

MEMORIES OF THORPE ST. ANDREW BETWEEN THE WARS

My name is Henry Bussey and as one who was born in Thorpe St Andrew as the Great War ended and lived in the village until enlisting in the Royal Norfolk Regiment just before the outbreak of World War Two I have been asked to record my memories of those days. Alas, they can only be random memories as I have now reached the ripe old age of eighty-one.

My father was born at Great Plumstead, one of a family of six boys and three girls and they lived in a two bedroom cottage adjacent to Keys farm.

Living conditions were appalling, there was no bath and washing facilities comprised a pail of water from the well in a brick outhouse. The girls shared a bedroom and water was carried upstairs in a bucket. It seems these conditions were the norm in those days.

As the boys entered their teens the lack of sleeping accommodation in the cottage meant fresh arrangements had to be made and the problem was solved by sleeping in a stable at Keys farm. My father and two of his brothers eventually found work in the area and the others took to the road. One to become a successful fruit farmer, one killed in an ammunition explosion and the other found work on the railway.

All the children attended Great Plumstead School during the 1880s and the teachers name was Miss Dale, a dedicated teacher by all accounts as they all left school literate and numerate. I was able to confirm this in later years when I saw some of the post cards they exchanged.

The three sisters eventually married. One settled in Norwich the two others moved to another part of the country and all are now dead. My mother was born in the crossing keepers cottage in Thieves Lane, Rackheath and was one of four girls and one boy. Grandfather lost his leg in a shunting accident and was given the easier job of operating the crossing gates although it fell to my grandmother to carry out this duty most of the time.

My father and mother married just prior to the Great War when he then began working on the railway. They set up home in one of the church cottages behind the "Buck" Public House and stayed there until shortly after the outbreak of the Great War. He was amongst all the young men of Thorpe St. Andrew who volunteered for military service at that time but was rejected because of an earlier accident when he lost two fingers in a farming accident.

He then left his job on the railway and was directed to work at St. Andrew Mental Hospital as it had been turned into a War Hospital for the duration. They then went to live in one of the pair of cottages on Yarmouth Road situated on the left hand side just under the railway bridge which belonged to the hospital and used for their employees.

As my father had experience of driving a team of horses he was given the job of driving a team of horses transporting coal from Whitlingham Station to feed the steam generator as the hospital generated its own electricity. '

Many older residents of Thorpe St. Andrew will remember the tall chimney belching black smoke day and night. My sister was born on May 31st 1916 and I was born on March 27th 1919 and my younger brother was born March 21st 1921.

Sadly, although I cannot remember, our lives were disrupted as my father lost his job when the men who survived the war came home to claim their jobs back and this meant losing our home also. Despite all efforts by my parents to find other accommodation they were unsuccessful initially. The bailiff came and all our possessions were put under the railway bridge nearby.

The family was split up, friends and neighbours kindly took us in until we moved to a cottage in Laundry Lane for a short while before moving to 8 Brooklyn Terrace where we lived until the late 1920s.

My earliest recollections are of a large back garden and a railway embankment close to the lane outside. We all went to visit our grandparents at Great Plumstead from time to time, it seemed a long walk for us children going past the hospital and up Green Lane where there was a cemetery for the hospital patients

who had died while there. I could never understand why there were no headstones to mark their graves, only a cast iron metal plate to identify them, however, in recent times I understand these have been removed and a memorial has been erected.

Visits to my grandparents were always enjoyable, we could run wild in the surrounding fields, chase rabbits and play with the local children and there was always an excellent tea before coming home. My grandfather was an avid reader of the Eastern Daily Press, sadly my grandmother could not read or write which made communication difficult when tradesmen called at the house, she would make her needs known by making a mark on a slate and they seemed to understand. The hospital was often referred to as "The Building", it seemed a grim place to us children and I can recall the cries of the male patients on the north side, many of whom were shell shocked during the Great War. '

Male attendants cared for them as the term nurse referred only to the female nurse at that time. The male attendants were easily recognised outside as their uniform consisted of peaked cap, navy blue uniform with black facings. '

In those days the hospital was in many respects self supporting with tailors shop and other tradesmen essential to the running of the hospital, they also had their own farms producing food for the inmates and using as labour those patients able to work under the supervision of an attendant.

On the south side where the female patients were housed I do not think they worked in any way. I recall some of them were taken out for a walk through the village once a week and a visit to the shops, it was indeed a sad sight as they filed past in their drab institutional clothing.

There seemed little understanding of mental illness in those days it seemed a case of confining these unfortunate people for life. It may not be generally known that in those days if parents were so inclined a daughter bearing a child out of wedlock could be confined in St. Andrew's hospital on the signature of one doctor.

Suicides were not unknown and I recall on one occasion one of the patients took his life by standing in front of a train on the Yarmouth railway line, his body was taken away on the hand propelled trolley from Whitlingham Station. Thankfully, great strides have been made in the treatment of the mentally ill, no longer through ignorance do the local children shout "here come the loonies" when they see the patients. I never dreamed I would live to see the closure of the hospital and the mentally ill cared for in an enlightened and humane way in the community, this can only be for the best.

We settled down in the house in Brooklyn Terrace, all the facilities we take for granted today were of course not available to us. There was one tap in the kitchen, three bedrooms one leading off the other and gas lamps for lighting and an outside toilet. The back garden was quite large and contained an apple tree, whilst the lane outside separated us from the railway embankment and the Cromer railway line. '

We had excellent neighbours and for us children there was much to do, further down the lane there was a large brick building used by a Mr. Read as a carpenters shop. It was here he made amongst other things coffins for the local undertaker, this was of course before the days of self assembly kits.

Mr. Read was a kindly man and always allowed us children to watch him at work. There was much to do, within a short distance there were woods and fields, the marshes leading down to the river where we caught tiddlers and carried them home in jam jars.

Bungalow Lane was a popular haunt, we could play under the railway bridge or go down to 'Tin Town', and I think the name derives from the fact that it consisted of people living in sub standard dwellings and wherries converted into houseboats. In summer we walked over the marshes to the river and near a sluice gate running into the river we leant to swim and also watch the river traffic going by.

There were still some sailing wherries in use taking cargoes from Great Yarmouth to Norwich and I wonder how many Thorpe people remember the old Norwich Trader plying between Holland and Norwich and unloading cargo at the Baltic Wharf.

In later years when working for a Dutch importing company I used this same vessel to bring in my company's products. Before leaving the subject of river craft it is appropriate that I should mention Colman's tug which towed barges from Great Yarmouth containing cargoes destined for their factory. This was easily identified because of the brass mustard pots, one each side of the funnel. In the winter of 1929 the Mustard Pot as she was known was given another role, which was to act as icebreaker for Everards Coastal Vessels caught in the ice floes at Reedham. The Mustard Pot public house in Thorpe Road is named after the boat and on the walls of the pub there are some photographs and memorabilia relating to the craft. "During the Second World War she was commandeered by the Admiralty and sent to Africa, never to return

It was from Brooklyn Terrace that I started school and shortly afterwards we were again given notice to quit our house as the landlord required it for his 'daughter who was getting married. A new estate was being developed to be known as Primrose Crescent opposite and we obtained the tenancy of number thirty-eight, this was bigger and the powers that be decreed there should be a bath, however this was not in a bathroom but shared the small kitchen with a sink with a tap over it, a gas stove and a kitchen table and a copper using solid fuel.

On bath nights the fire was lit, a bucket was filled at the sink with water and transferred to the copper and this process repeated until the copper was full. When the water was hot it was transferred to the bath, again with a bucket.

Readers will gather from the above that there was no proper hot water system or boiler; the one modern feature was that the bath could be emptied by pulling out the plug.

We accepted this procedure, as we had never known anything else. When my mother had gone through all the above it only remained to put a note on the door to advise callers to use the other door, thus avoiding interruptions, and then it was all systems go.

I was about six years old by now and continued my schooling quite happily, sadly, at this time like many others my father lost his job, unemployment was high amongst men in the village and this led to poverty and patched clothing was the order of the day. "Signing on" at the dole office meant joining the long queue at the entrance to receive the princely sum of £1 pound 7 shillings and six pence per week. This was meant to keep my parents and us three children for a week. The rent was twelve shillings and sixpence and the rest was supposed to cloth and feed us. There was no Social Security payments in those days and those that needed additional help were subjected to a means test when they would be questioned about their possessions, if, for instance they owned one of the recently introduced cats whisker radios they would be asked to sell it before being given further help.

A little later the government began a programme of what was known as Test Work, which entailed the unemployed working two days a week on civil projects, one of which was to reduce the steepness of Pound Lane. A light railway was laid from the top of Pound Lane to the bottom and bogies assembled to transport the soil from the top to the bottom; however, this for some reason was never started.

My father was employed and put in charge of some of these men and I recall him telling my mother they came from all walks of life. There were clerks, factory workers, shop assistants who had never used a shovel or pick in their lives, physical work came hard to them and many were undernourished.

At this time our house developed structural problems and once again we had to move, this time to 28 Primrose Crescent, the last house in Pound Lane and this was our last move.

Sadly, there was no bath so improvisation became the order of the day once more, however, we were growing up so on bath night it was a question of blocking up the sink and doing one leg at a time. These were the conditions that prevailed until the outbreak of war when my brother and I were called to the colours.

Shortly after moving into this house we were advised that electricity was to be installed for those who

wanted it, there was a mixed response strange to say, some said they only wanted it downstairs and some of the older people were known to remark that it was a good idea as they could switch it on to see to light the gas, eventually everybody had it and it proved a great boon.

We still had gas lamps to light the village street, they started at Stanley Avenue and the last one was the Postwick side of St. Andrew's Hospital bridge. I recall the lamplighter riding through the village on his bicycle with a pole with a hook at one end that was used to turn the lamp off and on.

All the lanes and roads leading off the Yarmouth Road bring back many memories as tremendous changes have taken place in recent times. Griffin Lane was surrounded by farmland with cattle sheds on the opposite side of the road owned by the hospital. At the bottom of the lane Hoborough's dockyard where wherrys were moored and also a boat hire business. It was also a base for a steam dredger used along that part of the river. As we grew older we did from time to time in summer hire a rowing boat to go to The Bramerton Woods End pub to enjoy a drink.

In Pound Lane where Sainsbury's now stands there was a field, a disused gravel pit and the Thorpe Rifle Club. Over the brow of the hill in the cottage opposite Boundary Lane there lived a Miss Russell who taught woodcarving, her life must have been very lonely as her neighbours were quite some distance away. The large house and estate not far from the top of the lane was owned by the Misses Peacock and a Mr Bloxham who was employed as their chauffeur occupied the cottage on the left hand side of the entrance.

Further up the lane on the left hand side was a pair of cottages, one of which was occupied by a Mr Wade and his family. Rumour had it that he was a poacher but I cannot vouch for this, only that he sold us rabbits from time to time for which he charged nine pence. Sadly, rabbit pie is now a thing of the past. I also understand that the Misses Peacock's house and estate has now become a leisure centre Whilst I have previously mentioned Bungalow Lane there was one occurrence about 1930 that caused us boys much concern, we went to play football in the field just under the railway bridge on the left hand side and much to our surprise two lines of fencing some sixty foot apart and extending to a point on the east side of the railway bridge had been erected. This was to be part of the proposed Thorpe Bypass, which was to start at Trowse and join the Yarmouth Road close to the Cromer railway bridge. However, this project was rejected because of the estimated cost of £30,000 pounds. The football pitch problem was solved for us as we were allowed to use the land behind the three rows of houses, which was later to complete the development of Primrose Crescent.

Whitlingham Lane opposite Thunder Lane gave access to the marshes and the river and was a popular walk on summer evenings. My earliest recollections of it was of a severe winter when all the marshes flooded and then froze over, and resulted in skaters coming from miles around to enjoy the sport which, needless to say was short-lived. This was during the late 1920s. Thunder Lane has changed out of all recognition since the early thirties; it was very narrow with a very large house on the left hand corner with a huge evergreen oak tree overhanging the road. A military family were in residence there. On the right hand side of the lane was a row of small cottages and opposite was a square of houses with a pump in the centre named Albert Place and this has been long gone.

Further up the lane on the right hand side were fairly modern houses and bungalows reaching to the point where the hill became steep. At the top of the hill on the left was High House in its own grounds. Beyond the top of the hill there were a pair of farm cottages adjacent to a farm where the traffic lights now stand. Further on was a large house standing in its own grounds occupied by the Birkbeck family and this is now The Cottage public house.

There were other houses after crossing over Plumstead Road East and one was occupied by the Laws family, the three children were much my own age and attended the same school in School Lane as myself.

The catchment area of the school was nearly three miles and quite a long walk, there were no school buses in those days and in bad weather we arrived at school soaked to the skin and sat in wet clothes all day. An old tortoise stove was the only means of heating in the centre of the teaching area.

Between Thunder Lane and the river green several large houses occupied by Norwich business people; some of whom would be seen being driven to work by their chauffeurs who lived in cottages in the grounds so they were always on call.

There was also a shop kept by a Mr. Firminger, a cottage and adjoining this was a stable, which was used by a Mr Hansell for repairing footwear. To all intents and purposes he had to work hard as he had a wife and five children to support.

The Thorpe Gardens public house later called the Boat And Bottle and now the Rush Cutters was a popular venue in summer. There was a large grass area fronting the river and this was surrounded by red brick cubicles with seating accommodation where parents could sit and enjoy a drink and watch the children as they played. This public house was popular with many people from Norwich; they would catch a tram as far as the Redan Public House and then walk to the village green where there was a choice of two other pubs The Kings Head and the Buck Inn. It is worth noting that Thorpe St. Andrew still has the same number of pubs as before the war despite the many changes that have taken place in the licensing trade in recent times.

So far I have attempted to describe the village as it was before the massive building programme that began in the early thirties started when practically all the land between Yarmouth Flood and Plumstead Road consisted of open fields. As the building got under way house agents were knocking on the doors of the houses in Primrose Crescent offering semi detached 2 bed roomed bungalows in the Thunder Lane area for £350, detached bungalows with a large garden £450 and semi-detached houses £500, this latter house could be acquired on Plumstead Road East for £25 down and repayments of 15 shillings per week. Those people in regular work took advantage of these offers but sadly it was beyond the reach of those who were unemployed or were in low paid employment.

Prior to the massive building programme north of the village the river green area was the hub of village life. The green itself did, not receive the care and attention pre war as it has since, in those days it was cut down by a scythe two or three times a year. The Parish Council is to be commended for its splendid appearance since the immediate post war years. A converted wherry moored behind the War Memorial was occupied by a Mr Hazell a boat builder and across the river was Harts, a family of boat builders who provided work for some of the men in the village.

The war memorial was a landmark in the village and I recall as a member of the choir we led the ex-servicemen, scouts cubs, girl guides and the church congregation to the memorial on remembrance Sunday to pay tribute to the men of Thorpe St. Andrew who gave their lives in the Great War, I think there were some forty names of men of the village inscribed on the memorial and to this has been added the names of those who perished in the last war.

The combined Post Office and confectioners shop was run by a Mr Parker and his three sisters at that time. All the post Office duties rested with Mr Parker I recall and his three sisters provided service in the rest of the shop. There were two postmen, Mr Joe Woodcock and Mr Bert Elliot who sorted and delivered the mail three times a day and were I believe the last two postmen to wear the old type postmans helmet in the village.

The newsagents was kept by a Mrs Watson and it was here us youngsters came to buy our comics, there was a plentiful range for all tastes and they included the Jester, Comic Cuts, Chips, Funny Wonder, Rupert, Modern Boy. If my memory serves me right I can still remember many of the characters in the

cartoon strips. There was Constable Cuddlecock and the Bash Street kids, Cowboy Charlie, Cast Iron Bill and a very popular film star strip featuring Rita Garbage and Bumfrey Dustcart.

Chapel Lane, though mostly a residential area will be remembered as the place where the old parish hall was situated, now long gone and replaced by a block of flats. In the 1920s and 30s this was used for lantern lectures shown by missionaries from Africa with collections afterwards, one I remember because of the collection box. This comprised the head and shoulders of a black child, our halfpennies and pennies were placed in his hand a lever behind his shoulder was pressed and the coin was duly swallowed. Somehow I don't think this would be acceptable today. Concerts were held there, the Mothers Union met monthly, the biggest users were I think the scouts, cubs and the girl guides as they met once a week. I was a member of the cubs and later the scouts. The scoutmaster was a Mr. Burrell and he did much to shape , our young lives. The peak of these 'activities was the annual camp, all our camping gear was pulled out from under the stage and packed in the trek cart, Mr Moore the local coal merchant based in the Buck Yard kindly took us to Hopton on his coal lorry with the trek cart tied on the back. It must be remembered that occasions such as these were something to be looked forward to as few of the ordinary people in the , village could afford a holiday. Apart from the camp, we children had about two days at the seaside a year and then one of those depended on whether or not you attended Sunday school.

From Chapel Lane walking towards the church there were two large houses, both still there, one was occupied by the Joseph family and the other occupied by the Skelton family. Next door was a cycle shop owned by Mr Frost and it was from here I had my first new bicycle, a New Hudson Racer. This was purchased on the glad and sorry with the help of my parents.

The Buck Yard was attached to the public house of that name and there were two cottages one of which we had lived in earlier. A Mr Firman and his two daughters lived in a larger house with a workshop attached, as he was in fact an undertaker. They were a devout family and Mr Firman was a churchwarden, his younger daughter eventually married Mr Daniels the choirmaster. He did ask me if I would like to join the choir at one point and I said yes and I duly sang a few lines of a hymn, I must confess he did not seem impressed with my vocal talents and I concluded I was there to make the number up. Choirboys were paid one penny per service and a half a crown each a quarter if we attended the full number of practice sessions. Sadly my interest waned after some twelve months and I left.

Sunday school was at two forty-five. The boys assembled at the old church ruins and the roll was called by a Mr Sendall who was also one of the local butchers. The girls assembled in the church porch and entered first. There was strict segregation as they sat at the front on the right hand side of the aisle and the boys sat on the left side and conversation was strictly forbidden although there were numerous winks and giggles from time to time.

I started at the infants school in School Lane in 1924, the teacher was a Miss Grimes, a kindly soul with ' unlimited patience and my time there passed uneventfully. One event while there has stuck in my mind to this day and that was the arrival of a horse drawn vehicle which stopped outside, the horse was taken . away somewhere and this proved to be the arrival of a horse drawn dental surgery complete with a dentist to check and treat the children's teeth. This was apparently a one off, as I do not recall any further visits.

At the age of eight we moved to what would be known today as the middle school, this was a corrugated iron building with a tortoise stove in the centre. The teacher was a Miss Newall and she worked hard to instil in us the importance of education despite the indifference of many of the children's parents so we were well prepared when we moved up to what we knew as standard six and seven at the age of twelve. Mr. Rudling was the headmaster and Mr Sturman another teacher and it was made plain to us that we were there to give of our best. The school bell was rung at nine o'clock and the register was then called, I cannot recall any truancy but there was the occasional absent face and an enquiry from a brother or sister would often elicit the information that "he ain't got no boots". A note would be made and the Education

Department advised. (Poverty was still rife in the village.)

Whilst teaching methods have changed over the years I can still recall the subject we were taught first. This was arithmetic, included fractions, decimals beside additions, subtractions and long division and also included was mental arithmetic. English grammar came next and much importance was placed on the ability to spell correctly. Dictation was also considered to be a necessary subject. Other subjects included history and geography and the arts were not forgotten, there was music, drawing, a smattering of Shakespeare and we would listen to readings from Charles Dickens novels. The Vicar came twice a week to ensure our souls were not neglected and there would be the occasional nature study walk when one of the lady teachers would tell us about the birds and the bees. This was a subject the boys seemed quick to understand. One morning a week we went by bus to a new school at Hellesdon for carpentry instruction in a modern workshop and what we learned there was to stand us in good stead for the rest of our lives.

Our physical well being was catered for by having P.T. from time to time in the playground and this was the only time the girls joined with the boys. Sex equality had not been heard of at that time and the girls were lined up in front and told to tuck their gym slips into their blue bloomers, the exercises began and the sight of the girls in front touching their toes was a sight not to be missed.

There was little in the way of sport, the boys went up to the top of School Lane during the football season for one half day per week and played in a field which is now part of the Norwich Union Sports Ground, two goats grazed there presumably to keep the grass short and these had to be led to one side before play began. Studies for the scholarship continued and I sat for this with no great enthusiasm bearing in mind my mother's earlier comments, I think some six boys passed two of whom went to the King Edward School in The Close, the others went to the C.N. S. at Eaton. Studies continued, school discipline was generally good and the cane was used very sparingly. All the teachers commanded respect because they earned it,

Mr. Rudling the headmaster had the ability to make all the lessons interesting and this was a splendid achievement bearing in mind the large range of subjects he was required to teach. It must be borne in mind the school had no helpers, no office staff, no parent teacher organisation, except from time to time student teachers would spend a short time at the school.

The last two years of my schooling passed uneventfully and thanks to the dedication of the teachers I left school with the rest of my class both literate and numerate in March 1933 and in my first application for a position I was asked to demonstrate this. It is worth mentioning my class were in the first group when conscription was introduced in 1939.

These random memories would not be complete without mentioning the social conditions of the time. There was no proper provision for the elderly if they could not care for themselves and many feared the prospect of going into Lingwood Workhouse. ‘

A couple ending their days there would be separated and see each other Sunday afternoons only. At the other end of the scale all the big houses in the village were occupied by apparently wealthy people with; servants, gardeners and chauffeurs, those of us in the middle felt no envy for the latter as we accepted our status without question.

Our village policeman was P. C. Risborough and we had little contact with him unless any of us had been in trouble and then he would visit the school to find the culprit with the help of Mr. Rudling. Shortly after I left school the first motor-cycle policeman appeared in the village, a P. C. Palmer, if he saw us up to mischief he would stop and send us on our way and if we did not move fast enough he would not be averse to accelerating our progress with the toe of a size ten regulation police boot and if we did not move fast enough he would not be averse to accelerating our progress with the toe of a size ten regulation police boot

At about this time the radio set and the portable gramophone put in an appearance at prices some people

could afford and this was followed by one of the first domestic appliances.

Men appeared in the street and around the housing estates with bicycles and carrying large cardboard boxes that contained the first Hoover Vacuum Cleaners they were hoping to sell to the people in the area. I do not believe they met with a great deal of success as few if any of the people had fitted carpets in those days except perhaps the very wealthy, people in our walk of life usually had lino on the floor with a rug here and there.

Bus services were reasonably good and I can just recall the open top double decker bus in service, there was always a rush by the children to sit by the driver on his bench seat. There was also a small private bus operating between Brundall and Norwich run by a Mr. Bainbridge but this was eventually put out of A business with the coming of the large bus companies.

There were also characters that came to the village for various reasons that should be mentioned. Old ' Cee, the Italian ice cream seller came Sunday afternoons in summer to sell halfpenny cornets and penny wafers on the river green having pushed his cart from Ber Street. The Barrel Organ grinder came to the village Thursday afternoons stopping to play at intervals from School Lane to Hillside Road. -

On Sunday afternoons a shellfish merchant drove through the village in a smart pony and trap carrying his produce in earthenware jars to sell to the village people.

We never knew his name, he was commonly known as fresh boiled, as this is what he shouted as he rang his hand bell. Lingo, the rag and bone man came to the village from time to time buying metal, old clothing or anything on which he could make money:

I hope the reader will bear with me if they see any errors or misinformation, I began this letter in the year 2000 and circumstances beyond my control prevented me from finishing it until now at the ripe old age of 83 years.

All in all my childhood was a carefree and happy one, today one does not see the abject poverty amongst the old and the young and no longer does the fear of the workhouse cast a shadow over the elderly, this can only be for the best.

On the other hand in those days we could walk through the village at night by the light of the flickering gas lamps to our scout and cub meetings at the old parish hall without fear of being molested in any way. Despite the drug related crime, which is rife today, and other social problems its thumbs down to going back to the past. People are better off today, the fear of the workhouse is no more and the opportunities for the young are there for the finding and medical care for all, need I say more.

I hope this article will tell you a little more about the village

H. C. Bussey.