

CHRISTMAS IN HAVENFIELD

Our village of Havenfield Stoney was one of those villages that resembled an old-fashioned Christmas card – you know the ones, a scene showing a sleepy country village in the middle of nowhere, a medieval church topped by a witch's hat for a steeple roof, carol singers with lanterns wrapped up against the bite, a wooden gate holding onto a fence post as if its life depended on it and with resident Robin, a slightly rutted track, the Plough Inn full of ale and cheer, and of course the obligatory smoke funnelling skyward from chimneys of cottages built in the eighteenth century or perhaps before. The whole thing cloaked with a fall of snow several inches thick and likely to remain in situ well into New Year.

The village pond always seemed to freeze over in Winter, and just like a H.E.Bates's novel, we would enjoy skating to our heart's content and enjoying a hot beverage courtesy of the village nousey spinster, Miss Andrews; and Old Benjamin's roasted chestnuts.

At the church school, us children warmed by the fireside and were read stories by Mrs Weaver; and then we would rehearse carols fine tuning ahead of a Christmas Day service. After practice, the village mothers would provide a lovely spread of sandwiches and cakes and homemade lemonade. My mother's speciality were mince pies with a butterfly shaped topping. To end our party, Father Christmas would arrive and hand out an orange and apple to us all packaged in brown paper with a note tucked up under the string tied in a bow. The note would be a blessing from angels of the lord – by the time I turned twelve, I realised that Father Christmas was our kindly Vicar who went by the grand name of Robert McCardle Tunnicliffe. The village just called him Mac.

Our parents and us children had all been Baptist by Mac, using the same font installed at the time of Agincourt – it still has slight cracks where during the reformation, hammers were taken to it but failed miserably to reduce it to rubble. The village joke was that Mac had been around since Agincourt! He was a good sport I have to say.

The Christmas tree on the village green was the crowning glory leading up to the day itself; and at Wood End Cottage, our family home, we celebrated

round our tree – my mother would always say, our tree cut from Haggard's Wood was like Christmas coming into the cottage.

After a goose dinner, mother's special Christmas pudding would be diced in brandy from the old laid variety in father's cupboard and finished off with more mince pies. Was just time to re-join the village on the green and sing carols until the cold bite or incoming blizzard would force a retreat to the fireside once more.

When I hear Silent Night now, I am transported back to those Edwardian Christmases. They were hard times but somehow, enriching and savoured.

That, was our village at Christmas time.

This is an edited extract from *Christmas at Wood End Cottage* by Ian Welland.

(Manuscript unpublished)