

VILLAGE LIFE ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT FROM 1850 to 1920

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My grandfather, who was born in 1860, used to walk every working day from Ryde to East Cowes and back for his work, a round trip of 14 miles a day. He would get up at 4.30 and set off at 5.30 to start work at 7.45. He would leave work at six, be home by eight, have a meal and go to bed.

It was a six day week in those days.

People from villages did likewise. We know of a man from Chale Green who walked to Newport and back every day to work in the brewery, another daily round trip of 14 miles.

Many people who lived in villages worked on farms but not necessarily farms nearby. Men from Ryde might walk to St Helens, Newchurch or Arreton. There were a group of farm labourers who lived in Porchfield who walked to Brook and back every day.

People had to work to live in those days, and so walking to and from villages to work was a usual thing.

But it did not stop there. On Sundays most families went to church.

Take the Williams family from Calbourne. They went to church on Sunday mornings in their Sunday best at Calbourne Parish Church and then, without returning to their house, walked down Lynch Lane over Limerstone Down to Shorwell to visit an aunt and uncle and have dinner and, later, have a light tea and walk the five miles back to attend Evensong at the Parish church in Calbourne. There was Mr and Mrs Williams, their 15 year old son, Fred, and their thirteen year old daughter, Emily. Poor Mr Williams was dressed in a suit and tie complete with collar stud and Mrs Williams had many layers of clothes, hat, gloves and boots. Fred hated wearing his suit and hat (a must for Sundays), and heavy boots, and Emily was also overdressed, as we might say today, in her long dress, many petticoats, bonnet and gloves, heavy and stiff boots laced up the sides. How they did not boil to death in those days we do not know.

But they were healthy. They had regular fresh air and exercise. They knew the country ways and took an interest in the countryside. Emily could name each species of flower and when they would bloom; Fred knew each breed of sheep and cattle and was an excellent navigator on any new walks or adventures. He knew the name of every wild animal, every mouse, every insect and could identify every tree.

Mrs Williams would collect wild berries and fruit and use it in cooking. She also collected some plants for medical purposes. And, in season, there would be mushroom picking.

In those days churches were full. Very few did not go. It was a part of community bonding. However many Anglican clergymen were not Christians and so people's lives were not always challenged. In the Victorian times if a well-to-do family had three sons, one would go in for law, the other for medicine and the third for the church. Each profession was a secure living and the third son went in for the church since this job had a vicarage or rectory rent-free and other perks but, perhaps, he had no Christian faith. However, he would have to learn Latin and Greek at university. The onslaught of Darwinism set the scene for schism in the church and it must be remembered that Darwin, once a believer, raged at God because his beloved daughter, Annie, died at Easter 1851 and Darwin vowed to take revenge on the Almighty and discredit Him. It was in this state of mind that evolution was born within him and creation dismissed.

It is strange how people blame God for tragedies and yet do not believe in Him.

Nonetheless morals were far better in those days although some matters went to the extreme. Some couples married and did not sleep together but made appointments to commence parenthood. Many such couples never saw each other naked and, in many homes, underwear was never displayed not even when drying after the weekly laundry. For children it was different. Saturday night was bath night and in the winter in front of the fire and both boys and girls of the family would take a bath with the others in the same room perhaps drying off or putting on their nightshirts or nightdresses..

In large families often you had several children, and of both sexes, in one bed. There was no privacy. That would not be tolerated today.

Particularly in village life there was innocence. Children remained children well into their teens. Puberty began in the late teens in those days. And life was safer. Boys and girls would go out to play together without snide remarks suggesting that such friendships were of a romantic or sexual nature. It was completely natural and innocent. Many girls were tomboys and so there was no sexual distinction. They would climb, swing and hang from trees and get involved in rough and tumble like the boys. Parents did not worry about their children going out to play in those days.

And yet girls were girls. They would always be dressed like girls and most had long hair. It was a symbol of femininity.

The boys in the villages learned country skills quickly. They would go out with their father and a shotgun hunting or poaching. Perhaps they might use a trap, some of which were very cruel. If father was ill, the eldest boy would take the gun and shoot supper whether it was a pheasant, pigeon, rabbit or hare. Failing that, and if there were no food available, large potatoes would be put under the fire and a jacket potato each might suffice for lunch. Or an onion for each family member would be baked and served as the main meal of the day.

The Williams family always enjoyed going along Barrington Row, which we know as Winkle Street, to see the sheep being dipped in Cal Bourne, a practice that continued until the 1970s. The Barringtons were the family that owned Swainston manor at one time..

There was a mill at Winkle Street and at one time Calbourne boasted five water mills. But not all the water of Calbourne could put out the fire that destroyed the tower of the church in 1683.

We are still in Calbourne. Here is a mother going to Newport in 1888 and pushing a pram and baby, five miles each way, perhaps to pay the weekly rent for their cottage of four shillings. Coming forward thirty years, here is a widow whose husband died in the First World War making that same journey. She is paid a pension of thirty three shillings and fivepence and her rent is now five shillings and sixpence.

For the destitute there were almshouses and children in Calbourne would pick primroses and walk to Crocker Street in Newport to hand them to old ladies living in these houses.

Children were taught to respect their elders. Ageism did not exist.

Village life had its appeal to townspeople and their children. In the school holidays children from the towns wanted to stay on a farm. Jobs were dished out. Older children could lead the horse and the men and boys would load the waggon with hay. Grandparents would come out with tea and a picnic and everyone would sit on the grass or the sweet-smelling hay. And, yes, there were hayrides!

The hardest workers on any farm were the horses who pulled the ploughs, led the waggons, provided transport and performed many other tasks.

The largest room in most farms was the dairy with their flagstone floors and a butter churn. The milk was always stored here since it was the coolest place and milk pails were still hung on chains from a wooden yoke across the shoulders. Boys would make carts or wheelbarrows often a Tate and Lyle chest on pram wheels and go to Morey's timber yard to collect off-cuts of wood for threepence and bring them home to light the fire for the following week.

Farms in the Calbourne area had to take milk churns to Calbourne station on a horse and cart to transport the milk on the railway to Newport and beyond. This was done every morning. Some of the milk went by rail and sea to Portsmouth.

Some children used to stand by a farm gate and when a vehicle needed to pass through they would open it and be thrown a penny for the service.

Tuesdays was market day in Newport and farmers took in cattle, sheep and dairy products to sell or exchange.

Each village was self-sufficient. In 1880, Calbourne had several sweet shops!

But let us go to Chale Green. It had a shop, a post office, a beer retailer, a shoemaker, a shoemaker, a carpenter and a wheelwright. It also had the village green which was enclosed until 1855. The village was self-sufficient.

If a village did not have such shops and other such outlets it was self-sufficient in that most people grew their own vegetables and fruit. Most families, even poor ones, had chickens or a sow which a boar would serve from time to time to produce piglets and country people often paid each other in kind. And villages were served by supplies delivered on carts from grocers, fishmongers and coal merchants from the towns. Often children would hold the cart horse while the delivery man went into a house or a cottage for a cup of tea or even a meal.

Today, if you take a village like Brook, it has no shop or post office. You have to go to Freshwater or Brighstone to shop.

Calbourne had an annual Christmas pantomime given by the Wight Strollers and at this festival season the children loved to go into Newport to see chickens, turkeys and geese hung up outside butchers shops. The shops themselves were hardly visible.

A visit for the boys to the barbers where haircuts were twopence. A treat in Newport was to have a cream cake at a penny each. A cream éclair was a penny ha'penny. Another treat was a visit to the Agricultural Show held annually at Nine Acres

In 1900 the local butcher could sell you a leg of pork for three and ten pence and a pint of milk would cost threepence.

A Yarmouth newspaper for October 1909 shows that a good quality loaf of bread cost threepence and an alarm clock half a crown.

But to return to Calbourne. It had a Methodist church and such non-conformist churches were less severe. The Calbourne Methodist Sunday School outing would be to Sandown followed by tea at Sandown Methodist Church. That was a great adventure and the boys would take off their shoes and

socks and paddle in the sea and the girls were allowed to take off their stockings for the same purpose! But this had to be done out of sight!

Sandown was surprisingly popular. Darwin visited Sandown as did the distinguished composer, Richard Strauss.

With the thought of Sunday Schools, I should mention Rookley Methodist, which had a Sunday School of almost 200 hundred children in the late 1880s, so much so that they had to have two meetings. The notion that children had to go to Sunday School is a false premise. They enjoyed going and Harvest Festivals and prize-giving were highlights. Some children were collected on horse and carts from far and near. Other children were happy to walk miles to go. Children learned Bible texts and substantial passages of Scripture and also received prizes. Girls would embroider texts on samplers.

There was a great emphasis on crafts, and villages were involved in community and church activities.

In 1866 several women and girls carved the new pulpit at St Andrews Church, Chale, and it is quite beautiful depicting Christ talking with His disciples. Also in the church there is a funeral bier, a wooden cart which was used to transport coffins to the church for burial

Chale is a fascinating place. The church which dates from 1114 has an interesting graveyard in which are buried many victims of shipwrecks. In one night 1757, fourteen ships were wrecked off Chale Bay, and, in 1836, the Clarendon was wrecked and much of its timber was salvaged and used in local houses and in the newly named Clarendon Hotel. But the box graves, or rather the rectangular graves were used to store contraband, or the smugglers themselves when pursued by the authorities.

Apart from smuggling the other main scandal in village life that occurred from time to time was the behaviour of some of the lords of the manor and their sons, particularly as they were, or thought that they were, aristocracy. Many thought that they had the equivalent of the Divine right of kings and, consequently, they could be arrogant and vindictive since all that they said and did was right because of who they were. Some of these landowners were tyrants. The gentry believed that they were not subject to the law.

Large houses employed many staff from kitchen maids to housekeepers, gardeners to coachmen (what we, today, would call drivers and chauffeurs). Westover House at Calbourne employed two nurses at one time to care for the family particularly the older members.

In some of these great houses young girls would be employed as parlourmaids, chambermaids and in other menial domestic tasks. It was clearly an age of master and servant.

If one of the men of the house took a fancy to one of these young girls he would have his way with her and there were many birth certificates in which the appropriate column stated Father Unknown. Such girls were ruined for life and the attitude shown to them was both unfair and untrue. Some girls died in the struggle to protect their honour but it is unbelievable that the so-called noblemen were protected because of their station and position in society. If a father of a ruined maid (to quote Thomas Hardy) were to complain or take action he would be sacked and together with his family probably become destitute. It is thought that many spinsters were spinsters because of injustice done to them and others were this because they were afraid or disgusted at the whole idea of being personally involved in procreation. Others felt it was their duty to look after aging parents.

Staff at such houses had to bow and courtesy and their terms of employment can be summed up in one sentence, "Do everything you are told!"

To add to this dilemma there was hypocrisy. The lords of the manor and the sons have their own pews in the local Anglican church and even there obeisance had to be rendered to them.

Some manor houses treated their staff well and there was no indiscretions. Westover Park in Calbourne always put on a Sunday evening dinner for all the staff. It might consist of jacket potatoes, cold meat left over from lunch and a cold tart with fresh cream or His Majesty's Pudding. At times the meal was luxurious with anchovy eggs, lamb cutlets, mashed potatoes and peas. Fruit could consist of apples, strawberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, pears, peaches or raspberries most of which were grown in the grounds. The fruit and vegetable store was always locked though!

Whitecurrants were saved to make a whiskey liqueur!

In the summer there were tennis parties and in the winter shooting parties. Cook would make the claret cup and apple cobs, a sort of apple dumpling in shortcrust pastry. The honoured visitors would have a hearty breakfast with kidneys and, usually, an elaborate fish dish. There were two employees who looked after the wine and on special occasions the staff were allowed to have champagne or cider.

There were two laundry maids. There was large laundry room with a huge copper and tubs for rinsing and a wringer. There was a stove that produced heating to dry the clothes. There was a room exclusively for ironing, each iron weighed fourteen pounds and there were further areas for drying clothes. Shirts were starched. Some clothes were taken in a wheelbarrow over rough ground to be hung out to dry.

The peacocks had an enclosure and a bin was kept for their food mainly comprising maize and it was kept indoors.

We will journey east to the straggling village of Arreton. It had farms and two manor houses and a school.

Schools in those days kept boys and girls separated. They had separate entrances and playgrounds. The girls would play hopscotch, skipping and playground songs and with hoops which were wooden and the boys often had metals hoops and played marbles and conkers. Even in village schools the classes were large and discipline usually very strict. The humiliation of children who were not very bright was abusive and the dunce's hat was worn and children often stood in corners or were caned even for trivial matters including untidiness. Poor children who had shabby clothes due to their circumstances were sometimes cruelly treated and some teachers were like the lords of the manor in that they were autocratic and unreasonable. And just like Miss Gulch in *The Wizard of Oz*, it was lady teachers who were often the most objectionable.

Teachers had power because they had knowledge and position, and many parents and their children could not read or write and these illiterates were scorned and, indeed, despised.

Going to school was not compulsory until 1880 and this was for all children between the ages of five and ten. many people, particularly village people thought it wrong for children to go to school. They did not need 'book learning' to do a simple job and being able to write was no benefit in milking a cow. Schooling might make them unhappy and hard to control. And Victorian parents had to pay something for their children to go to school although there were free schools usually church schools and the cheapest educational facility was a dame's school. There were private schools that the Education Department had no powers over, and in some areas ragged school where the children were so poor that they were dirty, badly dressed, without shoes and often very badly behaved.

As the Victorian age was also the age of invention certain training was necessary and so schools became more popular. In 1899 the school leaving age was raised for ten to twelve. Chalk and slates gave way to copybooks and copperplate writing was the discipline of those days whereas computers and the internet are the essential disciplines of our day.

Caning was frequent and many village schools had a system of how many times you were hit for any offence. Talking in class might receive one hit as would idleness and laziness whereas lying and deceiving might receive six hits. Some hits were by an inch strap of leather across the hand and it was said that Children should be seen and not heard and An inch of strap is worth a yard of talk.

There were school rules summarised as respect for teachers and elders, managers and visitors and to be reverent and lowly to their betters, to come completely clean and never be without a handkerchief, to be kind to all other children and never quarrel, never to mock the cripple or infirm, to keep the sabbath holy and to behave with reverence and seriousness in all places of public worship, on all occasions to speak the truth and to be quiet in school and to be neat in all things.

Village life and doctors is an interesting subject. When someone was very ill straw might be put down on the road outside to deaden the noise of horses and their carts. If you lived in Arreton and needed a doctor one had to be fetched from Newport and he would come out in his pony and trap and it would cost seven and sixpence a time. A visit from a midwife was two shillings and sixpence and often she had to be both fetched and transported with a vehicle supplied.

One of the reasons of a high mortality rate was because people could not afford the doctor or midwife. The cost of a doctor was almost two weeks rent for the cottage and landlords were not kept waiting for payment.

Horses and animals could be very stubborn at times and often straw was put under a stubborn animal and set alight to get the animal moving.

People in Arreton went to church, either to the parish church of St Georges or the Methodist chapel. On Plough Sundays many farmers and their families would come to bless the Ransome plough, that is to say the plough at Ransome, which was purchased in 1869.

Boys would be employed on a casual basis to be rat catchers. They were very skilful using boxes to drop on the rats or other methods to catch or kill them. It was the age of ingenuity. The boys would then cut off the rats tails and present them to the farmer who would pay them a penny or so per ten tails. Sometimes the boys stole the rats tails for which they had just been paid and added them to their next tally to be paid again.

Not only were rats a nuisance so were birds, and bird catching was also a necessary task. Many were shot by gamekeepers or estate managers but making were trapped and caught in nets and then there was a sparrow shoot. A live bird would be put under a flower pot and several flower pots with live birds inside would be arranged on the ground. Each pot was joined to every other pot by a thin but strong rope and when all the farmers and their friends with their guns were assembled, the word was given, the rope was lifted, the birds escaped only to be shot by the marksmen. This happened as regularly as necessary and also used to take place over Christmas as a sport.

Fire was a problem in Victorian village life because of the use of paraffin lamps which could be knocked over and broken. Occasionally it was caused by drunkenness, an unattended animal or carelessness caused by genuine fatigue. This is why there are roads called Burnt House Lane, a lane where a house was burnt. There is one at Alverstone and another in a lane from Downend to Newport.

To 'get into another lane' there are three Love Lanes on the island, in Cowes, Newport and Steephill Cove, Ventnor and there is no prize for guessing why they were so-called.

Alverstone is an interesting village. It used to have a shop but it was never allowed to have a public house and this was due to Richard Webster who, when he was made a peer and entered the House of Lords, he took the name of this village and was known as Lord Alverstone. Incidentally, he opened Sandown Library in 1905.

Island villages had their characters or Island characters visited villages. There were tramps who slept rough and might beg a piece of bread from you. There were the roadmen, many with long white beards accompanied by their scythe or sickle to cut the grass of the village green or verges near to public highways. As the roads were earth they had to maintain the roads. At certain points on the road they might have a small shelter to store their tools and this is probably where the term roadhouse originated and developed into such titles as The Roadside Inn, such as the one at Nettlestone.

We are now travelling to Brook. Brook House was owned by Sir Charles Seeley and then Captain John Bernard Seeley who started the public library service on the island. In fact, some libraries were called the County Seeley Library. Seeley was the coxswain of the Brook Lifeboat in the 1920s. The first lifeboat station on the island dates from 1860 and was at Brighstone Bay. J B Seeley was the first to be Lord Mottistone to which house he moved.

The Seeleys used to open the grounds of their house for fetes. Children would take part in races whether they were sprints, sack races or egg and spoon races and there were parents races and everybody still dressed up. Women, young and old, would race in their hats and layers of clothes and those stiff boots. The men would often race with their hats on as well but they were allowed to take their jackets off. Local farmers and people who were engaged in crafts sold their wares. These were the days of pride in home cooking and jams, preserves and chutneys were always on sale.

There were also festivities on special days such as Coronation Day 1911

Dancing became popular, particularly after the First World War, and young people especially went to Freshwater, Brighstone or Shorwell for such dances and, of course, they were also held at Hulverstone School the school that served a wide rural area.

Everybody helped when the lifeboat was called out. It was hauled by two carthorses to the beach for launching and at Brook House there were always volunteers to make teas and care for those about to come ashore. The cry was always, "Ship ashore!". In the First World War the big houses in the area had VADs to tend to the injured of the conflict or to look after those who had been tossed about in the sea.

However, most villages grew up around a manor house, or more than one manor house. There are three at Shorwell for example. The cottages were for those who worked at the manor houses or nearby farms. Most manor houses had a farm.

There is no doubt that manners meant a great deal in bygone days. Children respected their elders and old people as we have seen in the example of Calbourne children walking to Newport and back with wild flowers for the residents of almshouses. Just how regular the strap or belt was used to punish unruly children we cannot say but the Biblical injunction "Spare the rod and spoil the child" seemed to be carried out.

Nowadays children rule, not teachers or parents. In 1998, 300 male teachers were falsely accused by teenage schoolgirls of serious sexual assault. In Scotland in 2002 there were 4,212 cases of alleged abuse of children by teachers. A teacher who taught at a school near me was suspended because he

restrained a boy from kicking some girls viciously and the boy said the teacher hurt and abused him. We live in days when the tail wags the dog. This was not so in the period we are looking at, 1850 to 1920.

Probably we all have a favourite village on the island or a place in that village that is special to us. In my case there is nowhere more delightful than Shorwell. To see it from the downs nestling below is a wondrous sight as it shelters in a woodland. From Carisbrooke we approach Shorwell under the rustic bridge and on our left is a small green with thatched houses and a little further on the most glorious village church of St Peter. Opposite is one of three manor houses in the village, North Court, originally the home of the Leigh family. The main part of the building dates from 1615 that is to say in the reign of James I having been built by Sir John Leigh. The porch was attached to the north wing in 1837 and a gun-room and music room were in existence by 1905. Richard Bull purchased North Court from the Leigh family in 1793 and there is the story of the Thimble Cairn of North Court which is now on Brighstone Down. It marks the spot where a lover sewed her dressing dress waiting for her sailor to return from a three year voyage. He never came but she still kept sewing until she died and made a large trousseau. Elizabeth Bull had a round tower made on the down which was known as Miss Bull's folly. The waiting lover was her sister, Catherine. But Elizabeth also abetted her father in his passion for head-hunting. The poet Algernon Charles Swinbourne loved North Court and, at one time, his cousin Mary Charlotta Julia Gordon lived there. Mary was responsible for leading Swinbourne into the pornographic writings of the Marquis de Sade and also into alcoholism. The Harrison family purchased North Court in 1963 for £9,000.

Shorwell was originally part of the parish of Carisbrooke which caused problems particularly in transporting corpses in severe winter weather. In the reign of Edward III the villagers petitioned to be a separate parish.

The French were always the aggressors to the Island. In 1377 they burned Newton to the ground and were here during the Napoleonic wars. But in the second world war a 500 bomb fell in Shorwell just missing the church. To return to the 14th century Shorwell's vestry was a gun-chamber with an arch for a gun-port. In many island churches such defences were built in churches to keep out invaders and deter them such as St Michaels in Shalfleet.

It is not always remembered that these old churches were originally all Roman Catholic. Protestantism did not exist until the latter part of the sixteenth century when some of these old island churches became affiliated to the Church of England but some retained the High Church position and became known as Anglo-Catholic.

On the road to Brighstone is West Court and, to the south, Wolverton Manor built by John Dingley, deputy governor of the island during the reign of Elisabeth I's reign at a cost of £800. West Court is more homely, belonging, at one time, to the de Lisle family. Both manors supported a farm and were the main employers in the area. Wolverton is E shaped and West Court is L shaped.

Each village has its scandal. St Helens had the notorious Sophie Dawes who died in 1840. It was a tough, rough village and Sophie was a prostitute. Shorwell had a scandal in the 1600s in that a local resident, George King, had a wife described by her neighbours as a turbulent woman who spoke ill of all authority, kept an illegal ale house, sued many of her neighbours even for small debts and kept a bawdy house.

Charles I spent his last night of freedom on the island and Charles II visited many times. At least once he was accompanied by Nell Gwynn and the King was annoyed that the local clergy and some noblemen would not receive her. Nonetheless everyone commented on her beauty.

In Victorian times villages like Shorwell made their own entertainments. There were dances in the evenings, fetes at the manor houses, Country fairs, hayrides, a Christmas pantomime and Shorwell had a drama club. The manor houses had parties for the more well-to-do.

I wonder how true it was that each village had an idiot. Many people could not read or write and close-knit communities often had cousins or near relatives who married and their offspring were called moon babies who usually suffered from mental or physical disability. Often these unfortunates were disowned and left to wander and fend for themselves becoming tramps, beggars or rather unhealthy prostitutes with few teeth often rotting in their heads.

Most villages had their own rules. If they believed someone had committed a dreadful crime that individual would disappear or be found dead. The whole village would say nothing but generally most people knew how the miscreant died and who was responsible. Villagers were particularly protective of their children.

Villages produced outstanding craftsmen particularly furniture makers. Local men would do casual work as gardeners for manor houses and have a break of bread and cheese provided by the kitchen staff. If the gardener met the lord or lady of the house he would remove his cloth cap and acknowledge them. Coach manufacturers, wheelwrights and farriers were always needed, and people took pride in their work in those days. Many villages had a blacksmith. Most households grew their own vegetables and made their own bread and their diet was healthier than our present processed foods with preservatives. As much time was spent in the open air as possible. Today we worship the God in a box.

There were also street hawkers although these were mainly in the towns. Lucky heather and boxes of matches were the usual items. Ladies in the village would often bake for neighbours and barter systems were a thing of the day.

But deliveries were made to villages who also had regular visits from a man who sharpened knives and farmyard equipment. They were known as the grinders.

Although Shorwell is a few miles from the sea it once had a successful fish business.

The island's greatest legacy is not its commercialism or tourism but in both its old world charm and history, but so-called progress is out to destroy that. That is what a dying age is trying to avoid, but modern people have little sense of the value of the past of bygone days which some call the good old days. The attitude today is that if something is out of date it has no value. Such an idea is hopelessly wrong.

Life was more moral in those days.

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These notes were written and published in booklet form in 1974 and only updated since to include a reference to the internet.