

## REMEMBERING

In this article I wish to record from memory a few of the changes and some of the customs during my boyhood and youth.

My father, Bill Reeve, was the village blacksmith and he had the shop in the High Street. I was born in School Lane (now Latham Street) in the first house in the row opposite the school. Soon afterwards my parents moved to a cottage on Grafton Road. There were three cottages, all thatched. Two of them have since been made into one, but the thatch still remains. It was from this house that I started school, and, from a house further up the road, I began work. Many of my leisure hours as a boy were spent in the fields off Grafton Road and the walks along there remain special to me to this day.

Looking back over the years, village life was very interesting. All entertainment we made ourselves, as wireless and television were still things of the future. Lorries, motorcars and motorcycles were not seen on the roads. Bicycles, a pony and buggy, or a pony and cart, were our means of transport in those days.

During my years at school Mr J. Morris was the headmaster, a stern but good man who was not afraid to use the cane when a scholar deserved it and that sometimes applied to me. The infant teacher was Miss A. Smith and I remember her as a kind and gentle lady. Other teachers I remember were Mrs Hircock, Mrs Saunders, Mrs Payne and Miss Amos. There were others, but I cannot call their names to mind. The last two years were spent in Mr Morris's class.

On May 1<sup>st</sup> we celebrated the month of May with a holiday from school lessons. In the morning we would decorate a pole with wild spring flowers gathered from the woods and fields, and two or three boys would walk round the village calling at doors and saying, "Would you like to see our May garland?" Sometimes we would sing a May song and the people would give us a copper or two. The girls would do the same, but they would usually carry a wicker clothesbasket decorated with flowers, often with a doll in the centre.

In the afternoon we had our May Day celebrations. A May Queen and four or six maids of honour had previously been chosen and they would wear white dresses, usually with wide orange sashes. Mr Marsh, who lived in Bearwood Cottage, always made a crown for the Queen from Garden flowers. Dancing around the maypole and singing would then take place after the crowning of the May Queen. Then the Queen and her attendants would be put on a flower-decorated cart and drawn round the village by a horse with the rest of the scholars making a procession behind them. Finally we returned to the school where a tea was provided. The tables were very quickly cleared of all the bread and butter, cakes and buns. After tea games were arranged and played in the meadow or the park.

Another custom we loved was on Good Friday when the three village bakers would come round the village quite early in the morning selling freshly made hot

cross buns. We were able to buy eight for one shilling. If the weather was good all the children and adults would go into the woods and collect primroses.

During the summer much time was spent helping in the hayfield and then later the harvest. As a lad I used to go scaring the birds off the corn using wooden clappers. When it came the time for cutting the harvest men would mow round the outside of the cornfield with a scythe and sometimes the boys would follow and tie the corn up in bundles and stack it into sheaves to dry. Also the boys liked to load the corn onto the waggons and have a ride on top of the load to the farmyard where it was threshed and the corn put into sacks ready to be delivered to the mills. When the corn had been threshed the straw remaining was restacked for the cattle bedding and the fields were ploughed again ready for the next year's sowing.

As the summer drew to a close ready for the start of autumn we began to look forward to Brigstock Feast. This was held at the end of August. We could hardly wait for it to come with its fair and traditional food, pear pie. I can clearly remember the fair steaming its way into the fairground, now known as Causin Close on the Benefield Road. The fair had everything to delight us – roundabouts, swings, coconut shies, swing boats and shooting galleries. The fairground organ and the engines always had a crowd of fascinated boys standing, watching, around them.

As I said earlier, there was very little traffic on the roads in those days, just horses and carts. During the school holidays we would play whip and top on the roads and also trundle a hoop or bowdle as we used to call it. We would often trundle the hoop to Stanion and back, or to Sudborough and back. Marbles and hopscotch, still popular today, also whiled away many hours.

During the winter evenings, if it was not too cold, a group of us would go round the village with the lamplighter, Mr Woollard Chapman. He would carry his ladder from lamp to lamp throughout the village, lighting all of them. If it was windy it was a very difficult job as often the light would blow out before he descended the ladder and sometimes he would have to relight the lamp many times before it would stay alight.

Sometimes, in the autumn and winter evenings, boys would sit on the ancient Market Cross, sing songs of the First World War and then play a game of fox hunting. One boy, the 'fox', would be given a five minute start and then the rest of 'the pack' would follow led by the 'hunter', usually the biggest boy. The 'fox' was often quite difficult to find in the dimly lit streets.

On November 5<sup>th</sup>, Bonfire Night, we had great fun. For weeks before we would save our coppers so that we would be able to buy sparklers, devil-dodgers, bangers and Catherine wheels. A huge bonfire was made and lit in Larbrooks (bottom of Grafton Road) and some of us made turnip lanterns.

Christmas was, in some ways, very different to what it is today. We did not have so many expensive presents, but we hung up our stockings (not pillowcases) and

they would be filled with apples, oranges, nuts and sometimes a book or a toy. Although we did not have the number of presents the children of today have, how we valued them and looked forward to getting them.

Sundays were observed by most of the village children by going to the Parish Church or the Congregational Church or the Sunday school. Often we would attend services two or three times on a Sunday.

Two other events we always looked forward to were 'the Gaffe' and Plough Monday.

The Gaffe was a travelling theatre company which used to come to Brigstock in the autumn. The plays were performed in what is now Mr Pickering's back garden. The plays were acted in the red tiled barn, but the only titles I can now remember are 'Maria Martin' and 'The Mistletoe Bough'!

The second Monday in January was Plough Monday. I think this custom originated to give the ploughboys some extra money as they would not have worked throughout the winter, since the autumn ploughing (no unemployment benefits in those days). The ploughmen and boys would dress up and blacken their faces and often ended up looking quite frightening. They would knock on people's doors and say a rhyme and hopefully receive some money. The custom was that they could not do this after midday. I cannot remember when this custom stopped in the village, or what the rhyme was which they said.

There were, in my boyhood, three fields divided into plots of ten or twenty poles each and let to villagers as gardens for the growing of vegetables. One plot was along the Sudborough Road and extended from the cemetery to Lyveden Road. This land was later sold as building land for the council houses. Another large plot of allotments was on Stanion Road and known as Silver Hill. This was nearly opposite to the Windmill cottages. The third plot of allotments are still there on the Benefield Road and known as the Causin allotments.

The medical profession was far different in those days. A Dr Stokes from Corby would travel to Brigstock in a horse-drawn buggy or trap (later years in a car) to his surgery in the skittle room in the Three Cocks. The landlord then was Harry Curtis, a great and highly respected character in the village.

After Dr Stokes retired we had Dr Clapperton from Corby, and then Drs Irvine, Wilson, Hunter and finally Dr Ballantyne and his partners. The surgery, after it moved from the Three Cocks, went to a house on Hall Hill owned by the late Mr W. Palmer before it moved to its present location in Park Walk. Also Drs White and St Clair Gainer from Thrapston and Dr Lascelles of Islip had a practice in the village.

The village nurse in my early years was Nurse Rigby who lived in the thatched cottage in the churchyard where Mr and Mrs Hewitt now live. She firmly believed in hot poultices for boils and abscesses. Our own treatment for our aches and pains was much more basic than it is now. We had doses of

castor oil or liquorice powder for tummy aches, red flannel and bed for toothache, goose grease rubbed on for soar throats and chests, and, worst of all, a heated glass bottle was pushed onto a carbuncle so that, as the neck of the bottle cooled and contracted, the boil burst.

The clergy I remember as a lad were Rev. Sandlands and Rev. Hooper, the vicars at St Andrew's Church. Rev G. Marshall was minister of the Congregational Church for 33 years from about 1912 to 1945. All of these men did great work in their day and generation and served the parish well.

We had a resident village policeman as we have today. The first one I well remember was P.C. Benny Paine (or Payne), followed by P.C. Michael, P.C. Willis, P.C. Short and P.C. Cory. The police house used to be on the Hall Hill, later occupied by the late Mr W. Palmer, but during P.C. Cory's time a new police house was built on the Stanion Road.

Those days were not without their tragedies and disasters. I well remember the news of the sinking of the 'Lusitania' and the 'Titanic', the train and mining disasters, the tragedy of the R101, and the sad outcome of the Scott expedition to Antarctica. But the greatest tragedy of my childhood was 1914-18, the years of the First World War. Many of our young men from the village were called up to the armed services. Many did not return. Many returned with wounds or shell shock or suffering from the effects of gas in the trenches. Their names and those killed in the Second World War are commemorated on a plaque in the church and on the War Memorial.

After the First World War village life never seemed the same again. Things moved much more rapidly with the advent of the petrol engine, cars, lorries, aeroplanes, sewerage systems, telephones and electric lights. Gone were the days of rooms lit dimly with paraffin lamps, rooms that always seemed cosy and warm because of the soft light from those lamps. We had a wireless crystal set soon after they were easily available. Someone sneezing in the room was enough to stop this early wireless from working, but soon stronger and more reliable sets were on the market.

The depression of the 1930s caused much hardship and unemployment in the village as everywhere else. After the depression, life once again became more normal. More and more lorries and cars were to be seen on the roads, new technology began to take over the industries. Stewart and Lloyds rapidly expanded creating a town out of the village of Corby. People at last began to prosper again by full employment and there was an opening out of the village because of better communications and transport. This brings me up to more recent times when, again, the pattern of village life was to change totally with the gathering of the war clouds over Europe in 1938 - and at this point I shall leave my memories for now.

Looking back at my childhood it was a mixture of good times and bad, happy times and sad, but what a pleasure it has given me recalling some of it for you.

