

## CHAPTER III

The Tinker calls – Tramps along the way – Pedlars and Knife-grinders – Proud Gypsies – The onion seller – Shopping at Chard – The Carrier Van – The penny bazaar – Summer holidays – Taking the train – The station handcart – The mechanical reaper – The one-horse rake – The swath-turner and the hay sweep – Thrashing with the huller.

Tinkers still visited the villages in their carts setting up their braziers to heat the pots and pans. They would grind and sharpen the gardening tools, household scissors and kitchen knives. Their call of ‘scissors to grind’ an oft-heard cry as they spun the grindstone wheel.

The tramps made their way along Perry Street with their loads of clothing tied in bundles. It was not unusual to find one setting up his pot over a fire or making his lean-to tent. They never seemed to be thin... perhaps it was the amount of clothing they wore that fattened then out? They were in the main successful beggars, housewives giving them a crust or drink of milk to make them go away.

For hamlets and outlying villages – away from the main highways, the population was sparse the Tinkers and Hawkers took the place of small shopkeepers – they were an essential part of the countryside – a much relied on source of communication as well as suppliers of essential goods.

Pedlars and Knife-grinders also had a place in rural life... they plied their trade too. In those days the Pedlar was called the Chapman and was very welcomed... he passed on news and gossip to outlandish places in a similar way to the Tinker carrying an amazing variety of goods in his carpetbag – pins, needles, vests, caps, girdles, laces, gloves, knives, glasses, tapes, dusters and much else besides. He sold clothes for babies, cleaning materials for the kitchen and floor. Lengths of material, aprons, ribbons, and thread, for the dressmakers and wool for the knitters. All were very handy for those unable to get to the shops in town. The Pedlars had their rounds and were expected to provide the same produce summer and winter... for they were relied on... His round was passed on - from father to son - jealously guarded. No tradesman’s cart invaded his preserves... for in some instances, he worked conspiring with a local town’s, general store - which provided his merchandise. It has been known for Tinkers to set up shop within the village, and in time to be accepted and integrated into the running of the village co-operative. There was no other means of obtaining these articles for who else would travel on rutted tracks in all weathers and in all seasons.

The proud gypsies, with their dogs, still wandered the lanes of England, most staying within their locality where they knew the habits of the workers and the farming community. Some stayed in town during the winter only travelling during the summer months to sell what they had traditionally made; others worked picking the summer crops. The women sold wooden pegs, woven baskets and bunch of ‘lucky’ heather whilst the men picked the fruit, helped with the harvest and planted the seed. In winter, they sold scrap metal and made-up their stock. The traditional highly coloured bow-topped van, with its decorated sides and neat, stepped, glazed door - displaying gaily painted cans and boxes, all pulled by a single horse. Often there a convoy of gypsy caravans which passed by heading for an old familiar campsite? Underneath the cart, a cage was to be seen carrying a clutch of hens. The rabbit catching lurcher loped along ready at a call to find a rabbit for the pot. The families would all meet up at the same site to pick fruit or vegetables in season... re-establishing past friendships - cementing family links.

The Spanish onion seller on his bike operated from coast to hinterland. Having his own route cycled year after year, with his strings draped over every part of the bike so that it looked like a travelling stack on wheels.

It is the time of year when the sky shows a saturated blue above the new, fresh foliage of the nearby elms. The sky’s colour so intense that it creates a lightening vignette - halo, around the

skyline branches. This distortion or adjacency is purely an action of poor eyesight not actual. It is unlikely for a human being not to be uplifted by nature's allure. At last all the trees are in full foliage although still not fully formed and the sunlight reaches the ground below allowing under plantings to flourish.

Early summer mornings in June are heralded by the cocks crowing in all the chicken runs - at the bottom of the garden. This would be the start to one's day, quickly followed by the dawn chorus and the chatter of swallows in the eaves.

There being no traffic as such only the clip-clop of the milkman's horse and cart, resplendent in its coloured paint outlining its panels... the open back, made it look like a chariot, swayed as the milkman descended to deliver the day's supply. The welcoming chink of his bottles and clank of his churns was another reminder...

Along the roadside dense thickets of blackthorn covered in early morning dew, sharp smelling and alive with bees feasting off the white blossom. In the fields, the chirping grasshoppers fidgeted and the ever-buzzing insects flew about with a purposeful beat to their wings. Along the lane the mighty stag beetle worked his way over the rotting wood, his, was only a very short life, whilst the ants formed up one behind each other carrying their scrap of leaf, to who know where? No phones rang, no planes flew overhead and no dust was disturbed on the lanes. There was always plenty of time and the tranquil scene remained unspoilt even through the war years. Down stream from the bridge there are two workmen cutting the weed and dragging it to the side of the bank. Quantities of weed escape the attention of the men and drift down river becoming entangled in the trailing willow branches. It is late afternoon and the warm light highlights the heads of the marsh orchid amongst the waist height reeds. The swans paddle by now accompanied by their young, little grey-brown bundles of downy feathers. It is getting late and the background hum of insect life quiets the evening strollers start up the road towards the Poppe Inn.

The end of each day was announced by the screech of owls in the neighbouring trees, the local cats fighting for territory, and the bark of foxes in the copse. Pathetic crying... another victim would follow the occasional fluttering, scuffles and rustles... The countryside was not always sleeping!

Most villages were self-supporting in that they had a shop, a butchers and bakers. The fields and gardens provided the rest. Many folk had a bicycle - adequate for getting to work or shop - there was always the carrier to cart the extra purchases.

Village life carried on with the help of small businesses - passed on from generation to generation. Because families were large most of the children, on leaving school, left home to take up employment in the nearest town, which was in this case Chard. At least one boy always followed the father's occupation and one of the girls looked after the aging grandparents. [*Later on, the same girl looked after the parents*]. Other girls within the family provided help in wealthier homes, close to the family home.

Those children left at home after the parents had died usually took over the tenancy. Although it was difficult to travel about there was a lot of visiting of families, friends and relations, which closely bonded the community. Most of the village and local industry served the farmers - their farms and country estates. There was, throughout the year, a general working up towards harvesting time - getting all the machinery into working order.

It was not often that my grandma went shopping to Chard. The lack of money being the chief reason but distance and time made it a chore not an enjoyment. The children going to school, then to work, had to be looked after. Still, there were times when a visit had to be made, and more often than not, for clothing. Only working class mothers inhabited the shops. Nobody who wished to be thought of as middle class would be seen in such places. The workers' manners, clothes and speech would embarrass the shop girls of high-class establishments. The formidable shop-walker, in black

jacket and striped trousers - who's job it was to provide security and to stop shop-lifting, would soon hover close to unfamiliar faces as soon as they came through the door enquiring if he could direct you...?

The shop windows would be dressed very conservatively. The plaster models and designer sets represented daily scenes, most of the produce was kept in glass fronted drawers or cupboards – not in a position where the customer able to handle the goods. The shop assistant would be told the item to be assessed and they would have to fetch it and point out its suitability. If the article was large then the shop's carrier called to either see the client to the door or to take the item out and place it in the dogcart or carriage. It was possible to take the item on approval. Then the carrier would take the clients name, address, and list the goods taken. No deposit was required and the client departed.

Tills or cash registers were not on the counters. The cashier sat in a glass sided cubicle at the back of the shop. The shop assistant took the cash to the cashier - who placed it and the price tag in a metal container that was taken by cord and air pressure along a tube to the office. The receipt and change returned by the same route. If the change included a farthing, this was used to buy pins or some other small item.

The penny bazaar was a favourite place to visit, especially for children to spend their savings. Such places had an open front and display counters presenting all their produce to open view. They were always well attended the crowd shuffled through at a snails pace as... the excited children stared in wonderment. This was the forerunner of Woolworth's 'thrupenny and sixpenny' store.

The shops stayed open late on Saturdays particularly those in the street or market place. It was the place to buy cheap meat for the weekend roast, at the end of the working day. On market days, the place was alive with people, with stallholders all shouting and declaring their wares. It was always colourful and exciting with the one-man-band playing, jugglers and the occasional beggar... all demanding attention.

Grandma was so careful that whenever buying any material - it was carefully examined. The material was rubbed to see if the cloth was full of 'dressing' - which would wash out leaving the garment thin and limp. Clothes for her children were always bought too large, so that they could be worn for the longest possible time and then handed down. Invariably the colour was white, in that way they could be repeatedly washed - without wondering if the colour was going to last, and being the same colour as sheets, pillowcases and towels they could all be washed together.

All bed linen was white, which allowed girls, about to be married, to sew on lace edging... similarly the towels, flannels and tray cloths – embroidered then laid in tissue paper in the lowest drawer. Each daughter reserved this drawer for her private things – for her 'bottom drawer', items kept aside for when she became married. On rainy days this drawer was carefully turned out – relined, and then refilled. Keeping a bottom drawer was started at a very young age and used to condition girls - to seek a husband and start their own home. It was also used to keep the girls occupied. If they left home to be 'in-service', they lived in - treated as one of the family, under the control of the housekeeper. In that case, the bottom drawer stayed where it was; ready for the day she left home for good.

Household items were bought to last a lifetime. Good saucepans and frying pans were very heavy - made of iron, and carefully treated with oil, which eventually became burnt-on and black. This was never washed or scoured off, but left – being just wiped out. For boiling vegetables, plain white enamel was thought to be suitable.

As the summer term passed my brother and I looked forward to our holidays. My mother, anticipating her return to the country, tries to pass off the excitement by taking it all calmly. The weather promised lots of fun on the beach at Bridport where mother's sister Ada, who was a year younger, lived with her husband and daughters, Christine and Jean. A visit was also a necessity to

Dora, mums other sister, who was married to Sidney Wood, a butter maker, and daughter Sheila, who played the piano so beautifully...

The packing for our holidays went on for weeks – it was one way mum could rely on - to entice us boys in from the garden – to find a space for some other vital thing! Father had previously written out our warrant – for an employee's family, to travel free on the railway, sanctioned for annual summer holidays. Now all we had to do was wait... how time did drag...

At last... the appointed hour. Up early, a quick breakfast, and out of the house... we marched to North Harrow train station... dad staggering slightly at the weight, as he manoeuvres the two large suitcases up the stairs... onto the platform.

The Metropolitan line train carries us to Baker Street... where we swap over platforms to take the Bakerloo Line tube for Waterloo - Southern Railway's main line station. Stan and I had to see the driver and his massive steam engine, one of the must do things! The guards whistle jolted us back to reality, called us back onto the train, to find mum and our booked seats, to start, officially, our much looked-forward-to summer holiday.

The train, slowly made it way out of the station, its wheels slipping then gripping, to the accompany of much chuffing and billows of steam, to gather speed... as we made our way past the back gardens of the terraced houses along the line towards its first stop at Clapham Junction. The banging of doors announced our departure as we eagerly looked out of the window to watch the houses gradually disappear... to be exchanged for the marvellous countryside... then onwards... to Exeter Central, where we changed trains to take the little branch line to Chard Junction - on the Taunton Line.

The Bristol and Exeter Railway Company built the railway line from Taunton to Chard by 1866. The last British canal was built this same year... Chard Canal ceased to function in September of that year. The broad gauge track was converted to standard gauge twenty-five years later. By the time of the first world war began a branch line was run to Chard Road station, later to be called Chard Junction. Lord Beeching finally put paid to it in 1962 for passengers and for freight, 1966... long after we took our holidays there. Special rates were charged for farmers coming to Chard Fair and Great Markets and many of their livestock travelled on this line. Excursions were run to Lyme and Seaton with Bank Holiday specials doing a roaring trade, and of course, we went along too...

These entire little branch lines were attractive and frequently used at summer time for holidaymakers. They became part of the countryside linking the outlying villages and hamlets as much by sound and sight as for actual use.

We all gathered on the platform to sort ourselves out, before shouldering our bags once more to make our way outside the station to load our luggage onto the station cart, which was trundled down Perry Street by the porter. By the time, we reached Rosalie Cottage with grandma at the cottage door dad was totally puffed out...

Looking back to those far off days the weather always seemed perfect. The skies cloudless of cerulean blue the new foliage on the trees sap green and the blossom dazzlingly Chinese white. The oaks always the last to show their colour and in the hedges - made-up of hawthorn, willow and elder, blackberry and dog rose sent out their tendrils to tie the hedge together... At the base of the hedge the primrose paled beside the dandelion and shiny buttercup. Next door's poplar shimmered in the breeze and the apple blossom blew about. Every plant alive with tiny insects fed on by birds.

At last July, the cricket bat is put aside and packing begins... even though it is still weeks away before the family sets off. The sunshine, and the heat from the sun that is now overhead, reminds us that there are new discoveries to be made in the field and hedges, and the brook is always there to be damned.

The young corn is growing apace-showing fields of pale green and gold just standing level with the poppy and daisy. The buttercup is only just visible. The days go slowly by... not long

now ... The golden ears of wheat sway gently in the breeze against a background of dark-green hedges with purple blue shadows. The morning dew beads the heads as gossamer webs glisten in the fresh morning air. Not their time yet the hay now took preference... every year the same thing happened... the reaper was rescued from where it had stood all winter. Haymaking lasted most of the month, it was rare for the weather to be so bad that haymaking not completed before the harvest.

The farmer made sure his reaper blades sharp and properly set. He would be filing and hammering for days on end, making sure the harness not split or broken, but cleaned and oiled. This was no time to make do, the reaper had to do the harvesting as well as the haymaking, it was critical that all would last the season.

Meanwhile, on the banks of the river the yellow and purple loosestrife is in bud. Meadowsweet everywhere with its delicate tracery of white flowers, an attraction for the hover fly and digger wasp. A young thrush with speckled breast displays its buff feathers as it cocks its head on one side as if to say, 'watch me'.

Our journey had taken us past the fields of bleached grass glinting in the summer sun as the breeze wafted the tall slender fronds this way and that. They were pictures etched in our minds, of wonderful hazy days with a backcloth of hedges and mighty oaks, of chirruping crickets and the curlew's call.

Making hay began in late June, early July... My brother and I watched the grass being cut on the meadows along the railway line - as we travelled by on the train. It is now July - the start of high summer. The scythesman still tackled a field - usually around the gate - so that the grass was not trampled flat by the horses. This opens up the field for difficult corners and field edges to be penetrated - before the reaper and binder got to work. Grass badly flattened by bad weather also was left to the scythe or sickle using a bender to lay the hay over.

It was not strange to see a line of workers in a gang working at intervals. Some fields just cut, others drying, some cut, and turned or being tied. Much of this work was done before breakfast; in the early mornings so that it was cool for the horses.

Many Londoners and city dwellers spent their summer holidays working at piecetime rates for farms during the war sleeping in converted barns and outhouses. It was important to have this all done before it rained for if left lying in the swathe it lost its quality - started to go black. The advent of imported tractors and combines plus the need for greater output - larger, squared off fields; saw the demise of the scythesman in the fifties.

A team of horses could cut three-quarters of an acre in an hour. A workers wife would provide a snack at ten o'clock, noon and again at three. Horses would be 'loosed out', home-brewed beer or ginger beer passed round to compliment the doorstep sized sandwiches. A second team was prepared that followed on bring further drinks and lunch bags, nosebags for the horses, extra knives, files and whetstone. A three in hand pulling a reaper all acting together was an unforgettable sight that lasted well into the sixties.

After the grass, lucerne and seed-clover had been cut, it was raked into rows...later sometimes into cocks-of-hay or cock making, [piles], to further 'make' [dry]. It was most important to have the hay completely dry, any dampness will create heat - start a fire. The dry hay, then gathered up and pitched onto carts, fitted with ladders - side-walls, at each end to increase the load capacity... all, pulled by horses, dressed in shaft harnesses.

The one-horse rake, often residing the winter under some hedge close to where it had been last used, exposed, to have its knives sharpened and set - adjustments made with a spanner, and liberally dosed in oil. The horse keeper, lines in hand, would mount the iron seat and set off the contraption... rattling and clattering. By releasing, a lever regimented the swathes - left a trail of sweet smelling grasses laid out in long lines.

Machine cut grass, lays in neat rows perfect for drying, and could be left until the next day unless the sun too hot when it could become sunburnt. The haymaker was kept going all day to make the hay fit for stacking – leaving the hay light on the ground so that the sun and wind can get freely into it.

The driver of the rake sat upright occasionally flicking his whip. The horse nodding his head set out across the field. Every now and again, the driver raised the lever, which allowed another gathering of hay to drop into line.

Drying grass was left out to dry for several days, perhaps tossed by hand or turned by a swath-turner to ensure it was thoroughly dry then raked into haycocks by the use of a two pronged fork. With an eye to the weather, the farmer would decide if it was time to stack the dry hay... if it were, the hay wagon made its rounds to gather up the pitched hay to cart it to the stockyard where the rick was built and thatched.

These four machines – the mower, tedder, rake and loader were considered an excellent investment, even for small farms of less than 50 acres. Hay barns began to be used as a permanent shed for the storage of hay or corn. Where there is a hay barn, the hay can be stacked when ready not having to wait until there was sufficient to complete a rick. In cases where there is not enough to finish a rick a ‘tramp-cock’ or rick cloth erected. Whatever, it was important not to allow the hay to get wet whilst the rick was in the process of being made.

The haymaking methods changed by the appearance of the first hay-loaders, which ousted the pitchfork and its backbreaking work. The hay-sweep became the latest equipment in the thirties plus its compliment elevator - for taking the hay to the top of the stack. A pony harnessed to a pole turned the elevator, which lifted up the straw onto the stack was another method of winching.

The horse age ended, mostly during the beginning of the war, when more fields were made over to stock rearing. Horses could not cope with the difficult land now ordered for ploughing - meant to help make Britain self sufficient during wartime... this speeded up the introduction of tractors. Farmers were fined if they refused to plough up meadows, which flooded or left difficult hillsides to gorse and fern.

The horses would obey ‘the word’ putting their shoulders to the collar. With a clatter, the chattering blades would whirl round and the once rippling grass would be cut, leaving sweet scented grasses, vetches and clovers lying flat.

Threshing with the huller, the clover was sometimes mixed with the grasses to give a richer fodder for the stock. Rotating grass with clover and then corn enhanced fertility and improved yield. The cart would off-load the slightly green hay to make a rick; if the building is not far advanced, the walls were built up, if higher, the hay pitched onto the elevator.

Ricks had sides slightly sloping outwards... the rain would drip off each stalk to the ground. Each layer of hay would be tied and trodden down. Haylofts, above the animal stalls... were stocked from field to loft. The artificial drying of hay was a means of circumnavigating a wet harvest - using an action of tossing and agitation along a conveyor belt and fanned hot air.