

Hitchin's Oldest Living Native A Centenarian Interviewed

The following article was found inside a book cover in Hitchin Museum. It was being used as a bookmark and dates from 1903, since the subject of the interview, William Maylin died in 1905, aged 102.

Two years before the booming of the guns, the wild ringing of the church bells, and the flaring of the bonfires in the streets to signalise the memorable victory of Nelson at Trafalgar, William Maylin was born at Walsworth, at that time nothing more than a small hamlet a mile away from the market town of Hitchin. Though this latter event happened one hundred and one years ago last August, this hardy centenarian has recently revisited the scene of his early days, and when our interviewer called at the house of his granddaughter for a chat, the request was readily granted. Instead of ...

*"The lean and slippered pantaloons;
With spectacles on nose —"*

... one found a hale, ruddy featured old gentleman, whose hearing was as quick as that of a man of 40, and on whom nearly 102 winters had left but little trace, save that the sight was bedimmed and the limbs somewhat shaky. Many a man of seventy has whiter hair and bears more unmistakably the trace of the ravages of time.

Mr. Latchmore had just been taking the old veteran's photograph when I arrived, so the time was opportune for reminiscences.

"You didn't have to go under the railway bridge when, as a boy, you came up to Hitchin, Mr. Maylin?"

"No," and the old man smiled at the thought. *"There was no railway here in those days. I remember the coach used to start from the Swan Inn, in the market, where Gatward's place is now. I well remember Kershaw, who used to drive the coach to London."*

"The market was different then, wasn't it?"

"Yes; I recollect the stocks standing there. There was a chap with a wooden leg put in there once, and he wriggled and wriggled, till he finally slipped out, leaving his wooden leg behind."

With the aid of Mr. Lucas's celebrated oil painting, we traced the changes which had taken place in Hitchin since August 3rd. 1803, during which time five different monarchs have sat upon the throne of England. Many of the faces in the picture were at once remembered as their names were read out.

"Here is the picture of James Allen, the last of the Beadles."

"I remember him well, also Philip, his brother, who had the job before him. Then the peelers came in with their top hats, very different from the policemen of today. Bancroft is changed, too. Down there used to be Beaver's osier ground, where the old women used to go to peel the rods" (where Mr. Green's nursery is today).

Then a few names were read over. Dr. Niblock, who had a school at the top of Tilehouse Street, John Hawkins, John Wilshere, Oswald Foster, another doctor, John Ransom, a farmer and F. P. Delme-Radcliffe, the squire. Yes, he remembered them all quite well.

"There were some quaint characters in Hitchin, then, no doubt?"

"Yes; Dr. Mansell was a funny man. He had very prominent lips, and used to take the poker between his nose and top lip," and the old chap laughed heartily at a recollection which must have gone back half a century.

"Who was Teddy Burr?"

"Oh, Teddy Burr lived at Charlton Mill. He was very fat. They used to talk about Teddy Burr's rotundity, but Teddy could never understand what they meant or see the joke."

Right: William Maylin, a Hitchin resident who died in 1905 aged 102.



"Was High Street as it is now?"

"Very different; it was called Cock Street then".

"Can you recollect the Battle of Waterloo?"

"Quite well. I was twelve years old then. There was a grand dinner down Bancroft, plenty of ale and bonfires all about".

"News didn't travel as quickly then as now."

"Not quite; you see we had no penny post then. It cost 1s. to send a letter, till when I was a youth of about 27 it was changed to a penny."

"Times were harder in many ways then, I guess?"

"They were. Food was dearer for one thing. Before the repeal of the Corn Laws, bread was 11d. for a small loaf, and the men on the farm used to have barley, and get it ground."

"Was that what they called the black bread?"

"Yes; we had some rough times then, and had to live simpler."

"What were the wages?"

"I was exceptionally favoured in that respect, and had 2/- a week more than the rest of the men who had 10/- a week."

"You worked on the land, then?"

"For nearly 50 years. The present George Jeeves's grandfather – William Jeeves – was my employer, and after him I worked for James and Thomas Jeeves".

"You didn't have much more to spend on newspapers in those days?"

"We couldn't, especially as they were 6d. and 7d. each. No one dreamt of a halfpenny newspaper at that time."

"How long have you been away from Hitchin?"

"Been away 31 years, and have just run up to spend a few days with my grand-daughter here."

"You must have quite a colony of descendants by now. How many are there?"

"I don't know; perhaps she will tell you."

The grand-daughter was not quite sure, but she thought there were something like 250 of them.

"You have done your duty to the State."

The old man laughed merrily at the thought.

To the eye of his visitor, William Maylin looks good for another 20 or 30 years of life yet, though it would be almost too much to expect it. It may be of interest to the young people to know that when Mr. Maylin was 16 years old, viz., in 1819, the officers of Hitchin consisted of the following quaint personages:-

Two constables.

Six head-boroughs – two from each of the three wards of the town.

Two ale conners.

Two leather searchers and sealers.

One bellman, who was also the watchman and crier of the town.

The wards were:- Bancroft Ward, Bridge Street Ward, and Tilehouse Street Ward.

A head-borough was a deputy constable, and an ale conner tested ale by tasting it. The post of leather searcher and sealer of leather was nearly always filled specialist leather-workers of some kind; cordwainers were the ones most commonly elected. They were responsible for determining whether hides had been cured in a correct and legal manner. (A cordwainer was a shoemaker who made new shoes from new leather. The cordwainer's trade differs from that of the cobbler. The latter were restricted to repairing shoes).

Mr. Green's nursery and the osier beds are now under Bancroft Recreation Ground and Sainsbury's car park.