

Reminiscences of Percy Wicks Hine

Oxford 1882-1896

Father and Mother had 7 children and I was the 4th. Mother died before I was 4 years old in 1886 and my only remembrance of her is of our coming out of the Nursery on 2nd floor of 51 High Street into our bedroom and of her chasing us back and calling us "little rogues".

Mother was a Miss Helena Howes before she married my father, William Hine. After her death (8 months later), W. Hine married a Miss Williams and by her had Samuel (who died soon) and John. She died early in 1889 and my father died in 1890 before I was 8¹/₂ years old. After that we were left in the care of Guardians and Housekeepers and were sent to Central Schools. Before that we had had Governesses at home who had coached us well in the 3 R's, so that when we got to school Will and I were up to 5th Standard but because we were so young we were put in 3rd Standard- I don't remember about the girls Grace and Maude, but no doubt they were as well advanced.

While we were still at High Street during the school holidays Will and I were sent by old Aunt Jane (the housekeeper) to a crockery shop named Lisemore in George Street to buy a new po. The man who sold it to us in a sort of jeering way handed it over without any paper to wrap it in so Will and I had to try and sneak home along George Street and Broad Street carrying the pot. The jeers of most of the passers-by especially the girls and boys can be imagined. In the of bravado I put it on my head but it suddenly slipped off and crashed to pieces. We got into terrible trouble at home but were not asked to buy another.

Another day as the shop boy was away ill I was sent in a hurry to get 1/4 yard black velvet "on the cross"- I decided it was very wicked to say on the cross and was not going to mention it but the man at Badcocks counter said on the straight or on the cross so I HAD to say ON THE CROSS.

We children used to sleep in attic rooms on the 3rd floor of 51 High Street. In those days the Cowley Barracks housed red coated soldiers called the Militia and these young men used to come marching the 3 miles into Oxford during the afternoon. But somewhere about 8 o'clock at night when ordinary traffic had slowed down we children would hear jangling of harness and tramp of horses which meant that a heavy military waggon with iron tyres drawn by 4 horses with 8 or 10 soldiers marching with it and the Sergeant in charge came rumbling up the High Street to disappear at St. Giles and there wait for closing times of the Pubs. This waggon would be heard returning sometime between 11 and midnight with the most frightening noises coming from it and containing the collection of drunks collected from the Pubs at closing time. On Saturday nights 2 waggons were required.

The Parcel Post Coach

When we were still living at 51 High Street about 1891, the GPO for some unknown reason started a 4 in hand Parcel Coach which ran from Oxford to London and back during the night. It was an exciting thing for 4 youngsters to hear the coach coming down the High Street about 7.15 in the evening with the coachman tootling his horn. The coach returned up High Street about 7 a.m. in the morning and we used to scramble out of our beds to see it pass.

Pubs

Our house at 51 High Street was surrounded by 5 public houses. Nearly opposite was ? Ship Inn still remaining. But each side of our shop there was a pub separated only by a covered alley way. Behind our house were 2 or 3 cottages connected to our rear walls and at the farthest end a small pub much beloved by Cab men and College Servants. Exactly the same occurred on the other side of our house.

Occasionally we children were roused during the darkness by the noise of turning out time which was at that time at 11 p.m. except Saturday when it was midnight

In those days there were no sewing machines so the making of men's clothes was all done by hand. This was the tailoring workshop where 6 or 8 men sat cross-legged stitching suits. They were mostly consumptive coughing men. There were a lot of gas rings in full flame (for ironing the suits), spittoons for spitting, pints of beer (2d. a pint) and pipe smoking and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. We children were forbidden to go in. You can guess the "bawdy" talk and the swearing.

The Aunts (and Uncle Tom Howes till he got married) all on mother's side (that is mother's sisters and brothers) lived in Sutton Courtenay at the house now known as Brook House. Uncle Tom's Studio for the Picture painting and carving is still there in the garden.

Every now and then we children went for the day to Sutton House. Mostly we drove the whole way from 51 High Street through Abingdon in an open 2 horse carriage. I can just remember Grandfather Howes. He had whiskers and a long white beard. he was the local handyman and rate collector. Did all sorts of little house repair jobs etc. During his life he gradually bought various cottages and when he died there were 22 cottages plus the Sutton House. Later on (some 45 years later) when the last of our Aunts died, the property had to be sold and divided equally between 15 grandchildren. Then we found that all the cottages, and the Sutton house had big mortgages on them (Grandpa Howes had kept on borrowing on one or more cottages to buy some more etc). That was why there was only about 50 odd Pounds each for the fifteen Hines and Howes when it was all settled up.

It was perfect Heaven for we children to go to Sutton. It was usually timed when there was a little bush-fruit left in the garden (gooseberries, blackcurrants and raspberries) and after a solemn (to us) inspection of us indoors we were allowed to run into the garden, where we rapidly stripped the odd fruits left on the bushes. I remember once on the way home in our open carriage the driver spotted a big rabbit

sitting bolt upright on the grass by the side of the road. He stopped the horses and seized his whip handle, stepped down and knocked the rabbit on the head and triumphantly brought it and put it under his seat (No doubt the rabbit was transfixed by a stoat, so it would have died anyway, as the stoat would have sucked its blood dry!).

About 8 months after mother's death, Father (with 7 children on his hands), married his housekeeper (a Miss Williams who came from Beaminster, Dorset). In 1887 Samuel was born but died a few months later. Our step-mother to my mind was much too strict with us, and we preferred the governess (a Miss Joint) who actually had a wooden leg. She showed a reasonable bit of affection for us and was just with us. We were kept quite separate from Mother and Father, and only sat with them on state occasions such as Sunday after tea, and occasionally when visitors came (always members of the Plymouth Bretheren). Even then it was "Speak when spoken to"- otherwise keep quiet and sit still.

Then our step-mother died and there was father, once more left with 7 young children. He suffered from frequent attacks of Bronchitis, but in between he was a good humoured kindly man, good looking, clean shaven and with a very straight back. All we children had to go to the Plymouth Bretheren Meeting in New Inn Hall Street each Sunday at 11a.m. marching 2 by 2 in front of father. Most Sundays it was 12.30 before we got away, and our patience was severely tried. Later father was such an invalid that he used to go to meeting shut up in a closed bath-chair, pulled by an old man who looked nearly as bad as father. An elderly lady (a Miss Hoare- some relation of our late stepmother) became our housekeeper.

By this time, an existing rear cottage (3 storey) had been added to our house by making a doorway through each back room on every floor, and Miss Hoare had her bedroom there on second floor with wood partitioning to leave a corridor space to the cottage stairs. We called her Aunt Jane, and she was kind, but strict on discipline and we saw very little of her.

Perhaps I should have explained earlier that we children always saw very little of our parents (or Guardians etc.) in the normal way, as we always lived on the second floor front room looking out onto the High Street, with the Governess in charge and we all slept boys in 2nd floor back room and girls in one of the 2 attics with the Governess. 2 maids slept in the other attic. We had all our meals upstairs too. The fetching and carrying for the maids must have been very heavy work, but there was no lack of them or of charwomen. I used to hear occasionally bits of conversation from old women talking to step-mother or Miss Hoare, begging them to take on one or other of their children. Mostly (like our family) there were big families and one could get a young girl of 14 to live in for about £2 or £3 a year. These very poor parents put out their children as soon as possible provided they were sure of them being in a "respectable" home.

We children had a lot to do with these young girls who "minded" us very often when Governess had her afternoon off or was ill or away, and we heard quite a lot of real life from their lips from time to time. Father and Co. would have been shocked had they known some of the swear

words, bawdy talk and dirty rhymes with which we were regaled. Such were those queer Victorian times, when the grown servants thought £6 to £8 a year with keep were good wages, and charwomen were pleased with 2 shillings a day and meals, and thankful to take home any scraps of food with them.

