

CHAPTER II

The garden gate – Perry Street - The old ford under the stone bridge – The Crossways – The Village School – Chard Junction – Chard Market – Sheep on the Downs – Village fetes – The two-horse plough – The pack-horse route – Oxen ploughing – Muck spreading – Self sufficiency – The mole catcher – Drilling & Rolling – Riverbank.

The Collins' cottage stood next to the old ford, now bridged over. On a summer's day, the parapet afforded a convenient leaning place for members of the community to gossip over – discussing questions of the day and those things that concern the village. It is quite narrow, only allowing the easy access of hay cart, and driven flock or herd. It was originally built to save wet feet in times of flood and allow the passage of packhorse and drovers cart... It is like many others - picturesque, with a single arch; the swift flowing water opens out downstream - where the depth lessens, allowing the rounded pebbles to make the water chuckle and gurgle on its way to the reed bed lower down.

The garden gate opened off Perry Street, a road linking The Crossway's corner to the distant watermill... past school and shop... to Chard Junction – the nearest railway station. The name 'street' has a Roman origin, for paved way, this one linked all the main features of the village making it a frequent meeting place for passers by. In the twenties... on to the thirties, cars were a rarity – if a car went by children rushed to see it disappear up the road. Other than these rare moments, there was no traffic noise. Villages similar to Tatworth were self-sufficient; there was no necessity to travel afar. Many workers had bicycles and the carrier ran his delivery. There were very few changes to the village structure... for the same families existed - from generations past; everyone knew everyone else... there was no need to write the full address on an envelope for the persons name and village was sufficient. The exodus from the village final began after the war, in the 1950s, when young folk leaving school looked beyond the village. The change was remarkable for not only its completeness but also its speed. Still, I must not hurry the time along the change was fast enough. Back, we must return, into the thirties and forties as the robin's bright eyes peered over the nest – his head swivelled, registering neighbouring birds calling to each other... the chattering swallows, heard in the eaves.

Occasionally a clatter of hooves announced a herd of cattle or sheep being driven by, off to Chard market... The accurate passage of time was not recognised, for very few people had wristwatches and only the older men wore a fob watch. On Sundays, the church bells rang for each service. The churchgoers filed past the gate. When the single bell stopped ringing the late comers ran... Past summer memories return... the chirping of the crickets, the buzz of the bees... and the cock's crows, to the cackle of laying hens.

In outlying districts, oxen would provide the main pulling power, horses in areas with lighter soil. Women and men would follow along to break up the clods. The only relaxation from the grind of every-day work is a trip to market for the family. The wives and daughters would be in their best dresses their husbands in cord, cap and tweed.

The rat and rabbit catcher was still an occupation each dead animal paid by the tail. Hunting was a fashionable sport. Sheep grazed on light arable land like the Dorset Downs. The shepherd and his dog could still be seen standing guard over the flock. Repairing his pens, erecting hurdles, setting up his troughs and hayracks whilst living in his movable corrugated hut on wheels where he sleeps in a bunk warmed by a small cooking stove during lambing time Hand shearing, sometimes done by a single shearer and at other times a gang... began in early spring.

Chard market, which opened each week, was one of the main cattle and sheep sales for the area and covered a large site with hundreds of pens. The auctioneer could be heard calling out the

prices whilst the sheep gave voice and the cattle bellowed. This weekly market was what the rural community looked forward to each week. It gave the chance to sell their produce, hear the latest news and to keep up with prices. Streets would be sealed off, completely flocks, and herds driven in to be placed into their stalls and pens. The occasions were taken for the wives to visit the shops and buy the produce that could not be purchased at the village shop.

There were many customs and festivals all eagerly looked forward to and if possible attended. Mumming plays, May Days with a carnival procession - following the hobbyhorse, raising the Maypole, Morris-dancing, the harvest customs, bonfire nights and wakes... wassailing, on twelfth night and the local hunt 'meet'.

Every year there were flower shows, fairs, fetes and feasts. Showmen's vans and carts displaying garish and colourful posters; merry-go-rounds, stalls, roll a half-penny, coconut shies, gingerbread and lolly-pops. The showman's drum would beat and calls made to gather in the customer; bells would ring and the one-man-band starts up.

The jumble sale gave the villagers the chance to acquire cast offs and the unfitting given a new lease of life. Chipped plates a-plenty and broken children's toys; all were queued for long before the opening hour. The stall, which held the greatest attention, was the children's clothes. There was little 'bye-your-leave' but an undignified scramble... jumpers and blouses held up to the child to assess the correct size. The Rector circled the heaving mass never ceasing to be amazed by the aggressive tactics of the mothers. He was still due his tithes - one tenth of the annual produce from each parish. Even though this was reduced in 1836, many refused to pay it. There was much unrest and many court orders were issued. Even at the turn of the century through to the end of the First World War, and shortly after, tithes were paid. His control and standing soon began to fall-off never to assume its previous privileged position.

The farm-worker who looked after the horses was on many farms also the ploughman. He rose early to tend his horses that had to be fed two hours before they started work. During this time of cleaning, feeding and watering the ploughman had his own breakfast. When all was ready, the horses were led out to the field previously marked out for ploughing and an aiming stick planted to give a guide for the first 'up' furrow. The second 'down' furrow leaned against the first, making a ridge - a centre-furrow. The ploughman only worked for one continuous hour giving the horses a rest before starting again.

Ploughing was an autumn job always a rush to see who could start first after the harvest over and the old ricks broken up to be spread - to be ploughed in, along with stable scrapings and contents of the dung heap.

Even during the Second World War, those working the land continued to follow old customs and attitudes. The ploughman, who worked alone, and his fine team of horses would plough and harrow the field ready for the seed to be sown by drilling. He lurched all day long with one leg down the furrow and the other up turning the fire blackened stubble of the previous year... watching the lifted turf roll off the mouldboard - to compost down the top surface. During their breaks the horses would be given their nosebags contained oats and chaff.

Huge flocks of seagulls that came straight from the sea at Seaton and Lyme Regis always followed the ploughing horses. Most of the fields had their attendant rusting farm implements stored away in odd corners - the sprouting corn, weeds and brambles slowly hid them from sight until they formed part of the hedgerow.

The productive arable land was not so intensively managed in the early thirties. Later on, when Britain tried to be more self sufficient, every spare piece of land was used to produce food. It was known that lime and sulphuric acid wash out of the soil and should be replaced. Lime was the chief dressing, which then began to be used extensively - in the autumn.

When my mother was born, and for some years after, it would not have been strange to see oxen ploughing. Oxen had been used for farm work long before the horse in all corners of the world. Their working ability, after training, was the same although the ox stronger – could deal with land that is more difficult but they were slower. Their keepers took as much time over their appearance, with the tips of their horns capped in brass and bells beneath their necks.

A farmer would use an ox because they existed on courser food and were fast eaters, withstood worse weather, and after a couple of years could be fattened and sold at market. They were a cheaper option – needed no shoeing; horses were mainly for personal riding and carriage work. When fat beef cattle were preferred for slaughter the life of the ox became less secure... the advent of the tractor finished their working life completely and that of the ox-carter.

After ploughing in the stubble, spread manure and yard waste the field was left for the frost to work at ready for harrowing in spring. The cereal varieties have changed over the years to ripen quicker and have shorter stalks. Although this is good for the farmer it is not so for wildlife. The poor unfortunate field mouse no longer builds its nest at the top of a swaying corn stalk... Some of the field were left in fallow for the next year and others planted with pink clover, vetch, yellow mustard or broad bean. These were used as animal fodder - whilst the livestock fertilized the ground as they fed... Swedes were grown as an animal crop... either dug up or fed to the cattle... or the sheep turned into a fenced section of the field - to graze... the shepherd daily moving the hurdles, until the whole field covered.

Later on, the flock would be moved into shelters, still using the hurdles and bales of straw to enclose an area for the ewes to have their lambs. Coupling up a horse to the shafts of a horse-drawn hut-on-wheels, the shepherd would tow the hut to a convenient spot close to the flock and out of the wind. The hut was necessary, for him to stay with his dog, day and night, to guard the flock and to administer to the needs of the ewes shortly to give birth. The shepherd's hut contained a bed, chair and small stove to provide some heat and cook his meals... he would stay there until lambing was over.

The shepherd's son was thirteen, coming on fourteen, entrusted with looking after a flock of sheep on the common. He drove the sheep taking number different routes to crop new grass along the way. The path bypassed sown crops and populated hamlets keeping off roads and highways. Taking in the lie of the land, the larks soaring overhead, the growing wheat, and frisking rabbits. Along the path that lead to stream and brook giving water to the hurdle flock as it passed. This was a treat, a change from turnips. In the past, forty years previously – at the turn of the century, there had been a recovery from the imported corn and lamb. Once again, the farmer who had survived the bad years started to receive the benefits of patience and perseverance. Not those things got back to pre 1870 but they were certainly better than the nineties. |In the good old days the farmers planned a succession of crops for the sheep mainly vetches, clover and turnips. With the hurdle fold moved daily the shepherd rationed what food was available.

Lambing occurred in February and within the hurdles were bales of hay placed to afford shelter and food. Although it was a bad month for the uncertain weather, it did take regard of the coming spring and the new shoots of grass. The coming summer markets were the goal of the shepherd... his every working moment now directed to achieving the best fattening for the new lambs. Farmers who had the space built lambing pens in the barn but we are more concerned about the shepherd who did not have this luxury. Often you could see, as you passed along the lane, a corner of a field sheltered by high hedges – the lea protected from the prevailing winds. Close to the corner a rick, placed there since time immemorial for the same reason... It was to be the forth side to a pen using the meeting of two corner hedges and a set of hurdles, the third... Perfect for the job. As the lambs were born more individual coops constructed from bales and hurdles inside the main pen. This was no spur of the moment devise but one handed down through the centuries.

The shepherd's life was an exacting one for about six weeks. His hut-on-wheels emitted smoke from the bent chimney from his tiny round stove. The morning fry-ups always with ample early morning mushrooms smelt fantastic as the sausages spat and sizzled. He tramped his rounds every few hours with his trusty dog, who's post the at the foot of the steps leading to the shepherd's hut, remained his domain. The bed, with the colourful crotched cover remained unmade... no need to be worried about being chastised for not being tidy. The small table and rickety chair, the only furniture, softened by a dusty print hanging askew and from projecting wooden pegs an assortment of aprons, straps and topcoats. For this period, he was the key worker receiving due deference from passers by and other farm workers who acknowledge his importance. His boss kept him supplied with bacon, sausage and bread, and topped up his jar of ginger beer.

Within the time allotted for lambing the first green tender points of new grass began to show. It was getting on for late April when it was time to move the ewes and their youngsters down to the meadows. Still the ground was penned to allow the new grass to have a chance to grow. Within two or three weeks, the whole field could be opened up. By May, there was an abundance of clover, vetches, pea old dredge corn, and wild rye to feast upon. Haymaking time was fast approaching...

The ploughman would quickly follow on after lambing with the plough, if not done previously, or with the harrow - to break-up furrows - to prepare the surface ready for sowing. Whereas the harrow only cuts up the top, the plough digs and moves the soil in a certain direction. The ploughman considers how to turn over the soil - to prepare it for the winter's action, composting the previous year's stubble and root systems whilst allowing air to circulate; all the time giving thought to proper surface drainage making sure ditches were kept clear - without causing erosion or a series of hollows. It was normal working practice to plough furrows along the contours of the land. There were only a few reversible mouldboards and these were not always successful... so ploughing 'up' and 'down' was done a certain distance apart - into 'gathers'. These strips of ploughing kept the field in its original state consciously allowing the ploughshare to skate upon the surface at the turn of each row. Finally the whole field was circled anti or clockwise to set the direction of the soil needed. Ploughing done soon after the stooks removed from the field and the wastage burnt off.

It was almost a race to see which farm started work first... making sure all was ready for the first frosts to break the turf. Old ricks broken down and together with chaff spread - to be ploughed in whilst the work was in progress. The ploughed fields in autumn allowed the winter's weather to break down the clods, which together with the rains exposed the flints and stones. These picked up and removed to the edge of the field to swell the heaps of many generations of labour.

Steam powered engines worked the land operated by contractors using sets of cultivating equipment although these were obsolete just before the war. However, threshing and barn work still carried on with steam power as did road repairs using steamrollers.

At the beginning of the thirties, just after the General Strike ended, the agricultural community was in tatters. Generations of farm workers suddenly found themselves out of work - all their hard won skills unwanted. Many found work in factories, like the butter factory or lace mill. Some turned their hand to building being somewhat allied to farm maintenance work. This increase in building work was to be seen and felt all over England, particularly along the railway lines, and towns. It was fortunate that the lace factory continued to produce net for curtaining. However, none of this happened without a great deal of anxiety and worry.

Boys left school aware of local customs and work habits. Within a short space of time, they absorbed a number of different skills - all to do with building and farm work. These skills they picked up watching their elders and listening to their conversation. The tractor driver knew a thing or two about machinery and its maintenance. The ploughman could repair a fence, weave a hurdle and dig a ditch and the dairyman could become a shepherd - if needs be! No different for their wives

and girl friends - it was a matter of being versatile, for jobs were rare and times were hard. Not one of them does the same job... day in and day out... throughout the year. They may like to but circumstance dictates they turn their hand to anything that needs doing.

At the start of the Second World War when the government were forced to make the country 'as self sufficient as possible' farming began a series of transformations. As much land as possible was brought into cultivation - some neither economic nor practical. More tractors and harvesters brought into use quickly to cope with difficult terrain, larger fields, and lack of skilled ploughmen, insufficient casual and migrant labour and conscription of The Women's Land Army.

The country was at total war it was no good having too many scruples about maintaining parks and gardens or maintaining small fields and non-negotiable gateways. From the time when I was old, enough to take notice until well into the 1950s when rationing still in force, self-sufficiency was the government's aim. The farmer was as much fighting the war as the soldier; if not cooperative, he was forced to comply with The Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery's strictures or removed from his land. It was a difficult time; the seasons dictated the speed of progress towards the government's diktats... it was not many years before, that flails were used to thrash out the corn.

In the winter of 1939 there was enormous activity on the land... two million extra acres were to be sown in preparation for war. There was not enough equipment including horses - only fifty-five thousand tractors were available, in all of Britain.

A frosty start to the day... Winter starts in mid November when the last leaves swept off the trees - by the harsh cold wind. It does not take long for the Technicolor picture of summer to fade and the cold hard reality of winter about to descend... The icy blasts harden the furrow's ridge turned up by the plough's mould-board as the field is prepared for the winter sowing of wheat. Over the hedge the field of swedes dug up for market and the remainder placed in clamps next to the potatoes and mangold-wurzels. The carrots and beetroots taken inside the barn and put into tubs of dried peat.

Soon the onetime rain-filled clods now frozen rock hard. The dry twigs, lifeless ruffled leaves and remnants of half-eaten acorn and chestnut, crackle underfoot. Everything covered in the rime of hoarfrost... the countryside, glistens in the sparkling winter sunlight. On the allotment garden it is the month of digging and planting, making sure the beds are ready for next years potatoes, cabbages and onions.

The occasional flurry of snow chased hither and thither by the north wind. The last of the leaves drop at the beginning of December... the bare trees show their deformities to the windward side as the chill wind dries up the last remaining moisture. Wheat sowing continues unabated as the last field are ploughed for oats.

Whilst the hedgehog, dormice and bat hibernate, other animals lie still - conserving energy... Not all animals are retiring though... for the fox and weasel are on the prowl.

It is time for grandad to prune the fruit trees and take cuttings from the currants. There is little time for the birds to feed... grandma leaves out an enamel plate on the grass full of table scraps... it is not long before the plate is bare! The gorse on the common and the winter-toadstool in the wood, give the only colour to an otherwise grey scene. Pairs of hooting tawny owls begin their courtship feeding... not giving the foraging mouse and scurrying vole time to linger!

The wind begins to be noticeably colder - it is now bitterly cold with clear skies. Walking about close to the stream, the dead leaves were now frosted and sparkled in the morning light. The mistletoe in the lime trees looked like airy nests against the sky. The ditches are checked to ensure they are free and not blocked. The manure is taken to the remaining field that have so far escaped ploughing. Any good day is taken up spreading lime on fields taking brassicas.

The edges of the stream freezes... it is only the swift flow of the water in the centre that keeps it free from ice. The snowstorm for-fills the promise of the dark, heavy clouds... the lanes and fields merge: it is truly, a bleak mid winter scene. The wind swirls the snow about creating banks against the hedges. It is just as well that the workers in the butter factory can walk to work - for trying to cycle is impossible! Some dried reeds disguised the fact that the young growth had started to show through the frost-covered ground as a lonely bulrush nods its bedraggled head at the strength of the wind. It starts to rain and the light fades fast... The sheep begin to move towards the sheltered side of the field... A patch of dread flag iris cropped down display new growth - just visible under trampled leaves. A flock of lapwings fly overhead as a startled partridge races away.

Grandad spends his time in the greenhouse studying the seed catalogues the trays bearing the seed potatoes are under the shelf starting to sprout.

Back in the cottage, the fire in the parlour range heats the parlour and casts a cheery glow. Outside hardly a sound disturbs the snow-bound village... The family gather round the fire comforted by the crackling, hissing sap, as it bubbles out of the burning wood; the occasional crack heralds another flying ember... the nearest target extinguishes the glowing missile whilst grandma serves out the next round of cooked chestnuts... passing them in turn round the ring of fire lit faces. They do not linger... the offered nut, far too hot to help shed the peel...

The snow gives way to slush and the banks of the stream overflow. The bridged, one time ford, holds back the flow... the water creates a pool that dissipates towards the reed bed. A weak sun and drying wind soon returns the fields to a furrowed brown. At last, time to break up the spade turned soil - in preparation for outside sowing. February is the month to sow parsnips - the first vegetable to begin the cycle all over again. It will not be long before the purple orchid graces the woodland glade, to be followed by the pansy and violet.

There was talk about a mole that had been busy in the garden making a series of mounds across the grass under the apple trees... it is just as well that the mole is not distracted in its digging by the sodden ground. The snowdrops are a pitiable sight, dipping and bending under the weight of water. The rain continues to fall... Is it possible to be warm again and to run barefooted over the grass?

As soon as the scattered primroses line the ditches, the bees begin to fly. Now, at last, spring is in the air - to last from March to the end of April. Throughout England in the thirties, and at other times - after tillage farmers would sow their seed to coincide with their area's weather and ground temperature - knowing that spring is a period of instability. It is time now to attend to fattening and breeding stock.

Therefore, it would be wrong to say that on the first day of spring the corn was cast... wheat was sown in February, oats in March and barley in April. What decided the issue would be how the sun's rays had warmed the ground, the local meteorological forecast for future sun and the access to machinery... not on the amount of rain or wind. The sown seed is then promoted into life by dampness and decaying plant litter acting as an insulator from the cold night air. Usually after the warmth of the March sun just as the blackthorn comes into bloom - plant growth is triggered - when the ground temperature is 43°F. The early potatoes are planted and the summer carrots pricked out... early dwarf peas and summer spinach sown in succession. The onion sets are given their regimental rows together with the shallots. There is so much to do that it is late before granddad settles down in front of the fire.

The buds on the oak tree noticeably green peeps out. At last, winter is over... Along Perry Street, the ivy leaves on the walls are bright and shiny and opposite the church, the Jubilee Tree outlined against the pale blue sky. There is talk about some snow; forecast for the afternoon... the news does not interest the cock blackbirds who watch their hens battle it out on the grass. The wind now is blowing quite hard a few drops of waterfall - shaken out of the trees...

The rooks are repairing their nests. It is a time of great activity in the field, hedge and tree. The invaders migrating from abroad challenge competition between breeding birds for what food is available. The dawn chorus proclaims each individual's territory, beginning well before sunrise. Now the swallows begin to arrive... just before the cuckoo's call.

Down by the stream the willow's twigs and branches show more colour and buds have started to form on the ash. At last, spring is beginning to show itself... the hawthorn buds are green and the pussy willow worth collecting. Those blackbirds have started rowing again as they chase each other making such a racket. The work on the farm increases in intensity, the machinery shaken out and oiled.

Before sowing could take place the farrows had to be levelled off and the clods reduced. Harrowing with drag harrows with iron teeth reduced the soil to a fine tilth. Rolling could be used alternately to further reduce the lumps of soil. It was always beneficial to cover sowed seed to prevent birds from destroying the field. Sowing was still partly done by hand but quickly died out in the early thirties except awkward corners and small fields. A good sower of seed could cover an acre field using just three pounds of seed.

Mechanical drilling was often done with two horses and would take an hour to cover an acre field. A trickle of grain fell down the funnel into the small furrow from the box. The roller followed the seed-drill, in many places drawn by horses.

Mangelwurzels spread over the next field by hand or from the back of a horse drawn cart this gave the sheep something to crunch particularly at lambing times and fertilized the field - they were particularly difficult to pull out of the frozen ground in winter.

It was the schoolchildren's job to scare away the rooks using battered pans and rattles. The high branches of the elms hold the rookery - the nests made out of twigs laced together hold firm against the swaying of their homes. They are there surviving the winter storms to be rethatched the following spring. The rook's cries... filled the air.

In the houses and cottages, the start of spring heralded Spring-cleaning. All the rag, wool hand-stitched loose rugs would be taken out of the house to be beaten. As the cottage door was left open on most days - not only to air the living room but allow the smoke filled atmosphere to clear, the rugs would be damp... having to be hung on the washing line to dry before house-work started.

In the garden, it is the month of almost continual weeding, transplanting and thinning out. The greenhouse is taken up with pots of this and that sprouting up... The sweet peas are taken out to be planted and summer cabbage given another row. We start having rhubarb tart for starters...

The stream seems to know winter is over - that new life forming... it bubbles and chatters over the rounded stones on the streambed in celebration, sparkling brightly - in the morning sun. The catkins hang down from the hazel as a new growth of bramble entwines round the stem. At the base a patch of assorted primroses, some white, others pink, vie with the violets to brighten up the riverbank, mainly colourless in its winter coat... I wonder who is going to hear the first cuckoo...

The cows from the farm start to enter the field over the hedge there is a great deal of lowing. The milking is still done by hand in many areas - especially small farms, 100 million gallons a year was transported to London by rail in the thirties using special milk vans. Field crops were planted by hand every potato sown by gangs of local women and children all paid just four shillings a day, the same rate for stone gathering. However much the land around is finding new life the farming people still are challenged by the daily grind.

The swallow whirl overhead... they swoop round the eaves darting here and there just for the fun of it. If only they would be still - just for a moment. The reeds, once flattened and bedraggled, standing upright, resplendent in green. The hoverfly staggers by as he hurries home carrying his sacks of pollen. Now it is the turn of the wagtails to dart amongst the now active undergrowth wagging their tails vigorously on landing. There is no doubting the advent of summer as the May

buds start to open... All along the bank, the riversides bestir themselves. The flash of orange-red and turquoise startles them as the kingfisher showing off dashes by...

Early May sees the birth of summer... the weather makes a perceptible improvement. The trees spread their canopies giving shade... filtering the sunlight onto the ground. Now the insects start to home in on their particular source of food. The open countryside starts to change colour as each fruit starts to ripen. The birds start to quieten when the lazy days of summer herald school holidays and another harvest about to be planned for.

The splendid horse-chestnut tree in the next field now has bright green leaves and a few sticky buds are opening... it will not be long before the flowers open... At last, summer is just around the corner..., it has taken so long. All the winter rains and chill winds seem an age away. The hawthorn blossom is such a delicate thing but the most prolific flowering tree - which starts the race - for all the other blooms to follow. In the field, the first buttercups give voice to early summer suns. The cuckoo call seems to echo, bouncing off the trees in the wood. Down by the stream the early summer sun warms up the cow-parsley the myriad small white flowers give off a scent that is slightly sour - hangs in the air. Close to the riverbank, the cow's foot weed. It appears as if a larger version of the watercress, or giant clover; whose flower has to wait two or three days before its ball is fully open. Is it any wonder that it is such a favourite of the bee... who unfortunately has to be content with nectar from the comfrey? It is just as well that the bee is such an active insect - life would soon come to a halt without its labour. Little do that pair of tufted ducks care about such esoteric thoughts, they are far too busy - concerned about their nest and the batch of speckled eggs it contains...

In the deeper stretches of the river a pair of swans continue their patrol - first this way and then that. No river scene is complete without their graceful presence. Dusk begins - soon after tea; the evening stroll requires the welcoming comfort of a coat. A turn up the road, over the bridge... a glance over the hedge shows the mist is beginning to raise... the reed bed a distant outline.

A second sowing of French beans is tackled first thing after breakfast on Saturday, quickly followed by the potatoes being earthed-up. The kitchen garden is now almost fully planted with neat orderly rows stretching across all the gardens. Nothing is left to chance for it is most important that the garden produce all that the family needs.