

BYGONE SILEBY



THE RIVER SILEBY

SPORTS & PASTIMES

No 15

SPORTS AND PASTIMES

This subject is so extensive, it would require several of these booklets to deal with the material available. We hope that the items selected will be of interest to the readers. Other booklets on this subject will be issued from time to time.

The Athletes

In the years that followed the Boer War, Sileby had a number of men who were well known in Leicestershire for their athletic ability, especially as runners. Many cottages in the village were adorned with prizes won at contests in the Midlands. When the Rev. F. L. Burrow became Vicar of Sileby in 1910, he found himself in good company, as he was a runner of some distinction, and silver trophies of victory were displayed in several rooms of the vicarage.

Some amusing tales are told of the old-time Sileby runners.

A young man who had some success in money-prize contests, was always expected to hand over his winnings to his rather domineering mother, returned home one day wearing a gloomy expression.

"Ow did yer get on?" his mother demanded.

"Ah cum in second."

"Oo er," snapped his mother, "an ow many on yer run?"

"Theer wor two on uz," he replied.

A runner, whose reputation exceeded his ability, was seen one day hurrying past the "church stile" to catch a train to Leicester. As he passed a group of men standing at the stile, one shouted, "Ay, yed better get a move on or yowl miss it." As the runner took heed of the warning and began to sprint, someone said, "That's done it - if ayd kept walkin' ay might av caught it!"

A story is told about a local runner who competed in a race held in a field near Cossington Road. As he was expected to win the event, many men in the village bet considerable sums of money, anticipating a big return. When he finished the race several yards behind his opponent, the angry backers pursued him across the fields, and he escaped only by making a prodigious leap over the cut."

George Brown

One of the greatest athletes in bygone Sileby was George Brown, affectionately remembered by someone as, "a gentleman, athlete, and a devout Christian".

From childhood, George Brown had a natural inclination to run. At the age of nine, after the morning lessons at school each day, he would run from his home to the Barrow Lineworks, carrying his father's dinner. Father Brown's delivery service was so efficient, his meal was always oven-hot when it arrived.

He was a faithful member of the Roman Catholic Church.

Towards the end of the ministry of the Rev. Augustus Shears, who was Vicar of Sileby from 1873 to 1894, young George spent much of his spare time at the Vicarage, where he was employed as a "page boy" - to run errands and do odd jobs around the house.

As an adult, George Brown became well known throughout the Midlands as an outstanding athlete. Letters from admirers would arrive at his home addressed:-

"Brownie the Runner,
Sileby,
Leicestershire."

He rarely lost a race, and at the height of his career, he won the Leicestershire Championship twice. On one of these occasions, he ran against the best in the county without spikes in his shoes, and won comfortably.

When it was known that George was running at a sports meeting, Sileby people would hire a brake to take them to see their hero in action. When he was changing before a race, those from his own village would call to him, "What about it George?". If he replied "It's a walk-over," there would be a rush to put money on the race. Betting was a regular feature of those sports meetings.

There is still in existence a window bill, which states :-

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It is said that one Sileby man bet heavily on George in that race. H. Silvester, the Loughborough runner was expected to win, but Brownie came in first, and the Sileby gambler won "enough to buy a row of houses."

George worked as an operative at the factory of H. C. Bray, on Ratcliffe Road. During the summer months, when there was a decline in the sale of footwear, the workers were usually laid off, and as a result, they were often in need. One Saturday, as Brownie was about to leave the house to compete in a foot race, his wife said, "I hope you win George." He replied, "Maggie, I've got to," - they were desperately short of money. When he came home, he pressed a golden sovereign into his wife's hand, and she wept with pride and joy. That coin was worth more than the average full weekly wage at the Factory.

As a runner, George Brown had so many successes, he was respected and feared by athletes all over the Midlands. His fame led to severe handicapping, and all too often, he was not allowed to compete on equal terms with other runners. A good example of this is seen in the story of a sports meeting at Leicester, where he entered a quarter-mile hurdle race. As he was preparing his starting mark, the track officials informed him that his mark was some distance further back. George was astonished to find that his starting mark was in the next field! When the gun was fired, he had to jump over a hedge to get into the sports field, before he set foot on the quarter-mile hurdle course. Needless to say, this was one of the few races he lost.

One year, he was invited to compete at Leicester, in a race against J. Naylor, one of the fastest runners in England. As large sums of money were involved in side-stakes, George's backers arranged for him to go away from Sileby for a fortnight's intensive training. One of the conditions was that he should give up smoking during the preparation for the race. This proved to be a real problem, as George was, strangely, a heavy cigarette smoker. He managed for two days without a smoke, then could bear it no longer. He secretly obtained a packet of his favourite "fags" and hid them in the lavatory on the training ground, where he quietly stole away for a puff or two when he felt the urge. He visited that lavatory so frequently, his trainer became concerned, and asked him if he had worries about the coming race. "No, why?" asked George. "Well, you've got diarrhoea, haven't you?" replied the trainer. George laughed, and explained that if he did not have a smoke, he would lose the match. When the race took place, it was over 100 yards, and Naylor was given a two yard start. Brownie won by a foot. The backers made a lot of money that day, and we suppose that George was well rewarded.

It is surprising that such a great athlete smoked so many cigarettes. Someone remembers the times when George participated in cross-country races. He would set off like a hare, and was soon out of sight of all the other runners. About every mile round the course, he had a friend waiting with a lighted cigarette. George would stop, have a chat and a smoke, then be away before the rest of the field came into view.

On Saturdays, when he was not running, he would be employed by one of the pigeon fanciers in the village. (See the section on Pigeon Racing).

Brownie's interest in football is still remembered. During his career, he collected many medals.

Those who knew Brownie, say that when he won a race, he did not brag, and if he lost, he greeted the result with his most infectious laugh.

George Brown is still remembered as "a gentleman, athlete, and a devout Christian".

Joseph Yates

Another Sileby athlete, who excelled in several sports was Joseph Yates. Someone has said, "Running, jumping, swimming, football and cricket, he was in all of it."

As a youth, he played as centre forward for the Sileby Rangers Football Club, which was in the Leicester and Northants League. In 1896, he was in the team which won the Leicestershire Junior Cup, and had the distinction of being the first man to bring a football medal to the village.

In 1897, Joe enlisted in the Scottish Highland Light Infantry for a period of seven years with the colours, and had a brilliant sporting career in the army, achieving the rank of Sergeant. For five years he served in India. When the batallion returned to England in 1902, he was stationed at Aldershot and resumed his football activities. During the 1902 season, playing in the position of half-back, he added to his collection the Aldershot Cup Silver Medal and the Aldershot Cup Gold Medal. The same season he was selected to play in the Army team against Tottenham Hotspur. A further honour came to him the same year, when he was selected by the Army to play in a cricket match against the M.C.C. 1902 was a year to be remembered.

After leaving the army, Joe played for the Leicester Castle Cricket Club, in the Leicester Town League, and later, for the Barrow Town Cricket Club, in the North Leicestershire League. During his last season as a player, he was top of the League averages.

Joe Yates will be remembered as a member of the Sileby Parish Council, which he served for many years.

The Pigeon Fanciers

Records show that pigeons were kept in Sileby more than four centuries ago. They were not the racing variety, but blue rock doves, semi wild birds, which flew in and out of huge wooden dove cotes belonging to the richer villagers. One cote is known to have contained two hundred pigeons. They caused much annoyance, as they descended in flocks on the fields and grew fat on other people's corn. In winter,

many of the pigeons were killed to provide the cote owner with fresh meat, when other villagers were eating salted beef or pork.

The Belgians began breeding the modern racing Homing pigeons between 1840 and 1850. By 1876, pigeon racing had become established in the south of England, and the first Federation was formed in north-east Lancashire in 1890. The sport had a great following in the Midlands by the turn of the century. Perhaps the most famous local racing pigeon was "The Emperor of Rome", owned by the late Dr. P. H. Dalley of Syston, which won the great race from Rome. After its death, it was stuffed, and may still be seen at the New Walk Museum, in Leicester.

Even a Homing pigeon will get lost if it is not taught to fly back to its owner. Young pigeons were first placed on the roof of the loft and allowed to memorise their surroundings. Then followed a long period of training, known as "wunting", when the birds were taken further and further away from the loft, and released to fly home. As the birds were usually trained to fly home from the north, they were first released at the north end of the village, then at Barrow-upon-Soar, Loughborough and greater distances in the same direction. Various methods of transportation were used. Pigeon baskets were seen strapped to the back of bicycles, being carried by pony and trap, and being sent much further away by train from Sileby Station.

In a race, each pigeon wore a numbered rubber ring on its leg, as a means of identification. In the early days of Pigeon Racing in Sileby, when a bird arrived back at its loft, it had to be taken immediately to the pigeon headquarters at The Bellringer's Arms, in Brook Street, where the ring was removed, and the time of arrival recorded. The fastest runners were employed to make the vital time-saving dash from the loft to the pub. The great George Brown was often engaged by an enthusiast named Henry Breward. Children enjoyed standing outside the Bellringer's Arms to watch the runners arriving with the pigeons.

Racing was a serious business in old Sileby. On Saturdays, children and visitors were kept far away from a loft, to ensure that the pigeons would drop and enter the loft as soon as they arrived. Fanciers searched the skies anxiously for a sign of the returning birds, and kept a catapult handy to discourage any cat which wandered near the garden. If a pigeon arrived in good time, then sat on the house roof preening itself, the fancier would rush to the loft rattling corn in a tin, alternately pleading and swearing, trying to get the bird to come in.

Even more frustrating was the failure of the best pigeons to arrive home after a race. After years spent in breeding a good "strain", a storm could blow them off course, and they would fly on in the wrong direction, and get lost. One Sileby fancier who had had some losses, sent the best of his stock to an important race, and told his friends, "Ef thi doont cum um this wik, al sell um !"

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B Y G O N E S I L E B Y

These booklets are still being produced in the belief that unless someone bothers to take the trouble to record the events of the past, they will be lost forever. The old manner of speech, the habits and customs, the homelife and the remarkable characters who lived in the village will be forgotten as the years go by, unless an attempt is made to collect this material. As this is the only village where such a task is being undertaken, someday, the complete works will be unique.

Future booklets will deal with the ancient history of Sileby, and the many aspects of life in Victorian times, More old Words and Sayings, Old Herbal Remedies, Children's Street Games, Framework Knitters, Street Vendors, Old Proverbs, Visiting Entertainers, Old Recipes, etc.

There is a true story of one fancier who was employed temporarily as a verger at the Parish Church. One Sunday morning, a friend brought him a fine pair of Homing pigeons, just before the service began. Having no basket, he put them in the font, under the wooden bell-shaped cover. Unfortunately, when he left the church at mid-day he forgot to take the birds with him. That afternoon, when the Vicar was preparing for a baptism, he removed the font cover and nearly dropped it in astonishment, when two racing pigeons fluttered out, and circles the inside of the church at high speed.

Pigeon Shooting

Clay pigeon Shooting is now one of the competitive sports in the Olympic Games, but originally, live pigeons were used. About 1900, some men in Sileby participated in this activity, "up Physic Hill" and sometimes in a field off Cossington Road. Old and inferior Homing pigeons were taken to the site in baskets, and were released in ones and twos for the guns. In the local version, a man concealed in a trap threw up the birds by hand. A "dead" bird was one shot in flight which fell within a prescribed area. A "lost" bird was one the guns missed, or which fell outside the area. A "No bird" was the term used for a pigeon which was unable or unwilling to fly. Public conscience put an end to live pigeon shooting long ago.

Rabbit Coursing

Another sport which would raise a storm of public indignation to-day was Rabbit Coursing. Sileby poachers caught and sold quantities of live wild rabbits to the Coursing enthusiasts. Meetings were held "down the Slash", where the rabbits were released one by one from bags and pursued by terriers. Owners and spectators made bets on which dog would kill the rabbit.

Cycling

Towards the end of the Victorian era, cycling was beginning to attract some attention. As early as 1870, the "Bone-shaker" was in use in England. It had wooden wheels with large spokes, and pedals attached to the hub of the front wheel. The first bicycles seen in Sileby were Penny-farthings, which had a 4 ft. 6 ins. wheel at the front, and a small wheel at the back. Among those who owned this type of machine were Joe Yates, the well known athlete, and Charles Henry Preston, the boot and shoe manufacturer. Charlie Preston became so proficient on his bicycle he entered races held in the county, and some from the village once travelled to Loughborough to see him win a race against some of the best riders of that period. On one occasion several Penny-farthing riders from Leicester came to Sileby, and were refreshing themselves at the Duke of York when Charlie walked in. A discussion followed, in which it was claimed that it was not possible to ride his machine up any hill, and was challenged by the visitors - at a golden sovereign each, that he could not ride up High Street, from

Dudley's Bridge to the Horse and Trumpet Inn. Charlie pedalled furiously up the hill to the "Trumpet", turned and came back to collect his winnings. He returned their losses in the form of liquid refreshment.

Sileby people always showed interest in cycling. In the 1880's groups went into Leicester by train to watch Fred Wood and Dick Howell, who were World Champion Cyclists on the tall machine.

By the 1890's, there was a wider interest in bicycles. Even the Church Magazine began to include advertisements. In June, 1898, the readers saw the following :-

"I ride a Parr. Ladies' and Gent's Safeties from £9. Up-to-date. Order direct from the Makers, J. Parr & Co. Ltd., and save agent's profits. Our Private Riding School is open daily for beginners. Lessons at any hour, competent instructors always in attendance."

Even in the 1920's, some of the older cyclists still mounted a bicycle by the "proper method". Holding the handlebars, the cyclist placed the left foot on a two inch metal tube which extended from the hub of the back wheel, then propelled the machine forward with a push from the right foot and lifted himself onto the saddle.

Many bicycles had protection for the rider. Ladies' cycles were equipped with a canvas skirt. A guard which covered part of the back wheel. Some of the gentlemen's cycles had a metal chain guard. It was considered necessary for lady cyclists to wear special clothing, as shown in a Church Magazine advertisement of 1898 :-

"Write for Patterns of our LADIES' CYCLE COSTUME, Norfolk Coat with specially designed skirt. 2 guineas, from Tyler & Tyler, Halford Street, Leicester."

After solid rubber tyres came the "padded tyres" and eventually the air filled "Balloon" tyres. Charlie Preston owned the first pneumatic tyred bicycle in Sileby. It was made by Martin Wilkinson, at his blacksmith's shop in Cart's Yard, off Barrow Road.

Someone who remembers the first air-filled tyres to be seen in Sileby, describes them as "laced all round, like a boot".

Fifty years after the introduction of the "Bone Shaker", the name was still applied to dilapidated machines.

Older people in the village will recall the days when Mr. H. Baum had a number of bicycles which were available for hire at 3d. per half hour. One lady remembers going to Mr. Baum with a friend and hiring a couple of bikes. As they did not know how to ride, they were "too frit to get on um", but they still enjoyed the experience of pushing them "all round the Humbles".

With the improved pneumatic cycle, Charlie Preston participated in racing, and won many prizes, including two fine clocks, one in marble and another in an oak case. He could perform remarkable tricks on a bicycle. He was able to raise the front wheel, and ride along a road only using the back wheel; do a handstand and other acrobatics on the handlebars with the machine in motion, and crawl through the frame. Someone said, "It was just like a circus act."

Motor Cycles

The first motor cycle in Sileby was bought by Charles Henry Preston in 1905. It was a Triumph, which had a wicker-work sidecar. The motor cycle itself was kept in the front room of his house on Cossington Road. There were two particular hazards about riding the early models; first, the frequency of punctures, and secondly the occasional breaking of the thick driving belt which rotated the back wheel. The wearing apparel for the early motor cyclist was a heavy coat, a thick scarf, a pair of goggles and a cap worn back to front. Every journey was an adventure. When Charlie set out, he carried three spare tyres and a spare driving-belt lashed to the back of the machine, and three spare inner-tubes, worn across the body like bandoliers. Country roads had so many ridges and holes, a motor cyclist became exhausted from the effort to stay on the machine.

Sunday morning was spent in "greasing, polishing and kicking up a row", but it would have been a brave man who told Charlie that he was making too much noise revving up that Triumph.

Motor Cars

C. H. Preston made yet another place for himself in the history of the village, by being the first man in Sileby to own a motor car.

In 1908, when Edward the Seventh was King, Charlie Preston bought a second hand 15 h.p. Humber, for £400 from Messrs. Harper & Lane, Motor Engineers, of York Street, Leicester. This open tourer Humber was hand painted dark green, and highly polished. A windscreen and canvas hood were purchased as extras.

This first horseless-carriage in Sileby aroused interest and curiosity everywhere. Villagers would encircle the vehicle staring at it in wonder. When Charlie invited friends and neighbours to have a ride round the village, they proudly bowed and saluted the other inhabitants as they swept past. Men driving horses would leap to the ground to hold the animals heads as the car came by. The sight and sound of the green monster frightened horses, some would rear on their hind legs, and some bolt, with the driver frantically pulling back on the reins.

In those days, the country dirt roads were so dry and dusty during the hot summer months, it is said that they were "like deserts". In the year 1908, if a street was obscured by dust similar to a thick

yellow fog, villagers coughed and said, "that's Charlie gooin' by agen!"

There were of course no garages, and the car owner was both driver and mechanic. If the car stopped on a journey, he had to "get out and get under", to make the necessary adjustments. If he could not repair the fault, he suffered the dreadful indignity of being towed back home by a horse.

Obtaining petrol was a problem. In those early days before filling stations were invested, petrol was bought at the chemist's shop. A wise motorist ensured that he had a full tank, and spare cans strapped to the car before he set out on a journey. But many a chemist was called from his bed in the middle of the night by some unfortunate motorists, who stood at his door holding an empty petrol can in his hand.

One Sunday morning, Charlie Preston drove his Humber to the Durham Ox Inn. The big Humber attracted the attention of a number of farmers who were present, and when Charlie went out to return home, they followed him out to watch the car leave. When the engine did not start, it was discovered that the fuel tank was empty. As it was impossible to buy petrol in that area, Charlie had a sudden bright idea, he went into the bar and bought a bottle of gin for 3s.6d., and poured it into the petrol tank. The farmers roared with laughter, and said it was impossible to run a car on "drink". Charlie swung the starting handle a time or two, and the engine burst into life. In triumph he climbed into the seat and drove off to Sileby with the farmers open mouthed in amazement. He arrived at home with gin to spare!

In 1910, the car was sold to Mr. Shuttlewood, a Cossington farmer, who eventually modified it as a small lorry for use with the farm. It was working in 1930, when the engine was twenty-five years old.

During those quiet Edwardian years before the First World War, Dr. Herbert Skipworth, of Mountsorrel, abandoned his pony and trap in favour of a new motor car. Soon after its delivery, Dr. Skipworth drove to Sileby for the first time, to visit a patient. He arrived safely, but could not remember how to stop the vehicle, and drove round and round the village until he ran out of petrol!

After selling the Humber, C.H. Preston bought an Arrol Johnstone open tourer. This Scottish car had an engine made in Paisley and the brown hand-painted body added at Dumfries. In inclement weather, a canvas hood was raised to cover the driver and passengers, and "side curtains" were clipped between the hood and the body of the car to provide further protection. In the early years of the 1914 War, Charlie Preston used the car to take disabled soldiers from the Gilroes Hospital for tours round the county. Wartime restrictions eventually made it impossible to use the car, and it was sold. After the War, in 1920, he bought a second Arrol Johnstone, which had an aluminium bonnet, and used it for many years.