

Memories of Witcham in the 1940's

I was born in Ely in 1931. My parents were shop keepers (a sweet shop, where we lived, next door to Ely High School for Girls and a toy and woollen shop on the Market Place.) My ambition when I grew up was to be a farmer. I think it was through our connection with The Methodist Chapel that I came into contact with the farming family of the Pates of Witcham, in the early 1940's. Martin was the same age as myself, and I was invited to spend my school holidays with him on the farm. Martin's father and mother Mr Alan Pate and his wife, Hilda lived in Silver Street. It was here that I stayed during the week. Martin's uncles were Charlie Pate, who lived at the top of Hythe Road leading down to Clare Farm, and Harry Pate lived at Clare Farm. As Martin and I got a little older we became more useful on the farm. Harvest time was best of all, driving the horses and carts with the full loads of sheaves from field to stack yard, and back again, to be loaded up once more. Sometimes I had a spell on the stack, passing the sheaves to Uncle Charlie, not always getting them the right way up ! I even began to be useful enough to earn some money. Sometimes to start with payment was in the shape of a bag of oats for my rabbits which I carried home on my bike, at the weekend. After one summer school holiday I remember being actually paid £6 for my 4 weeks work. I was so thrilled with that reward.. We milked the cows in the field by hand, balancing on a one legged stool. Over head the Lancasters from RAF Mepal was very active setting off on bomber raids over Germany. Martin and I would identify the markings on the aircraft as they flew off, and try to spot the same aircraft returning the next morning. Uncle Harry was the stockman. Uncle Charlie the horseman and the horses, Whitefoot, Daisy, Blossom and dear old Ginger were stabled at Priestleys This was an off lying farm beyond Clare Farm, across the field. Uncle Alan was in charge of anything mechanical. This included the old steel wheeled Fordson tractor. Martin and I travelled many an acre sitting on the mud guards, whilst Uncle Alan ploughed with his two furrow trailer plough. Travel between Silver Street and the farm was by bicycle. Uncle Alan's had a large carrier on the front of his byke which invariably contained a drum of paraffin and bits and pieces for the tractor. Hythe Road, which led down to Clare Farm from the Mepal Road was just a track in the early 1940's, but was made up during that time. I remember one of the horses was loaned to pull the water cart required for the road construction. A much looked forward to day in the Spring holiday was driving a bunch of store cattle down to the Washes to spend the summer grazing. Young horses were also put down there until they were old enough to be broken in for work. It required much agility keeping the animals on the move, in the right direction.

One of my best recollections amongst so many was not the working day, but supper time after a day in the harvest field, with Uncle Alan and family around the paraffin lighted supper table. When the meal was over, Uncle Alan would play the piano and sing some of his well known songs, but the one I loved best of all was "To Be A Farmer's Boy". (and I still do and wonderful to hear it again on this website) He was always good for a funny

story some of which I heard whilst we sat having our “docky” of cold milkless tea and a hunk of bread, cheese and an onion, by some sheltered hedge or bank.

All of these memories are from 60 years ago. Martin and I have remained pals ever since, and we still have a laugh about those carefree, for us, days so long ago.

There is a twist in the tale. Recently I began to research my families history. Imagine my surprise therefore when I discovered via the Witcham Church register, that Martin gave me access to, that my great grandfather Sykes was a Witcham man, and had a small holding in the parish !