

LAKENHEATH – A Suffolk village in the 1930's.

My late sister was a keen collector of picture postcards and, among her albums I recently came across a black and white postcard of Lakenheath taken in the 1930's. It depicts a view of the village taken from the south side of the pond and looking north towards the church and, what was then, the Bell Hotel. I wondered how many people in the village would remember the pond, which was situated on the corner of the High Street and Mill Road just in front of the War Memorial. The only link today is in the name of a nearby house called Pond Cottage. All of this prompted me to take a trip down memory lane to try and recall my boyhood in the village.

Village Development

The village has always been long and narrow confined by nature on its western and eastern boundaries, {as its name implies}, by the "lake" or Fen and the "heath" or Breckland respectively. (There is a theory that "heath" is derived from the word "hythe" meaning "a landing place" on the lake, which, I believe did exist in prehistoric times.) In the 1920's and 30's the southern end was developed by the building of the Council Houses up to the parish boundary with Eriswell, and at the northern end, houses along the Station Road more or less stopped at the rear entrance to Lakenheath Hall. Back Street and the middle part of High Street hardly seem to have changed over the years, nor have the two roads, which cross them, Wings and Mill Road, which join at the School. In the 1930's, however, this road continued past the cemetery, over the hill and down past Maids Cross and the large chalk pit (which was still being worked) and on to the hamlet of Wangford, before joining the Barton Mills to Brandon Road.

Agriculture and Industry

Farm work was probably the main source of employment in the 1930's and I can remember the mass early morning exodus of farm workers cycling out to the Fen and their return in the afternoon or evening, depending on the time of year. Each one carried his or her "Dockey", (midday meal) in a bag on the handlebars and, in summer, an old Tizer bottle filled with cold sweet tea and cooled in a nearby dyke provided welcome thirst relief. My father farmed at Bedford Farm on Burnt Fen and among his neighbours were farms owned by Hartleys and Chivers, the well-known Jam manufacturers, as well as Bryant and Mays who had plantations for their match-making business. With the introduction of Chicory as a major crop in the area, a factory to process it was built by a Dutch company at Lakenheath Station.

Other industries still in existence at this time were sand extraction from two large pits on the Breck as well as the chalk extraction already mentioned. The Breck also provided work for a few Warreners who supplied rabbit skins to the factory at Brandon.

On a much smaller scale but no less important, Mr Smith, the blacksmith, had his forge at the back of the Plough Inn on the corner of Mill Road and Back Street. This was a magical place for a young boy watching him beat out red-hot iron into horseshoes, and the unique smell of burning when he fitted it to the horse's hoof. He could seemingly make almost anything you needed and created a special tool for my father for cutting asparagus. I believe his wife was the daughter of our next-door

neighbour, Mr Hammond, who was a Master Carpenter. He, too, could make almost anything out of wood, but his specialities were ladders and wheelbarrows. His ladders, which he made for the local fruit farmers, had to be extra tall to enable the fruit to be picked from old and overgrown trees. A far cry from today where fruit trees are grown on dwarf stock so that the fruit can be picked from the ground. I spent many happy hours in his workshop watching him construct a wheelbarrow, and the most fascinating part was the making of the wheel and putting on its iron tyre. His son, Bob, took over after he died but, sadly, demand for the old craft skills was on the wane and he had to find other employment.

Shops

With limited transport facilities to places like Mildenhall and Bury St Edmunds, the Lakenheath shops and Businesses could supply most of the inhabitants' needs. Coming in from Eriswell the first shop was a small general store on the corner where the Back Street joins the High Street, and the lady proprietor sold a range of things including groceries, confectionery, fruit and vegetables and, mysteriously, a few garden tools. There were one or two similar shops including Mrs Morley's, a few doors down from the Post Office. She had the advantage of having an Ice Cream freezer and once a week in the summer she had a delivery of Walls's penny Sno-fruits, twopenny wafers and, if you were "flush", a sixpenny tub. She did, however, have competition sometimes when the Wall's "Stop me and buy one" man came to the village on his tricycle, as well as home-made ice-cream occasionally made by Mr Rutherford at his Fruiterers on the corner of the High Street and Mill Road. It tasted just like frozen custard!

The largest shop in the village was the Co-op, opposite the pond. Not only did it offer a wide range of groceries and greengrocery, it had its own butchery as well as an in-house bakery. On top of this you could buy clothes and hardware all with the added attraction of the "Divi", metal tokens with a monetary value, which could be used against future purchases. Mr Moore had a butchers shop just along from the War Memorial and there was another bakery down the road from where we lived at No 81 in the High Street, owned by another Mr Hammond. His bread, delivered daily, was some of the best I have ever tasted, and on Fridays he brought an additional basket covered with a white cloth and containing a range of cakes including Madeleines, Jam Tarts and, my favourites, Cream Horns. Milk was another daily delivery but not in bottles as today. Mr Cook the, Dairyman, brought a large metal container to the door and ladled out your requirements into your jug with pint and half-pint measures. His splendid horse-drawn milk float was something to admire as he did his rounds through the village.

One of the most important shops and businesses in the village was the Post Office, (situated where it is today) and run by the charming Mr and Mrs Mallett, assisted by Ron (whose surname I never knew) who ran the Post Office section. I seem to remember that the shop sold ladies clothing and specialised in knitting wools and patterns. Mr Mallett had an additional job as part-time bank manager when he opened the building next door on Wednesdays as a temporary branch of Lloyds Bank in Mildenhall. They sent a clerk over by car with all the necessary cash and banking paraphernalia to provide a service to the village and, during the holidays, I sometimes went there on my bicycle to collect the farm wages. One could hardly imagine this happening in today's crime-ridden times.

Opposite the Post Office was Henry Flatt's mini-business "empire", comprising a shop which specialised in bicycling equipment, electrical goods and toys, a bicycle repair workshop and a taxi service. It also served petrol from two hand-operated pumps. One of his sons, George, ran the shop and his other son, Fred, looked after the repair shop and drove the taxi. Their sister, Elsie, helped out in the shop when she was not busy looking after the household. Henry Flatt was of the same generation as my father and they often had long philosophical discussions about farming, business and life in general.

Other businesses included Mr Diver, the builder, a florist in the Back Street as well as, (though I can't be sure), a shoe shop and cobblers. The one shop which the village lacked was a chemist, the nearest one being Fosters in Mildenhall, though I am sure the Doctor's Surgery dispensed basic medicines.

Services

Medical care was provided by Dr Barr, a jolly Irishman, and a District Nurse who could be seen cycling round the village and its environs in all weathers. Dr Barr lived in a house near the church on the east side of the High Street where he also had his Surgery. In the 1930's you had to pay for a doctor's services and so he was only called on in a real emergency, which meant that most households relied on home-made remedies such as bread poultices for chesty coughs, for instance!

Law and order was maintained by the village "Bobby" who lived in the Police House on Back Street. It was very reassuring to see him cycling round the village where he knew everybody including the few miscreants that were about. The worst crime seemed to be bicycle theft but woe betide you if he caught you cycling at night without lights! Nobody seemed to be concerned about burglaries or break-ins and we never locked our back door at night. A far cry from the situation today!

If you wanted a book to read, a limited library service was available one afternoon a week from a room at the back of the Village Hall or, to give it its correct name, The War Memorial Hall. They always seemed to have a good selection of "Westerns" which pleased my father who had worked as a cowboy in Canada in his youth.

I suppose that under the heading of "Services" I could include the weekly visit of a mobile Fish and Chip Van, which used to park by the pond. If you hadn't seen it coming from the thick smoke pouring out of the chimney on its roof, the smell of frying told you that it had arrived.

Utilities

In the 1930's there was no gas, no mains water, no mains drainage and only a limited supply of electricity on a private grid run by Mr Rolph from his generator off the High Street. We pumped our water from a deep well at the back of the house and what water it was- crystal clear and ice cold. It took ninety pumps every morning and evening to fill the tank in the loft and, as you can imagine, we were very economical with our use of water, a habit which is still with me today.

Most houses had earth closets and cess-pits which had to be emptied regularly. This was done by a man with a horse-drawn tank and a scoop on a long pole, and it wasn't difficult to tell when he was in your area!

In the absence of gas and a proper electricity supply, cooking was done on a coal range or, as in my mother's case, on a Valor oil stove. This comprised three

burners and a large metal box which could be put on two of the burners to act as an oven. This somewhat primitive arrangement never prevented her from producing wonderful roast dinners as well as a range of cakes and pastries. The oil or, to be more accurate paraffin, was delivered weekly by Bussen and Parkin, the ironmongers from Mildenhall.

We had a coal-fired range to heat our water, the coal being delivered by the twin Crane brothers whose father ran the Plough Inn on Back Street. On our open fires we burned apple and plum wood from the trees, which my father was clearing from the farm. Every so often he would send up a load by horse and cart from the farm, which was three miles away in the Fen. Unfortunately it arrived in the form of trunks and branches, which had to be sawn into suitable lengths for chopping, and my brother and I learnt to use a saw and an axe from quite a young age.

Transport

The bicycle was the main form of transport in the 30's with hardly anyone owning a car or even a lorry. In the postcard I referred to in the opening paragraph of this article it is interesting to note there are only two vehicles to be seen, one a horse and cart coming out of the Bell yard and a motor van parked outside the Co-op.

For longer journeys outside the village the Eastern Counties Omnibus Company kept a single decker bus based at Lakenheath, garaged at the back of the Bell Hotel. For many years this was driven by Ernie Fincham with his conductor Mr Cummings. On Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays there was a twice daily service to Bury St Edmunds, and on Tuesdays you could spend the afternoon in Newmarket. After leaving Mildenhall the bus did not take the direct route to Bury but went via several villages including Tuddenham and Risby so that the journey time was over an hour. The last bus left Bury at half-past four so if you wanted to go to the pictures to the Odeon cinema you always missed the end of the big picture, even though the bus station was only just across the road from the cinema.

Trips to Cambridge and Norwich and further afield had to be by train from Lakenheath Station which was (and still is!), three miles from the village. In the 30's the London to Norwich line was run by the LNER and even small stations like Lakenheath were staffed by a Station Master, a booking office clerk, a signaller, a porter and, often a young lad learning the trade.

Unlike today there was no motorway system or heavy long distance road transport and, therefore, goods had to be carried on the rail network. To this end every station had a Goods Siding and I can remember going with Bob Newell, who drove the farm lorry, to Shippea Hill Station where we loaded boxes of apples and plums on to a covered goods wagon which would later be attached to a train to London, and, ultimately to Covent Garden Market. You had to make sure that the boxes were packed in as tightly as possible otherwise, when the wagon was being shunted, the fruit would spill everywhere.

For the local movement of goods the horse and cart was still the main mode of transport. My father had three cart-horses, two were Suffolk Punches named Prince and Short, and a Shire mare called Marigold who, despite her size, was the most gentle and intelligent horse you could hope to work with. They were looked after by the Horseman, Ambrose Flack, who was well-known to everyone in the village, not least for the bag of Aniseed Balls he always carried in his pocket. I often wondered if they were treats for his horses rather than for human consumption.

For local journeys everyone who was fit and able had a bicycle but none of your mountain bikes with multiple gears! They were heavy, sturdily built machines with a one-speed gear, though if you had the money you could indulge in a three-speed version. The other alternative, of course, was to walk and my mother thought nothing of walking to Eriswell to visit friends for the afternoon.

The Church

Lakenheath is the second largest parish in the county after Mildenhall and its magnificent church dominating the centre of the village would seem to be in keeping with this fact. St Marys and the Baptist, Jehovah Jireh and Methodist Chapels provided for the religious needs of the village. The incumbent of St Marys in the 1930's was the Reverend Morris who lived in the Vicarage on Back Street, looked after by his housekeeper Miss Wilkins. As I remember it the Vicarage was one of the coldest houses I had ever been in and I was pleased to see what a welcoming place it had become when I visited Ambrose Flack some years ago after it had been converted into the Lakenheath Village Home.

The Rev. Morris was an impressively built man who wore pince-nez which always seemed to be about to fall off his nose. His Sunday sermons were exciting, to say the least, delivered in a booming voice with much arm waving. I often wondered if the slender pulpit would stand up to it all. The organ at this time was played by Miss Rolph with my mother deputising on occasions, and the Church Warden was Mr Margaretson Rutherford. The services were what my mother used to describe as "High church" and I was fascinated by the rituals which took place at the altar between the priest and his acolytes. Matins was followed by Holy Eucharist which meant quite a long service to endure for a young boy, especially as the pews were very uncomfortable to sit on for long periods. Even the wonderful wall paintings and the intriguingly carved bench ends couldn't relieve the boredom at times.

One custom which does not appear to be extant today is the tolling of the bell at regular intervals throughout the day to mark the passing of one of the parishioners.

Social Activities

My mother belonged to the Mothers' Union which used to meet in a small room above the West Porch of the Church. I believe this Porch is one of the unusual features of St Marys and may have been the original school room. She was also a member of the Womens' Institute which met once a month in the War Memorial Hall. When we first moved to the village she used to take me to the meetings rather than leave me at home on my own. On one occasion I released a clockwork mouse into the proceedings and the ensuing panic was something to behold! Needless to say, I was taken straight home and sent to my room without any supper and I often wonder how my mother was able to face the ladies of the W.I. again.

My father was a member of the British Legion which was opposite our house on the High Street, and on many an evening he would go over for a game of billiards. He was quite a skilled player but never achieved his ambition of beating "Gunboat" Smith!

In 1935, to mark the Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary, a sports day was held in the field behind the British Legion hut. Since it was only ever grazed by Mr Prew's cow, (of whom more later), I don't recall the surface as being

particularly suitable for one hundred yard sprints. However we children all received a Jubilee commemorative mug which I still have

The War Memorial Hall was a popular venue for wedding receptions, and was often used for Saturday night dances. Once in a while we would see a poster announcing the showing of a film and when the night arrived the hall was packed to bursting point. You had to take your own cushions as the seats were so uncomfortable, and if you sat at the back, by the time the film was halfway through you could hardly see the screen for cigarette and pipe smoke. As there was only one projector the film had to be stopped every so often to change the reel and this used to cause a bit of an uproar. If you wanted a rather more sophisticated evening you had to cycle five miles to either the Avenue Cinema at Brandon or the Comet at Mildenhall, which had been named after the aeroplane which won the Mildenhall to Melbourne air race in 1934. (Not to be confused with the later pioneer jet airliner). My father took me on his bike (sitting on the cross-bar) to see it at Mildenhall Aerodrome and in those days you could get very close to it on the Beck Row road.

In 1939 one of the popular films was "The Hound of the Baskervilles" starring Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes and which was showing at the Avenue at Brandon where my brother, sister and I cycled to see it. The ride back to Lakenheath across the Breck in the dark was eerie, to say the least, but when we were passing the farm at Wangford a dog started to howl and I reckon we covered the stretch of road up Maid's Cross hill in record time.

The occupants of Lakenheath Hall in the 1930's were Sir Charlton and Lady Briscoe, the latter being a keen amateur archaeologist. On part of their land not far from Maid's Cross she had unearthed the remains of a Roman farmhouse and used to get local volunteers, including my sister, brother and me to help with the excavations. We didn't find much, other than pieces of pottery, but she managed to put together some quite large remnants of original pots

From time to time, local "Shoots" were arranged by Sir Charlton on his land and sometimes by my father on our farm, where the beaters were led by our farm foreman, John Turrington. John had knocked on our door one day in 1935, looking for work and, despite the agricultural depression still having an effect, my father took him on. John and his wife Sarah remained firm friends with my father until his death in 1976.

Inns

As far as I can recollect, the village supported eight inns at this time. The Fox was the only one in Back Street and was run by Mr Crane who also owned the Coal Merchant's. Not far away, close to the War Memorial on Mill Road, was the Plough which is still open today. Going north and opposite the church was what was then known as the Bell Hotel, and further on still on the same side of the road was The Tap. On the other side of the road stood The Bull, almost opposite the Post Office, and the last pub in the main part of the village was The Half Moon just before the Station Road junction. This, too, is still open today. The old road to the Fen used to run from the Station Road junction and about a mile away stood the High Bridge Inn which had a sad and lonely air. I imagine that in the days when the Lode was a navigable waterway it was a very busy pub much used by the bargemen and river traffic. The last inn, though not, strictly in the village, was the Swan Hotel at Lakenheath Station, another which has long since closed. I am sure that in earlier

years there were other pubs in the village and, indeed, our house in the High Street had once been a pub known as The Wagon and Horses.

Sports Activities

The seasons in the 1930's always seemed to be more distinct than they have been in recent years, with long hot summers and cold winters with plenty of ice and snow. Furthermore, we played cricket in the summer and football in the winter and the latter wasn't an all year game as it is now. In common with most villages of any size, Lakenheath had its cricket and football teams and I seem to remember that the football team was quite successful in the late 30's, being able to call on players from RAF Feltwell. For a time the home ground was called "The Nest" and was situated in the large dis-used chalk pit at the northern end of Back Street.

In really hot weather all one wanted to do was to find somewhere to swim and cool off, but the opportunities were very limited. At a pinch you could paddle and splash about in the Lode, the artificial river down behind the British Legion, which connected the Little Ouse with the River Lark at Mildenhall. For a proper swim we used the former chalk pit by the old windmill on the Undley Road, which was very invigorating and, on reflection, quite dangerous. Being spring fed it was very cold, even in the height of summer and, with very steep sides there was no question of gradually easing yourself in- you just jumped! It was certainly inadvisable to dive as there was a lot of thick weed just under the surface and I doubt if, today, we would even be allowed to swim there.

In the winter we could go skating and tobogganing though the latter was difficult with the lack of hills in the area. One of the best runs was the slope leading into the old chalk pit which I mentioned earlier as the home ground of the football team. Most people had a home-made toboggan, constructed from wood and bits of metal, but a few hardy types went down seated on a tin tray. As for skating, when the fens flooded as they frequently did, you didn't have to go very far to find a suitable "rink", and one of the best places was alongside the Undley Road. Apart from the dykes which could be quite treacherous, if you went through the ice it was rarely more than a foot or so deep and you could skate for a very long way. Most small boys were satisfied with a good slide, and one of the best was on the village pond where, with a good run-in from the road, you could slide right across it. Fortunately there was no bank as this had been flattened by Mr Prew's cow, to whom I referred earlier.

I can always remember Mr Prew as a gentleman from a previous era, with his stove-pipe hat, chocolate coloured corduroy knicker-bocker suit and shiny brown leather ankle boots. I think he kept his cow up Mill Road and every day he would bring her down to graze in the field behind the British Legion stopping on the way for a drink in the pond. It was about the only action you saw in the pond as there were no fish or wildfowl- not even a duck! Perhaps this is why it was filled-in at the beginning of World War Two and has served as a car park ever since. . . .

from Robert Kidner
(ex Lakenheath resident)