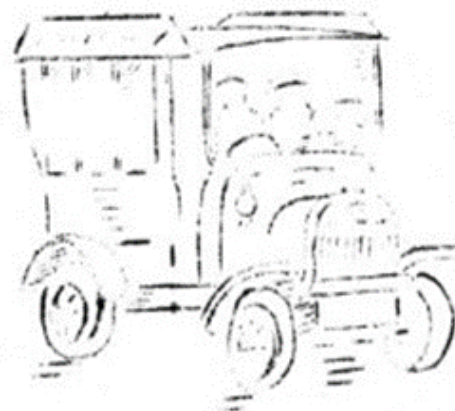


JUST ONE VILLAGE 1910 - 1960.

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and to Fred Archer for the illustrations.
E.J. S.



The idea behind this story is to record the life of our village over the fifty years 1910 - 1960, which I believe have seen more changes than any other half century in history.

Similar things have happened in villages throughout the land, and I hope that we all get pleasure from just thinking about them sometimes.

E. J. S.

CHAPTER ONE - TRANSPORT.

Our village is situated on the main road from London to Hastings, which in itself has been responsible for a moving of the busiest part over the past hundred years.

The old Parish Church, which goes back to the tenth century, is well away from the main village, for with the coming of the stage coach along the main road, the people moved to be nearer to this new means of transport.

When I first remember there were four quite distinct hamlets, Upper Green, Lower Green, Romford and Bo-peep, one at each point of the compass; since then the large open space in the centre has been filled with houses, and so the population has more than doubled, but I don't think that the number of real characters have doubled too.

My father was a coachman at a large house in Romford, and he, my mother, two sisters and I lived in a flat over the stable, which held three horses, two were used in a carriage, what a smart outfit that was. The carriage was black, with yellow lines, a crest on the two doors and two beautiful candle lamps for use after dark. The horses were black with white stars on their heads and one white foot each. But the crowning piece was my father, with a short black jacket, white buckskin breeches, black leather wellington boots with yellow tops, a yellow waistcoat and top hat. He sat on a high seat, called the box, with no protection against the weather except a leather apron when it rained. At times when the lady was only going for a short distance, the equipage would be accompanied by a beautiful collie dog, which usually ran between the back wheels; there was so little traffic that he could wander if he felt inclined.

The third horse was a big chestnut mare, named Flycatcher, this animal was a great favourite in the district, being a wonderful high stepper, always keeping up a good pace. She was used in a four wheeled dog cart, and frequently did two journeys a day to the nearest railway station, four miles away. The gentleman was a member of the Stock

Exchange and travelled to and from London. Many times in bad weather after dark, my father was none too sure of his whereabouts on the road, and on these occasions he just left it to the horse, and never once had any mishap.

One day when returning home, they arrived at a road junction at just the same time as an iron hoop from the side road, which caught the horse's front legs, and threw it with such force that the snatch on the reins pulled my father off the seat, and he landed smack on the top of his tall hat which was driven over his ears and he could not get it back. What a state to be in! Horse down, struggling to get clear of the hoop, and the driver unable to see anything because of the position of his hat! Fortunately the boy, who let the hoop go, was so frightened that he ran indoors and his father who happened to be in, and could see that something was wrong, went out to investigate, he soon saw what had happened, but try as he would he could not get the hat off. In the end he took out his pocket knife and cut the top off leaving the brim round dad's neck, where it stayed until he got home and cut the strong wire ring with a pair of pliers. Now, dog carts, top hats and hoops have nearly all disappeared.

At this time another well-known character was Sam Norton the carrier, who made the journey every week-day to the town, collecting parcels in the village in the morning for delivery in the town, and the other way round in the afternoon, with an occasional furniture removal thrown in. Most of his orders were never booked down, but few were ever forgotten. Sam was a good living chap, non-smoker and teetotaler and always at Chapel on Sunday, and when he knew people's adverse circumstances he often forgot to charge for certain deliveries. For many years his vehicle was a horse and large canvas topped van, which at all times travelled at walking pace, and a more mixed load would be difficult to find. His next door neighbour was the local mechanical and electrical engineer, a pioneer with both bicycle and motor car maintenance. After the first World War, Sam bought a Ford Chassis, made to take a $7\frac{1}{2}$ cwt load, and Fred the engineer, extended this chassis, making it long enough to take the body of the horse drawn van. It was then fitted with a dead back axle, a pair of solid tyred wheels with large chain sprockets. The original wheels were taken off, and a pair of small chain sprockets fitted in their place. When these were coupled with the new back wheels it reduced the gear and the outcome was a lorry capable of carrying 25 cwt. It was a great day when Sam became mechanised.

For some years the village was served by a horse bus service, which ran a two hourly service to the town on week-days only. There were two double decker buses which carried 24 passengers, pulled by a pair of horses on an ordinary run, but on Saturdays when heavily loaded or in bad weather, when the wheels sank into the mud, a third horse would be hooked on to the pole to help for the first two miles, which was mostly uphill. There was competition between the older school boys for the job of riding this horse, and bringing it back ready for the next bus. The journey of three and a half miles took on average half an hour to complete.

About two years before World War 1, saw the first motor bus. What advance! Now there was an hourly service, and the route covered in a quarter of an hour.

This machine was a twenty four seater single decker which was entered by a flight of five uncovered steps at the back, when the bus was full, two more passengers were allowed to pay their fare and then climb to the front seat with the driver. There were no doors, no wind-screen, the tyres were solid and there were no shock absorbers. The side, tail and inside lamps were oil burning, the head lamps were acetylene gas, and gave a wonderful clear light. What a job for the conductor on a windy night to see that they were kept alight.

About this time and for several years after, the night mail was carried from London to Hastings by a big lorry of similar construction to the bus, the driver and mate riding outside, with a sorter locked inside. One night when passing through the village, the back axle broke, and the poor fellow could not get out, for he was locked in at the start of the run, and let out with another key at the other end. The vehicle was stuck in the main road for well over twenty hours, and the only way to get food and drink to him was through a small grill in the back door. For food, biscuits were pushed through edgewise, and for drink the rubber tube from the gas lamps was taken off, and passed to him while at intervals the other end was put into a cup of tea or glass of beer, whichever he felt like.

In the end another lorry came from London bringing a new axle and a key. The mail was transferred and taken on, while the new axle was fitted on the spot. The occasion gave the engineer a chance to be a very proud man, for he had admirers all the time.

The tradespeople all did daily deliveries by horse and van, each of which had something distinctive about it. The baker's was the smell of new warm bread, the grocer the smell of paraffin and an extra-ordinarily sharp trotting Shetland pony, the milkman, the clatter of cans and churns, milk bottles had not been thought of then. I remember one day when the milkman was unable to do the round, his son, who was new to the place, put the pony in the cart and just let him go, calling at the houses where the pony stopped. He never missed a customer. A motor car could never be as helpful as that.

Heavier deliveries were done by the coal merchant, the corn man and the builder. Their horses pulled on an average loads of about one ton, at walking pace, and yet at these slow speeds, jobs were done.

These heavier carts had a really crude, but efficient system of braking. In front of the rear side back wheel hung an iron shoe on a chain, known as a skid pan. When going down hill the wheel was run onto it, and it just skidded down the hill, while behind the same wheel, hung on another chain was a wooden roller, known as a scotch. When going up

hill this was let down to trail behind the wheel, and if the horse had to stop, the cart slipped back until the roller stopped it. The roads had no tarred surface, so you can imagine what hard going it all was.

If you wanted to get anywhere in a hurry, a number of horse cabs were kept at the Camden Hotel. These were rather small single horse carriages, rather dark inside for the only light was from two small windows in the top halves of the doors. In some of the better carriages the back half opened like a pram hood and were quite pleasant to ride in.

At the same hotel for some time was kept a four horse wagonette, perhaps better known as a brake, or four-in-hand. This vehicle had two long seats, facing each other, was entered by steps at the back and had no protection from the weather except a striped canvas awning. It seated about twenty people and was used mostly in the summer for outings, and as the load was shared by four horses, were sometimes quite long journeys, anything from twenty to thirty miles each way. These trips usually started very early in the morning, to some given place, so that the horses could have a good rest before returning.

In a shed on the village green was housed a manual fire pump. When needed this was drawn by one horse, usually one from the cab stable, and on arriving at a fire was worked by any volunteers that could be found. Should the fire prove too big for this to cope with, the "Steam Fire Brigade" from the neighbouring town would be called in. This was a marvellous sight indeed, a team of four galloping horses, a crew of seven men in shining brass helmets, heavy serge trousers and tunics, with leather wellington boots. Round their waists they wore broad leather belts holding axes on one side, and coils of rope on the other.

The front part of the engine had seats made like a letter T, which were also boxes holding hose pipes and nozzles. On the front seat, or head of the T rode the driver and a man ringing a big bell, on the leg of the T sat four men, back to back, all ready to jump off and grab a hose pipe on reaching the fire. The seventh man stood on a platform at the back, getting up steam in an impressive brass boiler, which in turn worked a very efficient pump. When this engine was standing by, the boiler fire was always laid for instant lighting, and spare coal was carried between the front wheels. All metal parts where possible were made of brass which was kept highly polished.

For some years before this outfit gave way to modern equipment it was towed by a tractor, made from a converted large car; I am not sure that it was all that successful, for on a short journey the horses could be well on the way before this car could sometimes be started, since there was no self-starter, and instead of a choke each cylinder had to be primed by pouring in a small quantity of petrol through a little tap with a small cup on the top of it. That was when a driver had certainly to know his job.

As well as driving fire pumps, steam at this time was used for most heavy haulage. There were two contractors in the village, one used steam wagons and the other traction engines. The former were built with engine and load space all in one unit and were allowed to travel at 8 miles per hour while the latter were much heavier, the engine being complete in itself and able to pull various kinds of trucks, according to the load being carried. The speed of these giants was five miles an hour. At times larger tractions passed through pulling three trucks each, one of the most spectacular being "The Fride of Kent" a travelling showman's engine. This monster was covered by a large wooden canopy, supported by six twisted brass columns. In front of the funnel was a huge dynamo, used for lighting the fair, and behind it was towed an amazing assortment of trucks, water carts and caravans. This grand old fellow was a glutton for coal and the drivers of all these steamers were constantly on the look out for ponds and streams because their thirst was pretty enormous too.

One of the chief reasons that these machines have disappeared was the danger caused by smoke and sparks. Bicycles have undergone a number of changes since the beginning of the century, one of the early improvements being the pneumatic tyre. The last solid type that I remember belonged to an old fellow in Lower Green, and this machine had a fixed wheel and only one brake which worked on top of the front tyre, not on the wheel. The time came when the tyres became worn and loose, and he could not get new ones and so he kept them tied on with string which rendered the brake useless, and so he had to rely on the fixed wheel to hold him back when going down hill.

In those days all bicycles were much higher than those in present use. The men mounted their's by a step at the back which was screwed on to the end of the wheel spindle. The ladies with their long skirts had a much harder job to get on. What hard work it must have been for them with these heavy old grids and rough roads. Fred the engineer was an expert at building these machines and he made them for individual customers to their own measurements and requirements.

Boys, of course, never had enough money to buy bikes, but what fun we had on the old iron's which we made up ourselves. The frame, front forks and handle bars were the important parts; tyres, saddles, brakes and chains did not matter.

I never owned one myself but the one that I learned to ride on had pram wheels held in with two pieces of iron, found at the forge, a piece of wood pushed through the bottom bracket to put your feet on, a sack tied round the top bar to sit on, and no brakes. Of course you could only ride downhill, but what fun!

The early motor bikes were heavy affairs, driven by rubber belts from the engine to the wheel. Very few had a clutch and so no gears. The first built to carry a passenger were known as tri-cars, having

two wheels in front and one behind. The passenger rode in a wicker chair in front, and was covered in with a leather apron. The driver was perched up high behind, and to steer he actually had to turn the front half like a Bath-chair. Another conveyance which appeared regularly in the village owned by a commercial traveller, was a single seater three wheeler, two wheels in front and one behind. The traveller rode in a lovely coach built chair, with the engine behind him, controlled by a series of levers and rode on the left hand side and with his right hand he steered the back wheel with a tiller, just like a boat, and this was capable of reaching the speed of twenty miles an hour.

Baby carriages of all kinds have changed as much as anything. One of the earliest forms used in this part of the country was known as a Kent Baby Wagon, one is still to be seen in the Maidstone Carriage Museum. They were hand-made entirely, by local wheelwrights, the body, oblong in shape, a little larger at the top than the bottom and made with beautifully turned staves. The spoked wheels were wooden, about ten inches high, with iron tyres, the front pair moving on a small turntable to which was attached a single light pole with a T handle. I know quite a number of people still living who were pulled around in these carriages.

After this came the Mail Cart, a much higher affair, with a wooden body and iron wheels with small rubber tyres. These were soon improved by the addition of a hood and springs with the much more imposing name of Perambulator. Most of them were a load in themselves, without the child inside, and so the invention of the folding push chair was really welcomed for the baby who could sit up. These were four small wheels on a simple kind of deck chair, with a carpet seat and back. My sisters were pushed in one of these, and it cost 12/11 when new. Mother thought it rather expensive, but was glad of it.

Gradually in all classes of vehicle wood gave place to metal and canvas thereby being lighter in weight and quite as strong. No doubt this applies to aircraft as much as anything else. My mother died when I was quite young, and a few weeks afterwards my father was giving me a bath when we heard people running and shouting, "Here comes an aeroplane!". Neither of us had ever seen one, so dad was gone, leaving me crying in the bath! Soon he came back to tell me all about it, but you see I had not seen it, and so I still cried, when, wonder of wonders, the folk in the street were shouting "Its coming back." This time Dad snatched me up and rolled me into a coat, and that is how I saw my first aeroplane. It was a biplane, with wooden struts, and the fuselage was made of four uncovered poles, the pilot was sitting in an open seat with his feet on a wooden bar, he had his cap on backwards as was the practice in those days when riding a motor cycle, so the wind didn't get under the peak and blow it off.

All this was plain to see, for it was only just above the trees, and some of the young men of the village were tearing down the road on bicycles trying to keep up with it, with a fair amount of success, and so you can tell about what its speed was. This was only just over fifty years ago. I wonder what changes the next fifty will see.

Quite a big contribution towards increased speed of road traffic is due to the improvement of the roads themselves. In the winter months before the 1914/18 war casual labour was used for breaking stone and clearing ditches. The stone was brought into the village by giant traction engines, pulling three trucks at the time, and stacked in large piles on the side of the road where it was to be used. Plenty of pieces weighed up to 4 cwt each. A man would take on the job to break so many heaps at a given price, drawing it weekly, when old Eli Water, the road foreman, came round on his tricycle, but before paying out he would take a metal guage from his pocket, pick up a number of pieces and drop them through it. If he was satisfied that the pieces were uniform in size he would pay out, and for all his hard hammering the stone breaker was lucky if he picked up 15/- a week.

After the stone was broken, along would come a steam roller, pulling a house cart for the men to live in, and a tremendous heavy iron contraption with a number of steel spikes sticking through the bottom. These could be raised or lowered as required for breaking the road surface. It was commonly known as the iron coffin, because of its shape. Finally behind this would be the water cart, horse drawn when working, and the horse was usually hired locally.

When the whole outfit was working, the roller would first pull the coffin over a stretch of road and new stone would be spread over the loosened top, followed by the water cart, spraying water very liberally on to it to bring up the slurry as the resulting paste was called. To finish, the roller would discard the coffin and roll the whole lot back again. The completed job was a really good road but alas! it changed with the weather, mud in wet spells, and when dry even bicycle wheels would send up a cloud of dust.

On the side of nearly all roads, even in the High Street there was a ditch to take the surface water. In some places they were anything up to two and three feet deep. When entering the village from the town there was a particularly deep one, which on dark evenings was a nasty trap for the few motor cars that happened to be on the road. One young engine driver before going home would make up his fire on the off chance of being called out to pull these unlucky vehicles back on to the highway, thereby earning an extra shilling or so. Gradually as these ditches became more of a nuisance because of the increased number of cars, they were filled in and piped and the water gets away better than it did before.

In the early twenties, in the summer time a new sight appeared, barrels of tar and heaps of sand and grit were deposited on the main road sides, and eventually quite a large gang of men would arrive with three or four small tanks on wheels which held a barrel of tar, with a fire placed underneath it, to heat the tar on the spot. It was then poured on to the road with buckets, spread with long handled brooms, and finally smothered with grit from wheelbarrows with shovels, quite a long laborious task. Nowadays along comes a giant tanker with the tar already hot, which sprays straight on to the surface, followed by the lorries, which spread the grit as they unload. It is rolled in, and they are gone, all rush and bustle, and still not fast enough.

The volume of traffic to-day has so increased that the dog who ran with the carriage would hardly dare step into the highway for fear of being run over.

You will see as this story goes on how the great change in transport has had its effect on nearly every walk of life.