

Memories of Ronald Ernest Chrett - a Pupil at the Duke of Newcastle's Private Choir at Clumber Park.

These notes are information provided by Mr Chrett's sister who lives in Lincolnshire who set them to form part of the Clumber Archive. Mr Chrett now aged 90 and resides at 320-248 Street, Aldergrove, British Columbia, Canada V4W 2H1(?)

During the war years my mother had befriended and "old maid" who was having a hard time with war time employment, trying to run her housemaid's employment agency. After the war this Miss Hawkins was able to interest two sisters, whose doctor father had died and left them well off, to come into the agency. Miss Hawkin's brother was a priest in a Catholic School on the Duke of Newcastle's estate of Clumber in the Dukeries. As the choir boys in the church got a free education, and as I already sang in the local Anglican Church in Harrington, Miss Hawkins decided, over my mother's objections, that I was going to be a choir boy in Clumber Park. The next thing we know there was an appointment to meet the choir master at Novello's in Sheffield for an audition. I must have passed, for in due course I was notified to report to the school. The Choir School had thirteen members, who not only sang for the services, ut also to serve the church and the village oratory or chapel, as altar boys, acolytes and the various duties attending a High Catholic Church.

At the big feasts of Christmas and Easter dedications the first mass was said at 4 a.m. which meant that with a half hour walk, I had to be up at least at 3 a.m. As all choristers had been carefully screened re standard of educational abilities, the standard of education was very high. However, we had miles of Sherwood Forest to roam in. The yew trees, that Robin Hood used for his bows, still grew in profusion. The miles of oak trees (all sacrificed to World War II) were (shade) to acre after acre of rhododendron, and in the spring acres of bluebells bloomed in a carpet of blue.

However, boys will be boys. We might look like angels in cassock and surplice on Sunday, but outside church it was, perhaps another story.

If I remember rightly there were three terms in a school year. At the term beginning we all arrived by train to Worksop, the nearest town. Those from the north always arrived before the Londoners, and south and west of England. When we were present, we boarded a coach drawn by horses for the journey to school. The older seniors somehow managed to ride up front with the coachman! The Dukes of Newcastle got their wealth from the royalties in the coal fields of Derbyshire, Yorkshire etc, mostly in the 1800s. The Duke of Portland, Newcastle's neighbouring estate, also grew wealthy from coal royalties and invested their wealth wisely, and today are well off.

The coal mines of the 1800s were unbelievable. Children of eight years to ten were employed underground.

To get back to the railway station at Worksop.

After two "terrible experiences", it was decided that all thirteen students should not be allowed to use the station at the same time as the big school (in Britain the trains pass on the right). Fifteen minutes before our train pulled into Sheffield a train stopped en route for Scotland. It just happened, that a flat car loaded with the big schools' luggage got left on the north bound platform. As several of our boys believed in giving a helping hand wherever possible the following ensued.

The Scottish bound train pulled in and the baggage handler threw off the mail sacks and left the door wide open, exactly in line with the London baggage. Trying to be helpful we threw all the southbound London luggage into the baggage car and shut the door. The baggage car attendant, returning as the train started, climbed into the passenger part, and everything turned out as well as possible. We did hear some professors waited a week for their baggage to arrive from Scotland.

The second incident took place during the summer holiday break-up. It was a very hot day, and for some unknown reason, as the station master was in the ticket office issuing tickets, his coat and hat were hung up in the waiting room. Being small boys it was tempting to take this uniform and try it on. The hat on Millington was saved from disaster by his prominent ears, whilst the jacket fitted me were it touched, and the uproar by the rest of the gang convinced us we just had to find a mirror.

The only mirror was on the platform in a change giving machine. So thither we proceeded. However, which proceeding the Scottish train and several professors and students from the big school arrived together. One of the professors shouted across to us "this the London train?" Summoning my deepest voice I hollered "All aboard London, Kings Cross, Truro, Lands End and all points beyond". The professors piled into the nearest smoking compartment followed by about a dozen students, the doors closed, and everyone chugged away for Scotland. It was then necessary to return the borrowed uniform, and proceed to be the picture of innocence until our own train arrived. Some of our London chaps must have squealed for on the start of the new term we were called to the Headmaster's Office, but luckily he couldn't stop laughing, as we got off scott free.

The three years at the choir school, Hardwick, Clumber Park, were happy ones. We got in and out of trouble with regular monotony.

There was a large man-made lake in Clumber Park, probably five miles long by a mile wide. On the lake were two warships of Victory vintage. On one of these ships a couple of small cannon with a small pile of cannonballs rested. The naval cannon had long been removed. When the Duke and , or, his wife were in residence, the house flag flew over the mansion, and as on this particular day it was noted that no house flag was flying and rarely, if ever, servants were allowed in the front of the house, a few of us decided we needed a cannon. Why? I can never understand. The boathouse yielded a boat, oars and block and tackle, and in due course we were headed for the school with this confounded cannon.

The miserable thing on cast iron wheels fought us every inch of the way until the last mile, when we had a steep hill to negotiate. At the bottom of this hill an arm of the lake came alongside the road, and as we neared the top of the hill the cannon

decided to take off on its own accord. It raced down the hill and veered off the road and plunged into the lake. We were so fed up we agreed 100% to leave the darned thing there.

Then I remember the laundry episode. Workmen had left ladders leaning up to one of the many roofs of the school. It being Wednesday afternoon and no workmen around it was natural we should go exploring. I should mention we had Wednesday and Saturday afternoons as holidays from school. So we changed our boots for running shoes, the better to grip on the tiled roofs, and away we went. In due course we arrived at the laundry courtyard, where ten or so village ladies ran the school laundry. As washers and dryers had not been invented, it was all done by hand, and dried by hanging out in the courtyard on several lines put there for this purpose. It was while I stood on the gutter over the yard, that one lady pegged out suit of underwear, and slid it right in front of my nose, behind a buttress holding up the laundry roof. It was an assistants' work to remove the underwear and pass it up for the next guy who handed it in due course over to Alderley, who was standing on the roof directly over the basket of the lady pegging out the clothes. When she swung the laundry past the buttress he expertly pitched the underwear back into the basket. After about five minutes the old girl must have figured the line should be full, and her head appeared around the buttress, and a very astonished face viewed the empty line. The old girl renewed her pegging out with gusto and in due course inspected the line again only to find it again completely empty.

It was then that all hell broke loose. The screaming brought the others running out to inspect the clothes line. Naturally we chaps had retired out of sight, so the old girls decision was that the devil was loose and raising Cain, and the old dears departed on a dead run for the village screaming as they went.

Probably the most exciting event ever to happen in the village. However, matron coming into the Common Room and finding four of us chaps innocently reading jumped to the conclusion that we looked very guilty. The upshot was we had to chip in a days' pay for the ladies, and give them a personal apology.

However, all good things come to an end, and this occurred when my voice broke and the scene changed for me.