

Life at Ayton Law: by Ramsay Turner

Living as we do in a purely agricultural area it is amazing to realise what changes have taken place in one's lifetime in this field of activity. The size of farms in my boyhood days were never reckoned in acres but by the number of pairs of horses so employed and even to this day, having lived all my life in Ayton, I am quite unaware of acreages except by guesswork. In our youthful day there was as many if not more women working on farms as there were men and oddly enough they seemed to have the heavy end of the work since theirs was all manual - filling muck, and spreading it, singling turnips and shawing them, stooking at the harvest and forking at leading time - none of which were easy tasks when one looks back, but the folk on the farms were in the main a contented lot but somehow looked upon as of the lower order, but in many instances that I recall were really the salt of the earth, quiet living people who enjoyed the simple pleasures of life and who always had the greatest respect for the "maister" sometimes without good reason since they were in many cases a gie hard lot.

Regarding life on the farm I can speak with some experience as we lived in a farm cottage for some eighteen months which was something of a novelty for me and my brothers, living previously in a larger house with all mod. cons. and now having to carry water from a standpipe and having to get acquainted to the use of "The ivy bower" at the rear of the cottage. However, there were other compensations in that we had a kind of roving commission into all the other cottages and as there was one or two families with youngsters like ourselves it was only natural that we should foregather there of an evening. One such house in which I was a regular visitor was Imrie's where quite often I partook of their evening meal with them, after which the Father would suggest that the elder son - Tam - should give us a tune on the fiddle whereupon Tam would reach the instrument down from the rafters and after much tuning and screeching some semblance of a tune would emerge. He was never much of a fiddler nevertheless he did like a tune, and should it be a waltz or a polka his brother - Wull - and I got turn about trying our hand at dancing with the daughter of the house - Nell - and so the night wore on.

The family were very devout and regular attenders at Church so on Sundays if it was wet or very cold the "back room" fire was lit and we adjourned there and by way of change we would all sing from the Sankey hymn book until tea time after which we got ready for the evening service in Church. Such were the simple pleasures of the poor but that contentment they did enjoy far from "the madding crowds ignoble strife".

Another event of consequence at the cottages was the annual pig killing at the back end of the year. This ghastly operation generally took place at the dinner hour and it should be remembered that at the time I am writing of the dinner hour was two hours which gave ample time for the slaughter at which all the men folk had to attend. After "grumphy" was killed he was hung up on a ladder and the inside removed, having previously been well scraped on the outside to remove all hair, and there he hung until "lowsing" time where upon after tea he was cut down and carried into the house and prepared for curing, hams and flakes or sides. Naturally there was considerable offal left and everyone in the "raw" got a portion, ourselves included. Eventually the hams and flakes were hung up on the rafters ready for use when required - invariably the evening meal.

The horsemen on the farms usually commenced work about 5 a.m. when they went up to the stable to feed the horses but the actual work day didn't start until 6 o'clock and finished at 6p.m. with another visit to the stable about 8p.m. to bed the horses down after a late feed.

Harvest was the most consequential time of the year for us youngsters and when it was known that Ayton Law was "opening up" the felling stick had to be sought out in readiness for the "feenishing" and the rabbits. The "opening up" was really to prepare a way for the binders - no combines in those days - the men armed with scythes cut a fairly wide swathe all round the field and the women gathered up the corn and tied it into sheaves which were cast aside out of the way of the binders. I remember that at mid-day the workers didn't go home for a meal, instead the local

baker came to the field with " harvest baps" which were just like a small loaf of bread and crusty and the grocer arrived with harvest beer and cheese. I have a vivid recollection of this as it took place in the field next to our house and the workers were all sitting at what we referred to as "The White Gate ", why I shall never know. Many of our school mates came from farmplaces so we were always acquainted when there was likely to be a "feenishing". Oddly enough I don't think that I ever killed a rabbit in my life. I never could bring myself to inflict what to me seemed such cruelty on the poor things.

After harvest when everything was safely gathered in it was customary on many farms to have a "kirn" which was virtually a harvest supper with singing, dancing etc. I was never privileged to attend one of these gatherings but from what one heard they were hilarious nights commencing about 7.30 p.m. and continuing "ayont the wee sma hoors". The granary had been all prepared beforehand in the evenings by the women workers and tastefully decorated. Local musicians provided the music and the farmer and his wife provided the food, and it was the usual thing to have a barrel of beer on tap in the cartshed below. Fortunately the next day was a holiday for the workers and helped them to recover from the night's activities while many of their contemporaries had to be content with an hour or so among the hay after cycling long distances home.

Times have changed considerably since those days and "the ploughman no longer plods his weary way" home but arrives back on his tractor and into a house with all modern conveniences together with his coloured "telly" etc. Consequently much of the actual work has also changed, one remembers the "turnip singling" when the piece workers were paid. 1 1/2d or 2d. per hundred yards. Up and down the field with a hoe no wider than 6". What monotony, and yet it was surprising just how much they could earn in a day and conversely the same thing happened when the crop had to be "shawed".

At nearly every farmplace one was sure to find a quoiting pitch and in spite of a long day's work there was always a ready response to a game of quoits. It was while we were staying at Ayton Law that I was introduced to this fascinating sport down in the Haugh. Some of our chums from the village came up to try their hand at the game which I became reasonably proficient in time having had a good coach in old Wullie Imrie who had at one time played with the Scottish champion and managed to draw with him much to his satisfaction might I add.

Fishing was another of our pursuits, commencing with a bent

Editors note: Presumably more followed but this has not survived.

The above was written by Ramsay Turner around 1980 and sent to Wullie Imrie at Christmas 1980. Ramsay's hand written note is attached below.

The Rowans
Aylton.

Dear Nellie,

I recently wrote a history of the village and gave a talk on the subject to the local W. R. S. Time allowed that evening prevented me to conclude the items of life at Aylton Law, which I photo-copied & enclose. These were happy days indeed and many of our old contemporaries are no longer with us. You will remember how we played "fitra" in the wee field in the moonlight! I noticed Bob's death in the Scotsman but couldn't write his Daughter as I had lost her address when she wrote to thank me when Nell died. I hope you enjoy the enclosed & that you are both in good health.

With all Good wishes for Christmas
& the New Year.

Yours sincerely

Ramsay Turner