

## School Days

School was a lot different when I was a lad. Children of all ages were put in together as there weren't enough local youngsters to make more than one class. I can recall a number of occasions when I was the only one there and even the teacher hadn't turned up. On those days I'd call out the register to myself, write things on the blackboard and give myself lines if I felt I wasn't paying enough attention.

Back then it was far more important to help at the Mill or at one of the farms, and most parents considered schooling a waste of time. They said if you could swing a scythe you didn't need to know what the Chinese ate or how tall the Eiffel Tower was, and that even Mickey the Bug could make a living.

Mickey was a worker at the Flour Mill who couldn't read, write or speak properly but turned up every day, rain or shine. He had big bulging eyes and always wore the same red smock. Mickey's job was sit next to the emergency handle and to pull it if there was an accident. He sat there day in day out for over ten years but sadly, on the day that Casper Brown got his hand caught in one of the drive belts, Mickey got confused and pushed it by mistake. This made the machinery go faster, and cost Casper three fingers and part of his nose. Mickey went a bit funny afterwards and took to pulling it every couple of hours. He was eventually sacked, and to save paying a replacement the Mill owner simply removed the handle.

Anyways, I was telling you about school. The building was old, damp and draughty and there were very few books. We had to use that shiny toilet paper to write on and we all hated the teacher. His name was Mr Viper and he didn't enjoy his job, other than handing out punishments. Tommy seemed to come in for it quite a bit as he liked to chatter, and was often made to stand on a chair at the front holding the 'talking turnip' and grizzling.

Every week Viper would tell us about the schoolmaster who had flogged a boy to death, saying that he'd love to deal with us urchins like that. This was harsh as we weren't naughty until he arrived at the school and started shouting when we spoke without raising our hands or simply got things wrong. The previous teacher, dear old Mrs Corset, had let us make as much noise as we liked as she was stone deaf. She had spent her time in class knitting endless cardigans, with the balls of wool cleverly balanced on her hump.

Viper had a sixth sense when it came to sniffing out our attempts to play tricks

on him. He never sat on the drawing pins; he kicked the door open so the bucket of pigswill fell on Charlie Nettle's head and knocked him out; he wouldn't eat the spotted dick made with rabbit turds and he somehow avoided the trip wire across his garden path so the postman took the cowpat in the face instead.

I vowed to get him back when I was older, but the Germans beat me to it. I felt a bit cheated in a way, but as Tommy's grandma used to say, 'There's many a swollen acorn that never touched a cow.' I still have no idea what that means.