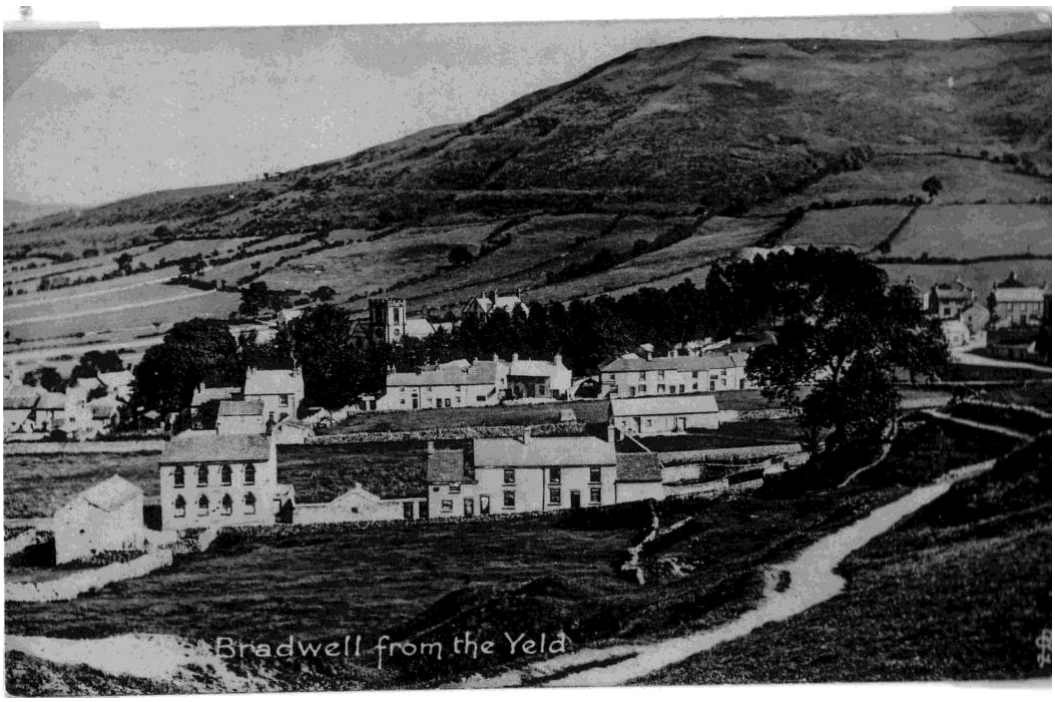
EARLY MEMORIES OF REG ASHTON

Written by Reg in the late 1990s and given to the Bradwell Historical Society by his widow Doreen (Aldred) after Reg's death in 2004

(This should be read alongside his sister Joan's account of her childhood.)

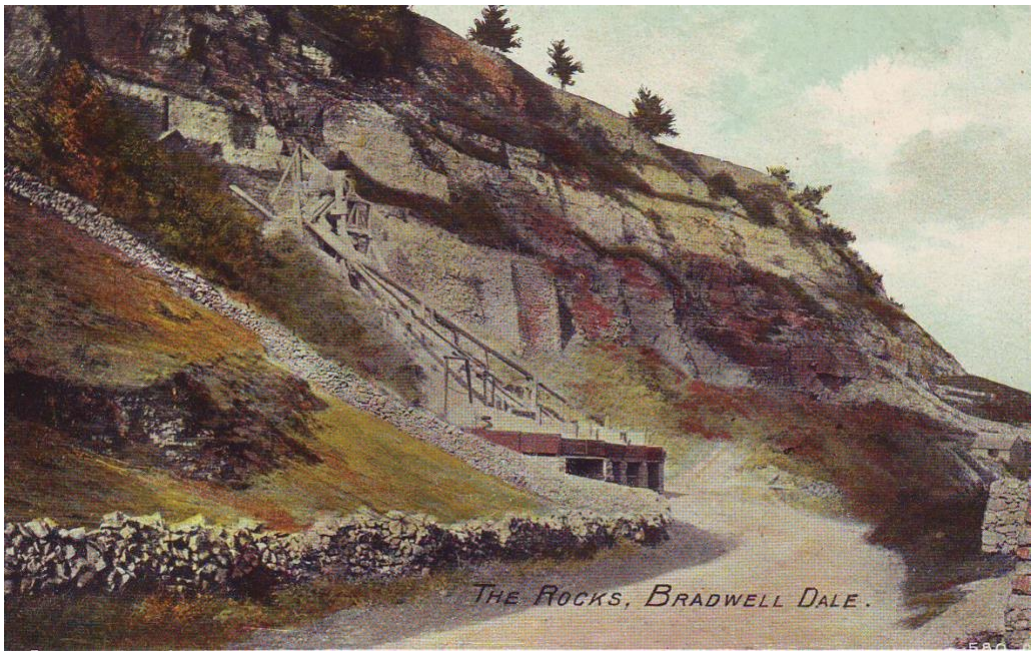
I was born in the summer of I923, the third of my parents four children. My elder brother was Henry, my elder sister was Joan and my younger sister was Dorothy. Our village is situated in the Hope Valley, a basin at the southern end of the Pennine Chain the range of hills which divides the northern part of England. Every outlet from the valley, which was surrounded by hills, was with one exception, a pretty sharp climb. There are no down hills in Derbyshire's Peak District only up hills. Bradwell is a rather bleak little village of, then, some 1300 inhabitants. It was on the route of Roman highways which they had built for the rapid movements of their legions and for commerce. North of the village was a Roman camp and a villa. To the west is moorland, to the south west their road led to Buxton, a Roman centre and health spa. Lead mining was carried out by them, and lead water pipes, from that lead, are to be found in the ruins of a villa in Pompeii. The mining of lead was carried on, after they left, until well into the I9th century and, indeed was one of the staple industries in that part of Bradwell. To the east of the village rose a rather imposing hill, Rebellion Knoll, better known to the locals as Bradda Edge. In my youth, it was quite bare, the only vegetation gorse and bracken.



Bradwell with Rebellion Knoll in the background

This was burnt off each year to give grass a chance to grow to provide pasture for sheep. The old men used to tell us that when they were young it was covered with trees. Since it is no longer used as pasture I hope to see trees there again. Bradwell's name is supposed to derive from the "Broad wall", which was a dyke, the Grey Dyke still to be seen, to the north of the village, which acted as a fortification

against the villainous northern tribes. Approaching Bradwell from the south, the road passes through a splendid dale, partly natural and partly formed by quarry workings, one of the other of it's staple industries.



As one approaches, the village opens out with the Church in the foreground. To the left there are the remains of old lead and fluorspar workings and to the right the "better end" of Bradwell, the Hills. There is a little shortcut, very narrow and very steep called the “Shart” presumably a local corruption of "short" It's quite a climb! So much so that it gave rise to one local poet and wit putting it thus: ‘With panting heart, we toil up th' Shart, and land among the Class!’ The rest of the village was of one main street, with branching side streets, mainly to the west, leading upwards to the moors.

My life really began at about the age of 4 years, the time that my conscious memories start. The days were warm and sunny, seemingly endless, with gentle background sounds of birds and insects occasionally punctuated by the wails of a new baby sister who had arrived on the scene (Dorothy in 1927). Many are the tales of my infamy as a child at that time, such as my lifting the lids of Auntie's apple pies in order to eat the apples, then replacing the lids. It became evident that I was to turn out to be the black sheep of our family. Life then was very gentle and peaceful for we children, living in the country as we were, so quiet that one could almost hear things growing. Cows mooing, cocks crowing, horses gently clip clopping around with the milk floats or coal carts, all well scented with the aroma of a farming community, There seemed to be limitless opportunity for play, hills, streams, farms, moors etc. and a goodly supply of daft old men to encourage us with tales of their youthful exploits much embellished, of course. We didn't realise that life was very much different for our parents, trying to keep their heads above water in those awful days of post Great War depressions of the I920's. Unemployed hopeless men with limbs missing, kids without shoes, were common sights in the towns.

On my fifth birthday, my brother (Henry) presented me with a large cap pistol. At that time our boyhood heroes came on the "pictures", the silent cinema in one of the village halls on Saturday nights. The films were, of course, in black and white, with occasional sub titles. To try to increase the drama, or heighten the romance or to add pathos into the story as it unfolded, a pianist hammered at a battered upright piano. And all this for two old pence [less than one of our present Mickey Mouse pence.]! At that time Westerns were all the thing, with heroic white men wearing white hats carried on waging the great American Dream of genocide against the Red Indians. "Baddies" white men who sold guns to the "Redskins", wore black hats. We cheered the heroic exploits of the "White hats" and dutifully booed the downfall of the “Redskins” and the "Black hats'. The countryside all around us was the perfect stage for us to re-enact the heroics of last Saturday's Western with the big strong boys being the “White hats” whilst we smaller and weaker ones had to be "Redskins" or "Black-hats". However, we survived, and went on, in our turn, to become heroic "White hats" and continue the genocide. At other times we saw the Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, Buster Keaton and others. On one occasion Dad took me to see "All Quiet on the Western Front". I can't say that I understood any of it, but it was topical, as the Great War had only been over for a few years and “All Quiet” was a view from the German side. Dad had, of course, been right through the war and it was still very much in his mind.

Up until then, we had no electricity supply to the village, lighting was either by gas or by oil lamps. But then, in about l932, ‘Great Changes’ began to take place. Mains electricity came to the village, wires were strung on poles everywhere. With the new power, the village memorial hall brought in Talking films! The original hall with it's frenetic pianists and the popping of the gas-engine generator didn't stand a chance and so closed it's doors. Mr. and Mrs. Brown, who ran this revolutionary new venture wore an odd pair who were always dressed up to the nines, were usually drunk and entertained us to their heated rows (and films twice weekly). She was a very attractive lady, rather in the style of a slightly "blown" film star. He was an irascible sort of man who wore pens-nez glasses and an overbearing manner and he vented his spleen fairly equally between we children and his wife. It was not unusual for him to stop the film in mid stride in order to eject some of the more unruly types, and then to restart the film at a different reel so that the plot sometimes became rather cloudy. We would see first reel one, then perhaps reel four and sometimes never see one reel at all! He could thus turn comedy into a tragedy or a drama into a farce! Surely Demon Drink never wrought such havoc in Hollywood as it did in our cinema!

The other main occupation of childhood is, of course, school. There were two schools in our village, the Council School and the Church School. As my family were and I still am, solidly Church of England, we all attended the latter. Of course, it was the better one! It was housed in a rather lovely limestone and gritstone building, which is, still in good order and now serves as the local Junior School. There were four teachers and four main groups-infants, a sort of lower middle, a higher middle and a senior. The head teacher took the "seniors" himself. I was rather fortunate in that I took to school like a "duck to water". My first day at school was in the company of a mixed group of other five- year-old boys and girls and we stayed together almost all of our school lives. We were a mixed bunch, some came from more well to do families, some were quite poor families but most of us fell into the category of the "just-making-do". On the whole I found lessons fairly easy and often managed to

come out top of the class in exams. This did not absolve me from regular corporal punishment for my frequent misdemeanours. At the age of I4 years the time came to leave school, but in those nine years, looking round, we had an excellent basic education which has served me very well throughout my adult life.

As I have said, my family consisted of my Father (Charles Bradwell Ashton), who was a stonemason by trade, and worked on the Midland Railway, later the London, Midland and Scottish Railway my Mother (Mary), who was the most wonderful Mum in the world, Harry, my elder brother, 4 years older than I, Joan, my elder sister, 2 years older than I, myself, then Dorothy, my sister,4 years younger than I. As I have said, times were very hard and Mum and Dad must have made a lot of sacrifices to give us the very best that they afford. Dad worked every hour he could to maintain a sort of lifestyle which today would be considered to be on the edge of poverty. But that was how life was in those times and we, as children, fared better than most. Mum was a most ingenious housewife, who conjured good wholesome food from the air, it seemed, was an expert tailoress, dressmaker, and teacher of the arts of living. We all owed, and still owe them an enormous debt of gratitude and love.

As a family group, we children tended to "pair off', the two older ones, and the two younger. Dorothy and I used to invent all sorts of games to play, using the furniture for "props", the settee for a boat or a train and all manner of games under the table. She was always a very willing accomplice, in such ways as donating her hair for me to make paintbrushes and other such brilliant ideas as I had. Her hair-styles were something to be seen! We were quite expert in ways of extracting ourselves from scrapes by mounting an "angels" offensive. Dear Mum nearly always gave way. One Christmas Eve we had been an utter nuisance and she had just about had enough, when with our unerring instinct we sensed the situation, so we sat on the stairs and sang “Away in a Manger”, and she quite forgot to carry out reprisals, as she had intended. This became one of her favourite memories, and she often told the story. More to her credit than ours, in the telling I suspect!

We hardly saw much of Dad, he seemed to always be working in order to keep us all. On the whole, we had a pretty strict upbringing, Dad could be quite a hard disciplinarian when necessary, and punished lying, dishonesty or lack of respect to others with his, literally, iron hand so that we all, at times, preferred to stand rather than sit!

Our "outer" family consisted of Dad's parents, his two brothers and two sisters, Mum's two brothers and her sister. Mum's parents had died years ago, and only Harry ever knew Grandfather Neil. Grand- dad George Ashton was a stone-mason and builder with many of his buildings still standing to his memory. He was particularly interested in building and repairing "pubs." And repairing 10 pubs according to records. He was also a lifelong Churchman, he had, in fact, worked on Bradwell Church tower when he was young, as an apprentice, and when I remember, had served as Churchwarden for many years. He was a gruff old man, as I knew him, possessed of a caustic wit and a most kindly heart. We all loved him and were always delighted when he visited us. At Christmas time he was always “in his element”, singing carols, for which his voice needed and received constant lubrication and rendering his party piece, usually “My Grandfather's Clock”. By that time the words were getting a little blurred, but we all had heard them so often that it

didn't really matter. When the travelling Fair came on it's annual visit to our village, he always made a point of calling on us to give us some money "for the fair".

One of Dad's sisters, Amy, had married and lived in one of the nearby villages, the other one, Doris, lived at home. Grandma had died and so she took over the house keeping for Granddad's home. Dad's brothers still lived at home, the older brother, Leslie, a stonemason, and the youngest one, George, worked at a local cotton mill. Mum's people lived in Lancashire, so we didn't see them very often, very strong Roman Catholics and so with Mum's marriage "out-of-the-church', a good deal of friction was created. Mum used to get abusive letters from her sister, which upset her dreadfully and we all knew when she had had a letter from "our Maggie." There was little tolerance between the two main Christian Churches in those days mainly it must be said, on the part of the Catholics. They were not allowed to enter Church of England churches, and I have often seen people attending funerals, standing outside during the service. They wanted to show their respects, but would not enter the Church. It was not as bad with the two Methodist Chapels that we also had in the village. Every year, the annual "Sermons" were held in either of the two Chapels, when the resident congregation held a great singing and preaching festival, and many of the C of E congregation attended, The girls all wore their finery for these occasions, and it was altogether an enjoyable event. Dad never missed if things could be managed. He was a rather exceptional musician, his career as a professional bandsman in Lincoln having ended in I9I4. During his service in the Great War, he carried his viol 'in everywhere he went, playing for the entertainment of his pals. Until Bradwell Band's unfortunate loss of most of their instruments in a fire, he was their last Bandmaster.

In his employment with LM & R, his work entailed budding and repair of all types of railway bridges, tunnels, station buildings and all manner of things to do with the efficient operation of the railway. Almost every weekend he would be involved in the inspection of the linings of one or other of the various tunnels in his Area. These were quite numerous, and included two of the longest tunnels in Britain. Constant contact with stone, bricks and lime mortar played havoc with his hands, very often they were covered in cuts and abrasions which the lime and the frost together formed open cracks in his skin. They were very painful for him and he was not, at such times, able to play a musical instrument. He could and did, write out bits of music on odd scraps of paper. I have often drawn lines on the white plain paper in which cheese was wrapped in those days. Five parallel lines, then a beautifully executed treble or base clef, then off he would go, writing an arrangement of a piece of music, just for his own pleasure. His assistance with my elder sister's piano lessons must have been of great benefit to her as she became a most accomplished pianist and, later an outstanding organist. In those days one or two of the Sunday newspapers were on the streets on Saturday evenings, the Empire News, had, on the back page, the latest popular and comic songs, music and words. Dad would teach us all these, singing the tune and words so that we knew all the latest. Of course, in those days very few people had radio sets, and we hadn't. At that time, radio, or "wireless" sets, were, at best, rather crude affairs, with lots of batteries and accumulators to bother about, and the performance was rather erratic, with lots of interference, squeaks and oscillations. Television was unknown and still in the future. Mum had a very good "wind-up" gramophone which gave her, and all of us, great pleasure. Records were easily available, made of a shellac compound, which broke

easily, and small cheap ones could be bought at Woolworths for 6d. Like the Stone Age wasn't 0, I remember that in 1934 our schoolmaster brought his wireless set into school so that we could listen to the launching of the Queen Mary, at that time the biggest ship in the world. I have, still, the memory of Queen Mary, I name this ship "Queen Mary," May God Bless Her and All Who Sail In Her". God Bless Her indeed, and all the once great British shipbuilding industry who built such wonderful creations. I doubt if ships today go into the water with God's blessing!

A lot that I have said has had to do with my various pastimes and happenings which amused me as a child. However, there were other aspects and experiences in my life during those times which have also left many happy and some not so happy, memories.

Times were very hard for everybody, there were not many jobs, the ones there were poorly paid so that luxuries were few, in fact, the bare necessities of life were beyond some people. Unemployment pay- the "dole", was very small, and so it was quite noticeable that people seemed to be growing thinner, greyer and to have lost all their vitality. On our way to school, the road passed across a bridge over a brook. This bridge was the gathering place for men 6d on the dole". They had nothing to do but foregather with their fellows to gossip and bemoan their lot, so that when we passed by, it provided them with a heaven sent opportunity for diversion, and we had to run the gauntlet of their wit and their bitterness. It was quite horrible, sometimes, but as there is no other route, it had to be endured. Four times each day if the weather was fine, our clothes, our haircuts, were commented upon. "Tha's got thi faythers boots on!" "Did thi sister cut thi hair?" We used to long to grow up and join them so that we could have our turns to practise small cruelties upon the young passers-by.

The local Labour Exchange was in one of the next villages, about 4 miles away, and these poor unfortunates had to walk there every week to collect their meagre pittances. There were no buses, and in any case they could not have afforded the fares. A refusal, after two jobs were offered, however unpractical the type or location of the job, resulted in loss of unemployment pay. A heavy snow before Christmas was a gift from heaven, providing temporary jobs "snow-shifting" to pay for a few treats for Christmas. It all sounds rather Dickensian, as indeed it was. Even Bob Cratchit would have wept!

One of the distressing results of the poor conditions under which a lot of families lived was the regular onset of epidemic diseases. Meningitis, infantile paralysis [poliomyelitis] measles, scarlet-fever, diphtheria and others, practically unheard of today, regularly visited at their various seasons, and each year some of the weaker children succumbed to them. Of course, there was no National Health Service, so that one had to pay for medical attention. Doctors bills were always a tremendous worry to parents, although I know of some doctors who treated their poorer patients with a great deal of compassion, charging them shillings where it should have been pounds.

Another season which was a boon to some of the unemployed was hay-making. Not that farmers were generous, they hated having to part with cash, but they preferred to pay by kind such as a bag of potatoes or a piece of meat or some such. Apart from any goods, the men were pretty sure of some good meals for the farmes wives

used to feed them well. Of course it all had to done "on the quiet" as if the Labour Exchange got to know that men had been working, dole money would be reduced, or even stopped.

My family fared rather better than most. This was due to the enormous efforts of my parents, my father's hard and long hours of work, and mother's vast skills and ingenuity in feeding and clothing us. Even so, there were very few luxuries in our lives, but for some reason, with only the same resources, life in our rural surroundings was much better than life in the towns. Freedom and clean air, birdsongs and green fields were something that the townspeople hardly ever knew.

Bradwell had a good collection of local tradesmen. We had three or four joiners shops, two or three builders, two garages and motor repairers, one of which also ran a motor transport service, two or three bakers, two drapers, a water man and plumber who looked after our local water supply, and five public houses. So that catered to most needs of the community. Our gas, which of course supplied most of the domestic lighting and some cooking needs, was supplied by a gas-works in another village, and was serviced by a very nice man who rode an old bike, festooned in rolls of piping [lead piping , if you please!] and bags of blowlamps and brass fittings. He could be seen, at various times in all the villages of the valley, on his old bike. When close, one could smell gas, the atmosphere in which he spent his life.

The joiners were a special breed, too, they carried on a multiplicity of trades. The boards outside their shops advertised that they were Joiners, carpenters, wheelwrights, painters and decorators, cabinet makers and undertakers and funeral directors. One even gave piano lessons, on a Bechstein "C" grand piano, no less! All of them were always ready with a joke or some cheerful remark and it was a pleasure to meet them on the streets, carrying their ladders and paint-pots to some job or other. Next day, probably, they could be seen in frock coats and top hats, conducting a funeral.

My closest school-friend was a son of one of these joiners, and sometimes during the holidays we would go to the workshop and root around in the cellars underneath. we found som odd things such as old guns, cartridges etc. Playing with things like that was a bit. chancy, I suppose but nothing ever happened, fortunately. In my earliest days, the woodworking machinery was driven by steam engines, but later, these gave way to oil-engines. Messing around such things gave me especial delight and perhaps that is what started my love of engineering.

My friend was not terribly bright at school work, so many times I would let him copy some of my answers. The only snag with this was that some times, I would get the answers wrong, and so, with our answers coinciding, it became fairly obvious to our teacher, what was going on, and so, we were probably both caned! We started school on the same day, and stayed together right to the last day, and spent most of the time sitting side by side. We were, neither of us great sports fans, and so, on Wednesdays, when football was on, we would volunteer to mow the vicar's lawns or something. When Cricket was on, if we could not get out of playing we usually contrived to find ourselves fielding in the out-field and pass our time looking for mushrooms. Probably, our dislike of the team sports was that they were dominated

by a group of loud mouthed bully boys. If, when playing football, one happened to score, there would be loud shouts of "offside" or at cricket, when batting, they would bawl "lbw". I had no clue as to the meaning of these terms, and I doubt whether they had, but they were so menacing that it was best to retire gracefully to the outfield and look for some more mushrooms. This must have seemed the least of two evils, as I don't like mushrooms. These impressions have never left me and I still think that such-like louts both as players or so-called fans put off many people from taking an interest in "bawl- game" sports . [I would like to pelt them all with rotten mushrooms!]

Two great delights were when the roads were being repaired and when the fair came on it's annual visit. The road repair gang used to arrive with a nice smoky steam roller towing a van and a tar spraying boiler. The foreman was my uncle Harry and he would come to our home to have his mid-day meals with us. He was a very pleasant man and we always enjoyed his visits. It is strange, but although he and Auntie Amy and our two cousins only lived a few miles away, we hardly ever saw them. People didn’t move around much in those days. Usually families were only together at weddings or funerals. The method of repairing roads was that the tar boiler was slowly towed along the road, the hot tar passing through hoses attached to large brushes with which men brushed tar on to he road. Then, chippings or pebbles were scattered on to the tar and finally rolled by the steam-roller. Of course, to boys, [and girls,] the tar acted like honey to a bee and we all finished up liberally coated with the stuff. It was everywhere! Mum, used lard to remove it from our skins and paraffin from our clothing.

The fair, only a small one, had beautiful huge ornate traction engines, which became an abiding passion for me, and still is! It came to various sites, but eventually the regular one became the field opposite our house. I had a grandstand view of everything to do with the setting up operation, but unfortunately, had to had to be at school when the best bits were on.

I have mentioned the infectious diseases which used to strike from time to time. At fair time I used to try to contrive to become a "contact". Anyone who had been in contact with one of the lesser diseases were very often kept away from school to try to avoid spreading the infection, so I made sure to show sympathy for anyone who was suffering, and visit them regularly.

The engines were "Sally" a Fowler B6 and "The Sun" Fowler R4 and were absolutely beautiful. When they were supplying electric power for the lights at night, they would be rocking gently, with puffs of exhaust smoke and steam floating from their tall chimneys, the smell of hot oil, -heavenly! They also had a glorious set of Gallopers - or roundabouts, with a lovely Savage centre engine. Everything was brightly painted and spotlessly clean, all the brass work on the rides and the engines fairly shone. I had only a little money to spend on the amusements, but that didn't really matter, my pleasure was derived from. Being near to those glorious engines. The fair was also the occasion for me and my favourite enemy to have a fight. This would take place ' behind the parked fair trucks and go on for hours. Nothing was ever resolved, and afterwards, bloody and bruised, we would carry on as best enemies for another year.

MORE MEMORIES

I suppose that impressions that are formed in any person's mind are gained in the so-called formative years of life, at what age varies from person to person. In my case, I am quite sure that what I wanted to do, and be, started in my last three years at school, that is to say, at about eleven years. Mum had her heart set on my becoming a school teacher, which would have been open to me, as it was to both my sisters. The decision times to take this course would have been at the ages of eleven or at thirteen. I had my heart set on a life with engines, machinery and the like, so I, to her sorrow, failed to tell Mum when the entrance exams for a teaching career would be taking place. I also had my schoolmaster to put off also, but I told him that Mum didn't want me to follow up the opportunity, which was of course a lie. Mum never let me forget how I had passed up those chances. That I did pretty well, doing things my way, will have to be the subject of a later chapter.

Both of my parent's families were stonemasons. so that both, my brother and I were involved in assisting at weekends and in the holidays on whatever work was being undertaken by Granddad Ashton, Uncle Leslie and my Dad, who helped out whenever he had any free time. Our work used to consist of mixing mortar, pulling cow-hair, carrying water, and whatever small tasks of which we were capable. Our wages were only coppers, but gave us more spending money for our pleasures. We had a funny way of looking at things, that pleasures had to be earned, in those days.

My brother was older than I, and so we mixed with a different age sets, so that we saw each other, apart from at home, when we were working together and at holiday times. He taught me a tremendous amount and we used to go out in the woods, pioneering, with some tea, sugar, flour and so on, and we would explore, watch the wild- life, cook dreadful flour, water and salt "flapjacks, pioneer style. When we eventually arrived home, tired, famished, filthy and brown as berries, we had had a wonderful time. I still use some of the skills he taught me, such as tying knots, rope splicing, gardening and woodcraft. He had a most enquiring mind, and whilst not formally "skilled" was one of the cleverest people that I have ever known. He missed the chance to go on to further education, due to ill-health causing him to lose so much school-time, and so he studied at home to take, and pass, the London Matriculation exams, which was the entree to university in those days.

Joan and Dorothy, my sisters, both stayed on at school until the age of eighteen to become qualified teachers, and to gain Oxford School Certificates which were also the entree to university. Of course, actually going to a university was, in those times far out of the reach of our family resources. It seems that I was the only dunce