

JACK WITNEY (Oakley's oldest native citizen and a descendent of John Witney who is recorded in the Chinnor Parish Register of 1538) REMEMBERS:—

There are very few spots left in this village nowadays where one is able to stop, glance around and imagine that you have turned the clock back sixty or seventy years. If the buildings remain basically unaltered the traffic, that continually flows past their doors soon ruins any such illusion in a matter of seconds. It is however, just possible to find such a spot at Oakley, along the tiny bit of Greenwood Avenue where it narrows towards its approach to Oakley Road. Here a collection of some half a dozen cottages, all immaculately maintained, provide a picturesque scene that could easily have been transferred from any country postcard or calendar.

One of these cottages, 'Hillside', is the home of Mr. Jack Witney a spritely octogenarian upon whom I had the pleasure of recently paying a visit. The picture-card image does not disappear upon entering his home but indeed is further enhanced by low beamed ceilings, comfortable armchairs, and the welcoming and homely sound of a kettle singing merrily on the hob.

Jack readily admits that he would dearly love to write a book recounting many of his memories from the past, though, as he says to have the desire to do so is quite different from having the ability. His school life began at the tender age of 2½ when he attended the village school by the Crown Crossroads. At 8 he can vividly remember helping his uncle Jack Witney at his bakery along the Lower Road (next to where the V.G. Stores is now). On Friday evenings and Saturday mornings he would be busy kneading bread and making navvy pudding. For the uninitiated, navvy pudding was a surprise package containing odd bits from almost anything likely to be found in a baker's shop. Cut into large slices each batch had a unique taste of its own and was immensely popular at 2½d.; the same cost as a loaf of bread. No wages were received by Jack for his services, his reward came in the form of the ingredients with which he could make a lardy cake to take proudly home each weekend.

At 12 years of age you could apparently leave school providing you had a job to go to, if you left without a job or were absent for any length of time, Mr. Betts the School Attendance Officer would be sure to be on your trail. Jack started work for Mr. Barnet as a drover, often taking his cattle from the fields near the Lambert Arms to the station at Aston Rowant. At the station he would sometimes meet the ladies from Bates's furniture factory who would tease him by saying "Ah! here comes Jack with his plate-racks", a

little indication as to how thin the cows were. It was all in good heart though, and more often than not if Jack provided the milk they were glad to make him a welcome cup of tea.

After Mr. Barnet Jack went on to work for Mr. Saw gaining for himself a 6d. rise in wages, 4/- instead of 3/6. A profit which did not last long as his mother was of the opinion that now he was earning a decent wage he should buy his own clothes. A little later he went to work with his father for Messrs. Knight and Sarney, straw and hay tying, a job which was extremely strenuous, rough on the hands and of course involved working incredibly long hours. The mere walk to and from work which was usually at Wallingford, Shillingford or Benson was a feat of physical endurance in itself for they also had to carry with them all their tools, some of which were quite heavy, plus any personal belongings which may be needed for a few nights stay away from home. There were compensations, plenty of fresh air, the satisfaction of seeing a cart containing 36 trusses set off all neatly loaded for its destination which was often London and of course a well earned beer and smoke at the local in the evening. The 'Home Sweet Home' at Benson was a favourite. Here it was possible to obtain ½ gallon of beer, a box of matches and ½ oz. of tobacco all for 1/- from which you would even get ½d change.

One of the occurrences about this time was a gigantic fire at Avery's Wood Yard near Wheatley Station. Huge leaping flames rose high in the sky sending an incandescent glow over the surrounding countryside Jack rushed to help the Thame Fire Service, which at that time was headed by Mr. Goodenough, to fight the fire. The struggle was a long and tiring one trying to bring the flames under control with hoses which were inadequate for the job. The heat was intense and penetrated every inch of their bodies but eventually at 4 p.m. ten hours after it had all started only an abundance of wood-ash and a mass of smouldering timbers remained.

When war was declared in the summer of 1914, Jack was attending Aston Rowant Fete at Plowden Park and it was he who transported many of the local territorials in a wagonette belonging to Mr. Barnet to Princes Risborough Station. Some of these young men were of course sadly never again to return, indeed Jack himself was to lose his brother Ernest in the 'Great War for Civilization' as it was so called in the muddy horror of the Somme. In 1916 Jack being then 17 years of age went to Holloway Road, Oxford, to apply to join the Volunteer Force. Eventually he was called up and sent to be batman to Major Jackson and Lieutenant Lett at the Prisoner of War Camp at Nuneham Courtney. An incident which happened