

'Gus Grit' recalls his Helpston Holiday

This article appeared in the Helpston Chronicle in March 1990 and was written by Douglas Britton, father of Chris Britton, our current choir-master and parish councillor.

When a very young lad somewhere around 1927, I was sent to Helpston with several of my school friends on a two week holiday organised by the Children's Country Holiday Fund. Not only did I enjoy a wonderful fortnight, but I learnt a lot of new things too.

Mattins was a new experience for me, for, as a chorister at a famous Tractarian (or 'high') church, I had never attended such a service. It seemed very strange to me to see a clergyman in charge staying in one place for most of the time. One new hymn I learnt in the course of this was 'Christ, Who once amongst us a child did dwell', which made quite an impression on me.

I stayed with a Mr. & Mrs. Fairweather who had a married daughter living in council housing near the station. I wonder if any members of the family are still living in the village today?

Not far from the church was a blacksmith's forge. I had never seen such a thing before and spent much time gazing in fascination at the flying sparks and enjoying the rhythmical noise of his work

There was a footbridge over the railway and it was a great thrill for me to wait on this at around 11.00 am for the Flying Scotsman to thunder underneath, showering me with soot from its chimney. The distinctive smell of its steamy smoke hung around me for most of the day after that.

There were some abandoned open-cast stone or chalk workings near the village where some of us pretended to be Stone Age cave men. Large sticks for a nearby hedge provided convenient clubs and not a few sore heads!

Fishing rods were bought from the Post Office cum General Store for use in the local streams, but we never caught anything. It kept us quiet for a little while though, as talking was forbidden in case the fish heard.

Some of us acquired rather amusing nicknames during the fortnight. Archie Collins became 'Popsy Nights'. How? Well, his mum had died some years previously and he had developed a strong attachment to his dad, hence 'Pop' and 'nights'. Because of the Stone Age episode I became 'Gus Grit' which stuck to me and all my brothers at school who followed me up.

Around 4pm one afternoon, three of us lads were returning home to tea and were on a road leading to Helpston and passing Maxey church, when we had quite a hair-raising experience. Just ahead of us the hedges on both sides of the road parted as if blown by a strong wind and there was a sound of galloping horses which lasted for possibly one minute. Three very scared boys ran home very fast! When we told the Fairweathers about it they exchanged meaningful glances but offered no explanation. I wonder if there is a legend of haunting near Maxey church?

Here too, I tasted cheese for the first time and developed a lifelong addiction to it. I was fascinated with the manufacturing process which took place at a large house down the road a bit nearer the church than our house.

The holiday finished as excitingly as it began. We had to change trains in Peterborough. While waiting on the platform at Peterborough South, I realised I had left my fishing rod on the train. The Station Master explained that if I ran to Peterborough North the train would almost certainly still be waiting there and I would still have time to catch the London train. I made it and got my rod (Seb Coe was nowhere in it!) but very tired little lad slept most of the return journey.

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