

Man's Best Friend

Animals are a major aspect of country life – but our modern attitude to cruelty to animals differs widely from that of our ancestors, as these old newspaper reports illustrate:

Northampton Mercury - 23rd July 1825

The Lion Fight, it now appears, will take place at Warwick on Tuesday 26th inst. The lion is backed against six bulldogs, which are to be let go three at a time. If the lion is successful in the first onset, he is to have 20 minutes rest before the remaining three dogs are to be sent in. The fight is to take place in a large iron cage, 57 feet round by 15 feet high, placed in the centre of a brick building, round which seats are erected for the accommodation of spectators, who will remain in perfect safety during the extraordinary spectacle. There has been no exhibition of the sort in this country since the reign of King James, and then the dogs were set on one at a time; the lion was, of course, victorious. The lion arrived at Warwick last week, and has been placed in the centre of the Amphitheatre. The agreement specifies that if the receipts amount to £500, the owner of the ground is to receive £100, and other sums are specified to be paid, in proportion to the receipts.

It's rather difficult for us today to relate to the above story. To get some idea of how folk viewed such things in those days, we need to remind ourselves that for humans the death penalty was still levied on a huge range of crimes, from murder right down to petty theft – and that crowds of people routinely turned out to witness public hangings, regarding it as all part of a day's entertainment. The story on the right, which appeared in the Northampton Mercury in 1834, records an attempted highway robbery against a Kilsby man, for which the would-be robber Charles Hutt was sentenced to death.

HIGHWAY ROBBERY.—*Charles Hutt*, was charged with having stopped *Wm. Smith*, on the highway, on the night of the 20th of February last, and robbing him of £3., the property of his master. *Smith*, the person robbed, was a young lad, in the employ of *Mr. Haynes*, who lives at *Kilsby*, in *Northamptonshire*. He was sent to *Princethorpe*, by his master, to receive some money from *Mr. Anderton*, who paid him £3. He left *Princethorpe*, with his horse and cart, about six o'clock in the evening, and had proceeded about a mile on his road homewards, when the prisoner jumped into the cart, and demanded the money which he had in his pocket; the lad denied that he had any. The prisoner then threatened to knock the boy's brains out if he did not give him the money, and after feeling about his dress, took it from the lad's waistcoat pocket, then jumped out of the cart and ran away. It being a clear moonlight night the boy had no difficulty in observing the features of the prisoner, and also his dress, which he minutely described. The prisoner was found guilty, and death recorded against him.

Here's another report involving animals, from about the same time:

Leicester Journal - 7th December 1838

On Sunday 25th November the good people of Daventry were thrown into the greatest alarm by the strange appearance of a human leg and foot, brought into the yard of *Mr John Wadsworth*, High-street, by his dog; after calling in several neighbours, who concluded it belonged to some unfortunate being who had met with death by some unfair means, it was thought proper that an investigation should take place. Accordingly they consulted the opinion of a professional gent, who pronounced it that of a female, and from its very fresh appearance, also gave his opinion that it had not been interred; at least the limb had not been severed from the body more than a fortnight; but this worthy gent returned after some enquiry, half an hour after the examination, to satisfy *Mr. Wadsworth* and his neighbours that the limb found was one that had been thrown away by *Mr. Edward Linnell*, who had been stuffing a bear for *Mr. John Cowley* of *Kilsby*; to the great satisfaction of the inhabitants of Daventry.

As you see from the 1838 news report above, "Mr John Cowley of Kilsby" owned a stuffed bear. He lived at Kilsby Hall (at the bottom of Church Walk), and family anecdotes relate that the bear was one of several animals kept in a sort of private menagerie in his grounds. The bear escaped on one occasion, and attacked a child – which is why it ended up at the premises of John Wadsworth the taxidermist in Daventry.

John Cowley's menagerie was not the only one in Kilsby – in the early 1900s a certain Major Forwood lived at The White House (on Barby Road, adjoining the Independent Chapel) ... and I can do no better than give you the story just as it was told to me 20 years ago by the late Mr "Bonny" Mason:

"The White House had stables up at the top of their land, and they had grooms that used to live in. There used to be a shed where they kept their two monkeys – and they had two scottie dogs, and two bull-terriers, and a mule – Miriam, it was called, and it was a right 'un! It'd bite anything, that mule – and so would the monkeys!

"When old Matt Conopo used to work there, he used to have to take their washing into Rugby; and he was taking it in one day, in the gig, when a copper came up to him to say something – and the old mule took hold of this copper in the shoulder and shook him like an old rat!

"Nearly had me, them monkeys did. I used to have to go along to old Forwood's; through the old gate at the chapel end of the house. I was round there one day, and went underneath a tree; I never saw this monkey, but he dropped down on my shoulder and grabbed me at the back of the neck – anyhow, I caught hold of him and bashed him on the floor, by crikey that upset him! And he was just getting up to fly at me, when one of the skivvies came out and stopped him – they'd take notice of her, 'cos she'd belted them a time or two!

"They set the house on fire once, you know, those monkeys. They had oil lamps in those days – and they tipped one of them over and set the house on fire. They used to be up and down at the big glass windows – and of course, the young chaps used to go there and act about outside to get them all worked up, they made them a jolly sight worse".

Mules and Donkeys

Major Forwood's mule Miriam was far from being the only example – there were in fact a number of mules and donkeys in the village in the 1800s and early 1900s, as the next newspaper cutting illustrates:

Northampton Mercury - 29th April 1871

Kilsby. —John Coleman, a lad of eleven years, was charged with cruelly ill-treating a donkey, the property of William Crock of Kilsby. Complainant said he saw his donkey alive and well in Mr. Lickorish's field on Saturday 25th of March. On the 27th he went to the field, and found the donkey dead.

The defendant was employed bird-tending in a field. Mr. Lickorish said to the boy, "Did you see anybody in my field on Sunday?" The defendant said, "No, I was not there". Mr. Lickorish then said, "You lying rascal, I saw you there myself, when I went across the field with a bit of hay".

George Linnett said he was in Nortoft-lane, on the 28th of March, about six o'clock in the evening, when the defendant came out of a field. Witness asked him if he was riding Crock's donkey on Sunday. Defendant said, "No," but afterwards said "Yes, we were riding Crock's donkey. There was another boy, Thomas Bedding". Witness said, "Had you a stick?" Defendant said, "Yes, a good thick stick. We knocked the donkey down and kicked him". The following morning witness told Crock what he had heard. The Bench said they were clearly of opinion that the defendant did commit the offence, and that it was both cruel and abominable. If fined, the cost would fall on the parents; so, as a warning to himself and others, the prisoner would be sent to prison for one calendar month, with hard labour.

I was told (by another correspondent who shall remain nameless!) that, on another occasion, some of the village lads 'borrowed' a couple of long ladders, with the aid of which they contrived to hoist some poor donkey up on to the roof of the north aisle of Kilsby Church – after which they hid the ladders, and any other ladders that they could find, and made themselves scarce.

The churchwardens, hearing the noise of a donkey braying somewhere in the churchyard, went wandering around looking for the animal; but it was some time before they thought of looking up to the church roof, where the poor beast was braying with all its might. I was not told how they got the animal down again ... only that it took a lot longer than it had taken to get it up in the first place.

Horse Breeding and Racing

Those of you who have read my books about Kilsby will know that there were two 'remount depots' in the village – Major Forwood's at the White House, and a second depot at what is now Kilsby House, the sheltered accommodation opposite the Village Hall – where ponies and horses were bought in and broken in, before being sold as cavalry mounts to the cavalry regiments stationed at Weedon Barracks. But horse breeding in Kilsby goes back a great deal further than that, as these reports (from 1839 and 1857 respectively) demonstrate:

To the BREEDERS of HORSES.

JOSEPH CLARKE returns his grateful Acknowledgments to his Customers and Friends for the liberal Encouragement he has received for upwards of thirty years in the above Line of Business, and hopes for a continuance of the same. He also respectfully informs them he has REMOVED from the George, at Crick, to KILSBY, where he intends carrying on the Business with the greatest attention and spirit, sparing no expense to procure the best horses the country can produce to accommodate his customers. J. C. also wishes to inform them that his well-known Horses,

PLUMPER & GEORGE,

Will travel their usual round this season, and on the same terms. Good Accommodation for Mares and Foals at a reasonable expense.

FOR THE SEASON, 1857,
The celebrated Fast Trotting Stallion,
WILD FIRE,
The property of Messrs. Cockshott.
At Two Guineas, and Five Shillings the groom.

HE is a beautiful Dapple Grey, 7 years old, got by Wildfire, dam by Fireway, and is open to be shown against any trotting stallion in England. He will leave Kilsby every Monday morning, through West Haddon, Kilmars, to Rowell for the night; Talbot, Market Harborough on Tuesdays, Kibworth same night; Lion and Dolphin Inn, Leicester, Wednesday, Fox and Hounds, Syston, same night; Volunteer Inn, Loughborough, Thursday, Queen's Head, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, same night; Castle Inn, Hinckley, Friday, from ten to one; Saturday, through Lutterworth to Kilsby, where he will remain till Monday morning.

The normal practice was for the horse-breeder to breed a prize stallion from the best available blood-stock that he could afford, and then put his horse on tour as a stud stallion, to serve mares, over a surprisingly wide area of the country. The above 1857 cutting illustrates this – as does the advertisement on the right, which appeared in the Northampton Mercury in 1840:

As you can see from these adverts, the horse breeder's groom had to walk around the country with the stallion, and was paid a small fee for each mare that the stallion covered. The fee of 2s-6d in 1840 (equivalent to 13 pence in modern money) gradually crept up, and was about 5s-0d (25 pence) by the late 1800s.

I quoted earlier from an interview with Mr Bernard ('Bonny') Mason, who was born in 1907. His father Henry Mason is described in the 1907 parish registers as 'shepherd', but his father before him had worked as a stud groom, as Mr Mason told me on another occasion:

"Well, my dad was born in Kilsby. My grandad came from Charwelton, and they settled here. I never knew my grandad, but he used to travel round the countryside with a stud stallion, to put to the farmers' mares.

"The Cowley family used to more or less own this place, all round here; and my grandad used to travel for the Cowleys. Dad told me a bit about my grandad - he said that at night-time when he'd finished work, if he couldn't get a bed anywhere, he used to have food for himself and the horse strapped on the horse's back; and he'd go in a pub and have a couple of pints, then he'd just find a heap of stones and put his things down on it – and he'd go to sleep there and leave this stallion loose to graze after he'd had his corn. And nobody dared to touch him, for the horse would have killed them if they had, he never needed to worry."

The final cutting in this series is from 1882, and shows that Kilsby was also a regular venue for horse racing.

It was certainly a very different world – but the combination of the First World War and the arrival of the internal combustion engine and the motor car and tractor were the main factors that disrupted that way of life.

Horses and donkeys gradually began to disappear from the fields and the roads – and with the advent of motorised transport, villages were no longer as self-contained and self-sufficient as they had been during the previous centuries.

I wonder what will happen in the future, as our oil supplies start to dry up. By 2100 or 2200, will Kilsby have returned to a horse-based economy?

