

Memories of Carsphairn

Mrs Jean S Abel, from Cheadle Hulme, Cheshire, recaptures the excitement of summer holidays with her grandparents in Carsphairn before the First World War. Sadly her first husband, Davis Seaton, who belonged to Dalry, lost his life when the Rawalpindi, an armed merchantman, was sunk by a German warship off Iceland in 1939.

Dates, times and irrelevant details may fade as one grows older but deep impressions, both pleasant and sad, seem to last forever. The Kirk yard may be full of graves but phantoms-faces-I have known so well, still flit among those grey stone houses nestling by the highroad beneath the peaceful hills around.

July 1914, I was about to say farewell to my primary school teacher and accept my scholarship to a local grammar school. It was the end of term and our teacher was in chatty mood.

“And where are you going for your holidays, Jean?”

“Back to Carsphairn, I hope,” I promptly replied. “And where is that?” “Oh, a very long way from Manchester by train. It’s in Scotland where my grandparents and lots of aunts and uncles live, in the proper country among the hills,” I told her.

NIGHT RUN

No, I’d never been to Blackpool, much to my friend’s surprise. But I could boast of exciting railway journeys by night. Puffing up the steep Shap slopes to the groans of a big steam engine; often too, waking to see the early sunrise reflected on the Pennine hills. Having my breakfast about seven o’clock outside Ayr station in the cold sea air while awaiting the mail train to Dalmellington, a clattering mail train on a single line, red poppies between the rails, a loop where we waited for the “up” train to pass. Pretty station gardens and Scottish voices something like my father’s.

PONY AND TRAP

Though tired, I think I enjoyed the last lap the best of all when, at our railway journey’s end we caught sight of the familiar face of Arthur Hyslop who was standing by his horse and trap awaiting the arrival of our train. He would first collect the mail, newspapers, etc., then the one or two passengers he was expecting.

Soon we were settled four aside, the luggage firmly placed between our legs or beside his high driving seat. A crack of the whip and out of the station yard, on through the mining village of Dalmellington we went. Rounding the bend, we were soon on the rising highroad to Carsphairn, a rather narrow road in those days through the steep sided valley. The wee stream to our right might be full after heavy rains, the scented meadowsweet grew by its side, black-faced Galloway sheep grazed on the hillsides among the purple heather. We were really on our holidays now.

When the load appeared to be too heavy for his poor horse Arthur might ask one or two fit and able folk to climb out at the foot of a steep rise and we would wait for them at the top.

Along the winding road and over one or two hump-backed little bridges he carefully drove as we passed wayside cottages and sniffed the peaty smoke of their fires.

After about an hour we crossed the one-time tricky bridge over the Deugh, we passed Bridgend cottages where we could, if we wished, open the gate to picnic in the Bankwood, courtesy of Mr Campbell. (Much later, the arrival of cars, coaches and marauding dogs ended that privilege.)

So, on trotted the horse past Lagwine Farm where Macadam once lived, past the row of trees. Hurrah! We could see the home of the Macmillan family – yes, Aunt Agnes, the postmistress was there to greet us at the porch door. “Puir wee pinkey faces! The fresh air will soon bring rosy cheeks.” But at last we’d arrived, though understandably excited and tired.

JOINER

My grandfather, George Macmillan, was the village joiner as was his father before him. As a respected member of the Free Church he served the parish in the distribution of Poor Relief, recommending suitable claimants for help. No National Insurance to assist the needy families then.

He agreed to accept responsibility for a sub-post office and accordingly built a suitably equipped porch at the front of his house with a counter and small section for the attention of the mail, Aunt Agnes serving as post mistress.

Aunt Annie, then housekeeper, attended the healthy plants in the windows in the windows of house and office. I remember the pretty plants and roses, pansies, clematis, honeysuckle, etc, that filled many of the little gardens bordering that sunnier side of the street, the vegetable and fruit gardens being at the back.

SUMMER SEAT

Outside the post office was a seat attracting villagers and summer visitors alike for a welcome chat – a central spot for the circulation of local gossip and other news. Here the outgoing mail was collected, hand stamped, and securely sealed in the large canvas bag ready for the arrival of the afternoon train.

The incoming morning mail was sorted into districts, while the postman awaited the share for their allotted districts, some quite remote would be visited less often than the nearer ones. A time-consuming and responsible duty carried out by a reliable and conscientious few, often cycling and tramping many miles in difficult conditions.

I remember poor “Matty” who lived with his sister beyond the Lead mines, being found frozen to death quite near his cottage. Wandering and lost in a severe December snow storm as he returned from a hospital visit to Ayr, he had taken a fatal rest beside the dyke.

Messages of more urgent nature were received and forwarded by telegram. I loved to watch and, very occasionally, tap out a message for my aunt, the wires buzzing continuously when lines were busy. Delivery of a telegram sometimes added a few coppers to my holiday spends.

WORKSHOP

Grandfather's busy workshop, approached by a short entry, was also a great source of interest to youngsters on holiday. The hum of the oil-driven engine that worked the circular saw, the smell of the hot glue, the swish of the plane smoothing the wood, the making of window frames and yes! even coffins.

The busy workmen were very patient with the little onlookers on a wet day, and might even spare time to fashion quickly a wee boat to sail on the Deugh.

Most of the villagers kept one or two cows to supply the family needs, often a pig or two, as well as hens. The vegetable gardens of most cottages produced excellent crops. My Aunt's berry bushes – currants red, black and white, strawberries, raspberries etc were healthy and productive – especially those nearest the pig sty.

WASH HOUSE

Behind our houses were byres, hay sheds, or milk shed with its separator and butter churn, the wash houses outside with very large boilers in which, as children, we often stood to be washed down before bedtime. The water for this purpose was just pleasantly warm – great fun.

Then there was the icy cold stream behind a dyke at the foot of the Craig and bordering the garden. I can't say I relished the icy cold dip we were once given there about 7 am on a Sunday morning. But we must be clean to attend the wee Kirk beside grandfather's wood yard opposite the house.

With our pennies for collection and a poke of mint imperials which we dare not drop on the wooden floor, we would walk across to the summons of the bell, all seated for the arrival of the precentor with his tuning fork. This, at one time, was Mr Martin, the village tailor.