

CHAPTER I.

Turn of the Century – Enclosure – Depression - WWI - Farming traditions – The Four Seasons – Horse and Wagon – The packhorse - Door-to-door- delivery - The village exodus – Crossways – Market days – Jumble sales - Ox and plough – Hedge and ditch – Farming life – The milking parlour – The chestnut trees in bloom .

At the turn of the nineteenth century, as in all farming communities, rural life revolved around the seasons. The work of the farmer began at first light and finished with the setting of the sun – cows have to be milked and fed. The workers needed to be flexible to accommodate the changes in light and weather; they were days of endless hard work with little to show for the effort. What was happening in Somerset was little different from elsewhere. The completely rural society operated in accordance with tradition typical of downland farming methods. Summers saw the fresh Alfalfa also known as Lucerne, being similar to clover with a small purple flower but growing to about three feet, swaying in the breeze ready to be cut for fodder. The cattle also relied upon maize and hay either in the field or in their shed. The majority of cattle were Devon's – the prevailing breed in the southern counties, related to the Somersetshire variety being larger than the North Devon's. Their coats are usually straight haired and red in colour bearing middle sized horns. Although their milk is rich in quality, they are not considered great producers, being rather small. Farmers love the breed for their compactness and countenance.

Much of the work done on farms before and during the war was piecework. These gangs of men or women worked planting, hoeing, pricking out and singling with sacks around their waists and slung round their backs – packing and stacking the boxes of picked produce...

At the end of the season, after the harvest - the fields of stubble and wastage burnt... then lime spread before ploughing as a general part of the system, making the fields ready for the wind, rain and frost to do their work. Later, manure spread... ploughed in... before grass and clover sown.

Arable farms worked a rotation of crop system... working a number of fields, usually four, to ensure a cycle. This rotation included the action of sheep cropping, grazing and enriching the soil. It was the production of sheep, which had made the area a centre for wool and its products... As the year unfolded and the early morning frosts arrived, the birds would quieten their calls, puddles started to form as the winter rain 'set in'. The whole scene became cold and bleak until the fast moving clouds were pushed away to allow the sun to come peeping through. A patch of blue appeared in the sky and a rainbow forms.

The hedges glistened with their covering of raindrops and the leaves shimmered in the drying wind. The fields were often banked six-foot high with hedge atop. These hedge banks could over five hundred years old and dated when the original farmland created. It is believed that many of these high hedges were for shelter for the animals as well as windbreaks. It was not always that they were heaped up. Some of them were the result of much cart traffic that cut a roadway in the earth making a depression assisted by winter rains washing the soil down hill. Hedges are a prominent feature, a reminder of the remnants of the woodland before the land was cultivated. The enclosure of land into fields began in the mid 1700s – by acts of parliament; previously the land would have been common land. This fencing in of land continued for about a hundred years.

The older the hedge the more species of tree and shrub within... they provide shelter for wild life, and food for both animal and man. Throughout the seasons the hedge is a place of much activity as much for plant growth as for the passage of animal – providing a safe passage from field to field. There were hard times, when there was no work for the villager. To give some wages to the poor these hedges, ditches and banks provided all year work - which was never wasted. The English

countryside has been the result of hundreds of years of labour contributing towards providing an honest living and food...

The hedges towards Perry Street were always full of yellow hammers. [Perry Street is a hamlet on the Fosse Way just along the road from Tatworth]. Further on, closer to South Chard, another hamlet, contains St Margaret's c15th Chapel... populated by nightingales, and the fields on either side inhabited by pewees who fed there in the winter when the fields were being ploughed, and nested on the ground in the spring... they were an aggressive lot trying to swoop down and bomb us as we hurried along. The rooks, did not find the farmers at all happy at their presence - preferring corn instead of grubs. The corncrake, partridge and pheasants scuttled across the road... disappearing in a flash into the undergrowth... Along the Water Lake, down stream, could be seen the kingfishers and heron... and up in the woods, the woodpecker taps and the cuckoo calls.

It was not always the local lads who trapped the wild animals. Many out of work farm labourers trapped rabbits. Unfortunately, it was not always a rabbit that caught itself... foxes too who were out after the rabbits became ensnared. The gamekeepers set traps, although they mostly shot the vermin after the game birds eggs. They had their special fence [the keeper's pantry] to hang their catch on displaying: magpies, jays, foxes, weasels, stoats, rats and sometimes moles. The gamekeeper had not sentimentality about dispatching their kill.

Not far away the Tatworth woodman worked all year round building up his stocks, looking out for likely timber and logs, taking note where a tree had died and needed felling. Most of the copse was made of oak with beech and hazel as underwood. Crowns of willow, chestnut and alder along the riverbank, cut and shaped from ages past, were regularly cropped for stave and stick. Coppicing and pollarding had gone on for ages and the crowns were properly looked after. The woodman had to work out his diary in accordance with season and call. He had to look after his customers.

His task in the autumn was to set out his pitch – a little shelter of hurdle and thatch its back directed to the north leaving the front open to the sun. He knew his stacks of wood would also shield... he had to work there all day and have all his tools and wooden devices, for shaping and holding, positioned perfectly. The chopping block, pole gauges, horse, and sail- block set up away from the ever-lit fire.

Most of his work consisted of making up his stack of fire logs for delivery, which was done one day a week to make up at least two rounds. His customers demanded a regular supply not just to use on the day but also to put by for the winter. His other main task was to make hurdles. He tried to keep all his items if not ready made with the wood ready for instant action. There would be a line of neat pens for willow wands, walking sticks, split canes, posts, spars, and palings. Although he could make special tools and handles – ladders, clothes horses, spade handles, baskets, brooms, farm implements and kitchen chairs, as well as providing a fence making business he tried to maintain a steady income from routine affairs. The specialist items needed a different set-up with tools and benches more fitting for such work. At times, his labour was called on to repair or laid a hedge, builds a fence or mend a gate. On his rounds he was made aware of jobs that needed doing where a particular type of wood, shape and length needed. Nothing in the wood and copse went for waste except the bark, shavings, and chips, which found a place on the woodman's fire.

Just after the First World War horse, drawn vehicles carried all heavy goods. Even massive boilers for steam production were moved from the makers to the boiler-house by a drag team of ten pairs of heavy horses. These low, heavy chassied, multi, iron-rimmed wheeled wagons, were chained to the team of horses. The shire horses were bedecked with brass medallions having their manes and tails braided and ribboned – a magnificent sight. Behind, followed the trace pair, that helped hold the load going downhill or were taken to the front to help climb...

Road surfaces were poor and the lanes no more than muddy tracks. Tarmac was to come much later. The banks and hedge high and untrimmed. Most lanes showed their age by being sunken

by continual traffic throwing the mud up onto the banks making the lanes even narrower. It was not unusual for oxen to be used for heavy carting work. Horse was kept for more detailed work being far more valuable. There were allsorts from Shetland ponies for light carts to heavy shires for wagons. Dapple greys and chestnut geldings many of them winning cups at the fairs. The carters took a delight in making their charges better than anyone else's makes. Their coats were groomed to perfection their white socks washed and brushed, manes plaited and braided with ribbon. Their ears enclosed in caps decorated with bobbles and their hooves varnished. The leather gleamed and their brasses shone. All this to pull a dray or deliver the coal. Horses were prized possessions that paid their way, and what is more, they were friends too.

Those farmers who ran large estates, had brightly painted, shallow sided wagons, in house colours, with a seat at the front - for the driver. These wagons needed one or two strong horses and were used to gather hay and corn from the field... to take to the rick yards, and later, after thrashing, the corn in bags to the mill or chandlers. Another common sight was the two-wheeled muck-carts taking the manure from the cattle sheds and yard... to be spread on the fields, lying fallow.

Horses of all types needed to be shod – from Shires to Shetlands. Hunters that were turned out for the summer had their shoes removed and the farrier then pared their feet periodically. Blacksmiths always wore leather aprons with a slit down the middle so that the horse's foot could be out between his legs – to rest on the farrier's knee. During the 'Depression' – a period that began with the General Strike and finally ended in about 1933 when a European war looked a possibility, the number of horses declined. When things began to pick up farmers began to think about replacing their horses with tractors. Ten years later the use of tractors became a reality and the sudden demise of the workhorse came into being...

The farm labourers wore flannel shirts in the winter under waistcoat and jackets, and a coloured handkerchief tied round their neck instead of a collar. If they were available some wore old army greatcoats – a left over from the war, others tied sacks round their shoulders to keep off the rain. Many wore corduroy trousers supported by bracers and the legs tied with string below the knees making it easier to bend down – it also kept the turnips from trailing in the mud. A few, particularly shepherds, still wore a smock but this was slowly dying out. A cloth cap was almost obligatory often worn backwards to keep the rain falling down the back of the neck, this also kept the sun off. All wore boots generally old army boots.

The coalman drove up in his four wheeled, flat cart with a high seat at the front. On his way past, he would call in to customers on his route to see if they needed any wood or coal. He sold coal in sacks, which were weighed on scales carried on his cart. You could order any amount for it was sold by weight not by the bag. He also sold faggots, chopped wood and logs. In the summer, the coalman used to put a straw hat on his horse to keep the sun off. It was a very patient; docile horse for it had to stand around for a long time as the coalman delivered his load. Along the road and over the bridge there might be coming horses working on the farms and in the woods. Occasionally the brewery cart pulled by two shires clomped past with their brasses tinkling.

In the late eighteen hundreds, through the war years... into the early thirties, steam driven vehicle proceeded petrol motors, especially for farm and timberwork. Many were Foden wagons, which trundled past Rosalie Cottage stopping at the stream to take on water for the boiler. These slow moving and noisy machines were hired to drive the thrasher, chaff cutter and drag plough. Quite often, they pulled either a drivers hut or trailer with spare tools and servicing equipment. If the job meant the driver stayed away from home he used the hut to sleep in. It also saved time to keep the boiler alight to save working-up steam-levels in the morning.

All major road repairs required the presence of a steam road roller. This machine did noble service right on past the sixties and still going strong.

There were outlying parts to the village, which demanded that children had some way to walk to reach school. Some of these cottages had only a grass footpath running to the front door. The children's way was by stile, hedgerow and wooded path, using as many short cuts as possible without getting their shoes wet or muddy. Those who lived upon the main road felt superior – that they lived in the thick of events. There was in the mid-thirties a general move towards couples buying their own homes. Before then to rent, a house or cottage was the accepted means of providing a roof over one's head. The breaking up of estates brought more land on to the market for builders to put up new affordable homes.