

## BRIGHT AND CRISP AND UNEVEN

Silhouetted against a bright crisp winter afternoon sky a solitary figure went about his labours in a vast unending field of sugar beet with no trees, hedge or building in sight. His rusty old bike lay against the fast decaying remnants of a five - barred gate which strangely had no fencing to accompany it and stood isolated by the side of the muddy fen track as if left as a reminder of what used to be. Talk to any old fen farmhand and he would see nothing out of the ordinary with this gate nor with the wild flat inhospitable landscape - it's always been like this since time began so why try to change it?

As I was about to move on in an attempt to defrost my body my eye was diverted back to the labourer, dressed in grubby overcoat tied together with twine, and now struggling across the field in the teeth of a bitterly cold wind. His approach was painfully slow but the first words he uttered in a broad fen accent as he walked by me, as if I didn't exist, were not unexpected.

'W'ere d'yew come from?'

Conversation with fen folk is nothing if not blunt, short and to the point. Once satisfied I was from the same town he stared into the distance away across the field in which he had been working all day and considered his position with some deliberation. The next question was just as blunt and obvious.

'Then whot yew doin' 'ere?'

The straightness of his question took me aback although I had no excuse considering my frequent encounters with

the old gentlemen that spent most of their day chewing the cud under the butter cross in the town. It was a valid enquiry but still very difficult to answer adequately to these wily and stubborn old fenman. Having spun him a plausible yarn about my deep interest in sugar beet and it's tending before the fast approaching harvest he seemed reasonably satisfied and at ease and shuffled across to his old bike. Lifting a massive army greatcoat from the intrepid machine he produced a greaseproof wrapped packet tied awkwardly together with fraying string and promptly lowered himself to the ground to consume his 'docky' under the shelter of the coat.

I watched, dumbstruck, in complete silence. Nothing was said and nothing happened except for the occasional moan of the wind and the rustling of the reeds in the dyke by the gate. 'Docky' finished he raised himself, placing the crumpled greaseproof paper wrapping and string into a cavernous pocket, picked up his well used wooden handled hoe, mounted the rusting steed and squeaked off down the track. Not a word was uttered. I pinched myself out of the trance that had fallen over me and gazed back towards the town and the direction in which the old farmhand had travelled. He was but a black speck on the horizon heading for home and a welcoming fire into which he would most likely stare long and silently - his routine had come with long practice ever since he had automatically become a labourer on the local farm since leaving school as a teenager.

Venturing back to the town, still rapped deep in thought, I headed for the market square and the old butter cross. The sun by now was falling rapidly in the west and although the fens have no hills to obliterate it's warmth

and welcoming presence St. Mary's Church, the fine Georgian building housing the Post Office and the George Public House bordering the Market Place cast deep shadows across the square causing a deep chill to descend. The market traders although well protected from the insidious cold by layers of clothing and the ubiquitous fingerless gloves began to seriously consider calling it a day. Under the fine pyramidal roof of the butter cross sat a group of hardy old timers drawing on their weather beaten pipes and exchanging stories of days gone by - and no doubt today's problems. Some of them I'm sure remembered as children the infamous Pentecostal preacher who spat fire and brimstone at bemused fen workers from a farm cart purloined for the purpose from the backyard of a pub fringing the market place. Protected by thick woolly scarves and gloves the old men recalled past days of working the land in unbelievably bitter winters when the Whittlesey Washes of the Nene set as hard as iron as the harsh weather continued for week after week. One old gentleman, propping his arched body on a rustic wooden stick joked and reminisced of the almost festive skating competitions held on the deep frozen waters. As snow settled on the fields and severe frosts set in thousands of land workers out of work on account of the arctic conditions took to the ice along with strange Heath - Robinsonish contraptions which spewed and belched great black clouds of smoke through a tall stove pipe like chimney and yet produced, we are told, the finest fish and chips in the land! How these cauldrons of heat and steam managed not to sink through the ice is still a mystery; presumably their intrepid owners had some intimate knowledge as to when they had to make their

escape to terra firma. For many years at the turn of the 20th. century competitive speed skating in the Fens, where many a reputation was won and lost, was the highlight of the year. Memories obviously still lingered on in the old gentlemen - names such as Turkey Smart and Charlie Tebbutt could be heard in their conversation.

Talking is thirsty work and as if on the click of a switch they all raised their weary bodies and headed on automatic pilot straight for one of the pubs. As drawn by a magnet I followed ever more eager to hear of past brave deeds by their colleagues some of whom no doubt had already been called to a 'better life' above. With beer in their bellies they began to argue over the awesome reputation held by the town.

'Without a word of a lie' one said 'there was a day when there was a different pub for each week and that's as true as I stand here'.

His friends did not seem at all surprised at his forceful and apparently accurate statement and in fact continued in the same vein eulogising on how you could stay in the bar of a pub for a whole week to have a 'good drink' and of the time when pubs began to be named after the letters of the alphabet since they were so short of names! Plied with copious amounts of alcohol they then began to recall times when they or a friend attempted to overcome notorious '18 pint a night characters' who frequently finished up returning home in a 'borrowed' wheelbarrow! Almost unbelievable stories of men who, having consumed as much as 2 gallons of beer, were still able to hit the bullseye of the dartboard time after time, began permeating the jovial discourse. Some digressed onto stories of ghosts and apparitions seen wandering the fen

village streets late at night. One haunting in particular seemed to attract a great deal of attention from all closely gathered around the bar. It seemed that a white hooded figure had been observed leading a ghostly grey horse and cart festooned with flickering lights - most likely the night soil cart!

'I was frit'r death' exclaimed the narrator visibly shaking - he had obviously been deeply moved!

'Nothing more thun that 'ol ruffian Tommy Onyett in a white sheet' retorted a younger man.

At this the group erupted into raucous laughter and the glasses clanked and jangled on the bar at the noise. At this juncture as the laughter reached a crescendo and several of my 'friends' appeared decidedly unsteady I discreetly stepped out of the pub into what was now a bright and crisp winter evening. Lights were already on in the street and nearby shops and looking upwards at the ancient hostelry I cast my eyes on the pub sign - I had been drinking at the Letter B! Suddenly the tales of those old fenmen did not seem so far fetched and incredulous.

Feeling decidedly unsteady - or was the footpath that uneven as it appeared to be rising up to meet me - I cautiously headed home a wiser man.

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