

THORPE BETWEEN THE WARS

The writer lived his boyhood in Thorpe and, as an apprentice reporter on the "Norwich Mercury", covered the village news from July 1937 to August 1938

"Heck'n th' lunies" (Here come the loonies) yelled an excited, grubby—faced boy with the seat out of his pants as he ran passed the village green towards Mr. Rudling's school, overtaking others as poorly dressed as they trudged up the hill.

It was 1926 and that broad—Norfolk cry, born of generations of ignorance, sums up as well as anything else the tremendous social and physical changes that have taken place in Thorpe St. Andrew over the past sixty years.

The boy was sounding a warning, half in ridicule and half in primitive fear, that a crocodile of unfortunates from Thorpe Asylum, that huge, grey complex of buildings which still dominates the eastern outskirts of the village, was being allowed its weekly airing. None remonstrated with the boy for all his insensitivity: his cry was acceptable such was the general ignorance about the nature of mental illness at that time. The closely shepherded patients were from the Asylum and therefore were lunatics, even though most were only mentally handicapped to various degrees, or in the first stages of senility.

BEHIND THE WALLS

Yet Thorpe should have understood better for the Asylum had been there since mid—Victorian times and by the early 1920s nearly half the village population of 2601 were inmates (1031). They were seldom seen behind the mysterious grey walls surrounding the buildings, though that was also true of the wealthier residents of the village who lived equally unobtrusively behind other high walls of differing hues.

All that, too, has changed in the last sixty years. From being a typical English village with clearly defined form and social structure, Thorpe is now a rambling dormitory town of 12,000 plus for the ever-expanding city of Norwich with many more to come, particularly in the Pound Lane area.

But let me begin at what for me was the beginning . . . I arrived from Lowestoft at the age of six in the dickie seat of a bull—nosed Morris car to my new home at Town House which my fisherman grandfather, John Jenner, had bought from Percy Curl, the departmental store owner, for £2,000 — - - yes, £2,000 for that fine old Georgian house, big kitchen and ornamental gardens with immaculate green lawns sweeping down to over 400 feet of frontage to the river. That reach of the Yare, immortalised by Joseph Stannard with his painting "Thorns Water Frolic" (1825), was serenely beautiful, fish rising in the river as it flowed sogently passed well-kept gardens and the green meadows on which Major Cubitt's sleek Jersey cattle grazed. It was lovely and Thorpe well merited its other description as the "Richmond of Norfolk".

HOUSING CONTRASTS

To this pleasant riverside village were attracted those who could afford to live in style; the successful shoe manufacturers, the store owners, the high flyers of the professions, and those who were just born wealthy. They lived in a handful of big houses with large gardens, while the working classes occupied cottages huddled in yards and lanes off the narrow, dusty road to Yarmouth, at which end of the village the first council houses had been built in 1923.

That road, running in sight of the river for less that two miles, linked most of the village together. _What is now known as North Thorpe was farmland, and indeed farms still had a dominant role along the road itself. The Dales were still farming opposite the Horse Water until after the 1939-45 war, and a farm came right down to the road near the Red Lion before it was taken over for housing after the war. At the Norwich end of the road was Carey's, best known for Carey's Meadow which for a time in the late 30s was used as a greyhound racing track. Another vicarious

thrill for schoolchildren at that time was to hear the screams of dying animals on "pig—sticking" days at Dales Farm.

NOTORIOUS "NARROWS" .

The road was notorious for its "narrows" at Town House where the width of this main road to the rest of England was only 14 ft. 6ins. until as late as 1954. (Thunder Lane up to the same time was 12 ft. 6 ins.). Traffic was regularly held up during the summer as charabancs (coaches) became jammed between Mrs. Morley's sweet shop and Town House. During the summer, too, the road was enlivened, particularly on Sundays, by Norwich families out for a stroll after taking the electric tram to the Redan public house on the Norwich-Thorpe boundary.

An animated scene greeted them as they came into sight of the river for it would have been full of craft of all descriptions -rowing boats, private motor launches, the occasional steam launch, yachts and bigger craft for the trippers to Brundall and Coldham Hall. Just as today, those who can afford it have cars, so then it was with boats. And very well turned out the people were, with Mum and Dad and the children in their Sunday best.

It was different when it rained of course, particularly for the swarms of cyclists who made for the coast through the village every summer weekend. The few cars were not a problem, but mud and the ordure left by cattle as they were driven along the road to Norwich cattle market on the Saturday were.

All that has gone, as has the domination of the village by the big houses. The actual buildings may not have all disappeared but their function has changed out of all recognition. Like . . .

TOWN HOUSE, home of Newbegin who installed a powerful telescope in the gardens before the property passed to Curls, then to Jenners who founded a boating business there, and which today is a hotel.

PINEBANKS, home of the Caleys of Marching Chocolate fame, and later Jarrolds (printing and retail store), and today the headquarters of the Norwich Union Sports and Social Club.

THE ROXLEY, another Jarrold family home which later became a hotel complete with outdoor swimming pool, and is now an old people's home and village hall.

IDLE HOUR, another Curl family home.

THORPE LODGE, home of the Haldensteins, show manufacturers.

THORPE OLD HALL, 60 years ago the home of semi—recluse. Major Cubitt who was seldom seen and neither was his home behind its high, thick wall and surrounded by the trees planted centuries before by the See of Norwich when it was a home of the bishop. The villagers hardly knew the hall was there until Alfred Ward bought it in the early 30s to move his boat business from Thorpe Gardens, now the Rushcutters.

SO MUCH HAS GONE

These houses, and others of the same vintage, had one thing in common — the grandest drive that could be conjured out of the available land. And no concessions to the schoolchildren who delivered the daily newspapers and milk from Dales Loke. The Tradesmens' Entrance meant just that, no matter how tender your age or fragile your physique - and tradesmens' entrances were always the furthest away. '

Gone too is the old church school (Mr. Rudling's), gone for a much fairer system. It was a product of the system designed to support the status quo, though it sowed through education the seeds of destruction for that. The big houses, farms, expanding factories and the two Army barracks in Norwich all required recruits who would not question their lot too much.

I was at that school until the age of 11 and in that six years can only remember four of five scholarships being awarded to the secondary school (municipal grammar), whereas today a constant stream of the same lively youngsters can and do reach the top of the educational tree.

This is not to suggest that we were unfortunate to live in the Thorpe of the first half of the 20th century. On the contrary, we were blessed in many respects. Above all, we grew up in a real community held together by the church, the school and the village characters who were real people to all of us, not just fleeting images seen through the windows of a car or bus, or seen on TV.

Of the church we might well ask about the correlation between the large congregations then and the comparatively small incidence of crime and vandalism in our parent's time. Perhaps it really was the fear inspired by the Rev. Supple who threatened fire and brimstone upon us seven year olds at Sunday school if we were not good. And perhaps we were indoctrinated by his favourite hymn - "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate".

VILLAGE CHARACTERS

Rector Supple was one of the influential characters in the village we actually knew, but the real power was held by the people in the big houses whom we seldom saw, though their servants — — maids, gardeners, chauffeurs and the like — — told us something of their doings.

For us the real characters were those who directly influenced us and shaped our lives — — like the Rev. Supple and the Rev. H.B.J. Armstrong who succeeded him. And again, like the . . .

HEADMASTER — Mr. William Rudling, so much more than a teacher. He was also the head clerk, or adjutant to the village. Whatever happened this survivor of the war in the Middle East had a hand in it. It was my greatest good fortune to be befriended by him so that I shared the private coaching he gave his son William so to enable me to escape the system to the City of Norwich School in 1929.

THE DOCTOR -Patrician Dr. Davidson whose house and surgery disappeared when the "narrows" were widened in 1954. So many villagers owed much to his compassion and sensitivity. His encyclopedic knowledge of village life meant that many of his bills were underwritten.

THE POLICEMAN — "Look out, hekon owd Risebra", the slow-moving giant on his bike, who put the fear of God into naughty schoolboys, and others, just by his commanding dignity — and others, just by his commanding dignity — and the occasional clout over the lughole.

THE STATION MASTER — Mr. Chissel, proudly important in his gold braid and busy station at Whitlingham. So highly respected was he that the impending extinction of his kind would have been unthinkable at that time.

THE POSTMASTER — Mr. Parker, given all the respect that bureaucrats then commanded, especially as he sported spats.

There were others, the village midwife not being the least important, and they all contributed to the quality of Thorpe St. Andrew life in the 30s. For children that quality was narrowly based in winter — the church, school, scouts and guides — and near paradise in summer. Thorpe was full of green lanes, woods and marshes, and above all there was the river. Dyke jumping, scrumping, swimming — what more could a boy desire.

For the adults there was, yes, the church of course, five pubs, all still surviving, gardening, bowls, fishing and football clubs, whist drives at the Parish hall in Chapel Lane, and for the up-and-comers the rifle and rowing clubs. (The Frostbite Sailing Club did not emerge until the late 30s)

THE BOAT TRADE

The villages also worked very hard in the big houses, on the land, in the Asylum (102 plus temporaries), in the burgeoning Norwich factories, and in the infant Broads holiday trade. Centre of that was of course at Wroxham, but Thorpe claimed an early stake and by 1930 had five firms engaged in it. Girlings were through the railway bridge, but the rest were in the village reach - Wards at Thorpe Gardens, Harts (no "e" then) over on the island, Hazells who "squatted" on the green, opposite the church, and Jenners, known in the trade as the pirates from Lowestoft, at Town House.

It was John Jenner, tough, hymn-singing North Sea fisherman, who vandalised Thorpe by erecting two huge corrugated iron sheds for his boats on the ornamental gardens so beloved by Percy Curl. In so doing he brought employment and a degree of prosperity to the village.

At one time it seemed that Thorpe would become the new centre of the Broads holiday trade, but something happened —perhaps it was the jet air liner — and things went into reverse.

Now in 1988 there is only one survivor in the reach between the two rail bridges ~ Hearts, now with the "e"

60- YEAR JUDGEMENT

As one who has lived nearly 70 years in or adjacent to Thorpe perhaps I may be permitted a judgement . . . nostalgia would suggest that life was better when I was a boy than now. In some ways it was, but overall thumbs must go down on the past. Despite riverside desolation from Whitlingham to Norwich, despite mud, traffic, juggernauts, and broken road surfaces, Thorpe is well rid of the poverty, disease, Postwick smell, and the rank injustice which was so much a part of the lives of many of the people I know sixty years ago.

Alfred Jenner, 15 Ranson Road, Thorpe Hamlet — March 1988.