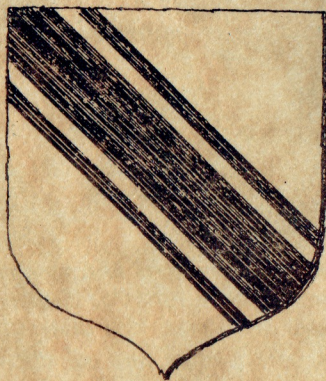


A SHROPSHIRE VILLAGE of YESTERYEAR



HARLEY
of Brampton Bryan



By Hilda Preece

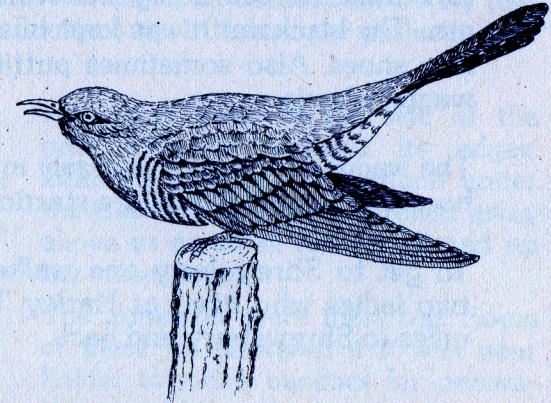
Dedication
*To my daughter Avie, so dauntless in
adversity, and Ken who appreciates John
Clare's work as much as I do.*

INTRODUCTION

Mrs Hilda Preece, once an infant teacher, recalls her childhood of the early 1900's spent in Harley Village, nestling beneath Wenlock Edge, when the "cuckoo sang all day".

Old Harley, Mrs. Preece writes, was agricultural. There were five farms and a few smallholdings. The latter were cottages with a few fields, some quite a distance away. Nearly all the cottages were "tied", housing the men who worked on the farms.

There were two small shops, one being the post office, at the Shrewsbury entrance to the village and the other Old Timbers.



*There was a time when the cuckoo sang in
the village all day long.*

There was a windmill, Harley Towers, and a watermill no longer being used seventy years ago. The windmill, oasthouse and other buildings were attached to what is now Harley Court. They were taken down after the Second World War.

The houses of note in the village were Castle Hill, the then Harley Towers and the Rectory, now the Old Rectory.

The village was well-served by tradesmen - bakers, butchers, fishmen, even drapers. This was fortunate as there were no buses. The only way to get to Much Wenlock was by horse and trap - or walk, which we did frequently.

There was a carpenter in the village. His small stone shed was taken down when other houses were built in the 1960's - 70's. This was near two parish cottages, given for the poor of the parish many years before. A small rent was paid to the church.

These have now gone and after the sale, the money was taken over I think, by the Church Commissioners. The church receives the interest on the money invested, not very much. There is still parish ground rented but much has been sold.

Another necessary place was the blacksmith's shop. No tractors then, horses doing the work, drawing ploughs, wagons etc.. The blacksmith was kept busy making and putting on the iron shoes. Also sometimes putting on the iron heads on the wagon wheels.

The waggoners went very early in the mornings to see that the horses were well fed before starting the hard work of the day.

To get to Shrewsbury one walked to Cressage Station. The two ladies who lived at Harley Towers often walked the ten miles to Shrewsbury and back.

It seems to me that one only left the village very occasionally. Life was lived in the village almost entirely.

THE LURE OF THE BROOK

I LOVE Wenlock Edge. I have lived in the valley below it for many years. It seemed to be the ending of the world to infant eyes. There was no thought then of what lay beyond.

As we grew older we climbed it. A pathway called the Jenny Wind led to the top. The theory is that it was called so because the Jenny (old name for donkey) carried its burdens up it before the pathway had been made through the rocks.

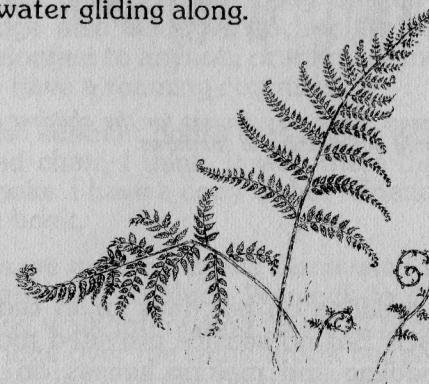


Anemones grew at the side of the path. Bracken strewed its edges. Bluebells carpeted the ground under the trees and the birds carolled away above us as small feet clambered up the steep slopes.

The primroses were there too. Some of these we gathered if it was near Easter to make bunches for decorating our old church.

Anemones grew at the side of the old Jenny Wind pathway leading up over Wenlock Edge.

Sometimes we took another way up over beautiful Wenlock Edge. Down the road and over the little humpback bridge that spanned the brook. Always we paused on that little low-walled bridge watching the brownish water gliding along.

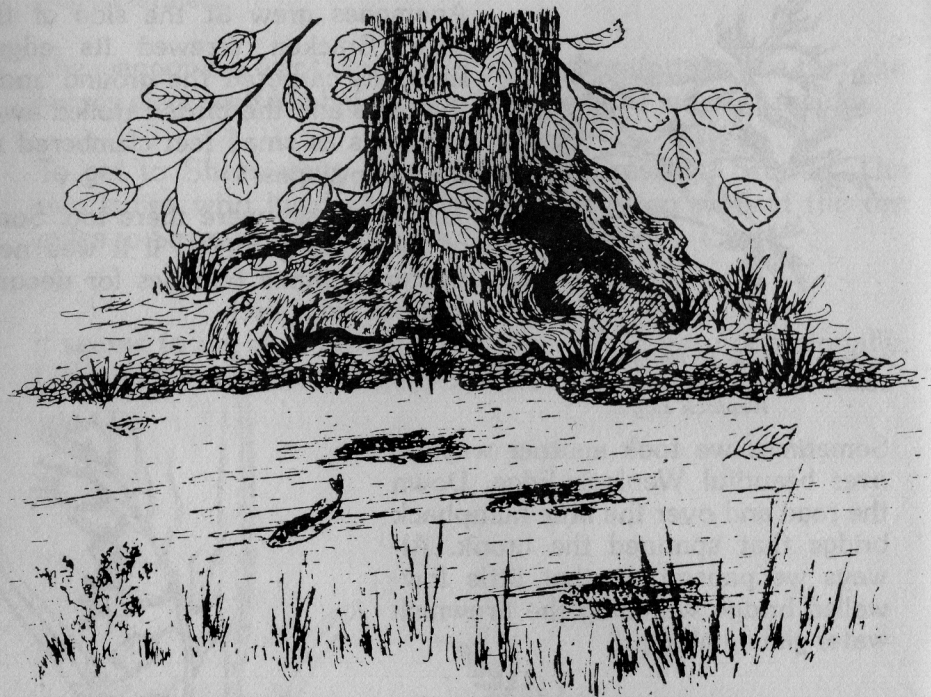


Bracken "strewed the edges" of the old Jenny Wind pathway that led up to Much Wenlock.



Bluebells carpeted the ground under the trees and the birds carolled away above us as small feet clambered up the steep slopes.

Sometimes too the lure of the brook was too strong and we stayed catching bullheads and minnows if we were lucky. It was part of a country child's education to know how the stones must be lifted so that the water would be disturbed as little as possible. The little fish, almost unaware of what was happening, would occasionally end up in small hands. The unfortunate fish ending up in a jam jar always died.



The roots of the trees beside the stream made play houses for the children when they weren't catching bullheads and minnows.

The brook was a grand place for paddling on hot days for in those far-off days few children saw the sea. But no seaside provided more happiness than did the brook. Paddling and making houses on its bank. The trees overlapping the brook provided shade and shelter in the crevices, and holes round the boles of the trees made grand make-believe cupboards.

Ladysmocks, cowslips and anemones were gathered to deck the little houses. One day one tenant fell into the brook but this presented us with no problem. She just stripped off to her vest and the wet clothes were hung on the bushes in the field to dry. Nobody would be in the least embarrassed although the company was mixed!

Looking back, we children were a mass of contradictions. Most country children were shy, too shy in those days. We lacked the poise today's children have, partly because we mixed with few other children and hardly left our village. Also we had been brought up strictly to be quiet in the company of grown ups, to be very obedient and self-effacing. No wonder we were almost negative. Yet we were daring in other ways, almost courting disaster across bridge walls and over the water-fall.

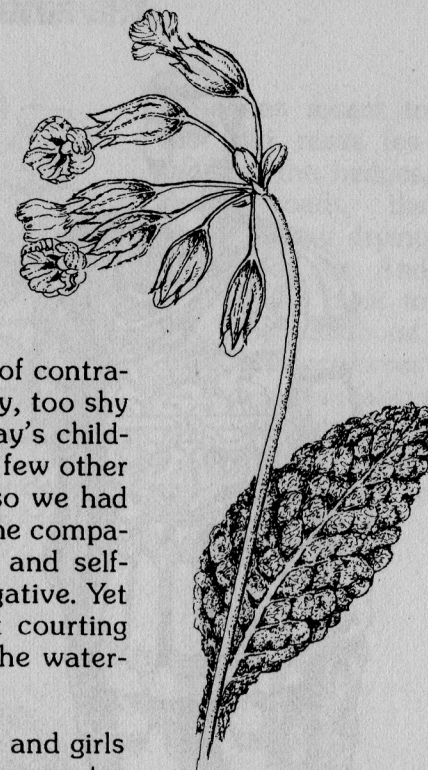
Unisex flourished many years ago! Boys and girls were treated alike, no quarter asked, no quarter given.

MY LADY WROTE HERE

Sometimes we would climb up to a small summerhouse on Wenlock Edge. It belonged to Lady Gaskell of Much Wenlock. That part of the Edge also belonged to her. As children we did not think the wood belonged to anyone, or many of the fields, for that matter. We seemed to have a roaming commission.

The summer house was a little wooden structure holding only a table and chair, I think. It was there that Lady Gaskell wrote some of her books. I have a copy of her "Friends Round the Wrekin", a real country book.

As we grew older, we discovered the other side of the Edge when we were sent to Much Wenlock to shop. There was much to make the long walk interesting to small people. A pause on another humpback bridge over the same brook but part of the main road. The stone-clad sides were higher here and only the taller children could see the water. The small ones had to hang on to the top and lean over. "Providence looks after fools and children". None of us ever fell over either bridge.



THE ROMANS AT HOME HERE



Today the mists are rolling from the top of Wenlock Edge leaving it a smoky blue. The valley is enveloped in the damp mist making it a no-man's land. In fantasy, anything could be happening in the valley now. Time could have slipped back and the Roman chiefs could be in their villa at the foot of the Edge.

This villa had been unearthed for eyes to see hundreds of years after it had been laid.

Did the hands of British slaves put in those dry stones while a more artistic, educated Roman showed them how to make the patterns!

This valley was a Roman encampment. The Romans called it Yarc-hester. The Saxons called it Ape Dale, one part of it further up the valley.

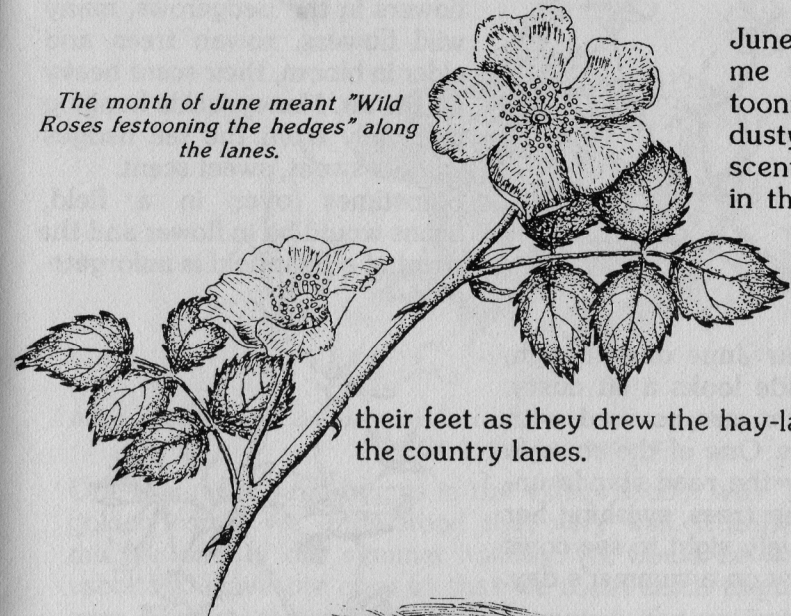
Time could have slipped back and the Roman chiefs could be in their villa at the foot of the Edge.

SUNDAY PROMENADE

Our footpaths which twine and intertwine through the meadows are used very little now. But on the days when cars were a rarity, people would be seen out walking on fine Sunday evenings during the Summer. Father, mother and all the children, courting couples and the elderly found relaxation in the peace and quiet of a Sabbath evening. Unhurried they walked along, the little ones gathering wild flowers, the father probably viewing crops which perhaps he had sown, or those he would be harvesting.

THE LANES OF YESTERYEAR

The month of June meant "Wild Roses festooning the hedges" along the lanes.

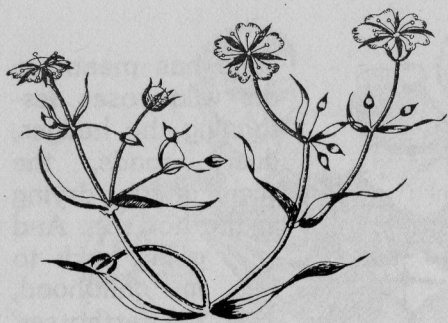


June has meant to me wild roses festooning the hedges, dusty roads, the scent of hay drying in the hot sun. And going back to my childhood, the carthorses' hooves making little clouds of dust round

their feet as they drew the hay-laden wagons up the country lanes.



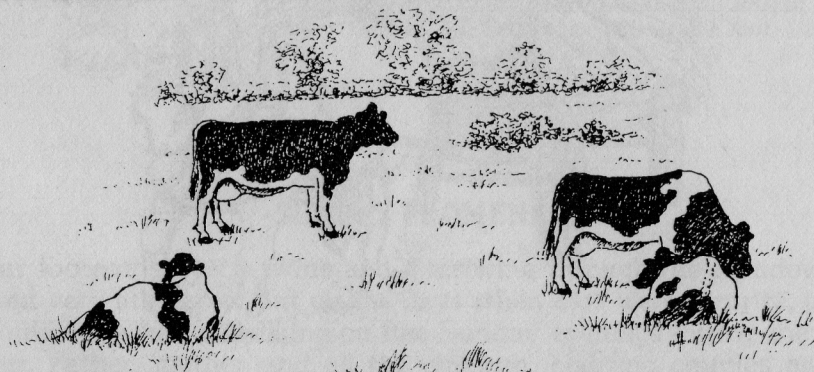
The carthorses' hooves made "little clouds of dust around their feet as they drew the hay-laden wagons".



The memory of those country lanes is often with me. Wild flowers in the hedgerows, many wild flowers, rowan trees and elder in bloom, their scent heavy on the air. Honeysuckle hanging gracefully from the tall hedges with its sweet, sweet scent. Sometimes over in a field, beans would be in flower and the scent of a beanfield is unforgettable.

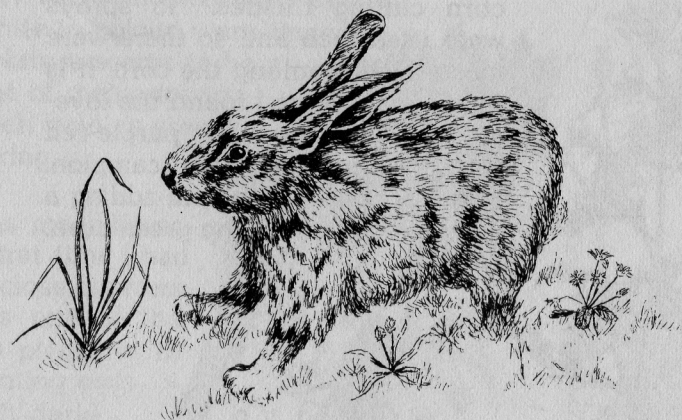
This particular June day, though, the countryside looks a bit dusty. The hawthorns are covered with fading flowers. One of the cows in the field over the road stands under one of the trees, swishing her tail. It is a lovely sight to see cows in the meadow on a summer's day.

I am reminded of years ago when herds of cows lived out in the fields for most of the year. One could watch them walking unhurriedly to the cowsheds to be milked, then in summer going back down the lane to lie on the grass till early morning. This still happens in many places but the milking herds are fewer.



The old cowhouses were warm on winter days, and peaceful, the silence only broken by the chewing and breathing of the cows and the clinking of the chain which tied each one to its respective place. On entering the shed, each cow went automatically to its own place.

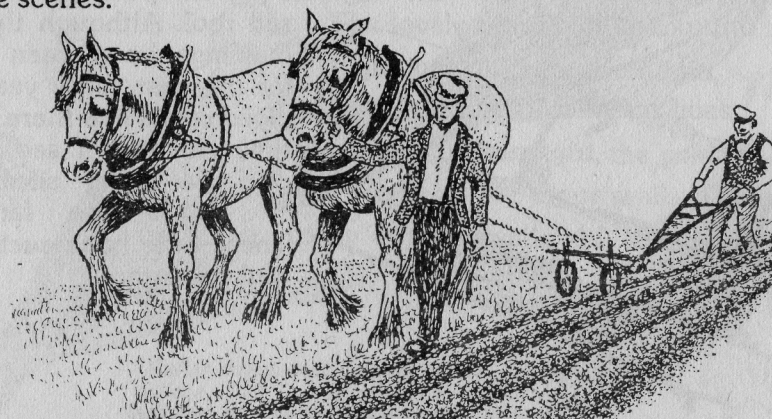
HOW WE LOVED THE HARVEST



Many a baby rabbit, or adult one for that matter, was caught by children as it fled from the harvesting machine.

One of our oft-sung hymns in the village school was "Fair waved the golden corn". We understood that very well. Cornfields were very much a part of our summer holiday. We would be watching for the rabbits to leave the corn so that we could catch them. We loved the corn harvest, the rides in empty wagons, the patient horses, some wearing earcaps to keep the flies from bothering them. These animals, so big, so strong and yet so gentle. All that strength put to good use, never used viciously.

The old waggoners loved their horses. Each would be up before five o'clock feeding them and getting them ready for the long day ahead. Man and animal worked together in complete harmony, understanding each other, respecting each other. A wonderful combination making a beautiful picture. There seemed something almost spiritual in these scenes.



Ploughing when men and horses "worked together in complete harmony"



One of the outside tasks of the womenfolk was to cut the thistles that proliferated among the then unsprayed corn.



Once a common weed in the cornfields, the purple-red corn cockle is now extremely rare.

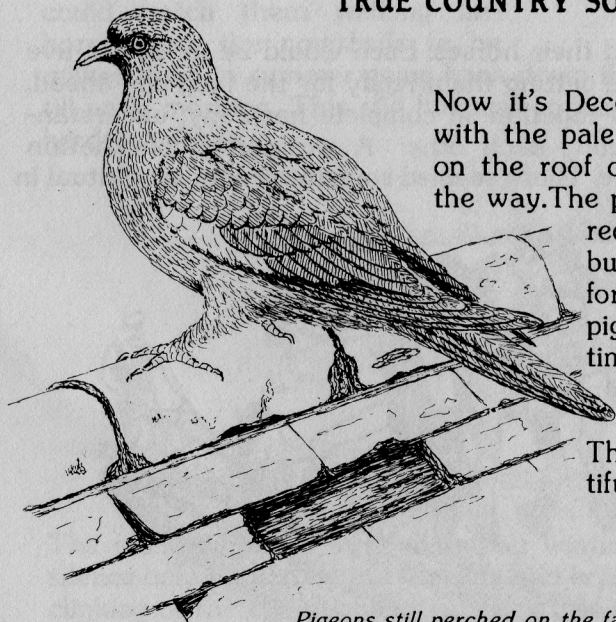


Women would work in the growing corn cutting thistles. No sprays were used then and so there were more thistles among the corn. It is many years since I found the lovely corn cockle, the purple-red weed resembling the campion. Some poppies still bloom adding a splash of colour to the green corn.

"Poppies still bloom adding a splash of colour to the green corn".

TRUE COUNTRY SOUNDS

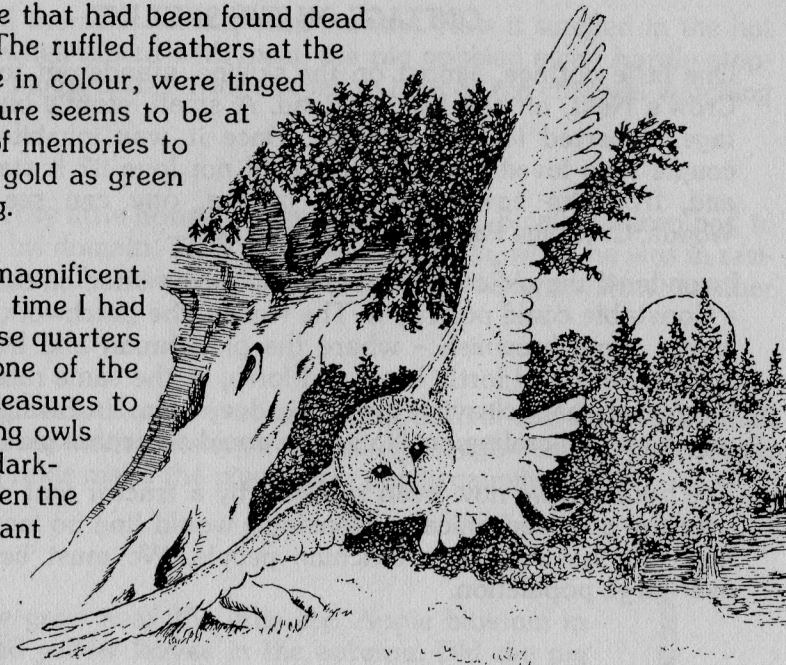
Now it's December 1st, wet and shiny with the pale sunlight on the road and on the roof of the farm buildings over the way. The pigeons perch on the blue-red roof. Although the farm buildings have been empty for the past three years, the pigeons still live there. Sometimes at dusk I see a large owl flying silently towards the farmyard. These owls have such beautiful colouring.



Pigeons still perched on the farm buildings long after they fell into disuse.

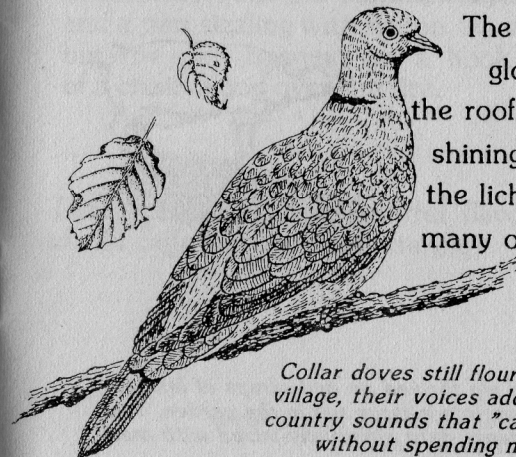
I once saw one that had been found dead in the belfry. The ruffled feathers at the neck, off-white in colour, were tinged with gold. Nature seems to be at this moment of memories to have as much gold as green in its colouring.

The owl was magnificent. It was the first time I had seen one at close quarters I think it is one of the real country pleasures to hear the hooting owls at night. Soft darkness..silence..then the weird but pleasant sound.



The barn owl found dead in the belfry was "magnificent" with off-white ruffled neck feathers tinged with gold. Now alas the bird is increasingly rare.

Two country sounds, the owls at night, the doves in the daytime, and all can be heard without spending money. The country has many compensations to offer those who earn less money because their lives are spent there.



Collar doves still flourish in the village, their voices adding to the country sounds that "can be heard without spending money"

The lovely greens of spring, the glorious colours of autumn, the roofs with their different hues shining in the sunlight, the gold of the lichen on the stone walls. There are many of these walls still left in our village.



COTTAGE ON THE SKYLINE

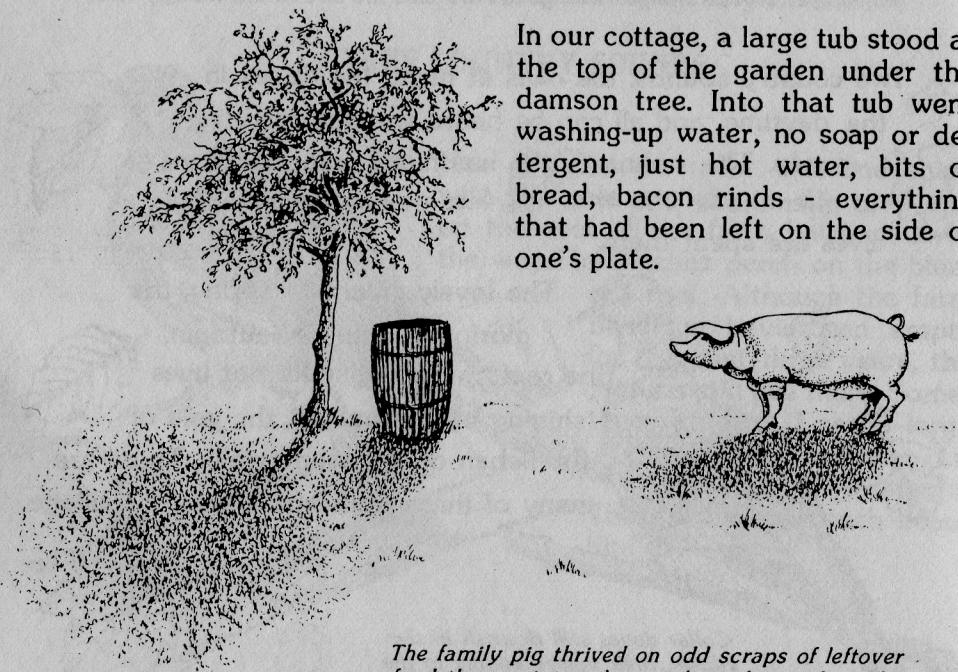
One little cottage, almost on the skyline, stands out today. It is the Crow's Nest, off the Kenley Road. A small, stoutly-built stone cottage, deserted for many years. Once it was inhabited by an old couple who loved it. And who could not love it? It stands on a hill and, from its now overgrown garden, one can see Belswardine Woods, Cressage Park and Wenlock Edge.

I wonder if the old couple feasted their eyes often on this scene. Only a Constable could portray it. The woods, the patchwork fields - some green, some brownish - where the ploughman and his horses had walked back and forth, back and forth, at the same rate. No rushing, the ploughshare cleaving the soil in deep furrows. Straight lines made only by a real craftsman. No novice could steer that plough.

The horses have now been replaced by a tractor that rattles its way over the soil mechanically. Constable would find no inspiration there now. We have become machine people. We must be to feed our over-large population.

THE FAMILY PIG

In our cottage, a large tub stood at the top of the garden under the damson tree. Into that tub went washing-up water, no soap or detergent, just hot water, bits of bread, bacon rinds - everything that had been left on the side of one's plate.



The family pig thrived on odd scraps of leftover food thrown into a large tub in the garden. The "high" contents were eventually mixed with meal.

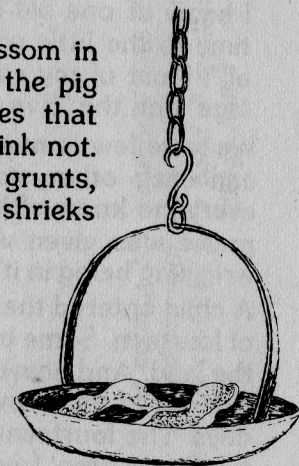
This tub stood there for weeks, even months. How it smelled in the hot weather! But when mixed with meal, the pig gobbled away hardly stopping to lift his piggy, bristle-fringed eyes to look at the children watching him.

He lived in a cosy little house with a low entrance. Small children had to duck to enter his domain. They never went, though, when he was in residence, only when his life was over and the dwelling awaited another tenant.

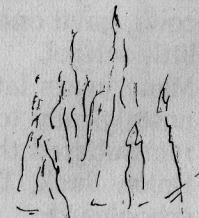
A small yard, walled with a strong door, jugged out from the small building. That was where the big iron feeding trough was put. Incidentally, did the bacon rinds make the piggy eater partly cannibal?

An apple tree grew near the little sty. Apple blossom in the spring and yellow leaves in the autumn. Did the pig ever notice the blossom or the yellowing leaves that sometimes covered the floor of his little run? I think not. He just ate and slept and grunted, short contented grunts, before falling asleep. Loud grunts mounting to shrieks when that meal was delayed.

Today the bacon is sizzling in the pan. The sound takes me back. Why do sounds rouse memories? I see the old kitchen, a blazing fire and a pan sizzling with bacon. No electric stove but the pan hanging on a hook at the end of a chain slung over the fire.



That bacon had a wonderful flavour. Was it because of the different food for the pig?



Bacon sizzles merrily in an iron pan hanging from a chain above the blazing kitchen fire.

Our school, now the Village Hall, was a stone-built, diamond paned edifice. One large room housed all ages, the infants' part of it being platforms, one above another. In summer the sun blazed through the long window above these platforms. A large fireplace was the only means of heating and, in the winter, parts of the room were bitterly cold.

Roasted near the fire and perished away from it, but we were hardy and we survived. Perhaps the chilblains most of us suffered from in winter were the result of sitting in that cold room. I do not know. I only know that today no-one would work in those conditions. There would be a walkout. The old grate must have been rather insecure. Occasionally, it fell out, spilling the live coals on to the stone hearth.

At one end of the room there was on the roof a small belfry with its brass bell. Its rope hung into the room. This bell was rung at a quarter to the hour morning or afternoon and again at the hour. The quarter bell told us that if we were dawdling to school, we must increase our pace.

Our schoolmaster, Mr. George H. Grosvenor, was a stickler for punctuality. The discipline seemed harsh, the learning difficult. But he taught us much besides the three R's although these were predominant.

I know of one old lady, who, when she hears the cuckoo, goes back in time to the little school singing: "And the cuckoo's call has a charm for all". Most of my contemporaries can recite parts of "The Deserted Village" and the "Eve of Waterloo".

We were few in number but we all stood out and we were real to Master and each other, not just one of many. If punishment was doled out everyone knew of it and sympathised with the unfortunate recipient. If praise was given we neither rejoiced nor felt envious of the blushing wriggling being in its moment of glory.

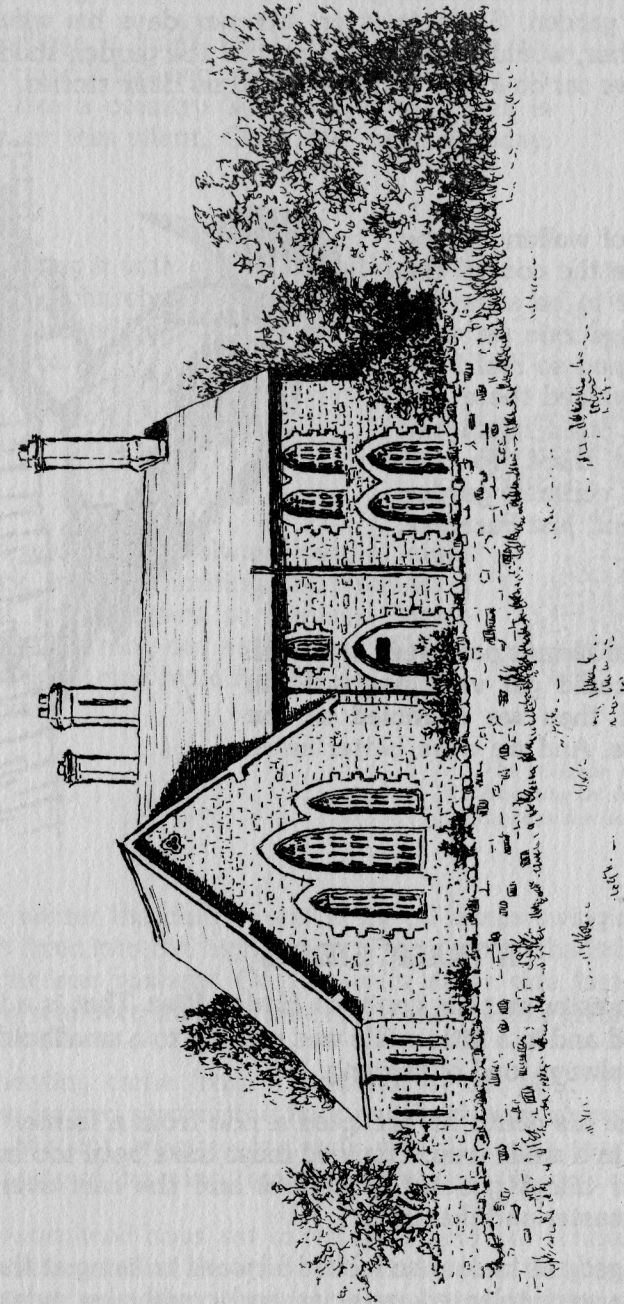
A child entered the school at the age of five and left it for ever at the age of fourteen. Some boys left even earlier during the 1914-18 war to help on the land. And how delighted they were.

Not one of us believed in the old cliché that school days are the happiest days. The fourteenth birthday was the day of release. The day of liberation had come, freedom lay ahead. We soon found out that there were other bonds forged binding us to our individual jobs. But to some extent, the sense of freedom prevailed. Working in the fields, tending horses or cows, gave one a feeling of liberty quite foreign to the days spent in the little school.

Many years later when life became more demanding, one looked back nostalgically to the schoolroom smelling of chalk. One looked back and remembered the songs we sang on Empire Day when we all saluted the Union Jack, the Christmas carols and the games we played in the schoolyard.

Somehow, time erased from memory the bad days. I have read where the wording on a sundial was "I only count the sunny hours." Our childish minds did the same and only stored the sunny memories.

OUR LITTLE SCHOOL AND HOUSE



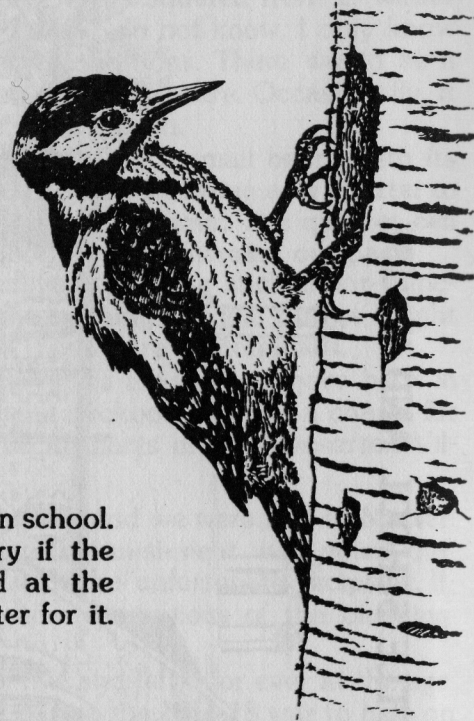
*One of the prettiest in the county, the old school with its charming arched diamond-pane windows with the schoolhouse at the end.
The building was recently restored by a band of modern villagers and is now used as a village hall.*

A VERITABLE GARDEN OF EDEN

Our schoolmaster was a wonderful gardener, not a weed grew in that large schoolhouse garden. Sometimes on summer days his wife, who was an infant teacher, would take us to a part of the garden shaded by hazel trees where we sat on forms and she taught us Bible stories.

When she spoke of walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, I imagined it to be a garden like the schoolhouse one we were in. And it all seemed so real I felt God could have walked there and talked to Adam. But I could not imagine a serpent there. To childish eyes it was a veritable garden of Eden, no serpent, just Paradise.

This mood was not always prevalent in school. Our pedagogue could get very angry if the need arose. And then we trembled at the sound of his voice. And we were better for it.



A TRAGIC ENDING

Sadly our schoolmaster met his death on Harley Rise. That is a bad hill. He had just retired and in a little while was moving to a smallholding not far away. He was always fond of farming.

On the morning of his death he accepted a ride from a farmer coming down Harley Hill in a small trap. The load must have been too much for the little pony for things got out of control and the cart overturned, killing the schoolmaster and the pony.

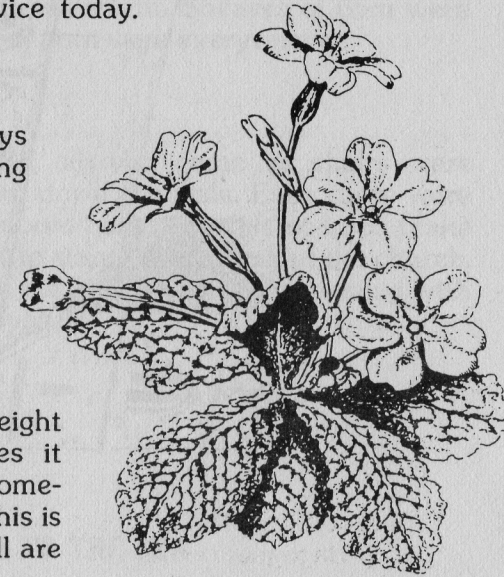
It was really a tragedy as he had so looked forward to living at the smallholding. He was a very talented musician and could play most instruments. He was church organist for many years.

LAMPLIGHT IN THE CHURCH

The village is quiet, very quiet. Since the bypass came it has become a little backwater, its road like a country lane. The church bell is more or less silent. Only one service today.

Comparing it with my childhood days even the church seems to be passing into subdued, almost lifeless existence.

Years ago the bell always rang at eight o'clock in the morning. Sometimes it called the villagers to service. Sometimes it just rang out as if to say: "This is God's day. I ring from His House. All are welcome."



The children gathered any primroses blooming at Eastertime to make into bunches for decorating the old church

In the winter the church was lit by oil lamps swinging gently from long chains fixed into the high beams. These white-shaded lamps were held in wrought-iron baskets. On the walls other side lamps were fixed. The lighting was soft, mellow, part of the old church, giving an air of peace.

The heating came from a fireplace in the floor. A long wrought-iron grating formed part of the floor and the warm air rose from this. Sometimes the fire, when going well, would almost roar. But if it was the wrong way of the wind there would be no roar - and very little warmth.

White-surpliced boys sat in the choir and our schoolmaster was seated at the harmonium. And how he could play that instrument! He was a wonderful musician. He was also a wonderful person. It is only in retrospect one realises his various accomplishments. The wonder still grows that one small head could carry all he knew.

The ancient square tower of St. Mary's Church overlooks the timbered Old Rectory and dominates the whole of the village.

HARLEY CHURCH

HARVEST FESTIVAL'S "FULL HOUSE"

Today is our Harvest Festival. The old church looked lovely with the autumn flowers. Shafts of sunlight fell on the yellow flowers on the sills of the diamond-paned windows. Only the people were lacking. Years ago Harvest Festival was a time of great excitement. Sheaves of corn were brought into the church and bunches of corn were everywhere.

The pews were not enough to hold all who came so chairs were borrowed from village homes and put down the aisle. Even these were not enough. Sometimes the vestry doors had to be left open to make room for people inside and some had to stand at the back of the church. It was a real Harvest Festival and the old familiar hymns were sung with gusto. Will this ever come again? I doubt it.

CHOIR OUTINGS TO THE SEA

We rose very early to go by coach or train on our choir outing to some seaside resort. We were about before real daylight having breakfast in the dim morning light, cutting and packing sandwiches. Then we would start on our journey, a happy crowd. For one day we were trippers and we "tripped". We crowded a lot into that one day at the seaside, collecting together for a midday meal. In the evening came the journey home. As it advanced everyone seemed to be very sleepy so it was quieter than the journey we set out on in the morning. How we enjoyed those outings. They were very few so all the more enjoyable.

Now all is gone. No church choir, no outings. We little thought that in our lifetime, our old grey church would be well-nigh redundant. I wonder what the "forefathers of the hamlet" who lie in the churchyard would think if they came back at the weekends when cars whizz along the by-pass. Few seem to heed the call of the church bell. Even the bell's short ding-dong-ding, a few minutes before the service is due to start, sounds melancholy these days.

CONSERVATION IN THE CHURCHYARD

Part of our churchyard now is given over to conservation and the old grey gravestones are surrounded by grass and, here and there, brambles. The National Society for the Protection of Rural England have now suggested this should be done as the old churchyard soil has been left undisturbed, not like many of the ancient pastures which have been ploughed up.



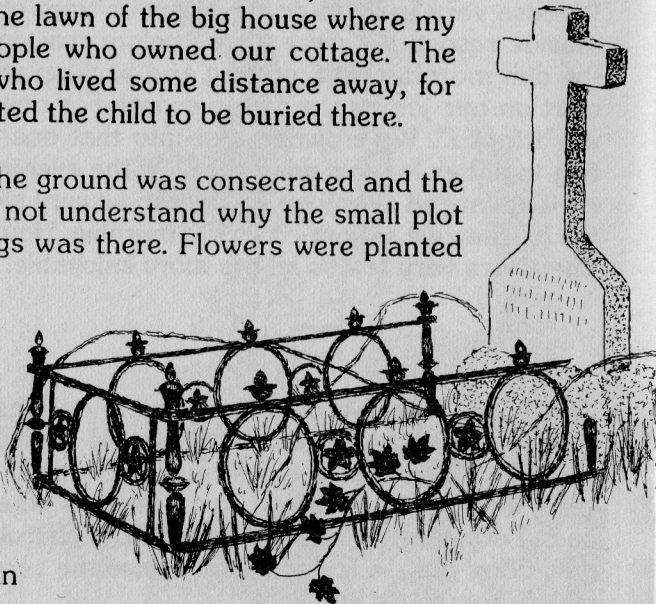
The small shy wren is another bird that is encouraged to flourish in the peace of the churchyard.

Harley has compromised. Part of the burial yard grows wild and part is mowed and looks very tidy. Some have the best of both worlds. Trees have been planted in the wild part to provide food and shelter for our wild birds. Some of the old lichen-covered gravestones have been cleaned. Some are very old.

In one corner of the part still in use, there is a kerb round the grave of a child who died in the year I was born, 1903. She was originally buried on the lawn of the big house where my father worked for the people who owned our cottage. The brother of our landlord, who lived some distance away, for some reason or other wanted the child to be buried there.

My mother told me that the ground was consecrated and the burial took place. I could not understand why the small plot surrounded by iron railings was there. Flowers were planted and, with the fir trees surrounding the lawn, it seemed a lovely quiet spot. After much questioning I was told what it was.

Many years later when the small estate came up for sale, the coffin was exhumed and buried in our village churchyard



THE LAST VILLAGE SHOP

Today our village shop closed down. It had become unprofitable. So now we are without one. In the march of progress everything done in a small way is crushed, the small shops put out of business by the supermarkets, the small farms swallowed by the farming combines - and a way of life is lost.

When we were small children our village had two little shops, one near the school, one a few yards away. The one near the school has been a shop off and on for many years, also the post office for a while.

The smaller one went many years ago. It was a picturesque cottage. A privet hedge topped the stone walls and on one side was a dark little garden surrounded by privet hedges. A laurel grew in the centre.

To me it seemed a fascinating place, dark and mysterious, quiet and peaceful. Here at the side door we bought our sweets, very few. Bread could also be bought there but ours came in a sort of covered wagon drawn by a steady old horse. The butcher with his straw hat and white apron travelled in another cart. For rainy days he had a huge umbrella.

We have no post office now but, many years ago, the post office was in a small cottage adjacent to the churchyard. Two elderly people lived there. The woman was the church and school cleaner. I hardly recall her husband but she was a wonderful character.

The post office cottage was taken down during World War 1 and she moved to another cottage in the village. She was kept on as caretaker for the church and school. She also took in washing, some of it for people in Much Wenlock. And every week she would take laundry in a wicker perambulator up the steep Harley Bank and bring the soiled linen home.

No welfare state then and I think the old age pension was half-a-crown weekly.

THE BLACKSMITH AT WORK

The blacksmith had his smithy opposite the school. We had to learn the poem "The Village Blacksmith" but our blacksmith was very unlike Goldsmith's. He was small and wiry but strong.



The children could hear the village blacksmith, described as "small and wiry but strong", hammering out the horseshoes and the roar of his fire.

When in the schoolyard we could hear the fire roaring and the chink of his hammer as he hammered out the horseshoes. Sometimes he would have a fire outside his shop when he was hooping the great wagon wheels. How deftly he worked. The building still stands but it has been silent for many years. The tractor has replaced the horse in this ever-hurrying world - and much colour has gone from the village.

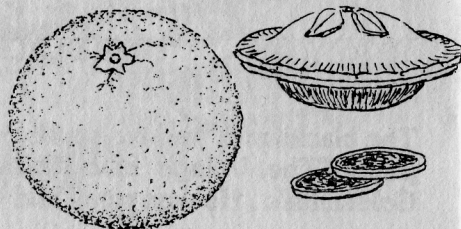
Silence reigns supreme at the old school and the blacksmith's shop. And the children who played in the schoolyard and watched the patient horses waiting to be shod are scattered, some passed on

In the blacksmith's garden, Emily's holly is bright with its many red berries. She had a piece of holly in the house one Christmas and stuck it in the ground later. Emily passed on many years ago but the holly tree she planted still stands in the garden with its gnarled pear tree, a very old tree. The holly is in very good shape, almost like a pine tree.

ANTICIPATING CHRISTMAS

For weeks before Christmas we children felt its delight coming. Who was it said "anticipation is better than realisation?" That was not strictly true. The realisation was good also. And yet compared with today's gifts, we had so little. For weeks before, carols took the place of hymns in the stone-walled school. These brightened the dull days and led up to the Great Day.

One year our schoolmaster took the whole school on Christmas Day, I think to Castle Hill. We formed a half circle round the front door and sang carols. We were each given an orange, a mincepie and two pennies.



Many children went round carolling in those days. Early on Christmas morning one would hear the piping voice of a child. How lovely that all was. My mother would give the singer a penny or perhaps twopence and then she would go to church. We played with our few toys until she came back.

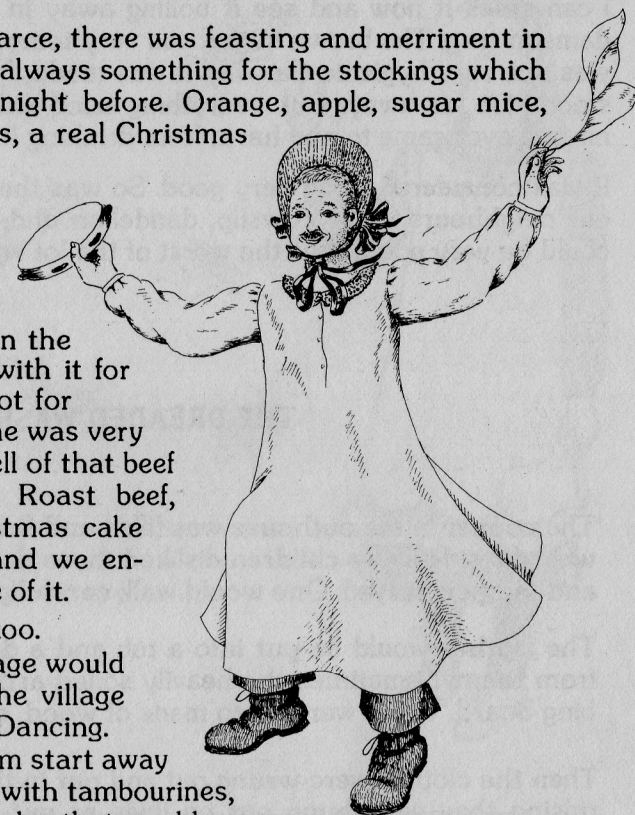
Although money was scarce, there was feasting and merriment in every house. There was always something for the stockings which had been hung up the night before. Orange, apple, sugar mice, tiny toys and, sometimes, a real Christmas stocking with its little treasures.

A log would be burning in the grate, some coal mixed with it for the side oven must be hot for roasting the beef, or, if one was very lucky, a chicken. The smell of that beef cooking was wonderful. Roast beef, plum pudding and Christmas cake made a wonderful day and we enjoyed every single minute of it.

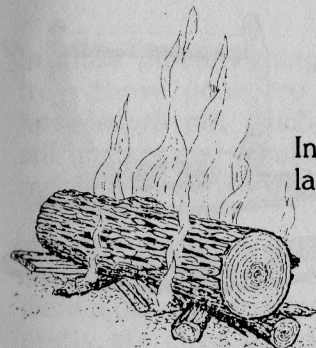
Boxing Day was exciting too.

Several men from the village would dress up and go round the village and other villages Morris Dancing.

We children could see them start away in their various costumes with tambourines, concertinas and anything else that would add to the noise. One, at least, would be dressed as a woman, complete with sunbonnet and wide skirt. Some dressed as clowns.



CELEBRATING NEW YEAR



In those old days there was always a yule log for the last day of the year. A large one so that while we waited we would be warm. Very few villagers went to bed before twelve o'clock. A dark man was eagerly sought to bring in the New Year. No woman must ever be the first to cross the threshold. That would mean bad luck.

I felt nostalgia that seemed to surround everything and everybody on that night. It was everywhere pervading all things. But New Year's Day spirited all that sombre feeling away. A few carol singers would call. As the day wore on other friends would call and drink the home-brewed beer my mother had made some months before.

I can smell it now and see it boiling away in the old copper under the damson tree. The brown sugar was very tempting to children. Perhaps it was not very hygienic the way it was made, for the washtub for the pig stood not far away. But everything used was scrupulously clean and no-one ever came to any harm from drinking it.

It was considered to be very good. So was the elderberry wine. Some of our neighbours made cowslip, dandelion and rhubarb wines. The latter could be very potent but the worst of the lot was parsnip wine.

THE DREADED WASHDAY

The copper in the outhouse was filled and fire beneath it was lit early on washdays. How we children disliked those days! Meals would be scrappy and tempers frayed. One would walk carefully on this day of the week.

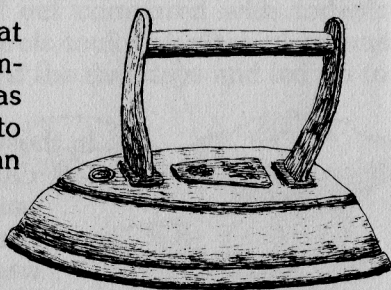
The clothes would be put into a tub and a dolly used to pound the dirt from them. Sometimes the heavily soiled articles were rubbed on a rubbing board. These were often made of wood, sometimes zinc or glass.

Then the clothes were wrung out and put in the copper and boiled. After rinsing they were hung out on lines or put on hedges to dry. Women would often go to the farms to do this work and would think they were well-paid if they earned half-a-crown a day.

After washing came the ironing, the flat irons heated on red coals. Winter and summer this work went on week by week. It was an age of large families so there was much to be done to send the children to school clean and tidy.

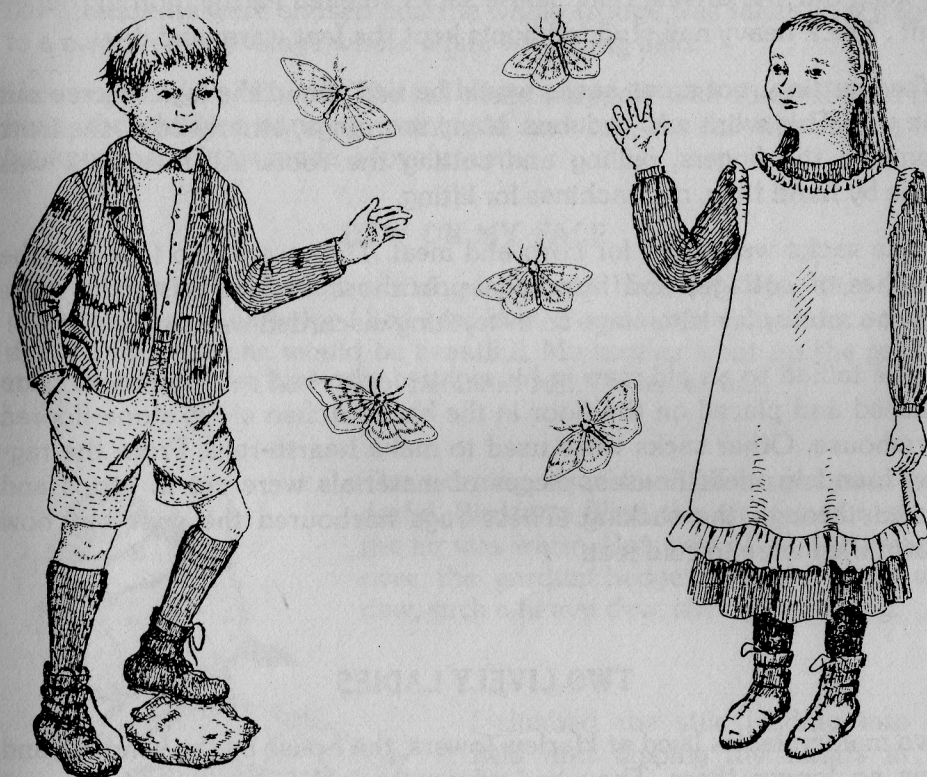
How hard our forefathers worked.

What changes have taken place in just over fifty years!



THE CLOTHES WE WORE

*Girls wore a red flannel petticoat under a thinner one beneath their frocks.
"Everyone wore a pinafore to keep the frock clean"*



*Summer and Winter boys wore hard shiny collars and woollen stockings.
Knee-length trousers were often made out of father's old ones.*

In those times nothing was wasted. Trousers for little boys were made from those gone too ragged for father to wear. As they were only knee-length not much material was used. Knickerbockers, shiny hard stiff collars and woollen stockings made up the schoolboy's dress summer and winter. In the winter a jersey called a "gancy" was added.

We girls wore thick underclothes in the winter - a red flannel petticoat under a thinner petticoat, a frock and to cover this a pinafore. Everyone wore a pinafore to keep the frock clean. The Sunday pinafores were very pretty, starched, frilled at shoulder and hem, nearly always white.

COUNTRYMAN'S GARB

In those times too, waterproof clothing for every day was practically unknown. The countryman would cover his shoulders with a thick sack to keep out the driving rain. These sacks smelled earthy, nothing repellent. Thick heavy nail-studded boots kept the feet warm and dry.

When cutting root crops sacks would be tied round the legs to keep out the wet. This work was arduous. Many mornings, bitterly cold, the frost numbing the fingers, pulling and cutting the roots. All this work was done by hand then, no machines for lifting.

These sacks were used for corn and meal. They were also found in the porches of cottages and farmhouses. In those days of austerity, there was no money for trimmings so everything discarded was made use of.

I have talked to an old man in his eighties who told me how sacks were washed and placed on the floor in the back kitchen of his stone-floored farmhouse. Other sacks were used to make hearth-rugs. From the rag-bag found in most houses, pieces of materials were cut in strips and pulled through the sacking. These rugs harboured the dust but how warm they were to cold feet.

TWO LIVELY LADIES

Two maiden ladies lived at Harley Towers, the house by the windmill and now no longer there. They had silvery curls framing their faces and many rings and jewels. A white peacock roamed round their house - living inside with the ladies were many cats and dogs.

An ancestor of theirs was part-founder of the Shropshire breed of sheep and the weathervane on the top of the old mill was in the shape of a sheep.

The house inside was fascinating, many paintings and lovely old carved furniture. At one time whist drives were held in a long low rafted room over what was called the storehouse. One entered the room by a very rickety staircase. This was frowned on by the police and the use of the room for these functions had to be stopped. But our ladies were never daunted - and a fire was put in an empty cottage. And those who could not play whist went there to learn.

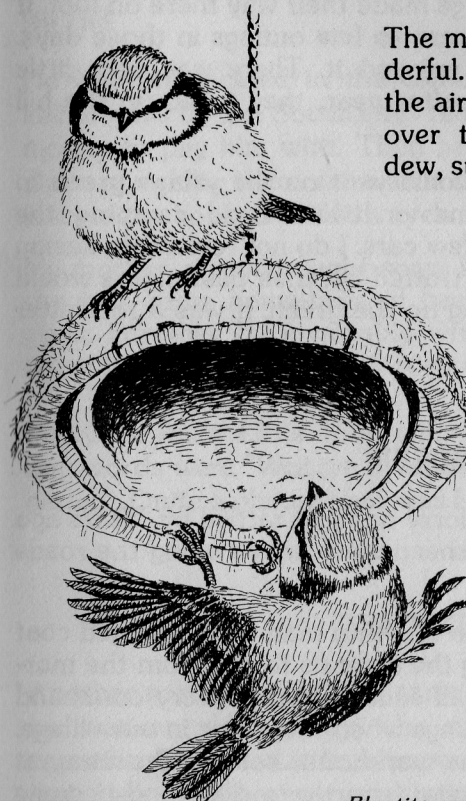
DANCING ROUND THE MAYPOLE

One year one of the ladies decided Maypole dancing should make a comeback. The pole was erected and the children put through their paces. The music was supplied by a gramophone. Later the queen and her attendants were chosen and the whole troupe was taken in a wagon to a neighbouring village where a fete was being held.

How enjoyable it all was. The tall white maypole with the coloured ribbons, the children dancing, twining in and out, the tall windmill in the background, all this made a lovely scene.

DEW ON MY FACE

One cold, misty dull May morning I thought back to a May Day many years ago. I rose early for I had read that if one washed one's face in the dew on May 1st one would be beautiful. My mother went up the garden to loose out the few hens into their wire run. I followed her.



The morning, even to childish eyes, was wonderful. Birdsong filled the air, the sun shone, the air was warm. But, best of all, the meadow over the garden hedge was glistening with dew, such a heavy dew, silvery, sparkling.

I climbed the stile leading into the field and dipping my hands in the soft, silvery grass, bathed my face. How cold it was!

I made my way reluctantly to the house. Magic seemed all-triumphant in that meadow on that early May morning. I have never forgotten it after more than half a century. Needless to say I kept this from my companions. I was afraid of ridicule which to a child is deadly.

Bluetits are thankfully as prolific among the birds today as they were at the turn of this century.

DAY OF THE FAIR

Years ago, May 12th was Much Wenlock's Mayfair Day. It was a day to be looked forward to. Fathers and mothers and children trudged up the Harley Hill, passing under Wenlock Edge in perfect safety. Horse-drawn vehicles of various sizes would pass them but not on the hill itself. The horse would only be going at walking pace there.

As one reached the little town the sound of the fair would reach one's ears, growing louder and louder as one reached the goal. Hobby horses, swingboats, coconut shies, all were there with stalls selling brandysnaps and various other goodies. The little town was filled with bustling crowds. The shops were open, at least for a while, but the centre of attraction was the noisy fair.

DAY OF THE RACES

May 15th, another memorable day in the annals of Much Wenlock. Race Day! Several of the men from this village made their way there on foot. It was a red letter day for them, there were so few outings in those days. How they looked forward to it and enjoyed it. There was very little money to gamble but somehow, year after year, they toiled up the hill and came home in the evening.

When school was over, we children would wait on the village green to see the brakes with the four-in-hand or two-in-hand carrying the wealthier racegoers. There were very few cars. I do not remember seeing one in the earlier years. As the horses trotted by, their passengers would throw coppers to we children watching on the green. It was a red letter day for us too.

THE OLD DROVER

Today is auction day. The large cattle lorry has just rattled by. Years ago on auction days, droves of cattle and sheep were driven along the roads miles away to the markets.

One old drover I recall was Abraham, a tall, thin man with a ragged coat and old boots. He made a living taking the animals to and from the markets. I remember his dog, a rather small collie, obeying every command his master gave. The two slept in buildings when they were in our village. I do not know if they ever went to the workhouse some miles away at Cross Houses. That building is a hospital (shortly to close and become government offices).

Once it was a temporary home for the elderly homeless or for other human flotsam who could not live in an orthodox manner but for some reason or another, tramped the roads from workhouse to workhouse.

THE LITTLE PEDLAR

A little old man we called Little John came round every week with a pack selling cottons, tapemeasures, pins and needles, studs and ointments. He also carried sweets, chiefly raspberry drops, and many other small things.

He was a small wizened man dressed in a greenish-black long swallow-tailed coat. I can remember him very well, spotlessly clean with a small weatherbeaten face under the wideawake hat he always wore.

Often I watched him walking up the bank away from our home, large box on a small back, reminiscent of a snail with a large shell. In later years he had a small truck which he pushed down and up the steep Harley Hill.

He was uneducated in the orthodox way so he had a quaint way of keeping his books. Sometimes there was no change to be given or ready money to pay him with. Then he would enter this in his little book. In place of writing there were little drawings and various signs. It seemed a fascinating book to childish eyes.

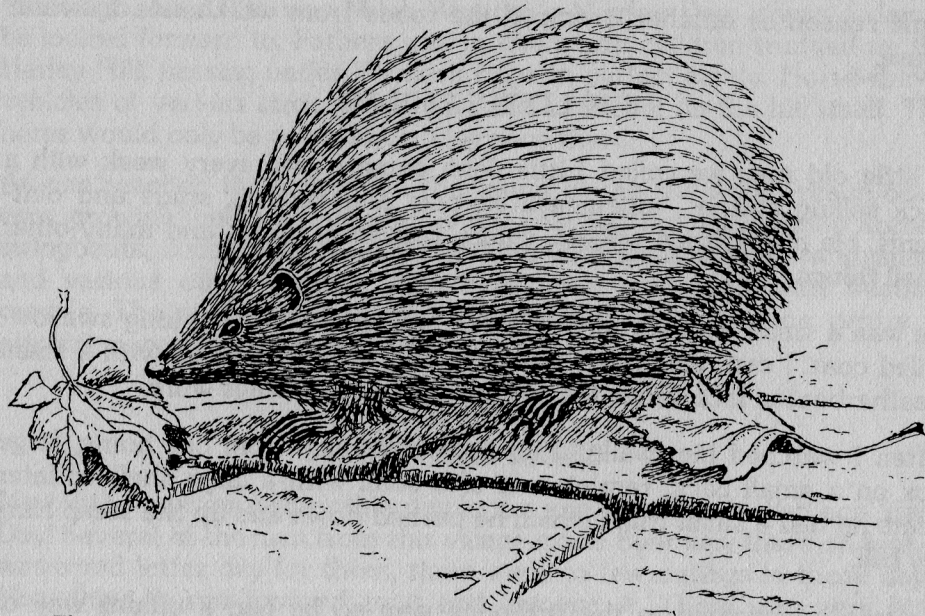
My mother always bought some little thing from the old man and when she had some home-brewed beer in the house she would give him a glass. For this, he invariably wrapped up a few raspberry drops in a paper bag and handed them over for the children.

Everyone knew Little John and welcomed him. I can remember his parting words were "Well we must do as well as con (can), we canna do any better". Quite a philosopher was Little John.

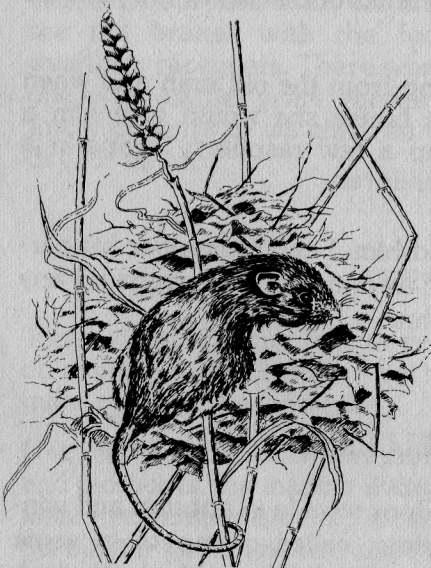
THE PIKELET SELLER

Another sort of pedlar who came to our door weekly in autumn and winter was an elderly lady who sold pikelets, called crumpets in some counties. She, like Little John, walked down the hill from Much Wenlock and then when her wares were sold, would have to climb it again to get back to her little house. And all for a few shillings!

SUMMER LIGHTNING



The hedgehog had more chance of surviving in those more peaceful days before the menace of the motor car. It, too, enjoys the churchyard.



The harvest mouse that made its nest in the corn was another animal to be disturbed during harvest time.

This year the summer days have been hot, very hot, almost unbearably so after the cold winds of the last few months. But now the hay harvest is nearly over. There is a tinge of gold on some of the cornfields.

Last night sheet lightning flashed in the darkness. Old country people used to tell us it came at this time of year to ripen the corn. I can remember watching it as its flashes lit up Wenlock Edge. It was at one and the same time beautiful and terrifying.

The day had been very warm. There was no moon and the sky was black. Flash followed flash, lighting up the oaks in the meadow, the fir trees round the pool and, best of all, Wenlock Edge.

OUR DANCING DAYS

The school is now the village hall. We had no hall when we were young and social events could only be held on a Friday or Saturday evenings. If possible Friday as we had to clean up the school on Saturday ready for the children on Monday.

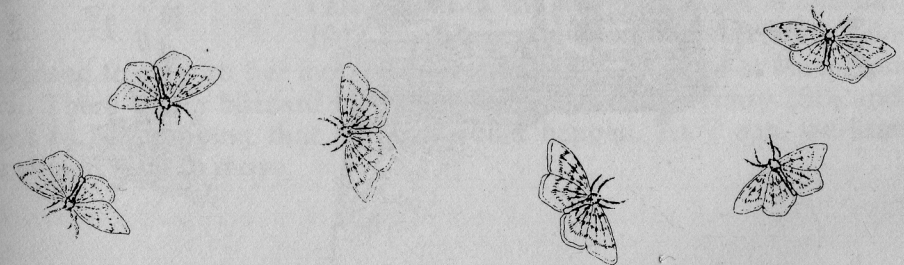
One winter, we decided we needed somewhere else where we could meet and dance. We cleaned out an old barn, got benches or chairs from here and there and danced to gramophone records. Primitive but we had a lot of fun.

The barn has gone now and several of the dancers. The ranks are closing year by year. When we attended dances in neighbouring villages, one cycled or travelled in a cattle lorry. The owner was a great friend and very good-natured so he cleaned it out thoroughly for us.

Our dances nearly always lasted until dawn. Most of the men worked on farms. They had to be at work very early so they preferred to change, wash and have something to eat, and after a little while, to go to work. It wasn't worth going to bed. Cars were few and far between in those days.

I am recalling also how, after having a summer fete, at night we would dance on the lawns. There was magic in the air. Then dusk would be falling and we would dance oblivious of everything but the dreamy music.

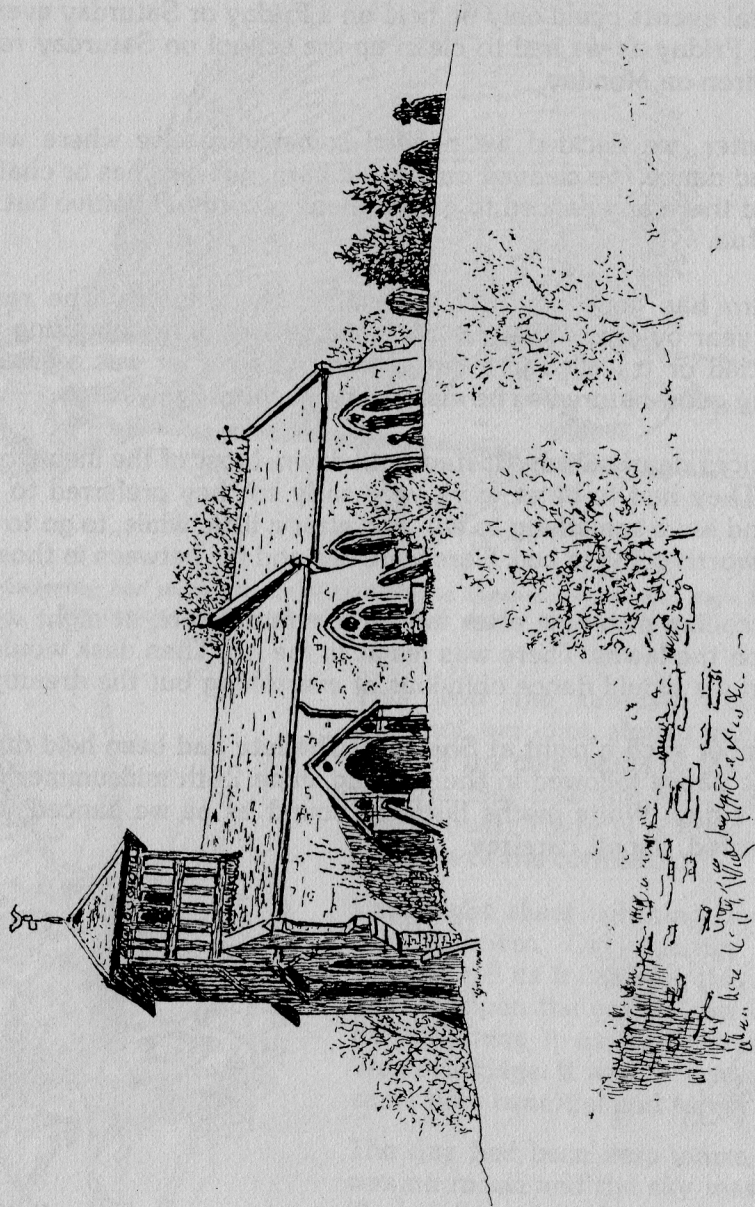
I remember such a night at Sheinton. The fete had been held during the day, the dance followed in the evening. June 24th midsummer St. John Baptist's day. White moths fluttered round us as we danced. We were lighthearted, happy, carefree.



Dances are now in village halls not in schoolrooms or barns. In the latter ones the floors would cause a dancer of today to pass out, or give them a wide berth, but the fun was great there and we really made merry even if it was only a old horned gramophone we danced to.

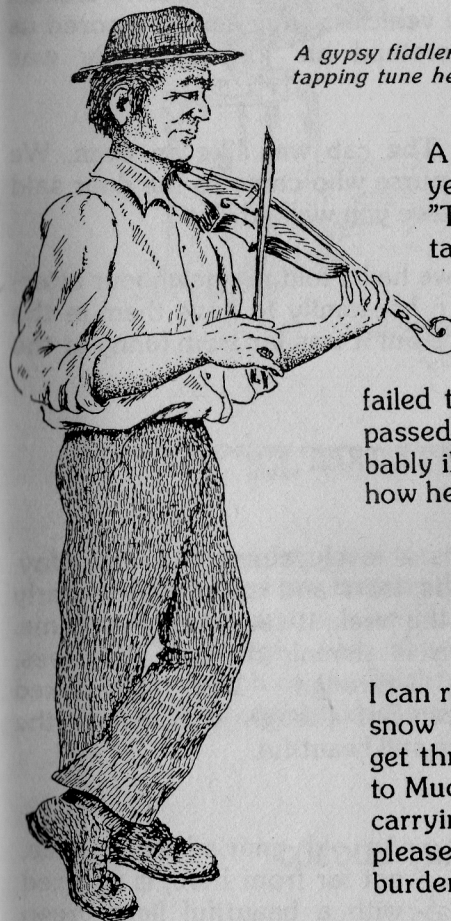
SHEINTON

June 24th, Midsummer St. John Baptist's Day



"White moths fluttered round as we danced" at Sheinton one
Midsummer's Day.

THE GYPSY FIDDLER



A gypsy fiddler used to call round each year. One toe-tapping tune he played was "The Dance of the Leaves"

A gypsy fiddler used to call on us each year. He used to play something called "The Dance of the Leaves", a gay toe-tapping tune.

He was well-rewarded with food and drink and a little, very little, money. One year he failed to come and we thought he'd probably passed on. A dark, swarthy, stocky man, probably illiterate, but he had music in his soul for how he played that fiddle!

CUT OFF BY SNOW

I can recall several bad winters - one when the snow was so deep the tradesmen could not get through. Several of us started out to walk to Much Wenlock for bread. We met one baker carrying sacks of bread on his back. We were pleased, so was he. We relieved him of his burden and did an about turn.

I also think of the heavy snowfall in February 1947 when my god-daughter was born. I had promised to go with her mother to the maternity hospital at Much Wenlock. There was a blizzard blowing on the night of February 25th and I went to bed praying that nothing would happen. At 7 a.m. we knew we should have to move.

The lane was deep in snow. Her husband, a lorry driver, said we must make our way down the lane as he could not possibly get the lorry up it. He went down to where the lorry was stationed to get it started while we floundered on the snow making our way to the road.

I do not know how many times we fell down but we eventually reached the lorry and got into the cab. At the foot of Harley Hill the lorry stalled. Many men were clearing a path for the vehicles. They almost ignored us until the husband made them understand his journey really was necessary.

I have never seen men move faster. The cab was like an oven. We reached the top and the hospital. The nurse who came to the door said "How have you managed to get here? Have you walked?"

My feet were burning. I almost wished we had. I told my neighbour afterwards if she had any more additions to her family to have them in the summer! We laughed about it afterwards but it was far from funny at the time.

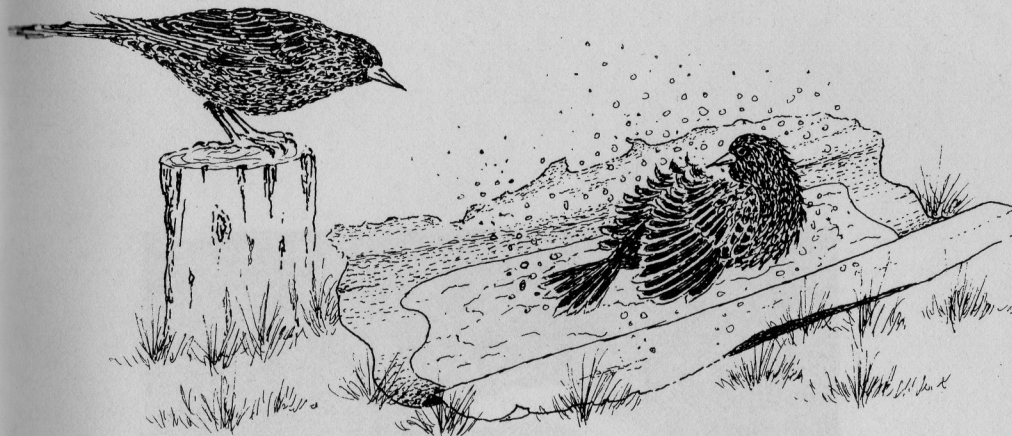
THE OLD APPLE TREE



Today is a lovely sunny February day. After the frost and snow of the early part of the week, it seems another clime. The sun is shining through the trees, filtering through the still-naked branches. But though unadorned, the trees are still beautiful.

An old gnarled apple tree, not far from here, is covered with a beautiful light green lichen. The sunlight splashing through the branches shows, here and there, this soft lovely colour.

A blackbird sits on a branch near the trunk, preening its feathers and obviously enjoying the warmth. Now and again its golden beak lifts the glossy black feathers. Green, gold and black, as always Nature's colours are in complete harmony.



Rainwater splashing over two starlings bathing in a puddle formed in a discarded piece of corrugated iron looked like "silver drops"

In the puddle, lying in some corrugated iron thrown carelessly on the ground, starlings are bathing. The water splashes over them looking like silver drops. On the wire fence are more glittering drops, many like jewels. The bright blue sky with its billowy white clouds gives the necessary touch to the bright morning. Suddenly it seems to be spring, a spring come unheralded but one wonders has it come to stay? I think not.

COLOUR THEN DID NOT REGISTER

It has been another lovely day (November 25th, 1972) for the time of year. I have just come back from Emily's. The evening is dark and gold. Gold in the setting sun, dark trees and shadows. Still and quiet, nostalgic. Suddenly I realise we, my contemporaries and myself, have grown old.

The days of youth seem so very far away. Memories of other days like this, many years ago, come crowding back. Cycling home from school, getting ready for a dance, all is far away. Somehow then the evenings with their colours did not register. It is only when we have time to stand and stare that these things push themselves to the fore as if to say,

"Look at us while you can and remember us".



Hilda Preece

The author would like to express her appreciation to Mrs Pat Seabrook for her lovely drawings, Mrs Joanna Gale for editing this book and all other villagers who have helped with this production.

Proceeds to be donated to Harley Church and Harley Village Hall