

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

March 2011

Memoirs

Historians and biographers have always depended on written records, whether inscribed on stone, stamped into clay tablets, penned on parchment or typed onto paper. But now it looks as if their sources are likely to vanish into cyber-space. How can they recover the emails, blogs, tweets and texts of today? Even the beautifully low-tech storage and retrieval system provided by the good old-fashioned book is threatened by gadgets like the Kindle, which is being aggressively marketed by, of all people, the world's biggest bookseller, Amazon.

Surely there are very few people whose lives have been so uneventful that they have no memories worth preserving and handing on to their descendants. And surely these would be best preserved on paper rather than on hard drives or memory chips which can so easily become obsolete. Until recently people were encouraged to put their memoirs onto tape – but cassettes and their recorders are disappearing from the shops. So let's take a walk down memory lane and write or print what we see there on paper. This is what a distant relative of mine did in 1949, when she was in her seventies, living in a Kent village.

One of the best bits of these memoirs centres on the outbreak of World War II. She thought she would be too old to contribute to the war effort, but had only just switched off the radio after hearing Neville Chamberlain's sad, exhausted voice, when the vicar rang up cheerfully to say that he was sending her nine evacuees. She turned to a neighbour who had been asked to find accommodation for the staff of a bank, and fended off the East Enders by saying that her rooms were full of bank clerks. These soon went back to the London suburbs, whereupon she took in a woman who arrived covered in brick-dust, having just been bombed out of her flat. She stayed for six years, but her husband had to stay in London because of his work. "You see," he explained, "I am manager of a firm that manufactures tombstones, and business has never been so brisk", adding bitterly "and no Carrara marble to be got."

Apart from growing vegetables she felt that her contributions to the war effort were pretty futile. She acted as the village's Officer for Salvage (now known as Recycling). After urging the importance of saving paper and bones and taking them to the collection point, she often found that the bulk had been burnt because no lorry had turned up to collect them. She was a Parish Councillor and gives an account of the first Council meeting of the war, which did nothing to dispel her feelings of futility. I quote verbatim:

We started with our Chairman, who was not a good reader, stumbling through the list of official Directions for Public Bodies on Air-raid Precautions, consisting of many columns of small print. After this reading had gone on for a long time we took it item by item, the first being the warning for air-raids and the all-clear signal.

"Any suggestions?" the Chairman enquired.

"I propose the laundry hooter," came the response.

The laundry hooter was discussed from every aspect, and finally unanimously agreed as the perfect warning: three blasts for the coming raid and one for the all-clear. When we had paused for the Clerk to write down this decision a timid voice said, "They haven't any steam to sound the hooter at week-ends. Would that matter?"

The Chairman, much annoyed, ordered the Clerk to delete the hooter decision. "Then we must use the Church bells," he announced.

"It's only got one," the Vicar countered.

"In that case it must be rung very fast for a warning and slowly for the all-clear."

"Won't that sound like tolling for the dead?" someone remarked, an idea that was not commented on.

The next item was shelters.

"There are only two good cellars in the village, and one of them is yours," the chairman said, turning to the owner of a drapery shop.

"It's very damp and full of cardboard boxes which can't be sat upon," he murmured despondently."

"There's the cellar at the Stag and Crown."

"It's full of spirit casks and beer barrels, which might be more dangerous than hat-boxes."

"In case of gas are cellars the best place?" I asked.

Again looking at the Directions, the Chairman slowly read out, "Gas, usually being heavy, sinks to the lowest level, therefore cellars should not be occupied during a gas attack."

As this made decision too difficult the question was deferred.

Decontamination came next.

"Where's the nearest station?"

"Eight miles from here."

"Then we must nominate volunteers to collect victims and transport them."

"Don't all their clothes have to be removed first?" someone said. "It might be very cold."

"And take them eight miles naked?" another asked.

"Most unseemly." The Vicar murmured.

Yes, that was the order we found when the book of words was consulted, and as this seemed too difficult, it, too, was deferred.

"We shall now appoint personnel for various posts," said the Chairman, wishing to achieve something. "We must have a demolition squad, a Red Cross and First Aid detachment, stretcher-bearers and transport people, and some of the demolition squad could act as first-aid and repair workers." Then, turning to the Clerk, "You have a list of volunteers?"

Before he could answer, an elderly person who had not spoken before, said in a plaintive voice, "If you appoint all those people there will be no-one left for casualties."

This comment was oddly prophetic, since the village suffered immense material damage, but very little loss of life.

Planning

In those days Parish Councils had little to do with planning, since there weren't any legal restrictions to speak of in those days. Nowadays, on the not infrequent occasions when this Council's views are ignored, feelings of futility can be just as keen as in 1939. But not this time, when we experienced another episode in the Saga of 20 Cattle Lane. In the previous episode we congratulated the architect on his design, but stated as strongly as we politely could that it would be a splendid house as long as he built it somewhere else. So along came the applicant and his architect to the March meeting, having gone back literally to the drawing-board. They brought plans for an equally distinguished house, which Councillors considered to conform pretty satisfactorily with the terms of the Village Design Statement. So, though we will mourn the passing of the last of the unaltered Land Settlement bungalows, we hope to welcome a new building which will do justice to that important site.

Risk

Poor old Neville Chamberlain was hardly in a position to make a risk assessment, but these days it seems that we should assess the risk each time we pick up a knife and fork because of the acute danger of injury from such sharp instruments. We have just received a document headed by very cheerful photographs of the staff of our insurance brokers. At first sight it looked as if they were grinning broadly because they were pulling our legs, but No. These were deadly serious instructions about organising litter-picking:

- Once the day of the clean-up has been decided then a risk assessment must be carried out and a written copy of it kept on parish council files.
- Personal Protective Equipment. Ensure that there are sufficient gloves, litter-pickers, bags, hi-viz tabards (if working near roads) and ensure that volunteers are wearing suitable clothing.
- First Aid. A qualified first-aider should be present.
- Rubbish. Ensure that everyone knows where rubbish should be left.
- Emergency Contacts. If mobile phones are being relied on, then reception should be checked.
- Instructions. Clear instructions should be given as to what is being cleaned, where the work is being carried out and who is responsible.
- If you are lighting a bonfire you must follow local authority guidelines and inform the Fire Brigade.
- If parents or guardians are bringing children along they should be aware that they are responsible for the children and should keep a close watch on them.
- If schools or youth groups are involved, all supervisors must be CRB checked.

All this, of course, refers to *organised* litter-picking. It looks as if the tidiness of the parish will have to depend on disorganised activity. Any volunteers for picking all that red tape out of the hedgerows? Strictly at their own risk?