

Tales of old Seacroft

By R.J. Shoesmith-Taylor-Marshall

It is a lovely Sunday afternoon and it is March 2010. I am sat in my dining room and remembering the stories my mother, grandmother, aunts and uncles used to relate to me when I was a boy. Now as an adult I am glad of it as they were stories of another time and another way of life. Harder maybe, but more sedate, in that distant past of long ago.

I'm going to tell you about old Seacroft and about the time, which seems not so long ago, when I was playing with my childhood friend Kevin in the old gate house yard. We played on the old horse drawn wagons and farm carts, both four and two wheeled, which had been stored there for ever and forgotten until our discovery. Oh, the amazement we both felt on finding such treasure!

As I look back in my mind on this, it is hard to believe that those old wagons of all types had been collected and left there after the estate farms had been broken up sometime on from the forties and I had often wondered what had happened to them all. As I remember, I counted at least twenty of them at the time.

I remember an old man coming out of the gate house and shouting at us to *"get over here before I call a policeman"*.

With trepidation we went over to him and stood there as he asked us our names.

"Kevin" said my friend, *"Robert"* said I.

"Where do you live?" he demanded and out spilled our home addresses.

"Redmire Drive" said Kevin.

"Same as me" I said.

The man looked at me closely *"I know you, you're James's lad, Robert"* he said.

"Yes I am, don't tell my mum will you or I will get into trouble" I replied.

"By gum, I remember when your mother were born - in 1918 that was".

He shouted for his wife who came to the door. She knew me straight away.

"How's your mum Robert? she asked. "I was talking to her in your gran's shop this morning as she was sorting out some vegetables".

This was of course my grand mother's shop, Marshall's Stores, originally called Ash Tree House. It was next to the Garden of Rest which was alas, demolished to make way for the present terrace of 'town houses' which were built on the old shop site.

I'm casting back in my mind, trying to remember the name of the old couple. I'm not certain but Mr. Mrs. Benson comes to mind.

However, by this time I had recognised him as one of the old men who, along with my uncle Alf, old Mr. Marshall and Mr. Russell, used to sit on the old benches at the corner of the village green, nearest the corner of the church by York Road. They would sit there passing a summers evening, watching the cricket and talking away between themselves.

This I remember very well indeed as I used to go and sit with my uncle, listening to them and the praise they would offer.

"By, ees coming on Alf" I would hear.

"Aye, ees not doin' bad ist lad, but he could do wi some muck in is boots" would be the reply.

Then, *"ere, there's half a crown, go get me ten Woodbines and watch t road on tha way"* and off I would go, down to my grans through the big gate and into the yard to the back entrance to the shop.

I next remember going down to the *"old house"* as everyone called the place, near the lake or fish pond. It was in fact by then, the ruins of Seacroft Hall, the old home of the Squire, of Seacroft, Darcy Bruce Wilson.

Around 1953-54, I remember my grandmother telling me stories about him. How he would not let anyone touch the trees on the estate in case they would cause them damage and not allow any deadfall wood, old branches etc. to be taken for fires, unless he had been informed first. But she always told me he was a gentleman, very polite and not aloof as many old squires were, in stories told.

Old Mr Russell, the boot and saddle maker used to tell me that many times in his old age, Mr Wilson would send his butler, Christie Cullen, to his house and tell him that the Squire wanted him down at the hall and to *"hurry up and don't dawdle"*.

He would go up to the hall into the glass covered back entrance via the kitchens, through the hall with its enclosed staircase* and either into the sitting room or the study. First being taken and announced by the butler saying *"Mr Russell has arrived sir"* and then entering the room quietly.

*(*The panelled enclosed staircase was very beautiful and I can remember watching the workmen, who were demolishing Seacroft Hall, taking the panelling and frames out and throwing it onto a large bonfire! Other panelling was kept on one side for removal to Temple Newsham. I took one of these panels and had it framed and hung on my hall wall but was alas, lost when I moved house.)*

There would always be a pair of riding boots stood awaiting his examination. On having being told to sit down, one of the maids** would have by now arrived and tea would be served.

*(**I look at the photos I have of the hall staff and I note all were smart and in uniform, except for Mrs. Townend, who in the photographs always has on an old pinafore as she was the housekeeper.)*

Whilst Herbert (Mr. Russell) was examining the boots, the Squire would talk away to him, asking after his health and his family (the Pickersgills) and then he would 'cross examine' him as he had been a practising solicitor (London circuit) years before and always enjoyed these little *"talks"* as he called them.

There was the time Herbert told me, when he and his pal Leonard Vince, were walking down past Swarcliffe farmhouse, approaching the little thatched cottage*** where the Tinkers lived, when they saw the Squire come round the end of the cottage where The Nookin began.

*(***This cottage is now identified as the dentist.)*

The Squire was quietly taking a stroll around the village and talking to all whom he met and they decided to hide behind the hedge whilst he passed. This they did and quietly waited until his footsteps came toward and then passed them. Leonard then decided to whistle at him as they watched as he went up the lane into the farm yard.

The Squire turned around at the sound and seeing nobody, proceeded on his way. Leonard again whistled. This time the Squire turned and must have heard them laughing and giggling, so he very quietly retraced his steps back toward where the two culprits were hiding. When Leonard whistled again they were shocked and surprised to hear the Squire demanding that they come out from behind the hedge "now" as he wished to have a word with them!

With great trepidation they did as they were told and with rather crestfallen countenances, faced him to hear "*Ah, Russell, Vince, I trust we are enjoying ourselves and having fun?*"

Neither said a word. They were terrified Herbert told me, as the Squire was waving his stick at them and quietly warning them what would happen the next time they were foolish enough as to play tricks on him again.

The two lads had been in the orchard# the week before with their other pals when the Squire had caught some of them and had laid his stick across their backs and none too gently at that! Plus their parents had received a visit from the estate agent, Mr. Townend and this call resulted in them all not being able to sit down for a little while!

(#The orchard covered a large area from opposite the gatehouse drive and across where is now the entrance to South Parkway on York Road, up to Ivy Cottage.)

But I digress. Another time, my sister Anita, myself, Kevin and two other boys decided we would go 'sailing' on the lake. I was seven years old at the time and remember it very well as 1952.

The lake had been partly filled in with rubble and detritus, but that was not about to spoil our day afloat. So sneaking past the gatehouse we went down to the stables to get one of the old tin baths that were stored there. The one we took was the largest of the three, with a high back rest.

So away we went, struggling across the park to the water where we floated the bath. As Anita and I were quickly trying to get in it I lost my balance I fell up to my hips in the 'oggin'. Climbing out I sat down and took my shoes off, socks and short trousers, leaving my wet 'undies' on of course, and tried again. I managed to get seated at one end and Anita at the other and paddling with our hands, we went 'sailing'. We took turns with Kevin and the other two boys for the rest of the afternoon.

I remember the hundreds of baby frogs hopping about all over the place, having changed from tadpoles which I was really happy to see. Most of them were hopping down the side of the stream, down to the crevasse, others up to the allotments at the side of the lake and which are still there today.

We really had to struggle to get the bath onto dry grass and back to the stable but we managed it. Then we went to have a look at the old hall, which was all dirty, grey and drab and which today I think of as a disgrace, as is The Grange by the village green, especially when you see photos of it in its heyday.

*(Recently found amongst old family papers is a rent book which states:
D.B Wilson in association with Samuel Cushworth Marshall 1891 – 1908 half yearly
collections by John Townend. Agent.)*