

A 'Kindertransport' refugee in Pettaugh by Professor Robert Shaw

The people of Pettaugh woke from their sleep to a pleasant autumn morning on Sunday 3 September 1939. There was, however, a sense of foreboding in the air as if the thunderstorms of the previous day had been a portent of the threat of war which had been in the news. Parishioners went as usual to the parish church of St Catherine for the 11 a.m. Morning Service. The absence of the wife of the rector, the Rev Percy Boyes, from her usual place in the front pew was noted by the congregation. After the opening prayers, first hymn, bible reading and second hymn the congregation had just become seated for the sermon when the click of the latch on the priest's door in the chancel indicated that someone was about to enter. Mrs Boyes entered and spoke quietly to her husband who was standing alongside the choir stall, about to enter the pulpit. After a short conversation with his wife, the Rev Boyes climbed the few steps into the pulpit. With a solemn face and subdued voice, he told his assembled flock that his wife had been listening to the wireless for the expected broadcast by Neville Chamberlain at 11.15 am. The Prime Minister had announced that the British Ambassador in Berlin had handed the German Government a final 'Note' stating that, unless the British Government heard from it by 11 o'clock that the Germans were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between the two countries. Mr Chamberlain went on to say that no such undertaking had been received and that 'consequently this country was at war with Germany'.

Two months earlier the residents of Pettaugh had become more directly involved in the consequences of the Nazi occupation and its treatment of Jewish people in Europe when a young Austrian refugee arrived in the village. His name was Robert Schlesinger (which he changed to Shaw on joining the British army in 1944) and, at the age of fourteen, he had to leave his family in Vienna for a new life in England. Robert was one of almost 10,000 children mainly, but not exclusively, Jewish who were rescued by the 'Kindertransport' programme from the anticipated Nazi round-up of Jewish people from countries under the control of the Third Reich.

The impetus for the 'Kindertransport' programme was precipitated by the events in Germany and Austria on the 'Night of broken glass' ('Kristallnacht') on 9 and 10 November 1938 when mobs of paramilitaries and civilians attacked Jewish homes, shops and synagogues. The pieces of broken glass that were strewn across pavements and streets gave rise to the name of those infamous events. About a hundred Jewish people were killed, and tens of thousands subsequently arrested. Jewish properties were targeted, with synagogues destroyed and thousands of Jewish homes, schools and businesses ransacked. The implausible excuse given by the Germans for these atrocities was that it was a retaliatory action for the assassination of a German diplomat by a young Jewish man. Amid real fears that these attacks on Jews were an omen for worse to come, a delegation met Prime Minister Chamberlain to plea that unaccompanied Jewish children from Germany and Austria should be allowed to enter Britain and be placed in the care of British families. A £50 sponsorship had to be raised for each child so that there would be no cost to state funds. The matter was debated in parliament on 21 November and the measures approved with arrangements for the necessary travel documentation to be issued. Appeals to the public to provide homes for the Jewish child refugees were made on the wireless by the BBC and on 2 December 1938 the first batch of children arrived at Liverpool Street station via the port of Harwich, the designated entry port and dispersal station of the refugees to homes throughout Britain. Jewish children were put on trains throughout German-occupied countries in Europe and the exodus continued until war was declared in September 1939 with a total of nearly ten thousand children arriving in England. One of these was Robert Schlesinger who had endured the long train journey from Vienna to Holland for the Channel crossing ferry to the port of Harwich in Essex. Robert's memory is a complete blank after the rail journey until he arrived in Pettaugh but he assumes that he was collected from Harwich by his guarantor.

Robert's guarantor was James Cutting, the tenant farmer who farmed and lived with his family at Abbots Hall. James Cutting was also the owner of the Pettaugh milling business with a windmill and roller mill powered by a diesel engine. The business also owned a steam traction engine and threshing machine which was kept busy during harvest time. Abbots Hall farm was one of the larger farms in the

village, listed in the 1881 census as being of '190 acres employing eight men and two boys.' The men labourers and their families lived in 'tied' cottages which belonged to the landowner. The farm grew arable crops (wheat, barley, oats, beans and beet) and kept pigs as well as a small herd of cattle for fattening which all provided valuable income when sold at market. Traction power for the farming implements was provided by six 'Suffolk Punch' horses as tractors only arrived on the farm soon after the war ended. Mains water arrived in the village in 1938 and households had to collect water from six standpipes at various points. Another source of drinking water was the village well with a manually operated pump and many properties had ponds to provide water for domestic use. Mains electricity only arrived in 1951 and until that arrived, those few families who could afford a wireless required large accumulators (batteries) to provide the electrical power. The village did receive a few London evacuees during the early years of the war but few stayed long, preferring the risk of German bombs to the rigours of village life without running water or electricity.

Seventy years after Robert's arrival in Pettaugh on 6 July 1939, he was interviewed in January 2009 as part of the Pettaugh History Project which set out to document aspects of the village history by interviewing about one hundred former residents who had lived in Pettaugh between about 1925 and 1965. Robert, who was by now a highly respected and distinguished Emeritus Professor of Chemistry at the University of London, proved to be a fruitful source of information. He not only had a keen memory of his time in Pettaugh but possessed the facility of descriptive power to articulate his experiences for the Pettaugh History Project. Many of the interviewees for the Project had recalled Robert's arrival in the village, noting with interest his accent and Austrian Lederhosen attire. During his time in Pettaugh, he lived with three families at different times, the Page, Boyes and Pallant families. Some of Robert's experiences were recorded in the two books 'Pettaugh Preserved' and 'Backwards into the Pond' published by the Pettaugh History Society in 2009 and 2014, respectively. More recently, Robert Shaw published his life story ('A Life in Science - Gifted by the Kindertransport', University of Wolverhampton, 2015, which he describes as his mini-biography and is currently working on a fuller version) and extracts are given below, with his kind permission.

"It was quite a shock arriving from cosmopolitan Vienna, to rural Suffolk, where my Kindertransport guarantors, the Cutting family, employed me on their farm and lodged me with a farm worker's family, the Page family, in their cottage. There was no electricity (oil lamps), no running water (the village pump), and outside toilets. I was employed as a farmyard boy. That meant assisting the men and doing all sorts of dirty and menial tasks such as sweeping out chicken coops, pig sties, cowsheds, horses' stables etc. I had to assist with the ringing of pigs' snouts. Pigs, rooting for food, had a habit of digging up the floor of their pigsty. To stop them from doing this, we had to ring their snouts. The procedure was to ring them when they were small. I had to grab one of the piglets by the ears, sit it up on its bottom and then grip it in this position with my knees. The farm worker would then grab the snout with one hand, using a tool with the other hand. This tool, in which the open ring was inserted, was then applied to the pig's snout and the ring closed on the upper snout. One can imagine the noise and chaos. Sometimes, when eating pork, I am reminded of the varying diet of my pig charges at that time. They would eat coal and the droppings from the chicken huts when I cleaned these out. This was not very appetising fare, enough at times to put one off from eating pork even when it is served as Hungarian goulash.

When helping with the hay harvest, I discovered that I suffered from hay fever. As I wielded forks and rakes, my handkerchiefs were spread out all over the field drying in the sun. Threshing was one of the most unpleasant jobs I had experienced on the farm. The threshing engine was drawn up next to a stack, on top of which a man with a pitch fork would throw sheaves of corn to the man on top of the engine, who would cut the string of the sheaves and feed them into the threshing machine. Out came three products: (1) the grain, which was collected in big sacks, very heavy when full, (2) the straw and (3) finally the chaff, also collected in large bags, but considerably lighter than the grain. The grain and the straw were the preserve of the men. The job of the farmyard boy was to collect the chaff. This was an incredibly dusty and dirty job. In the morning, on waking up after a day's threshing, I could barely open my eyes because they were so caked by dirt and dust. A job which I had a particular hatred for

was threshing barley. The long spike that emerges from the end of each grain of barley is called an awn. In their Suffolk dialect, the farm workers called them havel. These havel stuck in my shirt, in my scarf etc. and caused me no end of discomfort. This was accentuated, as I was then suffering from adolescent boils on my neck. Collecting chaff and 'sugar beeting' were the two most unpleasant tasks of my farm work, which I hated most. Apart from imported sugar cane, we also get sugar from sugar beet, which is grown in Europe. 'Sugar beeting', as it was colloquially called, was carried out as follows. The beet had ripened in the autumn, when the weather had turned frosty. It was loosened by means of a plough. Men or boys then went along the rows of beet, pulled them out, banged the together to get rid of snow and soil and then topped them with a tool to cut off the foliage. All this was done with bare, frozen hands, hence my dislike of this task.

The other bane of my life in this period was fleas. According to all I heard at that time, it was the worst epidemic of fleas in living memory and it was my unfortunate introduction to farm life. My working outfit in those days consisted of Lederhosen (leather shorts) and light-grey knee length socks. These socks were covered in black spots, fleas, as soon as I entered the farmyard. Nothing I did stopped me being plagued by them. I was told that Keating's powder (advertised for this purpose in 1887) would be effective. I dusted all my clothing and slept in a bed in a cloud of the powder, all to no avail. For a long time, my Lederhosen provided interest and talking points for the locals. People would cycle some distance just to see Robert working in his little leather shorts. Their knowledge of geography was rather patchy. An elderly farm worker, asked me in his broad Suffolk accent: "Where are you coming from boy?" When I replied from Austria, he said "Ah from down under". Apparently, Austria and Australia were indistinguishable to him and this confusion does not seem to be unique to him. A daughter of a Scottish friend, who was on a visit to the USA, was told there by a young Austrian woman that she explained the difference as "Austria is the one without the kangaroos"!

During my stay in Pettaugh, I occupied three lodgings. My first was with Mrs John Page in Shingle Cottage. My second was with the Vicar, the Reverend Percy Boyes at the Rectory. He had earlier served in Baghdad where, I discovered much later, my Vienna paediatrician, Dr Lederer, had found refuge after the Anschluss. The third and final lodgings in Pettaugh were with a farm worker, whose wife, Mrs Pallant, looked after me. I have one other abiding memory of my stay in Pettaugh which was the weekly Saturday's ablutions. Baths and showers were non-existent in these farm workers' cottages. Hence, every Saturday a metal bath was produced, just big enough for a grown-up person to sit upright in it. Warm water was put into the bath. Then the two children of my hosts were washed. Then came my turn, in the same water! After that came the two adults, still in the same waster. Environmentalists would have loved this situation – the economic use of water and heating.

Farm workers' pay was very low, 30 shillings for a 50-hour week for an adult man (£1 = 20 shillings = 240 pence – from the Norman Conquest until 1971 we used the Roman system, LSD (L for Libra, S for Solidus and D for Denarius) (L = pounds, s = shillings and d = pence). A 14-year old boy (like myself) earned exactly 1/3 of a man's pay, 10s for a 50-hour week. In today's currency conversion, it was 50p. My board and lodging cost me 10s per week. My spending money was exactly zero! If anybody who wrote to me, failed to enclose a return stamp, there could be no reply. Then farm workers received a big increase almost 12% to 34s a week, making mine 11s 4d. Eureka, I now had 1s and 4d spending money per week! In spite of all the trials and tribulations of my farm work, I retain a long-lasting gratitude to my guarantors. If it was not for them, I would have perished in one of the concentration camps like five other members of my family."

Robert left Pettaugh eighteen months after he arrived. His mother had also managed to escape from Austria and had come to London where she found accommodation and a job. Robert joined her there and they endured the horrors of the Blitz. Later he volunteered for service in the British Army and was sent to India and the South East Asia Command (SEAC). After the war ended Robert returned to England, having passed his Matriculation Examinations using a correspondence course whilst serving in India and the SEAC which enabled him to enrol at Leicester University College to study

chemistry. This set him on the road to further studies and a career in chemistry which eventually led to a professorship at Birkbeck College, a constituent college of the University of London.

Below are four photographs showing different aspects of Robert's life in England. There are his British Landing Certificate at Harwich 6 July 1939; Fusilier Robert Shaw, Royal Fusiliers 1945; Robert in his laboratory at Leicester University College, early 1950s, doing his PhD research; Professor Robert Shaw (right) with Education Secretary Margaret Thatcher during Birkbeck's 150th Anniversary Celebrations, in 1973.

Editorial note: The story of Robert Shaw is one aspect of the way in which the Second World War had an impact on life in Pettaugh. This particular story is a shining example of how the power of the human spirit can overcome the most profound adversity. One can only imagine Robert's traumatic experiences of seeing German soldiers marching through the streets of his home city following the *Anschluss*, attacks on Jewish property, Jewish businesses confiscated including his father's business, and the persecution and humiliating treatment of Jews. Robert was not allowed to finish his schooling and his parents divorced, causing him to reflect that this was probably the worst period in his life. Then followed the separation from his mother as he embarked on a long train journey through Europe with scores of other children, a ferry crossing of the Channel, the confusing crush of children in Harwich and the journey to Pettaugh. The transition from the large sophisticated city of Vienna to a small rural village with no mains running water or electricity must have been enough of a trial without having to adjust to a life of heavy manual work on a farm. In spite of all these harrowing experiences, Robert persevered and applied himself to construct a successful life for himself serving in the British Army, university studies and a career in scientific research, culminating in a university professorship and many academic publications and international honours. Personal fulfilment has also featured in Robert's life with a happy marriage and two children, both qualifying as physicians.

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PERSONAL PARTICULARS.

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