

FORESTERS AND FEASTS

There are people in Middleton who remember with great pleasure an event from their younger days which was more keenly anticipated than Christmas and which provided two days of light hearted fun and frivolity – this was the Feast. But the organisation behind the jollity, The Foresters, had a more serious purpose which added greatly to the social fabric of the village.

In the days before the welfare state there was scant provision against the deprivations brought on by sickness and unemployment and what there was had a humiliating aspect to it. Anything that alleviated these problems and reduced the financial burdens on the Parish and workhouse systems was welcomed both by the elite of the community and the more responsible villagers themselves. Even that usually sour critic of the rural workforce Henry Strickland praised it. It could indeed be seen as a good example of “self help” a concept much approved of in Victorian times.

By joining the organisation a member in return for the payment of a regular subscription would be provided with cash benefits in the case of unemployment due to sickness or accident, together with medical help, travelling expenses when seeking work and cash payments on his or his wife’s death.

The Ancient Order of Foresters was founded in 1834 but the origins went back to the Order of Royal Foresters which existed in Leeds in 1790. In Middleton the Court Devonshire of the Ancient Order of Foresters was founded by Thomas Thurlow, William Moat, Robert Syron and Thomas Petch in the Robin Hood Inn on the 15th February 1839. Other early members included John Wood (Surgeon), Manners Lamplough (Schoolmaster), Halder Wood (Veterinary Surgeon), Boulby Bell (Solicitor) and Wilsh Crowe (Miller).

On the 8th May 1840 Brother George Johnson proposed that the Revd John Blanchard be presented with a sash at the expense of Court Devonshire, seconded by Brother John Wood and unanimously agreed by members of the Court. This is significant because it meant that the organisation had the support of a powerful person within the village. John Blanchard was the “Sporting” rector of Middleton who resided at the Rectory (later known as The Hall) and owned 890 acres of land. He preached at the Foresters’ Service and acted as chairman at the Feast. He had not, however, always shown compassion towards the labouring classes as in 1833 when acting as a magistrate he jailed a farm worker for non-payment of tithes. An act which made him unpopular for a time.

The membership in the first year numbered some 50 persons and there was a steady growth so that by 1844 the figure was 94. The following sample years show that there was a consistency in membership even allowing for the growth of other forms of welfare provision after 1911:

1894 - 139

1916 - 159

1949 - 136

The membership form itself had to be completed by a proposer and seconder who had to certify that the applicant was a “fit and proper person”, “sober and discreet” “of good character” “in perfect health”. They also had to make a judgement about the applicant and his wife’s age and her state of health. (Birth certificates only arrived after 1837).

The requirement for “perfect health” would rule it out as a rival to the modern Health Service and suggests it was more akin to present day private health insurance.

Membership of the organisation as in the case of Methodism, allowed its officials to gain experience in running things apart from their usual work activities and could prove a useful training ground for future political and trade union involvement.

It would appear that many of the early records were destroyed in the early 1970s when the meeting place was changed from the Robin Hood to the Rose and Crown. There exist however some limited papers in the Brynmor Jones library. Some items are revealing. One concerns the possible fraudulent claim by a member, something that was inevitable in any organisation paying out funds.

In 1863 a charge was brought by Henry Thurlow against Thomas Thurlow for working while receiving sick benefit. As he never appeared it was settled by a committee on the 7th January 1863 in favour of Thomas Thurlow.

On 24th May 1871 proposed by Henry Lyon, seconded by Thomas Dooks for a new banner size 9 feet by 8 feet. Price 10 guineas.

4th July 1874 George Thackray, William Simpson, Robert Lee fined 5/- for being intoxicated in procession at feast.

25th February 1880 £20 to be lent to the Primitive Methodist Church at Middleton.

The local organisation itself was expelled from the Ancient Order of Foresters in the 1860s and was threatened with legal action in 1898 by the parent body when it claimed in its advanced publicity for the 60th anniversary celebrations to be a member of that body. The matter was settled amicably but Middleton did not rejoin the Ancient Order until 1963.

Medical Services, for which an annual charge of 2/6 was made were provided for members from 1841 by Dr John Wood himself a member and prominent Primitive Methodist. However in 1843 the doctor was charged by a member with neglect and he was replaced by Dr William Bulmer of Lund.

The Annual Feast became the public celebration of the Foresters’ existence as in the following advance notice:

“Middleton May 29th 1855

Sir, The period has again arrived when I have the pleasure of informing you that the Anniversary Feast of Court Devonshire of the Ancient Order of Foresters will be

celebrated at the House of Messrs Petch, Robin Hood Inn, Middleton on Friday June 8th, when we earnestly solicit the honour of your company.

The Principle of our Institution needs no particular comment, it being founded on the widest basis of Christianity, Unity, Benevolence and Concord.

I have the honour to be sir your most respectful and obedient servant

Mark Vary, Secretary.

Dinner on the Table at half past one o'clock"

The serious part of the celebration consisted of the Church service at which the Rector preached the sermon (his son continued the practice) preceded by the Procession with colourful banner and band. The dinner was followed by guest speakers who would address serious topics of the day such as in 1894 when the Revd. R.C.G. O'Callaghan called on all Societies to be affiliated to a more powerful one to meet the coming challenge of Old Age pension provision.

After 1884 when agricultural labourers gained the vote local politicians or their agents were keen to attend and Luke White MP once rushed to the Feast from London after taking part in a midnight debate in the House of Commons. In the late 1890s there was a growing emphasis on patriotism and military preparedness as reflected in Colonel Staveley's offerings.

The Government provision of old age pensions for the over 70s in 1911 together with the earlier basic health insurance gave a warning that the work of the Friendly Societies could be put in jeopardy in the future and this was reflected in a 1913 newspaper article about the village when the reporter said that "this club in common with kindred societies has had its best days".

The Feast was suspended during World War I but resumed afterwards.

In 1920 it was arranged that the Market Weighton Jesmond Jesters would provide the entertainment together with that town's band. (Over the years the organisers had hired many different bands.) On that occasion there was to be a cold dinner. The Feasts continued throughout the 1930s with Corrigans providing the sideshows and roundabouts.

It was perhaps fitting that the last full Feast was held in June 1939, its centenary year. The Driffield Times reported:-

"Streets were thronged with people when the procession formed at the Robin Hood Hotel and headed by members of the club with regalia and sashes, carrying clubs, horns and green staves looking most picturesque and resembling foresters. Their gaily illuminated banner was carried in front followed by the Nafferton Silver Band and club members. They paraded the village before the service in church. The Rector of Middleton, Dr Clements and the Revd. R.A. Loten walked in the procession.

The service in the Parish Church was conducted by the rector the Revd D.T. Silian Evans and the church was crowded. Popular hymns were heartily sung by the choir with Mr W. Eastwood at the organ”.

The Rector paid tribute to the club and hinted at the possible future threat to democracy.

The collection of £2.2s.4d was for the Alfred Bean Hospital, Drifffield.

The procession reformed and paraded the village prior to the Annual Dinner which was held in the village hall and about 130 guests and members sat down to an excellent spread provided by Percy Dove of the Rose and Crown Hotel. As he had done for 15 years Dr Clements presided supported by Ald. T. Beachell (Dalton Holme), Ald. W. S. Temple JP (Skerne), Mr W. Prince-Smith (Middleton Hall), Mr R. F. Byass (North Dalton), Mr Thomas Holtby (County Coroner), the Revd. R.A. Loten, the Revd D. T. Evans BA Rector of Middleton, Mr F. F. Hepworth, Mr S. G. Hogarth, Mr W. Eastwood and Mr J. W. Parratt. Mr Hugh Brooksbank could not be there because of his wife's illness.

The Revd. Loten (Methodist minister) made a prophetic speech in which he urged the need to preserve village and rural life.

Mr S. G. Hogarth, the Schoolmaster spoke about the raising of the school leaving age and technical education.

Ald. Beachell praised Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax for their peace efforts and the East Riding County Council for providing the village with water and electricity.

The immediate post war years were a period of austerity and the full Feast was not revived but Corrigan's roundabouts and fairground attraction made their visit in 1947.

In 1950 following a discussion and vote 33 of the 40 members assembled voted against reviving the Feast.

It is said that the Society continued to function until the 1980s but by then the full impact of the post war welfare state had weakened the voluntary sector. Regrettably the whereabouts of the colourful banner is not known.

But let the last word be with a joyful recollection of the popular aspect of the celebration in the poem by Mrs Audrey Thompson of Middleton reproduced here with her kind permission.