

An Old Man Tries to Remember by H.G.Lock

I, Henry George Lock am now in my eightieth year and I may well say with Jacob, 'Few and evil have they been.'

I first saw the light of day in Abingdon Berks on October 30th 1876. My father and mother had eight children, four girls and four boys. I was number five on the list, having three sisters and a brother older than myself. My father was a monumental mason which had been a family occupation for several generations, especially on my grandmother's side. She was a Godfrey and their names appear in the Sutton Courtney Church Register at the very beginning, about 1550.

Soon after I was born, my father moved back to his native village, Sutton Courtney, to take over the Plough Inn as his mother, who was a widow and the licensee, had died. At Sutton my mother gave birth to three more children, first two more boys and then a girl, so we were a proper Victorian family.



My first recollection is that of being taken to the village school at the age of three. They had a gallery at one end and we sat in rows. An older girl looked after us and she was more like a nursemaid than a teacher. I can remember words like 'cat' etc written on the blackboard. However, if you wish to know what a village and village school were like, you should read *Lark Rise* by Flora Thompson which is a very true description and would do for my village, only Sutton was much larger, nearly a thousand people. It had seven public houses.

Whilst on the subject I must mention a recent book by Miss Read called *Village School* which deals with the present period. These two books are very important. They may be called the 'alpha and omega' of village schools which will soon be numbered with the dodo and the horse, also Gray's *Rude Forefathers of the Hamlet*.

Another early recollection is of the great snowstorm of 1881. I can remember being hurried home from school by my sisters. After that I cannot remember much more as I would have been shut indoors for some weeks. However when older I heard terrible tales of the deaths of men and animals. My father said that heaps of snow that had been piled up to clear the roads did not melt till midsummer.

At six years old I went to the senior school. It was all one room without any partition. The master had just one pupil teacher to manage about a hundred boys and girls. My eldest sister was the pupil teacher, who later after her College training, became mistress of the Infant School. They had some very rough boys in those days. I have seen boys kick the master's legs and throw slates at him after having the cane. Games in the playground were very rough. Small boys were bullied and fights frequent. Still we were taught the 3Rs which is more than they are today.

One thing always stands out in my memory. In those days we used to pay twopence a week and after prayers, the master used to collect it. Whilst waiting, I was rolling my two pennies on the desk and when they rolled off, I could only find one. The master had me out, searched my pockets and there was the penny. It must have fallen in, like money sometimes will in a trouser turn-up. I felt like Joseph's brothers when the money was found in their sack. I was called a cheat and made to stay in after school and write 'cheat' out a hundred times. Remember I was only about eight and too astounded to utter any protest. I used to tell the master about it when grown up. He lived to be over ninety and died in Benson Oxon in 1940. I went to the funeral. My brother did the tombstone.

When I was eleven, I was sent to Culham College Practicing School which was about three miles from our end of the village. Some boys came from much further and two, who were farmer's sons, came on ponies. That was before the days of bicycles although later we had a bone-shaker and a penny-farthing in the village. Most boys came from Abingdon and you had to pay eight shillings a term. By the way when we gave up the old home in 1939, I found a lot of my school bills. Father seemed to hoard most things. I have one of his school books from when he was thirteen. It is dated 1852, all in beautiful copper-plate writing without one blot or alteration all the way through.

I asked my father once if he had ever had the cane at school. He said only once and then the master had to apologise. It appears that the master had just cut himself a new cane and was

looking about for something to try it out on. He noticed my father stooping, very busy at his desk and he fetched him a stemmer on the behind, which made him jump I can tell you! Well it so happened that he was doing work for the old man who was the Overseer, and refused to go on unless the master said he was sorry. Needless to say, it was not in the singular in my own case, but very much the plural!

Before I go any farther, I will proceed to give a description of the village as it was at the end of the 19th century; its principal houses, its various trades and buildings and so on. First it possessed a large and beautiful church from around 1100 although some parts may be older. Then two chapels, one, a very small one, built by a Reverend Tipstaff who left the Church of England on a point of doctrine. He also had a place in Abingdon. A large monument is erected in Abingdon cemetery, with a sum of money to keep it in repair. Up till now this has been done by my father and my brother. The other Chapel was Congregational and still carries on. It was rebuilt at the beginning of the century, chiefly by the efforts of Mr Gaius Hall the village grocer and baker.

The small chapel was empty when I was a boy, but somewhere about 1900 a man who was a member of a religious body who called themselves the Gold Preachers or Cooneyites took it over and by his own efforts made a nice place of it. The Gold Preachers had a large gathering at Hanney every Whitsuntide where they held baptisms in the Ock River. This man wanted to have some baptisms in the brook at Sutton but the farmer refused permission, which just shows how far the Church has travelled since our Lord was baptised in Jordan.

Then we had several large houses, The Abbey and The Manor, which were opposite each other and the Norman Hall which used to be the hall of Justice of the Courtenays. There was a C o E Board School with and Infant School and School House attached. There were also about six large farm houses occupied mainly by Pullens who owned most of the land, their ancestors having made much money at the time of the Crimean War. Not one of them is now occupied by a farmer, all having been sold and turned into private houses, the land being mainly farmed by absentee landlords. It was the old tale, shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in four generations although it was partly caused by the terrible depression in agriculture in the (18) 70s and 80s.

We also had two grist mills working on the little Ginge Brook and a disused paper mill. The following trades were carried on chiefly for the benefit of agriculture: first a large wheelwright and blacksmith business, run on very similar lines to Mr Melbury's in Hardy's *Woodlanders*, another blacksmith who kept to the one trade. They had plenty of work as a village was almost self sufficient in those days. My father used to paint the wagons and do the lovely lining out and put farmer's name on. He also did all the coffin plates. There was often ne drying on the mantelpiece at home. Once he had to do the turnpike tariff notice board. Much

to our amusement, after mentioning all the animals they could think of and the tariff for each, they finished with 'any other beast' I suppose that was in case a circus came through! Pedestrians had to pay one ha'penny to go through

At the end of the village, by the paper mill, was a wharf. Barges used to bring coal and stones for the roads. About 1912 the wharf and Queen's Head public house along with some cottages were bought by Lady Oxford and another house built and joined on to the house that was already there. The frontage was made to face the river. Mr Asquith was living there when war broke out in 1914. It was called 'The Wharf'.

The paper mill has completely gone by now. It vanished a bit at a time. The tall chimney was felled in 1897. It was a gala day for the village when this happened. We had a photo of it.

I remember several fires at Sutton when I was a boy. They were mostly hay or cornricks. It was a thrilling sight to see how the flames would catch another rick and run all over it in a flash. Years later when I read *Precious Bane* about the fire in Gideon's rickyard, my mind went back to it.

In those days they only had the old manual fire engines which were hand pumped and had to come from Abingdon, three miles away. Men who wanted to pump were give a wrist strap and would man the pump so many each side and go as hard as they could for a few minutes when another gang would take over. It was exhausting work but there was keen competition to get a strap as the pay was good compared to the 10/- a week paid by the famers.

The work on the land was nearly all done my men and horses. We had the portable engine to thrash the corn and the steam plough came occasionally. It we heard them thundering through the village, us boys would run to see them, for unless we walked some miles to the station we never saw anything like that. How they made the cups rattle on the dresser! In winter a certain amount of corn was beaten out with a flail but mostly peas and beans for cattle feed. Also, malting was done as some farmers brewed their own beer.

There was much poverty in the village, especially in the winter as the farmers used to stand men off. You could often see a crowd of them round the blacksmith's shop. They would like to get inside for the warmth. Farmers would give men permission when out of work to grub up tree stumps which they would then sell as blocks at 1/- a wheelbarrow full. They would break them up with a beetle and wedge. It was very hard work indeed which men would not do today. However at that time you got no help unless you went into the workhouse, which was looked upon with horror – like Betty Higden in Dickens. I remember a pauper funeral when a boy. The poor man fell into the river while mowing the bank. The coffin was made of rough planks and tarred all over. I can see it now.

The Village Feast, which took place on Corpus Christi Day, was an important event in the life of the village. Girls in service and any native who could manage it would come home in time for the Feast. The day started with a band coming to the village, met by the members of the Village Sick Benefit Society, headed by a man carrying a banner. It was looked upon as a great honour to carry this banner and it required a strong man especially if it was a windy day. Then with the flag flying and the band playing, we all marched to the church for a special service. Money had been left years ago to pay the clergyman £1 for preaching a sermon that day. After the service, they marched up the village playing at the big houses, where refreshment was handed out, until they came to the school.

At the school a good hot dinner was provided and Club members and some of the leading men of the village, such as the Vicar, Schoolmaster and some of the farmers would partake thereof. The bakehouse, which was next door to the school, cooked all the meat and so on. After dinner the band struck up again and they marched back through the village stopping to play at the big houses again, not forgetting the pubs. Dancing would take place on the lawns and at each place drink would be handed out. This continued till about 6.00 pm by which time most people had had about as much drink as they could carry. The band got past playing and the man with the banner would be staggering about. So it was time for the members of the band to get into their horse brake and depart for their own village.

The rest of the people who were capable would proceed to the village green where roundabouts, coconut shies and a dancing booth would soon be doing a good trade. This would be kept up till about midnight, when another red-letter day in the village would be ended. Often it would finish with several fights, mostly caused by village girls consorting with young men from Abingdon and Oxford which made the village youths see red.

I well remember one d feast day when some friends came to our house with a London boy, who was put in my charge to take to the feast. He looked a pale, puny boy and I had to try and protect him from being ragged by the village boys. But he was quite capable of looking after himself, for after he had been insulted a bit too much, he was off with his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and challenged the biggest boy present. It was soon apparent that this London boy had been taught something of the noble art of self defence, for he soon gave the bully a good thrashing, much to the surprise of all the other boys. I was mightily proud of him after that. It was a long time ago and I cannot now even remember his name, not did I ever see him again but I can still conjure up the fight in my imagination.

We had a Steeple Chase in the village every May. It was held in the meadows along the river between Sutton and Abingdon. The Grandstand was just opposite the mouth of the canal and so was the big water jump where a good many riders came to grief. The meadow belonged to

a Mr William Pullen, a part time farmer and gentleman rider who owned the racing stables. Sutton people had to line up at the top of Otney Lane and Mr Pullen would come and let us in for free. Most people entered the racecourse from the road near Abingdon and it was called the Abingdon Steeple Chase. We had a holiday from school and it often happened on May 1st so we went garlanding in the morning and racing in the afternoon. Any they used to say village life was dull!

I mentioned Garlanding just now. The day before May 1st we would search the meadows for wild flowers. When the season was late it was a job to find enough. Also our good branch of May we sang about was always blackthorn as, since the calendar was altered, I doubt if you every get May blossom out by the 1st. Well on the morning of the 1st, we went from house to house with our garlands. It was generally the girls and small boys, as when the boys got older, they were shy of that sort of thing.

This is what we sang in our village:

*Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen
We wish you a happy day
I come to show our garland
Because it's the first of May
A good branch of May I have brought you
And at your door do stand
It's only a sprout, but it's well budded out
It's the work of our Lord's hand*

After this we sang a verse of the following hymn. Why, I never knew but it was very prophetic.

*Childhood years are passing o'er us
Youthful days will soon be gone
Cares and sorrows lie before us
Hidden dangers, cares unknown.
Oh may He who meek and lowly
Trod himself this vale of woe
Make us his and make us holy
Guide and guard us whilst we go.*

Queen Victoria's firs jubilee was another even that stands out in my memory. I was then nearly eleven years of age. It was a beautiful summer day; the old Queen nearly always had fine weather on these occasions, whilst Elizabeth II is usually unfortunate. Trestle tables were set up under the ancient elms in the Abbey grounds. For days beforehand, preparations had been going on for a gigantic feast. Bushels of potatoes had to be peeled and a large number of Xmas puddings were made. My mother boiled a copperful.. While the potato peeling was going on, wagers were made on who could do a certain quantity in a given time. My father backed Mother against all comers and she won. While mixing the puddings, one farmer's wife lost her wedding ring. A reward was offered on the day and the ring was found in ne of the puddings, much to her joy.

In those days the village was nearly self-supporting, so the farmers slew sheep and oxen almost like King David and Solomon did at their big feasts. Then the village baker had to work overtime making the bread and cooking the joints and so on. My sister, who was helping, said that the farm labourers only wanted 'mate' as they called it. They said they could get vegetables any day. At that time, with the exception of bacon from their own pig, meat was seldom seen on a farm worker's table. Readers of Cobbett will remember how he went off the deep end on coming to a county very rich in cattle, only to find the labourers living on potatoes and turnips.

One thing about the Jubilee feasts that we children remember was that we had to wait for our feed until the adults had finished. In our case, and no doubt it applied to many more, Mother packed us off after breakfast and told us we should not want any dinner as we would have our feed there. The consequence was that it was the afternoon before we got ours as we did not have to have the meat. So we hungry children were gazing with envious eyes at our betters stuffing themselves. However, our turn came at last and no doubt we made up for lost time. We then had sports and so on but I can't remember what I ate. It is strange how some things stand out in one's memory and others are lost.

We had a man in our village who had twenty five children by his two wives. His name was William Carter. He gave most of the boys Bible names. Several of them were my school companions. On one occasion Mr Carter and ten of his sons played a cricket match against the rest of the village. A photo was taken of the event and published in the Abingdon Herald. When singing the *Te Deum* in church, we used to sing '*the noble army of Carters*'

In those far off days it was hardly safe to visit another village, especially for boys, unless you wanted to fight. It was the coming of the bicycle that opened up the countryside, as up to that time unless you were rich enough to own a horse and carriage, you had to walk. It was a case of saying '*Here is a stranger – through a brick at him!*'

My brother and I were very frightened once over a village fight. It so happened that some Sutton youths who had wandered into Drayton village a few miles away were set upon by the Drayton youth and had to flee. I suppose the matter was debated during the following week and it was decided to march into Drayton the following Sunday and fight it out. My brother and I thought we would go and see the fun instead of going to Sunday school. On the afternoon only a small number turned up from Sutton. However they boldly marched towards Drayton. ON getting to the top of Lumersham Hill, we saw a great host in the distance. It looked as if all the men in Drayton had turned out.

It was out of the question to fight that lot, so after a consultation it was decided to send a small deputation forward with an offer to fight their three best men. Some three men went

forward. There was a space of about two hundred yards between the main bodies. However the Drayton men were not sportsmen and instead of listening to our deputation they set on them and they had to fight and run. The whole army then advanced towards Sutton and our men had to flee.

What happened next I did not see as my brother and me, only about ten and twelve, made off across the fields and did not feel safe until we were back indoors. We heard afterwards the enemy did not come before the entry of the village. However our deputation of three got badly knocked about.

Some people liked fighting. One way to get into a scrap was to go into the taproom and turn a pint mug upside down. That meant the man was ready to fight the best man in the house and there was usually someone ready to oblige. But the beer was much stringer then and only tuppence a pint. Irish labourers used to come over in the summer to help with the harvest and, although they were good workers, they were always ready for a fight when they had had a drop.

In my young days most of the work was done by men and horses. They had threshing engines and so on although still used the flail to beat out corn for cattle. The machine first used was something like a grass mower of today. It was called a wadder. It cut the corn and threw it out in wads which women then tied into sheaves. If you recall Hardy, Tess was doing this work. Much of harvest was piece work and a man with a family could earn good money. While the man cut the corn using a hook and stick, his wife and children would follow behind and tie up, the children making the bands. The fields were set out in lands and a man took a land at a time. Today fields are all pulled down level because of the machines but the old men always tell you the land was much better drained when you had a furrow every so many yards.

Tradesmen and others of semi-independent means would turn out to help with the harvest. Boys would lead the horses into the field and shout '*Hold tight*' then bring the loads home to the rickyard. All day long great wagons would be lumbering through the village until it was too dark to see.

A farmer's last load was a great occasion. It was not a full load as that would have been dangerous. As many children as could squeeze themselves on would get onto the wagon and shout as loud as they could:

'Hip Pip Hurray, Harvest Home'

It was great fun and you generally got something to drink when you arrived at the farmyard.

During the summer holidays we children who were not working in the fields would go a leasing – or gleaning as they call it in the Bible. You remember Ruth and Boaz? We used to set off in the morning in families taking food and drink. About mid-day we would find a shady spot and have a nice picnic. In those days the farmer would let you on a field as soon as the last load had gone. They did not often horse-rake it or put hens on it as they do now, so we could have a good lot. The method was to pick up a big handful, then take out so many straws and twist round the neck of the ears of corn and tuck in the ends. The little ones would give their bits to older brothers and sisters. When you had finished for the day you had so many heads one way and so many the other which were tied in the middle. The bundles were carried home on your head. By that method your head pressed against the straw and thus did not beat out the corn. It was a good plan of getting the children out of mother's way. They would take quite young children as they could play about and not come to any harm. We would often stop out till quite late.

One year my two brothers and I leased enough to make three quarters of a sack of flour. When you got the bundles home, you cut off the ears and put them in a sack. The straw did for bedding for the pigs and rabbits. When all was safely gathered in you waited until a farmer was thrashing his rick somewhere near, and get his men to put it through for you in their dinner hour. We had a grist mill just down the road from our house and the miller would grind it into flour for us. One thing about leasing; it was necessary to wear an old pair of boots as the stubble cut them almost to pieces. We always wore heavy lace-up boots.

I will now write about our games and amusements. One very obvious one was fishing. WE had the Ginge Brook at our end of the Village and the River Thames at the other. Until we reached a certain age we were not supposed to go to the river as it was very dangerous what with the weirs and flood gates. The river nearly always claimed at least one victim every year.

The brook was comparatively safe except by the mill head. We would paddle in the brook and catch Miller's Thumbs and Tailor's Needles under the stones. Tailor's Needles were like little eels and more often than not slip through our fingers. One very easy way to catch minnows was to tie a worm to a boot lace rush and lie down to put it in the water. The minnows would get hold of the worm and would not let go so you could pull them out as fast as you liked. I do not think we ever used nets or flour bags as my children and those of today did.

When we got bigger we could fish in the River. We cut our own rods and you could buy a hook, float and line for a few pence, or make a float with a cork and feather. We usually caught roach or perch which mother would then cook for us. Sometimes I would catch a lot of gudgeons and my sister would do them like sardines.

Occasionally we would catch a Jack which caused great excitement. It used to make some of the grown up fisherman wild to see a boy catch a big fish with a halfpenny hook when he could not with all his expensive tackle.

We also used to catch a lot of crayfish in the brook. The method was to strip naked, wade along the brook and put your hand in the holes to pull them out. A big one might pinch your fingers or you may catch hold of a water rat but that was all part of the fun. I well remember one hot day when I had been at it all afternoon with the fierce sun on my back. In the night I woke up in agony as my back was so sore. I often wonder what some of the girls suffer who lie in the sun. I suffered through ignorance but never again. You only had to remember to dip in the water occasionally and make your body wet.

We had four rookeries in the Village and rook shooting was a great event for us boys. It generally took place in early May. The largest rookery was at the Abbey and all who had a gun were invited to join in the sport. Afterwards the dead rooks were distributed around the village to make rook pie. Years afterwards I got my wife to cook some but we could not get on with them. It is looked upon as very cruel now, but our ancestors' chief sport was killing each other so we had improved on that!

I am afraid that many of our pursuits were cruel according to the present day ideals. Killing birds and taking their eggs was one of our chief amusements. Most of us had a catapult and also a sling. My mother would cook the birds for us and also the eggs especially if we found some moorhen or partridge eggs.

We played cricket of a sort, cutting our own wickets from a willow tree. We scored by cutting notches on a stick, like a tally stick. The old football was to kick a pig's bladder about but after going to Culham College School, I played both cricket and football in the correct way.

Bung and Hockey, as we called it, was a great game. We did not mess about with goal posts. The boundary of the field was the goal. As many as liked could join in. We cut our own sticks and we boys whose parents owned a pub furnished the bung. They were soft and did not hurt if you were hit. Once I was very clever. Bungs used to wear out fairly soon and perhaps our respective fathers cut supplies. So one morning I sawed a piece of wood to the shape of a bung and took that to school. It did fine until, as the game proceeded, one boy made a very hard drive and my precious bung caught me just on the bridge of my nose. I went down like a felled ox and did not recover for some time, then spent much of the morning nursing my head on the desk. What annoyed me most was that I had the best pair of black eyes you ever saw and of course in those days there was only one way a boy could get a black eye and that was by fighting. So of course everyone thought what a licking I'd had.

Another favourite game was Linkum. Any number could join in. One started with his hands joined together, then when he touched someone, they joined hands and pursued the others. As they were touched they had to join the chain. It was played in a field and of course as the chain got longer, seeing it was composed of different ages and sexes the chain kept breaking. As the rule was you could not touch anyone unless the chain was unbroken it was a rare job to catch the last few.

Ring the Bull was another game. This was very rough, especially for smaller boys. You would join hands and form a ring. One would be chosen to be the bull and went into the middle of the ring and try to break out. A big boy was often Bull and he would hurl himself with all his strength at the weakest link, just like a real bull, so any small boys in the ring often got hurt.

There was also marbles and top spinning. Also peg tops where you would try to split each others tops and hoop spinning, hopscotch and dabs. There was a gambling game for buttons and marbles with a P put. This was a cubed piece of wood with a letter on each side; A- all, P – put, T – take, H – half and O – out. Each player would put one marble or button in the kitty and then take turns to throw the P into the air and see what turned up.

There was also conkers in season and, for the girls Kiss in the Ring and Poor Mary is a Weeping.

We also played a game called Bungle Barrow. This must be a corruption of some word. It was played thus: from four to six boys would bend down, like at leapfrog. The first one would have his hands against a wall and the others would catch hold of each other. Then the first of a second set of boys would run and putting his hands on the first boys back would come down upon it. All the others would follow in turn, the last boy saying

*Six and Four are ten
Bungle Barrow and off again*

If the side that were jumped on managed not to break before the saying was finished, it was there turn to do the jumping. It was a very dangerous game, as big boys would come down with great force and nearly break you back. If the side broke down, you often got your fingers trodden on.

The reflections end at this point