Memories of Ponds Farm

It was in 2005 whilst on a journey from Devon to Leeds and York that we made a detour for me to enjoy a few moments of nostalgia and for my wife to see a little more of Harthill than when visiting relatives some years earlier. It was clear that change was afoot with new housing being built and Sheffield sprawling further into the countryside. Now with the availability of Google Earth it is possible to see how this rate of change has increased. Similarly, with the advent of web sites devoted to genealogy it has been easier to relate geography and ancestry. Due to one Adolph Hitler causing me to be born in Hampshire and the difficulty of travel in the 1940s it was probably about 1946 before I set foot in the 'Broad Acres'. However, during the next 40 years I would be a frequent visitor to Harthill including living there for some months in the Autumn of 1948.

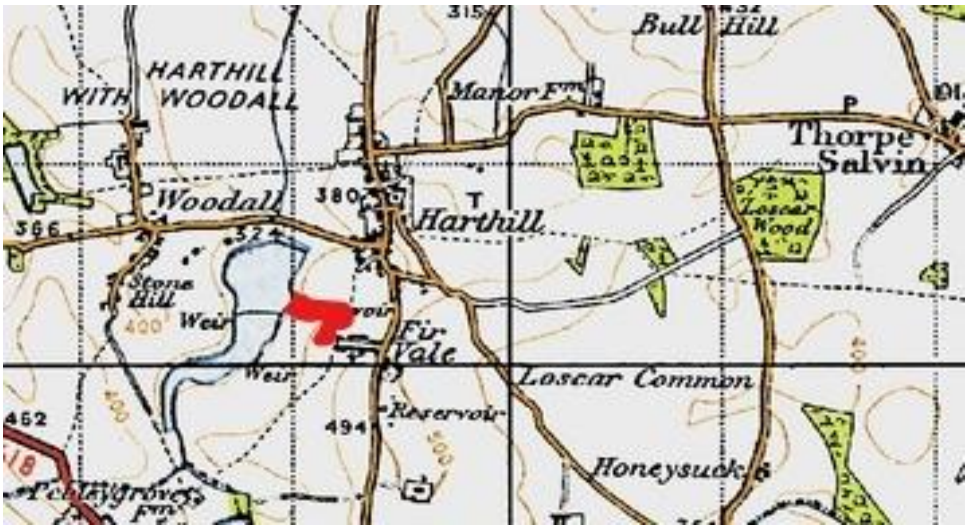

Figure 1, Harthill before the M1 was built.(The approximate location of Ponds Farm is shaded in red).

The village of Harthill existed long before the M1 motorway passed it by on its meander from London to Leeds and 'The North'. It stands on the northwest slopes of low hills in that enclave that is truly South Yorkshire with Derbyshire to the south and west, Nottinghamshire to the east and Lincolnshire not too far away in the same general direction. The motorway runs along the hills on the other side of the valley that contains Harthill ponds. By strict definition these are reservoirs created in the 19th century to provide water for maintaining levels in the Chesterfield Canal. This waterway formed a large arc from Chesterfield, passing to the west and north of Harthill, to join the River Trent at West Stockwith. As the land also slopes gently from the southwest the valley floor provided an ideal site for damming a stream to create these man-made lakes. The older parts of the village are built out of local sandstone, but red brick has been used elsewhere. The parish church of All Hallows lies at the northern or lower end of Main Street and within its grounds are the final resting place of my paternal grandparents together with other members of the family. A sign on the small green adjacent to the churchyard proclaims a connection with Robin Hood, Sherwood Forest not being many miles away.

Following the road from Kiveton, that becomes Union Street, the turning to Worksop (Thorpe Road) stands to the left almost as soon as the housing is reached. A little further on, as in many English villages, a hostelry "The Beehive" stands across the road from the church to attend to parishioners' earthly needs. As one makes further progress along the road the semi-detached house that Grandma lived in after the farm was sold lies on the right-hand side almost opposite Jack Hyde's shop. This emporium sold all manner of goods from groceries to pit boots, from paraffin to spice (as sweets are referred to in the local vernacular). Stiff blue paper had to be folded to make bags for sugar that was carefully weighed out and the butter was delivered in large blocks to be cut and weighed to order.

Almost opposite the shop was Woodall Lane at the top of which was a small butcher shop with its own abattoir before you passed "The Bluebell" next to which a Doctors surgery was built. A little further down Arnold Lavers had a sawmill. This was long before the Health and Safety at Work Act and it used to be a delight to watch the men at their work reducing huge felled trees to usable timber. Although the men did keep me at a good distance from the whirling blades, they told blood curdling stories about the day a tooth flew out! Opposite the doctor's surgery, one of my aunts and her husband had their house built, Orchard House, named after the mature orchard that it stood in. As well as apples, pears, plums and damsons there was a tree of pear cocks. This is a species that is probably totally out of cultivation now. One of the devices plumbed into the new house was a Bendix washing machine. It was a top loader but absolute rocket science to those still struggling with dolly tubs and washboards. Another attraction of the house was a pianola piano. What a miracle to an eight-year-old to see the keys moving and the music playing but no hands at the keyboard.

There is a turning off Union Street, (before the Post Office, the primary school and a branch of the Worksop Cooperative Society), leading off to the right that dipped and rose again before bearing off to the left a little. (Later this became Pryor Mede). On clearing the original village, one came into more open ground although it wasn't long before council housing was erected. On the edge of this ground was the local bus depot (Kirkby's buses provided the local transport to Kiveton and Worksop). A garage of novel design made out of concrete slabs was built to house the buses. Unfortunately, one slab slipped before it was secured killing a construction worker. This was an early reminder to the juvenile observer of the mortality of mankind when pitted against the untried and untested.

Further up the lane on the right-hand side lay the farm consisting of a relatively large red brick farmhouse, outbuildings and three or four fields some of which may have been rented. The L-shaped farmyard was entered through a gateway from the lane. Stables for the horses stood to the left backing onto stores, pigsties and cowshed. The rear of the house faced the yard along the long side of the L. Although tractors had been in use for farming for some years a small property like Ponds Farm was still usefully worked by horses. In the wake of the war, fuel was rationed for some years and machinery was supplied on long waiting lists and probably with the Ministry of Agriculture giving approval. Tommy was the original inhabitant of the stables joined later by Dolly. They were used as draught horses pulling a small plough, a binder, cart or dray. The latter vehicle being used to collect meal from the millers at Kiveton Park, a journey of about 5 miles and necessitating a half day expedition (another fascination for a young boy). On the route one of the hills was sufficiently steep for Grandad to

have to stop and fit a chain through the spokes of a wheel to prevent the dray trying to overtake the poor horse! It was always good fun to ride out to the fields on the broad warm back of Tommy who whilst not of shire proportions was nevertheless a relatively large animal. Close to the mill was a quarry where stone was regularly blasted for reduction into cement.

The rear entrance to the house was through a porch with the dairy door to the right and the kitchen entrance opposite it. This kitchen was the family nerve centre as all meals were cooked and eaten there and in between meals those not working outside washed, ironed, sat, talked, darned, knitted and passed the time. Although there were two other downstairs rooms they were rarely used. As central heating was uncommon in those days these rooms were unheated and always felt cold although carpeted and furnished.

The kitchen however, was womb-like being warmed by a range beside which Grandma would stand a large earthenware bowl for the bread dough to prove. Flat bread cakes and loaves were made regularly in addition to parkin and fruitcakes. The ceiling was high as it held a clothes airer almost above the range whilst hams and sides of bacon hung elsewhere. If a pig was sent to the butchers for killing it was returned jointed and the kitchen became a hive of industry with aunts co-opted to assist making brawn, scraps, rendering lard, salting hams and bacon to cure them. Nothing was wasted from head to tail.

Across the yard from the porch a boiler was sited in which the pig-swill was heated. In those times of maximising agricultural production 40-gallon drums of kitchen waste from Sheffield schools were delivered for recycling. One of the by products from this was a supply of cutlery thrown out with the waste. Just past the boiler a door opened into the cowshed and piggery. The latter housed a couple of breeding sows and litters that were marketed when grown to size. A small herd of cows had milking stalls in the shed. Milking was by hand. Grandad, cap tipped back, so that his forehead nestled into the cow’s body, just in front of its right thigh, as he sat on a three-legged milking stool gripping a stainless-steel bucket between his knees. Hand milking is a skill that takes practice to gain reasonable efficiency. A novice grandson was left in little doubt by the cattle that they hadn’t got all day!

At the far end of the cowhouse a double door opened onto the top of the nearest field. Manure could be conveniently forked out onto the midden beyond which stood straw stack and a clamp of mangels. Further across the top of this field was a small compound containing a caravan. Not a modern affair of lathes and plastic but a heavily built unit rather like a railway carriage on road wheels. Resting on blocks to preserve the tyres, this vehicle had not been on the road for some time and was the home of Joe who performed occasional work on the farm. Memories of sitting in the van and talking to its elderly occupant remain but the content of these discussions is lost. Joe may well have had Romany connections, but this too is uncertain.

Another entrance to this grassed field was through a classical farm gate and the end of the yard. The field sloped down towards the larger of the ponds, (close to where a sailing club now stands), with the lower end being quite wet with clumps of marsh grass and a small stream feeding into the reservoir from which it was separated by a straggling hedge and fence. If one faced the ponds with the farmhouse to your right a couple of chicken houses lay just beyond the kitchen garden. On one occasion an aggressive cockerel took a dislike to your author who had just collected a basket of eggs from his brood. The result was not a pretty sight! Neither were the results of a fox getting amongst the flock one night.

A second meadow lay beyond the home field for the dairy cattle and this led onto one or two fields used for corn that gave grain and straw for animal feed and bedding. Additional animal feed came from crops of mangel wurzels. Topping and tailing these was a task that we all shared in before they were loaded into a cart and stored for winter in the clamp. Grandad used a broadcaster to sow cereals rather than a drill. This is a device slung around the neck that ejected the seed by making a sawing motion with a bow which in turn rotated the spreading head. The grain was harvested by a binder after the border had been cut using scythes, stooked by hand to dry before being led on the dray to a temporary stack to await the arrival of the threshing contractor. The latter would turn up with steam engine (shades of the late Fred Dibnah) and a mighty threshing machine that separated straw and chaff from the grain. Health and safety dictated that this junior member of the family kept clear of boilers, pistons, fly wheels, belts and flailing parts and was dispatched to a distance armed with a stick to deal with any rats emerging from the foot of the stack.

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