

History at Plover Cottage

We enjoy learning about the history of Plover Cottage. Someone told us that the cottage is at least 200 years old and it's easy to believe. I think it might be older. Snuggled into the side of Bedford Bank it could have been built at the time of the early drainage of the Fens back in the 1600's. Ernie James, who lived here for over fifty years, spoke about the cottage in the book 'Memoirs of a Fen Tiger.' Ernie also appeared on television in the '70's, these recordings are still available on the DVD 'A man between three rivers'. The interviews were televised on a series called 'Bygones'; even at the time Ernie's way of life was disappearing.

The DVD brought back memories as it was recorded at the same time as I was growing up in a Fenland village no more than ten miles from Welney and there were many similarities between the two locations. In one clip of old Welney Ernie is standing outside the Lamb and Flag while a single vehicle travels past, there is no other transport. No heavy lorries and no speeding cars. The village I was in had little traffic but visit it today and, even though it now has a by-pass, the traffic is constant and noisy. The DVD also shows the poor state of the housing stock. We wouldn't have thought so at the time but it wasn't that long after the Second World War and despite the 'Never had it so good Fifties' and 'Swinging Sixties' there really wasn't much money around to invest in homes. The village I knew had small cottages that were only improved as people started to move in from more affluent areas. The housing in Welney is much improved since the time of the 'Bygones' recordings, most of it due, I imagine, to incomers from London and the Home Counties.

I was a lucky girl as a teenager, living in our little Fenland village. I had a pony and knew a freedom that few would today. At fifteen I could ride my pony out into the open fields. There'd be no one else in miles, no mobile phones. I can remember jumping off my pony and just lying on the grass under a wide blue sky. While my pony grazed next to me I lay on the ground listening to his munching and the breeze in the corn. On gymkhana days we'd start out early and hack to the local town. I knew the shortcuts but even so while other pampered ponies arrived in trailers and boxes my poor pony already had five miles of dust on his hooves by the time he arrived. But even with their head start he was always the star of the show, and the rosettes his at the end of the day.

A lot of villagers cycled then, to work and to the shop in the village. An old boy on his bike was a regular sight. If not on a bike the old fellas would most likely be walking their dogs. Apart from a wealthy lady who had a Pekingese the only dogs I saw were Labradors, mostly black. There weren't the exotic breeds then, just Labradors, walking at the heel of their owners who would be dressed in black overcoats tied up with orange string. If a lead was needed for the dog a matching piece of twine would be found in a pocket to use until the dog could be let off again.

Not that Ernie would have worn an old black overcoat. I've been told, by Ken Butcher, that he wore only the best of quality country clothes. It is said that Ernie never had a proper job, just wildfowling and fishing, but his was a lucrative business. In his memoirs Ernie looked back at his time of netting plovers. 'Sometimes, before the war, I was able to earn a hundred pounds a week from plover-catching, and that was a lot of money in those days,' he recollected. Ernie would pack about a hundred and twenty birds into a sack and cycle to Littleport station with the sack over his handlebars. London customers in smart restaurants considered the birds a great delicacy. I believe that's why, when Ernie bought this cottage in 1947, he named it 'Plover Cottage'.

A colleague of mine, London based, who I'd told about my cottage and its history referred to Ernie as 'a bit of a rascal'. I didn't understand why and then realised that he was confusing wildfowler with poacher. Poacher, Ernie was not. Before the Fens were drained the people who lived here had wildfowling, fishing and summer grazing to sustain them. It was a good life and people lived well. It wasn't for the resident's sake that the fens were

drained, it was to make profits for the Adventurer's, the city men. People in Welney still held on to their wildfowling and fishing rights. Those who ended up in the drained areas perhaps did have to resort to poaching, especially after enclosures at the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Ernie's work fell into four areas, mole-catching, wildfowling, plover netting and eel catching. We have photos of him making eel hives in the shed that used to be at the end of our garden. The willow for the traps came from willow farmed here in Welney. As well as traps Ernie would use a gleve, which was a spear-like instrument with four or five fangs fixed to a long pole. He would stab this into the bed of the river in the hope of spearing a nest of eels. On a good day he could catch about a stone of eels in an hour. He would then take these around the village to sell. I don't know if there are still eels in the Old Bedford or Delph Rivers.

In the book Ernie has this to say about eels. 'When I think about them I realise what wonderful creatures eels are. Born in the Sargasso Sea, millions of them start the long journey to these rivers yet only a small proportion actually arrive here. When they first come here they are tiny and known as elvers, and stay here for several years, growing to about five or six pounds. When they are fully mature they change colour from yellow to silver and make their way back to the Sargasso Sea where they spawn and die.'

Many years ago someone held an eel up for me to look at. Far from seeing a slimy, unattractive creature what I saw was an animal whose skin glistened. The eel looked at me with brown, soulful eyes, not fish eyes. It was an animal that had travelled a long way to be here but now wanted to be away, to return home. There is no way on Earth I could ever eat one.

We have met members of Ernie's family. They have been into the house and we have shown them where alterations have been made and where the rooms are still the same as when their family lived here. His grand-daughter, Sarah, had often stayed here and it pleased her to see the cottage where she had been as a child. She reminisced that the cottage had always been warm, that there was music and laughter. I hope this continues to be the case in Plover Cottage for many years to come.

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