

# Wemmergill Hall

Memories of School days during  
the Second World War,  
1940-44.

St. Hilda's School

by

Helen Espir (nee Joy)

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### **Introduction to revised edition.**

In 1995 I was asked by Howard Coutts, curator of ceramics and librarian at the Bowes Museum, to write up my memories of my school days at Wemmergill Hall during World War 2 for the archives at the Bowes Museum, as it was part of the Bowes Lyon estate.

It was only after I had finished my account that I learned of the significance of Wemmergill Hall in the early life of John Bowes, founder of the museum, and its subsequent history in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I have included this information as an appendix.

Helen Espir, Rickmansworth, Herts. February 2007

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Sister Hilary +OHP, archivist of the Order of the Holy Paraclete; Sister Barbara +OHP and Sister Mary Frances +OHP, of St.Hilda's Priory, Whitby, Yorks; Miss Joan Mason, former member of staff and form mistress; Jane Frazer (nee Hinchcliffe); Margaret Labram (nee Sugden) and Diana Watts, all school friends.

## **Memories of the School during the Second World War, 1940-44.**

**By: Helen Espir, known to her school friends as Helen Joy.**

In September 1940, I was sent to boarding school at Wemmergill Hall, aged seven. I spent four impressionable years there which I have never forgotten. Such was the spell of the place, that over the fifty years that have passed since, I have made several visits and seen and photographed the decay and final disappearance of the house. This is my account of those years.

### **The House.**

Wemmergill Hall was a Shooting Box in the Pennines on the edge of miles of grouse moors belonging to the Earl of Strathmore, and formed part of the Bowes-Lyon estates in County Durham and north Yorkshire. Situated five miles west of Middleton in Teesdale up the Lune valley, on the B6276 Middleton to Brough road, at an altitude of approximately 1100 feet, Wemmergill Hall was built of grey stone on a hillside that sloped south down to the river Lune. The site was well chosen as it was sheltered on the north and east by the hillside and by dense woodland that rose behind it. Long ago and with great foresight, the valley of the Wemmer ghyll had been planted with beech and other deciduous trees for about a mile above and below the hall so that the prevailing west winds scarcely touched the house. West of the hall, the lawn dipped downhill towards the ghyll, and rose beds had been planted across the steepening slope which finally plunged into a rocky ravine that bordered the wooded valley.

Approaching along the road from Middleton past the scattered sheep farms and pastures, the only indication that there is a house is a white painted road sign, 'Danger. Concealed entrance,' as the road drops downhill through the wood to a sharp left then a right turn before the bridge to enter the drive. The hall was a long stone building of two stories, aligned east to west, the north side backing onto the driveway and the south facing over the Lune valley onto a wide expanse of grass-covered fells rolling away miles into the distance; the distinct hump of Shacklesborough Moss, topped by a finger like cairn, rising in the centre of the view beyond Baldersdale, the next invisible valley

Looking at the roof line it was apparent that the hall had been built in several phases. It started with a small rough stone house with smaller windows, possibly a farm or an inn, and

extended east to include the kitchen and servants quarters, and west to provide comfortable living accommodation. Final additions to the west end of the house were a billiard room and state bedroom, and a grander front door, flanked by stone urns, facing onto the drive. Virginia creeper on the west and south walls softened the plainness of the stone. Climbing roses and jasmines rambled between the windows on the south front.

There were fifteen bedrooms, three bathrooms, at least three lavatories, front and back staircases, hall, ballroom / drawing room, morning room, dining room, office, maids sitting room / servants hall, kitchen, store room, butler's pantry and scullery. It had solid fuel central heating and Esse and Aga cooking stoves, gas lighting, (NO electricity), and a telephone. A 'garden room' with two walls entirely composed of windows, was built out on the south side on the terrace next to the dining room. It opened out onto the lawn and along one side the remaining terrace was planted with *cotoneaster horizontalis* and other low shrubs. The lawn was closely mown and set out for croquet, with here and there a standard rose on a circular metal support. There was a red clay tennis court with a bed of tall red oriental poppies on one side. In the far south east corner of the garden, beyond the tennis court, there was a wooden summer house thatched with heather. Rhododendrons that flowered in late June – July bordered the garden down to the ravine, which was crossed by a wooden bridge leading into the wood from the rose garden.

There were many outbuildings. On the left as one enters the drive, is a long building housing the coach house, garage and stables with the groom's quarters above. On the right, screened by conifers and dominated by a massive sycamore, were the woodshed, a shed for hanging meat, a series of stone buildings, some big, some small (possibly old kennels), one of which was used for making the acetylene gas used for lighting the hall, and nearest the house, facing onto the drive and west end of the house, the Gun Room – a wooden building lined with racks for the guns used for the grouse shooting.

There were in fact two drives; the lower one approached through the main gates and leading to the front door, and an upper drive separated by a garden bed planted with trees, and linked by a flight of steps. An enormous *Wellingtonia* grows here, its topmost branches rising well above the roof of the hall. This upper drive must have been the original entrance to the front door of the old house. Beyond and above it was a plantation of conifers, in the midst of which stood an octagonal wooden building with louvred walls that served as a meat safe.

At the eastern end of the hall was a small bungalow with a heavily mansarded roof, for the caretaker, Dent, and his family. Across the road at the top of the hill was a stone house for the

gamekeeper, Mr Nattrass. The front door had a porch with a pointed roof, and there were gabled bedroom windows on either side on the storey above. One severe winter in the early 1940s, the snow drifted right up to the bedroom window sills. (That house has been replaced by a more modern and undistinguished building). In the wood below the house he kept ducks and chickens, and further down, near the stream, were stone built kennels for the dogs, and a row of wooden hutches for the ferrets.

Wemmergill Hall was a comfortably furnished house and must have been in use in the summer for the shooting season and possibly longer, from at least the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Essentially a plain country house, there were none the less stylish details in the décor, such as the large wall mirrors in the ballroom and dining room corridor. A Regency circular convex mirror in a gilt frame, with, at the top, an eagle dangling a ball from its beak, hung in the drawing room. The billiard room walls were hung with red wallpaper or silk which set off the family portraits. The state bedroom, lined from floor to ceiling with white painted cupboards with black hinges, had its own massive bath with large brass taps and heavy wooden lid, and a four poster bed. The lavatory on the landing nearby was entirely boxed in with wood, and the flushing mechanism was a pull-up handle encased in the throne like seat.

The bathrooms and central heating were evidence of late 19<sup>th</sup> century modernisation and no doubt at the time of their installation were most up to date. Many of the bedrooms were hung with luxurious wallpapers, heavy with roses and ivies and other climbing plants. There were fitted carpets in the corridors and front hall. The dining room was panelled with dark stained oak with a delft rack and mock beams. There was a fireplace in every room, some downstairs surrounded with a tall brass fender surmounted by red leather padded seats. The walls of the house were about two feet thick and this provided space for folding wooden shutters and for window seats in the downstairs rooms.

It was always said that the Kaiser had been a guest at Wemmergill Hall sometime around 1900, - information that seemed shocking during the war when Germany was the enemy, - almost a betrayal, - but it is an indication of the importance of the guests and explains the expense lavished on the house.

The plan of the house was simple: downstairs, after entering the front door, there was a wide corridor with rows of pegs for hanging coats and hats on one side and racks for changing boots and shoes on the other. A right and left turn past the door of the billiard room, led up a short

staircase into the hall, known to us as the 'Green Room' on account of the colour of the carpet, curtains and armchairs. From here there was access to the main reception rooms. Beyond, a central corridor led past the dining room on the right and the green carpeted main staircase on the left (the green stairs), to the office and service area of the house. Here the floor was stone flagged. A dim passageway on the left, with hooks in the ceiling, led to the side door. Continuing down the central corridor to the back door and back stairs at the end of the building, on the right was the telephone booth, the maids' sitting room / servants hall, the storeroom and kitchen; on the left was the butler's pantry and the scullery. Upstairs a central corridor ran the length of the building with the bedrooms opening off it. There was green baize-covered swing door at the east end of the house separating the end four bedrooms and backstairs from the rest of the house. Needless to say, the fitted carpet stopped at the door and was replaced by lino at the other side ! The hall was equipped to serve the parties of guests who came for the shooting every year. Meals were served on blue and white Copenhagen china of the same pattern as a large soup tureen and stand purchased at the Paris International Exhibition in 1867 for 28 francs by John Bowes, which, in 1994, is on display in the French section of the Bowes Museum from the Founders Bequest.

This was Wemmergill Hall at the outbreak of war in 1939.

## **St.Hilda's School and the Situation in 1940.**

St.Hilda's school was founded in 1915 by the Anglican order of the Holy Paraclete, a religious order of nuns, that was started at Whitby on the North Yorkshire coast in 1914 by the Prioress, Mother Margaret. Based at Sneaton Castle, the school and community had both become well established and flourishing.

In September 1939, war broke out with Germany, and, bearing in mind that Whitby was one of the towns shelled by German battleships in the First World War, it was decided that the girls should be evacuated from Whitby. Arrangements were made for many of the girls under fifteen years of age to go to Toronto in Ontario, Canada. The rest were to go to Wemmergill Hall.

I was curious to know how Wemmergill Hall became available to St.Hilda's School and the O.H.P Archivist, Sister Hilary, has provided the following extract from the minutes of the Annual Chapter of the Order of the Holy Paraclete dated 9<sup>th</sup> September 1940, which I quote with her permission. Mr Farndale, who is mentioned as the instigator of the move to Wemmergill Hall, was a local bank manager, and his daughter Julia, was at school at Wemmergill.

*'On Saturday June 22<sup>nd</sup>, Mr Farndale and Mr Moorhouse, (two of the children's parents), suggested that the girls unable to go to Canada should be moved from Whitby which was daily becoming more part of the front line of the war. Mr Farndale knew of a house near Middleton in Teesdale which he felt would be suitable and he had already approached the owner's agent and obtained first refusal of it. The Prioress, after a hasty consultation with the Sisters, authorised him to take the house for one month if he considered it suitable. This would enable the children to take their London General Schools Examinations in a peaceful atmosphere, also it would provide a safe place for the children waiting to go to Canada in the second batch.*

*The Hall was taken on the night of June 23<sup>rd</sup> provisionally for one month. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, the children left for Liverpool en route for Canada, and the same day, the remaining children and the later evacuees for Canada, left for Wemmergill Hall.*

*Only part of the Hall was available until the end of July. At the end of July, it was decided to keep the Hall on at least until Christmas to see what need there would be for a place in England.*

*The Prioress saw Lord Glamis' agent, Major Kirkup, and came to satisfactory arrangements with him. At first, the rental suggested was £500 per annum ! However, it was*

*finally agreed, after pointing to the value of the premises to the Order and their liability, to accept a rental of £200 per annum plus rates. The rates are rural and therefore not high.'*

Thus it was that in September 1940, approximately twenty six senior girls, that is aged fifteen and over, and six juniors (including one boy), aged nine and under, together with Sisters and staff and Chaplain, started the Michaelmas term at Wemmergill Hall. There was no Middle School of girls aged between nine and fourteen, but, as the school year progressed, more juniors arrived so that by July 1941, when the annual school photographs were taken, there were ten in the Junior school.

At the beginning of the autumn term, the grouse shooting was still in progress on the Wemmergill Moors and, from time to time, lorry loads of beaters were seen assembling in the drive. Apart from this we were unaware of the real function of the Hall.

The reason why I went to St.Hilda's was that, in Newcastle on Tyne, my home town, all the schools had been evacuated in September 1939 and it was not possible for a child to be educated there. With my mother and brother I had been evacuated to Carlisle in September 1939. My brother was settled and attended Carlisle Grammar School, but after I had contracted Scarlet Fever in October and been obliged to spend a month in quarantine in Carlisle Fever hospital, my mother withdrew me from school and in March 1940, she and I returned to the Northeast. Rather than live with my father in Newcastle which was under constant threat from air raids, we stayed with my mother's parents at Cleadon, near Sunderland where I attended the local Council school. By the summer of 1940, air raids were more and more frequent, and after the dropping of a landmine near Cleadon, my grandfather was unwilling for us to remain there. My godparents, the Vicar of St.George's church, East Boldon, and his wife, were sending their eldest daughter Anne, to Canada with St. Hilda's School and had decided to send their two younger daughters, aged six and four, to Wemmergill Hall. Their mother was going with them and offered to take me as well. My parents jumped at this offer as it seemed the best solution to the problem of my education. The separation from both her children was a great hardship to my mother as it must have been for so many parents at that time. The girls who went to Canada were away for over four years.



## **The Transformation from Shooting Box to School.**

As soon as the decision was taken to rent Wemmergill Hall, two sisters were sent to see what needed to be done and start to make preparations for the arrival of the girls. Being alone in such a big and unfamiliar house, isolated among windswept moors, was not a situation to alarm them in normal circumstances, but, an event happened which they recounted to the girls on a future Hallowe'en evening as we all sat round the fire listening to ghost stories.

*Having arrived at Wemmergill, they found that the only place to sleep was in the large fourposter bed in the Stateroom. After saying the Office of Compline, they retired to bed, being under the Rule of Silence until after Office the following morning. In the Stateroom was a moveable stepladder, like library steps, with a tall stick like handle at the top. It was for reaching into the many cupboards that filled the walls from floor to ceiling, and also for climbing into the high bed. The Sisters had used it for getting into bed, and after turning off the gas light, had gone to sleep. Sometime later, they both reported being wakened in the pitch dark (they had closed the shutters) by the sound of something heavy being dragged across the carpet. Petrified with fright, neither had wished to waken the other nor break their Rule of Silence, so each had lain rigid in bed until the noise had ceased, and then had spent the rest of the night uneasily waiting for the morning. The next day, the source of the noise that had disturbed them was apparent – **the steps had been removed to the other side of the room by some unseen force.** On seeing this, only then did each tell the other of her terrifying experience in the night.*

The fourposter bed was dismantled and put in the loft, together with other furniture not considered suitable or too precious for school use. Most of the original furniture left in the rooms was labelled 'Earl of Strathmore', as we discovered when stacking tables and chairs upside down when sweeping the floor. The steps stood in the Stateroom which became a dormitory with seven beds, and were never known to wander again. The room was always said to be haunted but I slept there peacefully for many terms.

Desks, chairs, tables, pianos (at least three), a harmonium, gym and games equipment, iron bedsteads, mattresses, bedding, lockers, books, text books, exercise books and stationery, blackboards, crockery, glasses, cutlery, and all the impedimenta of a school and chapel, had to be transported from Whitby during the summer of 1940. My earliest memory is of tea chests being

unpacked on the drive, and one with gramophone records catching fire and watching the records curl up in the heat at the bottom of the chest.

The billiard room became the Community room for the Sisters, out of bounds to the girls. The family portraits remained on the walls. Sister Barbara has told me that the billiard table was sacrosanct and that not even a single paper was allowed to be placed on the green baize. There was a raised dais along the wall opposite the windows with armchairs and sofas for spectators watching the game. I never heard whether the Sisters were tempted to play billiards.

The hall, called the 'Green Room', became the school common room. There was always a fire burning in the grate; the comfortable armchairs and sofa and other furniture, the cushioned window seats where one could hide behind the thick curtains, made it a warm and welcoming room, retaining its country house atmosphere. It was also a convenient place for naughty girls to be sent to stand in as it was on the direct route between the Head Mistress's office and the Community Room, and one was sure to be caught and scolded by a passing Sister.

The drawing room, which I have referred to as a ballroom because of its good wooden floor, became a formroom, and was also used for dancing lessons. The pink carpet was rolled right back and the piano provided the music. Greek dancing, for which we wore a short tunic, was in fashion throughout my school life. We also did skipping, jumping up and down in time to the music – a skill that I never mastered and came to dread. This room was also used for concerts and parties when we played such games as musical chairs, forfeits, spinning the trencher, how green you are, and charades, and danced country dances, Sir Roger de Coverley and the Lancers, as well as the Valeta and Military Two Step and waltzes and quicksteps.

The adjoining morning room, with the bay window on the south front, was another formroom. Both of these rooms had fireplaces with wood fires burning throughout the Michaelmas and Lent terms. My mother said that all my clothes smelt of wood smoke when she unpacked my trunk in the holidays.

The cloakroom passageway that was entered from the front door, had additional coathooks and racks for Wellington boots, *de rigueur* in that rain sodden countryside. An extra cloakroom with more lavatories and washing facilities was added later at this end of the house.

The dining room remained undisturbed but with more tables and chairs – it was adapted as a theatre on many occasions with one end curtained off as the stage.

The garden room was a classroom and also a tearoom and I celebrated several birthdays in there with elaborately iced chocolate cakes sent by my mother from Willson's, the baker's shop in Northumberland Street, Newcastle.

The maids sitting room or servants hall, was the oldest part of the house. It had hooks in the ceiling for hanging bacon and hams, an old black iron kitchen range, a long refectory table, large built in cupboards and windows looking onto bushes which made it gloomy. Its use varied; sometimes it was a formroom, but we often had tea or supper in there. It eventually became the staffroom.

The kitchen was well equipped, and the cook, Mary Roe, and her assistant, Hilda, came from Whitby. What problems there were in catering for fifty or more people with the restrictions of wartime rationing, I have no idea, but we enjoyed home baked bread and rabbit pies from rabbits supplied by the gamekeeper's ferrets. The washing up was done by the Sisters and girls in the butler's pantry and scullery, and it was here that I remember seeing the blue and white Copenhagen china.

Upstairs, the bedrooms became dormitories, each named after a saint: St.Bride, St. Agnes, St. Prisca, St. Ninian and many more. What must have been a housekeeper's linen room, near the Stateroom, became the dispensary and was called St.Luke's.

The attics, which had been maids' bedrooms, and which were approached by a steep wooden staircase, boxed in, and with a door opening onto the landing near the baize door at the east end of the house, were used both to store surplus furniture, and the remaining rooms converted into a chapel, the most important room in the house. An internal wall was opened into three arches that separated the 'nave' from the 'choir'. A curtain hung behind the altar concealed the sacristy /vestry.

The chapel was lit by the skylights in the roof, clearly visible on the photographs of the south side of the house. There was a chapel bell at the bottom of the stairs which summoned the Sisters to their daily Offices and the girls to Matins and evening prayers. On Sunday, we attended Sung Mass, Matins and Evensong. Following the High Anglican tradition, there was plainsong, incense and the English hymnal. Father Armitstead was the resident chaplain, and after 1944, when he had gone to Whitby, his place was taken by visiting fathers from the Community of the Resurrection,

Mirfield, Yorks, and Kelham. We spent many hours in the chapel, observing the feasts and saints days of the Christian calendar and absorbing the Christian teaching of the school.

The garage became the gymnasium. The back part of the building had a high roof, and climbing ropes and a trapeze were fixed to a beam. The vaulting horse, box, springboard, benches and thick coir mats (essential on the concrete floor) were all brought from Whitby. Here we were taught drill.

One of the stables was used as a dormitory, the other as a laboratory. The upstairs rooms, which included a bathroom, were reached by an outside wooden staircase. These were used as bedrooms for the Sisters at first, but later were used by the girls. There was a piano on the landing as you went in through the door, and it was here that Sister Edith gave me my first music lessons. One night, fire broke out in the Barn, as it was known, and a member of staff heroically jumped out of a window to raise the alarm, breaking her ankle in the process. Apart from this very little damage was done.

The drive was renamed 'the quad'; netball posts were set up and it was used as both netball and hockey pitch. The Gun Room became the Games Shed, and the racks made for guns were filled with hockey sticks, tennis racquets and rounders and cricket equipment. The croquet lawn was suitable for rounders but not flat enough for cricket. Even in rounders, the deep fielder was down the hill among the rose beds and out of sight of the game, and could only wait patiently for balls to come her way.

As the numbers of girls increased and the accommodation became filled to capacity, the Sisters were obliged to move into a corrugated iron shed in the wood. Then, extra room was provided by building a long wooden hut in the wood to the east of the tennis court. At first, this was used as extra dormitories until a section of the roof was blown off one night during a gale. I was sleeping in the hut at the time and remember waking up and seeing the stars overhead and the treetops tossing from side to side. No-one was hurt, and we were put to bed for the rest of the night, sharing top to toe with another girl. It was a great excitement for us and became part of the history of the school, but it must have caused many problems for the Sisters. After that, the hut was used as classrooms, each being heated by a round iron stove standing in the middle of the room, with a long metal chimney going up through the roof – ideal for toasting bread and biscuits.

## School Life.

The school followed the standard curriculum of the day, leading up to London University Matriculation and School Certificate. All the usual subjects were taught: English, Scripture, Latin, French, History, Geography, Maths, Biology, Art, Needlework, Music, Drill (gym / PE), Dancing, Games, Hygiene and Domestic Science. Classes were very small and no doubt we received a lot of individual attention. The teachers were both Sisters and lay staff.

The standard school day was: 7am. Rising bell; 7.20. Chapel; 8am. Breakfast, followed by bed making. Lessons in 40 minute periods started at 9.15, and after a break for milk and an oatmeal biscuit, continued until 1pm lunch. The afternoon was divided into two periods, after which we changed out of school uniform into our own clothes for tea. From 4.45 – 6pm we did supervised prep (homework). Supper was at 6.30, and at 7.30 we went to bed. Baths were organised on a rota system. We were kept busy most of the day and our free time was limited. Lessons were as usual on Saturday mornings. No school work was done on Sundays.

During my first term I remember changing my hand writing from *copper plate*, as taught in Cleadon village school, to *Marian Richardson* by copying extracts from Dickens and Shakespeare. We read many Shakespeare plays, acting them in class as we went. Scripture, with bible stories from the Old Testament, was taught by the Chaplain. We had a very lively French teacher, Miss Redhead, who taught us French songs (which I can still remember) as well as the usual grammar. Latin lessons could be very lively, and I remember vividly how, after hearing the story of the fall of Troy, when we were playing in the garden afterwards, we re-enacted the death of Hector as he was dragged round the walls of Troy, dragging each other round the rose garden, bumping over the grass.

In hygiene we were taught first aid, how to make beds with ‘hospital corners’, and how to give bed baths. Domestic Science was the first lesson every morning and was in fact a euphemism for household chores. We learnt how to sweep carpets with a handbrush having first scattered damp tea leaves to keep down the dust. All the cleaning was done using brushes and carpet sweepers; not having electricity, there were no vacuum cleaners. Doing the vegetables was another of these chores, and a friend remembers being obliged to scrub potatoes for a whole term.

Biology lessons were often conducted outside. We looked at wild flowers on the pastures, and on the moor, both among the heather and in the boggy patches. Teesdale is well known for its alpine flora and our teacher, Sister Prudence, conveyed her enthusiasm to us all for the marsh

marigolds, heartsease violas, birds eye primroses, tormentil, sundew and many other flowers. We paddled in the river Lune searching for caddis fly larvae, and sought out the toadstools in the woods and other large fungi that grew on the fallen trees. We became familiar with the grouse, plovers, curlews and skylarks on the moor, sometimes finding their nests in the grass.

Games for the Juniors consisted of Rounders in the summer and walks in the winter. The Seniors played tennis, netball and hockey, and I suspect that in the early days there were not enough Juniors to make up teams for netball. Every afternoon we went for a walk, either in the woods where we gathered firewood and brought it back to be dried in the woodshed, or along the road as far as the Chapel in the Middleton direction, or as far as the bend beyond the end of the wood in the Brough direction. On Saturday afternoons we had a longer walk with our form mistress and could go much further onto the moors or along the river. Once a term, a school run was organised as far as the Chapel and back, which I hated.

In the summer we played in the garden, had dens under the rhododendrons and under the yew trees behind the Gun Room. We were given tiny garden plots to cultivate, planting seeds at the beginning of the Summer term; the time was too short for anything to grow to maturity but it started many of us off as future gardeners. We never tired of exploring the woods round the Hall, and the outhouses – in particular the stinking place where the gas was made, the empty cans of brightly coloured chemicals scattered about, was a place of fascination at which we peered from a safe distance.

The routine of school life was cheered by events linked to festivals in the church calendar or by end of term concerts in which everyone had to perform. If you had piano lessons, you played your exam pieces. I remember reciting Shakespeare's, '*When icicles hang by the wall,* ' and never really understood what '*greasy Joan*' was doing when she '*keeled the pot.*' The Sisters joined in the performances, reciting poems and telling stories.

In the Michaelmas Term there was Hallowe'en – ghost stories round the fire, or ghost plays such as '*The Hand of Glory*', - the story of the Spital Inn on Stainmore. St.Hilda's Day (November 17<sup>th</sup>), the patron saint of the school, was very important. We were obliged to learn the history of the Saxon kings in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the events in the life of St.Hilda, a Saxon princess, and the church at that time; a tradition that had grown up in the school at Whitby and which always culminated in a walk to Whitby Abbey. At Wemmergill we had to content ourselves with turning our shoes towards Whitby Abbey to ensure a fine day, rather like Moslems turning to face

Mecca. In the evening there was an entertainment by the staff. Towards the end of term, there was the Christmas play, carol service and Christmas party when the Chaplain arrived by various means disguised as Father Christmas.

In the Lent Term, there was a Fancy Dress party before Ash Wednesday. When I was eight years old in 1941, my mother made me a very smart Robin Hood outfit in green which had a long pheasant's feather in the hat that, to my embarrassment, tickled Sister Edith in the face during the party. My most successful effort when I was ten in 1943, was as a 'squander bug', dressed in a sack which had £ signs painted all over it, and wearing black stockings on my arms and legs. Unheard of since the war, the squander bug was a topical government propaganda figure aimed at discouraging people from wasting anything, especially money, and figured in countless advertisements in the newspapers at the time. Another excitement was the Oxford v. Cambridge netball match which coincided with the Boat race, an event which drummed up a surprising amount of partisan support considering that, apart from some of the Sisters and staff, we had little connection with either university.

In the Summer Term, there was the Whit Monday picnic when the whole school set off across the moors for some distant objective; the Fish lake and the Standards – a group of cairns on top of Forest Edge, a high fell about five miles northwest of Wemmergill was one such walk. The two really challenging walks were Mickle fell, a 2,247 ft high fell to the northwest, and Shacklesborough Moss, 1,489 ft, the tantalising hump to the south that we looked at daily. Each demanded a full day's hard effort across boggy moorland. I did reach Shackleborough at the age of ten and had the satisfaction of placing a stone on top of the cairn, but did not attempt to climb Mickle Fell until the 1970s.

At haymaking time, some of the girls went to help at Mr Tallentire's farm which was beyond the wood to the west of the hall. The afternoon was spent raking and turning over the hay and if it was dry enough, raking it into haycocks. It was hard work but well rewarded by farmhouse tea with a great spread of homemade bread and cakes that we had afterwards. The farmer's daughter, Lorna Tallentire, came and boarded at Wemmergill even though she could see her own house from school.

The Summer Term ended in late July with Speech day, with an invited dignitary to present the prizes; one year the Provost of Blackburn came. The assembly was held in the garage and every effort was made to enhance the dignity of the occasion.

Half term was on one Saturday per term from 11 am to 6pm and few parents were able to make the journey. Exeats had not been invented.

The winters of the early 1940s were hard and there was a lot of snow which lay for weeks. I remember waking one morning and looking out onto the drive which had been transformed overnight by deep snow and seeing Dent, the caretaker, walking towards the front door with snow up to his knees. Jane Frazer, (nee Hinchcliffe), remembers her father visiting for half term in February 1945, in the snow. They went for a walk in the woods and for weeks afterwards she saw her father's distinctive footprints frozen in the snow ! In the day time, as temperatures rose, there would be a brief thaw to be followed by a further hard frost. This resulted in spectacular icicles hanging from the gutters along the north side of the house. We suffered from chilblains on our toes, but I have no memories of being cold and miserable. There was central heating in the corridors, which in those days was a great luxury and unknown in ordinary houses, and constant wood fires in the downstairs rooms, convenient for baking potatoes in the ashes.

The climate in the Pennines is very wet and for days on end we looked out onto grey mist and fine rain hanging in the wind and blowing in tattered shreds across the landscape, blotting out Shacklesborough and the distant fells.

The school uniform with its emphasis on layers of warm underclothes was successful in keeping us warm; - woollen vest, *Chilprufe* liberty bodice (to which suspenders were attached for our thick black stockings), and woollen navy blue knickers inside which we wore white cotton knicker linings. A navy blue tunic and green blouse was worn on top. Navy coat and gaberdine with a round brimmed velour hat and school hat band, plus a variety of outdoor, indoor and games shoes and Wellington boots, completed the outfit, all of which could be purchased from Marshall and Snellgrove in Harrogate and York. This was still the era of natural fibres; rayon and nylon had been invented but had not permeated the textile industry.

The school doctor made annual visits from Whitby to inspect our tonsils and adenoids which were thought in those days to be harbours of infection and best removed. He also came to



immunise us against diphtheria in the early 1940s – the first public programme of immunisation since vaccination against smallpox. The doctor from Middleton was available for day to day emergencies and one girl remembers going by taxi from Wemmergill to his surgery to have her veruccas dealt with. There were epidemics of measles and scarlet fever on more than one occasion. Girls suffering from scarlet fever were sent to Romalldkirk isolation hospital. One bedroom was known as the Sick Room. School health was taken care of by the Matron. Syrup of Figs, senna pod tea and castor oil were among the medicines administered. One girl reportedly became addicted to Syrup of Figs, going every night for a dose. A large spoonful of Malt and Cod Liver Oil, thick brown treacly stuff in jars, was swallowed by most girls every morning to provide more vitamins. There was little fruit available apart from apples so any vitamin supplements were welcomed. I remember suffering from boils from time to time while I was at school. As there were no antibiotics then, these could be quite serious. At the beginning of every term we all had to have our heads inspected for nits, a process that continued throughout my school life.

Going to boarding school under ten years of age was a disturbing experience for some. But looking back, I can recall very few children who suffered from prolonged home sickness, or other problems such as bed wetting. One girl was an ink drinker and roamed the school with blackened lips, one or two ran away but never got further than Middleton. Some girls hated being at Wemmergill but I loved it and my overall impression is of being happy there and feeling part of a busy community. School discipline was maintained by a system enforced by the girls themselves. There was a set of school rules such as, silence in the dormitory, and a system of reporting any infringements oneself. Each form had a prefect who kept a list of all the names of the girls in the form, and every day we had to report our misdemeanours. We were set high ideals to aim for as a school and as individuals, and had regular assessments of our success or failure. Public criticism of individual behaviour was not spared and I have never forgotten being told sarcastically at the age of eight or nine, by my form mistress, that I ‘was not a paragon of virtue.’ I expect she was right !

## **The Effects of the War**

It is difficult today in 1995, to imagine the almost total isolation which surrounded Wemmergill Hall in 1940. Although only 5 miles distant from Middleton in Teesdale, we never went further than we could walk. Some of the senior girls had bicycles and went to Middleton occasionally, but this was stopped after one girl's brakes failed on Bow Bank and she had a nasty fall. A weekly bus came into the drive every Wednesday to take people to Barnard Castle on market day, the post office van called daily and there were deliveries of food, fuel and laundry.

There was little traffic on the road and petrol was severely rationed so that even people fortunate enough to own a car were unable to use it except in emergencies or if their job demanded it. The railway went as far as Middleton in Teesdale then, and most girls came by train via Darlington to be met by bus at Middleton for the journey to Wemmergill. At the end of term, we went home by the same means, catching the 6.50am train to Darlington, - an exciting journey from school starting in the dark at 5.30 in the early morning. Once, at the end of the Christmas term, the weather became so threatening with snowstorms that we were all sent home a day early rather than risk being snowed up at Wemmergill.

On one or two occasions, I was taken back to school by car, - a glorious drive over the moors from Tyneside across Weardale and down into Teesdale. My parents, who had no car, became friends with another parent, the Vicar of Medomsley's wife, Mrs Coates. My mother has recounted how on one occasion after saying goodbye to her darling child, she was overcome by emotion as she was driven away. Her friend, seeing my mother's shattered composure, offered her a cigarette, saying that she thought she needed it !

One member of staff, Joan mason, a former pupil at Whitby, taught us games and drill. Her home was in St.Alban's, Herts, and to escape the air raids, her parents came to live in Middleton in Teesdale. She recalls that on Friday afternoons, the lay members of staff went into Middleton either by bicycle or if there was snow on the ground, on foot, to do their shopping, - a ten mile round trip - and always ended up having tea in her parent's cottage. Her father joined in with the staff plays.

Army convoys rumbled past along the road, and sometimes tanks screeched and squealed as they rolled by on their metal tracks, cutting up the road surface. Every year in early summer we

were awakened by the clip clopping of hooves as gypsies went down the hill with their ponies and horses on the way to Brough and the Appleby Horse Fair.

At night we heard aeroplanes overhead and tried to guess whether they were 'ours' or German. All the ports and large towns along the east coast were bombed. During the school holidays in Newcastle I experienced many air raids, and have vivid recollections of nights spent sitting in the underground shelter in the back lane behind our house in Manor House Road, Jesmond, which we shared with many other families from the street. Sticks of bombs fell across Jesmond, destroying houses at random, dive bombers were heard overhead, anti-aircraft fire and tracer shots all added to the din, excitement and terror during these raids. For me the most frightening thing was to be woken at night by searchlights sweeping across the sky, heralding the sirens that soon followed. My father was a Firewatcher and spent many nights on duty at his office in Newcastle ready to spring into action with stirrup pump and sandbags if there was an incendiary bomb raid.

At one period the moors were strewn with strips of aluminium foil, said to have been dropped by German planes to render the radar useless. The chance of meeting German parachutists on the moors was always at the back of our minds, (exaggerated by the more imaginative ones among us), as was the threat of aircraft crashing on the remote hill tops. In fact, after I had left Wemmergill and gone to Whitby in 1944, a British Stirling bomber on a night flying training flight, crashed on Mickle Fell, killing all the crew. In the early 1970s, thirty years after the event, the wreckage still lay there, the engines and fuselage clearly distinguishable. It was to find this World War 2 relic that I climbed Mickle Fell with my family, my eleven year old son Adam being the driving force on this occasion.

The Hall had to be blacked out every night and fortunately the wooden shutters were ideally suited for this. After lights out, the shutters were opened and we could see the moonlight on the fells. A farm near the river Lune always had a light showing from a window and we were convinced that there was a German spy living there.

We gathered sphagnum moss from the bogs on the moor to be used in medical dressings as part of our war effort.

Many of the girls had relatives in the armed services, and several suffered the loss of a father or brother. However, no fuss was made about this and unless you were personally

involved, you were unaware of the situation. There were daily papers and a radio but of course no television. The anxieties and stresses of the adult world did not extend into our lives. We were totally absorbed by Wemmergill Hall and its surroundings.

Food was rationed, but from a child's point of view, only sweet rationing impinged on our lives. Every Saturday after lunch, a bag of sweets was brought to the formroom and divided equally between every member of the form. Perhaps ten sweets were allocated to each of us which lasted until the next day. After that we made do with foraging in the woods for wild strawberries and the bitter sweet leaves of wood sorrel. Eating toothpaste was another substitute for sweets and I recall the different flavours of Macleans, Kolynos, Euthymol, Colgates and Gibbs with a certain relish ! Children are always hungry and seeking to supplement meals but I am sure we were well fed.

Every day there was a cooked breakfast with porridge and boiled eggs or bacon, and a hot lunch with many stews and steamed puddings. Tea and supper were mainly bread and butter or bread and dripping with tea or hot cocoa and with rock buns, slabs of chocolate or fruit cake at tea time. The senior girls had a cooked supper, and after they went back to Whitby in January 1944, I found myself in the top form with responsibilities such as ringing the rising bell and lighting the gas lights in the dormitories at 7am. I was also promoted to having 'senior supper'. Later in the war tins of orange jelly and delicious blackcurrant puree which we spread on bread provided more vitamins. Apart from birthdays, parents were not permitted to send food parcels so we did not have individual tuck boxes.

## Postscript

Reflecting on my schooldays at Wemmergill from an adult perspective has made me realise the amount of organisation required to make the school function from day to day and caused me to consider the practical problems involved.

Feeding fifty to sixty people, doing the laundry, keeping the house warm and gas lit, providing enough accommodation, plus finding teachers for the subjects that the Sisters could not cover and arranging external examinations, were daunting tasks in such an isolated place and compounded by wartime restrictions and rationing.

I am filled with admiration at the way the Sisters and staff coped and the happy atmosphere they created. I am staggered at the amount of work Dent, the caretaker, must have done, being responsible for the gas lighting, the central heating, the hot water supply, and for providing wood and fuel for the kitchen stoves and at least seven open fires daily. Occasionally the gas supply failed and we had to resort to candles. The garden had to be kept tidy and I am reminded that in 1944, an Italian prisoner of war came as a gardener. He spent a lot of time picking balls out of the ravine and teaching the girls how to say '*grazie*' (thank you). The kitchen waste must have been used to feed pigs as more than one pig was slaughtered on the drive in front of the meat storehouse during those years; an event which we watched with fascination and which provided excellent bacon and ham. Our only reference to our noble landlord was Claude, the school cat, named after Lord Glamis.

Life has changed to such an extent in the fifty years that have passed since 1944 that our lives at Wemmergill Hall seem almost closer to Charlotte Bronte's schooldays at Cowan Bridge (also in the Pennines) than to the present day. Like her school, St.Hilda's was for the daughters of the clergy and founded on deeply held Christian principles. However, unlike her, we were in relatively comfortable surroundings, well fed, and not plagued by typhus and TB and were protected against diphtheria. For us it was a happy experience; the same could not be said for the Bronte sisters.

St.Hilda's school left Wemmergill Hall in 1945. The building stood for a further forty years but during that time the inside was gutted and it was used as a barn. In the 1970s, after my family's expedition up Mickle Fell, we visited the Hall and my son and I climbed in through one

of the kitchen windows. The building had been reduced to a shell and it was a strange experience picking our way across the rotting remains of the ground floor as I described to Adam what it had been like !

Photographs taken by me and my friends show the deterioration over those years. Finally, at the end of the 1980s the hall was demolished, together with some of the outbuildings. Today, all that remains is a flat stretch of land which was the site of the hall, and some piles of rotting timbers and stones poking through the grass. The once closely mown lawn is a tussocky field and the tennis court is covered with trees. The footbridge that crossed over the ravine collapsed years ago, but the rhododendrons and the iron fence are still there.

Although the view over the fells to Shacklesborough remains unchanged, the Lune valley is now filled with the waters of Selset reservoir so the farms and Lune bridge have all gone. The dense conifer wood below the gamekeeper's house has been cut down but the beech trees remain. The dog kennels are still full of barking hounds of various types but there are no signs of ferrets or hutches.

Reminiscing with my school friends about Wemmergill, I have been surprised how many of them have revisited and photographed the place on many occasions over the years, testifying to the deep and lasting impression it made on our lives and to the love we all felt for the place.

## Appendix

Since completing this account I discovered that Wemmergill Hall had played a significant part in the early life of John Bowes, Esq, of Streatlam, founder and builder of the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle.

John Bowes, 1811-85, was the illegitimate son of John, 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Strathmore, 1769-1820, and Mary Millner, 1787-1860, a girl from the village of Stainton near Streatlam.

According to Charles E. Hardy in *'John Bowes and the Bowes Museum,'* 1970, *'Almost all the authentic information we at present possess concerning the lady in this romance comes from the record of evidence given before the House of Lords Committee for Privileges appointed in 1821 to decide the claim to the Strathmore titles, made on the one hand by James Farrer on behalf of the infant John Bowes, and on the other by John's uncle, the Right Hon. Thomas Bowes. ...'*

*'Mary's first association with the tenth Earl was in 1809 when, as a young woman of twenty two she was employed at Wemmergill Hall in Lunedale on the Yorkshire side of the Tees. During the hearing before the Committee of Privileges she was asked by Mr Sergeant Blosset what her employment was at the time the connection between her ladyship and the late earl began, but when her son's counsel objected to the question Mr Sergeant Blosset did not insist and curiosity remained unsatisfied.*

*Early in 1811 it must have become apparent that the liaison was likely to bear fruit, and no doubt tongues began to wag in Lunedale and Teesdale, for in February the earl took his partner to London, installed her in a house in Chelsea, and through the agency of his friend, James F. Steadman of Gray's Inn, engaged a Mrs Jenkins to attend her as midwife.. About the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, the mother-to-be changed her lodgings and went to live at No.13 South Street, Chelsea, occupied by Mr & Mrs Murray with whom Mrs Jenkins was on very friendly terms. There on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> June John Bowes was born.'* The earl had visited the house two or three times a week and *'when he came to the house soon after the child was born, he took it up in his arms, agreeing with her that the child was like him, and carried it into the next room 'to the lady'.* The child was christened in the drawing room of the house on 29<sup>th</sup> June, the earl placed £10,000 in trust for *'an infant child, who is my son, or reputed son, by Mary Millner..... baptised by the name of John Bowes, son of John and Mary Millner.*

*The child and his parents remained in London for about a year, after which he was taken by his mother to Wemmergill Hall. In this lonely spot John Bowes spent his second year before being taken to Streatlam Castle, which for the first half of his life was 'home' to him.'*

His mother lived at Streatlam with the earl as his companion and was married to him in St. George's, Hanover Square, London, on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1820, the day before his death. Thereafter she was known as Mary, Dowager Countess of Strathmore.

The result of the claim on the titles was that the title and Scottish estates passed to the other branch of the family while John Bowes retained the English estates without a title. After his death without a son and heir the Scottish and English estates were reunited in the Bowes-Lyon family.

### **Information from the Archives at the Bowes Museum.**

Wemmergill Hall... from the *Teesdale Mercury* 8th August 1880.

'During the last few years a perfect transformation has been made in this retired place. The somewhat plain old Hall, now flanked by recent neat but picturesque erections, varied with rocks, ferns and creeping and climbing plants, has on the side facing the south a most pleasant aspect, while the level lawn in front, and the abrupt and unpromising steep towards the beck have been clad by the hand of taste in every hue of floral beauty. Close by, in the rock-bound stream and adjacent wood, nature has determined to show her supreme hand at decoration, for here not a rock, trunk of a tree or loose stone but has its crude form hidden or clothed in endless variety of moss, grass, fern and flower. The ferneries, one at the front of the Hall, under the shade of two noble trees, and one on the slope towards the Beck, are exquisite examples of the blending of nature and art, every object that meets the eye is in harmony and marks at once the unwearied care of Mr Joseph Collinson, who has charge of all these matters as well as the extensive moors around.'

*Teesdale Mercury* 18<sup>th</sup> May 1887.

'Estate Improvements. Since his accession to the Streatlam and Westwick Estates the Earl of Strathmore has given ample proof of his earnestness for improvements, and the contemplated adding of a wing to Wemmergill Hall, the celebrated Lunedale hunting-box, is one of the many projects initiated by the noble owner. The building of billiard and other rooms will have the effect of modernising this residence, which is situated in close proximity to one of the very best grouse moors in England.'