

The Good Old Days? Memories from *The Wychwood Archives*

Imagine you are transported back to the last years of Queen Victoria's reign. Luckily for us we have the voices and stories from *The Wychwood* to be our guide!

It's winter and cold in our tied cottage, one of several occupied by carters, shepherds and cowmen. Our father, like most, works on the farm, hard slogging foot-work; ploughing, cultivating, drilling, looking after the fine heavy draft-horses, all for not much more than a few shillings a week.

But Life is Hard

There is no welfare state yet. Work is hard, wages low and conditions terrible,

no wonder there is growing unrest amongst agricultural workers, with the National Union formed in 1873, as the result of the work of Isaac Castle who set up the Milton Union. No wonder so many have emigrated to the colonies. No central heating of course, no electricity, no cosy duvets, ice on the inside of the windows and a long walk up the garden path; sanitary conditions far from those we are used to now. Well at least we aren't waifs and strays, like the 22 girls in St Michael's, rescued from 'immoral surroundings'.

Seven in our family, we have all attended the village school from the age of three, but there are no school dinners so our older brothers and sisters take us over a mile home for lunch. Food is cooked on an open range. There is very little furniture in our cottage, hire-purchase has not really

started yet. Most of the water is pumped from wells which never run dry. The streets are lit by gas and a man is employed to light them and also to put them out. Like most houses we have no drains, our washing up water gets thrown outside- beware passers-by!

We met, we married a long time ago,
We worked long hours when wages were low.
No TV, no wireless, no bath, times were hard.
Just a cold tap and a walk in the yard.
No holidays abroad, no carpets on floors.
We had coal on the fire and didn't lock doors.

Our children arrived, no pill in those days.
We brought them up without state aids.
They were safe to go out and play in the park.
Old folk could go out for a walk in the dark.
No valium, no drugs, no LSD,
We cured most of our ills with a good cup of tea.
No vandals, no muggings, there was nothing to rob,
We felt very rich with a couple of bob. **Anon**

Making Our Own Fun

There is no radio or TV, so we all have to make our own fun, when there is any time to do so.

Holidays are few and far between for working men, really only the Bank Holidays.

In September

there is a hiring fair for farm workers in Burford. One of these men was in one of our twelve shops in Shipton, buying a knot of whipcord to put in his buttonhole to show he is a carter. After tea we play games in our own or neighbours' houses, but they are quiet games so that we don't upset the oil lamps. There are always stories to tell. LW Longshaw recalls old Sir John Reade whose butler died rather mysteriously and of the ghostly drive on dark nights with the coach and four!

Then of course there are the pubs, as George Shayler recounts:

"I've taken my glass of beer regularly all my life, but in 50 years of entering pubs, I never called a landlord or his wife by their Christian name".

George laments the passing of good manners. Certainly the order of the day is to be seen and not heard. On country

estates we all touch our caps or raise our hats when passing people of either sex.

Celebrations

Christmas is a great occasion. Carol singing starts about ten days beforehand. No turkeys but good local beef and plum pudding. Supper is cold meat, pickles and mince pies with home-made wine.



On May 1st. you can hear the happy sounds of children may-ing in the village streets. With their decorated wooden hoops and the girls dressed in their prettiest dresses and snowy white pinafores singing:
*"Please to smell the may
 Please to taste the cake
 Please to ask the lord
 to kiss the lady's face!"*
 But if we meet strangers we chant:
*"Down street scrubs,
 born in a tub
 Couldn't get out for lice
 and bugs."*

A New Year's Ball for all the household staff is given by the Pepper family, of Shipton Court. Young housemaids are much sought after as they can invite guests. George Shayler remembers the Slipper Dance when all the girls threw their slippers in a heap on the floor. He picked up a tiny shoe and found himself dancing with the very large cook! There is a Boxing Day meet at the Court, where you might be able to dodge the butler and grab a glass meant for the gentry not the local lads. You can earn a shilling opening gates for portly gentlemen who don't want to jump fences!

The Horse Age

Well, motor cars are few. Three times a day the horse-drawn bus comes to Shipton. It carries the Royal Mail and also delivers medicines from Dr Cheatle of Burford to the Red Horse. One Witney bus once lost its driver on the way home to Asthall. He fell off the bus into a ditch, unbeknown to the passengers within. Yet the horses still brought the bus safely home on their own. Another time a rival Burford bus was proceeding to Shipton Hill and when it reached the Barrow, one of the horses fell down dead. The driver commented:
*"E's never done that before!"
 Would YOU have preferred to live then?*

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