

OUR VILLAGE

15TH ARTICLE

EARBY'S CHRISTMAS IN BYGONE DAYS

There is no phase of Earby's village life which is more pleasant to recall than the observance of Christmas in former times.

When our village was but a small hamlet the Christmas festivities were confined to the homes of the people, and in the larger farm houses there would be family parties, supplemented by neighbours and friends. The rooms would be festooned with holly and evergreens, and on the hearth a great Yule log would send out a radiant glow. The bountiful spread of the festive tables, which never lacked good English beef and plum pudding, was eagerly partaken of, and the health of the host and hostess would be duly honoured. What tales would be told by the "older end" as they gathered round the fire, and what laughter and mirth would be provoked by the customary games into which the children plunged so eagerly. Christmas, with its festivity and good feeling, was a welcome break in the monotonous round of the winter months.

Early in the nineteenth century the social life of the village centred round the two chapels which had been built, one by the Baptists the other by the Methodists. Christmas tea-parties and entertainments became an established feature of their activities, and were a rallying ground for the respective denominations. There was an element of rivalry in the two "camps," which was quite natural, and they keenly strove who could provide the best tea and entertainment. But there was a rare spirit of enjoyment in the preparations and celebrations, and they were much talked of before and after the event.

I was recently shown a letter written by a gentleman who resided in Earby sixty years ago and, referring to the Christmas festivities in which he took part as a youth, he said that he had never in the subsequent part of his life had such pure enjoyment and good fellowship as he experienced in those days.

There was no difficulty in getting a "full house" for those annual gatherings ; rather the difficulty was how to get the people in. On one occasion at the old Methodist chapel they gave a dramatised representation of the life of Moses, the "characters" being attired in Oriental dress, and this event created such a sensation that every inch of standing room was occupied.

Picked Bakeresses

With the increase in population and the building of the new schools these Christmas festivities were bigger events still. What tea parties they were ! All the provisions were "home made," and certain good housewives were always selected to bake the currant loaves, the seed bread, the queen cakes and the "cracklings." There were "sad cakes," which were warmed in the school kitchen oven, and so well buttered that the butter streamed down the face as they were being eaten. There were always plenty of ham and beef sandwiches and mince pies and cheese, in keeping with Christmas.

It was a great honour to be selected to be the carver of the meat, and who can forget Dick

Demain and Billy Slater officiating in that capacity? And what a pleasing sight to look into the cutting up room and see the old ladies with their white caps and white aprons sitting in state!

The Christmas tea party was the village re-union. People who rarely saw one another during the year exchanged hearty greetings, and friends who had removed came home for the Christmas festivities. People didn't talk in whispers ; there was prevalent a spirit of joyful hilarity, and laughter rang out again and again. We shall never see the like again. The entertainments were great events in those days. They were usually a combination of a religious meeting and a popular entertainment. Usually a superintendent of the Sunday School presided, and he was supported by other prominent workers in the school. The Chapel Choir was also accommodated on the platform, which presented an imposing appearance. The programme included two or three addresses, musical items and an abundance of recitations winding up with a dialogue, generally one of Walkers Yorkshire Dialogues.

Earby people have always been good at amateur drama and opera, and this originated and was fostered by dialogues at these entertainments. Who that were there, can never forget "Tit for Tat," " Muddles at Home make Husbands Roam," "Wild Oats," and "Uncle Grumps the Grumbler?" From beginning to end there was keen interest, which was often very intense during the dialogue part of the entertainment.

MIDNIGHT BAND MUSIC

The brass band , ever since its formation, has been associated with our observance of Christmas. But there was far more enthusiasm fifty years ago when the band turned out to play as the clock struck twelve on Christmas morning. They met at the old Institute, and took up their places ready to strike up at the instant the signal was given. "Nah, then, chaps," Will Rushton would say, "get ready," and "Tinklo" would bang the drum, the air was rent with the strains of "Hail, smiling morn" and they would follow with "While Shepherds" to the old tune ; and how they could play it! There was some "glory" in their playing. (Really it is enough to make the old bandsmen turn in their graves to hear some modern bands play the simplest "common metre" tune for "While Shepherds"). And for the next week or two there was some grand Christmas music played in every street. There was plenty of Christmas singing by the two choirs, and they made the welkin ring with their melodious strains. They did the thing thoroughly, and practised well beforehand. It wasn't a case of singing a verse or two, and then "off we pop," but they had a fine repertoire of suitable music. They were frequently successful in raising good sums of money for chapel purposes. And how hospitably they were received and entertained! These experiences stand out in the memory of very many who were privileged to enjoy them. And there are many amusing incidents associated with these experiences. One recalls going out to Oak Slack Farm when Jerry Aldersley lived there, and the snow inches deep in the fields, and singing to an old horse in the fold (the inmates of the house were all away from home.) Also singing at Throstle Nest, Thornton (when Mr. Hattersley lived there) at the front door - "Here's a health to all good lassies"- and they brought out glasses of beer for the choristers who were all "teetotal" except two of them.

The old Band of Hope and Temperance Society used to have a well-organised treat for the children on the first Saturday in the new year, which is well remembered by old Earby children now grown grey. The assembly room of the institute was a fine meeting place for such an event, and three hundred children made merry for four of five hours with great zest. And surely there never were such good, big buns as were provided on those occasions from

Tom Hartley's at Barnoldswick, and the coffee made by Mrs. Demain and Mrs. Hudson tasted as no other coffee did. And how vividly does one recall the first Saturday in January, the 5th (exactly 45 years ago), 1884, when all was in readiness for the annual treat, and a terror-stricken cry ran through the village, "the mill's on fire!" and the buns and coffee were hasted away to refresh the men who, all in vain, were making superhuman efforts to fight the fire. That was the blackest New Year that Earby has ever known.

J.H.

Ref.- The Craven Herald-Friday- January 11th 1929