *Wiltshire Place-Names, Their Origins and Meanings* (1997) refers back to the Saxon *meolchamm*, “land in the bend of a river where milk is produced.” (p.97). In the Domesday Book of 1086 Melksham appears as *Melchesham*, but the 1229 spelling, *Milkesham*, is perhaps more telling.... Out on a limb is Tony Thomas in his *Outlines of Indo-European Grammar*, where he argues for the Frisian alternative of *milac* or *miliac*.

or *miliac*, meaning “a small inhabited parcel of land” (*ac* or *iac*, as in ‘acre’) which many years ago enclosed a water mill. Perhaps needless to add, the jury is still out on this one.

It is also out on the vexed question of whether there is such a thing as a Melksham accent, one, that is, which can readily be distinguished from the speech of a native of Trowbridge or Chippenham. Population movements in Melksham over the past half century would seem to make this impossible to determine. A Wiltshire accent, as opposed to one possessed by the natives of Somerset or Gloucestershire, may be easier to identify, but there are difficulties even here. A heavily accented ‘r’ is no clue at all, nor the dropping of aspirates.² A tendency to add unnecessary words or contractions, e.g. “you d’know” instead of “you know”, is a feature of Melksham speech long commented on, but there are others.³ Clearly one’s accent is influenced in early years by one’s parents, teachers and school-mates, and when Melksham began to experience the mass unemployment of the 1930s the pressure on schoolchildren to “talk proper” in order to get a good job was bound to be considerable. Unfortunately, except in its World Service broadcasts, today’s BBC no longer sets the standard it once did, a change ruefully remarked upon by our overseas visitors.⁴

2 If it were, then J.H.Thomas, the railwayman who became Lord Privy Seal in Ramsay Macdonald’s 1929 Labour Government, would surely qualify. Complaining one day to Lord Birkenhead that he “ ‘ad one ‘ell of an ‘eadache”, Birkenhead merely advised him to “take a couple of aspirates”.

3 A well-loved butcher in Melksham’s High Street, Arthur Poulson, kept his wartime queues in stitches with the playful way he dealt with their accents. The brogue of one of his regular customers was beyond anything known to man, let alone Wiltshire, which Mr Poulson invariably countered with a reply in an impeccable BBC/Oxford accent. Her “Now you d’know what I do want, dunnee ?” was met with, “I think I have a fair recollection, Madam.” It looks tame in print, but it brought the house down at the time. Fortunately, the lady in question always took it in good part: “I d’never mind what you d’say to I, as long as I get me scraggs!”

4 Among the many wartime newsreaders whose example today’s BBC might do well to follow were Bruce Belfrage, Stuart Hibberd, Alvar Lidell, Joseph Macleod, Frank Phillips and John Snagge. The “estuary English” which disfigures much of the BBC’s current speech is particularly off-putting. Fortunately Sir Trevor McDonald and Moira Stuart and, more recently, Mishal Husain have done their best to reverse this trend.

3

MELKSHAM'S POLITICS IN THE 1940S

The political slant of the sermons at St Michael's was somewhat to the right of the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, a man of strong socialist persuasions, but well clear of Canterbury's "Red Dean", Dr Hewlett Johnson. A popular guest on one occasion was the Methodist leader and Christian socialist Dr Donald Soper, who disarmed the congregation with "You can't expect too much of the clergy. They've only the laity to draw on." As the 1945 Election approached there was a slight stir in the pews when the Fabian Dr Alfred Schofield (of Place Road) preached one Sunday on the merits of public ownership, but otherwise party politics was wisely left to the politicians. Melksham was in the Westbury constituency in those days, and our Conservative MP, 'Bob' Grimston, had a rough time during the lively election campaign. "You're up against the workers this time, Bobbie!" was a shout often heard at his open air meetings, but he retained his seat nonetheless, albeit by the slim margin of 931 votes. His Labour challenger, George Ward, a bluff, down-to-earth signalman, had fought the same seat in 1929, and until recently one of Melksham's secondary schools bore his name. The Liberal campaign was muted, but Melksham's small Communist Party



George Ward

was disproportionately active. Ken Gill, a gifted cartoonist and the local Party's most prominent member (he attended Chippenham Grammar School with the present writer all through the War) later became President of the TUC,¹ and during the strikes of the 1980s his was the only genuine Melksham accent to be regularly heard on television.² The local government elections proved more promising for Labour, and in 1946 Melksham Urban District Council had a Labour majority for the first time, which attracted favourable comment in the *Daily Herald*.

1 Trades Union Congress

2 Ken Gill died on 23rd May 2009. For an obituary which lays stress on his local associations, see Brian Thomas, *Red Ken is Dead*, in the *Melksham Independent News* of 11th June 2009, a version of which appears in the Appendix.

4

THE TOWN AND ITS PEOPLE

Melksham's population, well under 4,000 in 1931, more than doubled during the War.¹ Apart from the RAF and other servicemen (who included many from Poland) there were a fair number of child evacuees, nearly all from London. Relatively few were churchgoers, and at Lowbourne School some of us had Jewish classmates for the very first time.

The *blitz* proper, which began on September 12th 1940 with the heavy bombing of London, Bath, Bristol, Southampton, Portsmouth and Liverpool, affected Melksham less than had been feared.² The number of evacuees meant that our Lowbourne School classrooms had to be



The new Melksham Baptist Church on Broughton Road opened in 1909.

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- 1 With a population then estimated at 5,896, Melksham was a thriving town as early as 1840. It was in that same year that pre-GWR Swindon, with a mere 1,198 inhabitants, was classified as a village.
 - 2 We carried gas masks, slung over our shoulders, to and from Lowbourne School until the end of 1941. As for the bombing itself, although Bath and Bristol suffered badly, Salisbury, like Melksham, emerged virtually unscathed. It is probable that Salisbury's 404 ft spire served as a useful marker for the *Luftwaffe* returning from raids on Coventry and Liverpool, but rumour had it that Hitler intended to marry his long term *confidante*, Eva Braun, in Salisbury Cathedral at the end of the War, and that *Luftwaffe* pilots were instructed accordingly!

shared with pupils from West Kensington Central School in London. As a result some of our afternoon lessons were held in the Baptist Church Hall at the end of Old Broughton Road, but a longer walk to school (for some) was the only real discomfort. West Kensington's translation to a rural environment produced surprisingly few problems. On the one occasion when Lowbourn's Senior Master, 'Ted' Mapson, was threatened in the playground with a penknife he dealt with both incident and perpetrator with his usual aplomb.



St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s

Built just in time to escape the *blitz* was St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church. Erected late in 1939 between what was then Kimber Street³ and West End (and still looking rather out of place with its pale, modern brickwork), its friendly incumbent offered useful tutorials in Classical Greek for those who sought admission to Oxford and Cambridge.

As for the town itself, greengrocers and confectioners seemed to do well throughout the War, despite (or perhaps because of) price controls, rationing and shortages, but others felt the pinch. There was little or no unemployment, which meant that some of the Welsh coal miners who came to Melksham in the 1930s to escape the slump found they could afford good quality meat for the first time in their lives. Price controls meant that both wages and prices, including rents, were fixed "for the duration".

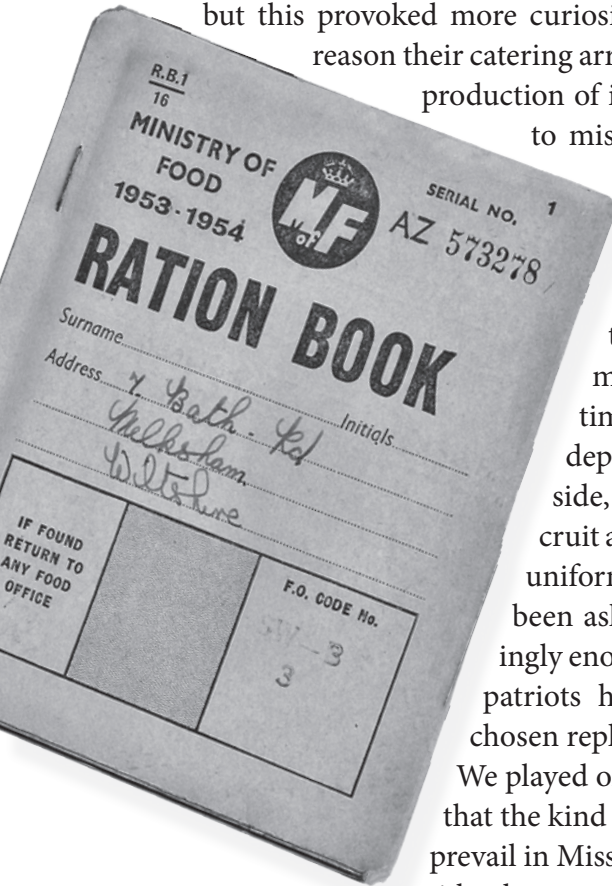
No church bells were rung after June 1940. The familiar chimes of St. Michael's would be heard again, we were told, only in the event of a German invasion or an Allied victory.

An invasion of a different kind occurred early in 1944, when a number of American GIs from Mississippi arrived in the town. Sent here to pre-

³ Named after a prominent Melksham surveyor, one Oliver Kimber. The Catholic Church is dedicated, unusually, to St Anthony of Padua, and between it and Kenilworth Gardens lies the track of the old Bristol & Avon Canal. The dismantling of Kimber Street's iron railings, a contribution to the war effort, altered the appearance of that street very considerably.

pare for D-day, they helped eke out the local rations with generous gifts of “spam”, chewing gum, chocolate, *Lucky Strike* cigarettes, *Tarzan* and *Superman* comics and - for the ladies - nylon stockings. Popular in the town, they were paid considerably more than their British counterparts, but this provoked more curiosity than resentment.⁴ For some reason their catering arrangements did not extend to the production of ice cream, and this they seemed

to miss more than anything. In their free time they taught us baseball on King George’s Playing Field on Sunday afternoons, where American and British teams played regularly for some months, but difficulties sometimes arose. Aware one Sunday of depleted numbers on the American side, the present writer sought to recruit additional GIs from among some uniformed onlookers who had not been asked to play. They accepted willingly enough, only to find that their compatriots had suddenly disappeared. The chosen replacements happened to be black. We played on just the same, but it taught me that the kind of Christianity which seemed to prevail in Mississippi didn’t always correspond with what we were taught at St Michael’s.



4 The locals found the American accent fascinating, partly because of Roosevelt’s insistence that U.S exports under Lend-Lease should include a quantity of Hollywood ‘B’ films. As a result hitherto unknown American “stars” (Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Dorothy Lamour) rapidly became household names, in Melksham as elsewhere. American jazz and “swing” bands (Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman) began to be heard on BBC radio, and for a time they supplanted Henry Hall, Joe Loss and Geraldo in the affections of the young, which is why we found the news that Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and our other heroes were unable to find hotel rooms in Washington because of their colour quite inexplicable. Hollywood also gave us the false impression that poverty in USA had been abolished and that every American worker had least two limousines apiece, “with teeth”(!).

There were many more shops in the town than there are now. In King Street alone there were no fewer than three confectioners, each competing for the younger generation's pocket money. Ida Jarvis's, E.N. Holloway's and Bewley's seemed to have no difficulty in making a living, despite having to cope with 'ration books', 'coupons', 'points' and the like.⁵ Bordering Market Place and King Street⁶ was a scrap metal merchant, W.T. Richards, and in the square itself we had the International Stores, a second greengrocer, E.A.J. ('Ted') Dicks, and a fishmonger, Benjamin Arter. Almost next door to Arter's, with an eye-catching window displaying pre-war Hornby "train sets", was Cleverly's, where children's bicycles could still be bought for £2.19s.6d (£3), while, a few doors down, J.F.P Kennelly (later Pocock's) supplied the electrical needs of the rest of the town.

But this profusion hardly compares with 1850, when, apparently, Melksham boasted no fewer than 14 shoemakers, 13 grocers, 7 drapers, 6 butchers, 5 bakers, 5 tailors and two makers of straw hats!



5 No one ever discovered how we were meant to respond to the mysterious coupon which the Ministry of Food inserted in our daily newspapers early in 1942. The caption read "Write nothing in this space until you are told." We never were.

6 An unusual feature of Market Place was its drinking water pump, well used by thirsty cyclists and others until its removal in 1947. Tuesdays saw the square covered in straw for the weekly cattle market, but unfortunately the fair which accompanied the market was closed in 1910 by Act of Parliament, on the grounds that it brought "too many undesirables into the Town."

Close to the Post Office in the High Street was a high class grocer, Mr Gowing, the aroma of whose freshly ground coffee was a welcome feature of that part of the town. His customers were obliged to sit on high stools while their coffee was being ground, but provided the younger ones refrained from kicking the legs of those stools he could sometimes be persuaded to dispense a packet of strawberry, raspberry or greengage jelly, a wartime treat indeed.



The Post Office when it was located on High Street across from Church Street

The “G.P.O.”⁷ as it then was, was not only a major employer of local labour, it was also a prime source of Christmas money for the young. Students aged 15 or 16 would be taken on some three weeks before Christmas and asked to choose between “sorting” and “deliveries”. “Sorting” meant indoor work in the warm, but it was not nearly so well paid as “deliveries”. While the latter meant delivering letters and packets on foot in “all winds and weathers”, it meant doing so on Sundays and Christmas Day as well as ordinary weekdays, and it

was on Christmas Day, unsurprisingly, that the public tended to be most lavish with their tips. Rarely did youngsters on “deliveries” take home less than £20 for their three weeks’ work, a small fortune in those days.⁸

7 General Post Office

8 All the houses in the long and badly lit Semington Road, for example, with their ground level letterboxes, had to be visited on foot as far as the canal bridge. It was an offence to leave even the smallest item of mail undelivered, but the memory of the average postman is phenomenal. Peering into his sack late one night at the end of his round, the present writer discovered a small and rather soggy postcard. “Which house?” demanded a rather irate postmaster. The answer was something like “491 Semington Road”. “Lucky for you !”, came the reply, “there’s no letter box there”.

For many years a familiar figure behind the GPO counter in the High Street was the delightfully named Violet Paradise, ‘Vi’, to her many friends. After 45 years with the GPO she finally retired in 1982. (She died, aged 90, at her Addison Road home on 10 June 2012.)

Further down still, in Bank Street, the Roberts brothers had a butcher's establishment which rivalled Poulson's. By contrast, nearby Church Street in the 1920s was largely residential, with no fewer than 70 families recorded as living there. But by the end of the decade the "Co-op" had moved in. Run by the Trowbridge branch of the Cooperative Wholesale Society, it was one of the biggest shops in Church Street, but its main attraction for most of its customers was the "divvi", as it was popularly known. While the dividend paid out on groceries was comparatively modest, for items such as coal it could be quite substantial. Almost everyone had a coal fire in those days, gas fired central heating being virtually unknown.⁹

Celebrating 50 years in business, the Co-op issued commemorative mugs (on loan to The Well House Collection by Melksham & District Historical Association).



But the "Co-op" was not the oldest shop in Church Street. That honour belongs to the corn and seed merchants, T.A. Kelson (later R. J. Edmunds & Co.), whose first customers in 1889 missed seeing Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations by only two years.

Signs that the War marked the end of the 1930's slump came in the form of a modest housing boom. New houses had begun to go up along the south-western edge of the town (Addison Road, Roundponds), matched by an equally modest expansion at its southern end (Warwick Crescent, The Close, and Kenilworth, Woodstock and Waverley Gardens). This was closely followed by the aptly named 'Coronation Road', built in 1937. Taylor Woodrow were the architects here; nearly all the houses were semi-detached, and all (save Coronation Road itself) were built in the suburban

⁹ One attraction for the young in the "Co-op" was that the money handed over at the counter went into a small pot which was promptly whisked away on overhead wires to the cashier at the far end of the shop, who then "whisked" the change back again. Splendid entertainment that was, as there was always the faint possibility of a collision at the junction where the different wires met!



New homes were built in Warwick Crescent and Kenilworth Gardens were part of a modest housing boom

style praised by John Betjeman in his film *Metroland*.¹⁰ Brick laden lorries began to trundle down the streets, including some belonging to one local builder who featured some rather puzzling non-sequiturs in his advertising!¹¹

A 'straw poll' taken half way through the War suggested that, apart from confectionery, bananas and the annual November fire-works were the items most missed



10 Despite being named in one brochure 'the Wonder Houses', thus inviting the derisive comment of at least one resident, "It's a wonder they don't fall down!", they were in fact quite substantial, and although designed for coal fires each was built in the quasi-art-deco style popular at the time.

11 E.g. "Thackeray gave us Vanity Fair. Let Carter Bros build your house." was one rather surprising example.

by the young. Many foods remained “on the ration” until the mid 1950s, but with the exception of Lord Beaverbrook’s *Express* newspapers the press was largely supportive.¹² Most newspapers, including those from the Camrose, Rothermere and Kemsley stables (the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Sketch*), were strongly patriotic. So also were the pro-Labour *Sunday People* and the *Daily Mirror*. The *Mirror* had been the Armed Forces’ favourite newspaper throughout the War and remained so for some years thereafter.



Flooding of the River Avon in 1935 before the weir was built near the Avon factory

12 Inevitably, Ministers of Food such as Lord Woolton, Sir Ben Smith and John Strachey were the butt of many a joke. One newspaper headline, possibly apocryphal, read: “Strachey to be pressed for more whisky?”... *The Times*, usually considered the organ of ‘the Establishment’, was surprisingly left-wing during the War. The influence of its pro-Soviet Foreign Editor, Professor E.H.Carr, and his Moscow Correspondent, Ralph Parker, was never fully appreciated, and in Melksham sales of *The Times* and *Daily Worker* in both Smith’s and Riddick’s (opposite Church Walk at its junction with Union Street) rose considerably, partly owing to the successes of the Red Army on the Eastern Front. (The fact that the Stalin Constitution of 1936 “guaranteed” full employment and gave all Soviet citizens a “free national health service” was widely publicised in the left-wing press, but I doubt if that influenced the author of the Beveridge Report of 1942. Sir William Beveridge was a prominent Liberal and wholly opposed to communism.)

Partly owing to the floods of 1935 and 1936, the River Avon at Melksham was badly affected by drainage problems, made worse by wartime neglect. But by the end of 1945 it had been transformed. Italian prisoners-of-war had been hard at it all through the War and their cheerful thoroughness and dedication had made all the difference.¹³ Nevertheless it was not until the 1960s that the river was finally straightened, and its former course filled in, to provide a much needed extension to the rubber works.¹⁴

The severe winter of 1946-1947 saw bread and potato rationing imposed for the first time since World War I, and this added to the general distress. Although the cold weather did not begin until the last two weeks of January, temperatures reached an all time low from then until the middle of March. Mechanical diggers were rare in those days, which meant that much of Britain's coal remained frozen in the ground.¹⁵

Although Britain had no National Health Service until 1948, the town was reasonably well served with doctors. Five (Drs Berry, Seton Campbell, Clarke, Ivan Keir and David Leigh Spence) served the main town; there was a brand new hospital in Spa Road and a Cottage Hospital in Bank Street.



Newly built Melksham Hospital on Spa Road in the 1950s

13 Italian prisoners-of-war over here rarely encountered the hostility which the Germans had to contend with. The attitude of Ernest Bevin, the Somerset-born lorry driver who became Britain's Foreign Secretary in 1945, was typical. "I tries 'ard, Brian", he confessed to Sir Brian Robertson, the Allied Control Commission's Military Governor for Germany, "but I 'ates 'em."

14 A rise in the level of the River Avon was partly responsible for the almost annual flooding of the streets near the town bridge. In 1926 the King's Arms Hotel was forced to run a special coach to collect its guests from the railway station, while a 45-minute cloudburst in May 1935 caused the Melksham-Holt bus to be stranded all night in Broughton Gifford.

15 Some tried to blame the cold weather on the government. Fuel Minister Emmanuel Shinwell was a favourite target. Declared Lord Winster: "We are suffering not from an act of God but the inactivity of Emmanuel"... But despite this Shinwell's takeover of the coal mines aroused little hostility when it finally became law in 1947, perhaps because people recalled Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's pre-war comment: "I thought the miners' leaders the most stupid people on earth, until I met their employers."



Possibly because the war-time beer was not up to standard, but also because the evening “blackout” curtailed many social activities, indoor entertainment became the norm. Apart from the radio (and in those days not everyone possessed a “wireless set”), entertainment for the townsfolk centred on the cinema in the High Street. Then called the *Picture Hall* (later rebranded as



Prior to the Picture Hall opening in 1912, there was a home occupied by three spinster sisters, Frances, Eleanor and Edith Flocks, called The Lindens, noted for the trees planted in front (top). To make way for the cinema, the house was demolished, and the sisters moved to Place Road. Showing at the cinema in 1918 when the second from top photo was taken, “The Voice on the Wire” was an action film serial directed by Stuart Paton and starring John Shirley, as Ben Wilson, and Polly Marion, as Neva Gerber. During World War II the cinema was taken over by the Cardiff-based Cornell Cinemas chain, operated by Max Corne, and around 1946, it was renamed Maxime Cinema, until it was closed in March 1964. The area was turned into shops and became known as Avon Place, or “The Precinct”, seen in the bottom photo taken in 1971.



the *Maxime*), it was popular with adults and had a weekly matinée for the children. Opened as early as 1912, it could seat up to 550 and its ornate Edwardian-style foyer boasted a Greek statue as well as old armour and firearms. Although never luxurious when compared with the *Gaumont* and *Regal* cinemas in Trowbridge or the *Gaumont* and *Astoria* in Chippenham, seats in Melksham's *Picture Hall* were not always easy to come by. Serials such as *The Phantom Rider* (featuring Buck Jones), *Jungle Jim* and *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* (with Larry Buster Crabbe) were on offer for the children, while full length films included *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland) (1938), Shakespeare's *Henry V* (with Laurence Olivier) (1944), the Crown Film Unit's *Western Approaches* (1944), and *A Matter of Life and Death* (starring David Niven and Kim Hunter) (1946). The Saturday matinée was particularly crowded, even with seats priced as high as threepence, fourpence and sixpence in those pre-decimal days. The notion, incidentally, that children were better behaved in that era should be treated with caution. The mild discipline of the cinema manageress, Mrs Higgins, sometimes failed and the harsher regime of her husband had to be substituted.

Apart from the RAF Camp in Bowerhill there was another in the nearby village of Steeple Ashton for displaced Poles, many of whom had fought with the RAF and some of whose beautifully kept graves can still be seen in the cemetery at St. Michael's. The Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland and the absorption of the whole country into what later became the Warsaw Pact caused much bitterness locally.¹⁶

Aerial of RAF Melksham,
December 1945



GOOGLE EARTH

¹⁶ The present writer experienced this at first hand when on September 8th 1955 he addressed a lively meeting of the Steeple Ashton Poles following the publication on August 20th of his *Wiltshire Times* article *A Wiltshireman in Warsaw*. His attempted defence of the Yalta Joint Communiqué on Poland in *The Times* (London) on October 26th 1956 and, again *The Times*, on April 4th 1984, proved equally controversial.



In 1829 a British School was opened as The Melksham General School for the Education of Poor Children. Unusually it was run jointly by Anglicans and non-conformists. Known as Lowbourn School from 1871, it was taken over by Wiltshire County Council in 1909 and a new school in red brick was built adjacent to the old school. The photo above shows the celebration at laying the foundation in 1909.

A report card from the mid 1940s



Opened as a National school in 1840, St Michael's School occupied various buildings, including part of the tithe barn. The photo above was taken in 2014.

5

MELKSHAM'S SCHOOLS

Then, as now, there were a number of private schools in the town. One was Miss Willcox's in Canon Square, while a second, run by Miss Edith Smith in King Street, was reputed to charge as little as two shillings (10p) a week for tuition, and was popular with those parents who were reluctant to see their children mix with the "great unwashed". But most of the town's offspring attended the two schools run by Wiltshire County Council, at that time the Local Education Authority. One, almost adjacent to the Parish Church, was St Michael's School. Small, traditional and church-oriented, St Michael's and its Headmaster, Mr Saunders, boasted a good academic record and the school was justly popular for that reason alone.

Further from the Church and town centre was the larger, red brick, more modern and wholly secular Lowbourn School (motto, *Vincit Veritas*), which included a somewhat dilapidated stone annexe for the infants. But there was nothing remotely dilapidated about the infants' headmistress, the redoubtable Miss Buckland, whose eagle eye missed nothing. It was Miss Buckland who in December 1936 had the delicate task of explaining to her small charges (who included the present writer) the mysteries of King Edward VIII's abdication and the unex-



Miss Buckland

pected accession of his brother.¹ She did so tactfully and skilfully, pointing out that if Edward had no real wish to be king he was hardly likely to prove a success.²

The cost of that abdication locally fell entirely on the Town Council, for every banner, flag and scrap of bunting bearing the legend 'ER VIII' had to be replaced within weeks by new ones showing 'GR VI'. Fortunately the date of Coronation Day (Wednesday, May 12th 1937) remained un-



Melksham Coronation Silver Band 1938

First row (L to R) E Foot, Hitchens, W Chivers, A Hillier, Band Master J Davies, Major CW Maggs, P Hughes, A Whittock, E Whittock, B Chalk

Second row (L to R) A Boulter, A Howell, L Farmer, C Simmons, W Gunstone, T Alford, W Oshan, H Williams, V Barton, F Bateman

Third row (L to R) J Butler, Noyes, G Leeves, A Robbins, J Rossiter, I Rowe, J Nash, A Bull, E Wootten

1 The playground altercation which followed Miss Buckland's recital proved fortunate. My mistaken belief, stridently expressed, that the next monarch would be styled 'Albert the First' led to a short bout of fisticuffs with one Reggie Mallard, who had a "wireless set" at home and was thus fully aware that the new King would be known as 'George the Sixth'. It was halted almost immediately by Miss Buckland, who insisted that the "cease-fire" should be marked by an exchange of gifts. Young Mallard readily accepted the proffered bar of nougat, offering in lieu a dog-eared set of Carreras cigarette cards featuring the Kings and Queens of England in chronological order, a gift which stood the present writer in good stead for many a year.

2 It is Miss Buckland's on-the-spot judgement which has stood the test of time. See Robert Rhodes James *A Spirit Undaunted: the Political Role of George VI* (1998), pp 112-115, and John Barnes & David Nicolson (ed) *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries 1929-1945* (1988), p 434.

altered, much to the relief of the newly formed ‘Melksham Coronation Silver Band’, whose leader, Ken Davis, had been rehearsing for that event for some considerable time.³ On the day itself all went well. Under grey skies children from the nearby schools donned red, white and blue uniforms (made out of crêpe paper!) and marched up and down the High Street to general applause.

The red brick Junior School which adjoined that of the infants was attended by some 120 children aged 7 to 11. It was supervised directly by Lowbourn’s Headmaster, Mr F. J. H. Watkins, a local entomologist of some repute. Popularly known as ‘Gaffer’ Watkins, he and his two deputies, ‘Ted’ Mapson and Mrs Mansfield, had charge of the boys and girls respectively and were supported by a staff of three. There were two pupils to each classroom desk and the teaching was fairly formal, with written reports on every subject sent twice a year to the parents.⁴

Each class contained some 40 pupils, who were then divided into the traditional four ‘houses’: ‘Drake’- blue, ‘Gordon’- green, ‘Havelock’- red, and ‘Wolfe’- yellow.

Boys who misbehaved or who arrived late were caned on the palms of their hands by the men teachers,⁵ but no other physical punishment seemed to be on offer. In the year before most pupils chose to leave (in the two senior classes designated 2a and 2b) the approaching “scholarship exam” (in effect the ‘11+’) caused a few parents some trepidation, but it differed hardly at all from other written tests and most who chose to sit for it took it in their stride.⁶

3 The band numbered 26 at full strength and performed regularly throughout the six years of war.

4 Both then and since I thought the most effective teachers at Lowbourn were the Misses V.P. Johnson and F.W.Wright. My First Year English teachers at Chippenham Grammar School in 1940 were amazed at the amount of English grammar we had been taught, apparently successfully, at Lowbourn.

5 “I keep my stick for the late customers”, was Mapson’s invariable prelude to the award of “three on each hand”.

6 I was delighted beyond measure by the first question: “What is the fifth letter of the alphabet ? The alphabet is printed here to *help* you.”



Melksham Lowbourn School Speech Day, 27 July, 1939

Top photo: some of the assembled scholars listening to Mr F. J. H. Watkins, headmaster, who was retiring after 40 years on the staff of the school, giving his last school report.



Left: Lieut.-Col. W. F. Fuller, D. S. O., handing the Headmaster's prize to Barbara Gardner.

Above, right: a present of flowers to celebrate her goth birthday is given to Miss Caroline Stratton, a member of the School Board management for many years.

A “snapshot” of the School’s 13th Annual Speech Day, July 27th 1939, which was held on a pleasant summer afternoon some six weeks before the outbreak of war, conveys something of its ethos and atmosphere.⁷ After a few choral items (by Wesley, Handel and Purcell) sung by the children, came the speech and prizegiving itself. Lieut. Colonel Sir Reginald Blake did the honours on that occasion, and the ceremony ended with the National Anthem. Familiar Melksham surnames dotted the list of awards,⁸ with Kenneth Gaisford in the lead with the Headmaster’s Prize.

7 The names of the prizewinners, donors and other details are taken from a copy of the School’s 1939 Speech Day programme in the writer’s possession.

8 Adams, Barnes, Coward, Cox, Davis, Dolman, Gaisford, Gay, Gregory, Gullis, Guy, Hale, Hannaford, Humphries, Hunt, Jones, Keen, Kirkland, Lamb, Legg, Little, Merrett, Potheary, Price, Price-Wootten, Rogers, Rose, Tate, Tayler, Thomas, Tiley, Toy, Wareham, White (The Merrett listed here is Kenneth W. Merrett, who afterwards became the town’s leading historian. In 1989 he compiled *Around Melksham in Old Photographs* for the Melksham & District Historical Association, and the Association’s Ken Merrett Memorial Lecture is held annually in his honour.)

Not all the awards were for academic achievement; some simply denoted “Industry and Progress”, while others were for needlecraft, gardening (Ken Gaisford again!) and domestic science. Leading local entrepreneurs and other celebrities donated the prizes, the names Bigwood, Hurn, Long, Maggs, Methuen, Stratton, Swanborough and Usher being prominent among those mentioned.



St Michael's School headmaster and pupils assemble to Dig for Victory in April, 1940.

Most pupils left school at 14, but a minority who had “passed the 11+” and “got a scholarship” were decanted on to one of three local grammar schools: Trowbridge High, Bradford Fitzmaurice and Chippenham, or, in the case of one or two, the Victoria Commercial School in Trowbridge.

Of those who “passed”, Trowbridge High School in the town's Gloucester Road took more pupils from Melksham than either Chippenham Grammar or Bradford Fitzmaurice; it was nearer, and those who attended had free season tickets which enabled them to go to and fro by train.⁹

Chippenham Grammar School, by contrast, was “co-educational”, a rarity in that part of Wiltshire, and the Lowbourn and St Michael's pupils who won places there “scored” in other respects. One of Churchill's “stars” (his own phrase) was his Chief of Air Staff, Sir Charles Portal, who

⁹ I am indebted to another historian, the late Miss Evie Fouracres, for this information. Her illustrated pamphlet, *My Melksham Memories*, published in 2002, gives a vivid picture of life in Melksham between the two World Wars.

lent his lovely 48-acre estate in Hardenhuish Park to the school. His old manor house was swiftly christened “The House” and used as a classroom annexe, while the rest of his estate became the school’s playing fields. “The House” was some fifty yards from the school’s main buildings in Chippenham’s Malmesbury Road, but these were brand new, completed only weeks before the outbreak of war. Anxious to boost the local building industry as Britain emerged from the slump, Wiltshire County Council made the new school a showpiece, giving it a sprung wood block floor in its gymnasium and (for those days) superbly equipped physics, chemistry and biology laboratories.

A third stroke of luck was equally unforeseen. As with many other schools in 1940, no sooner had war broken out than well over half the male teaching staff found themselves in the Armed Forces. But this had its compensations, for some of the replacements were semi-retired university teachers, two of whom happened to be outstanding academics in their own field. As a result Advanced Mathematics, Astrophysics, Calculus, Classical Greek, German and Hebrew were on offer in the school’s Sixth Form curriculum for the very first time.¹⁰

But for the majority of Melksham’s school leavers things were very different. Girls found clerical and other employment in local shops and offices, many replacing men who had been called up, but most of the unskilled boys went into “the Rubber”, as it was known. For many years the



In October 1941 Queen Mary visited the Melksham factory, where close to 2,500 men and women are employed at the time. She was presented with a bouquet of chrysanthemums.

¹⁰ Dr Boobyer’s opening words to his 6th Form classicists were characteristically terse, although delivered with a wan smile. “It’s Virgil’s *Aeneid* this term. Book VI... It’s a detailed description of hell, so you may as well get to know your way around.”

Avon India Rubber Co. near the Town Bridge had established itself as Melksham's leading employer. Its reputation was mixed, and despite the existence of a "Works Council" trade unions took some time to make an impact on management. For skilled and semi-skilled engineers, however, Spencer Moulton in Beanacre Road offered work (and apprenticeships) making shell cases until the war ended.

Melksham Urban District Council, as it then was, took on a few youngsters in its somewhat cramped premises inside the Town Hall,¹¹ as did Wiltshire County Council in its rather more impressive County Hall building in Bythesea Road, Trowbridge; but by and large office work was hard to come by. The jobs of many in the Armed Forces were reserved for them until the War ended, and this restricted the number of vacancies on offer. One or two of us who had more than a month to wait before our military service were taken on at County Hall as temporary junior clerks at £2.1s.4d [£2.7p] per week, "*inclusive of bonus*", and these were the lucky ones. County Hall had an ethos all of its own, and each new employee soon became aware of the presence of the august and formidable Philip Austin Selborne Stringer, Clerk of the Peace and Clerk of the County Council.¹² The hardly generous wage was supplemented by free tuition in typing, filing and "office management", which helped compensate for a rather academic school curriculum.¹³

11 Built in 1847.

12 A task which seemed to take priority over nearly everything else in "Clerk's Office" was the twice weekly purchase of "Mr Stringer's biscuits", and a set time and junior clerk (with bicycle) were allotted for this function.

13 Working at County Hall had its compensations, some unexpected. Engaged one day in the humdrum task of filling giant envelopes with 'Agendas' and 'Minutes' for the 88 Councillors and Aldermen, I came across the name of Alderman G.M.Young, of Oare, near Marlborough.

"Would that be the G.M.Young, the famous historian?" I asked the Chief Clerk, somewhat timidly. "Oh no!", Ron Colman replied, "We've no one like that here." Having read Young's 1936 classic *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* only a month or so earlier I was sceptical, but held my peace.

I waited until the Council Chamber emptied at the end of the day and pursued my quarry all the way to his Marlborough bus stop. It was the historian. We met only two or three times thereafter, but it was fascinating to talk to someone who had seen Queen Victoria driving through the streets of London in 1892, when Young himself was only ten, and who later became Stanley Baldwin's biographer. His memories of Lloyd George's World War I Cabinets were quite a revelation. (Young died in 1959. Ron Colman's father was Inspector Colman, who had charge of Melksham's police station in Semington Road.)

MELKSHAM

1959



STREETS

The Acre.....	C3
Addison Road.....	B2
Bank Street.....	D4
Barnwell Road.....	C6
Bath Road.....	C2
Beanacre Road.....	C4
Berryfield.....	G3
Bradford Road.....	E2
Chalfield Crescent.....	C6
Church Lane.....	C7
Church Street.....	E4
Church Walk.....	E4
The City.....	C4
The Close.....	F5
Coburg Square.....	E4
Coronation Road.....	E5
Craybourne Road.....	C6
The Crescent.....	C6
Crescent Road.....	B7
Dunch Lane.....	A2
Forest Road.....	C6
Fullers Court.....	C6
George Street.....	G4
Granville Road.....	B4
Heathcote Road.....	C6
High Street.....	E4
Kenilworth Gardens.....	F4
King Street.....	F4
Lambourne Crescent.....	E4
Leaze Road.....	B7
Longleaze Lane.....	F6
Lowbourne.....	D5
Market Place.....	E4
Martigny Road.....	E5
Milton Avenue.....	E5
Murray Walk.....	C5
New Broughton Road.....	D4
Old Broughton Road.....	D3
Pembroke Road.....	E4
Queensway.....	F6
Place Road.....	E4
Portman Road.....	B4
Radnor Place.....	G4
Riverside Drive.....	B4
Roundpond.....	B2
Rowley Place.....	D5
Ruskin Avenue.....	D5
St. Andrews Road.....	C6
St. Margaret's Gardens.....	D6
Sandridge Road.....	D6
Sangster Avenue.....	E5
Scotland Road.....	C4
Semington Road.....	G4
Short Street.....	B7
Shurnhold.....	C3
Snarlton Lane.....	D7

Somerset Crescent.....	E6
Southbrook Road.....	B3
Spa Road.....	F5
Thakeray Crescent.....	E5
Union Street.....	D4
Warwick Crescent.....	F5
Waverley Gardens.....	F4
West End.....	F4
Woodrow Road.....	B7
Woodstock Gardens.....	F5

SCHOOLS/ORGANISATIONS

1. Assembly Hall
2. British Legion
3. Canberra Youth Centre
4. Chaloner Lodge
5. King George's Field
6. Labour Club
7. Liberal Club
8. Lowbourne Infant's School
Lowbourne School
9. Melksham House
10. Melksham Lodge (Conservative)
11. Melksham Railway Station
12. Melksham Shurnhold
Secondary Modern School
13. New Hall
14. Police Station
15. Post Office
16. St. Michael's Church School
17. Salvation Army Hall
18. Sandridge Church School
19. Town Hall
20. Wilts County Library
21. Wiltshire Fire Brigade

COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

22. Avon India Rubber Works
23. C.W. Maggs & Co. Ltd.
24. Hurn Bros., Ltd.
25. Lloyds Bank Ltd.
26. Maximes/The Picture Hall
27. Messrs. B. Sawtell & Sons
28. Messrs. Joseph Rank Ltd.
29. Messrs. Spencer and Co.
30. Midland Bank Ltd.
31. The Wiltshire Farmer's Ltd.
32. Wilts United Dairies Ltd.

CHURCHES

33. Baptist Church
34. Congregational Church
35. Ebenezer Chapel
36. Forest Methodist Church
37. Friends Meeting House
38. Methodist Church
39. St. Andrew's Church
40. St. Anthony's of Padua
Catholic Church
41. St. Michael's & All Angels



Britain From Above - English Heritage

The Market Place and environs, Melksham, from the south, 1933



King George's Field on the north of Clacker's Brook was purchased in 1937 by public subscription for recreation purposes. Here Lord Methuen presents awards to students in front of the Pavilion.

6

LAW AND ORDER IN WARTIME MELKSHAM

Apart from the military police in the RAF Camp in Spa Road, Melksham's police station in Semington Road was staffed by one inspector, one part-time sergeant and two constables. In the twenty years I lived in the town I witnessed only two street fights: one in Church Street, which was rapidly suppressed by the onlookers long before the police arrived, and another when a few RAF men ran amok when a visiting fairground owner was judged to have acted unfairly in awarding money prizes in a competition.

That wartime Melksham was quiet and orderly is true, but no more so than most other small towns of that decade. With a population estimated then at just over 9,000, all who wished to be employed had jobs, and nearly all the children seemed to belong to two-parent families, although the demands of military service separated some. Apart from school and other organised sports, children who lived within walking or bicycling distance of Lowbourn were able to enjoy the facilities of the recreation ground in King George's Field.¹

¹ Considering the size of the town, the "rec" [or "wreck", as it was affectionately known] was surprisingly well equipped. Opened to commemorate King George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935, it had, apart from the usual swings, chute and 'roundabout', the novelty of a 'long boat' and 'double' swings. Evacuees from London were much in evidence, and friendships blossomed. The family of Elf, from Hackney in East London, who had ten children, and who despite their allegiance to Judaism were regular worshippers at St Michael's, were rarely absent.



Branson Motors circa 1928, on the left, was located in the Market Place. In this photo you can also see flood waters receding.



Melksham Railway Station opened with the original section of the line between Thingley Junction and Westbury, on 5 September 1848. British Railways closed the station in 1966, and the buildings (seen above in this 1960 photograph) were removed. The station reopened in 1985 and it became a single line. In 2006, service was dramatically reduced, but then reinstated in December, 2013 as the TransWilts.

7

LOCAL BUSES AND TRAINS

Over half a century was to pass before car ownership became the norm. Petrol rationing was partly responsible, while the few new cars on offer had waiting lists up until the mid-1950s. In consequence most people in the 1940s travelled much as they always did, relying on bicycles, buses and trains. Most Melksham people did their shopping on foot in the town, but for some a trip to Trowbridge or Chippenham proved essential. Since buses were exempt from petrol rationing their frequency and popularity increased. *Western National* had the monopoly here, as *Bath Tramways* catered only for those who could afford a five shilling (25p) return ticket to Bath or Salisbury. For private hire the coach firm Burrett & Wells was the favourite, but there was nearly always a taxi on hand (Branson's) in the Market Square.

Some of the bus conductors and drivers were themselves evacuees, who had chosen to accompany their offspring to Wiltshire and find employment there.¹



There was no splashing on this journey from Melksham to Trowbridge over the Semington Canal Bridge.

¹ Cockney humour, commonplace on buses in London, began to feature on some *Western National* routes. Overheard one day on the Melksham-Trowbridge bus: "Is this the one that goes over the canal?" "There'll be one 'ell of a splash if it don't, lady!"

Melksham Station, along with its track and trains, was part of “God’s Wonderful Railway”, as the “Great Western” was popularly, and sometimes ironically, known. Opened on 5th September 1848 as a branch of the Wilts, Somerset & Weymouth Railway, it did not become part of the GWR until 14th March 1850. In World War II it was still privately owned. Demands that Britain’s railways should be nationalised had been heard during World War I, but most post-war governments opposed the idea. By 1923 the 120 railway companies had been reduced to four: the LMS, LNER, GWR and Southern. Generally known as the ‘Big Four’, their boundaries with some of the older and smaller groups were ill defined. As a result Swindon, Marlborough, Andover and Winchester had two stations apiece, and retained both until the ‘Beeching Axe’ fell in 1963. Melksham’s trains stayed with the GWR, its boundary with the Southern Railway, which had been allowed to keep its distinctive green locomotives and coaches, being some 20 miles away at Salisbury.

On 1st September, 1939, two days before the outbreak of war, Neville Chamberlain’s government took control of all four groups, together with those in London. London tube stations rapidly became air raid shelters, one of which was regularly used by Churchill and his wartime Cabinet. Almost as soon as war was declared no fewer than 600,000 Londoners, mostly children, were evacuated to the West Country in some 1,500 special trains, and the whole operation went without a hitch, a truly remarkable performance. Melksham had its full share of these evacuees, some of whom stayed on in the town long after the War had ended.

Wartime trains, on the GWR as well as elsewhere, tended to be slower and scruffier than those in peace time, and only the Southern Railway was allowed any kind of catering. The freight burden steadily mounted, but on the whole wartime railways ran well, despite losing nearly 100,000 of their staff to the Armed Forces. Meanwhile the *blitz* and the new peril of V.1 flying bombs and V.2 rockets meant new dangers to be confronted. Like their compatriots in the Home Guard and Civil Defence, railwaymen, in Melksham as in the rest of the country, were expected to be on the scene of any reported bomb incident, often getting repair work under way while the bombs were still falling around them.

But it was D-Day, 6th June 1944, which imposed the severest strain. No

fewer than 24,000 “specials” ran on GWR and SR lines, 3,600 in one week alone. These were needed not only for troop movements but for carrying the increasing number of prisoners-of-war to their camps on nearby Salisbury Plain. ²

Despite its relatively small size and that of the town it served, Melksham Station was well used throughout the 1930s and '40s, and its employees surprisingly numerous.³ There was no “closed shop”, and trade unions had been free to bargain, and to strike, since the century began. Each railway union, in Melksham and in the country as a whole, was proud of its independence, and demarcation lines were rigid. The mass of semi-skilled workers such as platform staff and signalmen found themselves in the ‘National Union of Railwaymen’, whereas engine drivers and foot-plate men were encouraged to join the more grandly named ‘Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen’ (ASLEF). The latter,



Bob, the porter at Melksham Railway Station just prior to its closure in 1966

whose wages averaged a comfortable £4 a week, were regarded in those days as the aristocrats of the line. Signalmen were equally well thought of. Youngsters lucky enough to befriend one of Melksham’s most powerfully built signalmen, Harold Roxbee (who lived next door to the present writer at 4, The Close) were astonished to discover how much muscle was required to pull his levers back and forth. Clerical and booking office staff, by contrast, were looked after by the ‘Railway Clerks’ Association’, but that was deemed too proletarian a title, and was soon changed to ‘TESSA’ (the ‘Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association’). As “adding machines” and other primitive forms of computer became more common, skilled workers who proved competent in this new field were more likely to end their careers

2 It was the last Saturday of July 1944 when the railways came closest to breaking point. The threat from the V.2 had caused a second mass evacuation from the capital, and on that day Paddington Station became so crowded it had to be closed every three hours. Fortunately no V.2s fell in London during that crucial time.

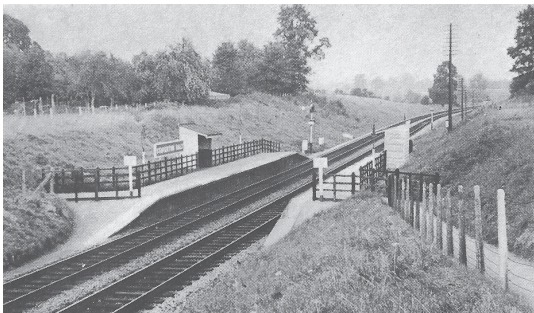
3 In 1938 they numbered 60. Local gossip had it that all Melksham Station staff were called ‘Charlie’, as opposed to those in the Post Office, who were allegedly all named ‘Bert’.

in the even more prestigious ‘ASSET’ – the ‘Association of Supervisory Staffs, Executives and Technicians’! American sociologists and others, always on the alert for evidence that the “British class system” is alive and well, may find trade unions a more rewarding field than either the aristocracy or Britain’s “public” schools.

Railway ‘halts’, i.e. very small stations with no booking office, refreshment rooms, toilets or other facilities, were common before the ‘Beeching axe’ fell in the 1960s, and in the case of the Swindon-Melksham-Westbury line they were both numerous and essential. A railway guard putting his head out of the window and shouting “Melksh’im, ’Gifferd, ’Olt, Stav’ton,



Holt Junction during more popular times in 1903



Staverton Halt in 1960; it closed in 1966

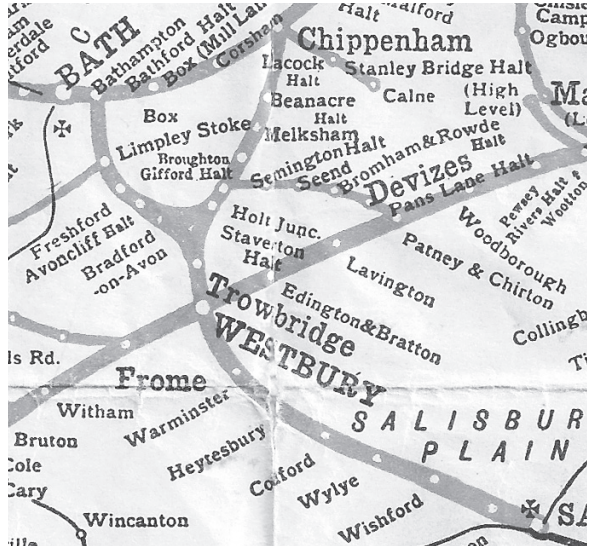
Tro’bridge, Wes’bree!” was a familiar sight, and sound, all along the line (and, in the Swindon direction, “Beanacre, Lacock, Chip’nim, Christ’in Malford, Dauntsey, ’Bassitt, Swindin’).⁴ That many of these halts and small stations were closed so easily after 1963 is often blamed on Dr Beeching, but the fault lay rather with Wiltshire’s 19th century landowners, who repeatedly refused to allow companies to build their stations anywhere near the villages they were supposed to

4 Inevitably the names of the poorly lit halts on Melksham’s Swindon to Westbury line sometimes caused confusion. Lacock Halt, for example, was illuminated only by an oil lamp, which was lit and extinguished daily by the train guard until well into the 1950s. One elderly guard used to shout “Broughton Gifford!” as soon as he arrived at Beanacre, and *vice versa*, although I doubt if many of his passengers were deceived. (The “third class” fare from Melksham to Broughton Gifford, incidentally, was held at 2½d (1p) throughout World War II!) Those like the present writer who lived near the eastern end of Spa Road could always catch a Reading-Westbury-Plymouth train at Seend Station if they didn’t mind a longer walk. [There is a description of pre-war Melksham Station and some of its adjacent halts, together with maps and some excellent photographs, in Vic Mitchell and Keith Smith *Branch Lines of West Wiltshire* (Middleton Press, 2003)].

serve. As a result there was less opposition to the closing of these smaller stations than might have been expected.

In the meantime the need to conserve coal stocks made the GWR reluctant to increase its passenger services or make changes to its timetables. Although the trains which stopped at Melksham were relatively few, people tended to grumble when changes were mooted, especially if this meant alterations to the main line connections at Trowbridge or Chippenham.⁵

The position of Melksham Station at the town's southwestern end did not add to its popularity at a time when the new houses of the Spa Estate (Warwick Crescent, Kenilworth Gardens, The Close, Woodstock Gardens and Coronation Road) were going up near the Devizes road, but its proximity to what was then the main Bath Road proved justified in the end.⁶



A section around the Melksham area of the Great Western Railway map circa 1930 showing lines and connections at their heyday.

-
- 5 The handsome 'King George V' locomotive and its almost equally splendid 'Castle' companions were among those which headed the 2.42 p.m. from Melksham to Swindon for many years. Somewhat less glamorous was the 'tank' engine which heralded the arrival of the 4.06 to Trowbridge. Nonetheless each had a faithful family of enthusiasts who during the school holidays were meticulous in their attendance on platforms 1 and 2 at Melksham Station. Writing of a time long before cars became popular one distinguished historian went so far as to suggest that the publication of railway timetables "did much to discipline the people at large." (G.M.Young, *Victorian England*, p 50.)
 - 6 The station approach was subsequently linked to the town by a long, dank and rather gloomy underpass, useful for pedestrians and cyclists but by no means popular with the ladies. Some 20 years ago it gave me an insight into one of sadder features of modern life. After I deliberately overtook one elderly lady in the "tunnel" we chatted for some time about the changes which had taken place in Melksham since the War. When we parted near her old people's home in Orchard Gardens she turned to me and said, "Do you realise you're the only person I shall be talking to today?"

Because people had become familiar with ‘Big Four’ reorganisation, state ownership of the nation’s railways, which came about when the GWR, SR, LMS and LNER became ‘British Rail’ on 1st January 1948, made surprisingly little difference. To the disgust of many on the left of the Labour Party, control was vested in an unelected ‘British Railways Board’.⁷ Both government and public took some time to realise that the railways could not possibly be made to “pay”, still less make any kind of profit, since, unlike roads, the money for their tracks and signalling had to come from the fares paid by the passengers. By 1938 only the GWR could muster any kind of dividend, while after 1945 one government after another reneged on its wartime pledge to provide that extra revenue which alone could compensate for wartime losses, stresses and strains. It was seldom realised that during the War servicemen and freight had travelled throughout the country at very low rates, and neither the GWR nor the SR was ever reimbursed for its losses under this head. Hence when our current obsession with the car began, augmented by the cheap petrol of the 1960s and ’70s, railways were still in a very poor state,⁸ and privatisation, when it finally arrived, did little to remedy this for some considerable time. To cap it all, GWR’s new General Manager, Sir James Milne, who was appointed to make British Rail’s ‘Western Region’ a success, had no faith whatsoever in his mission and remained throughout a bitter opponent of public ownership. He even refused to join the new British Transport Commission in which he was supposed to play a key role.

opposite: Melksham Railway Station and surrounding area in this plan from 1922

7 There were no workers’ or consumers’ representatives on this Board, unlike its counterparts in Eastern Europe at that time. Communist-led Czechoslovakia, for example, had, after the free elections of May 1946 *but before* the coup of 1948, a ‘triangular’ system of control for each nationalised industry, under which an elected board of 18 had six places for the trade unions, six for the consumers and six for the Government. Arguments were fierce but strikes were few.

8 “A load of old junk!” was how ex-Signalman George Ward described GWR’s rolling stock at an open air meeting (attended by the present writer) in Melksham’s Market Square during the General Election campaign of July, 1945.



Melksham celebrates the end of WWII with dancing in the street



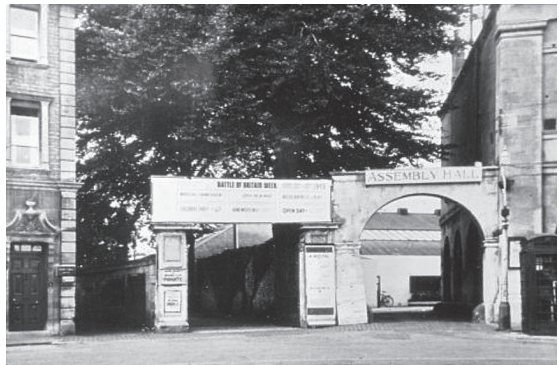
8

THE WAR ENDS

Victory in Europe, when it finally came on May 8th 1945, was marked by open-air dancing in Melksham's Market Square, but victory over Japan three months later made less of an impact, perhaps because the use of the atom bomb in the War's final days gave pause for thought.¹ Nevertheless, on August 15th all the flags of the new United Nations flew cheerfully from the pavilion on King George's Field, where a "victory" thanksgiving service was held in the open air. All went well until the unlucky town councillor who was chosen to read out the names of the victors tried to pronounce 'Czechoslovakia', but after three attempts he wisely moved on to 'Denmark'. Sadly, the "British Restaurant" on King George's Field, which until that day had nobly dispensed five shilling (25p) "meat and two veg"

Battle of Britain

10 July to 31 October 1940 represented the most intense period of daylight bombing during WWII. The Battle of Britain was commemorated in gratitude to The Few who defended the country. Shown right was taken during Melksham's Battle of Britain Week in 1949.



¹ Referred to at the time as 'VE Day' and 'VJ Day' respectively.

lunches “off the ration”, marked the occasion by closing its doors.²

As the “victory” celebrations drew to a close, and the people of Melksham tried to resume lives disrupted by six years of war, they were reminded that there had been no General Election in Britain for nearly ten years, although a series of by-elections, all won by the left,³ gave more than a hint of what was to come. July 5th 1945 was declared ‘Election Day’, with the results to be announced on July 26th, the three-week interval deemed necessary for all the votes to be counted.⁴

When the results were finally declared the shock was considerable. Despite Churchill’s immense popularity the Conservative Party was roundly defeated. Labour, which won only 154 seats in 1935, obtained 393 in 1945, and was returned to power with an overall majority of 183. Stalin, who wanted Churchill to win, declared that the results had been rigged, while many Americans, some of whom tended to confuse the Labour Party’s ‘socialism’ with the Soviet brand of ‘communism’, were equally baffled.

The reason for Stalin’s preference for the conservative Churchill instead of the socialist Attlee remained a mystery for another eight years. It was not until 1953 that the final volume of Churchill’s war history, *Triumph and Tragedy*, was published. This revealed for the first time that, contrary to what he told the Americans, Churchill had promised Stalin a controlling interest in Bulgaria, Romania and half of Hungary, in return for Britain having a free hand in Greece. This promise was made late at night on 9th October 1944, at the end of a *tête-à-tête* with Stalin in Moscow, but it was not reported to the Cabinet or the State Department.⁵ To clinch the

2 Fish appeared less often on the menu, much to the relief of a certain curate from St Andrew’s, who claimed to have been served with a “piece of cod that passed all understanding”.

3 Under a pre-war agreement the three main parties promised not to break the electoral truce, which meant that subsequent by-elections would be contested only by the minor parties. The most successful of these was the left-wing Common Wealth Party led by Barnstaple’s MP Sir Richard Acland, which stood on a platform of “common ownership” and “ethical socialism”. Four of its candidates became MPs in this way.

4 The ballot papers of members of the Armed Forces serving in the Far East took some time to reach Britain and find their way to the appropriate constituency.

5 On this see Churchill *The Second World War: Triumph and Tragedy* (1953) pp 293, 420f, 496f; Gabriel Kolko *The Politics of War* (1969) pp 144-145; Brian Thomas *Ideology and the Cold War* (1988) pp 172-179, and *Coexistence and Détente - What’s Left of the Cold War?* (1973) pp 131-142.

deal Stalin told the powerful Communist Parties of France and Italy to avoid revolution, join whatever governments happened to be in power and cooperate with the West. This they did until the end of 1948, a concession which cost them many votes.⁶

The reasons for Churchill's surprise defeat have been widely canvassed. In the first place Britain's constituency boundaries were those drawn up in 1935, and thus completely out of date. London and the other big cities had been overrepresented for years, and it was these seats which in 1945 gave the Labour Party many more MPs than it should have had. In terms of the votes actually cast its victory was nothing like as overwhelming. It is true that Labour won some 12 million votes compared with the Conservatives' 9 million, but that did not quite "square" with all those shiny new faces on the Labour benches! Liberals and the other small parties did badly, although the Communist Party could (and did) boast that its representation had doubled. It now had two MPs instead of one!⁷

What aided Labour was its commitment to full employment, lots of new houses and a "free" national health service, all of which the voters contrasted, unfairly or otherwise, with the mass unemployment, poor health and slum dwellings of the 1930s. The Armed Forces' vote was also a factor, although the turnout there was patchy. Not all servicemen had received their ballot papers on time, and this intensified the feeling that 'demob' was proceeding far too slowly. Important too, but rarely commented on, was the part played by some left-wing officers of the Royal Army Education Corps

6 The communist leaders Thorez and Duclos in France, Togliatti and Longo in Italy and Markos in Greece bravely, but foolishly, took it on the chin. For had it not been for the "free hand" which Stalin had given the British in Greece he would no doubt have supported ELAS, Greece's powerful communist army. In that case an ELAS-dominated Greece and a communist-led France and Italy would not have joined NATO in 1949. Stalin also agreed not to challenge Britain's position in the Middle East, and in 1948 the USSR became one of the first states (along with USA) to recognise Israel.

7 Their charismatic leader, the boilermaker Harry Pollitt, failed to take East Rhondda by the margin of 972 votes. Of the two communists who won, Willie Gallacher (West Fife) proved an excellent parliamentarian, his East London colleague in Mile End, Phil Piratin, rather less so. (Gallacher is credited with one of the wittiest Parliamentary interruptions on record. When a government minister was asked if an arrested ambassador of doubtful repute enjoyed diplomatic immunity Gallacher's instant retort, "Immensely!" became a classic in the annals of parliamentary repartee.) In Melksham Ken Gill followed the Communist Party line and supported the Labour candidate, George Ward.

in promoting Labour's cause inside the military camps.⁸

Finally, some of Churchill's election broadcasts were widely criticised, even by his own supporters. His portrayal of Labour's leaders as some kind of "socialist Gestapo" contrasted oddly with the loyal support he'd received throughout the War from Attlee, Bevin, Morrison and Dalton. He also seemed to have forgotten that the peoples of Australia and New Zealand had lived under Labour Governments for years, without apparent harm.⁹

On the other hand there was a widespread feeling that in the immediate post-war world the diminutive figure of Attlee¹⁰ would be no match for either Stalin or Truman on the world stage.

But Churchill's unique contribution to victory and his place in history have never been challenged. Throughout the War his many speeches, which combined a strong patriotism with the Christian message, were unrivalled and supremely effective. In the words of President Kennedy

8 As 1945 drew near a number of 'mock' elections were held in Army and RAF camps up and down the country, including the RAF Camp in Melksham's Spa Road, where each political party was duly allowed to state its case. However, in charge of these proceedings was the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), an organisation widely suspected of left-wing sympathies; and as there were four parties on the left (Labour, I.L.P, Common Wealth, Communist), but only one on the right (Conservative), the presentations tended to be somewhat one sided! The only other right wing party, the British Union of Fascists, had been banned in 1940 and its leader, Sir Oswald Mosley, jailed.

A number of ABCA lecturers, it might be noted, were returned as Labour MPs in 1945.

9 Thanks to the intervention of Melksham's MP, 'Bob' (later Sir Robert) Grimston, I was able to witness one of the few exchanges in the House of Commons in which Churchill came off worst.

It was in November 1945, and Churchill was at his ebullient best. With his arms rising and falling, which put me in mind of an old and rather crumpled eagle, he declared, in suitably stentorian tones, "The gloomy vultures of nationalisation are hovering over our basic industries." Up jumped Attlee: "Is it his view that our basic industries are so rotten that they attract the vultures?"

10 "A modest man with plenty to be modest about", Churchill was alleged to have remarked, although he later denied this. Failure to appreciate Attlee's sterling qualities was common across the Atlantic as well as in Britain. Attlee himself was aware of this, and it amused him. Witness the lines he penned and passed round the train on his way home from Labour's Annual Conference at Scarborough in October 1964, which I attended as Labour's parliamentary candidate for Carshalton & Banstead:

"Some said he was just a non-starter;
There were many who thought themselves smarter,
But he ended PM, CH and OM,
An Earl and a Knight of the Garter."

on a later occasion, “he mobilised the English language and sent it into battle.” 9 p.m. was when he usually broadcast, and whenever he did Melksham’s streets fell silent.¹¹ The worst news failed to discourage him, and even when Singapore fell he felt able to paraphrase Psalm 112 to considerable effect: “We shall not be afraid of evil tidings. Our hearts are fixed, trusting in the Lord.”



Even after more than 65 years, WWII defences, such as this seagull trench-style pillbox, still dot the local landscape, as seen in this recent photo. There were 11 pillboxes within a two-kilometre radius of Melksham town centre and were merely precautions to invasion, and there were no recorded bomb droppings within the town itself.

11 Most of Churchill’s wartime speeches are now available on CD, with the curious exception of one of his best: his address to both Houses of Congress which he delivered in Washington on 26th December 1941. Those wishing to read what he said on that occasion will have to consult vol. 3 of his wartime speeches, *The Unrelenting Struggle*, pp 333-340. In the 1980s that speech became prescribed reading for all my students in the Universities of London, Chicago, Iowa and Kentucky who were offering papers in either World War II or Anglo-American relations.

Because of his well known stutter, none of King George’s wartime speeches was ever shown to British cinema audiences. Churchill thought that this might lower morale, or be caricatured in one of Dr Goebbels’ propaganda films.

9

ENGLAND v INDIA: THE END OF AN ERA

The first post-war Test Match, held at Lords in the late summer of 1946, gave a short but welcome respite from the prevailing austerity and gloom. It would also prove to be the last time that England would play against India (as it was then), although few could have guessed this at the time.¹

The match itself was a walkover for England, who won by 10 wickets. The weather was poor and there were many intervals when rain stopped play. There is little doubt that the weather affected the morale of the Indian team, and perhaps that of England also. Had the same match been played at Lords a year later, in the middle of the hottest and driest summer of that decade, the result might have been very different.

The present writer, then in the Lower Sixth, watched the match and supported India throughout, not that it did their team any good. The England “stars” included Alec Bedser, Denis Compton, Walter Hammond, Len Hutton and Cyril Washbrook, but most eyes were on the virtually unknown Indian team, which was captained by the Nawab of Pataudi, Snr.²

1 The partition of India, when it came about in August 1947, meant that in future India, Pakistan and, later, Bangladesh, would each have to field separate teams against England. It meant also that first class bowlers from the new Pakistan, such as Gul Mohammad, could no longer play for India.

2 India’s best batsmen, for the record, were L. Amarnath, V.S. Hazare, A.H. Kardar, M.H. Mankad and the Nawab of Pataudi, and their best bowlers Amarnath, Hazare, Mankad, V.M. Merchant, Gul Mohammad and S.G. Shinde. Other members of their team were D.D. Hindlekar, R.S. Modi, C.S. Nayudu and C.T. Sarwate. Press cuttings and photographs of these decorated the present writer’s bedroom in Melksham for some considerable time.

By the end of August 1947, however, Britain's rule in India was over. Although the sudden decision to grant independence caught many by surprise, Japan's early military successes had made it impossible for the British to maintain their authority any longer. Churchill, characteristically, refused to accept this, but others had seen the writing on the wall for some time. Japan's persuasive slogan of "Asia for the Asians" had considerable success in the early stages of the Pacific war, but as soon as the Japanese became occupiers instead of liberators the mood changed, and in the eyes of their new Asian subjects they very soon overstayed their welcome.³

Nevertheless the loss of India had a significance besides the mere fact that Britain no longer had an empire in the Far East.⁴ While India's contri-



The Melksham Liberal Working Men's Club at 26 Bank Street was established in 1903

3 For this the conduct of the Japanese Army was largely to blame. Had they behaved differently they might have caused the British colonial administrators considerable trouble. A few years earlier a group of Japanese economists had devised a 'co-prosperity' scheme for the entire region (Dai To A Kyo Ā Ken), under which rice, wheat, rubber and other raw materials from the Asian colonies would be exported virtually gratis in return for their equivalent value in Japanese manufactured goods. But, as the founder of modern Singapore, President Lee Kuan Yew, put it during a Chatham House seminar attended by the present writer late in 1987, "I didn't mind the Japanese offering me a radio set with one hand but I rather resented being slapped across the face with the other."

4 On this see Correlli Barnett *The Collapse of British Power* (1972, 1984) pp 77-80 and 138-166.

bution to Britain's economy and trained manpower (other than military) was insignificant,⁵ the prestige it conferred was immense, and this was reflected in the discussions in Melksham's Constitutional Club in Bank Street (led by, among others, Councillors Percy Crook and Percy Hughes) late in 1947. There the prevailing mood was one of disbelief, mingled with anger and talk of a "sell-out". These feelings were particularly strong among the ex-servicemen who had served in India and the Middle East. Inevitably, the Labour Government and the last Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, came in for a good deal of criticism. Melksham's Liberal Club, which was also in Bank Street, had mixed feelings, as had leading members of the Labour Club in the Market Square (Frank Chivers, 'Ted' Weston and 'Ned' Thomas). While some in the Labour Party took the view that as Britain had ruled India for some 300 years India might be better off on its own, others were not so sure.⁶

Similarly, the "loss" in 1956 of the Suez Canal, the prime route to India and the Far East, led to more bitter feelings, and subsequently to the replacement of Prime Minister Eden by Harold Macmillan in 1957.



But, perhaps surprisingly, the "loss" of Britain's *African* colonies in the 1960s (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) did not have the same effect. Clearly there seemed to be something rather special about 'India', as indeed there was, and is.

Melksham Constitutional Club on Bank Street circa 1930. The club was closely aligned with the Conservative Party, with members having to pledge support.

5 Some 2½ million Indians, it should be recalled, fought alongside British forces in World War II, chiefly in North Africa, north-east India and Burma.

6 Judging by the remarks of a number of Asians who appeared on a BBC Question Time programme a few years after "liberation", not all former subjects of the British welcomed their independence. "As soon as the British left", vehemently declared one lady, "everything went to pot!" Like many another, she preferred to move to Birmingham rather than help to rebuild Kenya.

10

EPILOGUE

A GLIMPSE OF MELKSHAM 1945-1960

Although austerity and rationing continued well after the bitter winter of 1946-1947, the remarkably fine summers of 1947, '49, '55 and '59 gave much needed relief. While the Berlin Blockade of 1948 and the Korean War of 1950-1953 did no more than hint at anything worse to come, many Melksham conscripts had their periods of military service lengthened, some by as much as six months. There was some resentment, too, when the Army's Primary Training Centre at Devizes closed and the new recruits from Melksham found themselves transported instead to the larger (and bleaker) Bulford Camp on Salisbury Plain.¹ By 1956, however, the international situation was deemed to have improved sufficiently to allow compulsory military service to be abolished, although a legal requirement

1 In theory conscripts from Melksham could choose their preferred 'arm', but in practice most found themselves in the Army. Although training in the infantry regiments was rigorous, its physical, nutritional and educational benefits were very considerable, and in those days there were many more regiments to choose from. Most recruits from Melksham chose either the Wiltshire or the Hampshire Regiment, but the few who opted for the machine-gun detachments of the Royal Berkshire Regiment were surprised on April 7th 1948 to find themselves inspected by none other than the King himself, who unknown to us had just been appointed the Regiment's Colonel-in-Chief. (Had that ceremony been held a year earlier, we could have boasted that we were the last British troops to be inspected by India's last emperor.)

to enlist in “Z Reserve” (as it was called) remained.²

It was during these “post-Korean War” years that world food and raw material prices began to fall, and they did so quite dramatically. As a result more food and consumer goods, no longer rationed, began to appear in Melksham’s shops. New model television sets, while still showing only black and white pictures, became more numerous and more popular. Some called this “the new prosperity”, others “the new greed”, but the next generation would soon come to know it as the “consumer society”. But whatever label they chose they could hardly help noticing that the change coincided admirably with a spell of warmer weather, with both 1955 and 1959 helping to break the sunshine record of 1947. In the meantime the sudden death of King George VI in 1952 and the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II the following year gave television manufacturers an unexpected boost.³

All this, coupled with marginal adjustments to constituency boundaries, did much to strengthen the Conservative hold on the Westbury division, as the next three General Elections showed. Similar adjustments elsewhere began, though somewhat belatedly, to reflect population changes, a reform which cost Labour many seats, including the Prime Minister’s own.⁴

Physical changes to Melksham itself were far less marked, and gave little or no hint of what was being planned for the next three decades. The fabric of St Michael’s Church saw few alterations, but other changes were more deeply felt. After thirteen years of dedicated toil, much of it in wartime, Melksham’s beloved Canon Sangster retired in 1946 and was suc-

2 The 1953-1962 era was christened by the present writer “the Geneva summer”, a reference to the welcome failure of the Suez and Korean conflicts (and, more especially, the Cuba confrontation of 1962) to become nuclear, as well as to the relative success of the Geneva “summits” of 1955 and 1959. (See on this Brian Thomas in *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 40, no.2, April 1969, pp 173-186.)

3 Some two million TV licences were taken out in Coronation Year (1953), compared with only 25,000 in 1945. It was estimated that the Coronation was watched by 20 million people on TV and 1½ million in local cinemas. It was also shown as a full length film, “The Queen is Crowned”, in Melksham’s Maxime.

4 Although Labour’s total 1951 vote of nearly 14,000,000 was the highest it ever achieved, the boundary changes took their toll. Attlee’s old Limehouse constituency was abolished and the PM forced to contest the new constituency of Walthamstow West.



Opened in September 1953 with a capacity of 800 pupils, Shurnhold Secondary School was the first new post war secondary school in Wiltshire and was said to be one of the best school buildings in the county. It was later renamed the George Ward School, as seen in this 2003 photograph.

ceeded as Vicar by the Rev. Lionel Howe; and in Cyril Witcomb's return soon afterwards we had a happy reminder of former times.⁵

In the meantime Melksham's schools were preparing to undergo something of a revolution. A new secondary school named after the Labour veteran George Ward made its appearance along the Bath Road, just as Labour and Conservative administrations in Whitehall were beginning to grasp the idea that it was time for the 11+ to end and for Wiltshire's old grammar schools to go, to be replaced by some form of 'non-selective' schooling. Consequently over the next few years Trowbridge High, Chippenham Grammar and Bradford Fitzmaurice Schools all found themselves marked down for closure.⁶

Inevitably, local opinion on this was divided, and former grammar school students and 'old pupils associations' found themselves deluged

5 Canon Sangster, while assisting Cyril Witcomb in Devizes, continued to play cricket (for Dorset) until he was 73. He died in 1950, aged 77.

6 The blame for this, if 'blame' is the right word, should be shared equally by the (then) Labour politicians Tony Crosland and Shirley Williams as well as by Margaret Thatcher.

with bitter letters from their members and former teachers. One ex-com-mando⁷ with a particularly distinguished war record declared that the atmosphere in his school (the former Chippenham Grammar) had been “poisoned” thereby.

This change affected Melksham’s politics too. ‘Traditional’ conservatives were on the whole hostile, although parents whose offspring had narrowly failed to gain admission to a grammar school hoped, reasonably enough, that the new ‘comprehensives’ would be so well funded and equipped that the grammar schools would not be missed. For their part many La-bour sympathisers were by no means as keen on the abolition of gram-mar schools as their party manifestos appeared to suggest. While most on the left welcomed the end of the ‘11+’, a considerable minority took

the view that *some* kind of selection could and should continue, although not by means of a “once-and-for-all” test at 11. More important perhaps, this minority believed that state-of-the-art laborato-ries and equipment should now be provided for *all* secondary school pupils, and that the old grammar schools should never have been favoured in this way.

British Railways Board
Transport Act 1962

Withdrawal of Railway Passenger Services

The Western Region of British Railways hereby give notice, in accordance with Section 56(7) of the Transport Act 1962, that as part of proposed arrangements for the reduction of railway passenger services between Chippenham, Trowbridge and Westbury, they propose to discontinue all railway passenger services from the following stations and halts:

LACOCK HALT
MELKSHAM
HOLT JUNCTION (B)
STAVERTON HALT (B)

(b) In conjunction with Redwyn to Westbury proposals

It appears to the Board that the following alternative services will be available:-

EXISTING SERVICES BY RAIL

Passenger train services will continue between the following stations in the area:-
CHIPPENHAM — TROWBRIDGE — WESTBURY

<p>EXISTING SERVICES BY ROAD</p> <p>East Transport (Bath) Co. Ltd</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>ROUTE Via</td><td>Bath</td><td>Lechlade</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Bath</td><td>Halt</td><td>Melksham</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Bath</td><td>Halt</td><td>Melksham</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Bath</td><td>Halt</td><td>Melksham</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Bath</td><td>Halt</td><td>Melksham</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Bath</td><td>Halt</td><td>Melksham</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> </table>	ROUTE Via	Bath	Lechlade	RD	Bath	Halt	Melksham	RD	Bath	Halt	Melksham	Westbury	RD	Bath	Halt	Melksham	Westbury	RD	Bath	Halt	Melksham	Westbury	RD	Bath	Halt	Melksham	Westbury	<p>Western National (Dorset) Co. Ltd</p> <table border="0"> <tr><td>ROUTE Via</td><td>Chippenham</td><td>Melksham</td><td>Trowbridge</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Chippenham</td><td>Halt</td><td>Melksham</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Chippenham</td><td>Town</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Chippenham</td><td>Town</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> <tr><td>RD</td><td>Chippenham</td><td>Town</td><td>Westbury</td></tr> </table>	ROUTE Via	Chippenham	Melksham	Trowbridge	RD	Chippenham	Halt	Melksham	RD	Chippenham	Town	Westbury	RD	Chippenham	Town	Westbury	RD	Chippenham	Town	Westbury
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Any users of the rail service which it is proposed to discontinue and any bus companies representing such users may lodge an objection in writing within one week of Saturday, 5th September, 1964, (i.e. not later than Saturday, 17th October, 1964), addressing the objection to the Secretary, Transport Users Committee, Committee for the South Western Area, Manor House, 33 Victoria Street, Bristol 1.

If any such objection is lodged the service cannot be discontinued until the Transport Users Consultative Committee have considered the objection and reported to the Minister of Transport, and the Minister has given his consent in the manner under Section 56(8) of the Transport Act, 1962.

The Committee may hold a meeting to hear objections. Such a meeting will be held in public and any persons who have lodged an objection in writing may also make oral representations to the Committee, if they so wish.

If no objections are lodged to the proposal the service will be discontinued on and from Monday, 6th January, 1965.

© 1964 British Railways Board

This poster announced the closure of Lacock Halt, Melksham Station, Holt Junction and Staverton Halt in accordance with the Transport Act of 1962. It offered alternative rail options at Chippenham, Trowbridge and Westbury.

7 In a letter to the present writer dated 8th June 1989.

If this minority had triumphed, then ‘grammar’ and the new ‘secondary technical’ schools could have expanded simultaneously. But it lost the battle (though not the argument) and Wiltshire’s grammar schools continued to disappear.

Although petrol prices soon began to rise, wages did too, and in Melksham the family car became more and more popular. Buses became less frequent, and despite a brave attempt on the part of *Western National* in the 1950s to put on a 15-minute service to both Trowbridge and Chippenham the decline in their use continued. Much of this was due to the building of the M4 motorway, which meant rapid access by road to Bath, Chippenham, Swindon and beyond.

Trains were by no means exempt from this trend. By the mid-1960s Melksham was beginning to feel the first of the ‘Beeching cuts’. Not only did the railway ‘halts’ disappear, but staffing throughout the region was reduced and many of the main line services were drastically curtailed. As a result fewer trains stopped at Melksham, and for a spell in the late 1970s they ceased altogether.

While privatisation did nothing to reverse this, a feeble but nonetheless welcome attempt to provide Melksham with some kind of rail service was made by two rail companies: the Cardiff-based *Wales & West Passenger Trains Ltd.*, and (subsequently) *Wessex Trains* of Exeter; but their efforts, though well meant, were hampered by poor publicity, sub-standard stock, uncomfortable seating and unattractive timetabling.

By 2000 it proved impossible for rail passengers to travel to Melksham, spend a day shopping or visiting, and return at a reasonable hour. Although Swindon is the largest town in North Wilts and the terminus of the Swindon-Southampton line, no posters on Swindon Station mentioned Melksham at all.⁸ There was a similar dearth of information at Reading, both on the station itself and in the announcements made by the train guards *en route*. The impression given was that there was no rail link between Swindon and Wiltshire’s southern capital, Salisbury, even though the city of Salisbury is rightly regarded as one of Wiltshire’s

⁸ Passengers approaching Swindon from London or Reading were treated to announcements about every rail connection from Swindon except those on the Chippenham-Westbury line, the line which serves not only Melksham but the urban centres of Trowbridge and Salisbury!

principal tourist attractions!

It was not that Melksham did not deserve better. Its population grew rapidly after 1970, reaching 23,000 by the end of the century. By 2013 it had reached 27,835 compared with 28,065 for Chippenham and 28,163 for Trowbridge. But while full employment and stable world prices prevailed, as they did for at least another decade, Melksham itself seemed reasonably content, despite the absence of convenient rail links. Local news, hitherto reported only in the *Wiltshire Times*, *Wiltshire News* and *Wiltshire Gazette*, was now relayed in an entirely new periodical, the fortnightly *Melksham Independent News*. By concentrating on events in Melksham and its surrounding villages it avoided the trap into which many of its Hampshire and Surrey competitors had fallen, that of attempting to cover too wide an area. Praise for the new regional television stations, on the other hand, was far from unanimous. There were many complaints that Portsmouth, Southampton and Bournemouth (now in Dorset) were getting the bulk of the coverage at the expense of Swindon, Salisbury and nearly all of Wiltshire's villages.

At a time of rapid change one can hardly have everything, but some would like to have seen the old Lowbourn School motto on the new *Melksham Independent's* masthead: *Vincit Veritas*. This would have provided not just a valued link with the past but a welcome promise for the future.

Appendix

'RED KEN' IS DEAD

A Personal Sketch by Professor Brian Thomas

Reprinted from the Melksham Independent News, 11th June 2009, with one minor amendment

Ken Gill, who combined hard-line Marxism with an attractive and genial personality, died on May 23rd. One of the few Melksham figures to have made his name in national politics, he served on the TUC's General Council for 18 years and became its President in 1985, the peak year of the Thatcher era. He would have been 82 in August¹.

Kenneth Gill was born in Melksham in 1927 and won a scholarship to Chippenham Grammar School in 1938. His parents, Ernest and Mary Gill, were by no means well off and it was no surprise when Ken left school early to become an engineering apprentice. The political left had a strong appeal for many at that time and Ken was soon active in left-wing politics in Melksham. It was then (1945) that Labour's parliamentary candidate failed to wrest Westbury from the Tories by a mere 931 votes. Not that the politics of George Ward, a bluff signalman on the far right of the party, had much appeal for Ken, who by then had moved sharply to the left, and the early 1950s found him inside the Communist Party.

This cut little ice locally. Apart from Idris Rose in Trowbridge and Jack Lawrence in Chippenham, communists in West Wilts in the 1940s were pretty thin on the ground. The best Melksham Town Hall could offer Ken in the way of left-wing speakers were Tom Driberg and Richard Acland. The Fabian Dr Alfred Schofield (of Place Road) did his best on one occasion in St Michael's Church, as did the Methodist leader Donald Soper, but, as the latter famously said, "You can't expect too much of the clergy; they've only the laity to draw on." The com-

¹ August 2009

munist Dean of Canterbury (Dr Hewlett Johnson) was more to Ken's liking, but militant trade unionism proved a far more fertile field.

After serving his apprenticeship at Spencer Moulton's (later GEC) in Melksham, Ken's rise in the trade union movement was meteoric. A skilled draughtsman and an effective speaker, he rose quickly through the trade union ranks to become General Secretary of the draughtsmen's union just as it was about to merge with TASS (Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Staffs) in 1974. He opposed further mergers, which he felt would weaken the power of the left, but the charismatic Clive Jenkins persuaded him otherwise, and soon after Jenkins retired Ken found himself in charge of the giant Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union.

A constant thorn in the side of Mrs Thatcher, Ken appeared frequently on TV, where his soft Wiltshire burr was unmistakable. His sense of humour never failed him and he took his defeats well. A skilled negotiator, he knew just when to strike (in both senses of the word) and when to hold his hand. In this he resembled the railwaymen's leader J. H. Thomas, who, when confronted with shouts of "You've sold us, Jimmy!", promptly replied, "I tried to, boys, but I couldn't find a buyer." Ken, however, won far more battles than he lost.

I came to know him at Chippenham Grammar School during World War II, where, at Rowden House meetings but rather more often in class, he won fame for his astonishing skill at producing instantly recognisable sketches and cartoons. His ability to execute these at a moment's notice was almost miraculous. Two years Ken's junior, I often wished I'd kept the best of them, but fortunately in 2007 the TUC mounted a national exhibition of his work to mark his 80th birthday.

Tall and powerfully built, he would have been an asset to the school's rugby team had he stayed on, but it was not to be. To those who knew him for his ready laugh and high spirits, his hard-line Marxism often came as a surprise. But he was by no means dogmatic; his view was that of Lenin: "Our teaching is not dogma; life will show us". The postmen's leader Billy Hayes once called him the "John Lennon of the Trade Union movement", but rather more surprising was Frank Chapple's tribute. On the far right of the electricians' union for many years, Chapple had no time at all for Ken politically, but when President of the TUC in 1984 he surprised everyone by endorsing Ken as his successor. "He'll do a good job", said Chapple. And he did.

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IN MEMORY OF
OUR MEN WHO
GAVE THEIR LIVES
IN THE GREAT WAR OF
1914-1919

IN MEMORY OF
OUR MEN WHO
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CANON SQUARE