

God bless us, everyone

By BOB VICKERS

CHRISTMAS TIME. The words evoke a Dickensian mood: the punch-bowl before a blazing fire, the Ghost of Christmas Past, children at the foot of a decorated tree.

And the pinched face of Tiny Tim? Here the imagination takes a more sombre turn as from out of my memory tumble those realities of Christmas Past which I learned as a boy at my father's knee.

My grandparents had 15 children and poor grandma had to bring them up in a small house among many small houses on the east side of London. Christmas was no festival of plenty in the second half of the 19th Century.

"Christmas was a hard time in the hardest of weathers," Dad said. His words seemed to echo Dickens' grimmest pages. Dad had to go to a Ragged School for his education. Education, perhaps the most lasting of gifts, was not the treasure which Dickens found when he visited the Ragged School on Mutton Hill (now known as Vine Street) in London.

The school was named Field Lane Ragged School — a night refuge for poor children. He wrote a vivid description of the school in 'a sleep to startle us' (see *Household Words*, 13.2.1852) when destitute, dead-end kids swarmed in rotting tenements, lived on scraps of food called 'broken victuals' by Victorians.

G Fletcher wrote: "Who would go so far as to lay claim to education at a Ragged School?"

But Christmas is here again, and as Thomas Tusser wrote in his *500 Points of Good Husbandry*.

*At Christmas play and make good cheer
For christmas comes but once a year
We shall have food on the table no broken
victuals for us
We shall have christmas presents, and
warmth and hope for a new year*

Hark! Did I hear Tiny Tim's voice? "God bless us, everyone."



● COVER: Our cover of the old Manor School is an illustration by Braintree's world famous artist, Edward Bawden, who was born only a stone's throw away in Woodfield Avenue. It is produced by kind permission of his estate.



Chronicles

The Newsletter
of the Friends of the Braintree & District
Museum and Heritage Trust

Recalling memories . . .

By RON UTTLEY

OWING to ill health I was unable to start school until I was six years old in 1926 when I joined Class I of the Infants at Manor Street. My first teacher was a Mrs Potton, a very likeable lady who had a way with all beginners. There were four classes in the Infants department in the building which stands on its own away from the main school.

It was not long before I was moved up to Class II to put me among my own age group. My teacher there was Miss Fenson who was also my Sunday School teacher at Braintree Baptist Church.

I had another set-back when I nearly went blind; and would have done had my parents not sent me to Moorfields Eye Hospital in London for treatment. I was very lucky.

Back at school I was moved up to Class III although I was not really ready, having lost so much school time. I found it hard to keep up with my class friends. My teacher was Miss Luslgater with whom I spent little time before being moved up into Class IV, the last class before going up into the main school across the playground. I was eight years old when I joined Miss Spain's Class I. In our day, the boys began by congregating at about 8.30am in School Lane where we chatted or pitched cigarette cards against a wall or fence. These cards were highly valued. Most men smoked

in those days and when we were out playing in the street we had to pluck up the courage to ask "Please, have you got any cards, Mister?"

Sometimes we were lucky but sometimes we did not like to ask, so we often followed the smokers in case they threw down any empty packets. The cards had some interesting subjects in sets of 50, I still have full sets that I collected during my school days.

At 8.45am we formed up in School Lane and then marched into school, sometimes to the sound of the *Colonel Bogey March* coming from a small gramophone standing on a tall, old-fashioned teacher's desk in the corridor. A teacher, often Miss E Nankiville, would be wagging her finger at us and saying left-right, left-right, to help us keep in step as we made our way into our classrooms.

As I walked to and from school, and home to lunch since I was luckily living in nearby Victoria Street, I had to go through the Market Place. Outside the Cherry Tree pub I always stopped to admire a Model-T Ford belonging to Mr Crisp, the publican. He used his car as a taxi to take people to the railway station or around the town; probably the last of its kind to be used in Braintree with its black leather button upholstery and perambulator-style hood.

Going home from school at about 4pm, I . . .

GREAT FIRST YEAR WITH MORE TO COME

AMAZING how quickly the Museum's first year in its new permanent home has gone . . . but, looking back, its equally astonishing how much we have managed to pack in!

We have had over 14,000 visitors and visits by schools were booked for almost every term day throughout the year: with an average of 60 children spending a day at the Museum, experiencing a Victorian child's life in class.

We had groups of visitors as diverse as American fine-art lovers, Norfolk spinners and weavers, local guides and brownies, not to mention over 300 scouts and their families on one hectic afternoon in May.

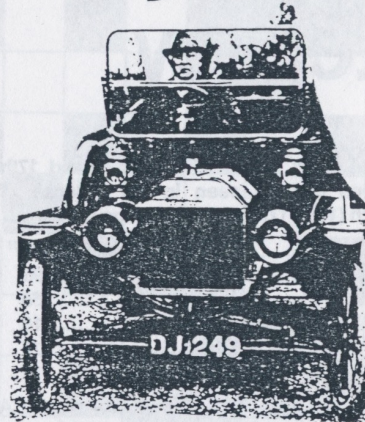
There were eleven temporary exhibitions including: Haley Smith Textiles, Coins of Rome, 'Wheels', the Crittall Portraits, Glass by Catherine Morrison, Feng Ge Batiks, Eastern Artefacts, Pop-art Prints, Images of War and Exploitation Earth, with 'Ends of the Earth' crafts.

We tried to offer variety, even though it meant enlisting the invaluable help of our Friends to construct an Afghan yurt, a section of trench and then a rainforest.

Challenges for 1995 include a thatched roof, a Victoria nursery and the completion of the John Ray Gallery. Meantime, heartfelt thanks for all your support.

JEAN GRICE — Curator

of days at Manor School



. . . had time to stop and watch the new Town Hall being built. It seemed a great and wonderful building, with men of all trades working together. Some I recognised, but the one I liked to watch most was the stonemason, who was related to my mother. He had come from Plumpstead in Kent and what a craftsman he was. He worked on the Coat of Arms under the clock though much of his work was inside the building.

He was stone deaf and dumb. He communicated with a writing pad but could lip-read almost every word. At meal times he would come to our home in Victoria Street. Some-

times he would catch me: creeping up behind me as I played in the street. He would put his hands on my head and with his fingers pretended to play a piano. I would duck out of the way but I will never forget the great power in his hands. I also watched him at work on the head of Mercury, the Roman god, over the entrance of our now-closed Post Office in Fairfield Road. He carved that beautiful face from a block of stone.

At school we would have special days when we would be taken out on to the front playground where we hope the statue of John Ray, presently in Bank Street, will be positioned next year. There were trees, shrubs and well-tended grass. Empire Day was particularly celebrated each year on May 24th when the Union Jack would be raised on the flag pole. We would sing a hymn or two and our headmaster would speak to us about the Empire we had at that time. We enjoyed these occasions when we were able to go outside in the sunshine, away from the classrooms.

The Headmaster was a fine man, Mr Ernest Zuick. Over six-feet tall, he towered above us all but was always ready to help. On very rare occasions when a boy got into serious trouble for behaving very badly, Mr Zuick would take him to his office for a good caning. No one every fancied a second dose. Whenever we met our Headmaster or our teachers outside the school we always saluted them.

DESPERATELY SEEKING SECRETARY

THE Friends of Braintree Museum urgently requires a person who is prepared to take Minutes at Committee meetings and generally co-ordinate the paperwork!

This would involve *only a few hours each month* and is ideally suited for someone who has an interest in the Museum and its work in general within the community.

The Committee members will be seeking re-election at the Annual General Meeting in February, and it would be appreciated if someone is willing to come forward before that date.

This important post *must be filled* if the Friends are to continue to function in an organised fashion.

Please call in at the Museum direct or phone Braintree 325266.

Diary date: AGM — February 3, 1995 at Town Hall 7.30

Charting the road to modern literacy

By BOB VICKERS

MODERN living demands that people are literate. The ability to read in medieval times, however, did not represent a wide social distinction and the majority of literates were, in any case, men already distinguished by membership of ecclesiastical orders. For them reading was a professional qualification, not an everyday necessity for the public in general.

Information was by the spoken word, complemented by illustration such as the wall paintings of religious events within church buildings. Thomas Tusser's books of *Points of Husbandry* were aimed at a mainly illiterate audience. He couched his information in doggerel rhyme to help them to memorise the spoken word.

Many of Tusser's words were localised and may have been unrecognisable by a peasant even a few miles away. The variation of language in England was so marked — and so misinterpreted — that, as William Caxton tells us, a man of the North could be mistaken for a Frenchman by a person of Kent.

But the change in English landscape brought about by the Enclosures also produced social upheaval, starting in the 15th century. Landless peasants became more mobile, bringing about a mixing of local values, ideas and, above all, regional language.

At this point, Caxton made a vital contribution to the English tongue by employing the Midlands dialect, as used by Chaucer, as the basis of standard English.

But literacy, and writing, did not come easily to England. It blossomed with William Shakespeare, but it is interesting to note that Shakespeare's father always marked papers with an X because he could not write his name. The power of language in Elizabethan prose owed much to its closeness to folk speech, according to Asa Briggs. The ability of individuals to sign their names in the eccle-

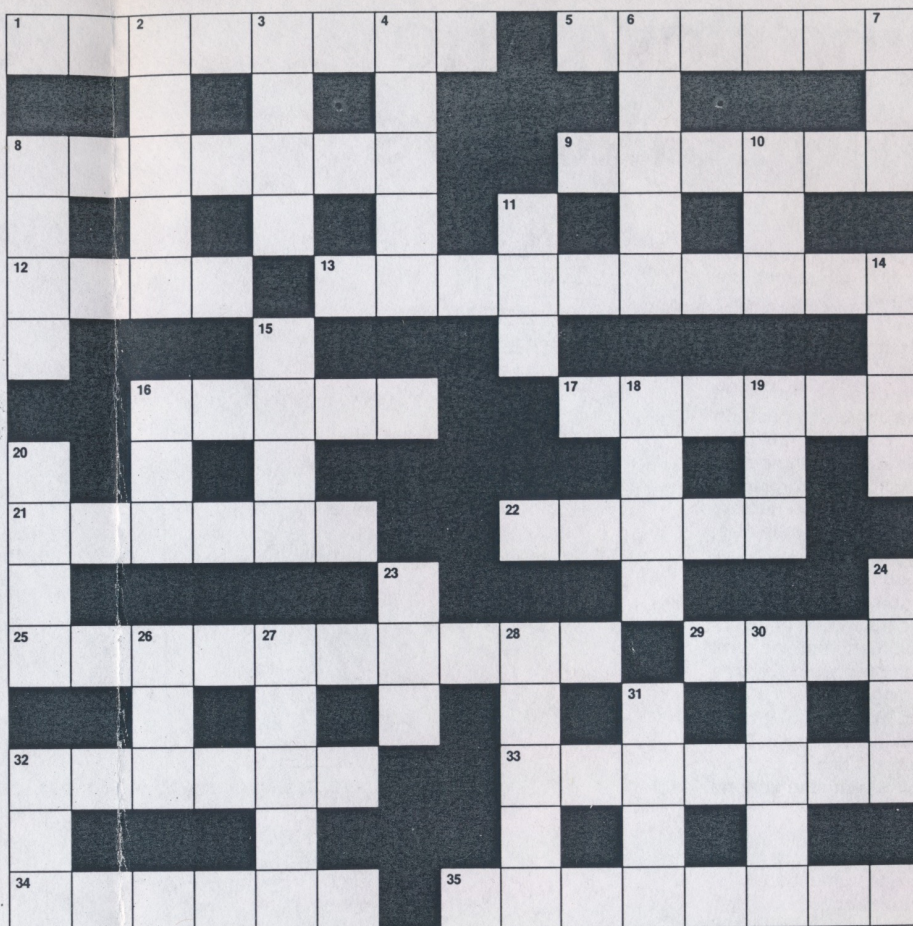
siastical court records in the 16th and 17th centuries can be seen in the Diocese of Norwich (1580-1726): in percentage terms . . .

CLERGY.....	100
GENTRY.....	98
YEOMEN.....	65
SERVANTS.....	18
LABOURERS.....	15
WOMEN.....	11

An extract from Page 118 of Asa Briggs' *A Social History of England* reads: "Education, like diet, costume and shelter, was socially and culturally satisfied, and the proliferation after the Reformation of a wide range of educational institutions, from small private establishments, often kept by a single master, to well-endowed grammar schools, exaggerated rather than reduced inequalities."

A strange twist of history exposed a need for literacy. In the 1660s a Poll Tax was worded in such a way that a written statement had to be drawn up for each household. It became obvious that not all statements were produced by the head of the household, with Scriveners being paid for the task. The Protestants and Puritans, anxious for universal education, used this to press their case.

Searches through parish registers before 1840 reveal that a high proportion of village brides were illiterate. A local example was a contract of employment with Courtaulds by Sarah and Jane Spurgeon (mother and daughter) who both 'signed' by an X. Courtaulds employed a school mistress, Mary Merryweather, to set up a school for factory girls in 1874. A former employee, a Mrs Taylor, reminisces that: "Mr Samuel Courtauld started the factory institute where lectures were given, and there was a good library. My father was librarian and I used to go down there with him. It was open from seven until nine in the evening, and the work people who used to eat meals in the place."



CLUES DOWN

- 1. A figure generated by the revolution of a circle or other conic section about a straight line in its plain. (5)
- 3. The officer who leads the devotions in a mosque. (4)
- 4. He who doesn't win. (5)
- 6. Opposed to poetry. (5)
- 7. A substance in a condition in which it has no definite boundaries or fixed volume, but will fill any space. (3)
- 8. A friend in this is a true one. (4)
- 10. Gaseous mixture (mainly nitrogen and oxygen) of which the atmosphere is composed. (3)
- 11. Icen. But somewhat warmer when lacking this bit. (3)
- 14. Mince chopped small. (4)
- 15. Lost lost. (4)
- 16. Greek pee-ess. (3)
- 18. Inflammation of the sebaceous follicles. (4)
- 19. Light-bladed pole for propelling craft. (3)
- 20. A friar — in Rome, perhaps. (1-3).
- 23. Nearly male. Wet. (3)
- 24. The big shot. (4)

CLUES ACROSS

- 1. One of the two small enclaves, relics of the Great Forests of Essex, is here. Bowler ground . . . (8).
- 5. . . . and the other is here. (6)
- 8. Essex watched while these installed its aristocracy. (7)
- 9. Which invaders gave us straight roads — some still in use? (6)
- 12. Teas in this direction. (4)
- 13. Clayey silt or loam used by builders trade after processing. (5-5).
- 16. Highly-spiced Eastern dish of rice with fowl, or meat or the like, boiled together or separately. (5)
- 17. People primarily responsible for defining our county boundaries. (6)
- 21. Our ancestors dug through chalk, making caverns and searched for these from which to make tools. (6)
- 22. Higher of two male voices, usually adult. (5)
- 25. The Queen opened a bridge across Thames, with its Essex base here. (2-8)
- 29. This 'Patra' had, apparently, some quite large needles. (4)
- 32. One of the most important flowers in Britain. Yes! Flowers! (6)
- 33. Liquid diffusion of cow's broken voice and half-sister (7)
- 34. A relatively modern movement in painting which seeks to represent several aspects of an object. (6)
- 35. Near which place in Essex might you find Dene Holes? (8)

Tracking down the old-time stationers

By BOB VICKERS

CONGRATULATIONS on producing a fine first edition of the Newsletter now christened the 'Chronicles'. It reminded me that that newspapers and information sheets bear names that were first associated with the spreading of news by the early postal systems.

Postmasters would jot down snatches of 'news' current in their villages and pass on these collections via the post boys on their rounds. Some even added titles to the newsletter, such as *Flying Post*. A few national newspapers continue to reflect these humble beginnings by proudly calling their issues, perhaps, *The Morning Post*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Messenger* or *The Courier*.

Even though we are now in an age when information comes by computer, most instruction, points of view, comment and general information still use the printed word through books, newspapers and magazines.

Talking of newsagents, W H Smith, whose local branch is now found in the George Yard Precinct, has an interesting history; particularly the part played in introducing the general public to the world of literature.

The Victorians found that newspapers could be bought at railway stations where the first 'circulating' libraries were also founded, supplied by W H Smith. At first, however, bookstall concessions were only granted to injured staff or widows of former staff. Their trade included cheap, reprehensible French novels: a corruption of literature, as the reformers called them.

As a reaction, earnest religious bodies were allowed to place Bibles — chained to lecterns — in certain stations. However, the more respectable publications became available when W H Smith opened his first stall at Euston Station in 1848.

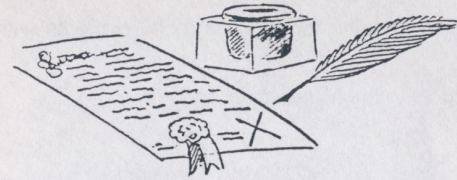
By 1853 he had a monopoly of the London to Birmingham line and he already had control of the stalls on the London and North Western railway in 1851. Until 1905, he had a virtual monopoly of all bookstalls.

That year brought many changes. Rentals were increased by the various railway com-



panies, and he lost out to a new agent, Wymans, who took over trade on L.N.E.R. and the G.W.R. In response Smith opened shops in towns throughout England, including Braintree.

I should add that others also played a part in public reading development. Boots the Chemist had a 'circulating' library as did Foyles; then there was the 'Twopenny Lending Library' as well as other small publishers.



Cyril Hamersma 1919-1994

SOCIETY often carries the image of an artist as someone working in a lofty garret, invariably alone. Cyril Hamersma, though, was seldom alone and never remote; his work reflecting the hopes and fears of our society.

He reached out to people while encouraging everyone to reach out to him and his work. Not for him a hands-off approach. He welcomed people touching his work. In his view the tactile sense is as important as the visual.

That genial spirit, though, is no more. Cyril recently died at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, in London, aged 75.

In his life he was many things: certainly a loving and devoted husband, father and grandfather, but also a man ever keen to put his many skills to the service of his fellow human beings.

Among a diversity of jobs to pay the bills and finance his artwork, he was a hairdresser and a nurse. In 1939 he became a Private in the R.A.M.C. and at that time had his first one-man exhibition at Oxford (1940). While working in the Military Hospital there, he painted the hospital screens just to "brighten things up".

Two years later the same smiling image was shown in his next solo exhibition in, of all places, Stalag VIII B in East Germany. He had been captured in Greece in 1941. The P.O.W. camp exhibition was to raise money for the Stalag's own school where Cyril was an art teacher to his fellow prisoners.

Cyril's last drawings were made at St. Bart's this year, and were inspired by the loving care and professional skill of the medical staff in the renal unit. These drawings and his comments on them have been passed to Channel 4 for a possible future programme, a fitting follow up to his part in the Comment series, *The Squircle Experience*, shown in October 1993.

Trying to keep my Spindle tree a secret

By BRIAN PINNOCK

MY regular morning walk with my dog takes me past a small wood which is filled with all types of trees including oaks, ash, elm, hawthorn and hazel. I am fascinated by this tiny area of Braintree with the almost daily changes in its character as the seasons slowly come and go.

My most exciting discovery came last November when I saw in the hedgerow a mass of delicate, fuchsia-pink flowers spurting from a bush. I discovered that it was a Spindle tree, so called because of its smooth straight hard wood which was used by the wool spinners for their bobbins and shuttles.

The tree is very rare having suffered from constant grubbing up by farmers because it harboured the bean-fly. The wood was also a regular source of charcoal for artists.

Was this tree, hiding discreetly among some holly bushes, a descendant of the Spindle trees used by Braintree spinners?

I am going to keep this little treasure a secret. It has given me so much pleasure as it changes colour through the seasons.

CROSSWORD SOLUTION

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How you can help Museum

IN SEPTEMBER, a working group was formed to raise funds for special projects with three immediate aims:

- To help provide a £5,000 capital fund for stocking the Museum shop: working as a revolving fund.
- To raise £2,500 to complete fitting-out of shop.
- To raise £2,500 for a major exhibition as part of Museum's on-going programme.

Plans to start an acquisitions fund are also being discussed with the Museum Curator together with longer-term projects needing support once the three priority projects have been achieved.

YOU can play an active part by helping to sponsor one or more project by way of an interest-free loan or donation.

Loans can range from £5-£500 (or more!) . . . whatever you can manage. Direct donations will be of greatest help while loans will be repaid as the shop sells more items from an enlarged, more varied stock.

All those helping with the appeal will have their names included in the Museum's book of sponsors: unless you prefer anonymity.

PLEASE FILL IN THE FORM BELOW (Copies also available at Museum)

Name

Address.....

Tel No.....

I wish to make an interest-free loan to the Museum Friends of £

Period of loan (eg six months, one year etc).....

I wish to make a direct donation to the Museum Friends of £

CHEQUES MADE PAYABLE TO *THE FRIENDS OF BRAINTREE DISTRICT MUSEUM.*

Ring specific project, if preferred

1. Stocking Museum shop 2. Completing shopfitting 3. Major exhibition

Book of Sponsors: Yes No

The Friends of the Braintree & District
Museum and Heritage Trust

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