

‘We Didn’t Think it was Monotonous in Those Days, but...’: Memories of Growing up in Rural South West England in the Early Twentieth Century

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CHILDREN IN A COUNTRY LANE IN 1904.
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Stan was born in 1911 in a small village near the north Somerset coast, and grew up in what he described as a ‘typical country cottage’. He felt that ‘there wasn’t all that much to do ... at least not here’.¹ Harry, who grew up in Uley, Gloucestershire, spent his childhood exploring the fields and lanes of the village and surrounding countryside, but also remembered that ‘entertainment

in rural areas was sparse, except self-created jokes and fun’.² Herbert, born in 1890, grew up in a village on the Somerset levels, and noted how ‘life in the village was really quiet, there was nothing much happening’.³

Accounts of growing up in rural communities in the south west of England can be traced through references in a range of personal recollections, both published and

unpublished autobiographical material, and existing collections of oral history testimony. The Bristol People’s Oral History Project includes around 175 recollections of childhood and youth from men and women in the south west born between 1890 and 1925, a number of whom spent their early years in the countryside. The Somerset Voices Oral History Archive comprises over 600 oral recordings of Somerset people, and features interviewees discussing their lives in agriculture, rural industries and

crafts, as well as childhood memories and accounts of youthful life.⁴

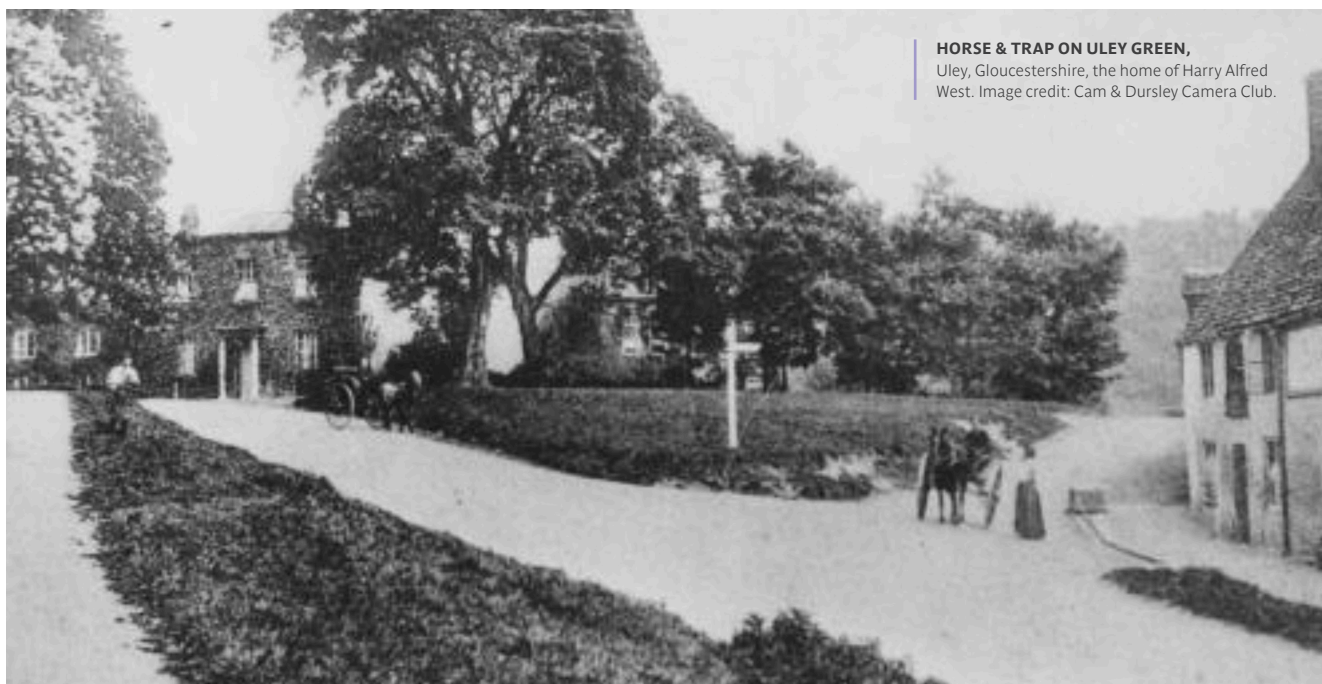
As part of the project 'The Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918', Paul Thompson collected over 450 interviews from men and women born before 1918, with a selection of interviewees recalling their childhood or teenage years in rural communities in the south west.⁵ This range of oral sources allows for a close examination of narratives of childhood and youth in the countryside, and we can explore how adult narrators construct their own understandings of growing up in rural communities. Oral testimony can also be supplemented by published memoirs of life in the south west. Many of these writers spend a great deal of time discussing their childhood in the countryside, though have a tendency to gloss over discussion of youthful experiences. Unpublished autobiographical materials also provide a wealth of detail about growing up in rural communities, and those referred to here have been sourced from the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies, which includes over 230 texts.⁶

These materials are of course collected and produced with the intention of reflecting back on the past, and are almost exclusively adult narrators recounting their experiences of growing up at a much later date. This raises many questions about the ways that memory, nostalgia and popular representations of the past shape an individuals' testimony, questions that are of key importance when discussing village life and landscape in the past. Many respondents are talking about some of their earliest recollections, and such accounts must contend with the hazy world of early memories, and are informed by the experiences of a later twentieth century where much has changed. In his memoir of growing up in rural Gloucestershire, Arthur Stanley Bullock joked the working title for his recollections was *Before I Forget!*⁷ Arthur Frederick Goffin, whose memoir is part of the Burnett collection of unpublished autobiographies, also touches upon the changing world of the twentieth century:

It is the peculiar privilege of the older folk to talk of bygone days. Who has not heard with

*interest of the old man's "Now, when I was a lad...". Of course the young people will listen patiently – perhaps, but not very interestedly. Their word contains so much which is more thrilling and exciting.*⁸

Interviewees regularly compare their experiences of growing up with the lives of children and young people later in the twentieth century. Mr Wilcox, who was born in 1897 and interviewed in 1972, was particularly keen to stress how behaviour among young men had changed: 'I don't think in those days there was so much amongst the boys you know – the swearing, I don't think so ... It was different in those days.'⁹ Herbert, interviewed as part of the Somerset voices collection, similarly concluded: 'it's different today with things that's carried on by the present day generation. I really can't understand it.'¹⁰ When she was interviewed in 1972 about her experiences of growing up near Torpoint, Cornwall, in the early years of the twentieth century, Mrs Deacon recalled: 'well – I suppose – we didn't think it was monotonous in those days, but – anybody today would wonder how you survived really!'¹¹

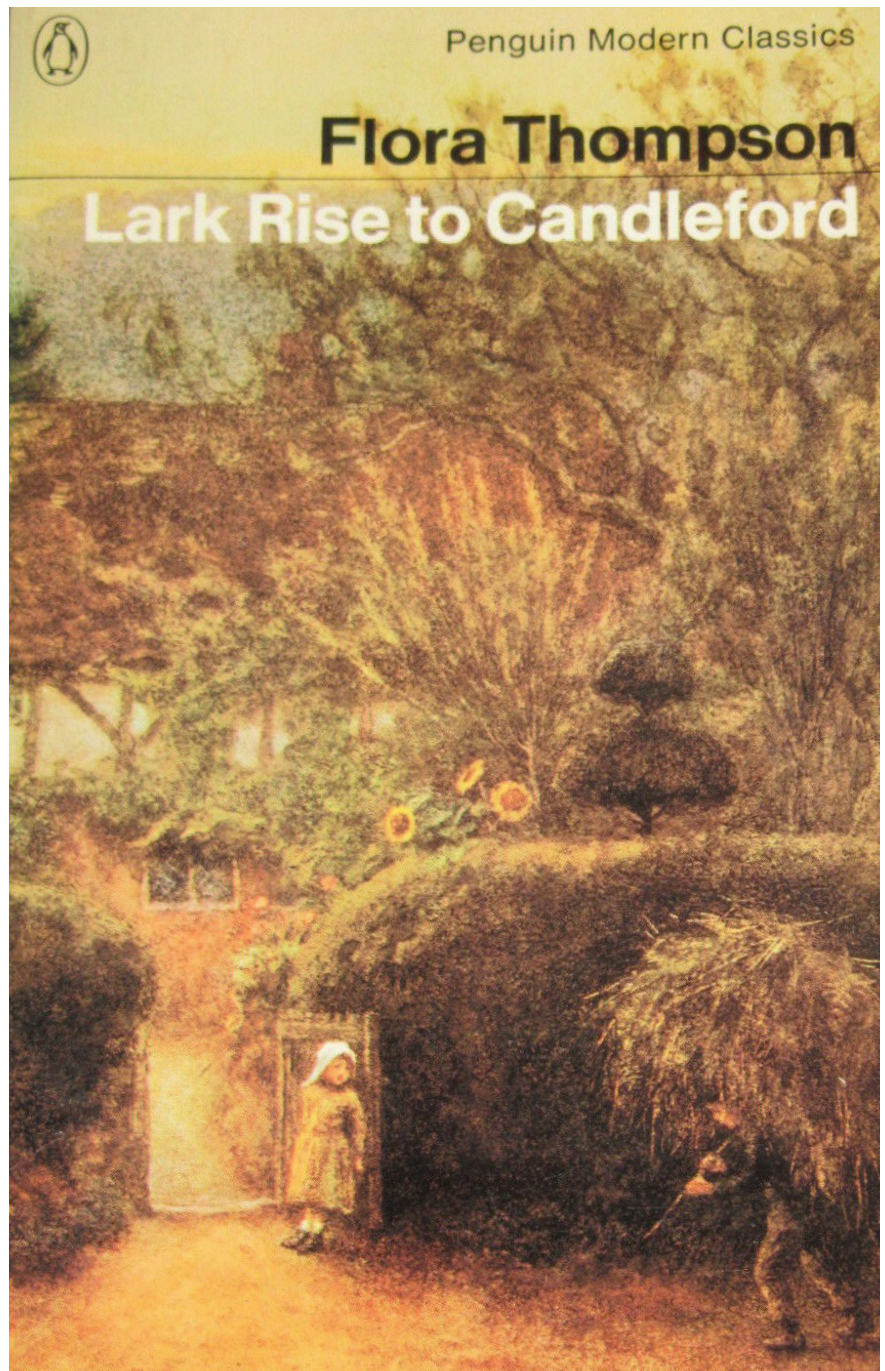


HORSE & TRAP ON ULEY GREEN,
Uley, Gloucestershire, the home of Harry Alfred West. Image credit: Cam & Dursley Camera Club.

These accounts can give a rich insight into how young people lived their lives in the countryside, but they are also contradictory and confusing. Memory is not just a passive depository of facts, but an active process in the creation of meanings, a process of making sense of the past – one that becomes particularly important when discussing growing up in the countryside.¹² Nostalgia particularly overlays memories of the time and place in which a person grows up, yet, it is the subjective nature of these materials that make them so important when trying to understand the role of the countryside in the lives of its young residents. What were the remembered experiences of those who grew up in rural areas in the south west of England?

While there is no one, singular experience of growing up, common themes certainly emerge in the oral history testimony and written recollections of rural life in the south west. When discussing their experiences of growing up in the countryside, adult narrators offer a rather romanticized account of their childhood as characterized by freedom and adventure, emphasizing self-created fun, and the ability to entertain themselves without the need for expensive games or toys. Rural childhoods are remembered as the ideal combination of innocence, play, adventure, nature and freedom, and often the most persistent recollections of childhood relate to outdoor places. As Caitlin Adams has argued: ‘childhood, but especially country childhood, is typically recalled in nostalgic terms and contact with the natural environment is a mark of special favour’.¹³ These recollections often mirror the way that rural childhoods have been depicted by adults in literature and in wider popular culture. As Owain Jones has identified, key books like Laurie Lee’s *Cider with Rosie* (1959) and Flora Thompson’s *Larkrise to Candleford*

(1945) present powerful evocations of recollected childhoods that celebrate the countryside as a rural idyll, and perpetuate the idea that rural areas are good places in which to grow up.¹⁴ Childhood is recollected as part of a comfortable, knowable rural environment, and for many respondents, as children the world was a profoundly local place. Winifred, who grew up in the Forest of Dean,



FLORA THOMPSON'S LARK RISE TO CANDLEFORD,
a trilogy of semi-autobiographical novels first published together in 1945.

Gloucestershire, noted how her village ‘was remote and self-contained. We were cut off from the world ... as children we didn’t think about whether we were isolated, of course’.¹⁵ For younger children, this local world was a place of excitement and adventure, and emotional attachments were made to the rural environment, attachments that were recalled even a number of years later. Ethel,

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who grew up in Woolaston, a small village in Gloucestershire, described the particular geography developed by the children in the village, recalling the specific fields that were a favourite place to gather and play; ‘Mary Anne’s Meadow, Junie’s Piece, Rocky Leaze, Smokey, Foxholes, Fair Oaks and Piccadilly.’¹⁶

These memories of childhood clearly draw upon the power of places past. Reg Beeston, who grew up in Uley, Gloucestershire, had similar memories of his village, writing as an adult about the names given by him and his fellow children to particular fields and lanes; ‘Crawley Bottom, Goblin Gate, Fairy Lane, Devil’s Den, Cuckoo’s Brook’.¹⁷ Children explore and name places that they feel some attachment to and, as Simon Sleight has argued, ‘to name an area is to seize rhetorical possession of it’.¹⁸ Denis Cluett, who grew up in Sampford Peverell, Devon in the years before the First World War recalled a childhood spent ‘roaming the lanes and fields’, and ‘never remembered feeling bored because there always seemed to be so much to do in the country’.¹⁹

The countryside was often remembered as a place of adventure and exploration, and children expressed a sense of

ownership through naming features of their local environment. However, oral history narrators commented on increased feelings of dissatisfaction with rural life as they grew older. The local world could become stifling. The rural environment itself may have changed very little, but young people’s relationship to these spaces developed as they grew older, often centred around the idea of having ‘nothing much to do’.²⁰ What was once seen as a space of freedom and adventure became increasingly associated with feelings of restriction and dissatisfaction; reflected in Winifred’s ‘as children we didn’t think about whether we were isolated, of course’.²¹

Margaret, who turned fifteen at the turn of the twentieth century, described her village in rural Dorset, as a ‘typical village’ with the nearest town ‘four miles away’. This town could only be reached in two ways – by walking, or taking the small open horse-drawn wagon known locally as the village carrier. This carrier came by once a week – and she recalled travelling this way was ‘not so bad if fine, but if wet most uncomfortable’. Those who decided to take the four-mile walk ‘had the pleasure of walking up all the hills... on roads either thick with dust or deep with mud’. Margaret concluded:

‘it was not all that easy to get about, and we mostly stayed at home’.²² Mr Wilcox recalled that as young men he and his friends were fairly confined to the village: ‘there was no buses, couldn’t get out very much, we were confined to this area practically all us life’.²³ Lily spent her teenage years in a small south Gloucestershire village, and also reflected on the challenges she faced when trying to socialise. She recalled one particular incident of going to visit friends in the nearby town during the war, and missing the bus home:

“You won’t get a bus tonight! It’s gone. Went an hour ago...”
He said, where’ve you come from?
Well, he said, that’s seven miles. You’ll have to walk. We had to walk back. We sang all the way... Got home at 3 o’clock in the morning. We had to walk all that way! And we never met a soul.²⁴

Villages and rural areas were remembered as places of close-knit personal relations, which for many children provided a sense of community, but could also feel repressive, particularly as children grew older. Ethel noted how in Woolaston, ‘neighbours knew everyone’s business’.²⁵ Harry Alfred West, who grew up in Upper Stanton, Somerset, recalled that ‘village life was generally more social and intimate, especially in those days. Everybody knew everybody, their lives, joys, troubles and sicknesses’.²⁶ For young people, this could foster a sense of surveillance, a feeling that was often magnified due to the small scale of space and more intimate social relations. Many commented on increasing feelings of restriction and regulation, and experienced difficulties in finding space of their own. Arthur Frederick Goffin noted how ‘as I entered manhood I began to ... resent the repression on all sides. I began to feel I deserved more freedom, if in a rather limited sense. I felt I should be able to come and go without my parents’ permission and I did not

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think it incumbent on me to say where I had been, or what I did, or what I thought'.²⁷

In a series of radio broadcasts in the early 1930s, writer C. Delise Burns discussed similar frustrations of rural life for young people. In the associated publication *Leisure in the Modern World*, he included a selection of listener's letters, including one from 'an interested youth in the country' who wrote:

The fault lies, I think, not in the youth themselves, but in the very nature of their environment ... There is not much to talk about and as people must talk, what is more interesting to gossip over than who so-and-so was seen talking to, who so-and-so danced with? Heads begin to nod and tongues to wag, which may be quite harmless, no doubt, but frightfully depressing when one has to live amongst it.

The 'youth' goes on to compare the range of encounters available in the city with 'the stiff narrow little meetings of the country church social union ... where everyone present knows the history of every other from birth ... the town spells "escape" to youth, natural freedom and equality. The country jogs along, thirty years behind the times'.²⁸

For some young people, these inadequacies of village life only became apparent after leaving their local communities. Winifred came back to her village in the Forest of Dean to visit her parents after spending a few months in London in her first position in service:

When... I began the walk home I realised how much I had seen, how many new sights and sensations I had absorbed in those few months in London. I had seen a mountain to measure

a molehill by. The endless green sward to the old brickworks was but a quarter-mile's walk of rough, open, sheep-grazing pastureland... everything seemed to have shrunk in that forest cleaning... The old magic came back as I entered the last part of my walk, through the forest surrounding our village. Now I was back home. But oh, how pitiful, how small home seemed!²⁹

For a number of respondents, their memories of youth in the countryside reflected the difficulties they faced when trying to find a space beyond adult supervision or surveillance. Living in a small rural community meant that even small transgressions could be noticed, and young people may have felt as though they had to behave in particular ways. Adult supervision often fell more heavily on young women; young men reported greater spatial freedom, with young women regularly bound closer to home than their brothers, and their social lives more closely monitored.

Stan, who grew up near the north Somerset coast, noted that though

'there was nothing very much going on' in his village, he and his friends would 'just go out' and 'knock about ... that's the sort of thing we did'. They were able to gather on the lanes and roads as 'of course there was very little traffic about in them days, compared to what there is now'.³⁰ Parents were particularly concerned to protect the respectability and welfare of daughters, and often tried to regulate courtship or involvement in youthful activities. Mrs Pender noted that up until marriage she was expected home by 9 'o' clock, and 'if we were after nine I had to give an account of myself, and where I'd been and who I'd been with. They were very strict if you were out in the night. They never thought that ... it was nice for a young woman to be out late'.³¹ Ethel's sister May was caught by her father loitering on her way home from the local Band of Hope meeting.

After failing to return home at the agreed time, he set out to look for her, and came upon a group of young people talking and laughing. Ethel recalls, 'they were doing no harm, but he had already taken off his leather belt to teach my sister obedience and he chased her down the hill'.³² Ethel



LOOKING DOWN LOWER TOWN FROM CANAL BRIDGE, Stampford Peverell c 1900. Denis Cluett grew up in the village in Devon in the years before the First World War. Image credit: The Sampford Peverell Society.

herself was often required to act as a form of surveillance on her sister, being asked by her parents to walk with her to any social events in the village. As she remembered: 'this served two purposes, or it was supposed to'. Firstly, of course, keeping Ethel entertained, but also: 'if I were with her, she would not be able to have a boyfriend bring her home alone'. However, Ethel's sister did find ways to subvert this form of parental control, with Ethel writing: 'it did not work that way as I was detailed [by my sister] to go ahead with someone and wait for her'.³³

There were many ways of experiencing rural life, but oral history accounts and personal recollections can give us a sense of how it felt to grow up in the south west in the early twentieth century; to walk its lanes, play in its

fields, and feel increasingly restricted by the rural environment. The stories adults tell about growing up in the countryside are determined in part by their experiences of the later twentieth century, and by powerful representations of the childhood rural idyll which often resonated with their lives, providing a useful reminder about the interplay between the past and the present.

This is not to dismiss such accounts as simply romanticized nostalgia, they are a useful way to examine how those that grew up in rural communities understood their own experiences. These personal memories also demonstrate that individuals can hold different perspectives on place, environment, and life in the countryside

at different moments in time, and when remembering their youth, recollections moved to the perceived problems of growing up in rural communities; isolation, a lack of 'something to do', and a landscape of adult supervision and surveillance. However, the accounts also suggest that young people were often able to negotiate the remoteness, close nature of social relations, and adult authority in their lives, and experiences could be shaped gender, class and culture, alongside age. Adults create their own histories of growing up in the countryside, and these memories can provide useful insights into the lived experience of rural life.

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