

PENNY A LEG
OR
OLD ROBERTSBRIDGE

BY F.A. FISHER

This is the answer I received from my father when I once asked him how much he had to pay to go through the Tollgate. Perhaps some older residents will remember how he used to train, drive and ride horses for Mr. Olney - the owner of the beautiful house, known as Blenheim House on George Hill. This property covered the ground from Claremont (now known as George Hill House), to the market yard, now Country Crafts, and down to the stream bordering Station Road. The garden behind the house went down to the stream by three terraced lawns, each kept like a billiard table!

The well known writer, Mrs. Keevil, who wrote under her maiden name - Averil MacKenzie Grieve - advised me to use my father's answer to my question as a title for a book, should I ever write one.

The Tollgate Cottage in question stood at the top of George Hill, and was used by quite a number of different people as a dwelling house - among them Mr. Vallancey, the well known PHILATELIST. He gave my young nephew, a keen stamp collector, a penny black, and a twopenny blue as a present - lucky boy.

Behind the Tollgate was a beautiful garden which went with the house known as Claremont. It is now a neglected piece of ground - a first rate rubbish dump.

I propose making a journey through the village as it was when I was a child many years ago. It was a village in every sense of the word.

* At the northern end of the village stood YEW LODGE. This, my mother remembered as a farm house, occupied by a Mr. Weeks, who farmed the land bordering Granny Bishops Lane - growing hops on each side of the lane. Council houses were unheard of, so the lane was the same width as it now is at the entrance to it. Where Bishops Croft now stands were two oast houses which I remember quite clearly. I also remember Bishops Croft being built there by Mr Sidney Ray.

To return to Yew Lodge. I remember, as a child, wishing that I lived there. In 1938 my dream came true and we were able to buy it, and lived happily there for thirty-eight years.

It is a scheduled building having been built circa 1683. A Phoenix Fire Insurance sign (Phoenix rising from the Ashes) can still be seen over the front door.

There were no locks on the doors - these were LOCKED by an oak bar, resting on two iron staples. The bar stretched across the whole width of the door.

A magnificent Yew Tree stands in the garden of Yew Lodge - hence the name. It is probably one of the biggest in the area. Others - smaller - but no less beautiful, are in the field next to the garden. At the lower half of this field are Yew Trees in a straight row. This is where I lived when a child, and now live in my old age.

There are fewer trees there now, but they are still, to me, very beautiful.

* SOUTHEAN ? - ed.

Lady Ellis, who lived in Rotherfield Hall, once told me that the monks of neighbouring abbeys, when visiting each other followed the Yew Trees as a guide. This, I feel, must be true, as Battle Abbey and Robertsbridge Abbey are very near to each other, and the trees would be easy to follow.

The two cottages at the rear of Yew Lodge were built by the owners of the farm. The real farm house now known as the Grove was occupied by the village doctor, until the death of Dr. Blomfield 66 years ago, and then by his widow until she died. It then became the Youth Centre. The stables were demolished, the marvellous garden was neglected and finally the Youth Club became what it is now.

To return to George Hill.

A wood yard called Country Crafts now occupies the site of the old Market Yard. A cattle market was held here once a fortnight and a FAT STOCK SHOW on the 12th DECEMBER every year. The yard was not entirely open to the road, but a wall ran down the side of the yard nearest the road, which was much narrower than it is now. The fields and gardens of the houses were cut back for footpaths to be made - an improvement if only the paths were kept to walk on, but after a time they are covered with every conceivable kind of rubbish, plus brambles, stinging nettles, and every other kind of plant.

We children had lots of fun watching the animals especially when one or two calves escaped into the road, chased by their excited owners with the help of the drovers who had brought them to market. Fortunately, children have short memories, so their language was soon forgotten.

The FAT STOCK SHOW was a different matter altogether. We were not allowed to go into the road at all on FAT STOCK SHOW DAY - even to go to school. That was the only time we did not attend school. As it was quite a common sight to see animals so fat that they could scarcely walk, we should have been, I expect, quite safe. I well remember seeing one poor beast, unable to move, just outside our garden gate.

Adjoining the Market Yard was the George Hotel Yard. This hotel, I understand, was the spot where one caught the Stage Coach, if travelling any distance. A wall, white with black lettering, informed the public that these were livery and bait stables. As a child, I never really understood what it meant. These stables were at the rear of a big open yard. Stables with hay lofts faced the road and there was a pond in the centre of the yard, where, I expect the farmers who had come to the market, fed and watered their horses, before returning to their respective farms. The dog carts, and other horse drawn vehicles were parked in the yard, near a window which opened on to the yard. From this window the landlord served the farmers with what must have been a very welcome pint.

The George Hotel, now called the George Inn, was the Inn where the most important meetings were held. Nothing of importance now seems to happen here!

We used to wait in bed to hear the Royal Mail go down the road - horse driven.

The High Street still looks the same, with the High pavement, paved with red and blue bricks and the High Street snaking its way through the village, but a very different picture presents

itself, when we consider that the amenities which we took for granted are no longer with us.

For instance, when I was young, there were three butchers in the village - now only one. Barclays Bank occupies the site of one, the office of a consultant surveyor another, and a Floral Boutique another. Again grocers' shops, once three, now one.

The Stores on the High pavement is now a solicitors office - Barnes, now an Antique shop and another small one in Northbridge Street. We have, left to us Croucher and Fullers. As the majority of people have a car, it is not to be wondered at if the owners of such transport go to the Supermarkets. It is hard on old people who cannot go further afield for the goods they need.

At least we have a good baker, a shoe shop, a chemist and a greengrocer. But we have a surfeit of Antique shops, one of which is known as the Saddlery for obvious reasons.

My brothers and I often visited old Mr. Burchett in the Saddler's shop to beg some whipcord, so that we might have whipcord races up the road!!! Practically all the old houses in the High Street are listed, the finest of all being that belonging to Mrs. Wightwick.

I suppose what interested us most as children was the number of sweet shops. We could be very choosy as to which shop we spent our occasional pennies in. We could get 4 ounces of good boiled sweets for a penny and that was when 240 pennies were needed to make £1. Imagine being able to buy 1 lb of sweets for 4 pence.

One must not forget three very important people

who lived in or near the High Street. I refer, of course, to the farriers, Mr. Simmons, Mr. Beaney and Mr. Hook. Without these three men, the farmers, and in fact, all people who relied on horses for work and transport would have been in a sorry plight. Without them, work and traffic would have come to a standstill.

Horses could be seen being shod on almost any day of the week at the forges of these men. How we enjoyed leaning against the forge door, looking at the horse shoes being made and fitted, listening to the hammering, and watching the sparks fly as the one responsible for the fire, pumped the bellows.

STATION ROAD is almost as it was, except that Sandcastle Cottages are no longer there neither is the Undertaker's workshop. The Timber Yard is still in the same place but no longer are the tugs drawn by a team of five horses ably managed by old Mr. Barden - a colourful character if ever there was one.

The Timber Yard occupies the whole of the left side of the road from the station to the entrance to Darvell Hall. This was once the residence of Mrs. Layton, who was driven to Salehurst Church every Sunday morning in a carriage and pair. Later it became a well known Sanitorium, with Dr. Dingley in charge. It is now the home of THE COMMUNITY OF BROTHERS. The Timber Yard premises stretch to the bottom of Bishops Lane.

The station, providing transport between Robertsbridge and Charing Cross, is, or was the South Eastern and Chatham Railway or S.E.C.R, these initials being translated by the villagers as SLOW, EASY AND COMFORTABLE RAILWAY.

At one time a small railway started from Robertsbridge on its journey to Headcorn, this journey eventually being shortened to Tenterden. This was the ROTHER VALLEY RAILWAY. It went on its journey through the village, past the cricket ground and eventually across the main road by Clappers Cottages, which like the fields, were often flooded.

A crossing gate was operated by an old couple who lived in the middle cottage, and any one or anything awaited their pleasure. This old couple, Mr. and Mrs. Martin, were known as CROWIE, don't ask me why. Their motto must have been 'SAFETY FIRST', for we waited a long time.

When it was found impossible to obtain an engine to draw the coaches, someone had a remarkable idea. Two vehicles were coupled together back to back! allowing the driver the ability to drive both ways. My sister, whose work took her to Tenterden, was once marooned in one of these vehicles, in flood water.

FAIR LANE

This is the lane leading from the Stars Hotel to the Gravel Pit. As children my mother would not allow us to go up this lane, but like all children, we did.

Probably it was because of the Fair which took place in the fields, that the road was called Fair Lane! This fair took place every year, on 25 & 26 September. It was a sheep fair, and during these days the main road was occupied by sheep! hundreds of them! There were horses too, exercised to show their paces in the field behind our houses. Great fun to watch from a safe place behind the hedge. Fair Field was then in two parts.

The 25th September was the day of the Animal Fair and the 26th the Pleasure Fair. The fair people were allowed one day (24) to go into the field, one day (25) for the sheep fair, one day (26) for the pleasure fair, and one day to go out (27).

The Pleasure Fair was run by Pettigrews, and it included everything - roundabouts, switchbacks, helter skelter, hoopla, coconut shies, in fact the lot. The usual side shows were there too. Two policemen were always on duty, during the fair days, to settle any dispute that may have arisen. One year when my father had taken my sister and me up to the field, we entered the field to find a fight going on between the woman managing the coconut shy and a local woman. At some period of time the mother of the local woman arrived on the scene. By this time the fight was getting serious, when a shout came from the mother in broad Sussex - "Goo on Lil, I'll 'old yer 'at". Needless to say, everyone anywhere near was doubled up with laughter, and the fight forgotten.

Now Fair Lane - with its Wealden Houses, is a very respected quarter of the village. In 1905, Mr. Sing, then our vicar, was instrumental in getting the Mission Room, as it was then called - built. It is still being used for services and all sorts of activities, a very useful building to have in the village. I believe, but am not sure that the foundation stone came from the Cistercian Abbey, which is at the end of Fair Lane. The Wesleyan Chapel has been converted into flats, known as Abbey Court, but at one time was used regularly for the purpose for which it was built.

Many years ago a disagreement arose between some of the congregation and one member left

the Chapel, and built a small chapel(?) on the Bridges. It was built of corrugated iron sheets, and my irreverent brothers, of whom there were five called it

THE TIN TABERNACLE

The Bridges and the Floods

Leaving the High Street behind we come to THE BRIDGES. This is a causeway, raised to keep the road usable, and free from flood water. Before any work was done on the River Rother and the surrounding streams, it was usual for all that part of the village to be flooded! The cricket ground, football ground and the other fields were all under water.

The flour mill, owned by Mr. Hodson when I was a child, and by Mr. Dadswell later on was situated on this stretch of land. The mill was driven by water over a water wheel. A dam was made at the rear of the Mill to supply the necessary power. This was the Mill Bay, a real beauty spot and a pleasant walk along the path that was beside it - now no more.

I remember, on one occasion the flood water came up into the High Street as far as the Post Office. The people in the cottages were obliged to live upstairs, and friendly neighbours supplied their meals by passing baskets of food through the bedroom windows. If one wanted to reach that part of the village beyond the Post Office, a Post Office hand-cart was used as a conveyance. The cottages behind the High Street were flooded - the water four treads up the stairs.

I had a ride in a hand-cart when I went to catch the train to go to school because Station Road was under water!

The Mill presented a very different picture from what it does today. (It is now SCATS). Corn was taken to the Mill regularly by the farmers. There it was ground into flour between two large stones - hence stone ground flour, and very popular it was. Many men were employed here grinding the flour and others to deliver it to customers - usually in covered wagons, drawn by two horses.

In 1903 a disastrous fire occurred. The top of the mill was destroyed and crashed on to the Mill House. Fortunately no one was injured. The fire engine, drawn by horses of course - was always driven by my father. I remember him telling me how once the horses (which were requisitioned from anyone who could spare them) were harnessed to the fire engine - one would work and one would not - so what a journey it must have been. It makes one see that the saying "Whip the horse that will work" is not without reason. The mill burnt for three days. The water was pumped by hand, so the firemen - all volunteers - had to work very hard - I think there were 3 or 4 men on each side of the pump. Should a fire occur the firemen were summoned by the ringing of a bell in the village, usually by one of my brothers. Although I was only between 5 and 6 years old, I remember crying because I thought Dad would not come back.

Northbridge Street

The name speaks for itself. This is the road that runs from the last bridge to the turning to the Church. I cannot remember any buildings except Lynton House being built and Rutley Close. Except for widening the street slightly by taking down some trees which were on the path, it is as I knew it.

My mother was born in Monks House as it is now called. This block of houses consisted of five cottages when I was young.

Opposite them was a field, part of Mill Farm, and a short distance away was Mill Farm House. This had beside it, a carpenter's shop, and a trimmed Yew Tree in the garden.

There was a pump here, and from this pump all the inhabitants of the street obtained their water. What a job fetching it. When we were on our way to school we often met men with buckets fetching water - especially when it was washing day.

The old people - Mr. & Mrs. Seeley - must have had a thriving business in the street for there always seemed to be someone in the shop.

The house where Mr. & Mrs. Taylor live is, as most people know, called Quaker Cottage. This name was given to it because a gentleman bought it from an old lady named Ann Friend (A FRIEND). I know, but only because my mother told me, that Mr. Levi Nichols lived in the house next to Mr. Taylor. He, it was, who was instrumental in starting the cricket bat factory - later to become world famous. He introduced the spliced handle - a strip of rubber in the handle to counteract the sting to the hands when the bat met the ball.

The school master, Mr. Potter, was responsible for the building of Lynton House. Opposite Lynton House now is Rutley Close. This was once a hop garden. (More about hop gardens later). The terrace of houses by Rutley Close was the old Work House, remembered by the name of the field adjoining it - WORK HOUSE BROOK.

Finally Church Lane. This fortunately cannot be changed any more.

The seven oak trees which once stood along the edge of the road are gone. Coronation Gardens are opposite where once they stood, also Rotherview Estate and two other blocks of houses.

Old Mr. Bishop, our much loved roadman, is still remembered by his cottage by the roadside. From there the road goes to the Church, past some ruins known as Pump Barn. I do not know why, and then on to the Church, where, if you are lucky, you might be greeted by the ringing of 8 bells - the best in Sussex. Robertsbridge itself has no Church, as it is in the parish of Salehurst. Natives of the village are very proud of it. The font, surrounded at its base by salamanders is reputed to have been given to the Church by Richard Coeur de Lion as a thank offering. The Abbot at that time was believed to have been the one who led the expedition to free the king when he was taken prisoner after a Crusade. The date on the Church is 1282. The Abbey dates from 1186.

The Village School

I have decided that the village school was deserving of a special place in this little book of reminiscences. It has been here for very many years, in almost the same state. Outwardly it looks almost the same - I was accepted as a pupil on May 29, 1899!! (see log book). What was the Infant classroom is now the kitchen, and what I think is known as the Hall, was once the big classroom. Three separate classes were taught here, one class separated from the next by a baize curtain. Think of the trials of the class in the middle - a curtain each side.

A big coke stove was at the front of the room - quite often smoking, or maybe not burning! We worked until 4 o'clock and there was no lighting system. The other two rooms were smaller but each had a gallery in it. Desks were hard, and discipline strict, which did none of us any harm, but probably a great deal of good.

Going back to the Infant class, we had no such things as plasticine and building blocks! We were at school to work. We were taught to write on slates with slate pencils. Each slate had a hole in the bottom of it, to which was attached a damp sponge, which was put to uses other than those for which it was intended, one being rubbing out what a boy or girl next to you had done, just before the teacher came to see the result of one's efforts. This resulted, as a rule, in a beating for the offender.

We sat on wooden benches with no back rests and our little arms were folded tightly behind us. Life was real, life was earnest in those days. A luxury to hold our books in a desk of our own was never enjoyed. After being used they were collected and put in a cupboard. We had desks to accommodate five to begin with and later had dual desks, a great improvement. We worked hard, we had a very limited amount of time to play but I am bold enough to say we enjoyed our time at school. I feel that I and many others owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Potter, who was the headmaster when I was young, and in later years to Mr. Wawne who was the headmaster when I retired from teaching.

The Industries of the Village OLD STYLE

Robertsbridge, an agricultural village with many farms - Glottenham, Parsonage, The Moat, The Abbey, Redlands, The Mill, Slides, The Grove, to name some of them. ALL the usual crops were grown and the usual animals kept.

Haymaking was a happy time for children who spent most of their time playing in the hay while their parents worked to bring the hay into the rick yard. This was a far different and more arduous operation than it is now. The grass was left to dry, then it was turned and tossed by a tedding machine drawn by a horse. When it was ready to be carried, women with wooden rakes raked it into straight lines, so that it could be loaded in the wagons. Usually the women were followed by a man with a buck rake (a very large rake which he pulled behind him) to pick up the stray bits of hay. When it was ready to be loaded, a wagon was brought to the field to carry it to the yard. Men with pitch forks arrived and loaded the hay, using pitch forks, a hazardous proceeding, for the horse might suddenly decide to move. Various expressions were used by the man in charge of this operation to stop or start the horse during the loading; the only one I remember being LI-ARD I think it meant HOLD TIGHT. It was taken to the yard where it was stacked in rectangular shapes - a real work of art. We had no bales of hay!

After a while it was thatched by an expert thatcher. We had one living in the village - Mr. Tester who lived in Fair Lane.

After haymaking came harvesting. This too, was very hard, interesting work, Combine harvesters were unknown. Harvesting was a very different proposition from haymaking.

Usually a scythe was used to cut round the edge of the cornfield, then a mowing machine. The corn, after cutting, was picked up by workmen. There were usually two who worked together, one to make the bond and place on the ground, the other to place an armful of corn on the bond, and tie it up. A bond was made by twisting two handfuls of cornstalks into one straight piece.

It was a bad time for rabbits, as they were always found in the corn, and as the mowing machine went round in ever decreasing circles the rabbits rushed nearer and nearer to the centre of the field, thus lessening their chance of escape. I always felt sorry for the rabbits.

The sheaves of corn were raised off the ground and made into shocks or stooks. There were usually six sheaves built up to face each other, and one at each end to keep them standing. They had to stand and harvest for three Sundays before being carried to the farm yard to await the threshing machine.

The corn was built into ROUND stacks with the ears of corn all facing the middle. The stacks had a firm foundation of sticks or wood, which, in the course of time became a safe hiding place and breeding ground for rats and probably mice. These stacks, too, were thatched. The threshing machine eventually arrived, drawn by a steam engine!

The stack was denuded of its thatch, and the sheaves of corn fed into the threshing machine by skilled men - the corn emerged on one side and the straw the other. A big boy, a caving boy he was called, carried the straw away, while lads, armed with sticks tried to emulate the Pied Piper and rid the place of rats.

It was enjoyable if you were only watching the threshing, but very dirty should you be helping at the actual job.

Now everything is done by a Combine Harvester!

HOP PICKING

This was the third big operation in the farming world. All or practically every family was involved in hop picking time. School holidays were arranged to suit the hop picking season. Hop picking, I fear, was not so much enjoyed as the other two - Haymaking and Harvesting. In the hop garden children used to sit and pick the hops into boxes or baskets, in fact anything that would hold them. Some used open umbrellas! The hop vines were trained up poles or string usually by women called hoptyers and when the hops were ripe in August or September hop picking began. The hops were picked into bins - hessian bags on a wooden framework.

Work started at seven o'clock in the morning when the farmer shouted "ALL TO WORK". The children sat beside the bin - there were six bins in a set - and the pickers were looked after by the pole puller, whose work it was to keep the pickers supplied with poles, which when relieved of the hops were thrown behind the bin in a pile. When all the hops had been picked, one person, usually a child, shouted "ALL OFF" and the measurer accompanied by THE BOOKER arrived to measure the number of bushels which had been picked. The number was entered in the booker's book and in the book belonging to the picker. The number of bushels was counted aloud by the measurer.

The children were kept at work sitting by the mother's bin and transferring the hops into the bin from umbrellas (upended) and boxes. A lot depending on hop-picking, for the children's winter clothes might depend on it. Wages in those days were not high! The booker's work was to ascertain how many pokes (hop sacks) were to be taken to the oast house each day, and then to count the bushels as they were measured into the poke. Each poke held ten bushels.

This was an important part of the booker's work, as the hop drier in the oast had to have the right number of bushels, or an oast of hops could be spoiled by too many or too few.

When the quota of hops was obtained the shout came:- NO MORE HOPS TO BE PICKED TONIGHT
SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING
So ended a day's picking.

This pattern continued until all the hops were picked, dried and pressed into pockets. These were big, exceedingly strong hessian bags.

Some farmers employed families from outside towns to pick the hops. They lived in a number of small wooden buildings near the farm which were called hopper huts.

When hop-picking was finished, people of the village settled down again to await the winter and the coming of Christmas.