

Village Life in Cornwall

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There are many nice places in which to be born, many nice places in which to live, but among them all to my mind there is nothing to compare with village life.

Where are you going to find a more delightful set of people in a more delightful setting than in Cranford? Where are you going for greater charm than to Miss Mitford's *Our Village*; Perhaps I love these books so much because I love our village more. "Lonely and dull" say they who only pass down the village streets and see nothing beyond the outside of things. "Lonely" when you know everybody and everybody knows you! You can be lonely in a town, but it is your own fault if you are lonely in a village. I look back to the old days of my childhood and it seems to me as if loneliness were a feeling I never knew until the time came for me to go out into the wide world. Lonely; with every cottage door open to you and everyone claiming you as one of their own?

How face after face comes before my eyes as I write. I can see old Betsey sitting in her chair which afterwards I knew to be Cromwellian -there in her kitchen with that lovely background of a dresser filled with blue china, cups and saucers all covered with great white horses prancing with their white legs all over the blue ground, or I can see her jinny-quicking ⁽¹⁾ the frill of her white cap, talking all the time to the boy at her side. Years after I learnt her old tea-set was "Herculaneum" ware. I knew every bit of old china in practically every cupboard in the village while I was only a child, and all the old things of the houses, and could describe nearly every clock in the place though it may be fifty years since I have seen them.

"Dull!" Why we had a shoemaker, and you could watch your own shoes made; a tailor; a blacksmith shop, and heaps of things beside. And then we had schools – sometimes as many as four at a time. The Education Act came in 1870, but it took a long time to snuff out all our schools. There was Misses' School – no surname was necessary! She was Misses! That was enough! A stately old soul she was, upright in her chair (I daresay it was a Chippendale one) with her voluminous skirts spread out. What a snuff-box she had! A great black papier mache one with "some lovely" picture upon the top of it! It was only the kitchen of her cottage where her children sat. There were no desks of course, only a few forms on which they could sit, but if there were not enough, well, the stairs were in the kitchen and they would take

the overflow. How much Misses knew I cannot tell you. She taught her children A.B.C. and X.Y.Z., and called the last of the signs "Pass e" ⁽²⁾ like every other one did, perhaps because it was so difficult to name that they were to "pass' e." ⁽³⁾ But I have not told you yet about that which had the place of honour in her school. Lying flat on the table where Misses' hand could at once grasp it was the one absolutely necessary piece of school furniture. It was a piece of white wood something like a small whitewash brush without the hair.

This was the custis and woe to the talkative ones! Misses' temper was not always of the best and there were times when the dread edict went forth, "custis all round!"

A little way out of the village on its Camborne side stands the ruin of one of these old schools. The school-room is 11 ft long and 6 ft broad. Part of the room was taken up by the stairs, which led to a bedroom so low that the old woman had to dress on the stairs. The school-room, which of course, was also the kitchen, was 5 ft 6 ins in height, and at the lower side for the little house was a lean-to the eaves are 7 ft 6 ins from the foundation. The door was always open and you could share the lessons as you went along the road. Here again was a certain amount of refinement in the old dame, but then dear old Betsey had a history. In that tiny room upstairs was a great chest, and on that chest a great coat-of-arms. Betsey's father was a shoeing smith, and once when he was shoeing her hunter, the lady owner came suddenly upon him with "Will you marry me?" "Yes, if you please, mum," was the ready response, and off they went to the wedding. Betsey knew no more; never knew who her mother was, but the chest she kept to the end of her days. And more than that, she kept something of that inborn refinement which never left her. I never saw Betsey's school at work beyond the peeps you could get through the open door. Often I have been in when the scholars were absent but I never saw a "custis" about the house and I don't think dear old Betsey ever needed one.

They are gone, these little village schools; but they did not altogether fail. In this same village, in another tiny school kept by his own father, that brilliant Cornish archaeologist, botanist, artist, writer, engraver, the late J T Blight, began his scholastic career.

"Dull!" Why, we had a fair in the summer, and "some fair" it was, too! If it were St Swithin's Day, well, it seems to me St Swithin was kinder in those days. I remember on one occasion the wheat was already cut and stood in shocks in the very next field to the fair. For weeks before the fair this would be the great subject of our

thoughts. What a crowd there was in church on the previous Sunday evening! 'Twas "Taking'sunday!" After service we walked to Clowance. There at Best Gate you would see two groups, one on each side. Then came the choice of partners for a walk through the park and the engagement to meet at the fair. I wonder how many scores of weddings in Crowan Parish have taken place because of "Taking Sunday?"

Then, what stories we heard, and when in our village they told stories, they either told us where the thing happened or who the people were who said the things, so the jokes we saw in the comic papers seemed cold and lifeless to us. For example, It was Betsey Ralph who said, "My dear, 'tes all for want of ig'rance : they don't know no better".

It was "the man out St Keverne" who had the letter from his son, "My dear father, I sends you a hat if it fit; if it don't, you come Helston next Saturday and bring the measurement of your head with 'ee".

If you wished to say more than you ought to say, then you were like "the woman in Helston, who was troubled with bad words".

It was "the man up to Truro," who said, "What things is made for money" when he saw the monkey.

No, whatever we may have been, we were not dull!

1. Gophering, a gophering-iron being a "jinny-quick". (Ed)

2. In the old horn-books one read "& per se, and; &c., et cetera". The Latin of et cetera was understood, but prese, "by itself" was joined to one of the &'s, as "an passy" or "passy an". (Ed)