Right: Wesley Children and Pet.

A Christmas Miscellany

by RUBY HUNT

BEFORE THE AGE OF GRAB AND GREED

'I remember, I remember', drowsed the old man by the fire. The time was Christmas and the big farm parlour happily enfolded family and friends as once again, replete, they prepared to spend the evening reminiscing in the golden glow of the big oil lamp suspended from the long, low ceiling. Outside snow deadened all sound save for the distant barking of a dog guarding a homestead in the neighbouring fen.

A cinder dropped into the hearth, the old man stirred—'Did I ever tell you about the Pinchbeck carpenter who sent his bills out all in rhyme?'. 'No', they said (Forgive them please!) as patiently they listened to the oft-repeated words :

	£	s.	d.
Oil for little and great Bell			
T'other three went very well	0	1	0
For eating and drinking at the Bell,			
For Ringing Christmas in so well	0	12	6
Paid for lean-toos, posts and planks,			
Over the grounds of neighbour Franks,			
Drunkards pulled up in their pranks,	0	8	0
Item, cutting and contriving,			
Fourpence nails, and sixpence driving	0	0	10
Laid a plank in Cuckoo Lane,			
Cuckolds never can complain,			
They may go to the Church and back again	0	2	0
For a new pulpit, oak the wood			
As parson Townshend said it should	5	5	0
To going to Pepper and to Gall,			
For cash to do the work withall,			
They the pulpit did, and preach and all	0	1	0
	£6	10	4

When such hot and bitter folks,
Pay me for my deals and oaks,
I know no more than Joney Noakes . . .

A nod, a wink—the old man slumbered, but memories, once awakened, flooded the cosy room. They spoke of the coming of the Railway—1882 it was—and the difference it made to their small Market Town. Folks often went down to Donington Approach just to 'see the trains come in' but the diehards among them 'couldn't a-bear the noisy things—never had a railway ride and didn't intend to, preferring to stay in their native place. Not that they scorned its uses—the market thrived and prospered as Mr. Beardall, the Nottingham dealer, sent his many purchases off by train, while Litherlands, first of the Market Gardeners, had quick contact with their Sheffield and Manchester markets.

Donington Road Station

Left: The early 1900s at Donington the Station Master Mr. Walton.

KAISER BILL

One man remembered an illustrious traveller passing through Donington Road Station in 1902—old Kaiser Bill himself—on his way to visit his cousin at Balmoral. What a fuss and commotion! Platelayers guarded the crossings—no-one was allowed over for half an hour before and half an hour after the royal train had passed. A line-side farmer, drilling wheat, was just about ready for home but no-one was allowed to cross over the metalled track—a sympathetic platelayer permitted him to fetch some sacks to cover the sweating horses but his son, newly returned from fighting the Boers, was furious. Remembering the Kaiser's congratulatory telegram to Kruger, he exclaimed, 'Mark my words, whoever lives to see it—we shall be fighting this crittur next—in 10 years time I'd say'. Alas! How right he was.

No such carping in 1907 when the popular King Edward went through on his way to take part in a shoot organised by his friend the Rt. Hon. Henry Chaplain, Squire of Blankeney and M.P. for the Sleaford Division for almost 40 years before being knocked out in the Liberal landslide in 1906. The new M.P., Mr. Arnold Lupton, brought a new approach to canvassing when he and his daughter cycled into the villages, ringing their bicycle bells and drawing attention to their cause.

Not that the working man took much notice as this was Harvest Time and there was much to be done in those long, hot summers of long ago. What a blessing the old Mill Pit proved to livestock keepers before the piped water came and how the farmers remarked what a good time it was for corn when 'the watter carts rattled'! The weary workers, carting 100 gallons for every 10 bullocks, were not so sure! Corn was tied at night and a rest taken in the heat of the day whilst the cattle, finding no grass, were fed on leafy branches.

SECOND PLACE

Everything took second place to the land. Even the Parson often seemed more farmer than pastor with his acre of meadow and allotted glebe while the much respected Doctor Jollye kept a groom-gardener whose interests, like those of his master, were fixed on the breeding of horses and pigs. The good doctor allowed all of his farrowing sows their daily pint of ale. Home made beer he strongly upheld but viewed with abhorrence the strong tea always to be found stewing on every labourers old-fashioned hob.

Chattering idly thus, the oldest among them recalled a verse learned long ago at school :

'The king he governs all,
The Parson prays for all,
The Lawyer pleads for all,
The Ploughman pay for all
And feed all' . . .

'That's reyte', said Uncle Arthur, 'and all for a few bob a week'.

Practically everyone was employed on the land—on the job by 6.30 a.m., the day seemed plenty long enough till 5.30, finishing time. With lunch at 9.00, and an hour for dinner, it seemed a long hour and a half after 4 p.m. No half-days then—perhaps leaving a little earlier on a Saturday afternoon, with a golden half-sovereign and a Crown a-piece if a full week had been 'got in'.

No wonder the breaks were longed for—filling food was plentiful during the early years. It was reckoned that a labourer's lunch could be packed for 4d, small loaf 1d, a lump of cheese 1d, a Spanish Onion 1d and a glass of beer 1d, or maybe a bottle of cold tea. Wilby Sharpe's bakehouse turned out plum cakes—good and cheap at 3 for a shilling—oozing with butter—butter with a 'bite' in it and all for 6d a pound. Two bakers, "Midnight" Baxter and "Bunny" Pattern, carts full of 4lb. loaves—4d one time and 4½d the next—always set out for the outlying fens late on a Saturday afternoon, eager to sell to folk leaving the pubs on a Saturday night—much to the annoyance of the Level Crossing Keepers, angry at the late return. But, 'Business was Business' and, in spite of late trading, these two men, stalwarts of their respective Chapels, never missed an Evening Service, hurrying home afterwards to 'set the sponge' for Monday morn.

LUSH WITH LIFE

May and June brought meadows lush with life giving fodder while after the haymaking the eddishes were covered with white clover in all its fragrant masses. Harvest was the busiest time—'oppening out' with scythes and gathering rakes, making way for the Gem of the Century—the Massey Harris Self Binder—clicking out the well made sheaves—much to the wonderment of the 'old hands', some of whom were 'dead agen' the 'maaister's new contraption'!

Livestock was everywhere—the cottager's pig, the cletches of farm-yard chicks, cattle, sheep and the countryman's indispensable friend, the horse. Engaged in every activity, either spanking along between the shafts of a smart little tub or patiently pulling the plough, the horse was the countryman's mainstay. Even at the beginning of the motor car era, the horse reigned

continued overleaf

Below: Private George Thorlby of Bicker, overseas, first world war.

Above: Harvest "opening out" Bank Farm Donington. Mr. E. Goodacre and Mr. G. Taylor.

continued from previous page

supreme and even the local lawyer, his new horseless carriage having broken down, suffered the crowning indignity of a tow home by a farmer and a horse with long ears!

WILLIAM HACKETT

This was the hey-day of William Hackett, the Vet. Jogging around in his tub trap, his tall figure swathed in layers of top coats and capes, he covered miles on his daily round. An eccentric, wasting few words, he was held in awe by villagers who, while respecting his undoubted skill, never really understood him. Many a client was ushered into his presence often to find him, feet on stool, still wrapped for his journeyings, with a dish of his favourite rice pudding clasped to his chest as he advised how best to treat the caller's ailing animal. Serving the district for over 50 years, he eventually succumbed—much against the grain—to the purchase of a motor car. Driving at a snail's pace, dead centre of the road, he was repeatedly overtaken by racing schoolboys, the more Biblically minded of whom christened him Jehu (For he driveth furiously!).

Work all the week and church on Sundays. Some of the packed congregation covered several miles on foot, the younger generation demurely carrying prayer books with sprigs of lavender carefully pressed between the pages. After the service, their thrifty elders discreetly passed the popular Stamford Mercury around between their friends. The beginning of the century saw the end of the Victorian era. Donington church was filled to capacity—benches lined the aisles—as everyone mourned the passing of the old Queen. Many an elderly lady, dressed after the manner of Queen Victoria, asked for no greater compliment than to be told how much she resembled the well-loved sovereign.

King Edward's Coronation, delayed by illness tho' it was, brought forth the Elementary School Brass and Whistle Band to head yet another procession as prelude to a gargantuan feast while Mr. Maples of Spalding marked the occasion by presenting every scholar in the Holland Division with a 1/- Bank Account—a gesture much appreciated by all and everyone.

There was always something to look forward to in the countryman's calendar. The Weekly Market around the Parish Pump with the early setting out of the Market stalls and the ringing of the Market Bell, the Feasts held by the Friendly Societies—Foresters, Oddfellows and Dividing Club—which for a few pence a week provided medical aid in sickness and pecuniary assistance at the last Sad Parade, the Fair, Temperance Concerts and Sunday School Treats. Almost all of them remembered the Spalding Sunday School Festival when over 2,000 scholars and their teachers sat down together. Laymen and ministers were busy from 6 a.m. carving from the glorious rounds of beef which were followed by huge plum puddings which had taken over a weeek to prepare!

At the mention of food, out came the Warner's Model Cookery Book of 1868 containing a London Syllabus with instructions to 'milk into it FROM THE COW about 2 quarts of milk' as well as 'Directions for Brewing in Cottages (A receipt off the late Duchess of Buckingham)'.

THRIVING MALTING

Donington had no need for brewing in cottages as it had a thriving Malting of its own. This was owned by the Dods family who, in the 19th century, had

Donington Market

Left: Mr. S. Beardall son of Mr. Beardall, Buyer from Nottingham holding one of his fathers purchases from Donington Market.

Down on the Farm . . .

Right: Blossom and Diamond down on the farm. Horseman G. Louth photographed with "Townee" visitor.

established a 'Carriers by Water' business on the 40ft. Drain—often taking goods to places as far away as Derby. Corn was regularly transported to Boston—replaced on the return journey by coal collected from the busy port, thus first establishing the Coal Business which still bears the Dods' name.

Every sack had to be manhandled down the steep river bank and dumped onto the waiting barges. What labour!

Employees grew old in this splendid firm's service—not always to the liking of son Joseph who once remarked, 'Father, are you aware that we are getting a lot of old men on our job?' to which father William replied, 'Yes, son, I am aware—but remember that I had them as fine, strapping young fellows. I've had the steel, therefore I shall put up with the old iron'!

Sometimes the horse-drawn barges carried a different sort of cargo—in 1903, a Special Tea Fight was arranged at Gosberton Clough and the local party departed from Donington Bridge, blue-jerseyed Boatman Rice at the helm. Soon, haunting strains from a violin floated over the water, signifying that Harold Holmes, local musician extraordinary, was aboard.

THE SQUIRE

Garden Parties were in their hey-day, enjoyed by young and not-so-young alike. The Wesleyans held their get-together a mile or two from town, at the Wykes Manor, home of the teetotal Joseph (Cocoa!) Drewery whilst members of the Church favoured the Park where Captain Richard Gleed reigned as squire. It was at the Park that the Annual Rook Shoot took place—anything up to 400 young birds were killed while the parent birds wheeled helplessly above the parental nests uttering their frantic, melancholy cries.

The Captain, a remote, somewhat austere man left contact with the village largely in the hands of his gentle wife who carried many a nourishing tit-bit to the cottages. Little did she realise that her kindness had often been forestalled and that the pot simmering on the black-leaded grate contained a fat, juicy rabbit, taken by stealth from her own husband's teeming pasture! Poaching, regarded as a countryman's right, was rife and game easy to come by. The more timid or the more law-abiding relied on 'something for the pot' from Rabbit Catcher Cook who, in his horse and trap, his dogs sitting up beside him, crossed over the river into the "High Country" collecting rabbits and destroying rats, his fee being 'a half-share of the rabbits and 4d a-piece for rats'. Selling 'rate good rabbits galore' at 1/- a time and 'less for half grown-uns' he was reckoned to be a dab-hand at 'scrattin' a living.

1914, and the dogs of war growled loud and long. Young, fresh faced youths departed, broken old men returned. In 1916 the Zeppelins came over in force, crossing the Wash at dusk. At their approach, trains were stopped and nothing could be heard save the noise from the deadly Zepps and the cackling of pheasants startled out of their customary calm.

At the mention of the Great World War the company fell silent, thinking regretfully of those no longer with them—wiped out by the cruel ravages of war.

The old man, sensing the silence, spoke once more: 'Did I ever tell you?' . . . 'Yes, yes Grandpa', this time they said, as the mellow ticking of the grandfather clock bade them all be gone. And, picking up the tattered book of Belloc's poems, Uncle Arthur softly read:

'From quiet homes and first beginning
Out to the undiscovered ends,
There's nothing worth the wear of winning
But laughter and the love of friends'.

Donington Schoolchildren and their teachers . . . c.1911

Below: Miss G. Stoneman, Miss F. Ruby (mother of Ruby Hunt) and Miss M. Sharpe (her aunt).