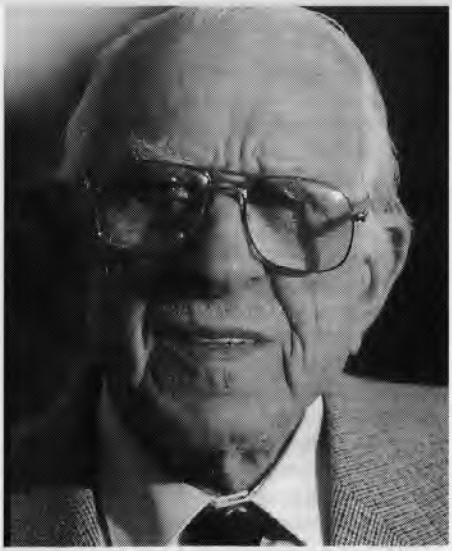
Interview with 'Budge'

MERRIL LILLEY



1996 [*photo:* SASHA LAWRENCE

MERRIL: Budge, the Newsletter has had many contributions from readers about their memories of Old Dover. You must have more memories to relate than anyone else in the Society and I would like to ask you to share some of these with our readers.

BUDGE: My only claim to distinction is that, with a birthday in 1909, I may well be the oldest of the Society's Vice-Presidents, but I do think I have had a very interesting life — and by that I mean 'interesting to me'. So, go ahead.

MERRIL: You have told me that you started school at the age of two years and eleven months. What are your earliest recollections of school-days?

BUDGE: The memory of my induction into Mr Relf's school in Beaconsfield Road is still very clear. I can remember climbing the seven or eight steps to the front door (fearful indeed of what was ahead of me) and being ushered into the room on the right of the entrance where I was set down out of the way of the, to me, enormous children who seemed to fill the room and who sat at desks that were equally enormous. My desk was *gigantic!* The working surface was at the level of my chin and the very flat angle of my sight line was, I do remember, most uncomfortable. The other children worked with pencils and paper but a clear vignette shows my only equipment was a wooden framed slate, a short length of slate pencil and a piece of damp rag. To the great annoyance of Mr Relf (and, I believe, to my great delight) I could make a screeching, irritating sound by holding the pencil flat and rubbing it backwards and forwards across the slate. I can still recall the picture of Mr Relf towering above me, looking at my slate and telling me to "Get on, boy!" Get on with what? I most certainly had then, and still have, no idea. I have the feeling that this command from Mr Relf was fairly frequent.

I remained in the same room, sitting at the same place for a little less than two years, and though it is certain that I did progress from slate and crayon to paper and pencil I cannot remember, with any clarity, anything more. I must, however have learnt something useful, because when after Christmas 1914 I was sent to Barton Road Infants' School I was not put at the bottom of the class but near the top, being accepted as fairly bright, and easily able to read the simple books, with many pictures and little text, that were in plentiful supply. I feel fairly certain that I learned to read at home under my mother's guidance. I can still picture my mother and me in the breakfast room at Millais Road with piles of wooden blocks, with different letters on their six sides, all around us. She would help me to form words and made a game of it. I suspect that about this time there began, – in the smallest possible way – and spurred on by my parents, an unplanned but absorbing interest in philology which,

though never profound, has been with me ever since.

It was during my time at Relf's school that I explored numbers with my father as my guide and he showed me that five or six or seven horses, or dogs, or cats, could be denoted by a wiggly sign as well as by a word and that, therefore, wiggly lines (or figures) were just a code for words, or, in some cases, complete phrases. Perhaps then began my parallel interest in practical maths: I am uncertain, but I would like to think it was so. Many years later my parents said they paid 6d a week (quite a large sum then) to have me at Relf's school and off their hands for a substantial part of the day – apparently they considered the outlay well worthwhile!

MERRIL: Your interest in words and printing started at a very early age. I suppose this started in 1915 when the shortage of staff in the printing shop left your father with very little help?.

BUDGE: That is true. 1915 was a year of the greatest significance for me and it is certain that our return to Castle Street in that year set the pattern of my adult life. The shortage of staff resulting from my half-brother and Charles Southey going off to war (they were in the Territorial Army) and "Nimble" Burton, the sole compositor, being called up for war service early in 1916, was more than critical – it was, eventually, catastrophic. It left my father almost on his own (a frail Miss Wells was still with him) and in a business such as ours, with its dual base, one man working almost alone cannot earn enough to support a family. And so I began working in the shop – if what I did can be so described: whether I was pressed into it, pursuaded or enticed I cannot remember – I like to think I went into it of my own volition.

By the end of 1915, at six years old, I was capable of doing Miss Wells' job, feeding the hand-striker pen ruling machine, and to do so I stood on a box nine or ten inches high. In no sense was this the exploitation of child labour; it was an activity requiring only a moderate degree of manual dexterity and it was something that I wanted to do. I 'worked' in very short snatches, ten or fifteen minutes at a time, and this also suited my then ailing father who was, amongst his numerous jobs, the pen ruler. As he became more and more unwell the work he was able to do became less and less and the business thus declined until it was forced to close down. The workshops below the living quarters then became my playground and so continued until we opened again after Charlie Southey's return from the war. (My half-brother had higher horizons and did not return to us.)

During my father's illness I would play with quads and spaces on a 'stone' in the comp shop, mostly building castles and getting my fingers black with the lead of which the quads were made and the ink – black, *of course* – that adhered to them. Very soon I was aware of the inter-relationships within the 'American' points system (I questioned why it was called 'American' when it was used in England – later I knew why) and also that diamond, pearl, ruby, nonparril and minion, brevier, bourgoise, long- and great-primer, small pica, pica, double pica and English, type sizes that had been used since the time of Caxton, were very difficult to handle.

These obsolescent names and sizes were empirical with no inter-relationship through out the size range and though still in use when I was young, (because replacement was costly) they wereanachronisms, though I am sure I didn't then know either the meaning or the use of that word. (Curious that I still remember all those size names – we did, however use all except the first three which were almost microscopic.) Early in 1914 my father began the replacement of the old type sizes and though by the time he became ill not great deal had been accomplished, sufficient had been done for me to learn what I needed to know. My father, I am sure, realised the value of all this and could see that I was easily, though subconsciously, absorbing much of the knowledge that would be so necessary to me in the life that was, apparently, already mapped out for me. When my father could again get about, he taught

me to set type and to find the 'nick' in the letter without looking for it so that, again with-out looking, I could put the letter in the composing stick both right way up and right way round.

The box I used to stand on to feed the ruling machine, nearly two feet square and about ten inches high, had a hinged lid and was known as the 'Stationery Box' and it contained the shop's entire stock of visiting and memorial cards in all their sizes and varieties. Later my father bought a lovely mahogany cupboard with five shelves and panelled doors and the name was upgraded to 'Stationery Cupboard'.

MERRIL; Did this continue throughout the war years?

BUDGE: Not exactly because early in 1917 my father became very seriously ill as a result of overwork and as my mother was more and more occupied with looking after him I was left very much to my own devices. Though I still played in the shop I was not allowed to move or operate any piece of machinery and my mother kept an eagle eye on me to prevent me from 'pie-ing' a case of type. I wondered if my father worried himself about what I was doing in the shop below. I can't remember doing anything particularly catastrophic but I was really learning the whys and wherefores of paper and ink, of type and ruling pens and leather and glues and all the things covered by the wide diversity of activities in the workshop of a jobbing printer and book-binder.

With no staff remaining and with my father confined to bed for so long there was, obviously, no income being generated by the business and the family finances reached a critical stage. In those financially dark days my mother, to whom all credit is due, with a sick husband at home and with two young children, took on an Industrial Insurance book from the Royal Liver Friendly Society and traipsed around the town collecting the weekly premiums. And we survived!

MERRIL: Obviously this was a very hard time for your family. What kind of jobs did you do at home to help your mother.

BUDGE: I don't recall doing anything specific to help my mother – my sister did that.. There were, however, two jobs I had to do on a Saturday. First I had to scrub the front steps and the basement area at 37 Castle Street and the brick paving outside the back door. I then had to do my grandmother's weekly shopping – she had by this time reached well into her seventies and was almost housebound. The shop she had always used was Faith's, the grocers, at the top of Snargate Street (now an amusement(?) arcade at the seaward end of Bench Street) and in my imagination I can still smell the spices and all the other wonderful things that were stacked around the shop – mostly in sacks with the tops rolled down like a collar – ready to be scooped up and weighed on a tall brass beam scale. At home I received a penny for the work I did and my grandmother gave me another. The combined sum was less than one of today's pence but was enough to buy a small bar of 'Sharp's Kreemy Toffee" – made at Maidstone. But before I received my grandmother's penny I had to pay a penance – or so it seemed to me. The old lady (who was, incidentally, an undeviating member of the Plymouth Brethren sect, with all that that means) made a sort of hard, almost rock-like, bun or cake, using, so I was convinced, 95% bicarbonate of soda and 5% flour. Those cakes were vile but I had to eat one before I was given the penny. It was my grandmother's thoughtful though unsophisticated way of enhancing my reward, but I could well have done without it.

MERRIL: Which of your memories of the war years are most vivid?

BUDGE: It is difficult to say – there really are so many. Some tragic, some poignant, some amusing, but I do well moving from St. James's to St Mary's School in 1917.

There were no 'catchment area' problems in those days and the high regard in which St. Mary's was held attracted boys from all parts of the town, to a school that for many years had been unofficially known as "The Queen Street Academy".

My first memory of the school was of standing in front of Mr. Wicks, in his headmaster's office and being asked a wide range of searching questions. After this grilling, for that is what it really was, I heard Mr Wicks say "Right, Arthur, I will have you in my school" – a Christian name was only used at the conclusion of the headmaster's acceptance interview and the form masters always referred to the boys by their surnames. Mr Wicks went on to say that St. Mary's boys always wore their school caps in public and on no account were ever to be seen eating in the street, not even an apple. I was duly installed in Form 3B, with Mr Godfrey (an old boy of the school) as form master.

Within a few days of my joining the whole school took part in an 'Air Raid Drill'. Air raid shelters were provided all over the town, mostly in caves in the cliffs and hillsides but also in street shelters where the population was dense and ad hoc shelters wherever convenient for schools and larger businesses.

The shelter for St. Mary's was in the basement of Sir Richard Dickeson & Co's provision warehouse opposite the school. In this particular basement, hung in rows on hooks fixed to long rails slung from the ceiling, were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sides of bacon. The space between the rows was rather less than a metre and we children sat on the concrete floor in that space. If a bomb had fallen on the building whilst we were sheltering there it would have been difficult, to say the least, to differentiate between the bacon and the boys. Fortunately that problem did not arise.

We had these Take Shelter' practices frequently and the speed we developed in leaving the school building, via a steep staircase, crossing the road, dropping down another flight of stairs into the basement and filing into our places, was little short of miraculous. We knew exactly where we should be in the shelter. We filed out of the classrooms a row at a time, always in the same order, the lower forms going first, and we took up our form's appointed row amongst the sides of bacon. The only time our positions changed was at the beginning of a new school year when most of us moved up into the next form. This rigid positioning must surely have been designed to assist identification should it ever have been necessary.

I don't think we children saw anything incongruous in all this but talking in later years to some of the wartime masters I found them to have been fully aware of the macabre humour of the whole enterprise. Many of us, as I did, whiled away the time by doing 'French knitting', using a cotton reel with five little nails driven in around the hole and operating with a crochet hook. We produced yards and yards of a sort of multicoloured tubular rope that had no significant use.

My sister and me, aged 5 and 7
December 1916