

It has not been possible to trace a member of the family to obtain permission but this account has been made freely available in the past.

LOWICK IN THE 1930s

PREFACE.

I feel I must write something about Lowick in the 1930s whilst these things are fresh in my memory. Soon it will be too late. Little has been said about that time, a hard but not always an unhappy time.

I hope these passages will give some information about the people and their work in and around the village and will also amuse!

Ronnie Howey.

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It was a February morning in 1932. About 7 o'clock, I was wakened in the Garden House where we lived, opposite the War Memorial. By then my father had already gone to Horton on his bike to be there at daybreak.

The only light on the upper floor came from a candle standing on the landing and from a shaft of light coming through the door by the side of the hinges, both lighting up the frost patterns on the windows. There was no central heating then and the upper reaches of most houses were very cold.

Once an effort had been made to get out of bed, one didnt hang around! Electric light was not to grace our house for another five years as I remember.

Downstairs a breakfast awaited, of fried bread sprinkled with HP sauce. Then it was time to do the 'messages' for the Black Bull. Now that is a very Northumbrian term. 'Messages' in this context means going for the shopping.

THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE.....

It was off up the street, then taking the cart track (now closed) which ran close to the big house wall.

In the distance was the red sky of the dawn and just enough light to see the icy tops of the deep cart tracks.

If you werent careful and went through the ice, you were up to the knees in mud.

The Black Bull always seemed to be surrounded by a sea of tracks and mud. I used the track going round the back of the pub, past the lodging house, an abode of tramps and wayfarers. Old Nellie, who kept the lodging house, always seemed to be standing by the door - an old, wrinkled figure, short in stature. The only coverings on the windows were farm sacks.

Having given a tap on the side window of the pub, a Miss Howey would appear. She was a distant relative of mine. One was never allowed into the bar or the public rooms. Miss Howey gave me money for the messages - about 4/- (20p).

There was a routine. The first stop was at James Foremans, the butcher, just below the school. There a big joint of beef - with some suet thrown in - cost about 3/- (15p)

From Foremans, it was up the street to Forsyth's, the bakers, opposite the phone box. Outside, vans would be loading to go to Holy Island, or into the countryside, on regular runs. By a knock on the bakehouse door, or at one of the vans, one could get anything long before the shop opened. With the messages done, it was back up to the Black Bull to receive 4d in wages.

The next port of call was at the Black Bull Farm to see Tom Fairbairn, the farmer. 'Yoke the horse in and go and get a load of baigies!' (for the uninitiated, swede turnips). 'If your hands get cold, thump them under the armpits like this!' In yoking the horse, the worst job was putting on its collar ; however, by standing on the manger it was easier. It was put on first upside down and then turned round. Tom would pull the shafts of the cart down a rope, hanging down to pull the shafts level with the horse. Yoking completed, it was away up to the baigie field. 'Gan canny past the 'tapestry rooms' (the lodging house), Tom would say. 'Theres some big ruts there'. It was a rough ride as all one had to sit on was a sack

on the shafts.

Once in the field, shawing began. Six baigies later, and after endless thumping under the arms, my finger ends were non-existent, but somehow I got a load on and took it back down to the farm where some of these vegetables went into the cutter for animal food.

It was then time to go and see 'the Chancellor of the Exchequer', Tom Fairbairn's old mother. She was always dressed the same - an old woollen hat and a 'pinny' from whose pockets she produced the pay - 6d or 9d. (2½ - 4½p)

LOWICK - THE METROPOLIS !

Although only a village with fewer than 900 inhabitants, Lowick boasted a good number of businesses - no supermarkets or multi-nationals, just family businesses where all local needs were met.

As well as the Black Bull Farm, Ronald Barber had a farm further down the village. It was Lowick Hall, a big farm of about 60 acres and he had about 20 horses.

600 ? — The firm of George Hogg and Sons was the saddlers. It was a busy place, making harnesses and saddles, and repairing binder canvasses, as well as selling fishing rods and tackle. James Hogg was the saddler, a fine, skilled workman, sitting at his little saddling stool putting marvellous stitching into leather. He was a canny soul, with thin gold rimmed glasses. His brother, George, also a bachelor, did all the housework and cooking. He was said to have made a spotted dick, which did not turn out very well, so he put it through the mangle and made it into girdle scones!

Jack Pringle kept a cycle shop, whose window is still there. A bike cost about £4.00; mudguards 1/-(5p); a tyre 3/-(15p)

Next door was Thomas Pringle and Sons, the drapers, where Miss Pringle was in charge. As the 'official' names indicate, these were businesses of long standing, passing down through the families. Pringles sold good quality, honest materials and it was said that mail order put them out of business. People could get more fashionable clothes by mail order. Once a year they had a sale. It was said that people had met at Pringle's sale and got married.

Next to Pringles was the garage of Laurence Robinson and Son. This was a hive of activity. I remember a Morris Eight in the window selling at £128.50, and having an envious glance at a Douglas Twin motor cycle at about £40.00.! Most people had wirelesses, needing big batteries, which were brought to Robinsons for charging on the big charging board.

Forsyth, the bakers, I have mentioned already. Their vans went all over the neighbourhood. The bakers worked all night producing wonderful bread and cakes, and 2d pies. As well as bakers, they were also grocers and corn merchants. Remember that the farmers' wives did their own baking as well and needed supplies of flour and oatmeal.

Mrs. Clara Foreman had a sweet shop near the corner. There were jars of boiled sweets and the counter was always full of some new delicacy. Liquorice allsorts had just come out and some short-sighted lady was heard to remark that 'what funny names they are giving sweets nowadays - liquorice arseholes!'

On the opposite corner was John Mabon, the baker. Jack Mabon

was the Boss, a stout, hearty, good-natured soul, whose vans, like Forsyth's, went all around the countryside. His son, Ray, was a wonderful confectioner, turning out beautiful wedding cakes, Christmas cakes, etc. On Guy Fawkes Night, Jack Mabon would treat the village to a Firework Display, much looked forward to by everybody.

Next door was the blacksmith, George Wilson, more commonly known as Tottie Wilson. There were always heavy horses standing waiting to be shod - it was hard work - Tottie and his assistants always in leather aprons.

Meat for the village was provided by James Foreman, the butcher. His butcher's shop was next to the school, but he also had his own slaughter house. He, too, supplied the whole area as well as Holy Island. He was a gruff, but kindly soul who had a nickname for everyone! He was also a great field sportsman and a good angler. I could write in detail about the slaughterhouse, but it is not for the squeamish and I prefer to leave that for later.

Below Foremans was Miss Patrick's little sweet shop which stood in front of the Wesleyan Chapel. She sold sherbet fountains, liquorice bootlaces and all manner of novelty sweets for ½d or 1d, a first call after Saturday pay.

We had a doctor in the village, Dr. John Elliott. His official titles were 'Surgeon, Medical Officer and Public Vaccinator for Lowick, Kyloe and Islandshire, etc.,' His surgery is where Sinton's shop now stands. A rotund, bald man, he was a good practical doctor. Any night after 7 o'clock, he would be found, standing at one side of the bar in the White Swan, playing dominoes with Bobby Steel, across the bar. 'Docy' Elliott was a chain smoker, his moustache brown from the smoke. He served Holy Island as well as Lowick and would be seen getting a lift on one of the bakers' vans, his little gladstone bag with him. He was very well regarded on the Island.

Coming up the other side of the village, Jack and Tom Renwick had a scrap yard, I think about where the entrance to Lambton Avenue now is. They also had stables and bought and sold horses.

Next door to them was James Ord. I think he had some of the first lorries in the village. I recall going in one with solid tyres.

Most of the milk for the village was supplied by Walter Piercy from his little farm, next door. Walter took it round in a large can, with ½ pint and gill measures hanging from the bucket. It was delivered to your door by about 7.30am.

In the big house at the corner of Phillips Place lived Jack and Harry Lyle. Their yard was over the road, next to the school. They were the village carters, put out of business by motor transport. The last time I saw them in operation with their string of horses was when a huge dip had to be filled in on the road between Lowick Mill and Berrington.

Their horses were shot and used for dog meat at Slainsfield Kennels. I remember that well, having had to hold one while it was shot with a humane killer. I think it was a woman who had to carry out this unpleasant task. She had to stand on a beer case to reach the poor beasts' foreheads.

Phillips Court could be called the slum of Lowick. It stood where Phillips Place now stands. Its houses were built of a

grey, slaty type of stone, with earth floors. To reach some of the bedrooms, you had to go outside and up a granary steps. I remember going to visit a small girl up these stairs. She was dying of T.B. The only light was a small night light, and the walls appeared to be wringing wet. The biggest house facing the road had half its wall fall down, and remained propped up for many years.

Down a small lane past where Charlie Carr lived, lived 'Moley' Smith, the mole catcher. From the ceiling of his house hung stuffed animals, and others on boards - weasels, squirrels, etc. As an amateur taxidermist, he stuffed and mounted these himself. He had a wonderful back garden, full of flowers, fruit bushes and strawberries.

The cobbler's shop was at the other end of the houses where Cecil Moffat's shop is now. Bob Hope was the postman in the morning and the cobbler in the afternoon. His three daughters assisted him, finishing off the shoes in the evening. They also collected shoes for repair in an Austin Seven car. One of my visits there was to procure some celluloid scraps left over from the car side screens which he used to stitch up. A match to these produced a huge flame. Whilst Bob was cobbling, he used to put the nails in his mouth and take them out one at a time. Goodness knows what his teeth must have been like!

Around the corner at the entrance to Dryburn Road was the Joiner's Shop of Tommy Hogg, otherwise known as 'Pinch'. I think it was something to do with his habit of taking snuff. Tom was also the undertaker. He would head the funeral in a long-tailed coat and stove pipe hat. Most coffins were just pulled along on a wheeled bier. This was a good place to have a wheelbarrow or a garden seat made. My youngest brother was apprenticed there and soon became known as 'Young Pinch'. The White Swan pub. was run for many years by Bobby Steel and family. I think they had a farm at the back with milking cows and sheep in the field. It was also the Head-quarters of the Leek Club and Flower Show, also quoits matches were held in his field. It was a busy place on a Saturday night.

Opposite the garage where there is an opening in the wall was the sweet shop of Jeannie Armstrong. Sadly it was burnt down one winter night when there was 6" of snow on the ground, the poor soul getting out only just in time. It was a better quality sweet shop and good for Christmas fare, etc. Paraffin for lamps could also be bought from the tanks at the back. Mole's shop is still there on the corner opposite the War Memorial, little changed, selling groceries, hardware, paraffin, etc. It was quite a modern shop in its day.

At the Ham Hall was the carpenter's shop of Dick Adamson, a fine craftsman and a great friend of mine. When one entered the shop, the nostrils were greeted with the lovely smell of pinewood shavings, glues boiling in pots, and all the other smells of wood being worked. Dick was also a great man with bees and I used to help him, making and moving hives, catching swarms, and separating honey.

I helped Dick build the bungalow which replaced the old cottages on the roadside, and which still stands like a monument to him. Dick did most of the work on it at a total cost of about £300. He used to tell me what things cost - a door cost 3/6d (17½p) - all the roof timber £7.50. Dick was also very good at making fishing rods and made one of my first.

I am not sure when he died but think it may have been in the 1960s as I saw him last about then.

The Post Office was opposite the War Memorial, kept by the Misses Stark for many years both before and after the Second World War. My main connection with the Post Office was the taking of telegrams. A telegraph boy would be employed at a main office but the local offices had to take them themselves or employ someone else. Rings were drawn on a map with the Post Office at the centre. Within the radius of each circle a price was charged for the delivery of each telegram; 6d (2½p) for the first mile, and so on. I think the furthest from Lowick was Gatherick or Holburn Grange, about 2/9d (14p). Having delivered one, sometimes one would return to find another for the same place. Only the thought of £.s.d. kept you going then. Many times I was out on a winter's night with the only lights on the bike carbide lamps. I recall one bonanza at the death of General Sitwell at Barmoor Castle. I had to take quite a number of telegrams at a time, 6d being paid for each. Most telegrams bore bad news, but they were the only communication then, unlike now.

Looking out of the window of Garden House we would see the mail van arrive. The Misses Stark would get the registered items and the rest would be sorted in the outhouse next door. The postman would be nearly blue with the cold, waiting outside, if the van was late. My mother was an auxiliary postwoman during the War. That could be hard work going with parcels aboard to Barmoor, the Low Steads and the smallholdings. But she was a lion-hearted soul who would think little of it.

In the village we had 6 religious groups - the Plymouth Brethren; Church of England; Church of Scotland; Roman Catholic; Wesleyan and Methodist. Everyone lived in harmony, worshipping in their own place of worship, all kindly and tolerant and finding common ground in the various activities like whist drives, sporting activities and leek and flower shows.

There is endless talk by the Government today about small businesses. But what we had then was the perfect small business system with nearly every other house a small business, working hard to produce goods or services in a much more self-sufficient economy.

Large families were brought up in these hard times, mine being one of them, and some in very small houses. I remember a child going missing from the farm cottages for whom we were all sent looking in sheds, etc. When the child was found, the father of a large family had put him to bed with his seven children, his wife having gone to a whist drive. 'I thought he made a lot of noise when I was washing him', the man was heard to remark!

A COUPLE OF CHARACTERS!

JACKIE MURRAY.

The first time I saw him was when we had moved from Wooler to Lowick and I would be in my first week at school there. Down he came past the school, around his waist hanging leeks, baigies, etc. He went into James Foreman's butchers shop and

I waited for his reappearance, my head barely over the school wall. He emerged carrying a whole sheeps head, the windpipe and lights attached, with Jim giving him the usual banter about leaving the eyes in so the meal sees you through the week. Jackie was dressed in what appeared to be the old clothes of a clergyman - long black coat, gaiters and wide-brimmed hat and he carried a cudgel-like stick. His eyes were red-rimmed from the smoke in his hut.

Jackie lived at the corner of the Eelwell Braes, in what was virtually a pig-sty; a square, flat-roofed hovel, covered in turf, with a stove-pipe or chimney coming out of the top. A sack was all that covered the door, the building being only 4 feet high. When Jackie wasnt there, we would peep in. All there was was straw for a bed, his cooking pot and a tin mug. The pot was full of sheep's head broth.

It was said he had his hair cut on Lowick Hirings Day. This was true. On Hirings Day, I lifted the side window after he went into the Black Bull and I could see him being shorn by Bob Robson, a groom at the big house. He was using big clippers used on horses or dogs. After his usual liquid refreshment, he came out of the Black Bull and we observed him from a safe distance. His hat was held up by his lugs after his hair had gone. I am sure he is buried in Lowick Churchyard, and I wonder if he died in that hovel.

Jackie's father was a baker in Lowick and his brother Jimmy, was another great local character.

JIMMY MURRAY - 'LOWICK JIMMY'

Jimmy Murray was Jackie Murray's brother and was widely known as 'Lowick Jimmy'. He spent most of his days wandering from place to place. He made frequent appearances in Court in his lifetime and eventually the Court suggested he be put away in a place of safety as a few days in prison was not suitable for him.

He was said to have a constitution of steel, often sleeping out with no cover at all. No Hirings or Fairs were complete without Jimmy. One of his feats of endurance was to race the stagecoach which ran between Wooler and Berwick before the Alnwick - Cornhill branch of the railway was opened in 1884. Before then, the only means of getting between Wooler and Berwick was to take the stagecoach or travel by train between Berwick and Belford and drive over the moors to Wooler.

This coach ran from Bertrams in Wooler and Jimmy boasted he could beat it every time. He ran barefoot, his boots and socks hung around his neck, and resting only at Doddington or the Redscar or at the pub. at Biteabout. People in the coach would throw him money and to finish, he would spurt up Wooler or Berwick High Street shouting 'victory', roaring and foaming at the mouth. He would race alongside any pony and trap if he thought he would get a copper or two. Once or twice he was put into the Workhouse but soon came out as he found it intolerable after the open air life. He was found lying on the roadside between Duddo and Berwick and was taken to Berwick Workhouse for the last time and where he died soon after. I do not know his age, but he was certainly over 70.