



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

From Aeroplanes to Racehorse Winners – Rambling Memories of Hanney

by C A Spinage

Twas a long, lonely quiet road that wound east from Hanney to Steventon, leading as it does to Cow Common. Before the War it was known more often by its name of the Cow Road than Steventon Road. An isolated group of red-brick houses built in 1931-32 stands aloof on the left almost a mile from Fiveways, the now busy East Hanney crossroads. Few know that in the field behind the houses was once stabled a horse which made racing history, Myra Gray which won Newmarket's Caesarewitch in 1926 at odds of 50 to 1, with a 'glorious benefit for the bookmakers'.

"The best that could be said for Myra Gray (a six-year old daughter of the expatriated Dark Ronald horse, Ambassador)" reported 'The Bloodstock Breeders' Review', "was that she seemed occasionally to be able to stay two miles in moderate company...." On the eve of the Caesarewitch she was quoted at 100 to 1. How it came about nobody seemed to know, but shortly before the race started the odds were cut to 66 to 1, and ultimately to 50 to 1, the starting price. While the first mile was being traversed, Myra Gray was lying third, but immediately after entering the straight, ten furlongs from home, she went to the front of her own accord, because, as her diminutive jockey afterwards explained, she was allowed to run the race in her own way. Though in the last hundred yards she headed Templestowe, Myra Gray was beyond reach. The latter won by two lengths, and there was half a length between Miss Sport (from the Lambourn stables) and Templestowe. The race was run in 3 min. 45 4/5 sec., which is a Caesarewitch record. The victory of Myra Gray stupefied the crowd. There was a murmur signifying incredulity when number 38 was signalled from the judge's box, and a reference to race cards revealed the name of the interloper. Then everybody began asking for information about Mr. J Davis, the owner, and Scott, the trainer. Most of them asked in vain.

Mr. Davis is a bookmaker of Shrewsbury, and it was not until last year that he joined the ranks of the horse owners. Scott, his trainer, is a native of Kelso, and has a little stable at Wantage. The boy who so ably handled Myra Gray, if by merely sitting still on her, is the seventeen-year-old son of G. Read, another 'small' trainer at Wantage. Jack Scott, the trainer, later kept a public house at Letcombe. He recommended 'all and sundry at Wantage' to put their money on Myra Gray, but very few people did so and 99% of double-event bets on the Caesarewitch and Cambridgeshire were knocked on the head.

That was all before my time, but I cannot imagine why Jack Scott kept the racehorse where he did. It is better drained now, but the field used to flood badly in the winter, the water lying deep in the depressions of the ridge-and-furrow contours, and in the great

winter of 1949 provided a broad expanse of ice for me to skate upon. The field was equipped with a well-built stable which fell down about thirty years ago.

An old, broken-down horse-drawn wagon from the First World War stood nearby, bought as war surplus to ply more innocent loads. It bore a gunmetal plate with the words 'Wagon G.S.C.O.W. X/1915 Reg. No.E 74136'. Well, G.S. would mean 'General service', but what 'C.O.W.' stood for I don't know.

In spite of the fact that another war had come along, summer days in the early forties seemed wonderful. Days of endless sunshine when harvesting was a leisurely affair and the seasons followed their ordered sequence. As a small boy I used to help in stacking the corn sheaves in farmer White's fields. Of course someone always came along behind me saying that I couldn't do it properly and they would all fall down. And then there was the thrill of riding on the back of the great cart-horse as it paced its measured tread along the road back to White's barn where, curiouser and curiouser, at the beginning of the 1920's two village brothers named Holmes kept a war surplus Avro biplane, and from here they ran a joy-riding business called Berkshire Aviation Tours Ltd. Their former air-strip was a field called Long Lains bordering the Steventon Road. Today the barn is a house.

There were two Hanney characters in the forties whom I recall. Best known was "Black Hanney", or "Black 'anney" as the locals pronounced it, the spitting-image of Dickens's Mrs. Grundy. "Black 'anney" was an old woman who lived on her own and wore voluminous black Victorian skirts, topped by one of those ancient black hats like an elongated bowler. Apart from her black clothes her face was always black with grime and village rumour was that she never washed. All the children were terrified of her and I recall the shock of seeing her one day walking towards me and my sister on the lonely Wantage Station road. All roads were lonely in those days, things had not changed much since 1908 when Eleanor Hayden (**I**) wrote "Few vehicles haunt the lonely road". Now wartime petrol rationing made motorcars a rare sight. We crossed to the other side and tremulously passed her by pretending not to notice, but she smiled sweetly and with a "Hello dearies" ambled harmlessly on her way. Sometimes it was said that she offered children apples, but we all feared this strange recluse.

Another character, who hailed from West Hanney, was known as "Strawberry Eaton". True to his name he always sported a straw Eton-boater. Certainly the appellation "Strawberry" could have fittingly been applied to his somewhat vinous nose. "Strawberry" always wore his boater together with blazer and grey flannels, ponderously pedalling an enormous bicycle around the village. On one occasion he ceremoniously dragged along behind a long dead grass snake tied with a piece of string to the bicycle's carrier, stopping before the school at playtime to proudly display his grisly trophy to the children. On Sundays Strawberry played the organ in the parish church and my favourite recollection is that of the Sunday morning when, in the middle of the service, he began to play the wrong tune. Not in fact, as I recall, a tune fitting for a church service at all. As Strawberry pounded away at the keys like someone demented the vicar came up to remonstrate, and Strawberry began snatching up hymnbooks and throwing them at the vicar with one hand while continuing to play with the other. I have never attended a more eventful morning service, but that was the end of Strawberry's career as church organist and we never saw him again after that.

West Hanney has seen more development in recent years than East, but many of the old houses still stand in both parts of the village. That pictured in Eleanor Hayden's "twisty street" in East Hanney with its projecting upper storey is still recognisable, although its name has changed. Most of the new houses have been built in ancient orchards. But the

village ponds have gone, that in East Hanney now a driveway leading to new houses. When it was drained one lucky villager found a valuable Ming vase in the mud. How it got there no-one knows. When, and if, the planned reservoir is constructed, we can expect many more demands for development. The planners have not been sympathetic to some of Hanney's larger houses, seemingly believing that houses should be packed together as tightly as possible.

Eleanor Hayden wrote that she had shown in her account of the Vale villages "the side that is best worth showing - the side that will live". It will live on in memories, but little will live on in fact.

Reference

(1) Eleanor Hayden: Islands in the Vale, 1908

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