

## FAC129

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*Chapters from the autobiography of a village lad showing the hardships and superstitions of village life in England in the first half of the last century from 1846 to 1858* subtitled *The story of twelve years in the life of a village orphan 1846-1858 told by himself*

1926

Written by Joseph Bell (b. 26 Mar 1846) and addressed to his daughter Ellen Withycombe and dated 1926.  
210 pp (photocopy of TS)

Preface by JB, dated 26 Mar 1926, states that 'the incidents I have herein attempted to record are a true description of the social conditions of life in our villages in the early part of the last century'.

In brief, the account falls into 3 phases: his early childhood in Turvey being brought up and taught by his mother (his father having died shortly after his birth); his stay in London as an orphan with his Aunt (pp 77-102); and life as a scholar at Bedford Union School within the workhouse (pp 113-210) up until his apprenticing at the age of 13 to John Andrews of 19 Silver St., Bedford, master bootmaker. He refers in detail to his mother and, although less so, to his two sisters Mary and Sarah. His other brother (Henry), sister (Elizabeth) and other relatives are little mentioned (except the London Aunt).

In general the writing is important in revealing the mentality, outlooks, perceptions, attitude, morality and psyche of a child growing up within the ranks of labouring poor of the time. It is written with a strong 'then and now' comparative emphasis in parts. Bell is keen to record the housing conditions, the hardships of employment as an agricultural labour, the exploitative nature of the lace-making industry, poverty and the relationship of the labouring classes with the gentry: the 'tyranny of the classes' as he calls it. He also records in detail superstitions and tales giving insight into contemporary village culture. His account of the workhouse gives a lot of detail regarding the regime, routines etc of life within Bedford Workhouse in the late 1850s.

Specific references worthy of note with page numbers are as follows:-

### Individuals (include)

- William Bell (writer's letter) (pp 5-6)
- The Rev J W Hawksley, Vicar of Turvey (pp 17-19,70)
- C Longuet-Higgins of Turvey Abbey and his family (pp 19,37,40-46,52,67,111-112 and 147)
- William Crawley of Turvey and his conviction and transportation for poaching (pp 53-56)
- the Rev W Monkhouse, vicar of Goldington and teacher at the Union School (pp 148, 155-156, 160-162, 166-168, 196, 206 and 209)
- Mr Spence, schoolmaster at the Union School (pp 113-210 passim)

### Groups, organisations, institutions etc

- Turvey Church Orchestra (pp 6 and 67)
- 'United Gardeners' (p 6)
- Victoria Lodge of Oddfellows at Turvey (p 6)
- Turvey Village band (p 6)
- Sunday School at Turvey (pp 11,20 and 67)
- Shoeblock Brigade Boys in London (pp 83-84)

### Places

- Turvey Village - description (p 8)
- Turvey Mill and Jonah Statues (pp 30-31); river, bridge and floodgates (p 31)
- Turvey Park : walnut tress and nut harvesting (p 37)
- Three Counties Asylum : Bell's sister's employment as a Probationary Nurse Attendant at (pp 46-47,67,71)
- Great Oak(s) Farm, Turvey (pp 48,63)
- Bedford Hospital (pp 64-65) and Union Infirmary (p 105)
- Ship PH, St Cuthbert's, Bedford (p 144)
- Bedford Post Office (p 151)
- Bedford Union Workhouse - scale of buildings etc (pp 152-154)
- Trinity Church, Bedford : refers to service attended by boys and girls from the workhouse and gallery in the church (pp 187-188)

### Social, economic and cultural recollections, observations, experiences etc

#### 1. Turvey

- horticulture and gardening (p 5)
- employment and industry : army bootmaking and shoe-making (pp 9,65-66,110 and 119); pillow-lace making (pp 9,13-16, 19-20, 45 and 104); and agricultural labouring - life, routines, wages, ganging etc - (pp 9,36,48-51,53 and 63-64)
- awareness of the Crimean War (pp 11,36 and 82)
- the village blacksmith (pp 10,30, 61 and 110)
- the Militia Act and local recruiting (pp 11-12)
- state of farming (pp 12,63)

- village poverty, and scarcity of food (pp 12-13, 36 and 68)
- housing, conditions, rural sanitation etc (pp 13,19,34-35)
- festivals, fairs, celebrations and customs (pp 24-27,38)
- gold coins found as treasure-trove (p 34)
- employment situation (p 36)
- use of children by chimney-sweeps (pp 36 - 37)
- local perception of Quarter Sessions (pp 52,55)
- poaching (pp 53-56)
- farming practises (pp 63-64,74)
- superstitions, witches, local reaction to visit of comet etc (pp 66-67, 69,72-73,81)
- the village carrier and local travel (p 73)

## 2. Bedford (and Workhouse)

- playing football in field facing Goldington Road (pp 120-121 and 124-125)
- creation and planting of flower plots at the Union School (p 127)
- marbles (p 133)
- water supply in Bedford (p 140)
- Christmas at the Union School, 1858 (pp 163-166,170-174,177)

## 3. General

- disease and illnesses (pp 6,33-34,67-69,105 and 154)
- good and drink (pp 33,44,58,69,79,126,129,150 and 174)
- apprenticeship (pp 71,83-84,112,134,136,178 and 210)
- railway travel, Bell's journey from St John's to King's Cross (pp 73-77)
- clothing and hairstyles (pp 114-116,145,179 and 185)
- natural countryside remedies (p 129)