

VILLAGE LIFE

“At that time the country villages were centuries behind the towns. Then the use of draught oxen had not been given up, and most of the larger farmers kept one or more yokes of these animals.”

So reads the assessment of J. R. Mortimer (1895-1911) written in 1903 and published in 1978 under the title “A Victorian Boyhood on the Wolds”. He was recalling his early days in Fimber before the coming of the railways changed the economic and social landscape of the country. He would in later days become a well known corn factor in Drifffield with diverse business interests and a passion for archaeology which was to make him an important pioneer in uncovering the early history of the Wolds. His education in the village lasted much longer than was usual at the time.

In his reminiscences he provides in addition to his own boyhood activities details of a village life that still believed in the existence of witches and where an operation on his uncle, without anaesthetic, for the removal of a bladder stone was carried out with the patient strapped to a kitchen table by two “Scotch” surgeons in the presence of Dr Wood of Middleton. The patient lived for another thirty years and the stone about the size and shape of a hen’s egg was at one time displayed in the Drifffield museum.

We also learn that the quality of bread was very inferior and fuel in the Wolds villages, where little timber was grown, was in short supply with coal only available from the River depots, so that the use of dried cow dung was common.

At the same time he states that “the farmers of Fimber were a very plain and homely class, worked and took food with their servants, acting, in fact, as foremen. They mostly wore the same kind of clothing as their labourers, which consisted mainly of fustian jackets and long frock-smocks, either white or brown, of a coarse material named duck.”

Farm equipment was primitive and limited and he recalls that there was not one cart with springs in the whole parish. The farmers and their wives rode to markets on horseback often with sacks of corn.

This was also a time when cruel sports such as dog fighting and badger baiting were the norm rather than the activities of the criminal fringe of society. Bull baiting was reserved for the wealthier villages.

In conclusion it must be stressed that the supply of water before the advent of piped supplies was of critical importance for all Wold villages, hence the prominence of the pond. In time of drought therefore the struggle to maintain animals and crops could take on third world significance.

Allen’s “History of Yorkshire” (1831) states “Middleton-on-the-Wolds is a pleasing village, situated in a valley, eight miles and a half from Beverley, with a population of

four hundred and forty one persons”. It could also have said that it is located a similar distance from the other market towns of Drifffield, Market Weighton and Pocklington.

Although we are not fortunate enough to have a book or reminiscences such as those of J. R. Mortimer many of his experiences would be familiar to other villages at this time.

In the years after enclosure in 1805 the methods of agricultural production changed and with it the present pattern of roads and farmsteads situated away from the village emerged. The majority of the population was engaged in agriculture and support services with the village being fully supplied with shops providing goods of every description. The village was self contained and largely self sufficient with little change from one year to the next. However by the second half of the 19th century the potential for change gradually increased for a number of reasons not the least of which was the Victorian zeal for progress.

In 1840 the penny post had been introduced nationally and in the Post Office Directory in 1872 Middleton had a Post and Money Office, Savings Bank and Government Annuity and Insurance Office. William Dewson was the Postmaster with letters through Beverley arriving about 8.45am. and letters despatched at 4.50 pm. Another Victorian innovation which revolutionised communications was the telegraph and with the coming of the railway to Middleton in the late 1880s telegrams which had hitherto been sent from Drifffield could be received and despatched from the Railway Station and eventually from the village itself. The development of the railways necessitated the standardization of time throughout the country and it is difficult to believe today that hitherto time had varied from place to place with no pressing need to regularize it.

The coming of the railway or even the buses did not make the carrier completely redundant and the service provided existed in some form until after the Second World War. The 1872 Directory lists Benjamin Richardson Towse as providing the carrier service to Market Weighton on Wednesdays, Drifffield on Thursdays and Beverley on Saturdays. Henry Soanes’ omnibuses and carrier provided service to Drifffield on Thursdays and Beverley on Saturdays – no doubt ensuring a bumpy ride for passengers.

It was during this period that the local government reforms started the modern means of dealing with local affairs and disposed of the remnants of the medieval and Tudor methods.

Finally it should not be forgotten that the improvements made to the humble bicycle from the 1880s onwards gave the individual a new basic form of personal transport thus easing travel from village to village thereby increasing social contact and as a local historian Valerie Porter states “you could find marriage partners who were not simply recycled from the village gene pool”. It also enabled town dwellers to discover the countryside further increasing contact between people of different backgrounds.

It was even used by the village doctor at one time and the Driffield Times of the 18th April 1908 contains the following report of an accident involving the newly arrived Ernest Clements:

“DOCTOR IN ACCIDENT – An accident occurred on Monday to Dr Clements who has taken the practise of the late Dr Wood in Middleton.

While coming down the hill leading out of North Dalton, his bag of instruments caught the brake, and his bicycle catching a stone at the same time he was thrown off with a severe shock. His nose was badly cut at the bridge and the muscles of his left arm put out of place. He laid unconscious for some time. Mr Binnington drove him home, and he afterwards went by train to Driffield to have his injuries attended to. We are pleased to learn that he is going on all right”.

We have no first hand accounts of life in the village until the latter part of the 19th century and these tend to consist of experiences recalled at a later date sometimes to newspaper reporters. Thus in February 1913 when a reporter writing as “Paul Pry” enquired if there were any noteworthy characters in the village his informant replied “nowt else”. The reporter conceded that “the notabilities of this village are on a par with those of any village it has yet been my duty to visit”! He then singled out Mr Ben Tranmer “who will celebrate his 80th birthday this month, who has hardly ever ventured beyond the confines of his own parish in his life, but who has endured manfully the rigours and hardships of an agricultural labourer’s life from his earliest days rising early and toiling late in the days when the agricultural labourer was not as well recompensed as he is today. For the past 15 or 16 years Mr Tranmer relinquished his daily labour, but still toils in his way and can walk four miles an hour with his basket containing thread, laces, etc”. The reporter continues “I was much struck by the variety of trades and professions represented in such a small village”.

“Beside the usual grocers, drapers, blacksmiths etc, there is a chimney sweep, a watchmaker and a farrier. Some of the business establishments also are in the hands of the third generation of the same name. Mr John Dove, blacksmith now 86 years of age is carrying on a business long established as is Mr T Norman, shoemaker. The name of Soanes is another long-connected with the village as carriers and now split up into other trades. Mr Petch, joiner and a Primitive Methodist of many years standing, is another well-known and respected inhabitant”.

The decline in agriculture because of increased foreign competition and the effects of the First World War both played a part in the erosion of confidence which was reflected in the responses of Waters Appleton interviewed in January 1929 by a Hull Times reporter who visited the village and spoke to a number of people. Mr Appleton a life long resident who kept a village shop was listed in Kelly’s Directory from the years 1913-1937 as manager of the Yorkshire Penny Bank in the village.

Part of the report states “Appleton can remember the time when parson and squire were rulers of the village. All the men bowed to them as they came down the street and all the women curtsied. This is not really so long ago, but old customs die hard on the Wolds”.

“To my mind that standing between master and man was a very good thing providing that “master” was one of the right sort. It was friendlier and each was necessary to the other. I have heard many regrets at the passing of the old regime, due to the high cost of living and the post war taxation. Appleton told me that Methodism had gone down in Middleton, for in the old days the chapel used to be full. The church too was emptier than it used to be. The coming of the railway in 1877 had made a great difference to this wold village and the old thatched cottages had vanished, the institute being built where once half-a-dozen cottages stood”.

The article also gave an explanation of the various “Garths” in the village such as Pant Garth, Mary Garth and Gray Garth each of which was said to be where sand had been taken for different purposes.

Waters Appleton in 1949 when he was 88 wrote an essay describing the village as he knew it in 1880 when there were approximately 800 inhabitants including two builders, two parsons, a doctor, a bandmaster, a chimney sweep and a gravedigger. There were two schools, two public houses, three places of worship and four wells, one in each street. In addition there was a pinfold, a round building 10 feet high with two gates. Any stray cattle found in the lanes by the roadman were put in the building and when the owners came to claim their stock they had to pay a shilling to release them. The church had three bells but no clock – it was installed to celebrate the Jubilee year in 1887. The lighting in the village was by tallow, wax candles and oil lamps. Coal had to be picked up at Lockington or Kiplingcotes Station without the use of bicycles or cars. This was before the coming of the railway to Middleton.

To be continued