4

Fifty Years Ago

In 1961, when my wife Dorothy and I paid a two-hour flying visit to my native village, I could see little had changed apart from the presence of radio aerials. There were only two houses that I did not remember clearly, so Jim Ulliot, the village brick layer, could not have made a living at this trade - at least, not in the village. I suspect he must have depended on his vegetable garden and such casual labour as he could pick up from time to time in more remote areas.

There was no dairy in the village. We got our milk and eggs from Mrs. Carrier Smith who lived next door. The hedge between the two properties

had a deep depression where these commodities were handed across and a few words of gossip exchanged. Similarly, there was no bakery in the village and many housewives were justly proud of their homemade bread made from flour ground at the local windmill. It came without super refinement and added vitamins. There are few aromas more fragrant than freshly made baked bread just taken from the oven to cool. I can still remember with joy a slice of fresh bread with a "dab in the middle." This was a generous dollop of mutton dripping in the centre. Was it more succulent when spread evenly over the whole slice or when one nibbled the fresh dry bread until there was just the centre with its dab of dripping left to eat in one delectable mouthful?

Mother, Bradford, England (1924). Note property lines in back yard – not wooden fence, hedge or barbed wire, but local solid sandstone wall.

One of the local delicacies was "Crud Chisscake." This was a curd cheesecake made with the "beastings," or first milking after a cow had calved. Sometimes it was garnished with nutmeg or had a rich sprinkling of

currants. I was dismayed and disappointed to learn in 1961 that the waitress in a Driffield restaurant had never even heard of “Crud Chisscake.”

Very early in the twentieth century, a single letter was transmitted across the Atlantic to Marconi at Signal Hill, St. John’s, Newfoundland. In 1990 that same energy is guiding and operating huge rockets thousands of miles in outer space. In 1907, the ocean liner Mauretania was launched at Newcastle-on-Tyne. In less than five days, she crossed the Atlantic and kept that record for twenty-two years. Soon after World War II, an American liner, “The United States,” set a new record, but shortly after was put in mothballs because the airplane had far outstripped in time the passage by sea. It was in 1911 that Bleriot first flew the English Channel, but by 1990, airline passenger service had made floating hotels obsolete. The Concorde, for instance, crosses the Atlantic in three hours against five days for the fastest ship.

These are three instances of the amazing achievements of technical developments that have taken place in the lifetime of people still living. Historians are at work recording the details of the impact these developments are having on society. But what was life like in those early days when very few, if anyone, could foresee what was then the future?

5

The Blacksmith and the Cobbler

Some years ago, when my dentist was shaping a tooth to receive a gold cap, he said, “I am working pretty fast because with root canal treatment, there should be no pain. Do you notice the smell of burning feathers?” “No,” I replied, “but I do notice the smell of a hot horseshoe applied by a blacksmith to a horse’s hoof.” “It’s much the same thing,” he said, “burning protein.”

Yes, we had, at Beeford, a very capable blacksmith. There were then, in various parts of the world, steam-driven tractors for many agricultural works, but not in Beeford. There, it was still the world of the horse.

Shoeing horses, sharpening ploughshares, welding broken tools for the countryside far beyond the confines of the village kept the blacksmith at work many hours a day throughout the week. Why I have forgotten his name I do not know for his shop was a location that never failed to command my interest. It is still a source of wonder to me what he could accomplish. I am not sure how much education he had, but he knew how to make and fit a metal tire for a cart or wagon wheel. First, he had to measure a length of flat iron, heat it, bend and weld it so precisely that when he welded it into a perfect circle and reheated it to the correct temperature, the metal tire would fit loosely around the wheel. Then, as the metal cooled and shrank, it fitted tightly in place and needed no further fastener. But, also, his huge muscular hands were able to fix the tiny mechanism of my clockwork train.

Which reminds me of an interesting person we called "Clockypostle," who had the reputation of being able to mend clocks and watches. It was not his mechanical ability, however, that fascinated me. He was neither bow-legged nor knock-kneed, but as a child had suffered from rickets and was what the villagers called k-legged. As he walked, his thighs, clad in corduroy, rubbed together and made a swishing sound which prompted me to ask my mother, "What is whipping him inside?"

Another long-forgotten memory suddenly flashed upon my mind. A few years ago, Dorothy and I were staying at an old farm on Meech Lake. This was some years before Meech Lake had become so well-known because of unsolved constitutional issues in Canada. Our host came in carrying a billet for the log fire in an odd-looking tool. "If you can name it, you can have it!" he said. "I found it in some rubbish in the old barn. I can't think what it was for." The tool consisted of two strips of iron each about twenty inches long and hinged in the middle. "Oh," I said, "I don't know its name, but I know how it was used." One of the legs had an iron ball at the end, and the other leg had an iron ring. In a split second, my memory had spanned three thousand miles and sixty years. How had it been used? My grandmother, who used to visit the village once or twice a year, had bunions. When they became too painful, she put a chalk cross on the uppers of her boots (note they were boots, not shoes). Then I ran with the boot to the village cobbler. He took the tool and put the leg of the tool with the iron ball inside the boot opposite the chalk mark. Then he squeezed the two legs together until the ball pushed a bubble in the uppers through the ring thus easing the painful pressure on the bunion.

A few years later, this or a similar tool was shown on TV as an interesting antique of unknown purpose. Then one day I drew a sketch of the tool and

showed it to a shoemaker in Montreal who said, “We don’t use these any longer, but we used to call them ‘bunion scissors’.”

In the same area as the cobbler, lived Billy Wilson, the village chimney sweep. As the fuel for heating and cooking in the village was soft coal or peat, Billy’s services were needed by everyone from time to time. He was a cheerful little man who always wore a bowler hat, and who always seemed to be moving at a fast trot. I never saw him drunk, but I never remember him completely sober.

6

The Royal Mail

The presence of a blacksmith might suggest an earlier age, particularly since the village had no garage. Remember, I am writing of conditions eighty years ago. There was, however, one institution existing that was far more efficient, though more old-fashioned, than some of its successors. This was the Post Office at the east end of the village, and its most up-to-date contact with the world beyond the confines of the village was telegraphy using Morse Code. Apart from an electric door bell at the vicarage, this was the only source of electricity in the village. Yet one could send a telegram from here to any point in the United Kingdom. The price, if I remember

correctly, was nine words for sixpence. Such a telegram would be delivered within an hour or so to any but the most remote parts of the country and it would be delivered to the door by hand.

Twice a day the custom-made scarlet-painted Royal Mail cart would collect mail from two post boxes. It would then be driven to the nearest railway station seven miles away. All but local mail was sorted on the train. A letter bearing a two-cent stamp would be delivered in less than twenty-four hours in London or Edinburgh, some two hundred miles away. Not only this, but in the sleepy, slow-moving village, there were two door-to-door deliveries a day, and this was certainly six and, if I remember correctly, seven days a

Visiting a friend at Bessels Green, Kent, England (1921)

week. So reliable and fast were these services that telegrams were very rare and were reserved exclusively for emergencies.

It is, of course, true that in a village such as Beeford the amount of mail, whether incoming or outgoing, was very small indeed. The telegram service, at the rates mentioned, however, was available if needed.

The transportation of human beings, as distinct from letters and parcels, was much less efficient. Carrier Smith, a next door neighbour, travelled to Driffield once a week in a horse-drawn covered wagon. The trip of seven miles took well over two hours. Not only did he travel at a walking pace, but there would be many stops along the way to pick up or deliver both passengers and messages. Grantham also had a weekly trip, but this was in a two-wheel trap and would be considerably faster. But even this improvement could not hope to compete with a bus service running once a day to and from Hull and Driffield. This was not much used by people from the village, partly because of expense and partly because the villagers mistrusted the reliability of the motor when compared with a horse.

Stimulated by Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men on the Bummel,* I have often daydreamed, with a spurious nostalgia, idealizing the time before the origin of the internal combustion engine. I would like to have been able to go on

cycling tours in Britain or on the Continent when only horsedrawn vehicles occupied the roads. In the last twenty years, there has been a greatly revived interest in the bicycle. But prior to 1914, the world of the bicycle enjoyed much of the glamour of the pre-automobile age. Certainly, in country districts such as Beeford, the push-bike was a vehicle not primarily for pleasure, but had become increasingly essential for personal transportation. If I remember rightly, a cheap bicycle could be bought for about a pound. This meant that a man earning eighteen shillings a week could, with great thrift, be able to purchase what was then still occasionally called a velocipede. There were, of course, more expensive models with two- or three-speed gears, a wheel chain running in an oil-bath, and even a primitive electric lamp running from a dynamo attached to the front fork. I imagine the new wage earner must have had twinges of conscience as he debated whether his first investment should be a bicycle or a Sunday go-to-meeting suit.

My Dad had a two-speed Humber. This may seem very elementary compared with the eighteen speeds of the modern Derailleur gear shift, but it enabled my father to travel the twenty miles from Hull to Beeford in just one hour. It is true he had a steady strong wind behind him. Mother's bicycle was even more primitive for it had no free-wheel. If a hill were long

enough, one could coast down with one's feet rotating with the pedals, or one could attempt to put both feet exactly at the same time on two brackets securely fixed at the top of the front fork. This manoeuver was fraught with great danger since the slightest mis-timing would divert the steering, and a painful fall in the roadway would result. Equally hazardous was the brake. When the brake lever was applied, it pushed a two-inch rubber block on the front tire. Unless very gently applied, this could stop the machine instantly and throw the rider head-over-heels on to the road. This was always called "Mother's bike," but I never saw her ride it! It was, however, the machine on which I learned to ride.

Though my father's model had a free wheel and could be mounted as one mounts a bike today, he had learned to ride before the advent of the free-wheel. He, therefore, continued to mount in the same way as though he were riding a fixed wheel. The back axle had a "step" in the form of a long holding-nut, perhaps three inches long. With the left foot on this step and standing directly behind, a couple of pushes with the right foot gave sufficient momentum for him to rise on the step and to descend in a dignified manner on the seat.

Bicycles were dusted, washed, adjusted, polished and oiled with as much loving care as is given to an expensive modern sports car.

If ever automobiles should disappear because of a shortage of oil and gas, there may come a day when the cyclist may once again tour the roads in greater safety. The tourist would travel not so far nor so fast, but might well see more of the flora and fauna of the roadside. He might see fewer historic sites, but see less and cherish more of his country's historic and natural history.

7

History and Legend in the Beeford Area and "Thereby Hangs a Tale"

Just how much history there is about the village, I do not know. The parish church is the one building with any claim to antiquity. It goes back at least to the sixteenth century. The Yorkshire Historical Society recently reported that at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, the village church had an endowment of one shilling a year for lights for the dead. The report has no further statement as to the extent of the parish, its population or other buildings.

Picnic at Beverley Minster, England
(August , 1914)

The same Society also recently reported the discovery of an Iron Age chariot-burial not far from the village. The name of the village assumes that there was once a body of water big enough to demand the existence of a ford, but no such river or lake remains today. Near the village green, there is indeed a beck across which one could easily jump, but there is no ford.

The East Riding of Yorkshire, now part of Humberside, is rich in Neolithic monuments such as barrows, but also with evidence of later, but still prehistoric, objects. Castles and abbeys from the Middle Ages, some in ruins, but others like Beverley Minster, are in excellent condition and are plentiful. Even closer to Beeford than the Iron Age chariot-burial is what is

locally known as a Danish castle. This is atop a characteristic mound rising out of what was once a moat. This is at Skipsea Brough, which we pronounced as "Bruff." The remains are very meagre in extent, but there is also another curious feature. At the foot of the castle mound and where the outer edge of the moat exists, there are four bare patches amid a lush growth of grass. Tradition has it that two Danish brothers fought a duel, fatal to both of them, and where they stood the grass has never grown again. This spot we passed when we went for a picnic by the seaside some three miles from Beeford. We went on foot, of course. I have a snapshot of my brother Norman, age thirteen, standing in these steps with a cricket bat raised to strike me down. In the other set of steps I am standing supposedly defending myself with a cricket stump. But the pose is unconvincing; one hand is behind my back, Mother was standing in the background having planned the pose. Thereby hangs a tail?

Mother, self and Norman at the Steps, Skipsea, England (1910–1912). Scene of Danish brothers' duel – the grass never grew again where they stood.

No, but there might be a tale involved. Just after we left home for the three mile walk to the seaside, mother warned me to be careful of my new shorts. Any accident to them would involve my being left at home. Less than a hundred yards from home, I climbed through a fence after a ball and tore the back of my shorts. Naturally, I kept to the rear of the party until we got to Skipsea. There it was that Mother arranged for the picture, and this accounted for the very feeble pose that I adopted. Without my hand behind my back, Mother would have seen the tear. I forget when the discovery was made, but we did manage to get to the seaside sands so the certain punishment was not inflicted.

In retrospect, this is a very slight incident to be recorded in a collection of memories, but at the same time the all too infrequent picnic was fraught with menace should any unforeseen circumstances arise.