

Dedham Vale Society

Article 3 : Dedham, Seventy Years Ago

The following is the third part of the recollections of the late Roger Freeman who died in the Autumn of 2005 a few weeks after dictating this vivid account of his early life in Dedham.

Seventy years ago the village was much more class-conscious. There was a good deal of difference around the locality and there is no doubt that some people thought they were high and mighty and would not even look at some of the lowly people who lived in the council houses. Today, of course, the whole scene has changed. It is far less class-conscious and the population is somewhat different because the people I would call the old ~Dedhamites have really been driven out because of the soaring house prices.

“Dedham today has only a handful of the people who were there when I was lad. It has not been a typical East Anglian village for many years in the sense that the average Suffolk village, seventy years ago, was very agricultural. Dedham had a large number of big houses, many of which were Georgian or Victorian, occupied over the years, very often, by officers retiring from the military in Colchester. The popularity of Dedham Vale through Constable’s paintings would have had a bearing on this. Certainly when I was a lad, several of these houses were owned by retired clergy, Canon this and Canon that, Major General this and Major General that, Admiral so and so. Dedham seemed to have far more of these houses than villages further up the Vale.

People occupying large houses further up the valley tended to be from professions. It was notable to me that there were far more clergy and far more military retirees in Dedham than in adjoining villages. Perhaps East Bergholt was similar, but there was no doubt that the area in general was considered a nice one to retire to.

The farm-labourer’s wage in those days was very low indeed, and really a pittance, I suppose. But the children of the farm-workers that I used to play with, I have to say, were always happy. There was a book produced by a certain academic about a village in Suffolk between the two wars which annoyed me because it tended to show farm labourers as being very down-trodden, and, I think, in his work he actually pities them. Whereas to my knowledge, although life might have been hard, I can never remember any moans or groans about poverty from these labouring people whose children I knew. If anything they were a happy crowd who accepted that life was hard having known nothing better. Their staple diet might have been rabbit and chicken, either home-produced or poached and they lived out of the garden.

I would say that on most farms there was a cowman, usually a local lad, but I don’t know what proportion of the labouring class in the village worked on farms but it was the occupation of the majority apart from, perhaps, those who lived in the council-houses from where a high percentage of the men pedalled-off to the BX plastics factory each day. That was a source of a good wage and was looked-upon with relish by those people who didn’t have the advantage of working there.

The village in those days was typical of all the villages in the area in that it was largely self-sufficient. There were cobblers, a blacksmith, a baker and a butcher. You name it, there was everything essential to life. In fact at one time there were at least four cobblers in the village, three of whom were men with a gammy leg or gammy arm or something. It seemed to be a regular job for people who had that sort of affliction. And, of course, there was a corner shop in most areas of the village. In fact nine in Dedham when I was a boy! By a corner-shop I mean a little shop where you could buy a can of peas, a box of matches or a can of paraffin to keep your lamps going. There were two on Lamb corner, my home at the time. Heaven knows how they made a living but they had no other form of income that I knew of. They have all gone, of course, and the pubs the same way. There were eleven public houses at the beginning of the last century but today only one “local” remains, the other two, (the Sun and the Marlborough), depend, I would say, largely on tourist money; the rest have all gone. But this is typical of most rural communities which were pretty self contained. The nature of things has changed. Of course, the culprit is the motor-car. We wouldn’t do without the damn thing but the fact is that it has been the downfall of all the self-sufficient local communities because everybody now worships at Asda or Tesco.

Dedham, like all the other villages in the area is very convenient for commuters and the exit from the village in the early morning is quite extraordinary. You can’t blame people; it’s a very pleasant place to live but the whole nature of livelihood has changed. Napoleon was a bit ahead of his time when he called us a nation of shopkeepers but we certainly are today. We don’t seem to produce much and that applies equally to farming and just about every other productive industry. But I’m getting off-trail. Let’s get back to those far-off days and the second World War.



Shoebridge Hill where Roger met Sir Alfred and Lady Vi

We had a lot of fruit-farms in the area, particularly in Langham and Boxted and also in Stoke-by-Nayland and Holton St Mary, but the whole farming industry had gone from being predominantly dairy to arable in five or six years of war. Labour, of course, was a problem, the younger men having left for the services. We were then faced with getting older men back onto the land, retired men in their seventies. I can remember we had a man called Horace Ellis, a wonderful character who, as a schoolboy, had waved the flag as the railway was opened from Ipswich to Felixstowe. That shows you how old he was in the 1940s. I always remember him scything round the outside of a field in 1946 to clear the way for the first combine harvester in the area. I always wished I had taken a photograph of the contrast between those two forms of harvest.

I should mention the characters in the village, typical of most in those days. The majority of the oldies had nicknames. I don't know how they came about and many applied to families as a whole. There were the Dumberlans, the Hoggereasons, the Squeak Jennings, (Mr Jennings being one of the oldest of the village residents now, having at one time worked for Mr Moorhouse.) There were the Niggereasons, the Soapysomes, the Hamstarlings, the Youngham, the Oldham, all of which has now died-out but was, one time, commonplace. People would say, "Have you seen Dumber today?" "Have you seen Squeak?" "Have you seen Drib?" "Did you see Mrs Drib?" It was extraordinary but it was common.

There were so many characters in the village, and again, I'm sure this was true of other villages. There was Oscar Radford, the gravedigger, who always had his hook strapped to his bar and if you ever talked to him and mentioned a name he'd say, "I didn't know him, but I dug his grave". It was almost his catchphrase. There was old Armstrong who wore rubber boots all year round and little Jimmy who was his henchman. Armstrong was a great big fellow but Jimmy was quite short and you would see them outside the Sun when the Sun was very much more a local pub, waiting for it to open at midday on a Saturday. I recall Jessie the paper-woman who had an extraordinary rate of travel with a very small box on wheels in which she had the newspapers. She would walk up and down Grove hill, Lecture House Hill and Long Road at a tremendous pace. She was a woman in her forties or fifties and I think she kept going well into her sixties. She lived with the Bartrams down Monks Lane and they owned the paper business.



Higham Hill, at the top of which Freddie Bowcher put the Daimler through the wall!

Then, of course, there was Les Frances the postman, quite the opposite to Jessie and as they were often in Long Road at the same time, the contrast was considerable. I shouldn't think that Jessie was five foot whereas Les must have been well-over six foot. Tall, gangling chap. I always remember talking to him about some of the people who lived in Dedham. He said, "Roger, there is only one man among the gentry here who is a real gentleman" and I said, "well, who is that and why?" He said, "it's Mr Mortimer because he doesn't call me Frances like all the other toffs do - he says Mr Frances". He didn't stand trouble from anyone and he was a postman for many, many years.

Of course, there were other characters beyond what I call "The labouring classes", or those that were considered the labouring classes in those times. Alfred Munnings, for example. In my opinion he was a loud-mouthed old rogue; yes he was very talented but I think he traded on his fame and, of course, a lot of the gentry and would-be gentry who would normally give him a wide berth were only too keen to be friends with him because of his fame and talent. I have to admit that I thought he was gentry until one day when I was cycling into Dedham it must have been 1945 when I was sixteen or seventeen and when I got to the top of Lecture House Hill on the stretch of road between there and Shoebridge Hill going towards Dedham village, I encountered Sir Alfred and Lady Munnings on horseback. There was probably twenty-five yards between them and before I actually saw them I could hear raised voices and they were having one hell of a row and when I got near, I was amazed. I overtook Lady Vi and cycled between them for a while until Sir Alfred told me to something, something off boy. Lady Vi was answering him in equally strong terms. It seemed that they didn't care a hoot about being overheard but then I suppose that was typical of Sir Alfred, he didn't care a damn. He had a reputation for being unkind to small people. I knew a local builder who had quite a talent for painting. He decided that to actually get some praise for his work, from the right source of course, he would set up his easel and paint beside a track where Sir Alfred regularly rode his nag for a morning outing. I think this was somewhere above Long road, I can't be sure. However, he started painting and was slightly out in the track but not actually obstructing it. Sure enough, along came Sir Alfred on his horse but instead of heaping praise on this poor fellow he shouted out "Get out the bloody way man". Munnings didn't suffer fools gladly, but I did think he traded on his fame a bit.

Lady Vi was another character. She was slightly eccentric, I think, very prim and proper on the surface although her language could be extremely strong if the occasion arose. In later years she had a dog called Black Knight which accompanied her everywhere. When the dog died she had it stuffed and carried it around with her. We had a very outspoken lady in the village, slightly butch but awfully nice named Miss Dick Cunningham. Miss Dick didn't mind what she said. She was in Spearings the grocers in Dedham Street, now the chemists, when in comes Lady Vi with Black Knight tucked under her arm. Miss Dick says "Morning Lady Vi, are you going to carry around Sir Alfred like that when he pops off?" Lady Vi didn't see the joke and never spoke to Miss Cunningham again."

The Munnings were certainly an unusual couple. They were very friendly with Freddie Bowcher who was a very, very wealthy bachelor who had several racehorses at stud in Higham on the hill towards Higham Bridge. Bowcher went around in rags and when I say rags, - I've seen his toes projecting from a pair of plymsolls, going into Spearings. It wasn't because he was poverty-stricken because he was incredibly frugal; he just didn't buy himself new clothes. He certainly bought new racehorses. On one occasions he had a very large car in his drive in Higham and I can recall going there and seeing a car-shaped hole in the brick wall on the opposite side of the road. Apparently Freddie had got into his car, begun to manoeuvre it but lost control before he could do anything with it. He was a great friend of Sir Alfred's who obviously didn't mind the tattered garb that Freddie went round in.

In a passage from Munnings' autobiography volume three, "The Finish", he describes the journey from Dedham to Newmarket by car, *"Now we are coming to Higham, famous for me because there is the home of the great Freddie Bowcher, who has appeared in my story as the owner of 'Cryptical', winner of the National Hunt at Cheltenham in 1928. Leaving Higham Green, ahead of us is an ancient house which was once an inn, and passing the drive gates of Bowcher's house we see his Daimler where it stands in the open, day and night, winter and summer."*

Gossip was a favourite passtime, certainly in the days before television took over and Dedham certainly had its scandals.