Shutford has evolved drastically in the last 50 years, but within the living memory (just) of one or two older residents a snapshot could be taken of a village, though much smaller than it is now, supporting a post office, three shops, a brewery, one pub and two 'ale houses', a blacksmith, a farrier, a wheelwright, carpenters, carriers, stonemasons, many weavers and a Plush mill. Where the winnowing and storage barns, now converted to expensive fashionable houses, were still operating right in the village. Oh and watch your feet along High Street just after the dairy herd from Monastery Farm have ambled down for milking. Or where those big 'shires' have just crossed Banbury hill pulling their load from the threshing machine parked on the brow of 'Thistly' or stood waiting to be re-shod by the old foresters hall at the end of West Street.

Spiritually the village felt in need (at times) of a church, two chapels and a 'friends meeting house'. Never mind their different denominations when going to chapel for Sunday school and church for Evensong and where the children, from the school in Malthouse lane, were all dutifully marched to give thanks on important holidays. Modern residents might wonder what they were giving thanks for as, before I paint too rosy a bucolic picture, other elements of life less evident need to be described.

Until the early 1950s the village could, if needs be, survive on its own, quite literally un-connected to the outside world. Electricity, Water and the accompanying sewage system did not arrive until this time. Village sewage and associated health issues were subject to each household's ingenuity. Some, standard in the circumstances for the day, others, and the anecdotes they generated, are best kept to those who witnessed them.

By today's standards the quality of life was way 'below par'. Cold is an abiding memory with absolutely no heating other than the fire that cooked the food and heated the water (carried in) for the tin bath parked in front of it and used in relay according to family priorities.

Ailments travelled around in a predictable annual cycle. 'Green' credentials might have been high, but quality of life would need to be measured on a different scale. In fact current lifestyles simply could not have existed in the absence of the national infrastructure we rely on today.

There was little or no choice. Families, interwoven and interdependent over generations, were tied for good or bad by necessity. People remembered which of your forbears did a favour for one of theirs and could, would, recite the lineage windingly down in support of the same mutual consideration being expected in the present day. But likewise if one of your forebears had been considered a 'bad lot' you would not escape being identified as being of the same stock.

The community wasn't just a collection of co-existing families. As well as their daily commerce, many were also tied by the organisations to which they subscribed. There were groups or 'lodges' based around a mutual interest or activity. There were regular events common to rural life. Most prominently, to brighten people's lives, there was the annual 'Shutford Club'. In later times this included a travelling fair complete with big wheel, bowling and shooting competitions, races in the street, brass band and a dinner in the evening. It was the social highlight of the year until it faded in the post war period.

Events and the characters involved were the shared reference points defining life, history and your place in it. As with the assassination of JFK, everyone is supposed to

remember exactly what he or she were doing when they heard the news. So, for instance, where were you when --------'s pet monkey escaped onto the roof of his house (top left, Banbury hill, later to become Mrs Murchison's shop and now Laurel cottage) and, having failed to be persuaded down, proceeded to destroy the thatch. At which point ------- decided enough was enough went for his gun and did what he thought necessary. Not in the same league as the president of the US maybe but an individual enough 'Ealingesque' occurrence to mark the day. (The 'Ealing comedies' are often described as taking place in an England that never existed. I might agree, for different reasons than intended, for in as far as village life was concerned the real 'plays and players' were often more bizarre, eccentric or down right dangerous than ever depicted on the sanitised celluloid version!)

There are many echoes of past inhabitants around the village. Silent to some, they are substantial reminders, 'ghosts', to others who encountered them in their daily lives. The cock still crows from a chicken run on Thistly (Thistle hill) where Bill Compton kept his fowl. Bill gave his name to 'Compton Cottage' below where the post box stands, which in turn was placed there due to being on the public path leading past Mrs Wellbanks's front room post office (in what is now Tudor cottage) on the direct rout for foot traffic between Balscote and the upper 'industrial' part of Shutford. The brick built weavers shop on the opposite side of the road also pays homage to the local industry. At the other end of West Street, why is there a row of five square windows above a front door they don't apparently match? Eighty years ago you'd have seen long lengths of iron and steel sticking out from what was the storage loft above the entrance to the Blacksmiths and Farriers working underneath (in what became the Forester's hall). The later, and larger, forge was located, until the 1960s, just off the High street. It is gone now, but the long 'monastery' building that housed the machinery is still there. All the machines were flat belt driven from a single overhead shaft powered by a single cylinder paraffin engine, every stroke banging like a field gun. Contrary to mythical opinion village life was far from quiet. At the bottom of the village there is the 'Tite', looks like an average duck pond. But it was intentionally dammed and created, not just for general use, but also to wash the newly woven plush, Shutford's great export, which once wet was too heavy to transport except by horse and cart, hence the large drying shed that stood along side. At the other side of the pond is the raised footway accessing the village's main public water supply. It was a very busy place. As was 'Jame' or 'Jam corner', at the other end of Ivy Lane. As schoolchildren graduating from Shutford to the larger school at North Newington this was where we noisily congregated for the bus huddled against the end of the house, now long gone, that once made the corner so awkward.
Shutford School is still clearly identifiable (in 'Malthouse' lane which needs no explanation). It was even more individual at one time being the only slated roof in an almost entirely thatched village. Most of the thatch disappeared in the 1950s, the cost or control of it's replacement being beyond most residents. However, the steepness of some of the roofs giving a clue to it's once being the standard covering.

I've referred to but a small fraction of what I still see around me of 'Old Shutford'. Others have different 'snapshots' to mine. (The two sets of petrol pumps that stood, one on Banbury hill and the other at the top of Malthouse Lane, the stream that dissected Shutford then left via the gully in Ivy Lane, the cook house just above the foot of the hill that gave cooks hill its name, the plethora of orchards and allotments,

the mess Freddy S…s cattle regularly left in Malthouse lane and west street!) Ether way, its all in the past

The young 'post war' generation were a factor, one of many, accelerating the previously imperceptible evolution of village life to something approaching 'terminal velocity'. Jobs on the land were disappearing with growing mechanisation. Trades that for centuries had gone hand in hand with rural life were in decline. Plush passed into history. There were better-paid jobs to be had in nearby industry and work buses sent around the villages to pick up the employees.
If the land and property owners no longer needed the workforce, what incentive was there to maintain the cottages that accommodated them? Even if they owned their own house, the jobs and money were elsewhere. Shutford was losing its 'reason to be'. The young had transport and used it. The birth rate went down. The school closed. Robbed of self-sufficiency the cost of rural life, to the standards now being set, rose beyond the reach of most who would have liked to stay.
Comparatively few of us now work here, or indeed would be able to find the sort of remuneration within the village, to support our modern lifestyles. In modern life there is little time or need to interact with other than close neighbours. It is possible to become as isolated here is in any of our big impersonal cities. But from where I stand there appears to be great hope for the future. The success of the village fete (well done to those who got up and made it happen) and every other event that brings the village together. Above all there's hope in every newborn Shutford child I read about in the Shutford News (even if not actually born at home in the village anymore). As children they inhabit a world that, in their eyes, seems never to change, to have always been, and from which they will form memories of a new, but to them old, Shutford. Its events and characters, to be recalled, as previous generations have done before, with a rosy, nostalgic affection.
As they slow down.
And the world speeds up more than they would like.
It's the way of things

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