

A LOOK-BACK AT WESTBURY-SUB-MENDIP

by Bill Tyley

In recent years, Westbury has grown in popularity by an ever-increasing influx of newcomers, many of whom commute to adjoining towns and cities, whilst others have come to enjoy their retirement.

With new housing and industrial estates in the process of development, I thought a look-back to yesteryear might bring a little nostalgia to the 'native' population, and an insight of what the village was like to the newly arrived populace.

Undoubtedly the most noticeable change to the village has been the transformation from horse-drawn carts to the present-day motorised vehicles. One could play 'hop-scotch' and tops and hoops on the main road in the 1920's and '30's without worries (you would not last long today with all the traffic rushing through).

The farming fraternity relied on horses for 'power' to transport their milk, either to Easton where Messrs. E.E. Hodges had their dairy, or to Lodge Hill Station for transportation to London. The horse was also in evidence in the fields ploughing, hay making and the numerous other jobs associated with the land; a distant cry from the present mechanised machinery and tractors.

Farming was, in fact, a major employer of labour, but many did travel to Haybridge and Wookey Hole where they were employed in the paper-making trade. Others travelled to Wells where Clares and Wilts United Dairies were major employers. Thorn-EMI were not in existence in the pre-1939 era.

Travel was also a case of 'Shanks's pony', pony-trap, a bicycle or by train. The village was well served by the railway at Lodge Hill, which has now been developed into industrial units. To many, the closing of the ex-GWR line by the Beeching axe, in September 1964, was a sad day. In its hey-day the station employed a station-master (Mr Walter Smith), and two porters. Besides the numerous passengers using the train to Wells (6d. return in old money),

school children were also carried to the Wells schools (the Cathedral, Blue, Central, Oakleigh or High schools). Milk was brought in from Mr Hodge's Easton dairies, and many farmers would descend on the station with dozens of churns. Cattle would also be loaded into trucks and transported to Shepton Mallet and Wells markets. Trucks of coal would arrive for customers in the village for use in their homes for cooking and heating (no gas or electricity in the earlier days!).

The bicycle was the most popular form of transport, and Mr Stanley Weeks ran a cycle repair shop. As in most villages, Westbury had its characters. One of its best-loved characters was Mrs Phoebe.

During the early summer months many villagers would send their strawberries to various parts of the country by train.

Another noticeable change in Westbury's character is the demise of shops and tradespeople who were plying their wares. To recap a few of the traders then in the village, the Post-Office and Stores was owned by Arthur Classey (who would also deliver groceries to Priddy by horse and cart weekly in all kinds of weather). Across the road was Charles Curtis's general store (which also sold paraffin for oil-lamps which most houses used for lighting). My treat in the Curtis establishment was a pennyworth of 'Bullseyes' sweets (happy days!). Mr Curtis also delivered the daily newspapers which came by train. Further down the hill was Messrs. Dennis' shop, which, besides selling groceries, catered for the early D.I.Y. enthusiasts. Among the shelves were various hardware items such as nails, screws, nuts and bolts and a host of implements of special use to the farming community.

Besides the shopping side of the business, the Dennis family were engaged in the building trade, wheelwrights, undertakers and ran the village forge, where horses were brought to be shod. Many a time as a lad I would pump the

embers to heat the horse-shoes for blacksmith Harry Tarrant to fashion them on his anvil. Also I would watch Bertie Jackson, another craftsman in his own right, bonding wheels for the carts and wagons; and Alfie Gallop making a coffin for some deceased parishioner.

In these days of the poignant smell of silage drifting across the village, it was the smell of newly baked bread which caught the nostrils, especially on a frosty morning, which emanated from Fred Holway's (later Len Robinson's) bake house, and now the home of **Mr and Mrs Lloyd**.

Westbury was also served by two butchers shops: James Griffin and Son (now demolished), and Charlie Barnard's (now Phoenix Cottage in the Square). Also in the Square another grocery store was owned by Mr and Mrs Bert Horlock, (now Medlar House).

The village was also well catered for with door-to-door sales of greengroceries and fresh fish delivered by pony-cart by John Classey (who lived in Moor View) and by Mr Cave (Nut-tree Cottage), while Mr Hooper had a shop at the junction of Wells Road and Station Road selling greengroceries. Much of the Hooper's produce was grown where the Station Road houses are now built.

After a long day toiling in the fields, the locals were well catered for at the Red Lion Inn in Free Hill, where mine host was Frank Hole, and at the Railway Inn (then in the Dalwood family). In recent years this has been renamed the Westbury Inn.

At the top of Duck Lane, Mr William Hodges carried on a business as a coal merchant and Mrs Hodges a news agency. Most of the national papers cost the princely sum of one penny. Mr and Mrs Hodges would deliver twice daily, walking around the village, Besides the daily papers they would have the evening and weekend papers to contend with. With the wireless becoming increasingly popular, Mr George Fisher started his radio business. Most sets were run off batteries and accumulators as electricity was only just becoming available. In fact the first electricity to be generated in the village was installed at the rear of Box Tree House by Mr H. Dennis, who besides lighting his own premises also supplied the Railway Inn and the Village Hall with electricity. Wickham,

who was affectionately known as 'Granny Wickham' to all the children who would call at her tuck shop in the Rocks. Mrs Wickham, who reached 102 years, celebrated her 92nd birthday with a flight over the village, and performed the opening ceremony at Westbury Church Fete on her 100th birthday.

Another popular figure between the wars was Miss Maggie Lovell, who lived at Laurel Cottage and was post-lady, delivering mail to houses at the upper part of the village. A postman would cycle from Wells carrying mail bags, and would deliver to the remainder of the houses.

Before his death while preparing the 1943 Christmas Day service, the Reverend Charles Barnes had been in the benefice for 52 years. A longtime and well-loved servant of the church, he must have officiated at many christenings and marriages of older village residents. His daughter, Miss Dorothy Barnes, donated the clock on the church tower to the parish.

Another skilled tradesman was Mr Charles Hooper, who carried out his taxidermist business at the top of Station Road; while Mr Percy Lane was the village cobbler, based on Top Road. When hay was the main winter feed for animals, the Cattell family, who lived at Hollybrook, were in big demand for thatching the ricks which were to be seen scattered around the fields.

Entertainments in the Village Hall consisted mainly of dances, whist drives and the occasional concert party. A touring party would also perform a variety show: one which comes to mind was Freddy Faye's Famous Frolics, who entertained at Burnham.

Between the wars, Westbury was well to the fore in the sporting field. The village sports ground was next to the present Robert Glanville sports field, and a wide choice of games could be enjoyed. The village had a football team which competed in the Cheddar Valley League; the Cricket Team entertained other village teams in the area; grass tennis courts were in great demand; quoits were also provided and hockey was also played. On Club Days, Westbury Friendly Society would hold their sports on the field, which also housed the marquee for the day's events.

My early recollection of Club Day was the parade by members to the top of Old Ditch, led by the Wells City Band, where they were entertained to liquid refreshments by Mr Harry Phelps, before descending to the church for a service followed by luncheon in the six pole marquee on the sports field. A children's tea was followed by, sports, and the day concluded with a dance in the tent.

Club Day, May Fair, Wells Carnival and a trip to either Weston-superMare or Burnham-on-Sea were some of the highlights of the year.

Sadly, many of the older families, whose ties with the village went back many generations, have now disappeared. Today only the Sealy, Hole, Stott, Dennis, Derrick, Phelps, Carver and Allen family's names are still in evidence. In compiling these notes I hope I have not offended anyone by not mentioning them; but so many have played a role in the past in making Westbury such a pleasant place in which to live.

G.E. ('Bill') Tyley, 1989

