

MEMOIRS OF AN OLD PLOUGHMAN : Memoirs of 1892 - 1914

By J.R. Anderson

(Unpublished MS.)

My first home was 40 Second Street Gateshead.

The houses were built in flat form; the lower flat had a passage with a glass door within the outer door. The sitting room door in our case, was on the immediate left after passing through the glass door, facing you along the passage was the bedroom door, the only bedroom, with a window out to the back. To your immediate left when at the bedroom door, was the door to the kitchen. ~~This was always called the kitchen, not as you would call it to day the living room or the Lounge capital L these days.~~ Through the kitchen in the direction of the back door, was a door to what we called the scullery, where all the rougher ^owrk was done.

Here stood a heavy cast iron mangle. It had iron casters that only ran one way or back and forward if you like, if you wanted it to side step or wheel to the front or rear, you had to lift it. It had a horrible sound & reminded ~~me~~ everyone of a makeshift dinner on Monday, washday.

In the scullery, was also a "copper", i.e., a square brick fireplace with a metal pan, enclosed in the brickwork, this pan held about 7 or 10 gal. of water. The pan or "copper" had a small fire place under it, with a little metal door about 8" by 14", this door closed tightly & the draught came to the fire by way of an opening underneath, which was also the place for the ashes to fall into.

The chimney was usually connected to the kitchen chimney, all very compact, it was a very compact life, one bedroom for five of us.

In the kitchen was a "desk bed" I think we called it. When it was closed during the day it looked like a present day wardrobe, about 5' 6" high. At bed time, the doors were opened, and a gate like structure was lowered on to two attached legs or feet. The mattrass & perhaps all the bed clothes were inside & this was where my brother & I slept for years.

There was an old Windsor arm chair, along with the usual chairs used at table. A sofa stood against the wall, it was used by my brother sister & I as our seat at table.

The table was covered with "oil" cloth, i.e., canvas coated with paint and often pleasant pictures of country life. ~~I suppose we had table cloths, but I can not remember them.~~

Two pictures on the wall used to fascinate me at one time, They were pictures of horses of the hunting type, ~~I must have been of weak intellect, because I wished the pictures would fall off the wall, or get the glass off in some way, then I thought I could use the horses for what man kept horses for.~~

Boys had horses for their dreams then, ~~and I~~ I spent hours, sat on a board rested on the arms of the arm chair, with another in front of me, my mother used to tie a piece of cord on the back of the chair in front of me & that was the reins so that I could drive in, my childish dreams, the butter and eggs to Morpeth as my grandfather or uncle Bob used to do. The whole arrangement represented to me a ~~pony~~ horse & trap. ~~A trap was a two wheeled cart on springs used as you use a motor car now.~~

We had our baths in the scullery in a tin bath, the shape of a barge, it had one end a bit higher than the other, ~~perhaps that high was to stop you falling out backwards on to the cold cement of the scullery floor.~~ The bath seemed to be busier on a Frid. after tea than other days. There was plenty of room in the bath for me & my little boat, cut out of a piece of fire wood. But the grown ups would spend most of their bathing time stood up.

The boots & shoes were cleaned in the scullery. We used "blackening". This was a concoction of black stuff, moulded into blocks 1" square by 4" long. It was wrapped in a piece of what would be called grease proof paper to-day. It always seemed wet to me, when you took the paper off it may have been some chemical in the "blackening". When you started cleaning, you had a saucer or shallow vessel to put the stuff in then you added a little water, I used to spit on it, but was not encouraged to do this. You used to put this blackening on a shoe brush & go round the boot. It did not polish at once, the boot looked as if it had a mist on it, or damp in some way. But after a bit of 'elbow grease' it used to shine in a really brilliant way. There was a rush on this job just before school time. I was often in trouble because my shoe heels were not cleaned as well as the part I could see

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when I had them on.

The "back" door out of the kitchen into the yard, seemed to be an impediment to me, when it was open you bumped into it, the scullery was not big enough for the open door. Two or three steps took you down into a cemented yard of 7 to 10 yds long by 4 or 5 yds broad.

My father had a wooden shed here, where he did odd jobs like mending^{ing} our shoes etc. He would do this to help the slender finances of the family.

At the end of the yard was a door in the brick wall, which opened out into the "Back Lane". On the left of this door was a door into a little house which had a box like arrangement about 2 feet 6 inches high. On the top of this bench, was a hole in the middle with a wooden lid, the lid had a handle on it. This box or bench was the seat of the place we call the lavatory to-day. We always called this place 'The Netty'.

The ashes were also tipped down here, I feel sure we had no dust bins. These places had a door about 3 feet square at the back in the back lane, used when the Corporation men came round in the night to clean out these places. The whole container would be about 4 feet deep by 4 feet wide. The floor was concave so that it held water.

A neighbour used to pour other liquids down this place & at times it used to run out into the lane. My mother used to hate this. At times the little square doors were broken or left open, giving access to dogs etc.

On a nail in the tidy places^{was} a supply of square cut pices of newspaper or other paper, in the less tidy a newspaper was just thrown on to the bench.

③ At the sweet shop opposite the school, you got 12 chocolate caramels for 1/2d.

② In the Bigg Market in Newcastle, half an hours walk away, you could buy a quarter pound of all sorts of good "bullets" i.e. sweets for 1 penny.

① ~~was~~ I have seen boys leaning over the dockside at Newcastle, trying to spear apples with a table fork on a piece of string, the apples were floating in the filthy water between the dock & the boats. They were in great danger of falling into the water 30' below. Hunger is a powerful thing.

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The markets, butchers, fruiterers, poultry^{tr}men etc., were open in Newcastle late at night; on a Sat. perhaps till 10 p.m. & after, little errand boys were there too, stuff really was cheap, it had to be.

P. 8

I can remember going to school on my first day. It seems to me it was raining that morning, by something my mother was wearing. She took me to school & she seemed to vanish, after that it is a blank, until just before dinner, I had a box of bricks in front of me on the tiny desk & I was told to put the bricks back in the box, before I went home. I must have been last because I was in an awful state, but they went back in the box at last.

Later on we each took a penny on a Monday that would be school fees. Not long after we seemed to stop taking ^{the} penny.

Later still I even had a bank book, it was 6d a week I took, I am not sure, one thing I do remember about the bank book, it got into a dirty, dog eared state, & I was told about it by some one.

We all seemed to be comfortably dressed, the usual smelly cloak room on a wet day, with the wash basins, that did not seem to be much used.

The toilets were crude, but better than the one at home. It was a series of little seats with an open glazed drain underneath, water used to run, at least it was supposed to run but sometimes it didn't.

The more daring boys used to walk or run along the wooden partitions surrounding this smelly construction.

We went to church every Sunday morning, before the grown ups went. We got a little coloured card for every attendance, these cards had pictures of the Good Shepherd & his lambs, & other like subjects. ~~Perhaps these cards were to show we had been to church when we went home to our parents.~~

On Sunday afternoons we went to Sunday school at Lady Vernon's school. Later on I was in the choir & Sunday was booked up for me.

Along the river side there was a lot of old shabby houses. A lot of the boys & girls ran about with bare feet in these parts. I can see the dirty water on a wet day, oosing up between their toes, they were inclined to be aggressive & I used to keep moving.

At Easter the church was kept busy. We School children went to church from Lady Vernon School on Good Friday morning. We were all drilled, like a trench raiding party. The question seemed to be noise, "that blasted noise" I think the teachers called it. The noise was made by our boots or shoes on a kneeling rail in each pew. The kneeling rail was on short legs, it was not a fixture. ~~We certainly did make noise enough. What I looked forward to most was the fact that after the service we went home for the day.~~

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Vernon

P. 10

A lot of babies died, the undertakers had an unusual cab for these funerals. Under the drivers seat was a glass sided box & the little coffin was pushed into this box from the side of the cab.

Once I went to a little girls funeral, we walked behind the hearse to Gateshead East Cemetery.

We three children used to have a bottle of lemonade sometimes at Sunday dinner time, it was called Trima it cost 1 1/2d for 3 gills, a gill is the name of a half pint of liquid on Tyneside. Another great event was the Sunday of Harvest Thanksgiving, after the morning service we choirboys were given the apples from the offerings, some of the apples were cooking apples, we ate them, we must have had stomachs like a butchers mincer.

Handwritten: D
Vernon

P. 13

At election times schools were used & the children had a day off. We used to go about with a piece of newspaper rolled up hard about the size of a tennis ball to this was tied a piece of string about a yard long, if they thought you were not supporting the right candidate, they swung this "baster" at you.

Handwritten: D
Vernon

We played at times with a "clagger", it was a piece of strong leather with a piece of strong string attached through a hole in the middle. This leather was thoroughly wetted & when pressed on the pavement by your foot, it used to stick by suction, or you could lift up a stone with it.

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You could buy a pennorth of potash ~~and~~ & sulphur, we mixed it up & then it was used to make some unholy bangs. We used to search for a nut & a loose bolt. The nut was placed on a hard surface, a bit of pot & sul was dropped into the hole, the bolt was then stood up in the hole of the nut & the careful ones ~~walked~~ stood back while the brave fusilier stepped forward with a big stone & he dropped it on the head of the bolt, it ~~did~~ make enough noise to please us.....

These various games used to come out every year, no one used to say anything to my knowledge, we would find ourselves playing marbles, then marbles vanished, we would be playing with various shaped tops & whips, or tops & string.

A game we played was "Kitty cat". ~~I have never seen our name in print, but we called it that, I don't know the correct spelling.~~ We cut a piece of stick, square in length, we sharpened both ends, it was about 5 inches long. We cut Roman figures I. II. III. IIII. like this on the flat sides. The Kitty cat was laid on the ground ~~and~~ & we hit it with a stick on the sharpened end until it rose in the air & then we tried to hit it again while in the air & send it as far as we could. ~~How we kept a secret I don't remember.~~

Another game was "touch stone" a stone was placed on a pile of stones & we used to try to knock the "touch stone", top stone, down, the game was to put the touch stone back quickly, it was a game where fingers were hurt. ~~Other details of the scoring is lost to me.~~

A queer game was two teams of four or so, one team used to bend down in a row head to tail like a pantomime horse, the front boy with his hands against a wall, the other team used to run in turn to the bending down team & jump astride on to their backs, the first boy had to jump far enough along the bent backs to allow his mates room to jump on. The losers were the team who could not all jump & stay on the bent backs.

We played various games of our own making for days. No ⁱcremas, no cycles, _N the pantomime once a year at Christmas. We could not afford to go to the sea

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for more than a day.

I know now how fortunate I was every school holiday I spent at my grandparents farm, beside that lovely trout stream, on a fine day you could see rows of trout lying on the gravel at the bottom of the pools,

Cleaning teeth did not seem of much importance then, I remember tins of pink powder used as tooth cleaning material. But we also gave our teeth a rub with salt & soot, we got a supply of soot by placing a wet finger on the fire back. One thing prominent to me now is toothache, it stopped all play for me at times. There would be dentists, but I don't remember being at a dentist's until in my teens & 30 % of my teeth had gone.

A fever case of an infectious & dangerous sprt would be taken away in a cab, ~~there did not seem to be a vehicle for stretcher cases, although no doubt there may have been.~~

Barbers shops had the barbers pole erected at about 45° degrees from the shop wall. My father was my barber. But I have looked through the barbers shop door when it was open & seen a boy perhaps no more than 10 yr of age working as a lather boy, no doubt he worked there all ^{at} Saturday until an hour later than people would believe possible to day.

We used to have ~~a flea or~~ fleas in our beds at times, my mother used to hunt them out. At school I have seen boys necks covered in brown spots caused by either fleas or bug bites.

We moved into the upstairs flat eventually but not before my mother & father had stripped every inch of wallpaper off the walls & plenty of carbolic acid used in the hot water used for washing. However the place had no insects I heard them say.

The boys & girls going to school used to bring their dinner in the form of sand wiches, we also had tin bottles filled with tea or milk, these bottles could be warmed in school on the stove at dinner time. These meals were carried in a bag with a leather strap, which we usually slung over our shoulders.

I had a mile to walk, some boys came from places as far as 4 mls. Jacob Douglas & his sister had bycycles they had at least 4 miles to travel each way,

They were the only cycles I remember. But others came as far & walked all the way. We were not late, we did not have to be late, Peter Robertson the schoolmaster made it worth our while to be in school by 9 a.m.

Piece time, i.e. playtime for a few minutes in the morning & afternoon.

Dinner time when the children in the village went home & the others ate their food in the yard or anywhere if it was fine.

There would be 40 or 50 of us, for teachers there was the schoolmaster & a lady teacher from 3 1/2 miles away. Now there will be 12 to 20 scholars if that.

At each side of the fireplace was a spittoon, it was my job to put clean sand in these every Saturday. I used to get a few pieces of sandstone from the river & crush them into sand on a big flat stone by bashing them into sand with another stone.

I used to be taken to Isaac Walton's shop in Newcastle as a boy & I believe the price for a 11 yr old boys suit was about 12/6 & the shop man used to slip a pocket knife into my hand with a smile before he started to wrap the suit up in brown paper..... The boys always wore a cap.

Butter was made once a week. I used to turn the churn. It was a barrel that hung on an axle at each end, it ran horizontally, not end over end as some churns. In the barrel there were three or four boards fixed, which broke up the even flow of the cream as the churn was turned by a handle at one end. The churn was set on a strong ^etristle which had a fitting at each side holding two wheels on which each axle of the churn rotated. In cold weather the cream did not turn into butter quickly, a glass bottle filled with hot water used to help.

None of the farmhouses had a bathroom. The children were bathed regularly. But you heard little of regular baths among the grown ups. There would be a tin bath for the family. At Shealey you washed at a wash stand in the scullery, an enamel bowl was used & the dirty water was put down a drain at the corner of the house. This drain had a hand carved stone cover with a series of holes in it. There was no drain or sink in the house then.

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At the village school in my time, prayers were said & a hymn sung in the mornings each day. At dinner time 12 o'clock we sang a grace or thanksgiving for our coming meal. A good deal of scripture was taught by our teachers. I never saw the vicar in the school. There was no secondary education to my knowledge. When you got to be 14, we village children only thought of leaving school & starting work. ~~In the towns there were Higher Grade Schools. But where we were, to my knowledge these places were not for us. They were too far away, 7 miles to Morpeth & no public transport. The only means to get there would have been walking, or by cycle or pony & trap.~~

I started work on the farm on leaving school at 14. There was no pay, you were clothed & fed, my elders had started work in the same way. They had no money to spare perhaps. ~~It never crossed my mind to ask for a wage.~~

~~There was no five & a half day week,~~ we started work on a Mon & worked on until 6 o'clock on a Saturday night. We did not take any notice of any of the Bank holidays. I knew there was such a thing but the other farmers worked on Easter Monday so we did.

At the age of sixteen a farmer 5 miles away wanted a boy for the term Nov to May, I got the job at £7"10 for the term. ~~No doubt that was the sum the farmer offered me & I would not dare to ask for more although my elders told me I should have had more.~~

This farmer thought I should work a little longer as the days got a little longer in the spring. He knew that I felt I was being exploited, he worked among pens of sheep after I had put the horse & cart away & I had to help him. One night his father told him I had done enough for one day. He told his father the time was secondary to his need for my help with the sheep. I knew the sheep could have been attended to in the morning.

John

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John

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P. 27 There was always thousands of rabbits, so that in the event of there being no butchers meat, we used to go down to the river side, gather a few stones as big as apples, then my father & I got into line facing into the field & the rabbits who were graising there used to squat when being confronted with a danger between them & there holes in the river side. We threw the stones at the rabbits as they squatted, we usually got what we wanted in a short time.

P. 29 M^r & M^{rs} Spencer once found three or four of us boys playing in the New Park behind the hall, we cleared out quietly when we saw them. However Peter Robertson was informed, he was the school master. Peter told us what would happen if we played & wandered off the path again. We were also told we had been laughing as we cleared off.

The "gentry" were all powerful in those days. My father would say to me at times, "Did you meet the squire", when he knew he was about. Then he would look seriously at me & say, "Did you touch your hat." The girls big & little used to curtsy when they came into the presence.

P. 316 I can't refrain from mentioning this incident that I saw in my youth. M^{rs} V-----, she was the sister of Lord A-----, walked into M^r Wisemans grocers shop in Belford one day, the counter/ was full of country folk waiting to be served. M^{rs} V. called out her requirements over the heads of the waiting women. M^r Wiseman served M^{rs} V. at once while the rest waited, no one protested, they would be occupying tied houses or had other fears that people lived under in those days. The gentry were not all like that only a few that used their power as M^{rs} V. did. Judgement will be passed on me for raking up these memories, but this is how we lived.

We had our baths in the scullery in a tin bath, the shape of a barge, it had one end a bit higher than the other, perhaps that high was to stop you falling out backwards on to the cold cement of the scullery floor. There was plenty of room for me in the bath & my little boat, cut out of a piece of fire wood.

P. 7

I remember a poorly furnished shop in School Street where they sold one pound of good dates for three half pence. You could get a lovely apple for a 1/2 d. I have known oranges sold at 40 for a shilling, they were good too, better than some to-day at 5d apiece. A 1/2d pomegranate, they were a new arrival then.

At the sweet shop opposite the school, you got about 12 chocolate caramels for a 1/2d. In the Bigg Market in Newcastle, half an hours walk away, you could buy a quarter of a pound of all sorts of good "bullets" i.e. sweets for 1 penny.

At the age of 18 the chance came to me to learn to drive a ~~motor~~ car. How I had saved any money out of the wages I got I don't know. But I went for a month to a garage in Newcastle & was taught to drive & maintain a motor car.

Board & lodging could be had for 14 shillings per week in those days.

Eventually I went to a titled man to work on his estate. My job was to help the gardener & drive a Belsize motor car.

V of an O P . 5

P. 18 (At the age of 13 I went to live with my father's brother ~~and~~ & sister at Shelly Farm, Netherwitton.)

P. 19

Wedding parties used to travel in brakes, a four wheeled machine, with facing seats holding about 20 persons, with 2 or 3 on the box. Children used to run along with these parties shouting "Hey canny man hoy a hapenny oot. The devils up the spoot & we canna get him oot." (Hoy, to throw. Spoot, spout.)

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a pay day morning. Good butter 1/- or less per ^{lb} ~~pound~~ The men who came round with the fish very likely had come by road from North Shields, 12 miles.....

Fish & chips at 1d fish & a "hapaeth" 1/2d of chips. The pork shops were lovely warm places in my eye. They had a hot plate in the window, it would be heated by gas I should think..... You could buy a "happeney duck". This was a piece of minced meat the size of a good apple, or about 1" to 2" deep about 4" square, these were sold hot or cold, & a "hapaeth" 1/2d of pease pudding, made a meal for a man let alone a child.

I remember a poorly furnished shop in School Street where they sold one pound of good dates for three half pence.... You could get a lovely apple for a 1/2d. I have seen oranges sold at 40 for a shilling, they were good too, better than some to-day at 5d apiece. A 1/2d pomagranate, they were a new arrival then.

V of an O P 2

P. 8

I can remember going to school on my first day. It seems to me it was raining that morning, by something my mother was wearing. She took me to school & she seemed to vanish, after that it is a blank, until just before dinner, I had a box of bricks in front of me on the tiny desk & I was told to put the bricks back in the box, before I went home. I must have been last because I was in an awful state, but they went back into the box at last.

H. 9

P. 6 Food was plentiful if you had any money, bacon about 8d per lb, a good rabbit for a 1/-. Men used to come round with a pony & flat cart selling herrings "Caller he herrin" they called them for 6 a penny. My mother used to bone them, roll them & they were baked in a pie dish in the oven. Another cheap meal was gurnets, a small fish with a large wedge shaped head, they were roasted in a dish & I was very fond of them, we used to have them on Fridays, we were not Catholics only hard up & the gurnets would be cheaper than a piece of pie beef, when money was scarce on

V 80P 7
Sheep heads were all¹ snapped up, they made good broth, nothing was wasted. Beef or any bones were sold without any trouble. I never remember anyone saying the meat was too fat, if you could get it down it was welcome.