

Memories of Winterbourne Earls 1875 - 1895

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About 1875 my father borrowed from Mr Godwin a cart-shed walled on three sides, the fourth open to the farm-yard. With the help of Saunders, the village carpenter, and some farm hands, the fourth wall was added. This formed a small hall, a door was added giving entrance from the road. Here, on winter Saturday evenings, my mother gathered a few farm hands and read to them portions of a story in serial form. This building still stands across the road from the School House.

I arrived early in 1879 so my precise memories only date from about 1884, but at this time the meetings still continued. They had developed into simple concerts, admission charge was one penny so the meetings were known as the "Penny Readings". Each week some five or six farm boys (that was the term, though their ages might be anything up to 40 years or more) came to our house to be taught to sing a song. I think they only achieved one song each which they repeatedly rendered at the concerts to their own satisfaction and to boisterous applause from the audience.

Once a year a free supper was provided. The first one is impressed on my memory because when about thirty men sat down they each produced an opened a large clasp knife, which they place on the table in preparation for the meal. These knives so occupied my attention that I have lost all memory of what happened regarding the conventional knives and forks, which I feel sure were provided. When or why these concerts ceased I cannot remember, but probably the increased popularity of the Village Club may have been the reason.

Club Day was a great occasion, much marching of the Band with enthusiastic beating of the drum. Sports were held in the field above the Vicarage. Climbing the greasy pole was the liveliest event. The prize was a small pig. The winner was expected to drive his prize home with a string attached to its hind leg. After much laughter the pig usually went in a sack on its winner's back.

I was born in Winterbourne Earls, was baptised and married there, the Rev Skyrme performing the ceremony. My mother lies in the churchyard. I lived "in the life" of the village. Every Sunday morning on returning from church I had to set out with a basket and two cans carrying a dinner to two old people. I thought it very hard when I needed my dinner, but rules were not lightly broken in those days.

In "The Winterbournes" Vol. 1X, No 5, Spring 1963, page 17, is an article "Boys will be Boys". The story of the carrier's cart is true, I know. Of course boys got into mischief, a few no doubt were rough, but most were well behaved, far better than today. Stout boots were a necessity with rough flint roads. Spindly legs were very rare, those boys grew into strong men capable of work and endurance that only a few today will attempt. Food was not scarce, unfortunately it lacked variety, but it was wholesome. The women were far too sensible to let their butter go rancid.

There was an enthusiastic team of bell ringers. There was a full peal at every service, at Christmas and midnight on New Year's Eve.

One memorable year the cricket team won every match of the season. Mr George Burt, at the Manor, bowled left hand, under hand, slow, with a tremendous break from the off; at the other end was Charlie Viney, left hand a combination of over arm-round arm and considered fast at that day. Opposing batsmen could not deal at all with this pair.

A remarkable thing happened, I think in 1891. Mr Willie Burt at long field lost a plain gold ring. The next year fielding in the same position he took the ball out of a hole made by a cow-hoof and with the ball the ring he had lost the year before. I was scoring and I saw this happen.

There were Sunday morning prize fights with bare fists in the Pigeon Cote field at Hurdcot, these had ceased before my time, but I well remember John Penny, who had been the local champion. His ears were in ribbons and I believed that rats had bitten them. He became deeply religious and attended mid-week evening prayer meetings in the Chapel. We used to creep to the door and wit to hear him pray. Always he commenced with these words in a great shout:

"Vlare up our arts like stools avire, oh Lord,
And let us goo dru this ere wicked worrld,
Shod with boots of brass and elmets o' iron on our heads"

From then on, I suppose it was extempore and was unintelligible, at least to me.

The work day was long but the tempo was slow. there were some evils which no longer obtain but if contentment is happiness then Winterbourne was at least happy, if not happier than villages I known today.

Our Constable had been in the village many years. He was looked on as a friend and counsellor. A boy who I will call Johnnie was accused by a man, Jim, of stealing a duck. Jim, to the disgust of all the village, reported the matter to the Constable so that Johnnie appeared at Salisbury Court and was awarded five strokes with a cane. This I think was our Constable's only case. It was felt that the disgrace was to the village rather than to Johnnie. Jim was in disgrace for not letting the boy's father deal with the matter. The result for Johnnie would have been the same.

The only duties expected by us of the Constable was that he should promptly move on any gipsies who might camp in the parish, and to attend at Porton station to see the first and last trains of the day arrive and depart. Such was life in Winterbourne Earls about eighty odd years ago.