

9. SMEETHAM HALL

Smeetham (Smedetuna) was in the Domesday Book and the manor then had four villeins (or peasant occupiers of land entirely subject to their lord), fourteen bordars (who menially served the lord in return for a cottage) and two serfs (who were even closer to being slaves). The woodland was sufficient for twenty swine and there was twenty acres of meadow.

There were great changes in the following centuries but can you say that things had changed so much in 700 years when you listen to the following? It is an order by W. Bullock, the steward of the Manor of Smeeton Hall in Bulmer to the bailiff, Robert Felton, and dated 15 May 1773. Felton had duly signed it to say that this order had been twice publicly read in Bulmer Church immediately after divine service.

“Warn the court of Dame Martha Martin, widow lady of the said manor, to be holden, when all the Freehold and Copyhold tenants of the said manor and also all the Resi(d)ents dwelling within the precincts of the said Leet are required to appear. All tenants required to pay their Quit rents due. The Constables of Bulmer are to attend to bring in fairly written names of all the Men as well as Householders and their sons and servants who are 16 and upwards.”

For villeins read copyholders.



Roger's Bountiful Blast

A previous owner of Smeeton's Hall, Roger Martin, was said to have built the chapel that once existed "against his manor house on the green now called Chapel Green". He was offered a post by Queen Mary, had a reputation for good works and "daily dispensed charities with his own hands". He lived to be over 100 years of age and "in his declining age and not able to go further than the next meadow, he made use of the whistle at the end of his cane to call the poor people to him." You will be glad to know that, when Death finally blew the whistle for this munificent centenarian, he was dining with friends.

In 1774 we read that Lady Martin holds Smitten Hall, "a considerable barn whereof was burned down by lightning". She consulted a Colchester lawyer to ask if Sir Maudent Martin could sue if she did not rebuild it. His advice was that, as tenant for life, she need not: but, if she did, she could use timber on the estate to do the job. There was still a considerable acreage of wood called Park Wood until the end of the 19th Century so perhaps the barn did not get rebuilt. More seriously, though, locally grown timber was certainly used for building and the Auberies had its own saw works. Heaven Wood nearby was regularly cut for poles and faggots.

Good Works

The farmer at Smeetham for the middle years of the 19th Century, Robert Spooner, was also active in good works. The farmworkers at this period were being organised into respectability. The old harvest celebrations or horkeys were being abandoned as too abandoned. Instead we find Spooner helping to organise the celebrations in the village for the Princes of Wales' christening in 1842. Five hundred persons celebrated with beer, bread, tea etc. but it doesn't sound exactly Dionysiac.

One hundred years ago George Coote, a forty nine year old Sudbury auctioneer and estate agent, was farming the land and living in the house. Four hundred and five acres gave employment to thirteen men and five boys (one worker to each twenty two acres). The household included his wife, sister in law, five children and two general servants. In 1876 the Misses Coote aged 18 and 17 did their good works by helping with needlework at the village school. From 1850 to 1870 agriculture prospered and by 1871 Smeetham had reached 540 acres. Later the estate was purchased by Col. Burke and for a number of years the bailiff lived in the house. The first of the Hyde-Parkers came in 1904; mention of horkeys above reminds us that the present owner, Laurence Hyde-Parker was churchwarden and still provides the cider for the village's harvest supper and that wood from Smeetham Hall blazed beautifully for our Jubilee bonfire.

Farmworkers Cottages

Smeetham Hall Lane some distance from the Hall itself again shows how extra housing was provided away from the farm house at the beginning of the 19th Century as the population rose to its highest-ever figure by mid century. Various commentators suggested that farmers had been separating themselves from their workers in several senses. Improvements in agriculture meant that the output of the bigger farms was greatly increased and income was much higher. Farmers' wives no longer wanted the men eating or sleeping in or near the farmhouse and their daughters were being educated. This rhyme was made possible:

1722

Man to the plough

Wife to the cow.

1822

Man tally ho

Miss piano.

Prosperity shows in the rebuilding or refronting of farmhouses. To start with, improved farms selling produce to the towns needed needed more workers, not fewer, because machinery did not seriously displace workers until the 20th Century. More workers meant more cottages and they were put at a distance from the farmhouses. This process can be seen not only here at Smeetham but also at Goldingham and Butlers.

The map of 1808 shows only one building in Smeetham Hall Lane and that housed two families. On the 1840 tithe map there were ten households shown and by the 1871 census there were still ten dwellings, one of them (No.2) unoccupied. Nos. 3 to 6 were until recently still there. Col. Burke records putting on porches and heightening their chimneys. Their last occupants were chickens. Nos. 7 - 10 were replaced by one of Col. Burke's own designs in 1887. In 1989 Nos. 3 - 6 were pulled down and replaced.

In 1871 a total of thirty one persons were living in the nine occupied dwellings. Four of the householders were there in 1840 as well. Save for one shoemaker all the men were working agricultural labourers ranging from 77 to 10 years of age. Almost all the women were straw plaiters.

It's time to take a closer look at this craft.

Female Industry

One can imagine these plaiters sitting at the doors of their cottages to earn those vital few shillings extra to augment a very low agricultural wage. The little bone "engines" used to split the straws to make the plait finer are still sometimes to be found in the area.

Children could earn about a shilling a week and very young children were taught to plait. They were taught to twist the splints of straw under and over, sometimes to the words and tune of a little rhyme - "under one and over two, pull it tight and that will do." The women walked miles to sell their score yards of plait to dealers. It often went to make straw hats in Luton. George Washington Brownlow painted a straw plaiting school in neighbouring Belchamp Walter.

More than half the working females of Bulmer in 1871 did straw plait, one hundred and one plaiters out of one hundred and seventy four at work. Only about a quarter of Bulmer's adult female population was working full-time in 1978. A hundred years ago it was about two thirds but plaiting, of course, was done at home. If you like your interpretation of statistics heightened, how about: "Modern Bulmer women relatively idle?"

"In the whole of Bulmer in 1871 the next biggest category of female employment after plaiters and weavers was domestic service. If you include laundresses, there were forty nine servants. That leaves only one of each of the following: schoolmistress, beerhouse keeper, shopkeeper, grocer and hen-wife. In the 1978 survey there were five domestic helps but the biggest group was six teachers.

The Sprite Who Shruck

If the Smeetham folk wanted some relief from labour on answering the whistle, they could look across to Brundon Wood. The History of Sudbury tells us that in the 18th Century Squire Hurrell of Brundon Hall found a leaden coffin containing the body of a beautiful lady, lovely and bright, wearing a gold bracelet". Sometimes when he rode his pony a lady would appear and he would fearlessly gallop after her to Brundon Wood where, with a fearful shriek, she would vanish.



Smeetham Hall