

## **Dougie Marshall and Memories of the Mid-Century Village**

*In 2009 a well-known village figure, the late Dougie Marshall, for many years Parish Warden, appealed through the village website for people to send in their recollections and anecdotes of Hook Norton in the early and mid-twentieth century. The invitation started discussions about many things, and we reprint here those of most historical interest. We omit some interesting items on wildlife and on Doug's abiding passion, aeronautical history. For the whole file, see <http://hook-norton.org.uk/old-and-interesting-posts-from-the-forums/>.*

### **Happy Memories**

*Dougie, September 2009:*

Hook Norton residents who can remember life in the village and its surroundings in the early to mid-1900s are getting fewer, and memories of old Hooky related sayings and stories are being lost. If you or your friends can recall any, please share them here before they are forgotten.

New Hook Norton residents (or ex-pats) shouldn't feel excluded from this topic. All anecdotes start somewhere, so if your family/children have come up with a recent Hooky or rural gem, especially if it raised a laugh, please put it on here for all to enjoy!!

Here's a starter:

I remember as a boy listening to the ironstone, brewery and farm workers as they enjoyed a pint of Hooky, outside the pub on summer evenings after a hard day's graft. One of their favourite self-deprecating sayings, oft repeated in their strong Oxfordshire accent, was:

"Hooky born and Hooky bred, strong in the arm but weak in the yed!"

This was OK if uttered by a local resident, but woe betide any visitor from a nearby village who expressed that opinion about a Hookyite. He quickly found out the shampoo benefits of Hooky beer!

*John Mann, December 2009:*

I recently spent a day up in Wales looking at the archives of the Brymbo Steel Company. These included the “Brymbo Works Magazine” from the 1920s, which, among information on how to buy a dog, make a wireless set or where to buy a pram in Wrexham, contains a lot of items about Hook Norton:

1. DECEMBER 1924:

At a recent big dance at the [Memorial] Hall a young gentleman (from the [ironstone] works), feeling a little fatigued through continuous jazzing, wended his way into the refreshment room where two ladies were talking over a cup of tea. Having called for and received his cup of tea, he changed it for one of the ladies' cups and proceeded to drink same. When questioned later as to why he did a trick like this, he replied, “Well I seen her been theer a good while a'blowin of it, an mine wer hot, so I changed em, beside her got more toime to blow it ner I ad”.

2. MARCH 1925, in a section labelled “Famous sayings by Famous Workmen”, the following appeared in a column called “Ower Cabin”:

“Well, ower uncle sin a fox fetch one o' 'is cockerels an' watched weer 'e burid it. When 'e went to fetch the old hen back it wer yetting a rabbut.”

“Well, ower Gramp's over 80, an e's as upright as ye like, bar 'is beard rounda 'ere (pointing under his chin) an' 'e sez as old men nowerdays sits lollupin' about in cheers an' gets stiff, instead o' gooin' out for a walk o' days, an that's why they dies sa young.”

I'm guessing that “Ower Cabin” was the nickname for the Recreation Hut used by Brymbo workers in Hooky. The Brymbo Company made a useful income (15/- a week [i.e., 75p]) from renting the hut to Oxfordshire Education Committee three days a week for about 20 weeks each year, for use as a “Practical Subjects Centre”. This arrangement lasted from 1924 to 1931 when the hut was sold. This hut was located next to the Memorial Hall, on the left. The gate is still there.

*John Mann, December 2009:*

From Geoff Walton's recollections of Hook Norton, published in the *Newsletter*, December 2000:

Mr Alban White, nicknamed "Stosh" (I never found out why), was a tall thin man, a loveable village character, a philosopher, full of wise words and anecdotes and awfully fond of Hooky ale (even Hunt Edmunds would do at a pinch). He was reputed to be the man, who sitting one night in the Pear Tree when the beer was a bit "off", said to Mr Heritage, the landlord, after his third pint, "Landlord, this beer's a bit rough. I shall be glad when I've had enough on it."

His stories included the one when he was once called to look at a sick pig: "it wus so bad I had to kill it to save its life".

*John Smith, April 2011:*

Don Best, former landlord at The Pear Tree, was "allegedly" once asked,

"Don, do thee wan tee know how to sell more ale??"

"How's that then"? was Don's reply.

"Fill t' bleddy glasses up", was the speedy retort.

*Dougie, May 2011:*

When I was a nipper my dad, to whom I am indebted for my lifelong interest in wildlife, drew my attention to a completely albino blackbird which frequented the area at the bottom of Swerford South Hill, near the brook. Dad frequently worked in that area and the bird had become quite tame, hopping close to pick up bits of bacon rind from dad's lunchbox. The bird was a true albino, with pink eyes. I have never seen one since, but one with a half-white wing has lived in the park and Watery Lane area for a couple of years. Another with a white patch on its back frequents The Bourne near Old School End.

I also witnessed at around the same time and place a Red Squirrel.

## **Village Football in the late 1930s**

*Dougie, Oct. 2009:*

Football was played in the field now occupied by the allotments in Burycroft Lane. Most of the team were local young men made fit by manual labour. There was no covered protection for spectators, but even the worst winter weather did not deter crowds from traipsing along on foot to participate in the ribaldry, because most players were Hookyites and hence locally well known.

Opposing teams came from nearby villages. There was keen rivalry but the game was played for the fun of it and if Hooky lost, as they frequently did, the crowd would holler "typical Hooky – 'opeless again".

Players would reciprocate by bowing to their critics, and afterwards plod home for a wash down. There was no mains water so it was a bowl or a galvanized tin bath, with cold or marginally heated water. (Hot water came from a kettle hanging on a chain over the open fire). Later they all meet in the pub or a dance at the Memorial Hall for more inter-village banter.

There was no official entry fee for the game but at the end a man stood at the gate holding out his cap. Depending on how much they had enjoyed the proceedings folk would put in a tanner (sixpence) or threepenny 'joey', for club funds.

It's pertinent to contrast Hooky 1st team football of 70 years ago with that of today, with its covered spectator stands, modern shower-equipped changing rooms and posh new clubroom. Opposing teams come from as far afield as Reading, Binfield, Almondsbury and Ascott (near the racecourse). The entry fee for spectators is £5.00 (programme inclusive) or £2.50 for concessions.

Paradoxically, despite copious effort, training, pre-match warm-ups, and the supporters' terrifying war cry of "Up The Hooky!", Hooky still manages quite frequently to lose!

*Dougie, June 25, 2010:*

I wonder what those Hooky players of yesteryear would have made of World Cup fever! Few, if any of them, would have owned a car to festoon with flags. There was no television. Highlight of Saturday evenings was listening to the football results on the “wireless” (valve radios, either mains – very modern! – or battery/accumulator), with a long wire aerial strung from a post down the garden. The scores were transferred on to Littlewoods’ or Vernons’ Pools sheets in hope of a winning line.

On bad weather Saturday afternoons, less hardy Hooky supporters would sometimes forgo watching their heroes slide about on the Burycroft field, and stay home to hear the featured First Division commentary on the BBC Home Service instead. Each mains wireless had separate inputs for aerial and earth, the earth wire being connected to a copper rod driven into the ground. If a thunderstorm approached, the set would be switched off and unplugged, and the aerial shorted to earth via a wall-mounted switch outside the house.

All wirelesses were valve driven. Transistor radios had yet to be invented. Mains sets took what seemed an age to “warm up” — a source of frustration when the first few football results were missed! The results were copied down using a pencil stub — ball and fibre tipped pens were still far in the future. A couple of spare, sharpened pencils were close at hand in case the excited listener pressed too hard and broke the point.

Traveling abroad to watch a football match was almost unthinkable. Air travel was all by propeller-driven machines, and only for the well off. (The first jet airliner, the British de Havilland Comet, made its first flight, to Johannesburg, on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1952).

## **Village Cricket in the late 1930s**

*Dougie, October 2009:*

The cricket square was in the centre of the old Park (Mr Page's field adjacent to the railway embankment between the two viaducts). The cricket pavilion was an old Pullman railway carriage with brown and cream livery. Children fantasized that it had rolled off the line in some form of freak accident, but in actual fact it must have been hauled there on a low loader, possibly pulled by a steam traction engine.

Some of the cricketers were big, powerful men and occasionally a batsman would slog one over the railway line to the far side of the embankment — no mean feat on its own — but even more impressive was the heavy ball that sailed over and hit a peacefully grazing rabbit on the back of the head, killing it instantly. The kids that went to find the ball found the furry corpse, with 'lucky' clover still clamped in its jaws.

At matches mums and girlfriends provided sandwiches, cakes, tea and lemonade. Many of the cricket team were members of the village Fire Brigade. There was no mains water, so mid-week in hot dry summers they would dam up the brook near the cemetery, insert their portable petrol-operated suction pump, and dressed in bulky firemen's uniform with leather belts, fire axes and brass helmets, run heavy canvas hoses with brass connections and nozzles all the way up the park bank to water the pitch. They called it a Fire Drill and it must certainly have improved their fitness and stamina.

*Dougie, July 2011:*

Cricketers of yesteryear did not have a monopoly of powerful hitters. Recently a few lofted balls have banged down in my vicinity, adjacent to the cricket field. I'm thinking of wearing a crash helmet when out in the garden on Sunday afternoons!

Getting back to Hooky cricket in the 'Old' Park, I recall how we schoolchildren would organize our own cricket matches, using stumps made from old broom handles, bats sawn and whittled from plank offcuts, and heavy rubber 'cricket' balls. On one occasion, an older boy who fancied himself as a batsman came out and made great show of 'taking guard'. He was tall for his age and we anticipated him being in all afternoon and hitting his usual big score, especially since the best available bowler was only a little lad. Grinning, big guy faces up. Little chap sprints

in and launches a belter which carries the middle stump with it. Tall Jim can't believe his eyes, but then comes up with a typical Hooky excuse:

“There was an ‘ole in the bat!”

## **Banbury Fair in the 1940s**

*Dougie, October 2013:*

Once again we welcome the start of the three-day Banbury Michaelmas Fair. As usual Hookyites will spend hard earned cash being ear-bashed by loud music and hurled from pillar to post on high-gravity effect rides. Afternoon is the best time for the little ones — it's not quite so noisy and the mini roundabouts start up before the bigger rides.

The fair was a lot different in the 1940s. In the boxing booth three darkie brothers from Leamington, Dick, Randolph and Jackie Turpin took on all comers. Huge beery labourers climbed in full of confidence, hoping to win a cash prize but usually left bloodied and subdued. (Randi Turpin went on to beat Sugar Ray Robinson for Middleweight Championship of the World in 1951, but after 66 winning fights his career declined and in 1966 he became depressed and shot himself).

One favourite was The Wall of Death, a noisy spectacle of brave speedway bikers, who circled round and up and down the inside of a ramshackle circular structure. Roaring bikes held on to vertical walls by centrifugal force, belching smoke from alcohol-enriched fuel, defied gravity. Behind a barely adequate metal safety barrier the coughing, eye-watering patrons loved it.

Tantalizing spectacle was the Strip Tease, where three bored-looking ladies, who looked about 50, strutted provocatively along a platform outside the 'Club'. Clad in glittering figure hugging corsets and black fish net stockings, the delectable trio beckoned enticingly. Under sixteens weren't allowed in. Big schoolboys age-lied, then were disappointed as the gyrating lovelies gradually removed scanty garments, only to keep their interesting bits covered with ostrich feather fans. The performance climaxed, curtains were pulled across and the premises were quickly cleared ready for the next gullible intake.

Personally I got more satisfaction eating one of Miss Biddle's Toffee Apples.

*Dougie, October 2014:*

Today (Wednesday, 15th October 2014) sees the start of this years' three day Banbury Michaelmas Fair, so I had a quick walk round to compare the modern day Fair with the above memories of 60 years ago.

Most striking today is the dominance of huge, new gut-wrenching rides. Health and Safety Rules and the possibility of expensive litigation have resulted in prominent notices near pay booths, such as 'People with neck, back, heart or blood pressure problems, or pregnant women, should not use this ride'. There are also height restrictions to prevent small people slipping out below safety barriers.

The absence of the popular amusement emporia with their 'Roll a Coin' and zany, noisy Arcade Car Racing / Game of Chance attractions was noticeable. A fairground man said they had been killed off by new gambling and licensing laws and by home computer consoles.

The big 'Gallopig Horses Rodeo' roundabout with its traditional old Fair Ground Organ is near Banbury Cross — appropriately opposite the Fine Lady Statue. A beautiful mini version for children near Debenhams' entrance is believed to be the fair's oldest ride. Built as a hand cranked 'horses on chains' roundabout in 1870, it's been in John Rawlings' family ownership for three generations since 1912 and now comprises car, motor bike, steam engine, aeroplane and double decker bus models in addition to some of the original mini horses.

## Hook Norton Ghosts

*Jammy93, January 2010:*

As a village with ancient roots, there must be ghost stories galore in and around Hooky. I've heard about a spooky cyclist seen coming down the hill towards Traitors Ford and a couple of other ghostly sightings in the village.

Does anyone else have any stories or spooky encounters to share?

*There were many replies to this inquiry, most detailing spooky experiences in old houses or on quiet roads. Few explained who the ghost might be. David McGill wondered whether the ghostly cyclist seen heading for Traitor's Ford might be Alban Clarke, the senior manager of the Brewery at the time the present building was constructed. He fell off a borrowed bicycle while heading for an afternoon's fishing in Traitor's Ford Brook in May 1917, and died of his injuries. His body was actually found on the hill down to Temple Mill, on the Sibford Road, not on Traitor's Ford Lane where the ghost was reputedly sighted.<sup>1</sup>*

*The most thoughtful comments on ghosts came from Dougie:*

*Dougie, February 2010:*

"From ghoulies and ghosties and long leggedy beasties and things that go bump in the night, Good Lord deliver us". This chilling plea has been variously attributed to the Scots and the Cornish, but applies equally well to Hooky folk who've seen ghastly things and been scared witless.

Many years ago, Mr [Ernie] Turnock daily drove Gaddes's bus load of Hooky workers back from the 'Ally' — the Northern Aluminium works in Banbury — after their shift finished at 10pm. They told of repeated ghostly sightings in Kissing Trees dip between Wigginton crossroads and Hooky (called Kissing Trees because branches used to converge over the road to form an arch).

Chilly mist sometimes forms in that hollow when there is none either side. One November night the bus almost left the road when a ghostly apparition wafted across in front of it. Driver and front seat passengers all saw it and over the next few weeks car drivers witnessed similar manifestations. Speculation was rife and pub

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<sup>1</sup> A report on the inquest may be found in Rob Woolley's book, *Brewed in the Traditional Manner: The Story of Hook Norton Brewery* (Brewin Books, 2015), pages 236-239.

humourists recommended buttock clenching as a precaution when approaching the Kissing Trees.

The mystery appeared to be solved when an intrepid late night cyclist, half way through the dip, saw a large white barn owl glide out of nearby railway embankment trees and start coursing the hedgerow, heading towards Hooky. Bright moonlight and only thin mist had revealed the silent-flying culprit.

The youthful cyclist was me, but even after hearing of my sighting, speculation continued. I switched to coming home from the Tech College via Broughton — just in case!

*Dougie, March 2010:*

We mustn't be too be too flippant [about the ghost stories people tell]. If people became reluctant to admit "seeing something" for fear of ridicule, we could lose a fascinating part of our folklore. Ghosts are part of our national heritage and a great asset to the tourist trade.

The forthcoming Hooky streetlight switch-offs may produce more sightings—especially when going home after a good night out. The problem would be remembering the what, where and when of the happening!