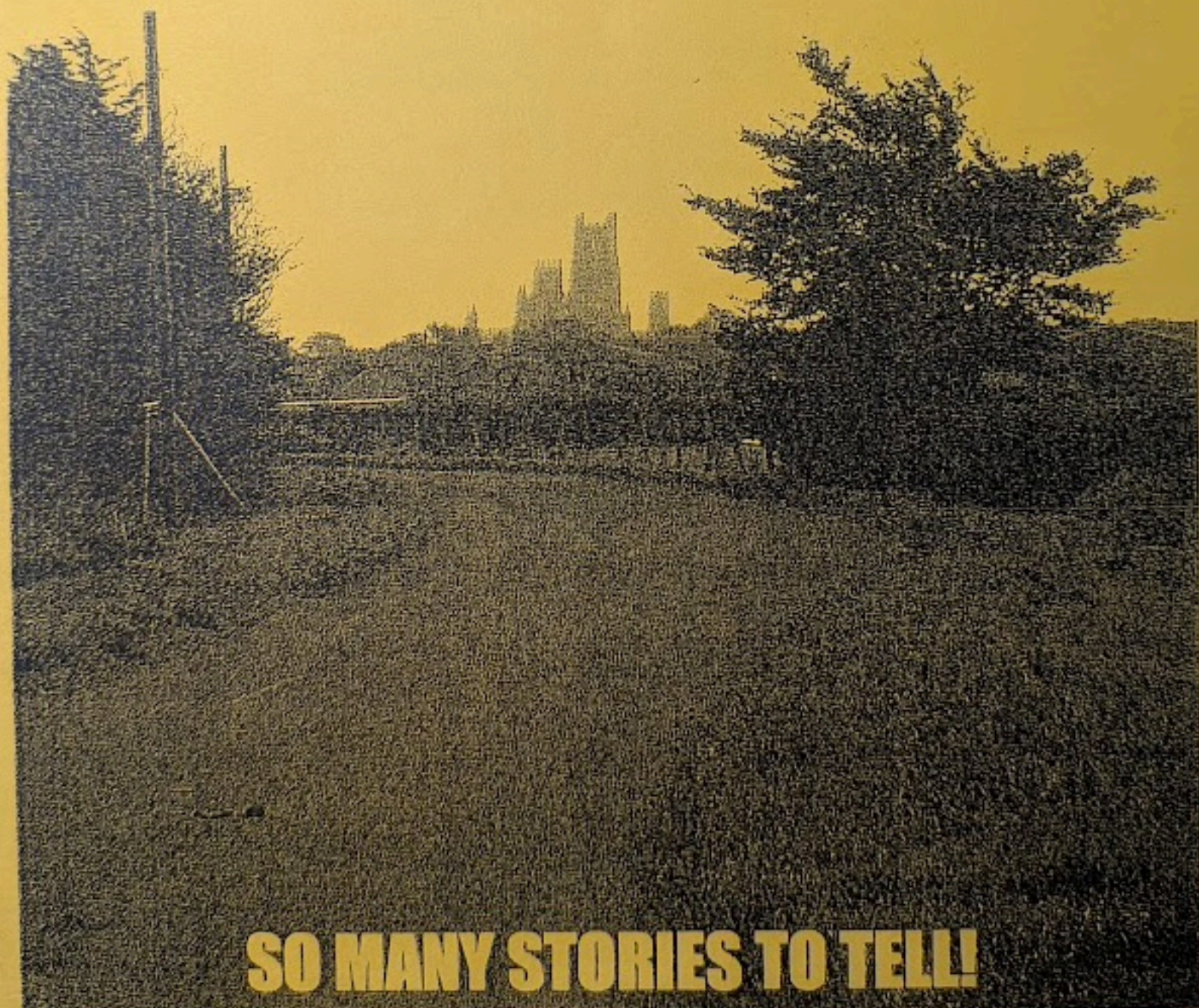


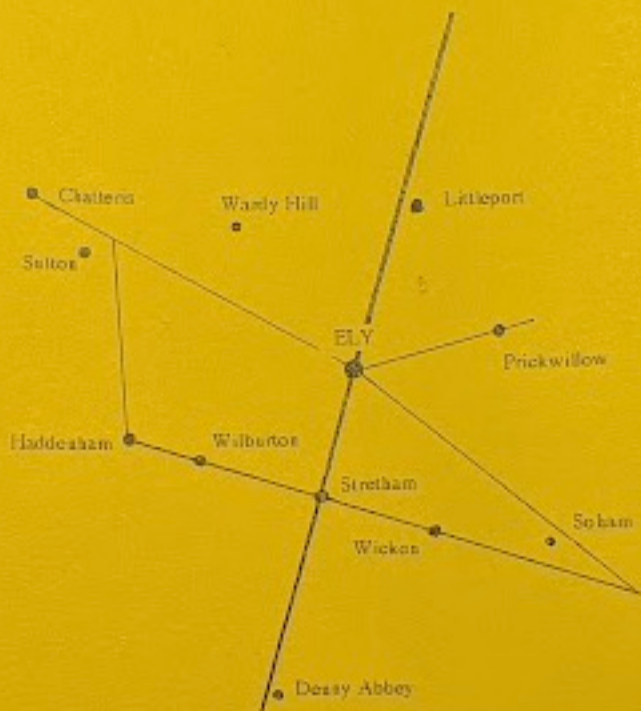
TEN MILES FROM ELY

COMPILED BY LORNA DELANOY MBE
AND PAUL MELTON



SO MANY STORIES TO TELL!

TEN MILES FROM ELY



Acknowledgements



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Clifford Manning of Ely who made decisions about excerpts for the amalgam tapes after the museum was awarded a Silver Jubilee Grant in 1977.

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Valerie Bloye who edited some stories into a more readable form and kindly proof-read the script.

And last of all, perhaps most important of all, the interviewees themselves without whom there would be no "stories to tell."

This is the first of a series of transcribed tapes from the Oral History Archive of the Farmland Museum. Any profits will be given to the Friends of the Museum, a registered charity.

INTRODUCTION



The changes that have happened in the last fifty years are beyond compare. Interviews carried out in the decades 1977 – 1997 with people in East Cambridgeshire are now in book form and therefore available to a wider audience.

Memories of a Fen lad in the First World War, the hard life of a mole catcher in the inter-war years and the child who could not wear shoes in the holidays because of poverty, are just snippets from the many taped dialogues. The story of these people's lives is told with affection and little regret; the attitude was *"This is our lot and we must make the most of it."*

The tape archive and its copyright is held by the trustees of the Farmland Museum; excerpts have been used by authors (e.g. Sadie Ward, 'War in the Countryside'), Radio Programmes ('Archive Hour' on Radio 4) and TV ('Look East' and 'Bygones').

Sadly all the interviewees are no longer alive, and it is hoped that this publication will serve as a memorial to "those who have gone before".

It was twenty-five years ago that the Farmland Museum received a grant from the Queen's Silver Jubilee Trust to provide "listening posts" so that oral history tapes could be played to visitors on Open Days.

This year, in celebration of fifty years of the Queen's Reign, it has been decided to take selections from the interviews and weave them into book form, creating a picture of life in the fens around Ely in the last century. It should be noted that the people being interviewed were pleased to relate their happy and sad moments.

Ten Miles from Ely



Mabel Demaine, a fen farmer's daughter born in 1908 and a life-long Methodist; recalls some village customs

When I was a child there were three old customs kept up in the village – which were the means of raising small sums of money. They were “goodnin”, “ploughboy’in” and “mayladyen”.

Widows went round on “goodnin day”; I do not know how it originated, but on the 21st of December, the shortest day of the year, widows in ones and twos, went around knocking on doors where they were given small sums of money or a packet of tea or sugar.

Only widows were allowed to take part in this. And one year, old Jinny Crocksen joined the collectors. We all knew she wasn't a widow. It was true her husband was often ill and unable to work ... when she came to our house, her right to join the widows was challenged. And she promptly replied, *“I'm worse than widow woman”!*

Widows were really poor in those days and had a hard life. There were no pensions and often their poverty was acute. Sometimes they got some small parish relief – a mere pittance. And it meant pleading poverty and almost begging. And these women had their pride. I can remember one woman who was left a widow with an invalid daughter to keep. She went out washing and became bent almost double through bending over the washtub. There was the hard scrubbing to be done and then the ironing – a full hard day several times a week. No washing machines or electric irons in those days. We used to see her going home; her stooping figure, looking so tired and weary, after these washdays.

‘Goodnin day’, coming just before Christmas, provided them with a little extra for the festive season.

Then in January there was Plough Monday which was called ‘Ploughboys’ Day’. I think it was originally meant for ploughboys only, and they carried a decorated plough around when they did their collectin’. Boys always wore heavy hobnail boots with heel and toe cleats and studded with hobnails. What a noise they made! You could hear them coming a long way off. They ran around from door to door, sometimes they came after dark and would carry a (rabi) lantern tied to a long pole. It was made by making a big hollow in a rabyworzel and cutting a window in the side where the light from a lighted candle shone through.

Then on May the first it was the girls turn to go round ‘Mayladyen’. They all carried dolls. There was great competition with the dolls. They all had as pretty and as well dressed a doll as possible. The girls

knocked on the doors and greeted everyone with, "*Please can you spare a copper for a May lady?*"

My mother wouldn't let me go 'Mayladyen'. She said it was only a form of beggin'. Oh! and how I envied the other girls who were able to take part in this activity. Especially when they told me of their financial results! This collecting was supposed to end at midday. And so the little girls often stayed away from school in the mornin' goin' from door to door.

Then there was another old custom. It was tollin' the church bell for any death in the village. The bell tolled three times for a man and twice for a woman and once for a child, with short intervals in between. This custom had to end at the outbreak of World War II, because orders went out that church bells were to be used as a warning of enemy invasion only.

Then years ago we also had a town crier and he went around the village with his bell and announced all important functions: sales and public meetings and lost property. Whenever we heard his bell, usually in the evening, we rushed to the door to hear the crier slowly shout his news. This custom also ended at the outbreak of war.

Charlie Ashton, who gave three hours of interviews, tells us of his childhood, spent travelling the British Isles

"I'm talking in my days, when I were young, all we used to do is sport. We never used to go to pictures much. Or out with girls a lot, only around our own lot. And our sport used to be boxing between ourselves and other travellers, bare fist boxing and wrestling. And cock fighting, or perhaps we race on ponies, you know, and all that sort of games. We had a game what you called peggy. I don't know if you've heard about that. Just a game where you could cut out the hedge, cut a bit of wood out the hedge about five inches long, point at each end, and then you cut yourself a stick out about three foot long a piece and if you laid this down - when you point it at each end, whip the end of it, like that the pointed end and then it jumps up in the air, you hit it and the one who could hit it the furthest was the winner. The game, known as Tippit is played at the museum on Games Day)

Cock Fighting at Roadsides

These was all games us brothers used to play and other fellas when we had to look after horses on the side of the road all day. And then we'd have a session of who could stand and jump the furthest. Perhaps we had a ditch there and we'd be betting who could jump over that. For cock fighting we didn't believe in using spurs, no we didn't believe in putting spurs on. We'd buy a cockerel, a young'un about a year, eighteen months old, and that had just got its own spurs nicely. If

anybody did tie things on the spurs I wouldn't let me cock fight with em'.

We Moved around a bit: No Maps to Guide Us

And then come right through Suffolk, Felixstowe, Norfolk and Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and you know, dad knowed every stopping place. He'd know where we were stopping the night. And he'd tell us children b'fore we got there – every night. And when we'd stop that night and sitting round the campfire he'd say, "We're stopping so and so tonight." And tell us the name of the pub cos he liked a pint. You know he'd say, "I'm going down and have a pint." He'd know just where they were. And where we had been, if a policeman used to come down, he'd say, "It's all right, that's you, Mr. Ashton, you all right?"

Tidy up Before Leaving.

We used to stop where they knew us, you see, and when we got up in the morning, if us children had sweets, he'd mek us pick every bit of paper up, no mess. And the campfire spoilt. He'd mek us clear the wood ourselves. He'd mek us pull grass up and put over it – you couldn't see where we'd been. And that used to go a long way. That's true Romany.

Royal Connection

One time I'm talking about b'fore I were born, just b'fore I were born, my mother sold some flowers on London Bridge to the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII). He come over and got out of a coach or somthin' and she spoke to him and he bought two bunches of flowers off her; I think she was selling violets and something else. And she also, in my time, she wrote to the Queen, what is the Queen Mother now (died 2002) and she got a reply. Straight from her hand, not from her secretary's, straight from her hand. She still got the letter now, I could show you. If she passes it on I should perhaps get that. We used to boast a bit about that and show it to the other Romanys.

Money or Goods in Lieu

When we travelled around the Fens we used to do in the winter like, back then when we had nothing to do – we used to do a bit of what they call round here they call it steaming, don't they? That's thrashing really. We'd go and do a bit of thrashing for a farmer. He'd perhaps give ya about ten, fifteen bob a day. That used to be all right, ya know then. Some farmers paid in food if they couldn't afford it.

They'd give ya sack of potatoes and cabbage and lettuce and what they could, give ya a bob or two.

Charlie Bester, who was Parish Clerk for forty years and author of "A History of the Parish of Haddenham". He was a great supporter of the Farmland Museum.

Proceeding along Hill Row we find on the left a small derelict building (now modified for a house 2002), which was used for a period up to the 1930's as the Hill Row Mission Hall. It belonged to the local parish church and in its early days was used for a Sunday school, weeknight services and social events. It continued in use as a small social centre until around 1950 when, because of its condition, it was closed and restored to the owner of the surrounding field.

Adjoining the Mission hall, being part of the same field, was a pond, which was owned by the parish council under the Enclosure Award. The pond has been filled and was sold by the council to Mr. George Amory, the owner of the field from which the pond was taken.

Hill Row and Riots

This pond and the property opposite was the scene of an extraordinary event in 1921.

The Great Ouse River Board had assessed thousands of acres of land for drainage tax and hundreds of farmers refused to pay this new levy. Mr. W. Peacock, who lived opposite the pond and farmed the land in Hill Row Fen, objected to payment. And after the statutory notices had been served, the River Board decided to destrain on a haystack in the nearby farmyard. Notices were posted in the district intimating that the stack would be sold at 11:00 a.m. on Monday.

Ammunition found: Plans were made

Over the weekend a small corn stack was thrashed out. And the straw was stacked around and over the haystack so that it could not be seen. Ammunition in the form of rotten eggs was obtained. Several of the farmers' wives incubated thousands of eggs and the infertile reject eggs, some having been in a refuse pit for two years, were collected and carefully concealed near the farmyard.

The Haddenham and Hill Row Irregulars, having armed themselves, waited for the enemy to appear.

Arrival of Auctioneer

At 10:00 a.m. an auctioneer from Cambridge named Love arrived in a motorcar - escorted by two burley assistants and Police Constable Breeze, the local policeman. After some time the haystack was located and the auctioneer prepared for action.

Warnings Given

Mr. Walter Player and Mr. Lewis Edwards, two local farmers, warned the auctioneer that he was trespassing as the haystack was on property owned by Mrs. Olive Peacock, the wife of the debtor. The auctioneer deferred immediate action and tramped to the telephone box in Haddenham to contact the clerk to the drainage board. Returning to Hill Row he announced that he would conduct the sale on the King's Highway. No sooner had he commenced his work, he was hit in his ear 'ole', (Mr. George Amory's description with necessary deletions), with a two year old egg, the contents of the missile running down his neck and a barrage of rotten eggs were hurled at the auctioneer and his assistant.

So terrible was the smell that several of the attackers succumbed to the fumes.

Rule Britannia

Supporters of the irregulars encouraged them by singing "Rule Britannia" and the "National Anthem". The auctioneer attempted to carry on with the sale but his voice was completely covered by shouts from irate supporters of the farmer.

Another subtle movement by the irregulars was deployed. The crowd commenced an encircling movement. And the auctioneer, bailiff and assistants was slowly but surely forced into the muddy margin of the parish pond. At this stage Police Constable Breeze made his presence felt. There is no doubt he handled the situation with tact and courage. Using his authority he stopped the encircling movement and prevented a mud bath. It is thought the stack was sold privately. Auctioneer and assistants tried to obtain a wash and brush up before entering their car but were unsuccessful and were obliged to return to Cambridge in a very sorry condition.

Fred Clifford, who was padre at the RAF Hospital Ely (now Princes of Wales Hospital), was a retired Superintendent Methodist Minister

In the fifty years of my ministry my faith was always being tested. In a hospital when one meets some very gravely ill people, not necessarily among the aged but among the young, the question that's on so many people's lips 'Why' comes into my mind as well. And while there are various explanations for certain illnesses, there doesn't appear to be any particular explanation for other illnesses. And in that respect I'm agnostic. But I have a deep sense that somehow all the incongruities of human experience - the pain, the anguish, in other words the depth of human experience, along with its heights, its joys, its successes, its achievements, is all, as it were, within the over arching providence of God. Which has for us all a destiny, which isn't confined to this life

alone with all its vicissitudes. But which in the very nature of our creation looks beyond into what I believe is the life to come and the nearer and the greater presence of God himself.

I can't understand

There are times when, in my own experience, through things that have happened, in our own family, I have felt very angry with God. And there are times when I sometimes say in my prayers, "*I don't know what you're up to, I can't understand it.*" But I'm able to talk to God like that because I believe he's there. And I believe that, although I don't understand, he's still in control.

Faith and the Future

At the back of my mind is the conviction that, increasingly, as the years pass, Christians are learning a bit more sense. And we're learning that our divisions are far less important than the things that we have in common. And I would like to feel that the Methodist Church in Haddenham will be increasingly making its contribution towards "The Church" and its witness in the world.

Roger Clarke, Director of Clarke & Butcher Flour Mill, recalls events in '44 and in '45.

Born at Mill House, Roger's earliest memories are of seeing men around the town in uniform – in the early days of the First World War

Surgery on the Kitchen table

As a small boy he contracted diphtheria which at the time was considered quite serious. He was operated on by the local doctor by lamplight at his home, for tonsils. No hygienic operating theatre for a lad as we would expect today!

A Full Day's Work – 15 Hours

On leaving school, his working day started at 6 a.m. lifting and organising the grain, and at 8 a.m. he had breakfast, changed into office clothes and worked until tea time, then changing back into working attire he finished at the mill by 9 p.m. A long day even for the boss's son!

The 1944 Bombs

Soham was found to be on fire. Despite efforts of the railway staff, two of whom lost their lives, the contents of the wagon exploded doing considerable damage to the town of Soham. The railway station was destroyed and the mill suffered a damage which caused it to stop running for two days.

It was a national subject in the papers, Soham, and of course I was in Soham at the time and it was quite phenomenal when things had happened, when an explosion of such magnitude goes off. I believe the actual number was forty four bombs weighing 500 pounds each, all went off in one go. It seemed a pretty long time one after another, you see, these forty four bombs. And they were just going on and on one after the other and seemed to last for about half a minute.

When I looked out the bedroom window the gas works was on fire, which was close to the railway. And we thought it was a bomb on the gas works, really. We didn't realise what was going through. It was the whole trainload of bombs.

The Mill

The Mill did not escape. It got a certain amount of damage. The worst part of the damage unfortunately was the steam engine in the mill. It had delicate moving parts in it, and those delicate parts were broken and the mill stopped for about three days to have urgent repairs done and then we were away again. But it was really a very big item in the affairs not only of the parish but of the mill and everybody living here at that time. And then of course shortly following that, exactly one year after D Day, we found ourselves once again in much trouble.

Fire 45'

The mill was a blazing inferno and mills are always very dry inside, and mainly timber floors, timber wood inside, to carry the different flours going down'em. And it was just an inferno, it was so terribly hot, but the shafting which carried the pulleys was two inches thick and when it was cooled off the next day these two inch rods went right through the mill. They were twisted like children's hoops.

Over a period of time, now that I look back to 1945 when the fire was raging, three o'clock in the morning, standing outside beside my father, watching it all go up in flames, the sight was ... depressing is very much an understatement. It was a lifetime's work of hard work going up in smoke. And my father was always a man of very even temperament and he said, "*Well, never minds, good will come out of evil.*" And that was very true, very true indeed.

Henry Constable, who was Mayor of Ely from 1978 to 1980, lived at Wardy Hill. He was a local Preacher in the Ely Methodist circuit for many years.

I wouldn't like to see Ely become very much larger than what it is now (just think of modern expansion in 2002). I think Ely is just a very nice manageable size. I don't think I would want to be the Mayor if it was a great industrial town. I'm quite happy... I think it's a wonderful place, I don't think there's any place like it. It doesn't matter who I talk to;

people who come in from outside, they say the same. And this happens all the time. This is perhaps one of my great worries, I don't know. We shall proclaim its goodness and therefore build it up larger than what we think it ought to be.

Palace Garden Party

I should think without any doubt the proudest thing that has come our way was meeting the Queen at the Palace Garden Party, a fortnight ago. We were actually presented to the Queen. And we spoke with her for about five minutes and she's a very lovely person. Someone who's quite easy to converse with.

It was just like talking to your own family, one of your own family.

Con Cameron, lived in Chatteris in the 1920's. Con was probably the first lady taxi driver in the area.

"I do everything, make it talk. The old thing used to rattle. We only got curtains in there, they had to put a hood up if it rained and ya'd get your fingers squashed.

Foot Control

I burnt me brakes out down at Shrewsbury because there was a flock of sheep coming up a hill and I went and shoved me brakes on quick. Course you could always use your reverse pedal there. See there's no gears. All your gears was with your feet.

I could drive one now if I had one! They'd be worth some money today!

Repairs to Cars

After Dad left the mill (Houghton near St. Ives) we had these three taxis and then we had fifty boats and punts on the river, we used to look after them.

We used to do our own repairs with the cars; you used to grind the valves in. Oh yes! They'd all fall to pieces at the back axle there... We used to take the plugs out and clean those. We used to have to put side curtains up, well, it was ever so draughty. I used to be out all hours of the night. You had to have a rug round your knees cos it was so cold!

No Heating

And you used to have to let the water out at night if it was freezing because they used to get froze. There was no such thing as anti-freeze in those days. And jack it up to start it in the mornin'. And then as

soon as you get the jack up you could start it up and crank it up to try and get it to start! You'd jack it up then it'd fall off the jack!

My Dad used to say, "One of these days you'll get down that Huntingdon Station, that train will just be going out." I used to say I like to get down there in plenty of time. I used to have his car running and Tom's car running. All for that nine thirty train. It used to be the quick train to London. And Dad used to say, "No, I like to get there just on time."

My father would not buy any new tyres or tubes. And do you know, soon as there was a hot day all the patches used to lift off these blessed tubes.

Kindness of a Stranger

I remember going to Cambridge once, we were going to the Botanic Gardens, and I took a crowd there, in our open Ford it was, and someone walked by and, some man it was, said, "Look at your tyre!" I looked at the tyre and there's a great big bulge. We hadn't been going long through Cambridge and it went off bang! So I had to go to a garage at Downing Street and they come and towed me in. Somebody gave me a lift to Downing Street; it was on a Bank Holiday anyhow, I know there weren't many garages open. And I said, "What am I gonna do?" And he says, "You're gonna have to have a new tyre." I says, "Well, I haven't got any money to get a new tyre I got a young baby with its mother and about four kids," and they went in the Round Church in Cambridge, fed this baby, get out the heat because it was a hot day.

And I was in this Downing Street pub and a young fella came up and said, "What's the trouble?" and I said, "I've got to get a new tyre and they don't seem to trust me", and I told him who I was and where I come from. I said I got to be back by 6 o'clock I got to meet the 6 o'clock train. He said, "Look", he said to the man, "I'll pay for that tyre". He was an Air Force fella from Duxford.

No Money for a Cuppa

They were happy days in that old Ford. They used to say, "*Send Connie along to take us to St. Ives shopping.*" I used to wait there all day long for these old fogeys to go shopping. And daren't charge them anything you know. I hadn't got any money to go and get a cup of tea or anything with. Because those days, I mean, six pence a mile...

My husband used to say to me, "*I can run quicker than you can drive!*" - I was very steady driver! He used to say, "*You're a nuisance on the road!*" (A comment often made about women drivers nowadays!)

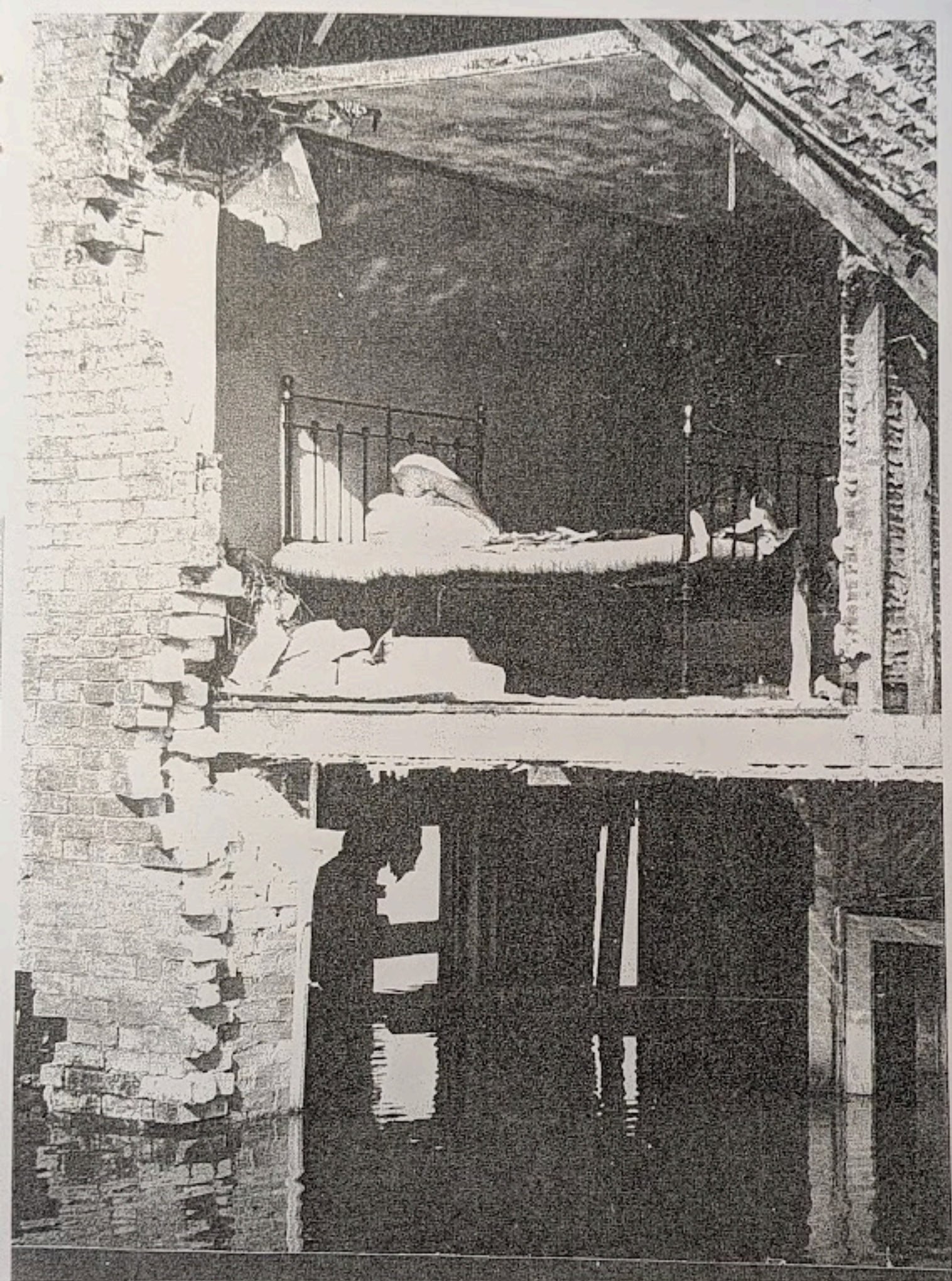
Mabel Demaine – Excerpts from her "Recollections of a country woman", written in the 1970's.

Kitchen and Cooking

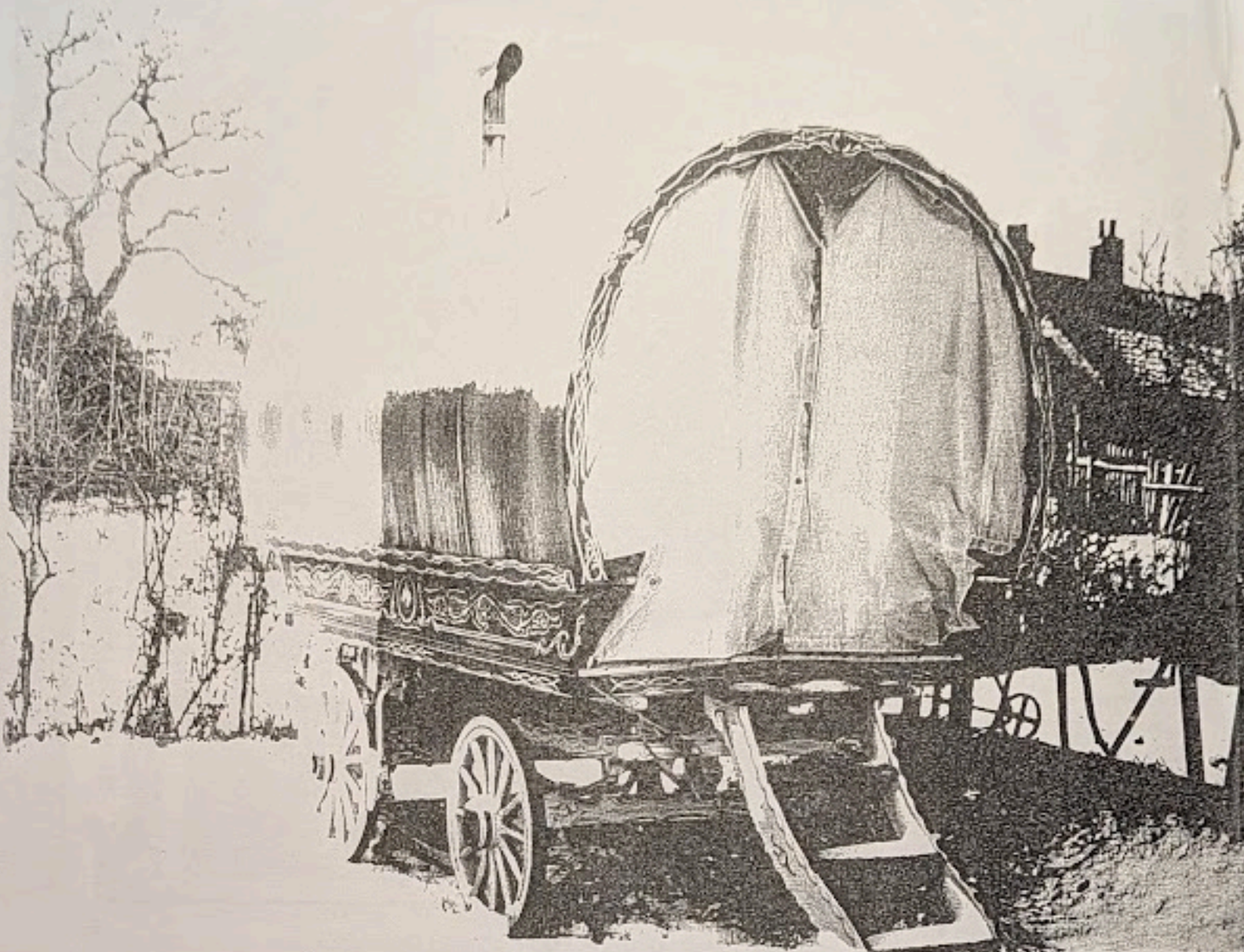
I can remember in our farmhouse kitchen; we had a stone sink and a large copper which was heated by a stick fire for wash days and baths. There was a 'low hearth' where the pots and pans and kettles boiled and how black and sooty they got from the fire. We had a large Dutch oven; we lit a fire under this twice a week – on Sundays the only day in the week when my father was in for the midday dinner, when we always had a roast joint and a Yorkshire pudding with plenty of vegetables, then rice pudding. This meal on a Sunday never varied and it was the only day when we had the sweet course last; other days we always began with the pudding, usually a suet crust, jam roll, apple pudding or spotted dick. One day during the week my mother had the oven going for baking day, she made lovely bread and cakes, tarts and scones and ginger biscuits. She always had a big tin of ginger biscuits (Mabel herself continued this tradition).

Before Central heating

There was a strip of coco matting on the tiled floor and a pegged rug at the fireside. We had most of our meals in the kitchen and all the work of washing, washing up and cooking was done there. What a change there is in that kitchen today; gone is the low hearth, stone sink and Dutch oven and old fashioned copper and in their place a modern sink unit, electric cooked, washer, fridge, mixer, kettles, all electric; gone is the coco matting and rag rug, all over that farmhouse there is change. What a difference there is in spring cleaning today! I remember what a major operation it was to have the chimney swept, especially in that low hearth. Will Watts was our local chimney sweep, we had to book him weeks ahead; he covered a wide area and, as he did the chimney sweeping only in the evenings, doing a full day's job during the day, he got well booked up, especially in the spring time; he had a donkey and cart for his brushes, etc. I think he knew every chimney in the village, some twisted and crooked, taking some understanding. He was a great talker and we learned not to keep in the room with him during operations because he would get the brushes half-way up and then begin a story about other chimneys, other jobs and other people, and on and on he would go with the job half done and so we found it best to leave him on his own, going outside to watch the brush come out the chimney top. Watty, as we called him, was supposed to be a good sweep, but oh! the soot we had to clear up after he left. He has been dead for many years, but I wonder what he would think of the electric sweepers and the sweep wearing a white coat of today. I am sure he would say the job was only half done under such conditions.



"Bed but no breakfast" one of many photos taken by W. Martin Lane of the 1947 Fen Flood. See Gaulty's account of the floods in the Fens.



"Barrel-type" caravan which was an exhibit at the museum for many years: the Ashton Family travelled all over Britain in horse-drawn vans.



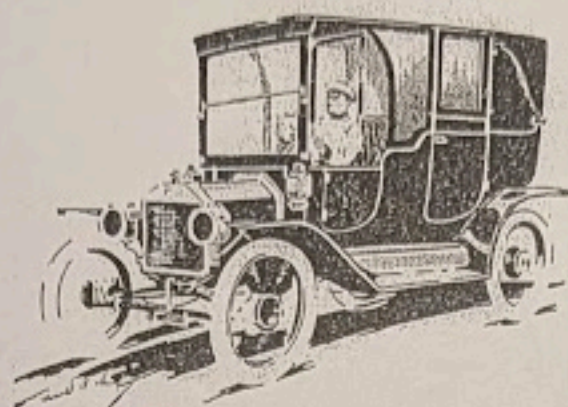
Friends of the Museum in fancy dress for the annual Blossoms and Bygones Day which raises funds for the village centre. Jean Richards is centre back and Mike Delaney is on right hand side.



This sail reaper is the largest horse-drawn implement in the Farmland Collection: owned by Jack Kerridge (who was a regular helper on Open Days) and last used in 1947 at Hale Fen, Littleport.



A little girl turning the handle of a butter churn just like the one used by Mrs. Howe in her farm kitchen at Prickwillow: hand power and horse power were all-important before mechanization.



H. L. DRAKE



Open & Closed
MOTOR CARS

for hire.

Railway Terrace,
ELY.

Telegraphic Address: "Drake, Engineer, Ely."

Telephone: No. 54, Ely.

H.L. Drake business card bought in a Norwich Antique shop, 2002. His daughter Ethel was the first woman taxi driver in the Ely area: note types of car and telephone number.



Floods at Sutton Gault in 1912 with a Savage engine pulling loads of farm produce: Richard Drake owned several similar traction engines – now seen at rallies throughout the country.

Feather Beds for Farmers

Spring cleaning the beds was another big job, the covers from the feather bed and mattress had to be washed and the mattress well brushed, especially around the buttons with a small stiff brush, then there was the "valance" round the bed. All the beds had a valance; it was like a frilled curtain round the bed. I remember ours were white print with pink flowers on and one with a lace insertion, these had to be washed and starched and ironed, what a business it was! A large white honeycomb bedspread was on the bed, white cloths on the dressing table and chest of drawers and lace curtains at the windows; all to be washed, starched and ironed with no electric washer or irons to help.

Ewart Drake was the grandson of the Sutton factory owner and director of the haulage contractors, H. L. Drake and Son of Ely.

Family Firm

My grandfather built two factories at Sutton, one in the Brook and the other adjacent to the railway line at the station, where there was a siding on the Ely/Sutton line (see Paye's book "The Ely and St. Ives Railway"). It was a great big place and they had conveyors and elevators there to take the chaff (chopped up straw) up to the top where it was mixed with hay which had been cut and then steam was forced through the mixture to cook it. It used to have a special smell about it and was called "nosey". People could smell this ever so far off and could predict the weather just as you can with the beet factory smell (Ely beet factory closed in the late 1970's).

Wholesome Food for Horses

There were boilers and a great big cylinder and they used to force steam into the cylinder to cook the nosey; this would then be put into bags weighing about forty pounds each; various mixtures were made according to the proportions of straw and hay and so different varieties were made just like cereals are today. These sacks were then loaded onto the trucks in the railway siding and taken to London (for feeding the horses pre-car days). Drake's had a depot at Bow under the railway arches, numbers 514 to 523 and had a registered office there too.

Barter is not New

My grandfather was a tinker originally and started the firm, Richard Drake and Sons, in 1856. This was the chaff factory. It started with threshing for farmers (separating the grain from the stalks) and often the farmers did not want the straw and farmers did not want to pay to have the threshing done, so my grandfather would take the straw, hence the farmers did not have to part with any money.... all he had to get then was the hay (dried grass) to mix with it. When he was on holiday

in Norfolk he saw around Hickling Broad some rush-like grass growing; he thought this would make good fodder to mix with the chaff so he bought some, loaded onto the rail at Stalham Station (now closed) and railed it back to Sutton-in-the-Isle. This is why my grandfather called his 'new' house in Sutton High Street Hickling House (now a super market). The row of cottages near the station was built for Drake's workmen and were called Bow Cottages (still standing and privately owned) after the depot in London.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Goulty of Littleport: Memories of the 1947 floods

Charles was one of the first people to be alerted when the water level in the Fen Rivers started to rise; he recalled the events of the first Sunday in March, 1947. "The wind was howling and I left my wife and little daughter to go to Ely to the Roswell pits to organise the filling of barges with gault. I stayed there on the houseboat-dredger and came home only at the week-end to get clean clothes and extra food. The riverbanks were patrolled by farmers, their employees and also soldiers. The water was rising quickly and I told my wife that she should open the front door and let it run through and out at the back, where the ground is lower." His wife added, "I took everything I could carry upstairs, including the jars of jam and bottled fruit I had made the previous summer. I sat in a fireman's coat and daren't go to bed - it was worse than the bombing." (Of Second World War some five years previously).

Twentypence

Mrs. Goulty had had experience of the characteristics of the Fen Rivers (which flow at a higher level than the fields which they drain) having spent her childhood beside the Old West River at Twentypence, Wilburton. "There was only a fen drove leading up to the village and it took me a long time to walk up to the school: my granddad kept the Public house (demolished in 2002 to make way for houses by the Marina) and we lived in the white cottage (later owned by Eleanor Somerfield and Leonard Sachs of Music Hall fame). Beer for the pub was fetched by horse and cart from Wilburton Station and if I could get a lift home from school by horse or donkey cart I thought I was very lucky. I lived there until I went into service at Cambridge" (employment for girls at this time in the early years of the twentieth century was very limited).

A lot has been surmised about the name "Twentypence". It cost a penny per person to cross to Cottenham and two pence to include a bike. One suggestion was that from Wilburton Church to Cottenham Church the return journey would cost twenty pence for two carts, their horses and wagoners but this is only an idea...

From Cam to Wissey

Charles talked of his work with the dredger taking gault (clay) from the Roswell Pits to build up the banks of the River Wissey, making a ten foot channel in the middle and sloping the sides; barges could carry fifty tons each and pulled by a diesel tug (in earlier days horses were used for their pulling power ... hence tow paths along a lot of river banks.) "We lived all the week on the dredger and some evenings we would shoot a rabbit, skin and cook it for the meal in the evening. Sometimes we dredged out bits of pots and things which Major Fowler would give us money for: we got a whole quid (£1) when we found a skeleton which is now in the museum at Cambridge" (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Downing Street).

It was a hard life for the bankers on the Fen Rivers; because of the shrinkage of the peat since drainage in the 17th century it is essential that the "banks" are maintained and the damage from moles etc. is repaired (see Thulborn, mole catchers).

Mrs. Esther Howe, wife of a small farmer in the village of Prickwillow, known to her friends as Essie

"I used to get up about half past six. My husband would get up just a bit before cos I used to like my cup of tea in bed, you see. But soon as I had that I had to get moving. So I used to get up at half past six. My husband and the milkman used to go out and milk and I'd be ready to separate (take cream off by passing milk through hand operated machine) at ten minutes to seven when they came in with the milk. We used to take the cream off. People used to come years ago and fetch a ha'peth of milk. A ha'peth of skimmed milk. Quite a can full cos you wouldn't do anything cept give it to the pigs. Whatever container they brought, you just filled. I had all the housework to do and course there was butter to make once a week. And chickens, I had about 400 chickens. They were free range. Every afternoon, wet or fine, eggs were collected and the egg man used to come round and collect them in a big lorry - a huge container lorry. The boxes they used to bring would hold thirty-six dozen. I'll tell you an ordinary day's work. We had what we called dockey at quarter past ten. And then the men stopped for oneses just for a cup of tea and a bite of cake or something. And then come in at four o'clock for a cooked meal. That was in an ordinary day's work when it wasn't harvest. But harvest there were these four meals to get.

We went to bed earlier than what we do now. Yes, half past nine. If we thought it was ten o'clock, my dear, we was late!

The Importance of the Women's Institute

I belonged to the WI and I've always belonged to the chapel. Years ago there were real old members, you see. They worked hard to get things

going in the village. For instance, they got the water brought down here. Yes. That was through the WI that water was brought to Prickwillow. Now this was in the 1920's I'm talking about. What the WI said then bore quite a bit of weight.

In the War Time

All this canning fruit went on, you know; the WI had its own canner. And then we used to go up to the Hall in turn so many afternoons during the week you see. And when the peaches were in season we used to go Ely market and buy a big tray of peaches and take them up to the WI hall to do. Cos we had our own hall then.

War Effort

We used to knit for the war effort, you know, mittens and balaclavas and scarves and socks and that sort of thing. This fruit business was for ourselves; when we was canning all this fruit we got up to 106 members! So you know they came for what they could get out of it. You see everybody was so pleased to get this fruit done. And I forget if we was allowed any sugar or not but you know during the war for the harvest months and the sugar beet season the farmers did get extra margarine, tea, sugar, cheese...

Rationing was not a Problem

Course it happened that I got one thing somebody else got another. Cos I could never make my tea ration last out, you see. But I could easily get a quarter of tea for a bit of butter cos we made our own butter. All this went on, you see. And of course we had our own eggs. We weren't short of milk or chickens. But there were things that we were limited with, but in the whole we did well.

Blanche Looker, who retired back to her childhood town of Soham, was a great observer of life in the country

"Everybody loved Herbert, my little brother. And we weren't jealous of him we girls, we all loved him. And we didn't have shoes, nobody had shoes until they were two and we didn't wear shoes during school holidays. But Herbert being a boy he'd got to have some shoes and we weren't jealous ... so mother went up the Coop which then was where Peers the chemist is, and she chose these shoes. They were brown kid. And they had some little butterflies on. And of course it was only tinsel but as far as we gals were concerned it was gold. And they were gold and they were two and six pence (12 ½ p.). And she paid the deposit of six pence and then she paid six pence a week until she'd paid for them. And she went two miles further round to come round to the town every week to pay that six pence.

When I think of it ... she used to take a short cut the other days. Even so she walked seven miles each day to her job at Stuntney picking onions, but she used to come around and pay that six pence. And the great day came she'd finished paying the two and six pence for these brown shoes. And we all gathered together, tho' father was at work, and Herbert was going to have his shoes. And all Soham knew; I told everybody at school my brother was having some brown kid shoes but they got golden butterflies, so that was news all through the school. "Blanche Looker's brother's got shoes with golden butterflies and he's never had a pair of shoes on his feet before."

And we propped him up in the corner and we gathered all round, all the whole lot of us, my stepsister was at home then, and he was laughing, he was always laughing, he was fat. And he took his first step. Well, the picture of my mother and all those miles she'd walked to buy that pair of shoes and the joy that we'd had got out of it. We didn't mind him having shoes with golden butterflies, we didn't care a bit, we loved it. And our happiness, as we were all round seeing him with his shoes on, it was lovely.

Harold Sennitt of Wicken, grass track cycle racer and the last of the peat diggers, enjoyed being interviewed by the media.

In his interview Harold recalled how, before the First World War, his younger brother had to be taken to London for treatment on a "club" foot and how he recovered sufficiently well to take up the sport of grass track racing. Visits to far away places, Chatteris and March, were well known local venues and prize money up in Yorkshire could be as much as £30 ... much more than in the Fen Country!

Bookies were involved and there was much "betting", sometimes with "fiddles" going on, proving that all was NOT as honest in the "good ole days" as we are sometimes led to believe!

Food from the Fens

Living all his life at Wicken, Harold was well known as a gatherer of food from the Fen and he passed on the following advice: when decoying duck, set fire to a block of peat (harvested from the Fen) before setting out the decoys, and smoke will take away the scent of humans so that the real duck will, out of curiosity, fly in and settle with the decoys and can then be easily shot for the table or the London Market. Thousands of duck were shot in the fens and sent to London by train before the outbreak of World War 2, a useful cash crop for the Fenman, such as Harold Sennitt.

The story of Turf Digging at Wicken Fen is recorded in Lohoar & Ballard's book.

Percy Tharby was a choirboy in the Cathedral. Life then was very different from that of the choirboys of today.

New Boy

Well, I had just celebrated my eighth birthday when I went. And, you know, it's all very awesome. You go upstairs at half past eight in the morning when school started, so you got there by five and twenty past eight, and then within a few moments upstairs came a tall serious looking young man I remember him well and everybody stood round in a circle at their music stands and rehearsal started in the morning. He would certainly note. "Oh, you've arrived, have you? Good. Hope you get on all right." That's what he would say. But may I add here that whilst we were perfectly behaved in the cathedral, like all small boys we had our moments when we were away from it.

Caning

However, on this occasion I'm afraid I forgot myself and someone very quietly pinched a sheet of music from my stand and I shouted, "Hey! What are you doing there?" And music stopped, everything stopped. And Poncenby said, "Who was that?" I said, "It was I sir." "Right! I cannot deal with interruptions in the course of the music lesson. You will go and report to my housekeeper and she will give you the cane". I thought he meant that she would hand it to me when I got there. Not to give it to me. But she was a fine ole Irish lady known affectionately by all of us as Sarah. She said, "Surely he's not going to beat a little fella like you!" Because I was terribly short for my age. However I came back to the school, this was the third day of being a cathedral chorister and he gave me six of the best. I can assure you that was the end of that sort of episode.

Jews' Harps

During my period Jews' Harps came into strong fashion. On one Friday evening practice which was at seven thirty, we assembled in the nave of the Cathedral and then promptly proceeded to play our Jews' harps. Unfortunately we were playing a little longer than anticipated and the organist came into get ready for the rehearsal, and of course there was eight of us banging away at these Jews' Harps and he was not terribly pleased. The following morning the precentor came up into school and he said, "Right, outside!" And we all had to line up and we got a terrific leathering! Every boy, well, not every boy in the choir because it was early on in the season, eight of us out of the sixteen got a good hard six. In fact, the precentor had brought along two new canes to make sure that we got the best of it!

Canes Cost a Tanner

Tommy Coats, who was a famous tenor in our choir, used to keep a lovely tobacconist shop in St. Mary's Street. And I'm sorry to say, was the supplier of the canes. And in those days they cost six pence each.

A good thing about the school was it was standard clothing from Monday morning till Sunday night. And weekdays you wore a nice little suit and particularly short trousers for the boys and on Sundays you wore long trousers – you had the Eton suit with the striped trousers and ... there's a little thing ... we had Mr Elfins arrive and he previously had been a Royal Naval Chaplain and so he was from the discipline. And instead of us tracking over to the cathedral as we used to do, he had us all formed up in twos and we all marched over. Further more – and this was the horror of it until we got used to it – on a Sunday we used to meet at twenty to eleven and what was this for, pray, at eleven? It was for the precentor to carry out an inspection of his choristers.

What did the inspection entail?

First of all on the order given, you stuck out your hands and he came along the line and inspected your nails and your hands and particularly your wrists. From there he looked you up and down to make sure your suit was in order. And then he walked down behind you, looked at fellas' necks, hair and every now and again you'd get a clip of the ear and he'd say, "*Haircut!*" And if you were not too clean he'd tell you about it. And there's a point too about haircuts... in those days you'd get a jolly good haircut for six pence but that wasn't good enough for him. We had to go to a firm in the High Street who were known as Doppler's; he was of French origin. And he used to charge eight pence. However, he'd called in and seen the proprietor and given instruction about this. We were all to have extra short haircuts. I do remember on one occasion that I'd had a haircut and the precentor looked at me the next morning he said, "*How much that cost you boy?*" and I said, "*Eight pence, sir.*" he said, "*Right, go back and have the other four penneth.*"

Albert Thulborn, member of a well known local family, had a wealth of rural stories to tell.

Mr. Thulborn started his mole catching career for the Cottenham, Rampton and Willingham Board and he only changed to the Haddenham Board when his mother died. He had left school at about twelve years of age after taking his leavers examination as Stretham. He passed it, and Miss Langford was glad to see him leave! He drove steam engines from Cottenham before becoming a mole-catcher at about twenty four.

Sale of Skins

He was paid weekly and was allowed to sell the skins, which earned him about ten pence or a shilling for each one before the war. He sold them to a firm at Wisbech called Friends. Since he caught about forty-five per week, he reckoned it was a good bonus. He didn't hang his skins on barbed wire, as some catchers did, but dried them by staking them on boards. He set his traps out in different fields on Mondays, section by section, knowing where the moles were by the mounds, and moving further forward each day.

Farming Moles

He didn't trap where there were breeding grounds, because it wouldn't be sensible, he admitted, to hinder his trade. In a way, because he looked after the moles, he considered himself to be a mole-farmer!

Need for Control

There haven't been so many moles since the floods of 1947 because many drowned and others took to the banks. The catchers had to try to catch them there, but the moles could weaken the banks and tunnel through. He was issued with clamp traps which sometimes got stolen by someone trapping a mole in their own garden (see Guy Smith "Moles and their control").

Jean Richards, editor of "Village Voice" and lay reader in the Church of England, received the M.B.E. for her work with Ugandan Refugees.

I had a very nice job in the Land Army, because I worked for a very – by the standards of the time – a very large farmer. He rented round about a thousand acres. And I had a job with him, which was partly being the farm secretary; I did all the paper work. And I used to rear about 120 calves a year. A cousin of mine was in the Timber Corps, that part of the Land Army which was concerned with forestry and timber. And they worked as gangs. In the horticultural areas they worked as gangs. But in an awful lot of the other areas there would perhaps be a single girl just living in the household. Some areas they had hostels and a group of girls would live together and go out to the farm. I lived in the household with the farmer and his wife and the children, and that was perfectly common then. The hours were very, very long but I mean, people don't know they're born nowadays.

Jack Reeve, a farm worker who spent all his life in the village of Stretham, was a mine of local history.

Jack was the only son in the Reeve household; his father had died when he was just a child leaving his mother with the responsibility of bringing up that family of three girls and a boy.

Public Houses

They lived in a pub, the Crown, and as Jack recalled, "*Beer at two pence a pint was a lot of money in them days*". There were nine other public houses in the parish all trying to get trade ... The Sun, The White Lion, The Malt and Hops, The White Horse, The New Red Lion, and The Bell and Bridge House. The two remaining ones at the time of the interview – 1977 – were the Chequers and the Red Lion (The latter now in 2002 functions as a good restaurant).

A Shilling a Day

Jack knew everyone in the village in his boyhood: a government "pass" issued in farming areas during World War I enabled him to "*start work on the land at the age of eleven for a shilling a day which began at seven and finished at five*". Harvesting was very hard work: Fields were mowed with a hand scythe. "*My first job was to make bands of corn to tie up the sheaves with*" (No self-binders in that farm then!). You had to be tough to do the hard work and long hours: "*I was at work by five to feed the horses and had to rack them up after a full days work before I could go home... all for thirty bob for a six-day week, no half day on Saturday.*" In those day's the workers were under the thumbs of their employers and Jack endured "*sharp winters with no protection from the weather but no work meant no pay, so we just carried on.*"

Smaller Farms Make Bigger Units

The farm was eventually owned by Stan Hopkin of Ely who planted many of the trees which can be seen today around the Old West River, (Currently the land is farmed as part of the Shropshire estate) but on the whole farmers "*don't want hedges around the fields as they were when I was a boy; they want bigger and bigger fields so that the machines can keep going on and on.*" In his interview Jack referred to a neighbour's donkey then kept solely as a child's pet; in his young days donkeys provided transport for carrying, enabling farmers and small holders to go to Ely Market on Thursdays and other place.

No Leisure Centres Then!

"I had some good times and some ruff uns ... I was so tired when I got hum a' nights that I'd just fall asleep. No leisure time like folks have today: the only place to meet people was at church or chapel on Sundays. Like so many of his contemporaries, Jack married his school-girl sweet-heart, Emily, and he lived to be over eighty, maintaining that if he had to live his life over again, he "*would not change a single thing*".

What contentment with his lot!

Mabel Demaine's memories of 80 years ago: How do they compare with ours of the twenty first century?

Christmas Memories

Peeping through the curtains to see the village Bandsmen clustered around a lighted lamp tied to a pole and hearing, 'Hark the herald' and 'Oh come all ye faithful' played with great gusto – and joining with other young people as soon as darkness fell to tour the village to sing these same well-loved Christmas hymns are two of my earliest recollections, deep snow and sparkling frost added to these pleasures. Why did we never feel the cold in those days?

Homemade Decorations

There were no luxuries in those bygone days, homemade paper chains and holly decorated our rooms and a pile of logs filled our hearth; homemade cakes and puddings and mincemeat filled the pantry shelves. A box of dates, a dish of nuts, oranges and apples and a bottle of ginger wine were included in our Christmas fare. Christmas Eve was always a busy time for my mother, stuffing the goose, preparing the vegetables, getting the children off to bed early. This was no trouble on Christmas Eve, the night when Father Christmas came. I can remember trying to keep awake, waiting to see him arrive, at the same time being somewhat fearful of some stranger filling that long stocking of my father's which hung at the foot of my bed. I can still recall the rustling sound that stocking made when I awoke next morning and pushed my feet down the bed towards its bulging sides – an orange in the toe, a few nuts and sweets, a handkerchief – just a few simple things were all it contained and yet what a joy and thrill they gave me. For several years my younger brother and I had our Christmas day tea with some elderly relatives who lived two miles away.

I wish I could make a ground rice cake like the one we always had for tea; no rich iced Christmas cake could compare with that rice cake, with its sugary, buttery, mouth-watering taste and how I would have liked a second slice! (Children were expected not to be greedy)

No Computer Games or Television

After tea we played dominoes and draughts and "I spy" and then hot mince pies and a cup of cocoa and muffled up with scarves and coats we walked home.

I can remember those walks over fifty years ago. It was always moonlit and frosty, and how the frost did sparkle – and the stars – I watched the stars, they were so bright and a shooting star gave me a shiver down my spine, it seemed such a fearful and frightening thing. I never see a shooting star now without being reminded of those walks home on Christmas nights.

The True Christmas Message

Looking back on those bygone Christmases, why did I enjoy a walk in the frost and snow then and now I hate to even step out of the door or leave the fireside for a short while? Does the cold get colder as we get older or do our likes and dislikes change? We roasted chestnuts and almost roasted ourselves by our open fires and then hugging a hot brick wrapped in flannel we went to bed contented with simple pleasures, finding time to think of a real message for Christmas, of peace on Earth, goodwill to all men

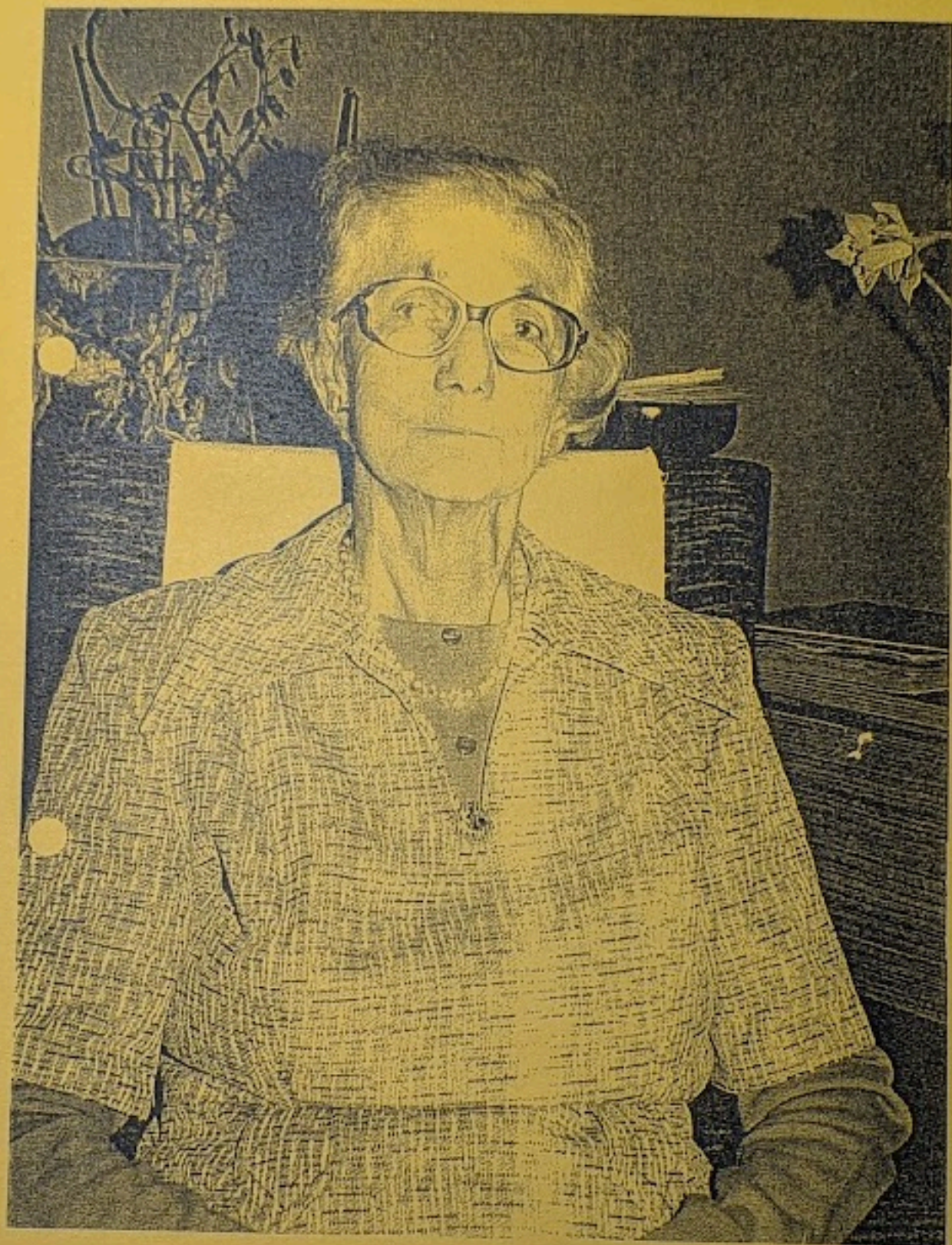
ARCHIVES



Their lives, now gone, we all can share-
The future, for the Past, should care.
Hard they toiled, little did they earn
But from their memories, we can learn.

They knew both times of peace and strife:
And lived a very simple life.
But they made the world that now we see,
Their memories left to you and me.





Blanche Looker, born 1899 and died 1983 who contributed many hours of taped interviews to the Museum Sound Archive: what changes she witnessed in her lifetime both in the home and on the farm!