

BENFLEET IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Chapter 1: Early Days

Before the first world war, a company known as the Land Company, manager Frederick Rarnuz, bought up a considerable amount of grazing land in Benfleet and New Thundersley and divided it up into building plots marking it out with wooden pegs defining roads etc ..

Prospective buyers were given a free first class rail ticket to Westcliff a champagne lunch and a ride in a Daimler to view the new estate and many plots were sold. War broke out and unoccupied land was commandeered for agricultural purposes and many of the marking pegs ploughed under with the result that when then new owners returned from the war they had to try and remake their survey before building. This coupled with the fact that some had been killed in combat and therefore could not claim their plots led to much confusion which has lasted up to the present day and has shown up when road charges were attempted to be levied.

All sorts of wooden and asbestos huts and houses were put up, especially between Cemetery corner and Tarpots Farm. This caused a transport problem for people wishing to go to work by train hence the need for public transport (see my next chapter i. e. the buses.).

Some Notes About Old Benfleet

When I first remember it, in 1915 the only way to reach either Cemetery corner or Tarpots was either on foot or by hiring a horse cab.

In 1921 a blue charabanc ran from the "Anchor" to Southend via Vicarage Hill described as a tour through Little Switzerland. A little later the Westcliff Motor Services ran the No.1 Rayleigh service connecting Southend with Kenneth Road.

The No. 2 Pitsea route connected Tarpots Farm with Southend and also a number of local tradesmen ran "so-called" buses, little vans with wooden seats. I remember Marchants and Binghams among others. The following year the Westcliff started No. 3 route to Southend via Tarpots. Meantimes Major Pearse started small Ford vehicles to Tarpots, Pitsea, Hadleigh and on Mondays, to Wickford Market.

In late 1926 Pearses obtained licences to run to Southend which the Westcliff bitterly resented. 'They decided to try to run him off the road and there were disgraceful road races. I know one man was killed and another had to have his leg amputated.

The Major lost money and eventually sold a majority of his holding to Scoby Bridge, formerly of the Edwards Hall Motors. Later they re-formed the firm as the Benfleet Motor Service, still remembered by older people for its reliable and punctual running. Finally they were amalgamated with the Westcliff and became part of the Eastern National Company

Benfleet never was a very good shopping centre, such few shops as there were, clustered around the station and church, Smith's the bakers being the only exception on the corner of Thundersley Park Road. Just after the first war, came the advent of The London Co Op.Society, where the Physical Fitness shop stands now. It drew customers from miles around. It flourished under the able direction of the manager Mr. Floukes. It preceded the branches at Leigh and Hadleigh. Would it were still there now!

In former times there were no Football Pools but there were Football competitions and the community were set agog when a young workman named Joe Searle won a thousand pounds. Friends exhorted him to save it up for a rainy day. However he spent a little of it. He bought a two stroke motor bike, a Levis. I was a boy of nine years or so at the time, but, many years later when I was a man grown I saw Joe still riding by on his machine.

Benfleet only had one air raid in the first war, unlike us in Southend, where we suffered severely. The bombers followed the river estuary, searching Kynochs Munitions factory. Not so very long before the wars end, one plane did come towards the village and was fired on by anti aircraft guns situated in the fields behind the Pitsea Gunn Inn. The shell misfired and landed on the greensward in front of a house called The Elms, property of Miss Boucher just above Cumberland Ave. It made a small crater which was guarded by two soldiers but left neglected for nearly six years.

In nineteen twenty four the gas mains which stopped short where Clifton Ave were extended to reach the whole village but when they reached The Elms, the workmen hit the buried shell which luckily did not explode. It earned itself a paragraph and picture in The Southend Standard.

Some Horses, A Donkey & A Ghost.

Until the mid twenties there were probably more horses than cars in South Benfleet. One persons name immediatly crops up in my mind Maurice Upson, he could do anything with a horse except make it talk. Riding, driving, jumping, trotting or paceing, all were his specialty and all done by kindness. He had two carriage horses called Khaki and Beauty. Khaki was a contankerous old brute. originally trained as a pacer, he was retrained as a trotter and some times if he was disturbed by a steamroller for instance; he would revert to paceing , making the trap sway from side to side, but would very soon revert to a regular trot. (In paceing, the fore and hind legs move together in unison). Beauty was a very lovely chestnut mare, she eventually had an equally lovely foal, which was sold to the landlord of the Wagon And Horses, Jack Ellison, who drove her for many years.

Persons trying to buy a horse between 1914-1918 had to be content to get throw outs, as the army had commandeered all the good animals. One such horse was the property of a Mr Petrovsky, a furrier from the East End, London, who was driven to and from the station behind him in a trap. He (the horse) had a metal tube in his throat and he used to roar and squeak as he went along. He was nicknamed "The Roarer". Mr & Mrs Petrovsky used to come off the 5.38 train from Fenchurch which arrived here at 6.30 and we used to hear them trotting and roaring (I meaen the horse not Mr & mrs P,)past Gran's house about 6.45. One fine summer evening, they went past uphill as usual and suddenly they stopped. Mother said to Gran, "they've given their poor horse a rest, bless them!" A few minutes later a little girl came running down the road crying out "Come quick, there's been a dreadful accident and Mr & mrs Petrovsky have fallen into the ditch, bring bandages". We all rushed up the road and there was the trap with its shafts upturned, the poor old coachman with bleeding hands and a bit dazed saying over and over again "I told you to get some new harness". Mr and Mrs Petrovsky scrambling out of the ditch as best they could, bruised and shaken but not badley harmed. I cant quite remember but I think the harness was temporarily mended with some clothes line and the journey completed.

Whilst the owner Mr Bowman (see next page) was resident elsewhere. "Hillside" had long grass all grown up in front and a man with a scythe, Jim Saye, came and cut it down. He proudly declared that he was the last of the pure bred Canvey Island Dutch. Some of the hay was sold to a funny' old chap called "Old Bill" he had a short straggly beard and rode a donkey. He believed that as heaven was the new Jerusalem the two were identical. Upson, twitted him about his steed, saying, " why dont you get a horse like everybody else", to which the old boy replied " chroist rood to heava on a donkey, good enough for he, good enough for oi". Changing the subject, after the gas mains reached Benfleet Village, there was a demand for street lighting and by Autumn some lights were installed (for Benfleet Parish only). There is a very curious demarcation line between Benfleet and Thundersley parishes (as I was to find out years later when I became Librarian). Going toward Southend on the A 13 all of the left hand side is in Thundersley, (or New Thundersley), but most (nearly all) of the right side is South Benfleet, right up to Shipwrights. Benfleet had a bad name in the parishes above Bread and Cheese Hill. It was considered to be the haunt of poachers, horse theives, didecoys and babies born out of wedlock, "Benfleet or Babylon" The Modern Sodom and Gomorah were said. Everybody in Kiln Road would always declare" We live in Thundersley". When the street lights begun to be installed they quickly changed their minds and duly produced their rate demands, saying "We live in South Benfleet and demand lighting", and they got it! About this time, people coming home from work passing the bottom of Vicarage Hill began to see strange white flickering lights seemingly float across the road. They came and went and people began to talk of ghostly visitations. "The White Lady of Vicarage Hill" was now spoken of. No would be historians could find anything in past annals to account for the phenomenon. Eventually, the real facts came out. It was a kind of mirror reflection such as we used to call a "Jack, O' Latern". when I was a boy, high sided vehicles and buses, caused a reflection from the new street light. When the lamp was moved the ghost was seen no more. "FAREWELL WHITE LADY".

A popular feature of Benfleet life was the weekly paper THE BENFLEET WEEKLY GAZETTE published by Naishes the printers. This ran from the mid twenties until the second world war.

There have been several curious characters in the past. First was the now almost forgotten Richard Bowman, scion of a rich aristocratic Cumberland family, who was subject to occasional fits of violence. He had one leg shorter than the other and used a crutch which he waved about when in a rage. He owned two cars but was unable to use them having lost his licence for chasing pedestrians. He lived originally at Kents Hill House in the Chase, now Villa Road, but became a sort of hermit, paid no rates or taxes and died miserably in another house Hillside.

In nineteen twenty six another figure was Captain Walker. He had an artificial leg, a glass eye plenty of money and owned a pre 1914 "Unic" ex taxi cab. He used to enter local public houses, put down a bank note and say "Drinks all round". He also paid the driver and guard of an express train to stop at Benfleet.

Another favourite character was old Mrs Cook of the houseboat "Lark" moored in Benfleet West Creek. She was an educated woman but felt that life had treated her badly. For some years she kept a pet monkey which she loved more than all mankind. When he died she went into mourning and she celebrated, if one could use such a word, the anniversary most solemnly. During the second world war she allowed the soldiers and ATS girls to use her boat as an undressing station for bathing in the creek.

Lastly we must not forget that colourful personality Captain Hugh Denny known to everybody locally as Curly who used to dress in a kind of marine uniform, and owned a small fishing craft which he used to go shrimping. Although he mainly served the London Market, he would supply anyone locally who happened to be standing by when he docked in the Creek. In the sad austere times of wartime food shortage it was a treat to have fresh shrimps for tea. He courted a girl from Tollesbury named Thirza and on the occasion of his wedding invited a number of houseboat dwellers to attend the ceremony at Tollesbury church. Being wartime there were no private cars available, so Curly hired a taxi for himself and told the others to take the number nineteen bus to Tolleshunt D'arcy where they would be met. There was a very thick fog, the bus went into the ditch at Eastwood, the taxi got lost, and finished up at Tiptree and the driver refused to go beyond D'arcy, Curly had to walk the last bit.

Well known in the forties and early fifties was old Charlie Stamp, a sturdy old wildfowler and fisherman. He spoke with the now seldom heard old Essex accent. He went shooting on the marshes between Benfleet and Hadleigh and also used to go barefooted along the empty creek bed armed with a long pole to which was attached a four inch nail. When he felt a struggle beneath his foot, he would plunge the pole into the mud and come up with a sand Dab.

He was very friendly with the author J.Wentworth Day who thought a lot of him and mentioned him in some of his books such as "Coastal Adventure".

A rather strange old lady who lived in Fleet road some twenty to twenty five years ago was Miss Overmark. She used to walk around the streets debating with herself loudly. Church going friends have told me that on Sundays at St. Mary's she used to criticise

aloud the vicar's sermon saying "Get on with it man, come to the point, get on with the sermon".

Until 1928, South Benfleet was part of the Rochford Rural District but then Benfleet and Rayleigh both broke away and purchased their own ambulances and formed local fire brigades. We became part of the Benfleet Urban District Council and all the old wooden huts were given a temporary lease of life only and had to be replaced by more permanent structures. Next year the main drainage began to be installed, then after that the electricity. I moved to Benfleet in 1937.

For many years there had been only one village constable. Once or twice even no policemen at all and it was necessary to get a. ride down to the Post Office (next to the Anchor and get Miss Lawrence to ring Rochford Police Station. However shortly before the Urban District was formed a more regular policing took place, we had Sergeant Bush and two constables. A year or two later police houses were being built opposite Cemetery Corner.

In the early thirties, it was decided to "put Benfleet on the map" and a grand annual fete took place on the Anchor Meadow, next St Mary's Drive,

When I first remember Benfleet, Dr Grant was the only physician; he held surgery at 11.15 daily at Killinback's Cottage, just past the "Hoy" (no Helmet in those days), Years later, we had Dr Wilkes who sometimes came on horseback. During the war, Dr Eaton was a popular Doctor. He loved swimming and used to bring his little cairn terriers with him, then swim across the creek and call out "come on the old lad" and the little dogs used to cleverly swim across. Dr Tyndall was very popular and well liked but he moved to Tarpots just before he died and was too far away for most of us.

For my part I lived first at Southchurch and then at Leigh from 1915-27, but my grandparents lived at "Cheridene" a bungalow just above Cemetery corner and my aunt Grace (Mrs Monk) from 1924-26:- Therefore never more than a week passed by without a visit to Benfleet. Originally by Midland Railway and then by bus. I went to school at Leigh Hill College, noted for its Cricket. Every time there was a match, we had the afternoon off and I visited Gran. Three Westcliff buses ran the circuit, two big Daimlers and a little Berliet. This little vehicle was run alternately by two young men called Ralph and Harry and occasionally they would both be together. This was rather fun. When the bus reached the "Wagon and Horses" they would say we're in the country now lets have a song and so I learnt many of the up to date tunes.

In those pre TV days it was quite usual for families to make their own music and at Grans we generally used to have a few songs after tea. So - following a rendition of such as "Excelsior", "Nirvana' and "Four Indian Love Lyrics" - my turn would come and I would give them "oh Donna Clara" or I'm one of the "Nuts from Barcelona".

And on that cheery note I'll end my narrative

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