

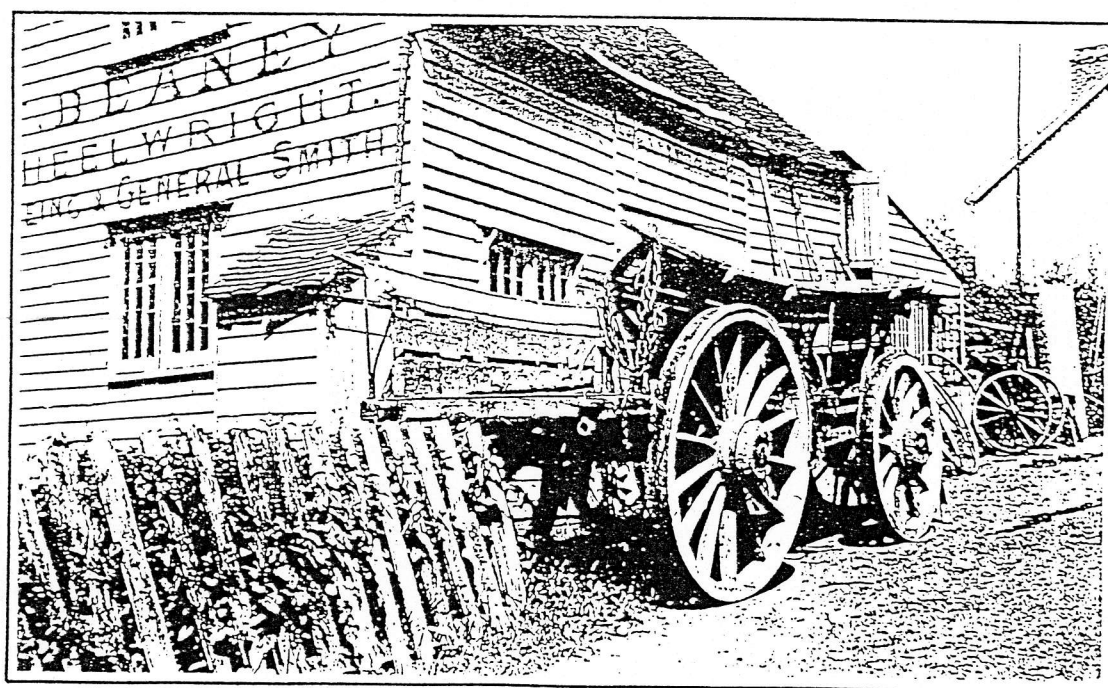
Life in the Village

of

ROBERTSBRIDGE

by

D.I.Martin, MBE.



WHEELWRIGHTS SHOP, ROBERTSBRIDGE

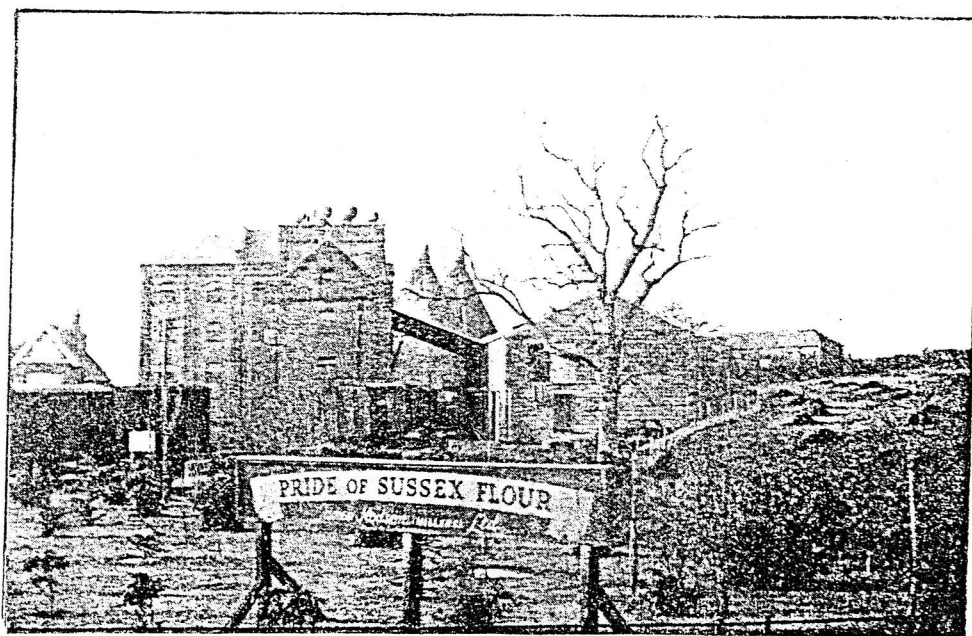
ROBERTSBRIDGE and DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

This is an account of life in the Village of ROBERTSBRIDGE as seen by Dorothy I. Martin, MBE.

It is in two parts,

The first part is a reprint of an article she wrote in 1988 under the title "Seventy Years in the Life of a Village".

The second part is an update of that article ten years on, entitled "Eighty Years in the Life of Robertsbridge".



The Mill buildings at Robertsbridge, Sussex

SEVENTY YEARS IN THE LIFE OF A VILLAGE.

As I was walking to the village one morning it occurred to me how many changes had taken place in Robertsbridge since I was a child. My ancestors have lived in Robertsbridge for many generations, so ~~on~~ before coming here to live, I often visited my grandparents. I was seven years old when we moved here, my father having bought the Wheelwrights and Blacksmiths shop off the High Street.

He was apprenticed there when he was about sixteen years old to a Mr. Funnell, whose name could be seen on the North facing wall at the time the shop was demolished in 1970. My father's name was displayed on the paint shop opposite.

Robertsbridge in 1919 was a very quiet village with very few cars about. One had to make their own amusements. We lived at the bottom of the village at Bridge House, opposite the entrance to the Wheelwrights shop. A small stream ran at the bottom of the garden. This has been filled in for many years. It could be diverted near a bridge in Station Road to flush the sewerage river, which ran parallel to it behind some houses and was turned into the Rother where the new bypass is being constructed. No sewerage plants in those days.

There was a public house on the North side of the track leading to the Wheelwrights shop called the 'Railway Hotel' and it was very rowdy at weekends. I cannot remember when it closed and became a private house. It was bought by a Mr. Bagley who set up a carriers business and sold petrol in cans. He had a large covered van which he used to transport goods to Hastings and on one day a week he would put long seats down each side and take people there for a few pence. This was the only transport except for the trains, which were not so frequent as they are today. Later he bought a Charabanc with a soft-top.

In those days there were many shops in Robertsbridge unlike today, even though at the time the population was quite small. Coming up the High Street, there was Carters the drapers, then the Post Office which are still there. Mr. Carter built a 'lock up' shop next to the Post Office for millinery and one could have a hat made there that would be unique. This is now the ladies hairdressers. Next to that was a small shop run Mrs. Burchett where the children could spend their pennies on sweets, and one got a lot for a penny. Next door to Mrs. Burchett was a barber, then another sweet shop, Miss. Baldwins. Up on the High Pavement was a grocers shop and beyond that a shoe shop.

On the West side of the High Street was the Langham Hotel. Mainly used by commercial business men and next to that Mr. J.J. Barnes' grocers shop. As there was no chemist in the village one could purchase patent medicines there. Next door we had a butchers shop followed by Mr. Douch the baker. His bake house was down an alley next door. Unfortunately today even though the population has more than trebled we have no bakers shop. The other side of the alley was Waters where they sold groceries and men's wear. It was an important shop in those days. It is still there and is Croucher and Fullers. There was a second butcher's shop up the top of the village. We also had two greengrocers where one could purchase seeds for the garden, not as we do today in small sealed packets, but loose, and we could buy just as many as were needed. We had a fish shop in the same place as it is today and Mr. Slaughter did fried fish and chips every Saturday in an old shed at the back, not very hygienic and wouldn't be allowed today.

When I was in my teens a small General Store was opened up Fair Lane where the Dentist now has his surgery. We had a second barbers shop where the Doctor's surgery is held now. No ladies hairdressers in those days, we all had to go to the barbers.

In Station Road there was, as there is today, a cycle shop and newsagents, but the former looked very different to what it looks today. More like a long shed. On the opposite side, where the motor bike shop is now, was the Corn Exchange where corn, maize and all sorts of animal foods were sold. In time this moved further along to where the Garden Machine Centre is now. Nearer to the Station was a two storied building, which was the undertaker's shop, Mr. Harry French being the undertaker. This was demolished in 1978.

There were many skilled craftsmen in the village. Besides the wheelwright and blacksmith there were two farriers, one at the bottom of the village and the other up Fair Lane at the back of the 'Seven Stars' public house. They mainly shod horses, only doing a few other small jobs. The blacksmith employed by my father did many larger articles including iron gates and farm machinery such as harrows, ploughs and of course all the ironwork necessary for the wagons and carts made by the wheelwright. To see a completed Sussex wagon, tug or tip cart was looking at a work of art. Each part fitted perfectly together to make the complete article. The children were fascinated as they watched a craftsman at work creating these lovely old wagons, and when finished they were just great with their blue bodies, red wheels and shining black iron-work, and when they progressed out of the yard pulled by two grand cart horses, who tossed their heads as if they knew what a wonderful sight they were, it was worth watching. In later years my father who was also a coach builder, used to build car bodies and paint them throughout, mixing the colours himself and completing the work by varnishing them. Another skilled craftsman was the saddler whose shop was at the top of the village on the South side of the road where there is now an antiques shop. He made variety of leather goods including saddles, reins etc.

The Cricket Bat Factory was a very small shop in those early days next to what is now Robertsbridge House, but was then the 'White Horse' public house. Later the factory moved to Coldharbour where instead of bats being made by hand they were made by machinery. They have now moved to Station Road to the building once used for making toys. Naturally having a Cricket Bat Factory in the village, and one whose bats were famous all over the world, Robertsbridge had a first class cricket team, who played host to the County Team on occasions.

Where the Bat Factory once stood at Colharbour there is now a housing estate, Oakland's Drive. Coming from there towards Robertsbridge is Hackwoods Estate, where in my young days there was a mixed wood, which was yellow with primroses and blue with bluebells in Spring, and filled with bird song including the nightingale. As we proceed towards the Station on our right was the well known Stennings Timber Yard, at first only a small one with its huge gantry crane, then Stennings closed their East Grinstead yard and concentrated on the Robertsbridge one, but when I was small it was very old fashioned. The trees were brought from the wood in horse drawn timber tugs. It was a common sight to see these tugs, drawn by three or four cart horses, the tugs fully loaded with huge tree trunks, coming along Station Road, and when they got to the last hill the horses had to strain to pull their heavy loads. Magnificent creatures they were. Of course in time they were replaced by motor tugs. Now all this has gone, no timber yard but around eighty houses are springing up where the sawmills and the stacks of tree trunks once stood.

As we leave the village going North we come to Scats mill now producing cattle feed. When I was young it was a thriving flour mill owned by James Hodson, the flour was known far and wide as 'The Pride of Sussex'. In those days the mill was worked by water wheels and afterwards by water turbines, and of course now by electricity. The mill was fed by a man-made bay, wide and deep and the water level controlled by flood gates. The other day I walked along it, after many years, and I could not believe my eyes. It has silted up and is only half its former width. I fished in/as a child and it seems to me that these things should be preserved. Another lost or nearly lost landmark.

From early days we had our own printer in Robertsbridge up by the saddlers. Mr. Whiting was the owner and on his death Mr. Brett carried on the work. When Mr. Brett died about eighteen or so ago the machinery was dismantled, and therefore another craft was lost to the village. In a way the flour mill and the printers were connected, for Mr. Hodson married Mr. Whiting's daughter, and their only son, Anthony, now living near Worthing is one of our members.

Of the five public houses in the village in 1919, three now remain. 'The White Horse' is now an estate agents and before that an antique shop, and the 'Railway Hotel', which I mentioned earlier was demolished and Robertsbridge Garage stands on its site. We now have plenty of estate agents and antique shops but a shortage of food shops.

There is no Church in Robertsbridge; the community is served from Salehurst, approximately one mile away. Parts of the church are thought to have been built by craftsmen from Robertsbridge Abbey. The name Robertsbridge is derived from 'The Bridge of Robert' built by Robert de St. Martin near the original Abbey site. In the 17th. Century some documents referred to it as Rotherbridge, but it only appears to have been known as this for a short time.

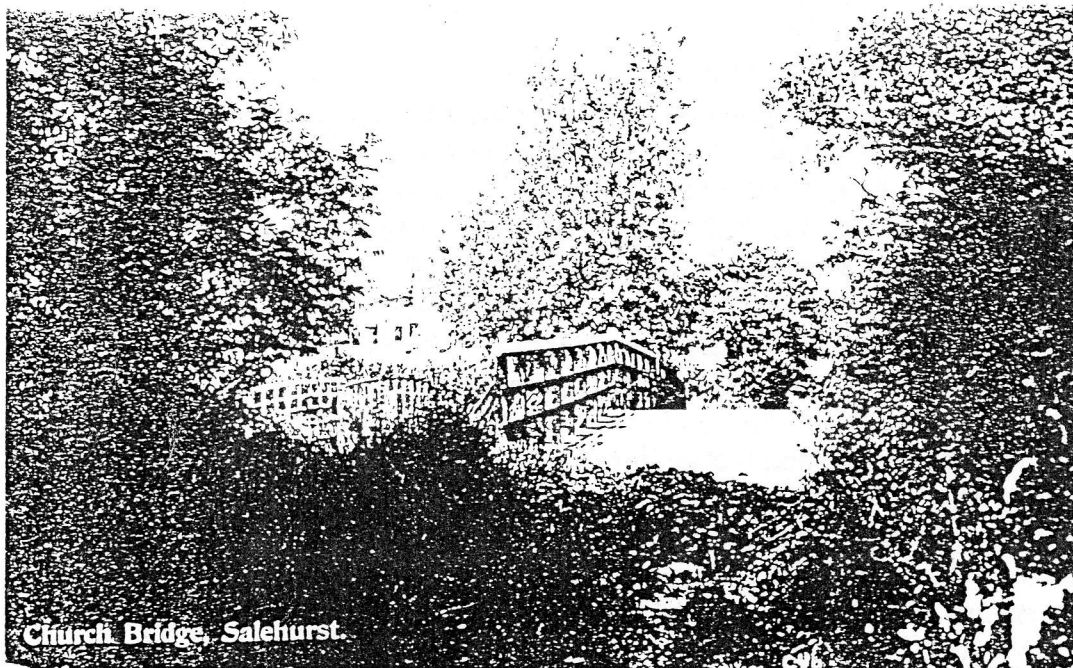
Even though we haven't a church in the village, there were a number of places of Worship. Methodism was strong at one time and Wesley visited Robertsbridge. The chapel was up Fair Lane, and was closed when they joined with the Congregational Church, now the United Reform Church, on the High Pavement. There is also a Strict Baptist Chapel in the High Street and at one time a Gospel Hut in the field between Ripley's and the first houses in the High Street. It was a small-galvanised iron hut. The Methodist Chapel has been made into flats and when looking at it today it is hard to think of it as the place where I went to Sunday School and where I was married in 1942. There was a large school room attached to the chapel, and the highlight of the year was the Sunday School Anniversary when the children sang special songs and recited, and if they didn't wear new clothes they at least had on their 'Sunday Best'. Then there were the Sunday School treats. In the winter held in the school room and the children played games and were given prizes. In the summer their treat was, in the early days, a picnic in some farmers field, and being transported there in a Sussex Wagon, a real treat, and in later years to the seaside by train, usually to Hastings, or occasionally by coach to Eastbourne. Simple pleasures, but we enjoyed them very much.

Th main crop grown by the farmers in my young days was hops, field after field of them wherever one looked, and school holidays were geared to hop picking which lasted six or eight weeks. The children found it great fun, but they had to pick a certain amount of hops each day, then if they wished they could play. It was a source of fun for the children and an added income to their parents, which helped to

buy warm clothes for the winter. The big treat at hop picking time was to visit the Oast House where the smell was wonderful, and to be given a potato baked in the fire. Simple pleasures of a country life when I was a child.

At hop picking time the Rother Railway, as we called the Kent and East Sussex Railway, came into its own, meeting the hop picking special from London and taking the pickers to the hop gardens, and transporting their friends down to see them at weekends. Alas it has all gone away now, Robertsbridge is no longer a junction, no longer a Market Town as it was before the last war. Gone are the sheep and pleasure Fair held annually every September, another date we looked forward to. A Royal Charter was granted to Robertsbridge by the King in 1225 to hold a Market and Fair. The Second World War put a stop to this and it wasn't long before the cattle market also ceased. So now instead of being a Market Town, as I knew it for many years, it is only a village, which it is hoped will revert to its old peaceful way of life once the bypass is finished in 1989. The old school has gone, where four generations of my family attended, to make way for the bypass, but a bright new school has emerged. Unfortunately housing estates are encroaching on the old village, but actually the old houses have remained as they were. Long may they continue to do so...

November 1988.

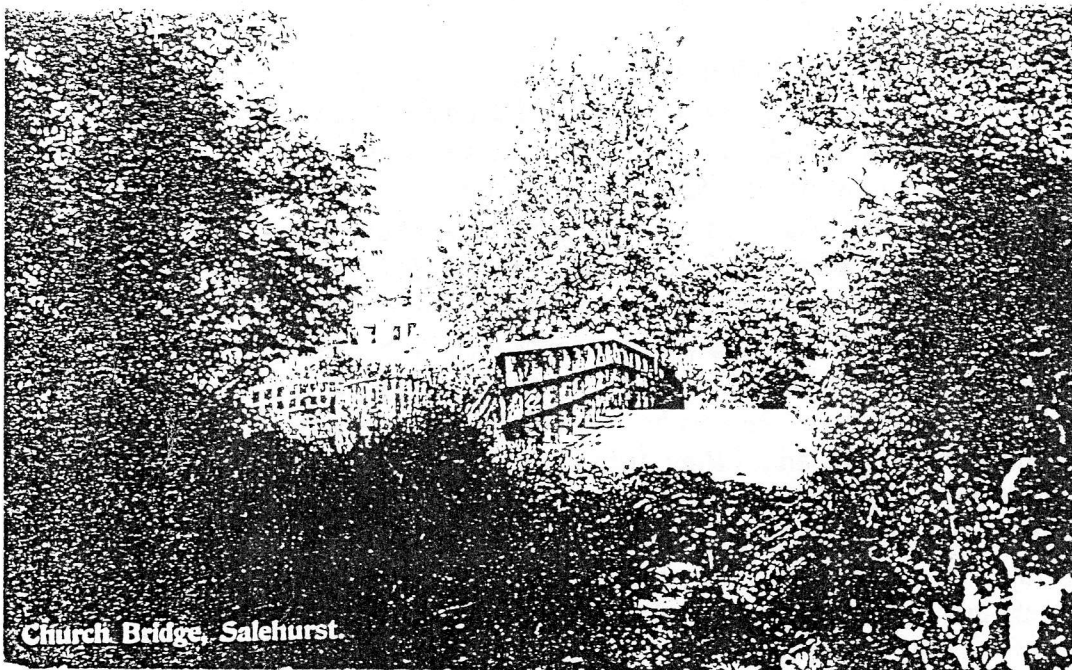


Church Bridge, Salehurst.

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November 1988.



TEN YEARS ON.

It is ten years since I wrote "70 Years in the Life of a Village", and, as we are fast approaching the year 2000 it was suggested to me that I should update it to the present time, early 1999. I think the best way to do this will be to take a stroll through the village, note the changes which have taken place and mention a few outstanding buildings, with a few additional notes about them.

THE HIGH STREET.

Ten years can make a difference in the life of a village. People and businesses come and go, so we will take a stroll up the High Street, starting at the first row of houses on the East side of the village. The first thing we notice is a large flat open space where Robertsbridge Garage stood until 1998 when it was demolished to make room for a number of houses. These will certainly change the face of the village once again. There is no garage in Robertsbridge today.

We pass Rose Bank, dated from the late 14th. century, with later additions, and we come to Carters Drapers shop, now a Floral Boutique. Alas no drapers shop in Robertsbridge now. Next door the Post Office remains unchanged as does the Ladies Hairdressers. At the South end of the next row of houses is another Florists shop.

We cross Fair Lane, one time known as East Street, start up the High Pavement past the 'Seven Stars' Inn, looking much the same as it did ten years ago. It is a Wealden Type House of around 1400, originally called Andrewes. The United Reform Chapel has not changed and a few houses on, the National Westminster Bank still opens three days a week, but when we cross the road it is a different story for the Barclays Bank is no longer there and the Veterinary Centre now occupies the property. We cross over Station Road and find the Butchers shop is still there, but next to this, the Antique shop is now a private dwelling. The 'Woodpeckers', part of a Wealden house originally called 'Craddocks', is no longer a tea room but also just a private house. Adjoining this, what was once the Bakers shop now sells Pine Furniture.

Glancing down the Alley we see houses where the Bakehouse once stood. In bygone days all the bread and cakes were baked there. We still have a Grocers shop, which Croucher and Fuller owned. This is greatly changed, from a family business to Self Service. No longer can one go to the counter and choose the bacon you wanted and watch it cut into rashers and choose some cheese and have it cut to the weight needed, it is all prepacked. Internally it has changed greatly.

Continuing on we pass the old Chemist, now a private house, and we find the Fish and Chip shop is still there but they now sell Chinese Food as well as Fish and Chips. The Estate Agents is now an empty shop. This brings us to the 16th. century close studded house once known as 'Craddocks'. I didn't mention in my first report that the front rooms of most of the houses on the West side of the High Street were used as shops. This building was no exception. The first room was a Tuck Shop run

by Miss. Hilda Lawrence, the middle one as a furniture shop, the lower one a Greengrocers. It as been a private house a good many years now. This brings us to 23 High Street where in my young days the Barber cut both mens and womens hair. When this moved it became an Electricians, then the Doctors Surgery, but it is now incorporated into the house itself.

We cross the Alley leading to Hoathly Cottages. In my younger days cottages lined the North side of the Alley and continued down the High Street. These were demolished years ago and modern shops erected on the site. R.N. French had his TV business there. It is now the Chemist and Nicola Grainge has the Dental Surgery over this. We have another Dentist up Fair Lane opposite the flats, which was the Methodist Chapel.

Next to the Chemists is the 'Bread Bin' where once again it is possible to buy a loaf and delicious cakes, these however are not made on the premises, but brought in daily. A few steps beyond the 'Bread Bin', in what was Mr. Hook's Forge, is now an Indian Restrauant. Ten years ago it was a tea shop. This brings us to the bottom of the High Street and we see many changes over the years. We will now walk back upto the butchers.

STATION ROAD.

What has changed in the last ten years? Not as much as in the High Street. We wander past the Car Park, and the Working Mens Club, past Langham Cottage to Sandy Common's Bycycle Shop. He retired recently and it is now 'Robertsbridge Classic Motorcycles'. The Newsagents hasn't changed externally, but we see a difference in the road itself. It was flat along here. Now they have made a big hump on the bridge and narrowed the road so that only one vehicle can cross at a time. Walking over the bridge a few yards on is the road leading to a housing estate. When I wrote my last article ten years ago there were open fields on rising ground. In the past ten years we have seen these disappear and many houses have sprung up, backing onto the gardens of people living on the West side of the High Street.

We continue on past the Robertsbridge Hall, which has been extended recently, past the 'Ostrich Hotel' and the building where Station Garage served petrol, across the Railway line, and we see a great change. In 1988 ther were some houses on the Timber Yard site, now it is full and houses line Brightling Road and stretch right down to Bishops Lane and on to the top of what was the yard. A completely different view. Just beyond this we pass Bishops Lane and look across the fields to the old Sanitorium, Darvell Hall, now housing the Society of Brothers. It is like a village, housing a vast number of people, in fact approximately 300, with its own shool for the younger children, their own place of worship as well as various workshops. We now retrace our footsteps. Nothing has changed on the North side of the road and so we come to the Station. This has changed little in appearance. Where in my younger days the lovely old steam trains ran, they are now electric, and when at one time we had a Station Master and quite a few Porters, there is only a booking clerk and he is only part time.

We may as well wander upto the Station, where once there was a busy goods yard, with small engines shunting goods trucks about, there is now a car park. The animal pens have disappeared and where there was a tarmac making building it is an

open space. The old goods yard is the Garden Machinery Centre, and opposite on the East side of the goods yard The Rother Valley Railway has a collection of coaches and two diesel engines, using one of the coaches as a collectors coach, where enthusiasts can purchase items of interest.

Adjacent to this is Culverwell's Complex. Ten years ago the yard had very little in it, now its packed with cars and tractors for sale.

Journeying on we now find the Doctors Surgery standing well back from the road and running by the side, from the road and going back quite a distance is the old Gas Works, until recently the Garden Machine Centre, now purchased by Gray Nicholls. The actual Bat Factory is a few yards further on. They have their offices in the building adjacent, nearer the road, which was Sherwood Bros. Builders Merchants shop. We proceed back to the High Street passing the empty shop from which the Robertsbridge Classic Motorcycles have moved across the road to Sandy's old shop.

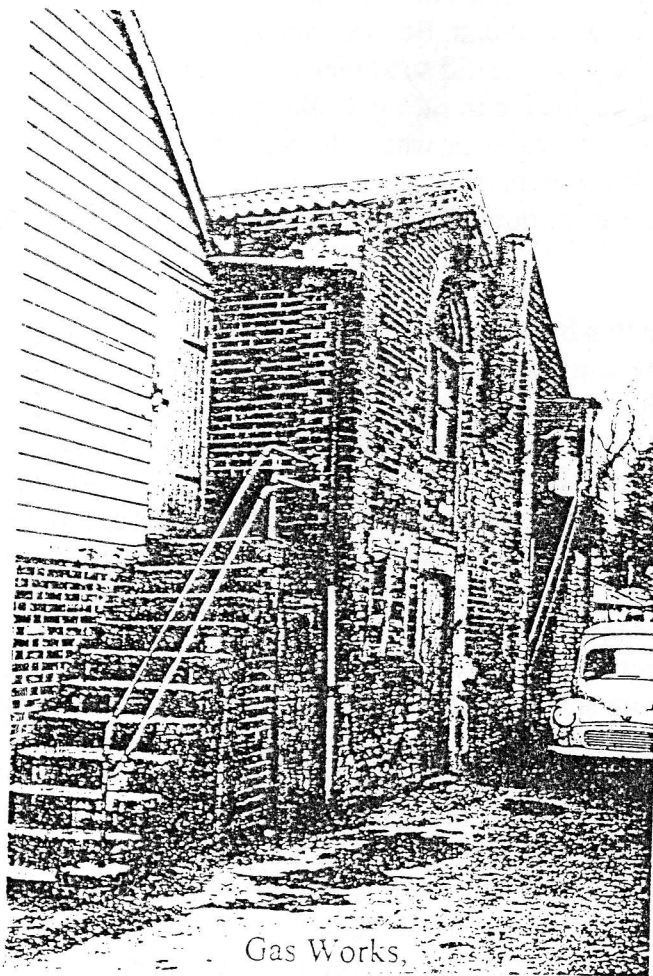
NORTHBRIDGE STREET.

We have completed the tour of the village, but let us look at Northbridge Street, which I omitted to do in 1988. In ancient times there was no direct route to it from the village, the road going via Salehurst. Between the two was a stretch of very marshy ground and anyone venturing on it did so at their peril. They would get bogged down. We will go over the bridge in safety, walking past the Recreation ground, the Cricket and Football pitches, over where the Kent and East Sussex Railway crossed the road. Incidentally, in those days, two cottages stood adjacent to the railway on the South. These were down from the road and frequently flooded in the winter.

Passing Scats, we come to a bungalow standing on high ground. A stonemason plied his trade there and many of his headstones can be seen in the churchyard at Salehurst. When I was a child my Grandparents lived at Yew Tree House, a big house a little way along the road from the bungalow, and I can remember a two storied Carpenters shop on the South side adjoining their front garden, standing flush with the road. A few houses along is Linton House, where, after the Reverend Ward retired, the Vicar lived until the new vicarage was built up Fair Lane. At the end of the street we see the new 'Eight Bells' still looking about the same, but there is a change over the road. When I went to school Mr. Gasson had a garage and repair shop on the corner on the North side of Church Lane. Practically opposite the playground of the old school. Houses now stand on the site. Continuing on past School Terrace we cross the road leading to the Bypass and come to Rutley Close. At one time this was a hop garden, stretching from the gardens of School Terrace to the new houses further on. After the hop garden it became allotments. At the end of the next row of houses stood a small shop flush with the road. It was run by Mrs. Harmer, and the children, including myself, spent our pennies there on sweets. She lived at Quaker Cottage, which stands back from the road. A few yards further on is a shop front, now a private house, but when I was young Mr. Leonard ran it as a grocers shop, later it was owned by Mr. Ticehurst.

I used to look out of the front windows of Yew Tree House on to some small cottages adjoining the shop. These were demolished some years ago. There is now a modern house in their place.

Just before leaving Northbridge Street, we pass Monks House, one of our old timber framed houses, and from there we cross the River Rother again and proceed past the Museum of Rural Life, where in my young days caravans were housed, now a bungalow stands there, and to continue on to the High Street once again. I think of my childhood days when we lived at Bridge House. Remember the real old Country Charactors I used to see in the Street. Such a quiet, friendly village where everyone knew each other and where children played with their hoops and peg-tops in perfect safety, with very little traffic, just an occaisioal car or perhaps a cart or a wagon passing by, and I wonder what the next eighty years will do to Robertsbridge, and what changes will take place to this old Medieval village which I have known and loved for over eighty years...



Gas Works,