

OTHER DAYS
IN



A SUFFOLK VILLAGE

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Thanks

This publication should not be viewed as definitive in any sense of the word. It is simply the results of the studies made by a group of people which they would like to share with the people of Witnesham and anyone else who may find such works interesting. We hope also that this work may encourage others to take a more positive interest in the place in which they live, with the realisation of what has gone before.

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Line drawings by Joyce Hill and Hester Gaught

OLD WITNESHAM

If I were asked what I miss most about "old" Witnesham, I think I would say the cottage homes, and the people who lived in them. They were mostly born of hard-working parents, with a pride and stoicism unequalled anywhere outside East Anglia. It is sometimes said that the East wind made the people of Eastern England hard and dour, but behind those characteristics, there lay far more, - a people so in tune with Nature through their everyday work and contact with their neighbours, that they had a keen understanding of human nature, a superb sense of humour, and usually, an implicit and simple faith in God and the hereafter.

Unfortunately, when I arrived here in 1940, many of those homes and people had already gone, but I am privileged to have known a few, and through them, learned much of Witnesham's past history, and I often arrive at some spot when walking through the village now, which reminds me of a conversation or witticism passed by the locals, and the marks of their work and trades are often still visible on the buildings and in the fields.

One day, I called on an old lady, and receiving no reply to my knock, wondered if she was alright, and so peeped through the window; there she was, on her knees in front of her armchair. She caught sight of me, and coming to the door remarked, "my dear I am sorry I didn't hear you knock, I was just thanking the Good Lord for all his mercies." I believe her sole income was the Old Age Pension as it was then known, and the amount at that time about 25 shillings (£1.25) per week. She told me that she and her husband had brought up a family of eight or ten children on 10 shillings (50p) per week, and if it rained a lot during the week, he sometimes brought home only 8 shillings. I asked her how she could possibly manage on that amount, and she said that she bought 3d worth of liver, and some bones from the butcher. She fed the family on soup made from the bones, and dumplings during the week, and they had liver on Sundays. They also had a few fowls to provide them with eggs, and grew all their vegetables on an allotment or garden. Since a lot of the Cottagers kept a pig there was sometimes a piece of pork or bacon as well as the odd rabbit.

A few years ago, an old friend in her eighties, told me of a day she had been working in the harvest field alongside her husband; she was walking home in the evening, and hearing the church clock strike nine, hastened her step because she had to get a meal cooked for her man who was coming home later! I expect they had both been on the go since six o'clock that morning, and would be up and at it again at 6 a.m. next day. Such was life in Witnesham, less than a century ago.

They had their entertainments, the menfolk would gather together for a game of Skittles, Bowling or Steel Quoits at the Barley Mow. Their holidays were few, - Good Friday, when weather permitting, they sowed their seed potatoes often kept from the previous year's crop. Easter Monday and Whit Monday they had a small Fair, consisting of a few stalls and frolics usually held around the Barley Mow, where their wares consisted of saucers of cooked prunes, whelks in vinegar, and huge dishes of Rice Pudding sold at $\frac{1}{2}$ d per portion. Christmas Day was enjoyed with their families, and on Boxing Day there was often a Pigeon Shoot. The rest of the days of the year were taken up with work and their pride in its achievement. The women found joy in keeping their homes and children as neat and clean as possible, and achieved wonderful results with their needle and thread on any article of clothing, or piece of material which they could acquire. Waste not, want not was their maxim.

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Further companionship was found for both men and women, by working together in the fields, and farmhouses. Harvest time with its "elevenses" and "bever" was a joy and recreation for the children, and the gleaning of the loose corn to be ground into flour to provide bread, the catching of rabbits, or a ride on the waggon, gave them all the amusement they needed during the Summer School Holidays. Perhaps a Treat of Tea and Games at the Rectory or Hall, or a day at the sea-side, crowned these weeks of happy freedom and interest.



The village was virtually self supporting, - there were at least three General shops, two Blacksmiths, two Wheelwrights, two Undertakers, three Builders and Carpenters, three Mills (two Wind and one Steam) - the steam mill was also a Malting, one Harness Maker, two Shoemakers, a Poultry Dealer, plus of course several Dairy Farms where milk and butter were obtainable, and a pork butcher. We even had a flax factory during the second half of the 19th century.

Before the days of a District Nurse, there was a village Midwife, one of the villagers who would go to the houses as needed, look after Mother and Baby, and cook and clean for the rest of the family until Mother was up and about again usually 10 to 14 days. At that time, babies were born at home, no chasing off to Hospital unless there was something very wrong. This Good Samaritan would also tend the sick and prepare the dead for burial, and in addition do the washing (no washing machines in those days) and look after her own family as well.

There were usually one or two men who would undertake shaving and haircutting at 2d a time, often on a Sunday morning. This was a service much appreciated and the locals gathered to wait their turn. It could be quite lucrative and add a shilling or two to the Barber's meagre income. He was usually a farm worker.

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There was a Reading Room in the Lower Street and this was once the rendezvous for the Sunday morning haircuts, as well as a place to catch up on the news. The Barley Mow was another meeting place, and in winter with huge fires burning in the grates, the lads would roast chestnuts to enjoy with their beer. Sometimes a man from Ipswich would call with a basket of Kippers and Bloaters which could also be cooked over the tap room fire. He also sold oranges from the same basket as the fish!

Many years ago, a young man set off from his home 'out Framsdon way' to begin another life in the New World. With his bundle on his shoulder, he started walking to Ipswich on the first leg of his long journey, there to pick up the London Coach to help him on the way to the ship which was to bear him across the Ocean. His brother walked along beside him for company, and when they reached the top of the big hill at Witnesham, the brother said that he would go no further. So, they shook hands and parted there, the emigrant to continue his journey to America, his brother to return to the old home in the Suffolk countryside. Ever since, the place of their farewell, has been known as America Hill.

As can be seen from old pictures and photographs, the other Witnesham hill known as Juby's Shoot, was once very much steeper and more difficult to climb than it is today. So difficult, in fact, that horses with heavy loads could not get up without assistance. For many years, Mr. John Juby lived and farmed at Hill Farm, where he kept a horse to assist travellers who needed help; for which service, he charged one shilling. So, the hill became known as Juby's Shoot, and remains so to this day.

In the Suffolk Subsidy Return of 1327 for Witnesham, one inhabitant is described as Johanne del Welle (of the Well) and another Johanne atte Welle (at the well). I assume this refers to the ancient well by the War Memorial, and if this is so, it must have been in existence for over 600 years. For many years it was the chief drinking water supply for that part of the village, which in Domesday is called Finsford and at that time seems to have been a hamlet of Witnesham. There are a lot of springs in this area, one by the Old Steam Mill ran continuously into a gulley. Dr. Meadows of Otley used always to fill a bottle with this water for drinking, whenever he passed, and said it was the best and purest he knew of.

Fynford Bridge Until 1892 the river ran across the road, and when it was in full flood, light carts, traps and carriers' carts, crossed over by means of a wooden footbridge set at one side of the road. Drovers had difficulty getting flocks of sheep through the water, and sometimes they too were driven over the bridge. According to a record I have, the new bridge taking the road over the river or ford, was begun on the 15th September 1892 and completed 17th December 1892. This bridge was replaced by the present one in 1981.