

In Living Memory

By Miss Betty Lawrence, 1992

It is with regret that we announce that Miss Lawrence died, peacefully at her home, on 27th May 2000, aged 96. She lived in Little Munden all her life and will be sadly missed.

Born in 1903, I was given the names of my two grandmothers. The village midwife from the next hamlet was called upon to bring me into the world in our "two up, two down" cottage, plus a lean to scullery. No running water but three tall barrels at the back door to catch rain water. Drinking water was carried from the 160 feet well at the end of the lane, by my father, using a pair of yolks over his shoulder to keep the pails steady and so save spillage.

In 1824 the village school had been built by the Rev. John Reynolds, rector of the parish and to this "Academy" I was taken by a neighbour's daughter for my introduction to school to be taught by "Auntie Annie". I was dressed for the occasion for every girl had a long white pinafore with a frill over the shoulder straps. This was changed after school trusting it was clean enough for the next day. Scripture stories, easy hymns, poetry, nursery rhymes and the three Rs were all part of the daily round.

I had a three quarter mile walk home at midday and back at 1.30. School bell might be ringing to remind us of time as we turned the last corner. There was no playground except the road but nothing was likely to come along other than a farm horse going home with the ploughman.

I learned to knit and sew as the years passed and when 1914-18 war came at eleven years old we were knitting sea boot stockings for sailors, mittens and gloves for soldiers overseas and sewing by hand night-shirts for hospital. The seniors dug a school garden from the ploughed field and provided vegetables to share round the elderly. Home life was centred on working and playing together and making our own fun. When our pets died they were given a proper burial and everything carried out correctly. Winter evenings were spent with games of Tiddly Winks, Snakes & Ladders, Ludo, Happy Families, Pit, with Mum and Dad joining in. Reading aloud before bedtime of "Christys Old Organ", "Jessica's First Prayer", "Little Women", "Joe's Boys" and our Scripture Union were always enjoyed. No library service then and only by exchanges with friends did we get a new book.

Transport to town was a carriers cart which went to town each Saturday and seats were limited so booking in advance was necessary. The carrier also called for the papers and we had to meet him with ours on the way to the village. The children's newspapers, a comic, a daily paper, the weekly district news in the "Mercury" and "The Ringing World", the latter being a paper for bell ringers and this was passed around the ringers each week.

So shopping was largely done through the door-to-door salesmen who came at regular intervals. The Draper with his case displaying one of each of many varieties from liberty bodices, combinations, knickers to blouses, stockings and socks, to lace-up boots (no wellingtons yet) and slippers. Orders were taken and sent on approval the following week. The Grocer called fortnightly, always leaving a few sweets for the kids. The Baker three times a week, the butcher weekly, taking the order for the next week at the same time. Milk from the farm, in a can, and skimmed milk could be purchased at 2d a quart.

Rations during 1914-18 were meagre and mothers became very resourceful in using aids to the larder. Marrow jam, adding cornflower to margarine and creaming the milk of its cream and shaking this in a jam jar to make butter, a lot of shaking for a little butter. We kept chickens and reared two pigs annually feeding them on boiled potato peelings and scrapings provided from porridge saucepan and dishes. These were slaughtered, one every six months. As children we hated the day "Bummen" was killed and scalded in boiling water. The pig-killer walked three miles and it took him all day - payment 7/6. Mother retained the offal, head and trotters which she made into brawn faggots and

chittling from the intestines, the latter taking hours to wash and turn in salt water. Many neighbours shared these goodies but with no deep freezers they had to be consumed in a few days.

Nowadays the car from one place to another, whether long or short journey is the norm, but my first sight of a car was in 1911. When the city gent bought the country house and moved in. The country folk were relying on the horse and trap, in fact every mode of travel was horse drawn even outings to the seaside, to the doctor in his surgery, and clergy for church and parish visiting. The notice placed over our village shop read "Dog Cart for hire" and it was by this method I was taken to the station at the age of six to be placed "in charge of the Guard" on board a train from Charing Cross Station in London, wearing my name label, for St. Leonards-on-Sea. A great experience for a small child - I was feeling secure and quite safe. The lady in the corner seat opposite helped me unpack my sandwiches but I gather my fingers rubbed the window many times and when Auntie met me I had to go to the wash room to be made presentable to the family. My luggage was a plaited straw dress case, with a cover which dropped over the top and a strap to hold it together.. So I saw the sea for the first time.

But the annual holiday was to visit Grandfather, Aunts and Uncles on a hill farm in Herefordshire which was the same excitement each year until schooldays were over. The tin trunk had to be packed and sent off "Luggage in Advance" and sure enough it was there waiting for us when we arrived at the little station on the borders of Radnorshire.

At Paddington we three children sat by the rest of our luggage on the platform and "as safe as houses" never fearing that mother would not return with the "Excursion Tickets" and a bottle of lemonade to have at lunch time. Note no thermos then. Life at the farm for the month of August was wonderful. We had tea with the hay makers and in cornfields I watched the binders on the hilly fields. I marvelled they did not tip over. There were cows to bring in and tie up for milking, chickens and geese to be fed, pigs swill to be mixed up and we looked for eggs in the most odd places. They seemed to be anywhere, some were never found, but came home with Mother Hen as a brood of chicks.

Water was scarce and a journey from the river a mile away, plus riding back on the wagon was a mornings outing. Baking day came round too when the dough was set to rise in the wooden bread trough. The fire was lighted in the brick oven and a faggot of sticks was burned at one time - mainly apple wood from the orchards which we helped to collect bakes. Apple tarts, dough cakes and bacon pies were also cooked at the same time. The smell still remains with me.

Then back home till next August.

Our village shop and post office was small but everybody knew everybody etc and it was certainly a meeting place. Nobody was collecting "Pensions". No such thing. No tinned soup or fruit either but biscuits, flour, dried fruit had to be weighed and placed in blue sugar paper bags. Sweets were put in a screwed up cone of newspaper, twisted at the top and bottom. The smell of cheese, bacon, paraffin all seemed to blend together - tobacco, Wills Woodbine cigarettes at 2d for 10, laces candles, flypapers and lamp wicks. You name it, it was to be found there. All this plus ribbons, cottons and lace and so the list goes on.

The health of the village was taken care of by our district nurse and midwife, the first arriving in 1907. Each in turn cycled around the area with her little black bag covering many miles. Babies were born at home and mums were taken care of for a fortnight by the nurse. Many times Nurse was known to put rice pudding in the oven together with potatoes to bake before she went on her rounds. A neighbour was engaged to do the washing and ironing. The washing alone was a days work. In 1918 our W.I. was formed and we flocked to join - 2/6 annual subscription. Now we had something of our own. The men had football, cricket and a Mens Club. There was church bell ringing and of course the pubs for a meeting house.

War came and evacuees arrived and W.I. were ready to be foster parents. Two families remained with us for the six years before returning to London. We became allotment holders, digging for victory, expert jam makers and canners dealing with food office permits for sugar, 2 cwt. at a time hauled back to base in the spacious boot of the Austin 10. Jam and Jerusalem it certainly was using Primus stoves and stoking the boiling copper for the canning. Those were the days.

The estates of the gentry provided much employment for village girls and boys both indoors and in gardens and stables. Cooks, scullery maids, housekeepers, butlers, footmen, grooms not forgetting the "Lamps and Boots". The latter was a full time job to fill and trim the oil lamps for each room and corridor in the mansion. Farmers too relied on the men as ploughmen, cowmen, shepherds, thatchers, hedgers and general farm work for all seasons. Hours were long and the work hard but men gave their all to the welfare of the animals. Cattle and sheep were driven to market by drovers starting early and walking in my area up to fifteen miles. Men too often walked some distance to work using the footpaths which sadly now have disappeared.

The Wheelwright and Farrier of the village too were kept busy with work for the farms. New shoes for horses, rims for carts and wagons, sharpening of ploughshares and resetting harrows. The county council even in its early days employed men to cover "stretches" as they were called of the round verges and banks. Each man had a section to keep clear of weeds, clean out gulleys, cut the grass banks and hedges. They were proud of their "Stretch".

Entertainment was varied. An annual school concert. A black and white minstrel troop. The Men's Club, where darts, billiards, dominoes and cards were weekly events. Magic lantern shows, a band of hope for the youngsters. All these in a confined space and much improvisation to make larger events possible. I must add that special evenings were always fixed according to the Parish Lantern, i.e., the Full Moon. This was most important.

Pocket money could not be afforded by parents, so children had to work for that by stone picking which went for roadworks, acorn and potato picking and in season pre 1914 at Libury Hall which was an agricultural college for German students. There we could go on Saturdays to pick soft fruit or shell peas and prepare beans for the cannery. The peas and beans at 9d a bushel. The bushel was my day's work. This pocket money for our family we were allowed to keep for our holidays or special Christmas shopping. This was a Red Letter Day when we set off to walk five miles over the hill with a packed lunch for the journey and a bottle of cold tea. We needed to be home by 4 o'clock or it would be dark. No fear at all. Hidden secrets in our bags for Christmas as presents for Mum and Dad, Grandparents, brothers and sisters. The joy of giving was tremendous. Of course it still is, but those days were happy and contented and relived in memories and as vivid as ever.

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