

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Memories of Old Stewkley - the final of three parts

These recollections of Stewkley old boy, the late E R Hedges of Alresford, Hampshire, were first related in a letter to the Archivist of the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society.

Part Three

But back to the Coles. Thomas Coles achieved some personal fame, for in 1875, in his mid-30s, he had married Jane Boiling, aged 19, the daughter of the landlord of *The Old Swan*. In July the same year, she gave birth to a boy (George) and to another boy (Fred) thirteen months later. Perhaps dismayed at the prospect of further and frequent procreation, she left him and for the rest of his life Thomas had a housekeeper.

In the 1890s he held a weekly musical evening at his home adjoining the Coles' workshops to which he invited various rustic instrumentalists and singers (including my father.) They played and sang the sentimental pieces of the time. He played the cello and considered himself an authority on glee-singing and harmony. Thomas was a man of unpredictable moods and was self-opinionated to the point of arrogance, and the female section of the choir would occasionally become depleted when he swore at someone he thought to be out of time or tune.

Soon after the turn of the century, a dashing young lady named Harriet Smale, a good pianist and soprano, came to teach at Stewkley School and was soon invited to Thomas' musical soirees. (*Miss Smale was 23 in 1901 and boarded at Beech House, now No. 80 High Street North, just next door to the Coles' home.*)

During an interval one evening, when the housekeeper was as usual dispensing cake and home-made wine, Miss Smale asked him what was the difference between A sharp and B flat (there is no difference but the note is shown in either form in a musical score according to the key in which the piece is set.) Thomas was in no mood for this mischievous question. He turned on her sharply and said, "If you waun'a know thaa', you be'er aks moy bloody a**e!"

She picked up her hat and coat, rushed to the door and was never seen there again. This matter of asking that part of the anatomy was often resorted to by elderly men when they were asked questions that they considered an impertinence; when questioners were being nose; when they were too irritable to answer a harmless question or, quite frequently, when they did not wish to admit to their own ignorance.

After the First World War, Miss Smale appeared again in the village, this time as the wife of Leon Belcher, the newly appointed headmaster of the school. My father saw her in the Post Office one day and asked her if she remembered Mr Cole's musical evenings. She laughed. "Not another word, Mr Hedges", she said, "Not another word!"

(*Sometime after her altercation with Thomas Coles, Harriet Smale returned to her native Essex where she met and married Leon Belcher in July 1914, when he was Headteacher of the Endowed School in Burnham-on-Crouch. Aged 40, he enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in December 1915 and served his country for three years in the First World War. Mr and Mrs Belcher came to Stewkley School in 1922 where Leon was Headteacher until 1935, with Harriet re-joining the teaching staff...see photograph.*)

Towards the end of his life, Thomas came to rely on Fred and family for the greater part of his morale. Apparently, he was a rather pitiful figure towards the end. My father told me that Tommy (as he always referred to him) always attended Stewkley's home cricket matches. After devoting himself seriously to his beer on Saturday midday (*there were 10 pubs*



Stewkley School, High Street North, 1930s



Mrs Harriet Belcher, nee Smale (centre) with her Headmaster husband Leon Belcher (top left) and some of Stewkley School teaching staff, 1930s

available for an adult male population of about 300, the majority of whom did not visit a pub), he would make his unsteady way across the Parson's Close to the cricket ground area while small boys pelted him with lumps of dry (a saving grace) horse manure. A few years ago, and not long before he died, I visited Fred Coles (the elder son of Thomas Coles' son Fred) at his home in Stewkley. He was in his mid-70s and had lost much of the use of his legs owing to a stroke. He and his wife were expecting me, and I found him dressed and sitting in front of a cheerful fire. But he was very depressed and gave nothing more than a non-committal grunt when I wanted yes-or-no responses to my questions about his forebears. He had scarcely given me a glance until, desperate for him to say something, I asked him-

but lapsing inadvertently into my father's term- "Fred, may I see a photograph of your grandfather, Tommy Coles?" He turned his head towards me sharply. "THOMAS Coles!", he insisted. After that, we were old friends again.

E R Hedges

Alresford, Hampshire.

The annotations in italics shown in parentheses have been added to E R Hedges' letter by the Grapevine's Heritage Editor to provide background information for our readers. If anyone possesses a photograph of the late Mr Thomas Coles, mentioned in this letter, the Grapevine would be delighted to receive a copy.

FROM THE GRAPEVINE 10 YEARS AGO...

From December 2013, young Freddie Perkin of High Street North turned out to be a chess star...Stewkley Singers were to present Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* as its Christmas concert in Stewkley Church...Stewkley observed the Act of Remembrance honouring its Fallen of two World Wars at the War Memorial...Thames Valley Police reported that 'Stewkley is a fantastic example of community speed watch working at its best'...Janette Eustace was newly appointed as the Parish Council's third Parish Clerk in 2013...Nature Watch reported on the approaching winter solstice and the village's golden autumn foliage...and Stewkley Players production of *Wind in the Willows*, produced by David Carter, stole the show at the Village Hall.



FROM THE GRAPEVINE 20 YEARS AGO...

From December 2003, The Parish Council reported that British Telecom was to remove one of the three village payphones at the High Street South/Dunton Road junction on grounds of 'underperformance'...the PC's use of its SID traffic speed monitor revealed a problem with speeding traffic at Dean Road/Mursley Road crossroads, and west out of the village along Dunton Road...Margaret Galvin (née Carter) was home from Australia 57 years after emigrating to Queensland in 1946...the village mourned the passing away of Violet Wayland-Carr aged 94...and Martin Gregory was awarded the SVCC 1st XI trophies for both batting and bowling at the club annual dinner.

