

Some Memories of Thorpe St Andrew in the 1920's

by Ray Bloomfield written in 1987

I lived in Thorpe St Andrew, at Southwold House on Yarmouth Road, from early 1921 when I was 7 and a-half, until late 1924 when I was 11. Opposite our house, where School Avenue now is, was Dale's Loke Farm. Nearby was a farm which was mainly for pigs, though I also remember watching the cows being milked – by hand of course. My mother was worried when we first moved there, by the powerful farm odours which drifted across the road and penetrated our house. "No, no risk to health", said Dr Davidson, amused, I imagine, at being consulted. In fact, he assured my mother that the smells were positively healthy – something to do with ammonia in the atmosphere, we children were told. What on the other hand probably was a health hazard, was the huge fly population, also engendered in the pigsties and on the farm midden, though nobody seemed worried. It seemed merely a part of everyday life to have a constant buzzing of flies above the dinner table, and there was nothing repulsive about the sticky fly paper, also buzzing with flies struggling to free themselves, which hung from the ceiling.

Across the road at the Red Lion, an exciting occasion was the installation of one of the first radios – or rather wireless sets as we called them - to be seen in Thorpe. "Seen" is the word rather than "heard", because the village children, standing around the open door of the saloon bar, gazing in wonder at this contraption, with its large black panel festooned with knobs and dials, never heard any sounds coming out. No doubt, at opening time, the doors were closed in the face of the children, and 2LO was switched on, as the Steward and Patterson mild and bitter was being drawn.

Common Lane, opposite, ran steeply down from the road, and its rutted and potholed surface continued behind our house and those of our neighbours. The village boys played endless games of football in the lane, and I shyly joined in. Common Lane also gave us a short cut to the marshes, and from the marsh dykes came many a jam jar of minnows, sticklebacks, and tadpoles in the spring. The main access to the marshes was, of course, as now, across the station bridge. They were extensively grazed and the grass was short and sweet as it should be in water meadows. One evening, a cow slipped into a dyke, and in my memory's ear, I can still hear her bellowing her misery. As dusk fell, I could just see from my bedroom window, silhouetted in the fading light, a gang of men with ropes advancing along the dykes to haul the terrified beast out.

At the top of Common Lane, was the little shop where we spent our pocket money on gob-stoppers, bulls-eyes, and delicious sherbet, sucked out of little cylinders through a liquorice tube.

A few doors to the east of Southwold House was Mrs Folkes' general store, and a little further along was Mr Strangleman the butcher. My father and Mr Strangleman clubbed together each year to buy fireworks for Guy Fawkes. From the safety and in shelter of the big lean-to in our garden we watched our fathers light the bonfire and set fireworks off, while the village boys clambered up to the less privileged position of our back wall and garden gate.

Favourite walks, especially on Sunday afternoons, were provided by the round of Thunder Lane, Laundry Loke (now Laundry Lane) and Pound Lane, sometimes clockwise and sometimes counter clockwise. Except at the foot of Thunder Lane and Pound Lane, there were scarcely any houses or cottages, and Laundry Loke, in particular, was little more than a footpath running pleasantly now between hedgerows and now across pasture. Here I first learned how to identify and name wild plants. For some reason, oak apples, old man's beard and raged robin stick in my mind. In Laundry Loke, I also first learned to clap cool dock leaves on nettle stings.

On special days, we took a longer walk, going up to the Plumstead Road, a delightful country road running through mature woodlands, strewn in autumn with conkers and also sweet chestnuts. At blackberrying time, there were plenty of choices, but my mother's favourite was a fine bramble hedge bordering a wood at the top of a steep meadow, with a splendid view across to Whitlingham and Crown Point; I think this must have been where the map now shows Hilly Plantation. But the greatest treat of all was a picnic in Postwick Grove, when I climbed a favourite oak and ran up and down the grassy slopes above the Yare. The view across the river was unblemished; I dare not go back to see what it is like today!

During those years, I was at the village school – the C of E School in School Lane where the Adult Education Centre now is. The rector, the Reverend Canon Supple, came once a week to give the statutory scripture lessons, and I also remember him, invigilating when some of us sat for county scholarships. Canon Supple, who wore a grey spade beard, was an earnest and rather severe High Anglican, whose views were clearly disturbing to many of his parishioners. I remember large congregations attending matins on Sunday mornings and then tiptoeing out before the much less well attended Sung Eucharist. One day there was a great scandal; Canon Supple refused to read the burial service over an infant who had died without being christened, and the village was outraged when the district nurse walked the length of Thorpe carrying the little coffin to the cemetery. The conventional churchgoers of the day, who would never have dreamed of countenancing heretical deviations from the Book of Common Prayer, failed to grasp that the conscientious if rather unimaginative rector was complying with the precise instruction that the burial service is not to be used for any that die unbaptized.

In 1921, the village schoolmaster was Mr Potter, bald and easy-going, a genial man. His assistant was Mr Snooks, very fat, wheezing and snuffling, a rather pathetic figure who earned no respect. Surprisingly, both men were nearing retirement. Mr Snooks went first; I remember him being presented with a leaving gift and remember him stepping behind the junior classroom for a quiet weep. I cannot recall his successor – a mistress, I think, though curiously enough, I have no recollection of where the village girls were taught. My sister, aged 12, was sent to Cedar House School, off the Thorpe Road just beyond where Carrow Road leaves it; his was a small fee-paying establishment, slightly genteel, and educationally, I would imagine, thoroughly inadequate. When Mr Potter retired, not long after Mr Snook, his successor was Mr Rudling, who looked severe in his gold-rimmed glasses but wasn't in the least. He was an excellent teacher, who gave us sound instruction in all the requirements of the elementary schools of those days, but went far beyond them. He introduced us, for example, to English literature. At the age of 9 or thereabouts, I learned by heart a Wordsworth poem (The Reverie of Poor Susan), and I remember making

my first acquaintance with Shakespeare – “Is this a dagger...? - and also for some reason the tennis balls episode from Henry Vth. Best of all, once a week, Mr Rudling wrote a few lines of descriptive poetry on the blackboard, and invited us to use our imagination and draw an accompanying picture. I remember one of my drawings of which I was rather proud – someone sitting by the roots of a great tree on a river bank; but what was the poem?

Our handwriting was uniformly excellent – not copperplate but bold, well-formed and well-rounded lettering (this of course was long before he revival of italic scripts). My writing went to pieces within weeks of starting in 1924 at King Edward VI School in Norwich.

We also learned to sing with great vigour many traditional English songs – The Lass of Richmond Hill, John Peel, the Golden Vanity, Barbara Allan, and so on.

Many of the boys came from distant parts of Thorpe and beyond. There were, of course, no school meals, and these boys, who could not get home at the midday break, were supposed to bring their own dinners. One boy, who came all the way from the Plumstead area, and all too obviously from a very poor home, simply brought a large potato, which at the start of the school day, was thrust into the ashes of the coal fire which was all the heat we had. This unfortunate boy, when I first went to Thorpe School, sat apart from the rest of us because he had had ringworm; his shaven head was covered with what looked like a blue pudding cloth with a drawstring.

We played all the traditional games – marbles, hopscotch, hoop bowling, conkers. Conkers, of course, was autumnal; but for some reason, the other games seemed also to have their seasons. Another important autumn activity was making popguns out of elder sticks. The popgun barrels were formed by diving out the soft pith; the ammunition was an acorn, propelled with some force and accuracy by a hardwood rod, whittled and smoothed to fit precisely into the elder gun barrel.

The education of most boys finished at the age of 14. I remember, in particular, our awareness on one occasion that in the midst was a boy of outstanding intelligence – in my memory’s eye I can still see his bright face and the gleam in his eyes – and Mr Rudling could not conceal his sadness that family determination was to make him a farm boy at 14 instead of sitting for a county scholarship. There was, of course, in those days, no such thing as PTA, but my recollection of our teacher is one of conscientious and admirable relations with parents. The village schoolmaster in the 1920s was probably no longer the dominant figure in rural life that he was in Goldsmith’s days; but his influence during those all too short formative years was profound, and if he was a good man the benefit to his pupils was incalculable.

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