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TWO BOYS SHARED ONE PAIR OF BOOTS

Potten End in the 'Seventies

A very sprightly lady, 84 years young, called to see me the other day. "Are you the man who writes about Berkhamsted in years gone by?" she asked.

I confessed to the crime, and honesty's reward was a sparkling account of family life in a Potten End cottage eighty years ago. I have my informant's permission to publish her name, but after due consideration abstain from doing so.

Mary (that is not her real name) was the youngest of ten children, two of whom died in infancy. Their father worked for Lane's Nurseries at Potten End, and never earned—it would be kinder to say never received—more than 13s. a week. And he worked from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m.

Poor, but Contented

The eldest son was born in 1854, in one of the cottages which formerly stood on Cherry Bounce, Frithsden. The only subject he was taught at school was straw-plaiting, and at the age of five he became a wage-earner. But he taught himself to read and write, became a prominent chapel worker, and wrote a number of poems, which were published, privately, some 25 years ago. Let me quote three simple but revealing verses:

We were not sent to school as now,
Nor were we over-fed;
Our school was where we made straw-plait
To help earn daily bread.
No need for us, those far-off days,
Economy to teach;
Perforce we had to be content
With a slice and half for each.
And if by chance we tasted fish
For breakfast or for tea,
The humble bloater had to serve
Divided into three.

"That's right!" exclaimed Mary. "We even had to share an egg between three—and mother usually went without herself."

The Potten End cottage to which the family moved in the 'seventies is still standing, but it no longer has only one door—the front door. Mary recalled the time when there were no rugs, no carpets, no linoleum. The only covering was a sack in front of the fire. The floorboards were scrubbed twice a week and sprinkled with fine sand. There was but one tablecloth and but one pair of sheets: those articles had to be washed and dried quickly for use the same day. For a time two brothers had to share one pair of boots: one boy wore them in the morning, and the other had that privilege in the afternoon.

"Poor?" echoed Mary. "Of course we were poor—but so was almost everyone else in those days. Our cottage was not exceptional. But it was kept beautifully clean; we were never short of soap and water, even though we had no tap and had to get the water out of a tank. My father had only one bath in his life, and that was when he was taken to hospital, a fortnight before he died. But he was always clean, and so was the rest of the family."

The Perils of Courtship

"And," continued my informant, "we had very good neighbours. At times of childbirth or illness, no housewife was without help. Neighbours came in and worked for hours without thought of payment; they would have been offended had payment been offered, even when they hadn't a penny. I can assure you that we were only too ready to trudge all the way to Berkhamsted and back to get free soup."

Potten Enders, nicknamed "Cherry Pickers," were notorious for their clannishness and dislike of strangers. But, Mary went on, it is not true that strangers—that is to say, anyone from Frithsden, Berkhamsted, Hemel Hempstead or more distant places—took his life in his hands if he went to Potten End! She admitted, however, that it was dangerous for an "outsider" to court a Potten End girl. Youths laid in waiting to give invading paramours a good hiding! Mary's mother and father always accompanied her young man to the parish boundary to make sure that he would not be molested!

Plaiting and Singing

Everyone looked forward to May Day. A maypole was set up on the village green, and the girls donned white dresses and made house-to-house pilgrimages, carrying dolls in garlanded cradles. Householders paid to see the garlands, and the girls sometimes returned home with 7s. or 8s. each—as much as their fathers received for half a week's work.

Public entertainments were few: indeed, Potten End had to wait until fairly recent times for a village hall. But straw-plaiting kept the people busy and contented in the evenings. Mary loved

the work and recalls with pleasure the fireside evenings when the whole family plaited and sang. Music while you work is not a modern idea! One old song began with the verse:

Straw-plaiters are up in the morning betimes,
Get all the odd jobs done before the sun
shines,
And when they have done, at their plaiting,
will sit;
I'll have a straw-plaiter if one I can get.

The Decline of an Industry

The last line (for male chorus?) must have encouraged girls to believe that straw-plaiting and hard work would lead to matrimony! It was certainly a profitable craft when mother trudged to Hemel Hempstead once a week to sell plait for 2s. a score yards. But what of the time when the price fell to 6d. a score, and half of that price had to be paid for the raw material? Threepence was too poor a reward, even in those impoverished days, for hours of skilled work, and the cottage craft died out. All the same, Mary assured me that she would be delighted to take up straw-plaiting again; she often plaited bull-rushes for the fun of it. Incidentally, she attended a plaiting school in Vicarage-road, Potten End, kept by a Mrs. Burnham, who told Mary that she was "an audacious little hussey" for making others laugh. That capacity, happily, has not declined with the passing years.

Mention of straw-plaiting reminds me that a recent article on this subject brought comments from a number of readers. Mr. Chappell, of Queen's-road, who is also in his 'eighties, tells me that he attended one of three plaiting schools which flourished in Bridge-street when he was a boy. Widows and maiden ladies made a small charge for passing on their skill, and boys and girls attended classes for two or three hours every evening, after normal school hours. There wasn't much time for play!

An American Impression

Finally, here is a comment from an unexpected source—the *New York Times*. An article, published in that newspaper about 50 years ago, states:

"Standing by a cottage door [at Aldbury] are two comely lasses at work straw-plaiting. We pause to watch them; beneath the arm is a little bundle of the straws used, each perhaps 8-in. long and one-eighth of an inch wide. One can scarcely follow the swift action of the nimble fingers as the plait grows longer. They giggle of course as the stranger looks on. "And what, may I ask, do you get per yard for that?" "Oh, threepence three-farthings a score yards." "Where does it go to?" "Well sir, to Luton, but we take it to Tring market, and the buyers meet us there." "Well, let me have a length." Then a sensible face looks round from the interior. "How much, sir?" says the careful soul, scissors in hand. "Oh, a foot, please." "And how much?" "I asked of the sensible dame, "will they do in a day?" "Oh, not much, sir. Ye see, the girls as get messing about with that stuff won't go to service, I've known the time when they got half a crown a score yards, and now it ain't fourpence."

'BEORCHAM'

MEDICINE, PETROL & FOOD

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine and petrol are now operating in Berkhamsted as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening and Sunday morning service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

Sept. 28—Oct. 4: Taylors.
October 5—11: Boots.
October 12—18: Figg.
October 19—25: Dickman.
October 26—November 1: Taylors.

GARAGE OPENING

The summer-time opening of garages in Berkhamsted on Sundays (from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.) concludes on October 12th.

Here are the final openings:—

October 5—Underhill & Young Ltd., High Street West.
October 12—Callaghan's Garage, High Street East.

FOOD OFFICE

The Food Office, in the Town Hall, is open on four weekdays as follows:—
Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 to 5 p.m.
Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 noon

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:

Monday and Friday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 5 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Thursday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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