

LOCAL MEMORIES
OF THE "OVER SIXTY" CLUB OF
BAMPTON
(IN THE BUSH)
OXFORDSHIRE

Bampton. or Bampton-in-the-Bush, which was its earlier name - lay outside the main stream of affairs, at least until the Enclosure Acts. Before that it lay in a flat and marshy common covered with scrub and there were no roads of any kind leading from Bampton to the neighbouring towns and villages. Travellers made their way as best they could to Witney, Burford, Faringdon and Oxford by striking across the common over rough tracks.

Though the advent of the railway and of course in recent years the motorcar has rendered Bampton more and more accessible, yet it is no wonder that in many ways Bampton has retained its old-world flavour and has tended to preserve old customs and ways of life. The memories of its oldest inhabitants confirm this.

A.

THE BAMPTON MORRIS DANCERS.

The custom of Morris-dancing has continued without interruption for over three hundred years and may well go back earlier still. The dancers consist of a team of a team of men in snow-white shirts and trousers, and black bowler hats gaily decorated with flowers with rows of "jingly" bells wrapped round the trouser legs below the knee.

Memories go back to the famous fiddler Billy Wells who was born in 1868 and played the old tunes to which they danced. At times he would hand over his fiddle and take part in the dance or act as the "Fool". They danced in the streets (and still do) the square and on the lawns of the larger houses.

A sword-bearer parades with them carrying impaled on his sword a large cake of which it is good luck to eat a portion. In older days Bampton enjoyed the privilege once a year of hunting in Wychwood Forest and in those days a buck was carried round and divided among the onlookers. The cake appears to be the humble substitute today of this earlier practice.

(A portrait of the fiddler Billy Wells - painted by a local artist - hangs in the Cecil Sharp House in London.)

B.

THE GARLANDS.

The origin of the Garlands seems obscure but those whose memories go back farthest remember well "going round" with double loops made of hazel sticks decorated with leaves and wild flowers - generally with a small doll in the middle. Early on Whitmonday - the day of the Morris dancing - the garlands were taken round on show from door to door with one child carrying a tin with a slit in the lid for coppers. It is not known why the garlands were made for Whitmonday instead of for Mayday as in other Oxfordshire villages, but possibly there was originally some connection between the garlands and the Morris dancers.

THE MUMMERS.

For generations a Band of Mummers went round performing at the various Inns and larger houses in Bampton at Christmastime. Among the excitements of the festive season it was much looked forward to by all.

There were seven characters, Father Christmas, Dr. Good, The Landlord, Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, St. George and the Tinker, all dressed for their parts and each with his piece to recite.

This dates back at least to the early part of the thirteenth century and developed into a horse fair, though doubtless there were many other activities. Some people remember that on the occasion of the Fair held yearly in August the Methodists conducted a service in the enclosure where the Coconut Shy was.

One cannot do better than give in her own words her memories of Bampton Fair supplied by Mrs. A. Townsend of Ash-tree Cottage, Weald.

"Previous to the 1914-18 War Bampton had one of the largest horse fairs in this country. The Fair was held on August 25th-27th. Hundreds of horses lined the streets, hurdles were hung over the house windows to prevent the horses pushing against the glass and breaking it. When I was a girl my father lived at Calais Farm on the Aston road. The dealers used to bring the horses to the different farms in Bampton and we used to take in from one hundred to two hundred. They were turned out in the fields at night before the fair, the charge being sixpence a head. Early in the morning they were brought into the yards and their manes and tails were plaited with straw before going up to the fair. The piece of ground opposite the church used to be full up with what were known as Welsh ponies. Buyers came from Wales to buy ponies for work in the coalmines.

I well remember two very stout dealers who came every year-two brothers, David and Reece Morgan. Others came from Bicester, Bourton-on-the-Water and Stow-on-the-Wold. Two of them were also brothers-John and Percy Boulter. The drovers who brought the horses, by road, used to have pink cambric flags to frighten the horses and make them go faster. Every time a horse was sold a strip was torn off these flags and tied to the horses tail so that we all knew that one had been sold.

Most buyers stayed in Bampton for two or three nights, but when tractors and cars came the horses at the fair grew less and less until now it is no longer a horse fair, though the fair itself continues.

BAMPTON FIRE BRIGADE.

This dates back for many years and still continues to operate with splendid efficiency. The original hand pulled engine was kept in the church and the church bells were rung for an alarm. Today a modern fire-engine is kept in the Town Hall.

1904 was the great year in the history of the Brigade, as it competed in the National Fire Brigade Union Championship Cup. Old inhabitants of Bampton remember the great day., when the victorious Brigade arrived at Bampton Station - two miles away- by the last train and found a huge crowd awaiting their return. The road from the station glittered with the lights of vehicles lining the way and as the calvalcade neared the village the horses were released from the brake which carried the victors and it was drawn by the hand to the Town Hall- led by the local band playing "See the Conquering Hero Comes". Captain Williams, the leader, delivered a speech, horses were decorated, flags were hung out and in conclusion amid the plaudits of the multitude the brake was drawn round the town. This was a memorable day in the annals of Bampton.

At the beginning of the century and for some time thereafter, the church was lighted by oil-lamps and the organ was blown by hand.

On Ascension Day all the children from the National School came to church.

On Whitmonday the members of the two clubs-i.e. the Foresters and another club whose name cannot be traced- who had their headquarters at the New Inn and the lamb respectively walked to church behind their bands and after the Service (when the church was filled to capacity) they adjourned to their Headquarters for beef and beer, while the children hung their Whitsun garlands round the inn rooms.

Hospital Sunday was regularly observed on the Sunday before August Bank holiday and again the Clubs and the Fire Brigade attended a thronged service.

The fine Peal of Bells was rehung in 1903. There is also a Methodist and a Baptist Chapel and a small community of Roman Catholics.

The Church Sunday school was held twice each Sunday - in the morning at the National School, after which the children marched to the church being allowed to leave during the first hymn. On their way to church it was a regular practice to leave the Sunday joint at Mr. Wenman's, the baker, who Bakery stood on the site of the present War Memorial.

The Baptist Sunday School met three times each Sunday. Sunday School treats seem to have been held in fields lent by near-by farmers, who sent wagons to fetch the children

At the beginning of the century there were four schools in Bampton.

1. The old Grammar School founded by R.Vesey in 1670 - now unfortunately closed.
2. The National School for which a weekly fee was paid of 1d for infants and 2d for others.
3. A High School for girls at ~~Ap~~^Wney Lodge.
4. Another School for girls at The Elms in Broad Street.

Many of the children would walk two or three miles to school each day and bring their dinners with them. Some of the older people in Bampton remember leaving school at the age of nine and going to work on the farms for 2/6d a week. Most children, however, left at thirteen. The chief subjects taught were of course the three R's - reading, writing and arithmetic. Girls could also learn sewing and knitting. Attendance does not seem to be very regular till the Education Act of 1903.

The children's games consisted chiefly of Hoops, Marbles, Hop-scotch, tops and skipping.

For children who had left School there were various opportunities. There was a Reading Room available at the Grammar School for boys up to fifteen and evening classes (1/- for the course) were given. These classes were held in the National School for the boys where instruction was given in such subjects as geography, History, Horticulture and Drawing. Girls could attend for the same fee - courses at the Drill Hall - the subjects including Geography, History, General Knowledge, Vocal Music and Cookery. All these classes met twice weekly. Some girls attended a sewing class run by the three daughters of one of the two doctors.

Boys attending school wore caps, broad white collars and hob-nailed boots.

Girls wore white aprons, pinafores and long black stockings.

I.

HOUSING AND SHOPPING FACILITIES.

Since the beginning of the century a good many old houses and cottages have been pulled down, especially in the Weald district where at least thirteen have gone. They may have been picturesque, but they certainly had many drawbacks. Some had stone staircases and no ceilings to the bedrooms - only the bare thatch with perhaps some canvas stretched across. Water had to be fetched in buckets and sanitary arrangements were extremely primitive.

Some details:

1. The shop of Mr. Beard the printer is now the shop of Mr. Slim.
2. The shop of Mr. Goodman was next to The George and Dragon. This beautiful cottage has now completely vanished and the entrance to the drive of Little Place stands on the site.
3. There were two smithies - one in the market square and one (that belonging to Mr. Cripps) at the corner of Church Street. This house is still called the Forge.
4. Older people remember three bakeries, three butchers and three grocers. Today we have two butchers, one baker, five grocers and a fishmonger.
5. Where Eton Villas now stand in Broad St. (built in 1907) old people remember a small shop standing which sold a variety of articles.

J.

TRANSPORT AND POSTAL SERVICE.

A bus drawn by two horses ran from Weald bridge to the railway station two miles away. The fare was 6d. Those who lived on the route could stop the bus by hanging a red flag from the windows. Men walked to work each morning and back at night - often five or six miles each way.

Letters were carried to Faringdon by a postman who walked each way. Later a horse and van were introduced, the driver being known as "Johnny the Mailman".

K.

HEALTH.

Two doctors resided in Bampton, one of whom went his rounds in a dog-cart driven by a man in livery.

There was also a District Nurse.

District visitors provided soups and puddings once a week for the poor and needy. Parish relief at 1/- a week and a loaf of bread were available also in cases of need. A soup kitchen was open at the Grammar School presided over by a Mrs Dipper, who would fill the largest jug for 4d (or less, if you could not afford to pay the full price.)

1. Flag baskets in which workers carried their tools and their dinners to work were made at Weald from rushes gathered from the river.

2. There was an old man called Loveridge with a long white beard, who was a tinsmith. He pushed a hand-truck round the village hawking baskets, scoops, skimming dishes and colanders which he had made.

3. Potato nets were also made to hold the potatoes which were placed in the big iron crocks on the fire with bacon, onions, dumplings or meat puddings.

4. About seventy years ago a deaf and dumb woman called "Dumby Ann" taught two or three young girls the smocking pattern which had long been used for men's smocks in Oxfordshire.

5. Oxfordshire Sunbonnets were made in Bampton and many are still owned by elderly women.

6. Corn-dollies were made and there is one in the church and another in the house of Mrs A. Townsend at Weald.

Within living memory many pedlars visited Bampton. "Tiddles" Clark walked from the near-by village of Aston carrying a large basket on his head full of fish which he sold from door to door.

An old man called Castle pushed a handcart from Witney every Sunday morning - six miles away - with papers, fish, kippers, bloaters etc.

Another old man carried a basket of oranges round the village which he praised very highly and sold for $\frac{1}{2}$ d each. His basket also contained kippers!

Another man from Witney drove a pony and cart to Bampton once a week selling black and white puddings. i.e. Hog's Puddings: He did a roaring trade.

Once a year in the spring a man called Burrows arrived on the scene with a flat "float" a lorry drawn by a beautiful horse. The lorry was laden with farm implements such as sythes, rakes, hoes and pitchforks. He left his cart outside the Jubilee Inn for two days and then moved away to visit neighbouring farms.

Once a year in a shed belonging to the Wheatsheaf Inn a 1d bazaar was held and many objects bought here are still in existence in Bampton.

N.

FOOD.

Bacon was the chief food and most families kept two pigs - one to pay the rent and the other to support the family. Large joints of beef or mutton could be purchased for 2/6d and of course everyone grew his own potatoes and vegetables, Some families used black treacle to sweeten their tea, as it was much cheaper than sugar.

Agrimony was gathered in the summer and dried, and from this "tea" was brewed by adding boiling water and allowing it to stand in a jug. It was a "certain cure" for all minor ailments!

On Saturdays in summertime a cheapjack had a stall outside the Town Hall and sold a variety of objects - chiefly crockery.

"Raggy" was a well-known figure. He was an old man who came with a pony and cart collecting rags and rabbitskins. He also sold paraffin. He had a store of sweets too, which he gave in return for the rags and skins. Unfortunately the sweets and the paraffin were kept side by side at the back of the cart so that the former often tasted of the latter. This only seems to have made the memory pleasanter.

VARIOUS MEMORIES.

1. There was a town crier called Cox who lived in a cottage belonging to The Elms. He wore some sort of uniform and paraded the village on a tricycle ringing his bell and making his announcements.

2. Two houses were said to have been haunted - the Hermitage Priory (at one time one house, but now divided) and Southview. These have been exorcised in living memory. There was also (or still is) a ghostly apparition which haunts Cowleas corner a little south of the village, where at one time there was a gibbet and suicides were buried.

3. Some old people remember an old "trampy" man, who stole a hen. Fearing that a policeman was on his track he plunged the bird into a pot of boiling water without removing the feathers. Ever after the children would call after him "Hen in Pot" or "Old feathery broth".

4. Many families went gleaning (or 'leasing', as it was called) after the stooks had been removed from the fields.

5. A farmer's wife remembers that when she was very small a menagerie was on view in a field behind the School. A bear went mad and after the owner had tried to keep it at bay with a red-hot poker, her father-in-law was summoned, who seized his gun and shot the poor creature dead. He was presented with the head which remained in the family until quite recently as a memento of a gallant effort!

6. There are still many who remember the General Election of 1906. The accompanying photograph shows a lively group of Bampton people assembled outside the Talbot Hotel. One enthusiast is pointing to a poster which depicts "Jo" Chamberlain.
7. There was an old lame man called Billie Tanner who lived in a shed at Weald and made toffee on Sundays in an old iron saucepan. He dropped some fat on the stone flags of his floor (which was none too clean) and proceeded to rub it in with old newspaper. He poured the toffee from the saucepan on to this and made what he called "black candles" which he sold to the children for 1d or $\frac{1}{2}$ d a "candle".
8. Some remember an old man called Teddy who lived with his housekeeper Leak at Pudding Corner - so called because many years ago a woman made a pudding for her family so large that when it swelled it could not be extricated from the pot! Leak used to take parties of children "leasing". She had a wooden truck and on the return to Pudding Corner Teddy thrashed out the corn and gave each child a portion to take home.
9. In 1897 (Diamond Jubilee) or perhaps later a greasy flag-pole was erected outside one of the inns with a ham on the top. One Bampton man succeeded in climbing the pole and securing the ham

10. One old man over 80, recalls that on Sundays men wore white smocks and red handkerchiefs. He also remembers oxen ploughing at Ham Court. He was one of eleven children and his father's wage was 18/- weekly.
11. When not at school children seem to have enjoyed "sticking" (gathering firewood) "leasing" and weeding lawns at 4d an hour.
12. Watching the bands and dancing seem to have been very happy memories. A clever fiddler lived in Bampton-
"Deedlum" Butler, who at times would erect a small tent in the square and a wooden platform for dancers. As he fiddled he sang
Up the middle
Down the middle
For she's a pretty little dear.
13. Bampton was lighted by oil-lamps and children used to follow the lamp-lighter on his rounds. *Bampton 7/- a week*
14. Many years ago during the Bampton fair a gipsy child died and was given a big funeral, as the photographs show. Up to a very few years ago relatives of the small gipsy boy came regularly once a year to visit the grave.
14. The Lady Well some two hundred yards from Ham Court was noted for its waters being a "cure for sore eyes" and years ago was much used for that purpose. It got its name from the belief held in mediaeval times that the Virgin Mary delighted to haunt the place and, as Dr. Giles says in his History of Bampton, "perform her personal ablutions in the miraculous well".

CONCLUSION.

The general picture is one of a poor, but honest and industrious community. Their life must have been hard and in many ways monotonous, but "cheerfulness kept breaking through". They had their joys and their happiness and their life seems to have been full and in many ways satisfying.