

A TYPICAL HERTFORDSHIRE VILLAGE ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

by NINA FREEBODY

Just over a century ago the village of Preston, near Hitchin, consisted of fewer than 300 people, although at that time the houses north-east of Chequers lane, the Dower House, Preston Farm and Wain Wood, were in St Ippolyts. A hundred years later, in 1961, the population was still only 374, but by then the parish boundaries were more conveniently delineated.

The enumerators in 1861 listed 272 inhabitants who ranged in age from two-year-old Amos Jenkins to widow Pedder, who was eighty-six. There were fifty-three dwelling in the village, in some cases occupied by more than one family. Four cottages stood empty.

The people of Preston followed the typical rural occupations for those mid-Victorian times. They supplied the principal landowners and farmers with agricultural labour and fifty-eight men and youths were listed as such, but the chief occupation was straw-plaiting. There was a straw plaiting school on the outskirts of the village at Poynders End but there is no doubt that other housewives ran their own schools. A little later it is recorded that Mrs. Stratton's school faced the village green and that of Mrs. Peters stood near to the Bunyan chapel.

The straw-plaiters, sixty-seven in all, included wives, widows, daughters, lodgers and even four young boys - George Mumford, Elijah Peters, John Mays and Edward Payn. From the age of seven the boys and girls were taught to plait the wheat straw. Some plaits were worked in split straw and some in whole straw. The finished work was taken to Hitchin market where the buyers would pay according to quality. A good worker could make 2d or 2 1/2d a length, but the average was 1 1/2d for twenty yards. The lengths were then taken to the Luton straw-hat factories.

Men as well as women and children did the work, as they could supplement their low agricultural wages of about 10/- per week in this way. In those days more than a quarter of a man's wages could go in rent, for the cheapest cottage on the Temple Dinsley estate was £3 per annum and the average about £5.

A few folk in the village were self-employed, their trades supplying some of the basic need of the community. The publican was also a cattle dealer. He lived in a tied house, for the Chequers Inn was rented by the Russells of Hitchin from the Temple Dinsley estate for £30 a year.

Then there were Amos Shepherd the baker, David Smith the grocer and the butcher and two shoemakers, John Feary in Back Lane and John Wilson. The smithy was in Kings Walden Road, but the blacksmith, John Swain and his family together with his sixteen-year-old apprentice, lived elsewhere in the village.

Farther out on the short road linking Chequers Lane and Butchers Lane was a cluster of cottages, some of which are still standing today. In 1873, when the Temple Dinsley estate was sold by the Dartons to the Pryors, this was the site of three cottages. One had a shop, another a bakehouse and there was a wheelwright's shop adjoining. At the time of the sale the whole property included a small field and an orchard. The total annual rent was £19/4/-.

This must have been a busy corner of the village, for when Daniel Wilson occupied the wheelwright's premises twelve years earlier his wife, Eleanor, was a shirtmaker and his spinster sister did straw-plaiting. Sharing their cottage were young James Day, a tailor, and his wife who

sewed bonnets. In the adjacent cottage lived an agricultural labourer, John Sharpe, and his family and next door an elderly tailor, Joseph Sanderson and his journeyman plied their trade.

Apart from three men who called themselves dealers, one in hemp cord, another in horses and a third in marine stores, only a few farmers could also be considered as self employed. The remainder of the villagers working for the gentry or on the farms were servants, cowmen, carters, ploughboys, shepherds or general labourers.

The tenant farmer at Preston Castle at this time was Samuel Kirby. His was the largest farm in the village and he employed eight men and five boys to help him with his 283 acres. The Kirbys were not local and although their two youngest children had been born in the village the other five sons and daughters had come with their parents from Hatfield in Essex. As a well-to-do farmer, Mr. Kirby was able to provide his younger children with a governess. They also had a servant girl from Therfield to help in the house and George French, a Preston boy, looked after the horses.

At temple Dinsley the widowed Mrs. Maria Darton lived with her five daughters. Her son was away and apart from a twenty-one-year-old school teacher, Sarah Orford, who no doubt taught the Darton girls, only a cook and a housemaid lived in. For such a large house this appears to be a small domestic staff, but probably the other servants came in daily as there were two laundresses and a gardener in the village.

Through the generosity of the Dartons a village school had been built in 1849. This was a charity school which also functioned as a church on Sundays. A gallery at the east end provided seating accommodation for the household and staff of Temple Dinsley. The thirty-nine scholars, mainly under twelve, who were listed in the 1861 census would not attend their lessons regularly. There was no compulsory education yet and their appearance at school would be governed by the farming seasons.

People did not travel very far in those days, for roads were bad, especially in winter, therefore it is not surprising to find that over 150 of the villagers had been born in Preston. Except for a very small minority the remainder came from Hertfordshire towns and villages for many miles around.

There is little left to remind the visitor to Preston of life 100 years ago except the winding lanes, the woods and the few remaining old mellow brick cottages. The tumbledown thatched dwellings have disappeared and their sites are now occupied by modern houses. The ponds have been filled in and the well on the green is disused. A new church and school have been built since those days.

But the names of some of the old Preston families still survive. Although the five branches of the Payn family have long since gone, names such as Crawley, Currell, Freeman, Jeeves, Palmer, Peters, Sharpe, Smith and Walker can still be found here.

The green still enhances the centre of the village even if the annual fair, the bonfire lighting and the maypole dancing are pleasures of the past. Nearby Temple Dinsley, hidden behind a high wall, stands as witness to a distant age, for without the Knights Templar there would have probably been no Preston at all.