

My Earliest Memories

by F Yeoman

Harbertonford Village Life 1907 onwards to 1917

Falling into a pond, when as a small boy, I wore a frock – this was custom for little boys before school age, which was then three years. I was pulled out dripping wet by another older boy.

On starting school I progressed year by year to leave at the age of 13. This was possible although the official leaving age was 14 years. The school leaving act was watered down because of World War 1 and permitted children to leave at 13 if they wished.

My father died when I was 10 years old leaving my mother penniless, it was therefore very necessary for me to earn at the earliest opportunity. My school master promised to help me to a better position if one came about. Meanwhile I started work in the only jobs going, which was in the woollen mill in the village. This mill provided work for about 80% of the working population. The work was hard and the hours long, starting time was 6.30 am until 6.00 pm with a $\frac{3}{4}$ hour break for breakfast and similar for dinner. My weekly wage for all this was five shillings per week (now in today's money 25 pence). My widowed mother worked there as well (at the same hours) and her wages were about 12 shillings and sixpence.

My older sister was working in what was known as "private service" and she managed to assist with a few shillings a week. On the whole poverty was not unknown in the village, but it was a well knit community embraced by the Church C of E and three chapels, Baptist, Congregational and Methodist.

But my memories of my boyhood are varied, with lots of pleasant ones.

As the village was placed

The main road from Totnes to Kingsbridge and Dartmouth ran through it, passing over the bridge over the Rover Harbourne. This river also produced water power for four flour mills and the large woollen mills, also a foundry for making agricultural tools. One flour mill I recall had two large water wheels to provide power to work the mill. This particular one was called Crowdy Mill and was worked by two brothers, Samuel and Eddy Ball. They also employed a full time carter for transporting flour and grain.

Now returning to the woollen mill in which I worked. This produced top quality serge for the armed services, blankets and another material known as Collar Checi. This was used to line the pulling collars of horses and probably saddles. This large factory of six storeys received its supplies of wool from Australia which was transported by a waggoner from Totnes goods station. These bales of wool were about 6 ft length and 3 ft across.

The whole process from raw wool to the finished material, is fascinating to recall which I can vividly, although long ago. Another interesting part was the water supply, again the River Harbourne. At Rolster Bridge one mile distant a leat was constructed which carried the water to a large artificial pond. This in turn fed water to three powerful turbines to assist in starting the masses of machinery inside. One in particular was also connected to a dynamo which provides current for all the electric lights, at least 250 as a guess. I should have said the main power was derived from a massive crossly suction gas engine but before this by powerful horizontal steam engine with Lancashire boilers to provide steam. One fact I

should add, was that the driving power from the engine was taken by thick ropes endless running over grooves in the fly wheel and the crown and pinion gear shaft (factory chimney). In those days the only way to get from A to B was by horse drawn vehicles. At Harbertonford bakery owned two of these. One a wagonette and a governess cart, these were hired out with a driver in charge, very few owned a bicycle, so it was the normal thing to travel on foot.

Just walking to the nearest town – Totnes – was mere nothing. I can remember walking with my father to Dittisham, a distance of 7 miles each way. On another occasion an intended day trip to Paignton, after walking to Totnes, and missing the GWR hourly bus, continued walking and was only a mile or so out of Paignton when the next bus picked us up. You can see as a result of all this foot sloggery the majority of children – teenagers and grown-ups all wore boots with hob nails, steel toe plates and heel plates in the soles. During my school days I can only remember wearing sand shoes on the village sports day, for taking part in the races – (daps).

All children of school age walked to or ran to school and many coming from considerable distances as their homes were far in the country – in all weathers, winter and summer and to be late for school was almost unknown. Highlights of school life was the celebration of Empire Day (May 24). This often took the form of a procession with garlands and patriotic songs, followed by half day holiday. Still not forgetting the annual trip to the seaside town of Teignmouth. This was a very special day. Children and parents were transported by horse drawn waggons with generous amounts of clean straw to sit on (these were lent by local farmers) to Totnes the nearest GWR station then the rail trip to Teignmouth. On arrival the whole party dispersed, to meet again at teatime in a church hall, where a very large spread was all ready prepared for us. On arrival back to Totnes the waggons were waiting to transport the party home again.

Before the 1914 Great War the motor car was a very rare sight except during the summer months. The only visits to the village were the Doctors from Totnes. These cars were single or twin cylinder engines which chugged along at about 25 miles per hour. When summer came the situation changed, when the wealthy came through with more luxurious cars. As the roads were made up with broken quarry stone bound together with wet soil/soaked the result was in very dry spells each car would raise a cloud of blinding dust as it passed by and the hedges on both sides of the road would be a dirty white colour with the dust until the next rain storm. Then the road would often be a muddy track and a peril to cyclists as the mud would collect in the mud guards and often prevent the wheels from turning.

As detachable spare wheels on cars for changing were unknown a service known as the stepheny spare rim, an inflated tyre, was carried on the running board of cars. This when a tyre went flat was bolted on the rim of the car wheel and so avoided mending a puncture by the roadside – as mentioned before the waggon and horses were the only means of transport until the advent of steam traction engine. These of all kinds passed through the village as the main road was close to a deep stream of water, the majority stopped here to fill up their water tanks via a large diameter hose with a strainer on the end to prevent stones etc being sucked up. As a rule these powerful steam engines drew two large trucks – sometimes massive three trucks on special designed carriers. Another very speedy steam lorry was the “Sentinel” very fast and late designs could travel at 30 miles per hour on the level. The Foden was of similar design but the Queen of them all were the Showman’s Road Locomotive - these handsome and powerful engines painted in gay colours to the owners design and polished brass works, hard and rubber tyred wheels were with their loaded trucks and caravans with the emergency water tank trailing at the rear a delight to behold – again these always stopped to fill up before the long hill pull to Halwell and then on to Dartmouth for the annual regatta.

A steam roller was nearly always found in the vicinity, the driver and sometimes his wife lived in a portable caravan during the period he was working in the district.

The stone for the road repairs came from a local quarry, this was blasted from the quarry face with gunpowder. The method employed was to make a hole in the rock, by two men, one holding a crowbar and the other with a heavy sledge hammer and so with continuous blows make a hole deep enough to insert the charge. When the fuse was lit the men would stand well away to warn anyone coming, traffic or pedestrians. The large boulders were then carried to a fairly sheltered spot and tipped at the side of the road. Now this provided work for one man who cracked the stone by a hammer into smaller pieces, this was then made into a formed heap, stretching for around 18 feet, ready for the steam roller to renew or remake up roads.

Highlights of Village Life

Coronation of King George V June 22 1911

Annual sports day and evening dance

Annual flower show

Good Friday football match

Guy Fawkes night November 5th

The coronation of King George and Queen Mary was celebrated in a big way on 22 June 1911. The days previous were devoted to decorating the street. Flags of all descriptions and bunting was strung across the roads.

Two large wooden arches, made of strip wood the gaps filled in with flowers and ribbons and at night were illuminated by candle fairy lights. (these ere coloured glass jars designed to burn night lights) The day started fine and after a church service an early start was made for the sports field. Here races of all kinds for the young children, then followed by the athletics which always included a steeplechase covering two miles. After sports a public tea in the school playground. A grand finale was a huge bonfire but unfortunately rain came on during the evening and rather damped down the hilarity which would have followed.

The annual sports day followed a similar pattern but was attended by a Brass Band. The Brixham Military Band playing selections during the afternoon. A very special treat for children was ice cream sold by a man from Paignton. He drove a small horse drawn van, covered top and open sides for selling. When ice cream ran out he lot up his chip boiler and when ready would sell chops (potato chips) ½ d per portion then when all his potatoes were chipped through a hand operated chipper and sold out he would close down and drive back to Paignton.

The evening celebrations was an alfresco dance on the open space by the bridge with music supplied still by the Brixham Band. I must mention one rule. There was a period of Quiet as the horse drawn Royal Mail van approached at 8 o'clock to collect mails at the Post Office, then as soon as the main van was out of sight festivities proceeded until about 10 pm.

Although the woollen factory was the main source of employment there was also a brewery and a mineral water factory. I know little of the brewery as it was hidden behind another block of buildings. On the other hand the mineral water was of great interest to school boys who used to stand watching the bottles being filled with foaming and fizzing liquid, namely Lemonade, Ginger Beer, Ginger Ale, and Cherry Cider. The man who operated this machine wore a mask (similar to a fencing mask) to protect his face as

frequently bottles would burst when being filled. These bottles then on coolers were labelled by hand by a lad who was the envy of the rest as he got free Lemonade or any other he liked. This mineral water factory supplied all the surrounding villages for miles around – note – the bottles were so designed to be sealed with a glass marble which was forced into the neck of the bottle by the gas in the liquid mineral water.

The annual flower show was a more modest event than the previous ones I have written about, but besides flowers there were cakes , jam tarts, and all kinds of home made jam and marmalade. Good Friday always meant attending church in the morning and in the afternoon a so called football match between a unspecified number of youths of Harbertonford and Tuckenhay another village 2.5 miles away. This game was a cross between Rugby and Soccer with no rules except to score goals. This game always ended in a free fight between the contestants of scoring was not satisfactory.

November 5 Guy Fawkes , Bonfire night or otherwise known as Tom Pope's night, a reference to the throwing off of the Roman Catholic grip on England. Always a huge mass of hedge trimmings and combustible rubbish was collected on a piece of waste ground between the bridge and the vicarage, but again the same rule was strictly observed and enforced by the Village Policeman. No lighting until the Royal Mai had passed through at 8.15 pm. Then the fun was let loose with a large crowd of onlookers. The bonfire was lit and the surroundings were soon illuminated with a red glare, with fireworks exploding, Roman Candles and squibs popping, and Bengal lights flaring. BY 10 om all was quiet again as the villagers retired for the night.

AT this period of time there were only a few oil lot lanterns to light the road during the winter, not more than six, those were attended by the Village lamplighter. But there was one exception. After the coronation of King George V – to celebrate the event a gas lamp was erected by public subscription. This did not prove reliable and eventually given up as useless.

As my story is nearly completed I'll write of incidents that used to happen. There was no milk delivery and milk and butter was fetched by children from the nearest farm. All butter was made by hand from cream produced by scalding the new milk in large pans. AT one farm the butter was kept during the summer months in a cave hewn out of rising ground in an orchard. The sides of the cave were lined with slate slabs keeping the temperature low. Annual fair days at Totnes and Kingsbridge made more interest as hordes of cattle sheep and cows, (the bulls which were always led by a man holding a wooden pole with a clip in the end attached to a ring in the bulls nose passed through the village. The sheep one could hear approaching a long distance away as they Baa Baa their slow progress, driven by a drover and a couple of dogs.

Come Autumn and vast loads of reeds from Slapton Ley. Waggon's were piled high drawn by two cart horses. These reeds were probably used in basket making and not the usual kind for thatching roofs.

On water supplies popped water was non existent and all relied on hand pumps in various locations. Some on private property and others for general use – during the summer these pumps gave trouble, as the leather plunger would dry up – then water from a stream collected in a bucket would be poured into the tap o make the leather swell up again. Sewage, well the less said the better – it was positively primitive.

Coal was very cheap around one shilling and sixpence a hundred weight. Coal was mainly brought by waggon's from Tuckenhay another village 2.5 miles away. A creek of the River Dart allowed coal barges to be unloaded here and stored for sale to surrounding villages.

As probably in most villages around those times there were men who that I can describe as “characters” or “old chawbacons” – or “old sweats”

There was Sergeant – Corporal – “Old Steamy” - “AP” and another whose sons were nicknamed Shedrack Meshack and Abednego – (correct names omitted) but the men who were actually respected by all were the Vicar Rev A H Bartholomew the school master Mr E Kenshale and the constable P C Blee.

In conclusion I must add the serious disadvantage of living in these remote villages, was the complete lack of medical resources. Totnes the nearest town had only five doctors to cover the town and huge rural areas. As a result in cases of emergency and serious accidents on farms and elsewhere it was very difficult to find a Doctor through lack of communication and usual transport of a person was badly hurt would be by a waggon and horses.