

The Fields, Summer 2000

A Sunday Walk 50 Years Ago

On Sundays, once a respectable time had elapsed since midday dinner, say about half past four (nobody said 4.30 in those days) my Grandfather would say, "Fancy a Walk?"

It was long before the ground was made up in Meadow Lane and where Isis School is now was quite a squelchy, flowery meadow, where on Sunday walks, I was not allowed to rush about for fear of spoiling my best shoes. We passed the Kidneys, where men were often fishing for eels to add to the meagre diet of those days. I remember my uncle bringing home two good-sized eels from these pools and as nobody had a refrigerator, we took down the large tin bath that hung on the side of the shed for Friday night usage, part filled it with water and put these two, still very much alive, eels inside. Two days later (in order to get any muddy taste out of them) my Grandmother killed and fried them – delicious!

We joined, sandy, dusty Donnington Lane and crossed the river by the graceful stone footbridge. In the middle I would pause and look down where army tanks and amphibious vehicles had practised landings two or three years previously.

Along the tow path we would stop at the Isis where grandfather had a glass of beer and I a packet of crisps (with the salt in a little screw of blue paper). Grandmother would have nothing, as she held that eating and drinking in public was "common" at best and for women unthinkable.

Returning home via Iffley, we crossed Henley Avenue by the War Memorial. This recorded names of men Grandfather had known, and he often removed his hat when passing. Sometimes we walked past John Allen's Steam Ploughing Co. building and then down Rymer's Lane (a dusty lane with blackberries growing along the middle of it). At Cricket Road we would turn down a lane following "Withy-Brook" through the Elder Stubbs Charity Allotments, to rejoin the Cowley Road. My Grandfather would point out that this brook was the old city boundary and that was why on our left was Cowley Road Oxford whereas on our right was Oxford Road Cowley.

The last short mile home was walked quietly. Outside "The University and City Arms" on the corner of Magdalen Road, Grandfather would remark that when he was a young man you could have stood on this spot and apart from Bartelmas, Taunt's house and the odd farm see nothing fields between here and Cowley.

Looking back on that very common walk for us, I realise how semi-rural it was and how much of the time we were walking ages-old footpaths and lanes, sometimes dusty, sometimes muddy with hedgerows in abundance and farm animals and cultivated areas often in view. Only very occasionally would we see an example of the thing that was to change much of what I have described beyond all recognition, namely the motorcar.

John Purves