Chesterfield and District Local History Society

HISTORY PAPER NO. 7

'OLD CHESTERFIELD' Interesting reminiscences by Ex-Alderman Dronfield – Part 2.

BRIAN AUSTIN

CAMP LIFE IN 1851 *Derbyshire Times* 29th January 1921)

The camping vogue is not as modern as some may think. It is almost seventy years since I spent my first summer camping with my father and two other men. We camped near Hathersage in what is called High Low Wood, where he spent ten weeks of the summer working up timber for making clog bottoms. The timber was cut and roughly worked up on the spot and left until the winter to be finished, in order for it to season a bit. When we reached the wood we set about to find a suitable site on which to pitch our camp and erect the cabin, which was to be our house. We selected a flat bit of sand at the bottom of the wood near the water, in order that we should not have to travel far for water. The erecting of our cabin was left to my father, who, having worked in the woods twenty years, had built many such places in his time. He commenced by getting three poles about fifteen feet long and tying them together at one end. These were then erected and opened out to form a three legged frame. The three sides were then filled in with smaller poles, an opening being left on one side for the doorway. The outer sides were then covered with turf, placed with the grass side downwards. Each turf overlapped the preceding one as in the case with slates so that the rain would be thrown off. This done, the "furniture" was fitted inside. This consisted of a "gantry" built round the cabin about a foot off the ground for dryness and ventilation and this was used as a bedstead for all four campers. My father then lit a greenwood fire in the middle of the cabin, the smoke from which killed all insects and other pests which lay concealed in the turf. We took with us four canvas bags about seven feet by four and these were filled with straw and laid on the gantry to form our beds. My father then proceeded to make a small fire in order to make some charcoal, as charcoal was wanted for burning in the cabin at night in order to warm the place without giving off smoke, as any other fuel would have done. Whilst he was attending to the charcoal preparation we busied ourselves fixing up benches and a table near to the cabin, as all our meals were taken out of doors. The table was not a fixture as it had a dual purpose viz, a table by day and a cabin door by night.

EGGS TWENTY FOR A SHILLING

To do the cooking we took with us a large iron tripod, from the centre of which was hung the setpot or frying pan, according to requirements. This, together with a large kettle for boiling water, completed our kitchen equipment. It took two or three days to complete our living arrangements and during this time we lived on the food we had taken with us from Chesterfield. About the third day everybody started to work in earnest, my father and his men went off woodcutting, and I was left to look after the camp and do the cooking, washing, bed-making – daily tasks to be performed until the woodcutting was finished. I arranged with a farmer for a supply of milk, eggs and butter. In those days prices were reasonable and I remember in bargaining, we agreed on a flat rate of twenty eggs for a shilling and sixpence a pound of fresh

butter. (There were no Food Controllers then.) A cart came from Chesterfield each week and brought groceries and anything else we required and took back a load of wood, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

As many of you know the woods round Hathersage contain, or did contain, large quantities of wild raspberries. The raspberry season arrived whilst we were in the wood and the opportunity to make raspberry jam was too good to be missed. We got a large stew pot of Brampton ware and a supply of sugar from home. I made a large fire and allowed it to burn down until there was just the glowing embers left, and put the pot in the hot embers, buried to within a few inches of the top. The fruit and sugar were put in the pot which was covered over and left till properly boiled. When the jam was ready it was either used or bottled. Bilberries also came ripe and a there were huge quantities to be got on Eyam moors, not more than a mile or so from where we worked, I took care to add stewed bilberries to our daily menu.

Thus the ten weeks passed away and the time arrived for our return. On the Saturday evening previous to our departure we had a sort of farewell party in the wood. Several of our visitors became fast friends. One of whom I must not forget to mention was the gamekeeper who always took care to see to it that we had an ample supply of rabbits. The Hayshawe family of High Low Hall were always very good and supplied us with potatoes and vegetables free of charge. The singer, before we left, sang for the benefit of our visitors, "Home, Sweet Home", with a voice ringing through the wood, which brought the visitors to tears. Monday was spent in dismantling our benches and packing up and we left for home on the Tuesday morning. We left the cabin intact, as it was taken over by a party of charcoal burners. At another time I hope to say something about charcoal burning.

GOOD ADVICE

Sixty nine years have now passed since the events described took place, but my memory has often been refreshed since then as I have gone over the old ground and met people who remembered our visit. The last time I went over the Sir William Road and Eyam Moor I called at Lead Mill and there I met an old man who remembered the cloggers. He asked me if I was "Harry". He was a boy at the time and a frequent visitor to the camp. We shook hands upon it and he enquired the whereabouts of the young man who was a good singer. Unfortunately I could not enlighten him. Being now in my eighty first year and in good health, I am perhaps entitled to offer a little advice to the young people. My advice is to take long country walks, avoiding the dusty roads and keeping to the woods and by-lanes and fields as much as possible. Study nature in all its bearings, botany, geology, zoology etc. Get to know the names of the herbs, roots, barks, fruits and flowers of your own fields and forests. It will enrich your life and drive away monotony, and you will add an inestimable value to your lives, in increased health and broader and deeper interests and in spiritual wisdom.

CHARCOAL BURNERS – *Derbyshire Times* 26th February 1921

Perhaps my readers will remember that in my last article I promised to write something upon charcoal burning. Charcoal burning was to some extent associated with the clog sole cutting in that both occupations necessitated a lengthy sojourn in the woods and consequently an outdoor or camping life and both occupations have now become almost obsolete about this locality. In fact

charcoal burning in the wood is an art, which has now almost disappeared in this country and has been discontinued in Derbyshire for over half a century. The chief reason for the decay of the occupations is the advance in our knowledge of chemistry and of chemical industries whereby much material that was formerly lost in the old process is now saved. Charcoal is now only produced by the dry distillation of wood in retorts when all the by-products can be collected and utilised. Another industry which was directly associated with charcoal burning is that of oak peeling. The bark stripped from the trees was used for tanning leather but here again the old process has been superseded by modern chemical methods and thus another industry has become almost obsolete. The trees peeled by the peelers were those used for making charcoal, so that there was a direct connection between the two occupations. The tree was stripped from top to bottom. The upper branches were then cut off and then passed into the hands of the burners. The trunk was left standing until the autumn in order to allow the sap to fall. Here again we have an instance of the integration of trades. The oak used in this county was at one time almost entirely a home/local practice and there was a ready market for available supplies, but now the demand for articles at popular prices can be better met by using imported timber. At one time oak was practically the only wood used for charcoal production. This was due to two reasons, firstly, the supply of oak available for the purpose after the peelers had done their work, and secondly, the fact that larger quantities of charcoal were required for the manufacture of gunpowder and charcoal made from oak was the only satisfactory kind. In fact, the Government used to stipulate that charcoal made from peeled oak only should be used in the making of Government gunpowder. At a later date, however, apart from the supplies for the state, charcoal was made from many kinds of timber. The demand for charcoal for gunpowder has considerably decreased owing to the invention of various types of explosives which do not require charcoal in their composition. Its modern application is in the manufacture of steel by the carbonisation of iron, in the making of blacking as used by moulders for dusting the moulds, in the packing of boxes for the removal of offensive smells and as a packing around hot chambers where it acts as an insulator.

In a further article I shall describe how the workmen carried on their occupation in the woods. It is now more than seventy years since I became acquainted with the charcoal burning industry and I also had the advantage of my father's experience. He worked in one wood (Wharncliffe Wood) for twenty one summers and in following his occupation often assisted and co-operated with the charcoal burners.

To illustrate more clearly what I propose to describe, I have prepared some miniature models showing the process as it was carried out in the wood and the manner of living of the workmen. I hope to exhibit these models in some conspicuous place in Chesterfield. The children will then be able to see for themselves what went on many years ago, and to learn something about an industry which is now almost defunct. These models will be on view the week following the appearance of this article and by these models I shall be able to show every detail, sleeping, cooking, meal-taking and burning and by these means children will be able to see what took place centuries ago.

(Continued in *Derbyshire Times* 12th March 1921)

In my last article I gave the preparatory stage of charcoal burning in the wood and how it has become a lost industry. The first thing to be done is to select a piece of ground near the riverside with a good grass turf. The turf on the piece of ground chosen to build the pit was first removed

and the soil taken out to depth of about one foot. This was done to form a circle of forty-five feet round and fifteen across. The wood was selected and graded according to size, the largest pieces being about five feet long and the smallest about two feet in length. The largest and strongest stakes were put in the centre and driven a little way into the ground in order to remain firm and erect. These pieces were arranged so as to act as a flue or chimney, and at the base was built another horizontal flue running radially from the centre. This was made to assist in the ignition of the stack after completion. This framework having been completed, the building up of the whole stack was then proceeded with. The selected pieces of wood were placed in an upright position, the largest were fixed first and the others gradually added until the whole formed a bell-shaped stack. The stack was covered with turves and all the cavities filled in with the exception of the space at the top of the chimney which was left open temporarily. The lighting of the stack was accomplished by placing in the chimney a mixture of charcoal and dry wood. This was ignited from the bottom by means of the flue previously described. After the wood was thoroughly lit and burning satisfactorily the opening at the top of the entrance of the flue is closed with large turves. Nothing more remained to be done but to watch the stack until the burning operation was complete. The stack was kept under close observation throughout the period of burning, which usually occupied three or four days. The process was judged by the nature of the smoke which issued from the pit. At first it was a dark blueish colour. This gradually became lighter and lighter until finally it was reduced to an almost invisible vapour. It is obvious that the wind would affect the burning to a considerable extent and a strong wind might be a serious impediment to the steady and regular burning which was essential to success. If calm weather prevailed no trouble was experienced but if the wind were at all strong brushwood hurdles were erected to windward the pit, and these acted as a screen. After it was judged from the appearance of the vapour that the burning was completed the fire was extinguished. This was done by piercing the turf at the top of the pit and inserting a funnel through which water was poured and the hole was quickly plugged up again. The heat inside was sufficient to convert some of the water into steam, which being prevented from escaping, freshly permeated the mass and so reduced the heat and damped out any trace of fire. After the roughly cooling, care was taken not to expose the interior until it was properly cool, the turf was taken off and the stack dismantled. The charcoal was broken up into the required sizes, placed in bags and sent away to headquarters to be distributed.

As promised in my previous article, the miniature models of a complete charcoal floor will be on view at Messrs. Williams on Saturday the 12th instant and a numbered list stating what the different models represent. I hope that these models will guide the children in their knowledge of an industry which was carried on in the woods some seventy years ago.

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