

Living in Hetton Square Part 5

By Martin Lewins

The Earl of Scarborough often stayed at Lumley Castle during the 1920s and would visit the parish church of St. Mary and St. Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street on a Sunday morning. During the service of Matins he would read a lesson, a duty towards God and neighbour. In every station of life there are nature's gentlemen, a dustman, an architect, a chimney sweep and a bishop and everyone has a duty to his fellow man, and not forget the people at the bottom of the ladder. In 1936 I came across many and there is still some about to the present day.

Scavenging in the 1930s was carried out in most districts by hired datal labourers. The ash man had a rate of pay of 15/- per day for a horse and cart man. Few people ever wanted this job for apart from the smells there was always the health risk of disease, with midden cleaning taken for granted. Others as members of stronger unions would get several rises in wages to the cart-man's one. The contractors were given a raise in wages to 21/- per day. This was agreed upon, but within a short time there was to be a strike. The rate was lifted again. The Council were taken aback when the rate rose to 25/- per day. A few meetings later, it was decided in the District of Hetton to buy two Ford trucks to do this important job, so some of the horses were retired. Also to speed up the programme of installing water closets following the opening of the Hetton Sewage farm by Councillor Tom Golden in 1934. Meanwhile Dr. R. Macleod with the help of the Public Health Department, Mr. Bell, Agent for the Lambton & Hetton Collieries, Newcastle University Medical Department and many others were intent upon reducing the death rate of the young and very young to as low as possible.

In May 1937 working hours were reduced from 49 hours to 48. There was a flying circus performing near the new Hetton Sewerage Works at Houghton for a period of two to three days. It was possible to have a flight in one of the planes for 15/-. At that price there were not many takers. The planes used, could take off and land on a very short runway. There was a long single line of trees along the 'old Durham Road' and we could see the planes landing and taking off.

It was September 1935 when I first went to Barrington Boys School with Mr. Robson as my first teacher. The following year was Mr. Wood and when in the third year the teacher was Mr. Baldwin, the maths teacher. It was during this year when doing a maths lesson, Mr. Brittan the head teacher, interrupted the class to ask if any boy would like to join the church choir and would he attend practice on Thursdays at 6 -30 p.m. I went straight home after school and talked to my parents who agreed that I should go as a member of the Sunday

School. When I did go Jack Defty and Leslie Hodgson were there also. Jack was a class mate with plenty of confidence as he had sung solos at the Miners' Hall on stage with his father's charity concert party, whereas Leslie's father worked on the mineral line as a plate layer replacing sleepers and re-fixing wedges and every night and morning climb the ladder of the signal arm opposite number 15 and trim the oil lamp with the paraffin oil can from within the signal box. We attended three morning services on a Sunday and then we were called into the vestry and handed out cassocks and surplices. The vestry was too small for the amount of choir members. On fine mornings we would stand outside waiting for the call to service. At the same time we were moving house to the Downs and I found it a bit of a problem on a Sunday – 10 minutes walk to church then the same back again to home, then in the afternoon it was back to Sunday School in the centre of Hetton, back home again then back to church in the evening for evensong. I was spending an hour walking backwards and forwards. I enjoyed the singing but didn't like the crowded vestry and as a result I stopped going to the choir but not the Sunday School until we had a very bad bout of heavy rain.

My uncle who was staying with us for a few months had saved up to take us all, father, mother, myself and younger brother to Roker Illuminations on a Saturday night. This time we travelled in the bus and outside the museum at Sunderland, special trams were running at very little cost. The lights were very good but the rain again spoilt the event. There was a queue of 200 to see the "fairy dell" and there were hundreds and hundreds of people enjoying the night out. From the side of the steep path next to the bandstand one could watch the band playing. All seats were empty as it was heavy rain but the band played on. It was Roy Fox, as I found out much later, he was not well, and by Christmas he had left the country to live in Australia for six months. Unfortunately he was there for the duration of the war. Roy Fox was American born on the 25th October 1901. He died at Twickenham on the 20th March 1982. He played cornet and came to England with his American band in 1930. He played at the Cafe de Paris and the Kit Kat Club and went on National Tours between 1934 and 1938. When touring Britain after the war, Billy Butlin had him play at his holiday camps. He returned to America in 1946 where he became bankrupt. The end of the dance-band era was 1971 and the most famous song 'Whispering' was soon forgotten.

As most boys and girls of my era you only spoke if you had to and when the vicar called in our "new" home he asked my mother what we two boys did at week-ends. My mother explained that I went to Hetton Church Sunday School and I was complaining about the rain and catching colds. He asked me if I would like to attend church at Eppleton as it was not too far to go while my younger brother could go to Sunday School. My father said that if I wanted to change churches he would give his permission and he would allow me to have his A and M Prayer Book which I found out had been printed in 1901. When I went to the church for the first time I was greeted by the Church Warden who led me down the aisle and who said "You will sit in my pew this morning." The service was Matins and he helped me to find my place in the prayer book and quietly told me when to stand, sit and kneel. I

was also honoured to be given a hassock. After six or seven weeks H.C. the vicar asked me after the service one morning if I would like to join the choir by attending the vicarage, first for a voice trial, with two other boys. It was the first time that I met Jim Heslop and Eric Knaggs. We were shown to seats in the hallway and Jim was first to go into the vicar's study. The door closed and Eric and I were left with five grandfather clocks ticking away in different positions around the hall. I was, in turn, summoned into the study. Piles of books surrounded a typewriter and a tuning fork. I was nervous, but having been in Hetton choir for a number of weeks, was able to sing the scale of C with a bit of a strain to reach top G managing top F only. We were accepted and had to attend three practices at 6.30 p.m. on Thursdays.