

# **WORDS, WORDS & MORE WORDS**



*Compiled by  
Maureen Scott and  
Lorna Delanoy*

## Sayings/Words collected from the Forties in the Cambridgeshire Fens

- As bald as a coot. As batty as a fruit cake  
As black as Newgates knocker\*  
An apple a day keeps the doctor away  
A bun in the oven (pregnant)  
A stitch in time save nine  
Bottomless pit. Bright as a button. Bold as brass  
Bad luck to put shoes on table\*  
Bad penny (not worth much as a person)  
Bellows like a bull in a china shop (shouts)  
Considered lucky if a bird drops his business on  
your head\*  
Cold as a brass monkey\*  
Can you spare a penny for the Maylady? (May 1<sup>st</sup>  
custom)  
Causey = causeway across the lower land.  
Do not cross knives and forks  
Do not pass cutlery to another person (bad luck)\*  
Don't count your chickens before they are hatched  
Deaf as a post . Dry as a fish\* Daft as a brush  
DUFFUS –dovehouse; place for keeping pigeons  
for table\*  
DOCKEY, a real FEN WORD, consisting of a hunk  
of bread, raw onion and cheese/fat pork, eaten out  
in the fields with only a "shut knife" for cutting;  
wrapped up in greaseproof paper and a cloth (no  
poly. bags in 1940!)  
Fat as a pig. Flat as a pancake

Fen Slodgers (Fen folk in Lincs were known as Yellowbellies)  
Got a hide as thick as a rhinoceros (thick skinned)  
Gault = clay for making up river banks  
Hawkeye (inquisitive person). \*  
Has a mouth like a barn door  
He's had more affairs than I've had hot dinners  
How long is a ball of string  
His/her bark is worse than their bite  
Happy as a sand boy Hang on to your holly hocks\*  
If the rooks build high, it will be a good summer  
Lost his marbles\* Middlin; keeping fairly well\*  
Make a silk purse out of a sow's ear  
Make do and mend, a wartime slogan.  
Mad as a hatter . Measure twice, cut once  
Never cast a clout till May is out (month /blossom?)  
Never put up an umbrella in the house (bad luck)  
Not so green as cabbage-looking  
Over Will's mother's (in the distance)\*  
One slice/crust short of a loaf  
Phoebe (sun) is out/here comes Phoebe.  
Penny short of a shilling. Run like a March hare  
She looks like death warmed up (very poorly)  
Shank's pony (walking). Sick as a dog  
Slow as a snail . Sound as a bell.\* Sweet as honey  
SLUB - a Fen word for very thick mud  
There's money in muck/where there's muck, there's money.  
Thick as two short planks. Too big for his/her shoes  
There is enough to make a pair of trousers (blue sky, no clouds)

To have a kip (sleep/nap). That'll do another turn  
(will last another year)\*

TAWDRY –cheap; ref. items for sale at St.  
Audrey's fair\*

In answer to the question: Where has he gone? Oh,  
to Toodleum Flower Show\*

Up with the lark (early riser)

Used every part of the pig, except the squeak.

Very bad to see a robin in the same place three days  
running\*

Why don't you jump off a short pier?

Wouldn't know the truth if it jumped up and bit  
him\*

Why spend sixpence when a penny will do?

You could hear a pin drop

You need to eat a peck of dirt before you die

### **Rhyming couplets are as follows:**

Red sky at night, Shepherds' delight

Red sky in morning, Shepherds' warning.

If you have half an hour to spare,  
Don't come and spend it with those who haven't.\*

Sticks and stones will break my bones  
But names will never hurt me.

Pinch, punch, first of the month.

April's going and May is coming  
You're the fool for being so cunning.

Let wind go free where'er you be  
For nipping and squeezing will soon kill me.\*

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John  
Bless the bed that I lie on.

Onion skin very thin  
Mild winter coming in.

February fill dyke, black or white!  
Captain Flood will win in the end (Fens will  
return to wet-lands)\*

The wise old owl sat in an oak.  
The more he heard, the less he spoke.  
The less he spoke, the more he heard...  
Why don't we imitate that wise old bird?  
If you want to find a fool in the Fens,  
Bring him with you!\*

Early to bed, early to rise  
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

A woman, a dog and a walnut tree  
The more you beat them, the better they be.

Good morning, Valentine,\*  
Curl your locks as I do mine  
Good morning, Valentine

Roses are red, violets are blue  
Sugar is sweet and so are you

Something old, something new,  
Something borrowed and something blue

\*not common to both villages

This list was compiled in 2013 by Maureen Scott  
(Littleport) and Lorna Delanoy (Mepal)  
if you have any "special" sayings from the Fen  
Country, they would like to hear from you

## RECOLLECTIONS OF A CAMBRIDGESHIRE CHILDHOOD OF THE NINETEEN FORTIES

IT was a tea-time conversation with the grandchildren that made me aware of how vocabulary has changed during my “three score years and ten”.....yea, even the word SCORE is a rarity (it is in fact, twenty) Who remembers twelve pence in a shilling or what is half a crown? Today children struggle with the decimal system yet we ENJOYED chanting “twelve inches one foot, three feet one yard, twenty two yards one chain” etc....and I still “think” in terms of yards and inches!

From my “memories” box, I have selected a few dozen memories of childhood days (were the summer days always warm and dry?) and perhaps they will spark off others from readers so that a whole “ GROSS “ may be listed (144 for those people who were born after 1950!)

Electric lights in only three rooms (paraffin lamps and candles for other lighting: food cooked over an open hearth in big black saucepans (no electric cookers in those days); home-churned butter made from “saving” the tops from the milk to shake in a Kilner jar for what seemed like hours; having to “clear up” what was put on one’s plate.....war-time rations were meagre and remembering a favourite quote of my Dad’s “If it’s good enough for me, my gal, it’s good enough for you.

Gardening was not just “pretty flowers” but the food basket for the family....fresh juicy carrots (wiped with just the leafy top before eating raw) were crunched with glee; Garden Centres did not exist and vegetable/flower seeds were “saved” from one year to the next for planting; hyacinth bulbs for Christmas flowering were considered a “luxury” item and often planted in home-decorated pots in the autumn to be given as Christmas presents.

Only one room in the house was heated so the modern fashion of children “going up to their room” was unheard of. Radio, or rather wireless, programmes such as ITMA (It’s that man again) or Dick Barton, Special Agent, were listened to by the whole family and discussed with enthusiasm at school next morning The sheer luxury of having a small black and white TV on which to watch the coronation in 1953 was the envy of many of my pals; our house was filled with wide-eyed viewers on the nine-inch screen.

Games in the village street were my equivalent to today’s computer games;

hop-scotch, marbles...who remembers Sevensie, sixie ball games? Winter evenings were occupied with dominos (good for mental arithmetic!), Ludo, Snakes and Ladders (useful to teach children that winning can be quickly followed by losing) and folding newspaper into "spills" for lighting the fire the following day.

Outdoor pursuits included bird nesting....what a grand collection of birds' eggs my school friend had (she had an older brother who climbed trees to get them for her!) What would HEALTH and SAFETY have to say to that today? An exciting addition to Nature Study in the Top Juniors was when some older girls brought some newts to school in a jam jar....are there many proper ponds left in villages today? They were the source of horse/cow drinking establishments in the Forties....and think of the painting by Constable of soaking the wagon wheels to ensure a tight fit of the rims in the classic of Willy Lott's cottage. Many of the village ponds were filled up in the Fifties to "tidy up the landscape"...I read recently that the survival of frogs is entirely due to the little garden ponds so loved by the Garden Centres

I well remember seeing the first banana....it seemed so small compared with illustrations in my drawing book; today youngsters talk of Kiwi fruit, pineapples etc as common-place....we had only plums, apples and pears grown in our own garden. The meat on which I was brought up (being a farmer's daughter) was fat pork from the pigs killed twice yearly and having no DEEP FREEZE all the surplus meat was salted in the earthenware pork pots....yuck! how I hated it. I made a declaration at the ripe old age of nine, that if ever I became a "Mum" I would never force MY children to eat fat meat!

Our horizons were limited; no cars to transport us to school/Brownies; we had to use our feet (an interesting comment made to me by a retired GP recently when I asked to what he attributed his reaching the age of ninety (four score years and ten!)...he said, using my legs and not driving the car everywhere in the village. However, some Saturdays my friend and I embarked on what WE thought was a GREAT ADVENTURE....we got on the bus at 1.15pm., paid the conductress (a dead breed today) our two pence fare and rode to the next village where we both had grandparents living (families tended to settle in the same locality as most of them were employed on local farms, living in "tied" cottages), spent an hour or two with our respective relatives and then walked back across the fields before it

was dark...dare one leave children to "walk home alone" these days?

We must have been much tougher sixty years ago; I had piano lessons and had to practise each day in an unheated room; our bedroom windows used to have ice on the inside in the winter months and chilblains were very common....who remembers Wintergreen, the cure-all for such ailments? For many the only toilet was "down the garden path"...not a very pleasant place to go on icy winter nights...and toilet paper was an unheard-of luxury.....cutting rectangles from newspaper gave the children something to do before the days of TV watching.

It is said that children today have a lot of sugary drinks; very bad for the teeth; in our day water was the common drink and for many this came from the wells, being pumped up from the depths; even after our house had a mains water supply, my Dad still preferred water to drink from the well (the fact that many wells in farm yards were very near the "muck heaps".....not to worry, they survived!

Like our horizons, our knowledge of the big wide world was limited too; the older generation looked forward to the weekly newspaper each Friday and to read the columns of bmd...births, marriages and deaths; a death in the village meant that curtains were drawn if the cortege was to pass by and certain folk always went to funeral services at church/chapel so that they could see their names printed in the paper the following Friday. For many homes the "weekly rag" was the only newspaper bought...and another use of it was to wrap up the fish and chips at the local chippies where a portion of chips sold at an old penny.

Feast Days and Church Garden Fetes gave people a chance to put on their Sunday-best clothes and meet up with friends and relations; band concerts on the village green were occasions to look forward to....and many a romance was begun at such events! The opportunity to meet folk from outside ones' parish was not possible till transport was more readily available; today youngsters cannot IMAGINE how we survived without a car....and to think that we had "dip pens" to write with and no phones either...even now Junior children have their own mobiles. How DID we survive?

"Food for Free" is nothing new....I used to pick mushrooms (before the local gypsy-woman gathered them), in one of our grass fields, pack them in a chip (a container made of wafer-thin wood) and then they were collected

by the local carrier to be taken to the railway station, and sent off to Midland Markets....a half-crown returns meant that I was "rich." Black-berrying in the Autumn meant that we had jam and bottled fruit to eat in the winter time.....the idea of BUYING such commodities was unthought-of.

Excitement one day at school was caused when some "big " girls brought along some newts which they had caught in a pond...how strange they seemed to us younger ones....are there any ponds supporting such animal-life in the village today? Many of the village ponds were "filled in " in the fifties to "tidy up the landscape.....and the survival of frogs is entirely due to the little garden ponds so loved by the Garden Centre.

Who remembers the SMELL of home perms? The advert too brings back memories....Which twin has the Toni? ...in earlier days parents "cut" their children's hair to save money....and one Dad I remember took up the task of trimming his friends hair for "bacca money" Think how much is spent on hair care today! The shelves of chemists and supermarkets are filled with hair care treatments. My Aunt always washed her hair in water from the trunk (ie that which had drained off the roof) as she assured me it was softer and would give her hair a sheen.

Horizons were very limited in pre-war days and so the arrival of the weekly paper with its b m d info was eagerly awaited and for many homes this was the only newspaper bought; another use for newspaper was that of wrapping up the fish and chips bought at the local chippie. How did we survive such primitive food treatment?

Cars were few and far between; petrol was rationed and women drivers in the Forties were a "rare breed"; the garage owner's wife, the doctor's wife and the local JP together with the district nurse were the only women drivers when I was a child. Two-car households did not exist....and the word GARAGE was not part of our vocabulary.

Two old ladies, some may think of them as "Wise Women" were on call in cases of deaths and births; they would prepare bodies for burial (Chapels of Rest were not available and so the dead person remained in the family home until burial) and also act as house-keeper while the Mum had her ten days resting after giving birth. What contrast today, the body is removed and taken to the chapel and Mums are out walking the day after giving birth.

For many it would seem "proper" to attend the funeral service for any villager even if one knew them only slightly....after all, one's name would be reported in the local paper! What a claim to fame! But there was always the show of "respect" for the departed and support for the next of kin; a very different attitude to that of the Twentyfirst Century. Masses of flowers surrounded the grave....today donations to charities in lieu of flowers seems to be the accepted pattern

One Ag Lab wife I well remember used to get on the school bus each Thursday morning with a wood box; in it were young rabbits which were sold at the Comins Auction Yard at the old cattle market in Ely; their sales brought in enough money over the year to buy her son his school uniform...another used to have a stall outside her gate with home-grown vegetables which again helped the home-economy.

Do you know what the word PRIVY is? Today children expect every home to have a flush toilet, or two or three; time was when the little building up the garden path served the same purpose....and squares of newspaper acted as toilet paper; how things have changed in half a century!

Another economy was swapping garden cuttings of herbaceous plants/shrubs....bedding plants were not at all common (after all, they lasted only one summer) and the Garden Centres non-existent.; someone suggested that by boiling sugar-beet (a farming crop since WW1) a syrupy solution could be obtained, hence helping with the sugar rationing; and mashed-up parsnips were a substitute for bananas. Try them and see what you think!

Technology in my Grandparents cottage was basic; the most complicated mechanism was the alarm clock which was religiously "set" every evening for the following morning....no electricity nor even an inside tap. After washing her hair, grandma would dry it by putting her head down and winding her locks through the mangle....not pleasant if wound too far.

Women had rag bags and clothes were repaired...even socks were darned and we were taught at Primary School how to do a neat darn by picking up alternate strands of wool/cotton with our needles. The "throw away age" had not begun....paper bags were folded and kept; pieces of string were saved "for another time" and polythene bags and Sellotape were not even heard of; children today marvel how we survived without them.

One of my earliest tasks was stone picking; yes, Dad had a paddock on which an old greenhouse had fallen into disrepair; the War Ag ( a Committee appointed by the wartime Government to reclaim land back for agriculture) had ploughed up the grassland (Dig for Victory) and we children, with older relatives, had the job after school of picking up the bits of glass and stones, making the soil more productive. My first-ever paid job was picking black currants for Chivers the jam firm....I earned the princely sum of half a crown (twelve and a half pence) for over three hours work.

Cats were workers and regarded as "ratter" or "mousers" and if unwanted kittens were born, then they were quickly disposed of; visits to vets with cats were unheard of...and often the farmer would treat his ill animals with his own homemade remedies thus avoiding vet bills. Brimstone and treacle together with potions from the local chemist are remedies that I can remember.

Travel was on Shank's Pony (ie walking!) or the local bus; a trip to Ely on Market Day was the excitement of the school holidays....and there was always the strong smell of beer coming from the numerous hostelryes and the ever-present policeman on duty at busy street corners as at the Lamb in Ely . The fare to Stretham to visit my Granny cost two old pence and it was collected by the conductor....a job that no longer exists today. For the princely sum of one penny I could catch the bus to the next village and walk back across the fields...sadly one would not allow a child to do that on its own today.

Feast Days were looked forward to and celebrated with enthusiasm; decorated carts and later lorries recalled all sorts of dramas and many hours were spent in their preparation; trophies were awarded for the best "floats" and the concerts given by the local brass band were always well-attended....often collections being made for worthy causes such as the local hospital.

Bicycles were often hand-me-downs and often in poor condition....one of the exciting things to do was to ride without holding the handle-bars! I have scars to prove my inability! Others rode two-on-a-bike with the first child standing on the pedals and the other sitting on the seat....with today's traffic and its speed, that would be impossible. Some children were bribed to do well in the "scholarship" exams...with a brand new bike; how I envied them.

It is said that smells are very evocative and two that take me back to my

childhood are wet box hedges and warm milk; to this day I cannot drink milk as it reminds me of the cows being milked by hand on hot summer evenings and then it was my job to take them along the road back to the fields...a five year-old driving six or seven large bovines. It was in the garden where the box hedge grew that I first remember picking rhubarb...it seemed so strange to me that it did not grow on a tree (like apples) or a bush (like gooseberries)

Have you heard of anyone having chilblains in recent years? As a child I suffered every winter with itching blotchy feet...the treatment was to rub them with WINTERGREEN, an ointment that was bought at the chemist and lasted from year to year; but of course we had no warm bedrooms and I am sure the winters were colder; in fact we had only one heated room in our house so no wonder families "stayed put" whereas today children can go up to their own rooms in the comfort of central heating.

I have rambled on long enough; what are YOUR memories of YOUR CHILDHOOD?



*Haddenham Methodist Sunday School 1947; Sunday Schools are no longer well-attended; too many other attractions*

## A Wartime Childhood in Ely

From my mother a protective hug,  
overhead the rumble of a "doodlebug";  
on her face, fear when the engine  
stopped.

I can't even recall now where it  
dropped.

From the RAF Hospital, in bandages  
swathed  
Came airmen, the results of bombing  
raids braved.

The clanking train as it went over the  
river  
Pulling truck-loads of bombs for more  
airmen to deliver

Over the fields by the stickleback  
stream

Were men behind barbed wire -  
prisoners it would seem.

"B" for banana in my alphabet book;  
I was ten when my first bite I took.

Another thing, I thought it was funny,  
That "coupons" appeared more important  
than money...

"When the war is over, Daddy will come  
home" -

...But he didn't.

## **Spooky stories I've been told: some need an explanation!**

Over the past 40 years local historian, Lorna Delanoy, has built up a collection of oral history taped interviews: here some of the stories are recalled in written form.

Among my collection of stories taped over the years, there are some anecdotes/unexplained happenings that are worth recording. My interviewees were of varying ages and from different parts of the UK; the one thing their stories have in common is that they all lack logical explanation. Read on ....and see what YOU think of them!

A very personal one happened to me way back in 1986; having just had major surgery, I kept a promise to meet up with two retired friends for a holiday on the Isle of Mull; we "booked in" at the B and B (as recommended by other friends), on entering the house my husband felt "cold water running down his back". I rested on the bed after the long car journey and felt OK. Alas, during the evening he could not concentrate on his book and to this day he declares he slept only a few minutes during the night; he felt all the time that he "was being watched". Our two elderly friends noticed nothing strange and were full of plans about what we would do during our stay there...but we all left promptly after breakfast!. Many months later, in conversation with a Scot, who knew the Isle of Mull well, we were told that that particular building had "a sinister story to tell" but we have never discovered exactly what – nor have we ever wanted to return to the beautiful Isle.

Several interviews concern happenings in connection with young children; are they more aware of "atmosphere" than adults....or is it childish imagination running riot? Up in Yorkshire a house known as Woodroyd was used for many years as a private children's home; the owner/matron there was Doris Liversidge a Quaker who some twenty years after retiring called in at her old home in Pateley Bridge and met the present-day owners who knew nothing of its original use. They told her that they often heard children laughing and chatting in the garden....had she any idea why? Was this imagination or fact?

Another concerns a little boy whose Mother used to leave a key for him to let himself into the house after school each day; in conversation with his much older sisters, he referred to "his little friend who coughed a lot" and they told their mother that they too had had a peculiar experience when a young child seemed to share their bedroom and that he was always coughing. On relaying these stories to their neighbours they were told that yes, a little boy had had TB and had died in that house some years earlier...was it his spirit that was still in evidence? Within weeks the family managed to find another house to rent, nearer the county town of Stafford and the mother changed jobs so that her son was no longer a latch-key child.

A third unexplained happening re a child was in a newly-built house in the county of Cambridge. On several occasions the toddler was found to have in his cot a blue rabbit –

but this blue rabbit was no ordinary soft toy – it always sat on top of the wardrobe in pride of place. How did it get into the child's cot? "Oh, it flew down here" was always the child's reply. "Nonsense", said the parents, "inanimate objects CAN'T fly". Father of the house was even more disturbed when, on shaving in the bath-room, objects "flew around" for no apparent reason – how CAN a hairbrush move by itself? Those mysteries continued for several months and, as the toddler grew older and a baby brother joined the family, nothing more mysterious happened: why? Or indeed, why not?

An engineer working for the Pye Group, (a well-known employer in the Cambridge Area in the Seventies), was driving home one evening and the image of blood repeatedly kept flashing through his mind; why? On reaching home he was greeted by a distraught wife who was desperately trying to calm down their two-year old toddler who had fallen over and bitten his lip which was bleeding profusely. Why did the father have this premonition on his way home that evening?

A well-known ghost story concerns a public house on the river Ouse near St. Ives in Huntingdonshire: called the Ferry Boat (after which the song of the same name was supposedly called): a local girl, Juliet, committed suicide by hanging herself on a tree because her lover had rejected her. Her remains were not allowed to be buried in "holy" ground; a stone slab on the floor of the bar marks the spot and her ghost is supposed to float through the pub building on the anniversary of her death in March each year (this account may be read on line in Explorer programme)

Smells and things unseen can have affects on both people and animals. Here are two instances that I can recall: on moving into a Fen village a couple attended an evening service at the Parish Church. "Never again" was their united comment; they both felt an uneasy "presence" in the nave and a peculiar smell which neither of them could identify; what is more, no old-timer member of the congregation made a point of welcoming them. Certainly not a good advert for the church of God!

Two animal stories concern dogs; a black Lab., Ben by name, was walking on a lead past a Methodist chapel; he stopped abruptly, the hair on his neck bristled up and he refused to budge....what had he seen or smelt? The second canine, this time a Golden Retriever, had the very same reaction at Castle Acre Priory in Norfolk; the custodian there assured its owner that certain parts of the old building have similar affects on some dogs: why? Can canines detect something that we humans can't? It is a well-known fact that the olfactory part of Labradors brains are particularly well developed....hence their use for tracking game down on organised shoots.

Horse-keepers had "magic potions" which, when used, could stop horses moving out of their stables or refusing to pass certain buildings; the great oral historian, George Ewart Evans, recalls several "weird happenings" re horses and the old generation of horse-men. (see "Ask the Fellows who cut the Hay", "Where Beards wag All" and other titles)

A retired farmer, David Hamence, enjoys telling the story that in the Seventies a group of fishermen from Chatteris used to "camp out" in the washes at Sutton Gault to fish, drink and enjoy male company over weekends. One particular Friday evening they

arrived, dragging their old caravan behind a Fordson tractor and within minutes they packed up their belongings and left in a great hurry. According to local gossip, they "saw something strange"....what was it that caused their sudden departure, never to return? David also said that in the vicinity of where they "camped", three scorch marks could be seen in the grass surface, making a perfect triangle.....was it a UFO landing pad? It has been said that the straight lines of the two Bedford Rivers can be seen from way up in space.....

Two joggers in their early twenties were running along a road, down a hill out of the village; one glanced round and saw an old lady dressed in black a few yards behind them; where had she come from? A second glance back, and she had disappeared; where had she gone to? Many years after I was told of this sighting I had a letter from a friend now living in Fakenham; in it he relates how, long before the war, cries of "Help, help" were heard by residents along that road.....that evening the body of a woman was found dead in a rain-water tank outside her back door; her neighbours suddenly had brand new furniture in their cottage and the widower soon managed to find another wife....is there a connection somewhere in these two stories....or is it just "coincidence"?

My husband was in a group of WEA members being shown around Hinchbrooke House in Huntingdon; he distinctly smelt smoke and interrupted the guide to tell him so; the guide was not pleased and added that there HAD been a catastrophic fire in that part of the building over a century previously....was my husband the only visitor who "smelled smoke"? Interestingly, several of those present edged a little way away from him during the course of the evening!

Sometimes one's imagination CAN run riot....a wildfowler out on the Ouse Washes was convinced he could see a ghost of an old monk with a misty aura surrounding him; yes, there was the shape of a cowl head, and a long cassock-like robe; on further investigation the "ghost" was, in fact, an old willow tree stump which someone had tried to burn the previous day

The writer Audrey Denton used to go to Christmas parties at Denny Abbey when the Dimmock family lived there; seventy years later she recalled vividly "seeing" monk-like figures moving round from room to room....but no one was ever frightened by them. Since the Farmland Museum has been sited there in the grounds, groups of keen psychical researchers from Cambridge have spent nights camped in the abbey – but to date nothing strange has been recorded

Some seventy years ago an Ag Lab was boasting one evening in the Red Lion PH at Stretham that he did not believe in such things as ghosts; imagine, some nights later when he was walking back to his home across the fields, he saw a BIG WHITE apparition! He heard the clanging of metal and he ran for his life! His mates had borrowed a large bed sheet, put it over their heads and bashed tin cans together. Never again did he boast about ghosts.....but this is ONE story that needs no explanation!

**BARRY HADDER** wrote these verses in the nineteen twenties about his home village of Mepal; it is situated on the bank of the New Bedford river some five miles from Chatteris. He lived when the power on the farm was the horse; cars were few and far between and much of the farm work was done by hand. Sundays were a "rest" day, with a roast joint of meat for the mid-day meal if the family could afford it. Formal education was completed at the village school when most of its pupils left at fourteen, "to work on the land".

### Visit to the Blacksmith

When I took my poor old mare  
Ali Setchfield wasn't there.  
Round to Barrs's I did pop  
There sat Ali having a tot.  
Mrs Barrs came to the door  
Said that she'd been scrubbing the floor.  
I said: Is Mr. Setchfield there?  
I want him to shoe my poor old mare.  
Ali he came trotting in,  
Licking his whiskers with a grin.  
To the bellows he did go  
And started to pull them to and fro.

### Village Life

When we were young we went to Mepal School  
There to learn the golden rule.  
We studied hard from morn till night  
To do our sums and learn to write.  
We went to church on the Sabbath Day  
Where Rev. Ramm would preach and pray.  
We sang the hymns in cheerful voice  
With Setchfield, Newton and Bob Boyce  
At times we had a lot of fun –

Bob Ladson taught us all to run.  
At cricket Cooke was not a Don –  
Not nearly as good as Uncle John  
We never had a lot to spend  
We were always broke by the week-end  
But when we had twopence to spare  
Nicky Rayner would cut our hair.  
We started work at an early age  
For a very lowly wage.  
We cut the hedge and trimmed the ditch  
And in the winter we dug the twitch.\*

At times we really got fed up  
With cleaning mangolds and spreading muck.  
Picking potatoes was a tiring job  
And at the end of the day we had earned two bob. (ten pence)

\*a very difficult weed which rapidly spreads underground



*A line of farm buildings now derelict ..... but were a centre of activity in the time of Barry Hadder*

THEN AND NOW – a monthly column for the Ely Standard

## JULY JOTTINGS

When I was a child, a phrase my Dad often used in connection with past events, was “that must be twenty years ago.” I realise it is more than twenty years ago since I was a regular Village Correspondent (no, not co-respondent, a hyphenated word often used in divorce cases!) for this weekly newspaper. Another of his expressions was “that happened before the war” ...that too has ES connections as Aunt Em was the village correspondent from the mid-Thirties to the late Forties. One of my earliest recollections is of her pedalling up the hill every Monday afternoon (yes, contrary to media belief, there ARE hills in the Fen Country ...the ridge south of Grunty Fen reaches over a hundred feet above sea-level) to catch the 5pm post collection with her bulging envelope of news that would reach Market Street, Ely first thing on Tuesday morning

What contrast today: no hand-written script delivered snail-mail but with the click of a button this column will be in the office in seconds ...and no problem for the editor/news compiler to decipher hastily-written pages.

Village columns in years gone by were very detailed; the locals really looked forward to THE paper delivery each Friday; many enjoyed seeing their names in print as attenders at funerals or donors of wedding presents and long descriptions of wedding dresses were very popular. Announcements of births (then, as now, for a fee) were eagerly awaited; was the new baby to be given a family name or one from the latest radio programme? The bmd info is still popular today but reporting of events has changed a lot over the decades since the Sharman Family of March owned the Ely Standard newspaper.

Readers of a certain age (ie those of us who can remember “before the war”). might well be interested to read, on line, (get your grandchildren to “Google” it) a scrap book compiled by Louise Porter; it was she who collected news items of the area around Ely and stuck them in a book (Scrap Booking in the twenty-first century is very different format) A recent display of the old-fashioned scrap books made by another village correspondent created a lot of interest at a recent charity event; one “new” Dad searched diligently through the faded pages to find a photo taken of him when he was a Cub Scout so that he could show his wife what he looked like in smart uniform, twenty years earlier.

So – with the passage of time, everyone so busy doing their own thing, will there be such a thing as the local weekly paper when that small baby is a parent? Or will we all come to rely on “news on the web”?

## STRANGE WORDS

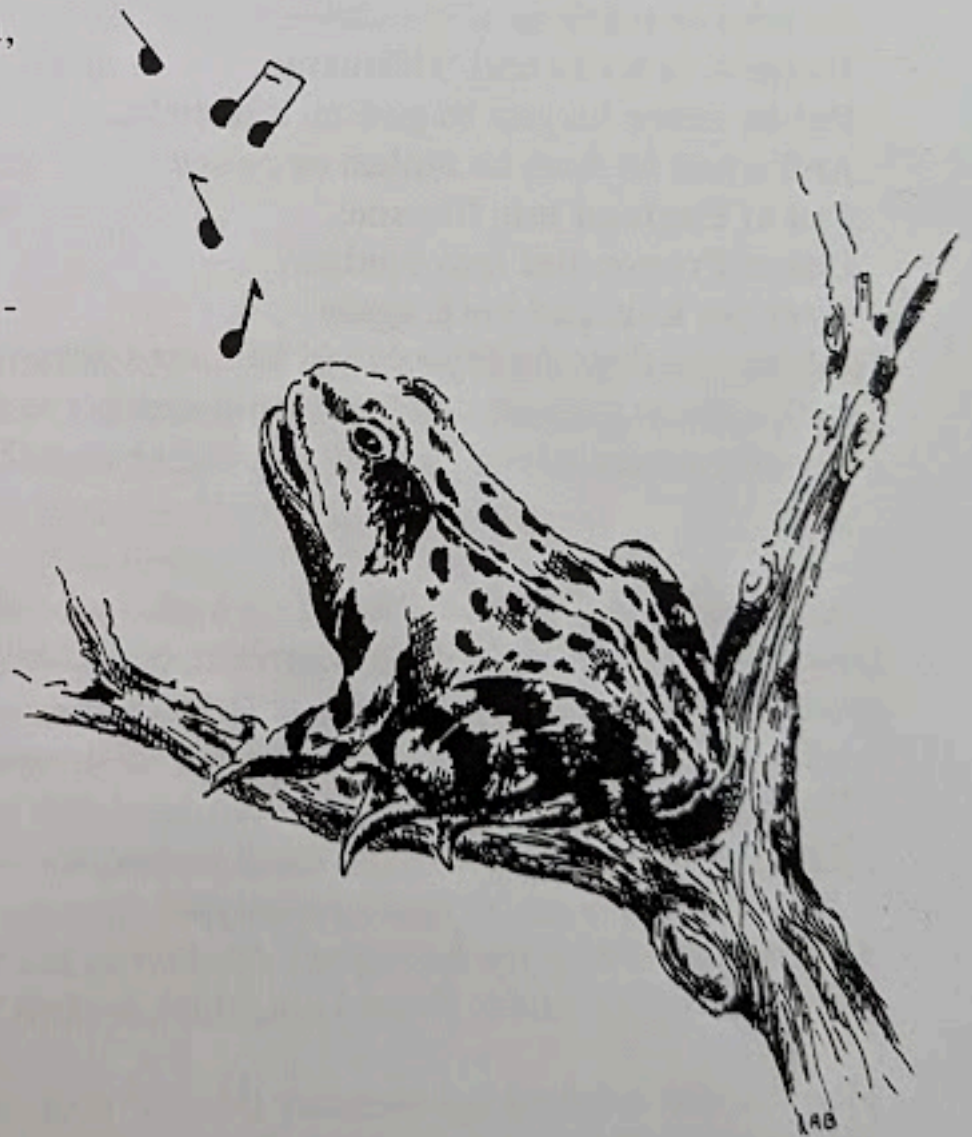
We have some strange words in the Fens -  
Lunch is DOCKEY or GRUB,  
And when the land gets over-wet,  
We say it's gone to SLUB.

Small potatoes are known as CHATS.  
Others are SPUDS or TATERS;  
And when conditions are very wet,  
We wear LALLYGAGS, not gaiters!

Wildlife does not escape strange words -  
A HODMEDOD is the name for a snail;  
And that little friendly creature  
The frog, is the FEN NIGHTINGALE.

And if something belongs to you  
We would say it is YOURN.  
SHOCK doesn't only mean trauma,  
It may be sheaves of corn.

And if something is very small  
We would say it was DODDY.  
There must be others I don't know -  
I'd like to hear from anybody!



## CAMBRIDGESHIRE VERSES From my bookshelf

The recent interest in poetry both on radio and TV, not to mention the many "poetry competitions" in glossy magazines, has prompted me to look through the publications which I have collected over the years.

My very first "verse" other than nursery rhymes was taught me by my Dad during the war (1939/45, not the First World War!); it recalls villages around Ely:

**Sutton good mutton**

**Ely good beef.**

**Wilburton's a pretty place –**

**Haddenham's a thief.**

The last two villages were interchangeable depending on which village one lived! It used to cause rivalry in the school playground and Enid Porter was fascinated by the rhyme when she visited Haddenham in the early Fifties; it is included in her tome CAMBRIDGESHIRE CUSTOMS AND FOLKLORE, published in 1969

A verse to which we used to skip (do children SKIP these days?) was :

**Mister Wheeler is a very good man**

**He tries to teach us all he can –**

**To read, to write and 'rithmetic**

**But he never forgets to give us the stick...**

**And when he does he makes us dance**

**Out of England into France;**

**Out of France and into Spain...**

**Over the hills and back again**

The idea was that the rope should be turned faster and faster for the "European Tour"....the nearest we children would ever get to the continent, but a simple lesson in geography nevertheless! Use of the stick, or cane, has been banned for many years

An "everlasting" verse is carved up high on the drainage engine building near Little Downham, written by William Harrison, the Internal Drainage Board engineer. It contains some very sound scientific facts:

**These Fens have of'times been by water drowned**

**But science a remedy in water found.**

**The power of steam she said shall be employed**

**And the destroyer by itself destroyed! .....**

Clever stuff would you not agree? Another of his verses survives at Prickwillow Pumping Engine on the River Lark, which is open to visitors during summer weekends

Harrison has acquired the honorary title of "Poet of the Fen Country" in acknowledging his natural skill for verse-making, he having had a very basic education.

The story is told of a physically-handicapped lady (not the jargon to use in the twenty-first century!) who used to write poetry, have the booklets printed by Jefferson in Ely and "sell" them at a shilling per copy "to make ends meet" during the inter-war years....my copy contains a beautiful poem entitled IN SPRINGTIME:

**Like a wealth of golden sunbeams,  
Caught upon the glad Spring air,  
Lightly held by swaying grasses,  
Laughter-loving,...**

It may not be Wordsworth quality but Hilda Everitt's descriptions of the landscape were really good.

A framed poem written by Thomas Berry of Willingham hung for many years in the Three Kings Public House at Haddenham; it was "rescued" by the renovation team in the mid-seventies and given to the Farmland Museum for public display; later a copy of the verses was given to the Cambridgeshire Collection. Entitled THE HADDENHAM VOLUNTEERS it was published in 1804 to recruit more effort against Napoleon; the names listed two centuries ago still have descendents living in the parish today. This has proved very helpful for tracing Family Histories which is such a popular hobby these days influenced by such TV programmes as "Who do you think you are?"

**When the Haddenham lads brigaded are  
With the Ely lads and Stretham,  
And join'd to those the Sutton lads  
If Boney lands, they'll meet them!**

I was recently given a copy of SONNETS OF THE FENS by bookshop owner Roger Pratt (his speciality at Hereward Books is Hunting, Shooting and Fishing, not likely to include material written prior to 1948 by a lady from Wisbech!) The Fens were once described as a land of wide skies and I think her lines show this;

**A calm broods on the Fen. The evening light  
Illumines all the dreaming landscape, while  
The sunlit orchards bloom for many a mile,  
And blackthorn in the hedges blossoms white.**

Sadly since Constance Breed's day many acres of apple and plum orchards have been "grubbed up" and so many varieties of fruit in our supermarkets are flown in from abroad; there is, however, a society for "saving" old varieties of top fruit; called the East of England Apples and Orchards Project, with its own website EEAOP.....

A friend of mine, John Taylor, now living in Australia, decided to reminisce on his Littleport Childhood and last year Melrose Book published his efforts from Down Under; how often do we see a "bobby on the beat" these days?  
IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE TIME.....

**Going home was never hard,  
Rushing out of our schoolyard.  
Although we were taught the crossing code  
A policeman always saw us across the road.**

Copies of this book are still available at Burrows Bookshop in Ely and it is the most "modern" publication on my bookshelf.

Waterbeach writer and artist Denis Cheason, took Rupert Brooke's well-known poem, the Old Vicarage, Grantchester, and illustrated the rhyming couplets with his artistic scraper-board illustrations. Two particularly amusing ones are:

**"Strong men have run for miles and miles,  
When one from Cherry Hinton smiles**

**At Over they fling oaths at one,  
And worse than oaths at Trumpington"**

The final question of the poem: And is there honey still for tea? Might well become a problem in the future as so many honey bees are being killed off by a viral infection. For those who are interested, there is an amazing collection of photos and memorabilia about RB and his Cambridge friends at the Tea Gardens at Grantchester a short drive out from Cambridge.

The Cambridgeshire country side is epitomised by John Clare, a poet who had a very sad life; his Shepherd's Calendar is a classic and has been read world-wide; his home was at Helpston in the NW of the county where a museum dedicated to him and his works opened this Summer. A great admirer of him is Edward Storey (formerly of Whittlesey) ...as well as writing many books about his beloved Fens, Edward turned his interest to verse in the latter days of the twentieth century, inspiring many school children to write their own.

Fen Farming today is often featured in the local press, particularly in connection with Wicken Fen Vision; here are some verses from Fenland Facts and Fancies which epitomise modern agriculture...a far cry from that of Clare in the early Victorian days when so much work was done "by hand"

**Fen Farming today consists of very large fields,  
With nitrate-assisted very high yields.  
And alas, the hedges are in decline  
To make more room for the new combine.**

**Gone forever are the days when  
The fifty-acre farmer went to plough the fen.  
His work was hard, his profit small  
But at least he had control over all.**

**And Wide Skies referred to earlier in this article:  
A young lad from London visited the Fens -  
He must have had a discerning eye  
His comment when he stepped from the car:  
“Cor, int you got a lotta sky!”**

**He had spotted in that brief moment  
One of the great features of the Fen  
To depict the sunrises and sunsets  
With brush, or words, defies men.**

**But there are those who scurry on,  
Never taking time to look so far....  
Sunset, alas, only means to them  
It's time to put the lights on in the car!**



*A view across Wicken Fen with the pumping mill in the distance; one of the first Nature Reserves bought by the NT 1890s*

As we celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in the Twenty-first Century, here are verses written by a Fen Man about two earlier reigns:

THE DIAMOND JUBILEE

OR

*Her Majesty* QUEEN VICTORIA

(On whose Empire the Sun never sets),

And the Loyalty of Her Subjects.

*By Abraham Ward, West Norfolk Poet, of Southey, now in the 72nd year of his age.*

Rise, Britons, rise! sing praises of Victoria!  
The longest ever reigned beneath our royal crown—  
The Star of the World of civilising nations!  
The grand example she has set—its equal can't be found.

She pleads for peace and plenty, she's reigned o'er half a century,  
But the tyrants of the world she must put down!  
No lions can be braver than her Army and her Navy—  
They will fight for dear old England, Victoria, and the Crown!

Would you like to join the Turks in their horrid cruel works?  
I'm sure you'd treat humanity more brave;  
Would you like to row with Russians in all their great oppressions,  
And be exiled to Siberia as a slave?

Oh, no! it will never do for Joe—  
It will not do for Joe the Marine!  
Nor yet for Tommy Atkins, why, he'd form a great objection—  
He'd rather fight for England, and our long-beloved Queen.

On June the twenty-second, when Nature is in bloom,  
What grand sights throughout England there will be!  
On towers mounted high, our Union Jack will fly,  
And on topmasts of shipping on the sea.

Rich foreigners will come, and leave their native homes,  
To us they'll bring their millions of money;  
We will slip it in our banks, and return our humble thanks,  
Like the bees depositing their honey.

Oh, yes! yes! money never comes amiss!  
John Bull will find them something for to see—  
Eight horses of pure cream will draw our British Queen  
Thro' the grand streets of London at the Diamond Jubilee!

Five and twenty thousand pounds Lord Lipton has laid down,  
For London's poor to drink his health in tea;  
And the Alexandra Fund has been added to the sum  
That all may have a happy Jubilee!

And to give them all a feed (to those who are in need),  
A present from Australia has come!  
Fat bullocks and fine sheep for all to have a treat,  
In the land of their forefathers' home.

Now, country and town be loyal to your crown,  
Whatever rank or station you may be;  
Now let us row together in harmony and pleasure,  
And drink health to Victoria and her Diamond Jubilee!

# THE CORONATION

OF OUR ROYAL SOVEREIGN

# KING EDWARD VII,

26th JUNE, 1902.

By ABRAHAM WARD, Southey, the West Norfolk Poet.

THIS great and royal sovereign will now ascend the throne,  
The royal heir to the British crown, to which his Grace was born,  
The son of Queen Victoria, who for sixty years did reign,  
And Empress of India—great nation o'er the main.

Some thousands from our Colonies will be here on that day,  
And Germans, Turks, and Russians, will here a-visit pay;  
New Zealanders and Australians will come here at the spring  
To view the grand Coronation of our royal British King.

The Queen, she will be present,—his dear beloved wife,  
Who shares his joys and sorrows through this wide world of strife;  
Beloved by all Norfolk, and all the nations round,  
No kinder lady in this world there never can be found.

The streets they will be crowded, through London, left and right,  
From every nation in the world to see this splendid sight;  
Our Army and our Navy—those boys who have stood true,  
To fight for dear old England's flag, the Red, White and Blue.

Houses, tops, and windows, are filled with every class,  
Grand stands for upper tens, to see them as they pass;  
The Bands will play, the Flags look gay, and merry bells will ring,  
The shouting loud rings through the crowd, "Long live our royal King."

The Lily of the Valley is the chosen flower that day,  
Every lady in her hand will hold a grand bouquet;  
Sweet Roses and Carnations, those flowers of rich perfume,  
Will be worn by Gentlemen on the twenty-sixth of June.

Come, all you loyal subjects, in country or in town,  
Be loyal to your country, be faithful to the Crown;  
No king or ruler in this land, a better one could be,  
If he could but reign for fifty years, we'd raise a jubilee.

Fenland which stretches from just north of Cambridge north-west to Peterborough and on to Boston, and east to the edges of Breckland near Brandon and on to Kings Lynn, has undergone many changes in its landscape over time. The most radical was when the Dutch civil engineer Cornelius Vermuyden was employed in the seventeenth century to create a drainage system, this was because the low lying areas of Fenland were prone to both marine due to the fluctuating level of the North sea, and freshwater flooding from swollen rivers flowing down from neighbouring higher ground. The centre piece of his drainage project was the creation of two artificial rivers, today known as the Old and New Bedford rivers. These rivers were dug roughly parallel to each other, the area between the rivers some 2260 hectares having a dual function, in summer it provides grazing land and when the area is at risk of flood it can become a wash or washland. The Old Bedford river was cut in 1637 with a sluice at Earith and a tail sluice at Salters Lode. This was followed in 1651 by the digging of the twenty one mile long New Bedford river (or Hundred Foot), with a sluice being completed at Denver in 1652.

Traditionally ice skating had always been a popular activity in the fens among adults as well as children. In winter it must have been one of the easiest forms of transport, skating along the dykes and rivers must have been preferable to horse and cart. So it was hardly surprising that this new area of washland would soon become a popular venue for skating when frozen over. People came from far and wide to skate on the wash. Racing competitions took place regularly, starting at the Welney end of the wash half way along the wash road, and then onwards towards Earith. The earliest skates were made from animal bones strapped to the foot with leather thonging. After the Norman conquest, craftsmen who had been employed on Ely Cathedral introduced the French 'patin'; a narrow metal blade embedded in the sole of a small wooden shoe. Hundreds of years later De Wit a Dutch man who had settled in the fens, realised that this design could be improved, he went on to produce a type of skate known as fen runners. The first mention of iron skates was in 1662 when they were used for skating on the river Thames. In fact it was Holland and the Low Countries where ice skating originated and a lot of East Anglian families are descended from Protestant settlers from Holland. It is not unreasonable to suppose that many brought their skates with them.

The Smart family from Welney produced four generations of British speed skating champions, starting in 1790. In 1854 the most famous one was William 'Turkey' Smart, he won every race he entered for thirteen years until 1867 when he had to succumb to a younger man. He died aged 89 and is buried in Welney churchyard. Tom Watkinson from Welney held the championship for three years, then back came the Smarts in 1878. George Smart was known as 'The Flying Fish' due to his love of swimming and diving and the way he 'flew' across the ice when skating. He became the top British skater with twenty seven wins to his credit, he took part in nearly one hundred races and was only beaten twice. Once at Cowbit he skated one mile straight, without wind assistance in three minutes.

Welney Wash was not the only place where skating took place, in fact wherever there was an expanse of frozen water people would congregate to skate. Some say the Fens have nothing to offer, believing the landscape to be nothing more than endless miles of flat agricultural land, they are wrong, one only has to study the washland through the changing seasons to realise that Fenland is at its heart a truly magnificent place.

If the sceptics saw the Wash when it is flooded, with the trees and bushes poking their heads out of the water, the winter sun shining on the water making it sparkle like jewels, its population of thousands of visiting swans and geese, followed by the lush summer grass grazed by cattle of various breeds they might revise their opinions. It is a magical place.



*A gang of workers riddling potatoes "by hand" ..... corn and root crops are now harvested and graded by machines*

## **Second list compiled by Maureen and Lorna with “a little help from their friends”**

Middlin (fairly well)

Flummocksed/flummoxed – confused

Buskins: boots, not Wellingtons

Foursies ; tea taken in afternoon, often in the fields

Frimmocksing – fussing over appearance/tittivating

Lollygagging – lazing about. Mizzling – drizzling  
rain

All mouth and trousers. Buppy jam – child’s snack

Bees knees – very good.

Muggy – mild, warm/humid

Skerrick – a small amount/eg pinch of salt

Mithering – worrying

TAWDRY – a word originating in the Isle of Ely to  
describe cheap trivia (as sold at St. Etheldreda’s  
Fair aka Audrey’s Fair)

High Road (as opposed to Fen road, or DROVE  
which could be slubby in Winter)

Too big for his/her boots

Slaking thirst....in desperate need of drink

Slagging someone off – nothing good to say about  
them

Pompous ass – someone showing off

As you sow, so shall you reap

Never judge a book by its cover

Call a spade a spade (down to earth)

When a glove is dropped, DON'T pick it up (Bad luck)  
Never say CAN'T....cross off the T and you CAN!  
If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well  
A little help is worth a lot of sympathy  
I was the apple of his/her eye (popular)  
Don't spoil the ship for a hallow of tar  
Don't count your chickens before they hatch.  
Dull as dishwater/ditchwater  
Many hands make light work  
A trouble shared is a trouble halved  
Time flies, but pigs can't because their bottoms are too heavy!  
Tough as old boots (stubborn)  
I am up to my eyes in it (ie very busy).  
Up from the sticks (country person going to town)  
Blummen –bother, wretched  
Weskert –waistcoat, part of a suit of clothes  
Black Shuck – a dog that haunts the Fens and East Anglia  
Door-step – thick rounds of bread  
Two birds with one stone (achieve two things at same time)  
Pop your clogs –to die. Frog in the throat.  
Many hands make light work  
Bellows like a bull in a china shop  
Bite off more than you can chew  
Fat as a pig. Thin as a rake  
Has a mouth like a barn door  
He's had more affairs than I've had hot dinners  
How long is a ball of string?

Lost his marbles. Mad as a hatter  
Make a silk purse out of a sow's ear  
Sick as a dog. Sound as a bell  
Sweet as honey. Deaf as a post  
Why don't you jump/walk off a short pier?  
Wouldn't know the truth if it jumped up and bit him  
Never put an umbrella up in the house (bad luck)  
In for a penny, in for a pound. Bright as a button  
Not so green as cabbage-looking  
Why spend sixpence when a penny will do?  
Bold as brass. Flat as a pancake  
Dry as a fish. Deaf as a post  
Got a hide as tough as a rhinoceros  
Keep your trap shut (do not speak!)  
Advice is cheap. Too many cooks spoil the broth  
Jawwin –complaining  
Village saint, house devil  
Big head –over-confident

Hen-pecked (a man who is “bossed” by a woman)

You're a Rumman/ that's a Rumman (unusual/not to be trusted)

Carrot Cruncher (name given to folk in the Chatteris area where carrots were/are an important crop)

Use plenty of elbow grease (hard physical work)

Two WRONGS do not make a RIGHT

Between you, me and the gate-post (secretive)

Old Bill's advice: it reflects his age of 80plus!  
In your pocket always carry a shilling (tied up in your handkerchief for emergencies), a shut-knife (to cut up your dokey or anything else) and a piece of string (in case your shoe-lace breaks)

An apple a day keeps the doctor away

Roses are red, violets are blue  
Sugar is sweet and so are you.

*repeat*

Something old, something new  
Something borrowed and something blue

*repeat!*

If at first you don't succeed,  
Try try and try again

The cuckoo comes in April, sings his song in May.

In leafy June he changes his tune and in July flies  
away

Go to Swaffham and dew a day's threshin for  
nothing,  
Then that's suthin

Early to bed, early to rise  
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

*repeat*

North, East south West  
Home's best

Many of the above expressions are in use  
nationally; a few are regarded as "Fen only"  
Make your own list and see how long it is!

# NEATH FENLAND SKIES.

**N**eath Fenland skies of every hue  
No smoky chimneys mar our sight.  
Neath cloudy canopy of blue  
Stands Cromwell School - Fortress of might  
Where tulips flourish, roses blow,  
And apple-trees shed down their fruits,  
Where yellow daffodillies grow  
The Cromwell Spirit spreads its roots.

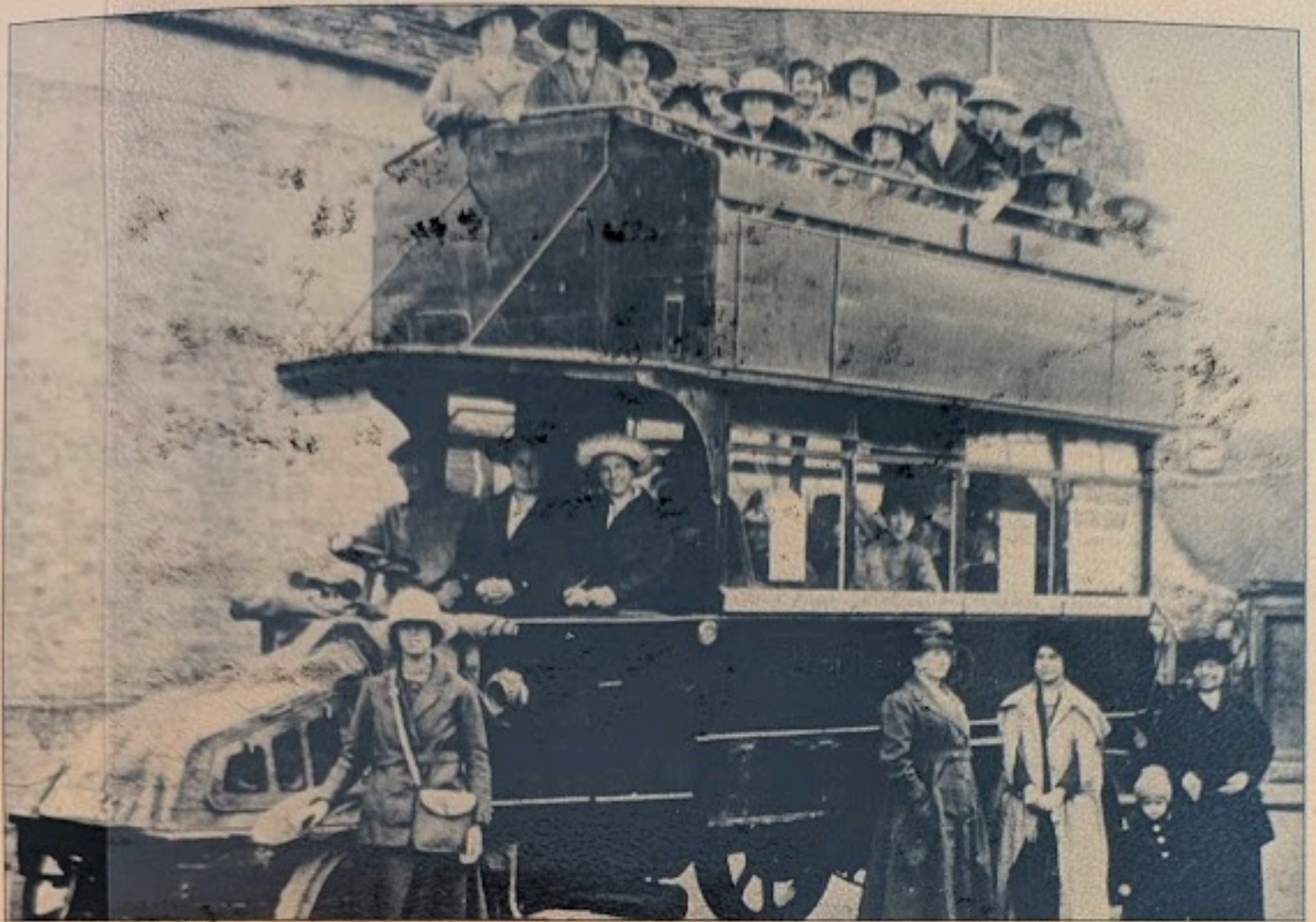
**N**eath Fenland skies so clear and bright,  
Where larks soar upward on the wing  
And buds and blossoms burst their sheaths  
Through Summer, Winter, Autumn, Spring  
Is there the Cromwell Spirit grows  
A worthy tree erect and strong  
What matter though the East wind blows?  
It stands for right, it scorns the wrong.

**N**eath Fenland skies - in rain or fire  
Our solemn pledge is ours to keep.  
We dare not fail this sacred trust  
If we the fruits of toil would reap,  
With heads held high and flag unfurled  
With cry of "Cromwell" in our ears,  
Our doubts are to the four winds hurled,  
We march towards the future years.

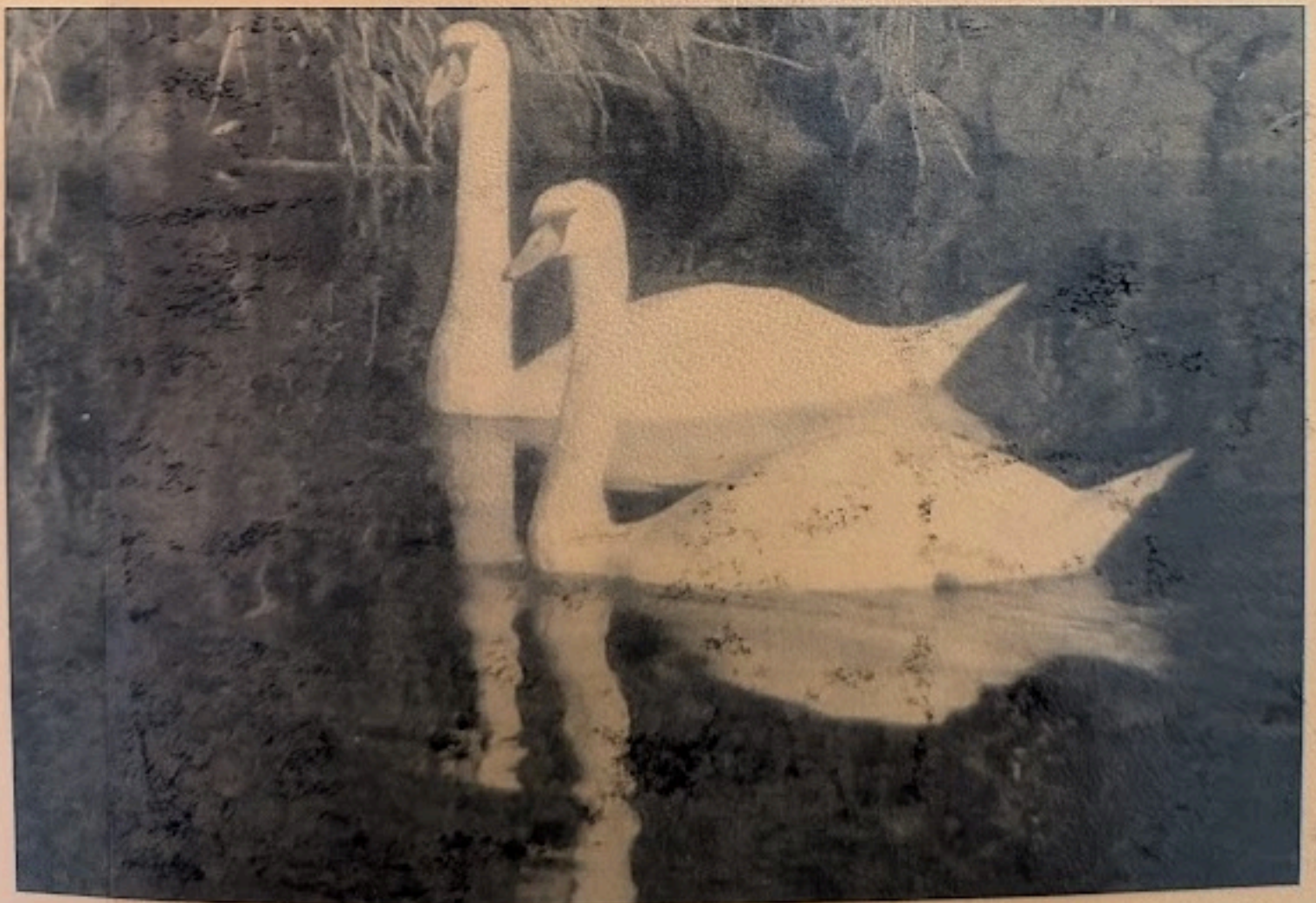
**N**eath Fenland skies - in sun or shade  
Though travel we by sea or land,  
The Cromwell Spirit will pervade  
Untouched - unspoiled by Time's rude hand.  
So let us raise our glass and drink  
A toast to loyal friends and true  
All those who bear the Cromwell sign  
We drink to them - we drink to you!

(Words by C. Judge)

(Music by D. H. Curran)



*The WI enhanced a lot of women's lives in the inter-war years; here a "bus" is taking them on an outing: note the hats!*



*Reflections of mute swans on the New Bedford River at Mepal*

Sketch map to show places mentioned in text

TO WISBECH ↑

