

My Hampshire Village



This Month:

Wherwell

Between them, Vic Pyke and his father were landlords of the White Lion for over 70 years...



My home village of Wherwell is situated beside the river Test, world famous for its trout fishing. As a boy I used to watch cartloads of turnips passing through the village on their way to the jam factory at Whitchurch. I wonder if anyone eats turnip jam now?

Between us my father and I were landlords of the White Lion public house for 72 years. My father started off with five horses and a hostler. As a small boy living on the premises I got used to doing all sorts of odd jobs. In the fishing season I would be busy twice a day cleaning the waders and gumboots of our fisherman guests. There was a rule on the estate that no-one who lived within 50 miles was allowed to fish the river. So wealthy men from far away would book rooms at the White Lion for a whole season and travel back and forth at weekends by train from Wherwell station. Now the railway line is a country walk.

Meals at the pub revolved around the fishing, and were served later on in the

summer as the evening rods would go out at 7.30 until after dark if the fish were rising.

Once two brothers took the fishing, bringing their manservants with them who were two black Basuto tribesmen brought home from one of the brothers' big game hunting expeditions. As trained manservants they wore white shirts, stiff collars and dark suits. They arrived bearing their employers' suitcases and picnic hampers on their heads. This was the first time anyone in Wherwell had seen a black man, and it caused quite a stir. At the end of their day's fishing, cottage windows were full of the peeping faces of adults and children and people even came from as far away as Chilbolton!

Wherwell Priory was owned by Colonel and Mrs Jenkins and when they died their daughter, Countess Brecknock, inherited it.

The Jenkins kept quite a big staff. Indoors there was a butler, housekeeper, cook, two kitchen maids, two housemaids, two footmen, a coal boy, a ladies' maid and a valet. Outdoors there were six gardeners, three odd-job men and three chauffeurs.

Colonel Jenkins was a great huntsman with the Quorn and used to rent a furnished house in Leicestershire for three months of the year. He would hire a train to take 20 horses, six grooms and 15 other staff there with him from the priory. When the train returned to Wherwell station we were let out of school early to meet it. You see, many of the children's fathers were on the Colonel's staff and they hadn't seen them for three months.

There was a big shoot each November. Lord and Lady so-and-so and their staff would descend on the village. While they joined wealthy house parties, their chauffeurs and ladies' maids stayed at the White Lion. Of course the cars were always Rolls and Daimlers, but I do remember one time when a guest arrived in a Ford V8 shooting brake and the other chauffeurs turned their noses up at such a common vehicle. On shooting day there'd be 8 guns, 8 loaders, 8 men picking-up and 30 beaters - and a bag of around 500 birds.

A real bit of excitement was the village's first flush toilet - installed at the station. Gentry staying at the pub would visit there in the mornings so the station porter always made sure he was polishing the seat at the moment each one arrived, thus getting a tip every time.

With beer at only 4d a pint he soon collected enough for a pint or two!

The winters are milder now but I well remember the winter of 1928 when the village road was cut off by 6ft snow drifts and how the postman walked every day from Andover over the hills where the high winds had blown the snow away. And the year 1947 when we had ten weeks of deep snow.

Nowadays the White Lion is not such a meeting place for the locals. People drive here from miles away to eat the good fare, especially the fish and chip suppers on Monday nights.

On retiring from a busy and happy life I had to find an absorbing hobby. I turned my hand to woodwork and now make and sell ornamental wheelbarrows, bird feeders and nest boxes. I've just made eight today.

A friend and I are making a video of Wherwell's history which will be produced in the Millennium year. We've collected many photographs which are being filmed along with the interviews. It will be a lasting record of my Hampshire village.

(Vic Pyke was in conversation with Barbara Bennett)

Vic and his brother (right)

