



HISTORY ON OUR DOORSSTEP

by members of Project Purley

No 17 Farming Memoires

For many years before he retired the late Ken Mercer sold insurance to the farming community. He recalled some of his experiences to Project Purley.

There were alleged sightings in the Long Crendon area of a demon farmer who drove his large open car whilst standing up with his right hand steering and left hand flourishing a horse-whip. He would appear over the crest of a hill or round a blind bend on the wrong side of the road. This was of great cautionary value to local drivers.

The huge open air cattle markets with hundreds of string tied hurdles such as at Thame have ceased, some altogether and others in permanent metal frame sites. Surrounded by fourteen public houses The Tuesday Thame street market produced much squealing and bellowing most from farmers poking the animals. Sheep and piglets accepted this but not the large livestock and especially large pigs and sows. Their snouts under the hurdle could distort the whole layout but also lift it to escape with no stopping them from starting a long hike. The hurdle maker was already making replacements with fascinating dexterity.

A fire brigade call on market day was a fun event preceded by volunteers arriving on bicycles to emerge from a narrow side road still getting dressed on the fire tender which had to make a very sharp turn to avoid the hurdle area. It was so sharp that equipment, helmets and, on one occasion, a fireman were scattered in the market square to be collected by on lookers and duly returned to the fire station.

A worthy Thame resident was machinery officer for Berkshire in World War One when the War Agricultural Committee, too many of whom were failed farmers, instructed local farmers in ploughing and crop raising. Locals at Wittenham Clumps rebelled at attempting to plough around and up to the trees for both practical reasons and infertility. Afternoon tea with my friend, the past machinery officer, and his wife was with full Victorian splendour and glittering silverware in front of a well tended coal fire.

All affable bachelor farmer treated me to Irish Whisky as a means to my being audience to his playing a harmonium - quite well too. He schooled horses as a sideline but developed lumbago so he had two friends to help him on the horse by lifting him up, one each side. The drop had to coincide - which it did - but the horse had moved forward, It was many weeks before he could play the harmonium again.

At one of several farms called Coldharbour I was invited in for a bite; strips were cut off the side of a pig hanging down. I liked the company of Henry, his wife and two teenage children, but Henry had great trouble masticating, which bothered me. When he had gone out I asked his wife deferentially about false teeth. She pointed to the top dresser shelf and a full set of false teeth which she dusted daily and polished weekly as she had done for 20 years.

When I was first developing the Bucknells Meadow Recreation Ground, I had to meet John Bucknell who was Chairman of the Parish Council. He instructed me to meet the Bucknell family agent and agree the purchase of a two acre section of Home Farm. This involved bisecting a home field so I visited when there were some young heifers there. Three of them picked up a loop of measuring tape and before I could act I was closely surrounded with gentle tugs on clothing and they had happy smiles on their faces. By clapping hands and arm waving they went off but I looked round in case my stupidity had been witnessed. At Council meeting the next week, John was still laughing himself silly.

Ken Mercer.