

# Silverwell - Memories of Pure Gold

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Silverwell is included in the Gazetteer of Cornwall of 1884 as a scattered village with a Wesleyan chapel. Not much of a description for a pleasant little village but accurate enough. It is a disparate community with no discernable centre and visitors across the years have struggled to find its main features.

It straddles the parish boundaries of St Agnes and Perranzabuloe, a line mainly defined by a small river. It is a part of the ecclesiastical parish of Mithian, given that name when Silverwell was considered unsuitable due to the decline in mining activity there. The Reverend Alfred Lord built St Peter's Church at the mid point between the villages of Blackwater and Mithian...it is Mithian Church but located at Silverwell.

Silverwell River begins its journey in a field just below the Church. It passes through Silverwell Moor, now mostly drained, and down through some lovely valleys to the sea at Perranporth.

The origin of the village name is uncertain but Charles Dysart Teague, sometime owner of Silverwell Mine, wrote in 1903, "In old times hurling (hurling) was a big game in the county. It is said, in one of those games they lost the silver ball in this valley, it was afterwards found in a well and from this it took the name of Silverwell."

I lived in Silverwell during the 1950s and 1960s, from the age of five. The village was heavily reliant on agriculture and my father worked for the Hoskins family at Greenacres Farm. The sounds and smells of farming were always present but there were no complaints in those days, it was natural and somehow less objectionable than today, besides, there were fewer incomers to complain.

I often watched my father milk the cows, each one with its distinctive name. The clanging of the metal churns is still in my head, it is evocative, a memory that doesn't fade.

Before the arrival of the tractor, shire horses held sway and I remember being placed on Major's back when I was about five years old. I could almost touch the sky, not an experience I enjoyed.

When I was a little older I worked on the farm during the school holidays and at weekends. I fed and mucked out the pigs and I still have a fondness for them. They were housed in sheds around the yard, all having access to a field. I also helped with the harvest, on the combine harvester, the dustiest job on earth, and carrying bales. I don't recall harvest time with the nostalgia that I often read about; it was hard work.

Apart from the post office and the possible existence of a small shop at Laurel Villa, Silverwell had to rely on mobile shops. Butcher Bray of Penstraze brought the meat, Stanley Cowl of St Agnes the bread, Mr Murrey of Chacewater delivered the papers and George Symmons of Mithian the groceries. Les Shugg called with paraffin and Harry Thomas of Trevellas kept the wireless running with his accumulator charging business. Arthur Benney was the greengrocer and prior to him it was Raphael Thomas with his horse and wagon. Mrs Rashleigh, a gypsy lady from Radnor, sold pegs and Mr Rashleigh, presumably her husband, travelled the area selling canvas offcuts for floor covering.

I lived at Lilac Cottage; tied to Greenacres Farm. It was quite large and whitewashed on the outside. I have fond memories of growing up there in a happy

household. If my father had lost his job then we would have lost our home...a bit precarious but I don't remember it being a problem. Of course, it may well have been through my parents' eyes.

The kitchen was the heart of the house, the big Belfast sink, the huge kitchen table and canvas on the floor. The food was always good and probably contributed to my long-term weight battle; the heavy cake, pasties, bread & butter pudding, apple pie, under roast, saffron cake, rabbit pie, buns and, of course, the bowl of simmering milk on the stove...none of that bought in clotted cream trade for us.

Neville Paddy, my cousin, has fond memories of Cornish Gold, from when he worked at Silverwell Dairy during the 1950s. "The milk was poured into enamelled bowls and placed on the slab (Cornish range) until the fat rose to the top. It was covered with muslin and left to cool on the slate slabs in the dairy and when the crust had set, and the cream's consistency was such that it did not drip from an upturned spoon, it was skimmed off. My father always enjoyed his with bread and treacle (thunder and lightning), my mother preferred hers on a Furniss's gingerbread and Edward Lawrence liked it on porridge or on slices of freshly picked tomatoes. My own favourite was on warm ginger sponge but a special treat was a piece of honeycomb topped with clotted cream...ansum."

Before the days of television our sitting room was only used for high days and Sundays but once the box was installed it became an everyday room.

Our lavatory was in the rear garden, an old stone building with a slate roof. It was not a place to linger because of the wildlife; the certain presence of spiders and the lack of light ensured it was always a quick visit. It was a bucket and chuck-it job but after a while there was progress...a flush toilet and cesspit. A few years later a bathroom was built on. The old tin bath was consigned to the rubbish heap and the ritual filling with kettles of hot water became a thing of the past. I'm told that the idea of an internal lavatory was a bit objectionable for some but I don't remember any problems in that respect...it was paradise.

The village was connected to the main water supply in the 1950s but prior to that we had to pump it from our well; my brother and I had to fill the buckets from a hand-pump in the garden. I remember the water being very cold and tasting slightly metallic. The aged pump needed priming - pouring water down the upturned spout to fill the pipes - and a failed first attempt meant a lengthy walk to the river. For those at the other end of the village there was the option of a trip down chute, a supply close to the reservoir, in a lane near the old post office.

Before the installation of mains electricity in the 1950s we relied on candles and oil lamps and, of course, the famous Tilley lamps with the fragile, white mantles that glowed to provide a brilliant light. Actually quite dim compared to even a 40-Watt bulb. The lack of good lighting helped ensure that we went to bed on time. "Up timberin hill," as my dad used to say. The eventual purchase of an engine with a generator meant that convenience lighting had arrived and the 12 Volt supply seemed like heaven especially as we were able to run a small television albeit with a rolling, flickering screen that would be switched off in disgust these days.

Growing up in a 1950s Cornish village was idyllic: riding our bikes, playing in the streams, running in the woods and nicking Edward Lawrence's apples. I don't know why we did that, he was a friend and would have given us as many as we wanted if we'd asked. I guess it added to the excitement; it was what boys did.

There were always camps to build, either opposite our house or in Tywarnhayle Woods but not, as I remember, amongst the trees in the chapel grounds which seemed inappropriate for fun and games.

There were derelict cottages to play in, homes of past generations of miners and farm workers; like the one just down the hill from Chapman's haulage business and the one in the middle of the field on the left of the hill to the church. There were also a number of cottages where the reservoir was built and in the lane leading to Tywarnhayle Farm. Many were small and, considering the size of some of the families, must have been very cramped. They were mostly built of cob with very little foundation and roofs of salvaged timber covered with slate, cement-washed many times over the years. Although the walls were probably a couple of feet thick the damp usually managed to find its way in. Layers and layers of wallpaper and Kotina (polystyrene) did its best to keep out the moisture but, at best, only disguised it.

Just a short distance away, down a typical Cornish lane, was the chapel. Access was from a choice of two parallel tracks; ours was top lane. Silverwell Wesleyan Society built their place of worship sometime around 1900, on the site of a previous Wesleyan chapel which was in a dangerous state and had to be demolished.

There was once a Primitive Society meetinghouse, dating from 1841, in a field at Mount Pleasant Farm. It closed in 1883 and was sold to John Harris for five pounds.

In the late 1890s an application was submitted to the Wesleyan Chapel Committee in Manchester. It stated, "There are 65 regular hearers out of a neighbour population of 200." One of the questions on the form asked if it would be in the midst of a poor or middle-class population. The response was, "Farmers and Labourers."

The building cost less than the estimated £325 but a dispute with the builder, John Symons and Son, regarding extras, rumbled on for many years and when it was eventually resolved the Society had to pay its own costs. That meant the provision of a schoolroom had to be delayed until more funds could be raised.

Like so many chapels, the building work was undertaken and paid for by local members and there was much consternation when it was discovered that ownership would pass out of their hands. For years after local farmer Edward Lawrence complained, "They took it away from us."

The account book for Silverwell Band of Hope includes a tea in 1911 for 64 people at 6d each, a trap from E Cocking at four shillings and sixpence, a brake from E James at ten shillings and for two shillings more, a horse to pull it. Mr R Mitchell's brake or buss was often hired, for annual outings. In 1921 the Red House, presumably at Perranporth, supplied cakes and there was an item for furniture for the new Sunday school, built in 1924. An ominous entry in 1958 stated, "Very few services during this period."

When the chapel first came into use it had 70 let seats and 50 free seats. As late as the 1950s Josephine Forway (née Chapman) collected pew rent of two shillings and sixpence per person per year. Mrs Rickard's seat was at the back, she was not often present but when she did attend, perhaps for Harvest Festival, anyone sitting in her seat would have to move.

The Revd David Easton recalled Alfred Hoskins telling the story of someone asking the way to the chapel and being told, "Go down that there lane and you'll find 'n' 'itched up to a bramble." It was certainly difficult to find but Edward Lawrence took exception when it was once referred to as, "The chapel in the wilderness." The Revd

Joe Ridholls, the Perranporth and St Agnes Circuit Methodist minister from 1957 to 1962, recalled it as, "Somewhat isolated, so much so that one preacher from Newquay failed to find it and returned home." The lane in question continues its way to Whitestreet and was once a main thoroughfare; in the mid 1800s it was the route for funeral cortèges journeying from Mithian Village to St Peter's Church.

During the late 1950s the congregation was small and services ceased. Charlie Barker, who had moved from London, was appalled and complained to such an extent that Joe Ridholls invited him to take responsibility for services there. He did, and kept it going for quite a number of years. The children had good reason to remember him as they used to line up to receive a humbug whenever he preached.

It was once quite normal to leave churches and chapels unlocked so that people could enter to pray or to simply admire the building but around 1980, some kind soul abused that trust and stole two communion chairs and the gas heaters. A few years before, a less selfish visitor had called. The Rt Revd Donald Coggan, Archbishop of Canterbury, visited the tiny chapel and left the comment, "Most impressive."

Over the years many hell-fire preachers kept the congregation awake with their sermons. I remember some who certainly put the fear of God into me and, I must say, painted a picture of a being who was to be feared rather than loved.

Tea treats were held at the end of July; always a happy occasion. At the head of the procession was the banner, carried as a proud demonstration of faith. Then it was back to the field for fun and games and, of course, the tea treat buns.

Harvest Festival was an enjoyable event when the chapel was adorned with every sort of fruit and vegetable for the service of celebration.

Anniversary was viewed with some trepidation as each child had to sing or recite a poem. My singing was not particularly angelic so it was a recitation for me. I remember children attending from Mithian, in particular that Suzanne Roberts. Her rendition was always word perfect and about five times longer than mine. No one likes a smart-ass, thought I, but they did. It was strange how that thought came back to me on our wedding day.

One miracle that you won't find in the bible occurred at Silverwell in the 1950s...changing the jelly into wine. Josephine Forway and my parents, Douglas and Muriel Mansell, were stewards. It was the job of one of them to obtain the communion wine but on this occasion it had been overlooked. "Don't worry," said Josephine, "I'll make a weak jelly and no one will ever know." Unfortunately the chapel was a few degrees colder than her kitchen and by the end of the service the liquid had been in the little communion glasses for quite some time. One by one the congregation raised a glass to their lips only to find that the upper surface of the wine had set and was sealing in the liquid below. Finally, with some determined shaking and with one great slurp, gravity won the day. The Revd Payne returned to our house after the service and could hardly stop laughing.

Communion must have been a bit of a problem at Silverwell as the Revd Ridholls recalled. "On one occasion we ran out of communion wine and had to use sherry as a substitute; no one seemed to mind. Another time I noticed the Communion Table had not been prepared. 'Never mind dear,' said one old lady, 'we can have a nice cup of tea instead'."

Silverwell Chapel closed in 1982 and before long it was converted into a dwelling. Having known the place so well that still seems strange to me.

So much of my young life revolved around the chapel; that was the way it was in rural communities. Like most youngsters I saw the services as a chore but now, looking back, it means more to me than when I was young. It was a part of my growing up and I have warm recollections of the people who attended and preached there.

Elsie Thomas (née Pearce) was born at Poltaire, Silverwell, in 1915; unfortunately she died a few days after she told this story about her young life.

“I attended Mithian School, about three miles away, across fields, a river and a number of lanes. There was a Cornish Range where we could warm our pasties but there were no flush toilets, only buckets.

At home we boiled the kettle on a primus stove or the Cornish Range. We cleaned the range on Fridays. The oven was removed to clear the soot, the stove black-leaded and the brass-work polished with Brasso; a dirty job but it looked like new when done.

Monday was washday, the clothes were scrubbed on a wooden tray and then rinsed twice, the second time in blue water known as bluen. There were no washing machines and most items had to be put through the mangle. Men wore stiff, white collars and maybe cuffs which had to be washed, starched and ironed.

We picked elderflowers to make tea; the berries were dried and a few pieces put in a jug and boiling water added, peppermint was used for flavour and as a treatment for colds. We also made butter; a bowl of milk was placed on the range until a crust formed on the top. The next day this was stirred until the buttermilk came out; it was washed several times in very cold water, beaten and left to stand on a cold slab.

Mother and I drove to Truro in a horse and trap and we sold the butter to the shops where we bought our groceries. Doxie, our horse, was stabled at People’s Palace to where an errand boy from H D Brewer brought the groceries. Most things were weighed and wrapped in brown paper tied up with string. Bread was delivered but mother did all her own baking. At Christmas time I helped with stoning raisins for the mincemeat; there was even a postal delivery on Christmas Day.”

Elsie also had to help out on the farm and her memories of the work were very vivid. “When baby calves were taken away from their mother you had to teach them to drink from a bucket by putting your hand in the milk and letting it suck your fingers. Bullocks were walked to market but pigs were slaughtered at home and taken to the butchers. Eggs were collected once a week by the egg-man with his wagon; he also brought our oil.

Harvesting was a busy time. The hay was cut with a reaper and, when fit, was turned using pikes. Neighbours helped each other in those days. Most farms had mowhays, where ricks were built, thatched and roped down. If the weather was uncertain the hay was temporarily stored in pooks and later brought in by horse and wagon. Hay was cut from the ricks with hay-knives when needed for cattle feed.

For the corn harvest, the men cut around the edge of the field with scythes and bound it into sheaves; a horse and binder did the remainder. Tea or croust was taken out to the field with herby beer or some such drink. Later, the threshing machine arrived pulled by a traction engine for which my father fetched coal and water. Three men came with it and joined us for breakfast and supper; they had to start early to get up steam. Those who didn’t have a bicycle or pony and shay stayed overnight. The corn was threshed, the grain stored in the barn and the straw built into a rick.”

Farming was hard work but there was always time for a bit of humour. Chris Parris and Charlie Williams were working in a field when Charlie suddenly asked Chris if he had seen his waistcoat. "You're wearing it," said Chris. To which Charlie replied, "'Tis a good job you told me otherwise I'd 'ave gone 'ome without 'n."

Silverwell Lead Mine was called Wheal Treasure but it seems inappropriately named as no fortunes were ever made there. J H Collins, in his book Observations on the West of England Mining Region, described it as, "A mine often prospected, but never with success."

According to Jack Trounson it had, "A most extraordinary little stack." It was actually quite ungainly and consisted of an old iron boiler tube approximately three feet in diameter and about 25 feet high, secured by four chains. On top of this was an eight feet high brick cap which made it look top heavy.

The mine seems to have been last worked shortly before 1914 when a small amount of galena (lead sulphide) was extracted but Jack Trounson's comment said it all, "It did not contain enough lead to make earrings for a black-beetle."

During the 1920s a young Chris Parris and his friend, Will Angwin, were not adverse to a bit of mischief. They filled the old firebox with furze and wood and set fire to it. They then toured the village spreading the word that the mine had opened up again. When the stack was demolished the iron was used for armaments in the Second World War.

There are many who mourn for the Silverwell of old, the tight-knit community where you knew everyone. Where much of the work was on the doorstep, the entertainment was home-produced and the chapel central to the way of life. In many ways it was little different from any other Cornish village. It had its characters, its folk who were always ready with a bit of gossip or a touch of scandal, spread more efficiently than the pages of the West Briton.

Silverwell has changed over the years; the farms modernised, the cottages improved, the chapel no longer a place of worship. But the biggest change is in the people; the culture is different and the accents of 50 years ago are sadly missing. Those people helped shape our lives and the community gave us values. I regret that my children do not share its memories.