

Childhood memories of Reepham

Mrs Ann Dickinson of Hunstanton has written of her childhood memories in Reepham, a childhood which she says she looks back on with great affection in her beloved Reepham.

Ann Dickinson's parents were married in 1918 and she was born in 1923. She started at Miss Bull's kindergarten school in 1926 and her memories are of events between 1926 and 1935. Her father died in 1935 and both she and her friend Peggy Hurn went to Dereham High School as weekly boarders; later they both became nurses.

After obtaining an extra copy of the Reepham Society Magazine for my lifelong friend, Peggy Hurn, I reflected on a wealth of memories of Reepham. To begin with (at the age of three years) we attended Miss Bull's Kindergarten School at the back of the Old Brewery House – there was Peggy and her brother John, Pat Hall, Kendal, Barbara Hilton, Joyce Wagg and myself.

At a year or two older we attended dancing classes at Miss Hoolah's, these were held at Rookery Farm. The dancing school put on shows for parents and friends at the Town Hall, I remember dancing in the "Wedding of the Painted Doll" with John Kerridge, son of the bank manager, who was Jumping Jack.

Sunday School was conducted by Mr Donald Chapman, who with his sister Olive ran the Post Office (Iona House). Donald ran a very flourishing, well attended Sunday School, we had wonderful outings and prize givings. Miss Wacey taught the senior children and when we reached her class, she insisted we learned the Collect for the coming Sunday off by heart which we had to recite in turn. I remember her with great affection and appreciation.

My mother was organist at St Michael's Church when the Rev. Geake was incumbent at Whitwell Rectory. Often, I had to pump the organ for her, watching the lead weight rise and fall and to pay attention and not let the lead fall below a certain mark – otherwise the organ gave a tremendous sigh and faded out. Both churches were used for Sunday worship, frequently the congregation of St Michael's would be waiting for the sermon to end as we listened to the congregation of St Mary's singing their last hymn. The Rev. Moore, in charge of St Mary's, invariably finished his service first.

With the retirement of the Rev. Moore and the Rev. Geake leaving in the early 1930s the Rev. B P Luscombe was installed and the two churches and four parishes of Reepham, Whitwell, Hackford and Kerdiston were amalgamated, and a communicating door was installed between St Mary's vestry and the chancel of St Michael's.

The Rev. Luscombe was extremely musical and could coax ability from the least able. We had a fantastic choir under his leadership, singing oratorios at special lips, the Messiah, Elijah, Olivet to Calvary to mention just a few – occasionally incorporating the voice of Mr Broad from Heydon, although Donald Chapman did very well in solos and supported by his fellow tenors, Fred Alford among others.

Mother took over St Mary's organ from Miss Jewel. As Mother had played a church organ from the age of fourteen, she became an excellent organist under the Rev. Luscombe's jurisdiction.

Apart from church music, various members of the choir founded a group to entertain during the year putting on many Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. The group included Donald and Olive Chapman, Elsie Varley, Mabel Utting and Mr Cocking – the latter running a boot and shoe shop (now Gwen Hardesty's fruit and vegetable shop).

The Market Place was a grandstand for the Reepham Town Silver Band under the baton of Mr Ruffles from Fakenham. When the weather was kind and it invariably was, they played for the town's entertainment after evening service at church on Sunday evenings until nine or ten o'clock. Reepham also boasted a fine Salvation Army Band and shared the Market Place as its meeting place – alternating with the Town Band. Memories too of carol singing with the choir in the snow, and with the handbell ringers. Picking primroses at Broomhill, snowdrops growing like a carpet at Catch Back and the perfume from the violets at Reepham Moor was unbelievable – the seasons seemed more seasonable in those days.

Father, who was invalided out of the Navy with T. B., put his great talents to effect when he settled in Reepham. My mother loved to tell the tale of when motor cars were the "in thing". My father built one around an engine and chassis and so anxious to try it out that one Sunday afternoon he drove Mother and Aunt and Uncle to Cromer and back. Father, being the driver, sat on the kitchen chair and his passengers on upturned orange boxes. The sides of the car consisted of chicken wire draped with old curtains but when they reached 10 mph the curtains flapped alarmingly and had to be removed.

Mother started a business making hats which flourished, and this eventually became a fully-fledged drapery, millinery, tobacco and confectionery shop. Father, in between bouts of illness, dabbled in photography, watch and clock mending, garage and battery charging and when confined to bed, built models, two of which, a ship and a traction engine, drum and elevator, are now housed with the Reepham Society.

The garage, erected to service the growing car trade, was built at the rear and side of the shop, over an old Baptist immersion pool. (This site is now rebuilt as a hairdressing salon and Reepham DIY.) I am sure it needed very little demolishing as it

was built chiefly of corrugated iron but the side facing our garden was all glass, consisting of photographic plates of every photograph, well almost, my father ever took – I wonder what happened to those?

Part of the garage was given over to the engine room where Father had a generator from which he produced electricity and proudly wired our house – the first in Reepham to have electric light, 1928 or 1929. He also made me a doll's house and fitted that with electric light powered by a battery.

Towards the end of my father's life, I remember the trees in our orchard had to be felled; they were very old and barren and had given shelter to the goat and bantams we kept there.

Mother's ambition of having a tennis court built in the old orchard began to take place, Father wanted to oversee the project and to make sure the ground was level but because he was now on constant oxygen this proved a problem. Not to be outdone he asked Dick Hatley, who worked with him, to get an inner tube from a car wheel and inflate it with oxygen – a piece of rubber tube to connect with the valve and by slinging the tube over his shoulder and a clip to control the flow of oxygen he was able to walk up the garden and inspect the new tennis court for himself, returning before the tube was deflated.

We were now able to have tennis parties – comprising Donald and Olive Chapman, Jean Hawes, Evan Symonds, Ricky and John Lambert, Ruby Barnes, Len Wilkinson, Mother and myself.

My great friend Peggy Hurn and I had other delights in common – her father Mr Fred Hurn and both my uncles, Mr Edward Gibbs Senior and Junior, were among the company which formed the "Black Minstrel Troupe" and we look back with great affection to our childhood in our beloved Reepham.

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