

I Remember – Part 2

The story of Reepham Market Place in the early years of this century as seen by a small child.

In the last newsletter we printed the first part of the reminiscences of Miss Marjorie Gibbs of Reepham Market Place during the period 1902–1920. The first part detailed the residents and their businesses, and this second part elaborates on the social life of the Market Place.

The social life of the Market Place was almost a community in itself: Austin, Fisher, Hall, Peck, Cocking, Riches and Gibbs all being members of the parish council and most of these on various committees that were formed from time to time.

One of the highlights of the year was the fair on June 29th and I can remember the excitement to us youngsters when the Market Place was invaded by vans, roundabouts, coconut shies, shooting galleries and stalls selling home-made rock of many flavours and much stickiness. They usually stayed for a week, to the delight of the younger generation, although the adult part of the population was glad when they left owing to the noise and many other inconveniences. Stalls were gay and lighted by paraffin flares. The majestic engine with its shining brasswork was admired and wondered at by everybody as it provided steam to run the roundabouts, current for the organ's repertoire of tunes and the lighting system. This was also a strain on the pockets of the youngsters for pennies, which often had to be supplemented by a visit to their parents two or three times during the evening. The vans were drawn up side by side on the King's Arms plain facing the road and the horses were put out to grass on a meadow. We used to visit the "fair people" and take them fruit and vegetables, since my mother always remarked, "Poor things, they have no gardens." One family came year after year and we would be asked into the van, so spotlessly clean, a wonderful house on wheels and I wished I lived in it. People would throng in from the surrounding villages and make it a real frolic. I was told to be home by 9 pm for bed, but I would lie awake listening to the organ playing its repertoire of the topical tunes of the day and waiting for God Save the King at 11 pm.

I can recall Barnes, Stocks, Shaws and Grays, and once Stocks stayed for three weeks. I may add as a personal note, that this liking for fair people has never left me.

Disturbing the quiet of the week, each Wednesday was the scene of much activity, when market day arrived. Farmers drove in with their horse and traps, the latter of various shapes and sizes. The horses were taken out of the shafts and stabled at the King's Arms or the Sun, though some preferred the lesser hostleries such as the Lord Nelson, the Greyhound, Duke of York or George and Dragon. The carts were parked on the Market Place or in the yards of the selected stabling.

Farmers used to congregate to talk to each other and exchange views and farm gossip, bargain with the merchants to sell their corn, or to go to the bank for wages, and do most of their farm shopping at the local ironmongers and agricultural engineers. I have seen cheap jacks with earthenware, and if the sale yard was too full, calves and sheep would be kept there until such time as there was room in the sale ground. The Market Place was the central meeting place for everyone. On Sundays, the Salvation Army band would hold services in the Market Place afternoon and evening. The band was very good in those days. Two army officers were in charge and the Army had a good cause here. I would always run to the window to see them march by as they paraded to the barracks in Norwich Road via the Back Street, that is, if I was not in Sunday school in the afternoon.

The Market Place set the scene for another "once a year" occasion. The Oddfellows held a district church parade, usually on Whit Sunday evening, when men, and in some cases their wives, came in from various lodges, arriving by wagonette, horse brake, horses and traps or bicycle. The men met at 6 pm on the Market Place looking very gay in their various coloured sashes and, with a very imposing banner bearing the symbols of the Oddfellows on it, would march to church via the Back Street.

In those days, the churches were not amalgamated, and I think the service was held one year in St. Mary's and one year in St. Michael's alternately. After the service they would again parade with the band (usually the Dereham Volunteers' band) proceeding along Norwich Road, Reepham Moor, Cabbage Court (now New Road) to Station Plain and back to the Market Place via Station Road collecting money en route. They would then disband and repair to either the King's Arms or the Sun to "whet their whistles". As a child this was a highlight, and my mother would entertain one or two of the wives during the parade and we would keep open house with coffee and cakes for anyone whom my father or my brother would bring in afterwards. It was a "treat" for me to be allowed to stay up to watch the parade after church.

I cannot recall the Coronation of Edward VII but to celebrate this I believe marquees were erected on the Market Place and the whole village attended a feast of cold salt beef and pickles (I don't think salads were so fashionable then), with plum pudding to follow. Every child was given an enamel mug with the picture of King Edward and Queen Alexandra on it, as a souvenir.

Another feature of life in the Market Place during the winter months was the weekly dancing class held in the King's Arms club room. I envied my sister and brother who were old enough to attend this very popular pastime. Most of the young ladies and young farmers from the district attended (even Mr. Peck, though not so young!). The culmination of all this was the annual dance, held in the same place. Miss Boon supplied most of the music on the piano and the dance usually finished by midnight.

The King's Arms had a flourishing Bowls Club, well supported by the Market Place residents.

Another daily event in the Market Place comes to my mind. At 6 am the people living there were often awakened by the arrival of the mail cart and its noisy driver. The cart was like an ordinary heavy trap, with a covered-in portion behind for the bags of mail and was red. The horse was given a nose bag while the driver knocked up the postmaster. He came every day including Sunday.

Musically, the residents could be an entertainment in themselves. Mr. Fisher was organist at the chapel, choir-master and also conducted Glee Parties. Mr. Cocking played the bass fiddle and trombone, Mr. Juby the violin, Mr. Edward Gibbs Junior violin, piano or any other instrument he could find, and with residents from other parts of the town, a string band was formed, not grand enough to be called an orchestra. Local concerts for various charities were given in the old school, Mr. Peck singing in his light baritone voice part-comic, part-sentimental songs that not always succeeded in being funny. Miss Boon was a willing accompanist and would also sing well-known ballads of the day such as "Don't Hurry" and "The Song that Reached My Heart", accompanied on the piano by Miss Austin who lived next door and who was also pianist with the string band. Mr. Austin had a rich tenor voice and could always be relied on to sing "Nivana" or "Thora".

Mrs. Wilton and lastly the Gibbs family would sometimes help. My father was ever popular with repeated requests for one of his six or seven humorous patter songs, some for which he had never seen the music and my brother would invent accompaniments for them. Since my father had a gift of wit and great humour, he could always be relied on to make a racy speech of introduction or pass a vote of thanks. The elder daughter would recite and the son, with that rare gift of improvisation, would play the piano or organ and any instrument that he could find for his collection. He even invented an attachment for the piano which was like organ pedals and produced music from bells, each pedal playing one bell. The younger daughter (myself) only came in to the music picture about 1913 by playing accompaniments on the piano and piano solos, and even at an early age was in great demand to sing childish songs. Throughout the War she sang in concerts for the troops. Her voice was trained but she could never pursue a musical career as intended, as with the shortage of man-power she had to leave Dereham High School and make a career in the family business instead. With several "outsiders" from other parts of the town and surrounding district the musical gentlemen of the Market Place formed a highly successful minstrel troupe, calling themselves "The Black Diamonds". Mr. Le Neve, the relieving officer from Dereham Road, was interlocutor, the two corner men were my father as Bones and Mr. Sidney Eglington as Tambo. The assistant corner men were Messrs. Austin and Peck. They rehearsed in

the club room and were in great demand as entertainers. Every year a grand Garden Fete (another highlight since there were few cinemas and a visit to the theatre an event) was held in the grounds of Dr. E. V. Perry, the committee for this being of course the Market Place gentlemen with a few others. Their wives formed the tea committee. Sometimes the Barnardo boys from Watts Naval Training school at Elmham would give displays of life-saving, various gun drills and physical displays and also dancing of the hornpipe. The band of this school would parade from the Market Place. At night the gardens would be illuminated with hundreds of fairy lamps, along the paths and festooned around. These consisted of coloured glasses about the size of a large cup, each containing a night-light. Usually, one or two of the juniors were assigned to light these at dusk, and the band played for dancing on the lawn.

When the Black Diamonds were formed, their first performance was given at one of these fetes. For this premier a covered proscenium was erected, the string band accompanied, and it was all a huge success. The stage was unique in those days in that it was lighted by electricity supplied through the gardens by land line from Mr. John Dixon, who at that time had the cycle shop on the corner of Towns End.

The friendly Market Place took on a different aspect and with the outbreak of war in 1914 everything seemed changed. Market days still continued but with less enthusiasm, local men were either called up or volunteered for the forces and with the arrival of troops, the Market Place became a parade ground. We had army personnel here throughout the war billeted in homes and various buildings. There was much excitement when the first troops arrived in late 1915. These were the 'A' Company of the Honourable Artillery Corps. I well remember them arriving on horses with their equipment.

We were daily awakened by the sound of reveille from the Market Place at 6.30 am and it was also sounded from various points in the town. During the day, we heard "Come to the cook-house door" and later at sunset, the "Last Post".

To the younger generation who did not realise the seriousness of war it was a thrilling sight to see the Company on horseback lined up for inspection on the Market Place, probably before going around the country side on manoeuvres and many a child was late for school in consequence. This group of peace-time soldiers who were called up at the outbreak of war were drawn from all quarters of city life in London. Stockbrokers, solicitors, actors, musicians and all grades of professional life. It was Reepham's boast that it held a very special regiment. These men entered into the village life and were very welcome guests in many homes. The officers' mess was at The Ollands, and the NCOs and men were in billets. The horses were kept in various stables in the town, and we had two, as well as our own horse, in ours. We had two sergeants billeted with us. One was a dentist from Hanover Square, London, who by way of contrast was the Saddler Sergeant.

The other sergeant was a highly qualified engineer, and he was the Wheeler Sergeant, so was more or less dealing with machinery. They invariably had their evening meal with us, and although the sergeants' mess was at Brewmere, they became part of our family.

The very small artillery guns of the H.A.C. were kept and guarded on the Market Place. One vivid memory of the H.A.C. is still very much imprinted on my mind.

It was New Year's Eve. We had kept open house for most of the evening for coffee and drinks for several of the officers and men with whom we had become friendly. There seemed to be a great camaraderie amongst these troops and various ranks mingled with each other very freely.

Nearing midnight everyone came out of their houses and a huge ring was formed entirely around the Market Place. Soldiers and civilians linked up, in rather a merry mood, and we all sang "Auld Lang Syne" and "Home Sweet Home". For a very young teenager, taken care of by one of the sergeants of the household, this was, as I have already said, an unforgettable experience.

If the Market Place could feel, it would have thrilled as it listened to about 150 folk of all ages, singing the Old Year out and the New Year in. It was with much sorrow that we saw the H.A.C. depart for active service in the spring of 1916. The Middlesex Yeomanry followed during the next winter, with horses, and the year after that the Hampshire Yeomanry arrived on bicycles when, instead of the Market Place being a parade ground with horses, we saw bicycles lined up for inspection instead. By this time, a small Y.M.C.A. was functioning in the King's Arms club room. A succession of regiments followed, and each one entered into the life of the village, although we did not even have another New Year's night on the Market Place.

During the war several of the Market Place gentlemen were special constables and would be on duty in pairs, working on a rota system. The young generation became adept at avoiding their respective fathers, not wishing to be caught with a special army friend.

When peace was declared and Reepham was again without its troops it never seemed the same. The tone of the town had altered, some men did not return, some were crippled, some had been prisoners of war and we all felt war weary and in a much more thoughtful mood.

However, the old Market Place itself never changed and it returned to its peaceful splendour and serenity as it is today.

As a matter of interest, the ironmongers' business of Edward Gibbs was established in 1767. In approximately 1850, Mr. William George had these premises. I do not know who had the business previous to Mr. George unless it was his mother. It was found in records of the early 19th century that Mrs. George was a shopkeeper in

Reepham, but no trade was mentioned. Mr. George was a man who did not intend to miss a penny, and it is said that he would open the shop at 7 am and sit on the doorstep eating his breakfast of bread and milk to avoid missing a customer.

About 1875 the business came into the hands of S.W. & W. Leeds.

In 1888 Edward Gibbs (my father) took the business over. He wanted to be a farmer as his father was before him, but at that time farming was at a low ebb, and he was apprenticed to what was said to be the next best business, and that was an ironmonger. Here he remained all his life, being joined later by his son.

The premises were large, with many warehouses, each one assigned to one section of the various goods stocked. In the 1890s the grocer's shop adjoining became vacant, and this was added to the existing shop.

Until after the war, the shop was opened at 7.30 am, open all day until 7 pm, on Fridays 8 pm and on Saturdays 9 pm and it was never closed for meals.

The dwelling house attached was enlarged in 1904 when two rooms were added, one on the first floor and the other underneath, with an extra staircase and pantry behind.

The business carried a large stock in great variety including some unusual articles, e.g., piano hinges. It was said that if a certain article could not be obtained elsewhere it could always be found at Gibbs'.

A story with its unconscious humour occurs to me. My mother often helped at the desk with bookings and cash on Wednesday afternoons. During the war she was chatting with a customer, long since deceased, about meat rationing. She remarked that as a farmer, he would have, at least, a plentiful supply of eggs to supplement his meals, to which he replied, "What's in a egg, two mouthfuls."

As a child I loved the shop, and the premises were fine for playing hide and seek with my friends. I could write about the business at great length but so many reminiscences might be boring. Sufficient to say I have enjoyed writing this saga of Reepham Market Place of so many years ago. I have looked back into childish memories and savoured again my childish pleasures as 'I remember'.

Marjorie Gibbs

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