

EXTRACTS FROM *THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF MARJORIE REEVES (1905-2003)*

This book should now be available in Westbury Library or, to buy, from www.mellenpress.com (sales@mellenpress.com) or to order from Devizes bookshops. ISBN-10: 0-7734-3933-1 (soft cover); £39.95.

From Chapter I – Identity: a Place, a Community, a Family

Lying on the grass I looked down to the little Gothic church on the hill-side immediately below and then across a little valley to our red-brick house, to the stream, Stradbrook, running out of the chalk, to the cluster of the village, to ‘our’ Works and further below to the ancient yew trees of my grandfather Whitaker’s house. ‘Now I know what I belong to’, I thought, ‘I can see it all’. My community lay, as it were, within my grasp in size, pattern and purpose. I lived in a particular place, not any place.

Bratton lies under the northern escarpment of Salisbury Plain on the road from Westbury to Devizes. When Cobbett rode along it in 1826 he described the Plain running along the skyline on his right, with its flocks of sheep cropping their way day by day over the downland and the Vale below him on his left, full of rich dairy pastures.

The ever-present hills half circle the village affectionately. From our own house we could race downhill into the village on our own peculiar errands. Everyone we met greeted us. We generally knew exactly where they were going and what they were doing. A routine visit to the one general store would be for buying farthing bars of chocolate or an ounce of sherbet which we poured into our palms and licked as we went on our way. Bratton Ironworks, plumb in the centre of the village, formed its real focus. Everyone set their clocks by the Works whistle. The village, in fact, had a special character for three reasons: the Ironworks had brought craftsmen to the village, earning higher wages than farm labourers; there was no one leading squire to act as patron; the Baptist congregation, dating from the 17th century about equalled, sometimes even exceeded, the Anglican presence in numbers and importance. Hence there was a certain egalitarianism which, at that date, would not be found in surrounding villages.

.....

[Life at ‘The Elms’ ca. 1914]

The drawing-room furniture was very much *à la mode*, in imitation ebony, with unsubstantial chairs, a fussy china cabinet and an over-ornamented overmantel. Later, I wondered how my mother, brought up in a home full of solid 18th-century furniture, could have chosen such stuff, but then remembered that her mother had demoted Heppelwhite wheat-ear chairs in favour of a Victorian suite. Consumerism, in the sense of an urge to throw out in favour of the newest style, was already with us.

Our new technology in the form of bathroom and indoor WC was an admired advance on the Yew Trees arrangements. But we were only half way there, for sewage was still dealt with

by a septic tank and we all took turns on a rotary pump which pumped water from our deep well to tanks in the roof.

Because of the needs of the Iron Works gas had reached the village soon after 1900. So there was no longer a fleet of oil lamps to be trimmed and filled each day. The height of sophistication was reached in the bell system: instead of lovely old swan-necks tinkling away we had press-button buzzers at the outside doors and in the chief rooms which activated a battery of winking lights just outside the kitchen. They were a great temptation to children. The kitchens were only slightly updated versions of the old farm kitchens, with a range for cooking and stout, white-scrubbed tables. In the back kitchen the pump trough (pronounced *trou* in Bratton) with its curving black pump handle was located, close to the well just outside the house. A 'copper', heated by a fire underneath boiled the laundry on washing day – and also the Christmas puddings! The huge old mangle (clothes wringer) was a danger to fingers but a delight when we were allowed to turn the handle until the stone weight fell with a clunk which eventually wore a hole in the flagged floor. Two areas of the house were our special playgrounds on wet days. On the first floor landing we played card games or competed fiercely in putting together jigsaw puzzles at top speed. (We had a splendid collection of these since they could be home-made with plywood and fret-saw). Playing in the roof was less acceptable, especially after Kathleen, crawling along the unboarded rafters, put her foot through the best bedroom ceiling. But it was a most desirable place, reached by a fixed ladder in the 'dirty clothes cupboard' and containing in the boarded part two large water tanks and lots of fascinating junk.

The front lawn was just large enough for cricket (with a certain risk to the plate glass drawing-room windows). But to the grown-ups it was essentially for the refined game of croquet. This was the great game of the 'gentry' seeking genteel exercise. I hated it because my game always seemed to expire by being croqueted into the shrubbery. On the lane side our doings were screened by a yew hedge which must once have been small but which I only remember as high and thick enough to lie on the top and read through a summer afternoon. You could also do hand-stands against it. Another thick hedge of cypress screened the front garden from the 'tradesman's entrance' to the side door. On that front lawn many things happened – carpets swept at spring-cleaning, sewing parties, bazaars, innumerable tea-parties of all sorts and kinds through nearly a century.