

Reepham 'Sixty Years Ago' (1920s)

Sixty years ago, Reepham was a busy market town (not village). The population of the four parishes – Reepham St. Mary, Hackford, Whitwell and Kerdiston – gave Reepham a total population of 1,300. Most of Reepham is the old Hackford Parish. Reepham's market dates from the 13th century.

The medieval market was probably bigger than the existing Market Place, round which the buildings are largely 18th century, although most, such as the Brewery House are obviously older, at least in part.

In the 1880s the coming of the railways – Reepham Station (L&NR) and Whitwell Station (M&GNR) – made Reepham's weekly cattle market the biggest in this area of Norfolk. On Wednesdays, the town was crowded with dealers and farmers and their wives. The pubs were open from 10 am to 10 pm; and as many deals were done in the pubs as in the market. Horses and carts were put up in the public house yards. Bullocks, sheep and pigs were driven through the streets, and to and from the stations. Sainsburys van stood on the market to buy eggs from the farmers wives, who also brought butter to sell to the shops, which they would patronise while their husbands attended the cattle auction run by Irelands, the auctioneers, did deals, and visited the ironmongers, seed-merchants and saddlers.

Around the market place from Town End Corner, the shops were as follows. On the north side was the shop of Edward Gibbs and Son, ironmongers and seed-merchants. This was the oldest ironmongers in Norfolk; there had been an ironmonger in these premises since the middle of the 18th Century when Edward Gibbs took over the business in 1888. The next block of buildings housed D'Arcy Collyer, a solicitor, and Jewell, the druggist, whose shop ran round the corner. After Jewell's shop there was Barclays Bank, manager H. T. Owen. Over the bank was the office of Purdy and Holley, solicitors (who are now in Ivy House across the market place). Originally a chemist, Johnson Cripps had acted as the local agent for Gurneys Bank and on the amalgamation of Gurneys Bank with Barclays, the Reepham branch of Barclays Bank came into being. Adjoining was a cottage; and then came the shop and workshop of J. Hall, saddler and harnessmaker, who also had a branch at Briston where he did all the harnesswork for the Melton Constable Estate (Attfields occupy the premises today). Across the narrow gap of Fishers Alley was the grocers and drapers shop of G. Fisher (now the Chimes). Finally, a striped barber's pole denoted the shop of a barber named Swoish.

On the north side of the market place, Mrs. R. Bircham lived in the Brewery House, with the old well in the yard and the Volunteers Drill Hall behind (which now forms the banqueting room of the hotel). Next came two houses, the second occupied by W. Ford, a baker, who was reputed to make the best bread in the district, with his

bakehouse up the adjoining yard. The next block comprised the house and shop of G. Cocking (now Gwen's greengrocers' shop); with private house next door. St. John's Alley is named after a tallow-chandler, not a saint: many years earlier a man of that surname made candles in the sheds behind the shop and house. W. Bishop, watchmaker, had the first shop on the east side of the alley, adjoining the newspaper, sweets and tobacconists shop of B. Miller. Another private house separated the newsagents from the corner shop of A. King – 'breeches a speciality' – the tailor. Further along, at the Ollands Road corner was J. Rump, a butcher.

On the south side of the market place, adjoining the churchyard was the high-class grocers shop of L. R. Riches. The next range of buildings with the corner shop belonged to Hilton Brothers, Cash Grocers. A small group of non-conformists, Plymouth Brethren, were allowed to hold meetings in an upstairs room over a warehouse on the premises. The large house now forming the Bircham Institute has an interesting history. Until 1873 it was the Old Hackford Vicarage. Later it had more than one private owner and was called Hackford House. Then in 1919, Mr. S. Bircham gave it to the Hackford parish council as a war-memorial; and it became the Institute, with Dr. Perry of Eynesford House as the president, and Chute Thompson, headmaster of the elementary school and captain of the local cricket club, as librarian.

Pudding Pie Alley is obviously very old: I have an idea that the name might be a corruption of 'court of pie powder', which was the title of a summary court, held by an official in charge, on the spot to settle disputes between market traders in medieval markets. ('Pie powder' was a corruption of the old Norman-French name.)

The King's Arms was the premier pub – the only one called a hotel – and was popular with commercial travellers, who would stay for a week and go round the neighbouring villages in a horse and trap, hired from the proprietor, G. Hubbard. Over another bootshop, run by T. Coe, was the district office of the Oddfellows Friendly Society, where on Saturdays the members would pay their weekly dues. With a private house in between, next came the projecting shop front (now Diane's Pantry) of W. Utting, butcher. He had taken over the business from Watts Austin, whose family had been butchers since the middle of the last century. D. Kendall Chapman's post office and stationers' shop was alongside.

Between Chapmans and the 'Sun' stands Ivy House, a large double-fronted house, occupied by Mrs. Wilton, who operated the Reepham manual telephone exchange in the porch. Only a few private residents and some of the more enterprising tradespeople had the telephone. Kelly's Directory in 1925 listed the telephone numbers on the Reepham Exchange as: 2. Sir Woolmer White, Salle Park; 3. Dr. Perry, Eynesford House; 4. E. Gibbs & Son; 5. L. R. Riches, grocer; 6. J. White, garage; 7. Mrs. Ryder Smith, Reepham House; 8. Eglington & Beaver, agric. engineers (later

taken over by F. Randell & Co.; 9. E. Barclay, Whitwell Hall; 11. R. Coller & Sons, coal and corn merchants; 12. Stimpsons, corn and coal merchants; 13. Barclays Bank; 14. H. Frost, garage; 15. Cross & Co, corn merchants; 16. Purdy & Holley, solicitors.

Later Ivy House was taken over by Mr. Jewell; he lived in the part of the house nearest the 'Sun', and in the other section he had his druggist's shop, which he moved over from what is now the Bank corner. Barclays at the same time incorporated Jewell's old shop into an enlargement of the Bank premises. The telephone exchange moved across to a part of Gibb's block of buildings opposite. Later Purdy & Holley moved into Ivy House. Finally, the 'Sun' public house and run by C. Watson. The 'Sun' was patronised by the local tradesmen; and had its own bowling green across School Road, now used by the Reepham Bowls Club. The 'King's Arms' also had a bowling green, along the Dereham Road.

Wesley Piercy

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