

The Golden Days of the 19th Century

Thomas Brown's Memories



Although not a member of the Glemsford Local History Society, due to inability to attend meetings, I have had the privilege of reading the summer edition of the Society's Newsletter, which I found interesting and informative.

I was especially intrigued by the article by Mr Stephen Clarke who writes of the so-called golden days of the 19th Century relating to the perilous times for schoolchildren and the undoubted hazards of health which they experienced.

At the other end of the age scale, some who were born in the latter part of the 19th Century did not find their days so golden either, as was often related to me by my father, the late Cornelius Brown, (Neally, b. 1870 d. 1954). Some of the struggles recounted, I, born 1916, also experienced, so can vouch for their authenticity.

Cornelius, who was very small in stature, left school at 12 years of age, and was quite a good scholar but circumstances compelled to follow the normal path and take a job in the mat making industry. This was steady and ready employment for him until a serious bout of Erysipelas left him with the loss of sight in one eye and some damage to the other eye. This was in the days when doctors considered fresh air in the sick room was not conducive to the patient's recovery and so all windows were kept securely fastened. On one of his visits the doctor pronounced that

Cornelius's life was virtually over and instructed his wife to open the windows. The fresh air wafting across the room caused Cornelius to flutter an eyelid; the crisis was over with the fresh air doing more good than the doctor, from thence he made a steady, but only partial, recovery. Whether the long absence from work, plus the loss of sight, was responsible for Cornelius losing his job is not now clear. He was unable to obtain further regular employment but was possibly unfit for heavy work.

In those days there was no unemployment or other State benefit, so Cornelius was left without any income other than what could be earned by seasonal or casual labour, which provided him with a very meagre living indeed. He did all the seasonal work available, assisted by his wife Mona and his children as they became old enough, anything from about 7 years upwards, eventually including myself.

This work included turnip, mangold and swede pulling, cutting off the tops in often the bitterest and wettest weather with bodies swathed in corn sacks as protection against the elements. Pea and potato picking, flax pulling and that most iniquitous and monotonous of all jobs, stonepicking. All these tasks were performed on a piece-work basis. Hedge-cutting was an unpaid job but he was expected to get his reward from the sale of the resulting faggots, not so bad with a good hedge, but a very poor return when the hedge was thin or thorny. Hedge cutting included the trimming of the ditch if there was one for which no allowance was made.

Cornelius also tried to earn a living from various forms of trading, a fried fish shop, a sweet shop, selling crockery, pots and pans etc., rag, bone and rabbit skin collection, hawking fish and fruit around the surrounding villages for which he used a horse, or mule, and cart. Buying and selling of fruit and walnuts was another of his efforts, buying standing crops, harvesting and hawking them.

The return on these efforts was extremely small, so he was never able to buy half a pint of beer; he liked a smoke but only had the occasional half ounce of shag or "Bingo" block tobacco, his pipe remaining largely unfilled.

When none of the seasonal jobs were available, and all other efforts brought in insufficient money to support his family at even the lowest standard, he had, as a very last resort, to apply for "Parish Relief" which was a payment from local funds.

People were most reluctant to go "On The Parish" as it was considered degrading and signified the last stage of desperation. Cornelius would tell of the time when he had no alternative but to seek this help which would mean a grilling by the Relieving Officer who would then award him half a crown or so (12p) in return for which he would have to walk the 7 miles to Sudbury Workhouse, chop wood all day, then walk the 7 miles home. I was unable to say exactly how many times he had to do this.

On one occasion, the Relieving Officer told Cornelius to sell his horse, which would deprive him of his means of hawking; this he did, the purchaser being a London man who wanted the horse delivered to an address in London. Accompanied by his brother Joe, Cornelius took the horse to London, riding and leading it in turn.

Having disposed of the horse, and being unable to pay the train fare home, they had to walk the 60 or more miles back to Glemsford. This journey took them three days, sleeping in ditches on the way.

Cornelius had lost two younger brothers; both the first born of the family had also died at the age of 7 months. He lost a sister at 33 years of age and a brother at 44. In spite of all these struggles, Cornelius retained his dignity, self-respect and good humour but, no matter what other people called them, my father did not refer to them as the "Golden Days".

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