

SOMERSET VOICES

A Celebration of Memories

Ann Heeley, Louise Clapp, Liz Snelgrove

THIS FASCINATING and copiously illustrated volume is drawn from the collection of over six hundred oral recordings of Somerset people made since 1973 and held at the Somerset Rural Life Museum [SRLM]. Life is shown as it really was in the twentieth century in the words of those who lived through great changes. It features memories of childhood, everyday tasks, social life, manual work and the joys of mechanisation, cider making and cheese making, war time changes, peat digging and much more.

The majority of the men and women recorded were born in Somerset or lived most of their lives in the county, and there is a diversity of background and status, with people living in cottages, farmhouses and manor houses in villages and in towns. Those interviewed came from across the county including west Somerset, the Quantock villages, the Levels and the Moors, the coast, central and south Somerset and the Mendip hills. The book has three themes: At Work, At Home and In the Villages and the Towns, and the interviewees talk about their lives in agriculture, rural industries and crafts as well as their social activities and home life.

As the doyen of Somerset historians, Robert Dunning, says: "This book...is the memories of the guardians of our past. Here are people who grew up with candles and tin baths and outside loos and who could remember, as clearly as if it were yesterday, the excitement of adequate light at the flip of a switch, the luxury of instant warm water, and the comfort of a water closet without the expedition into the garden...The memories in this book and in the whole collection are of another world; of smaller towns, of self-sufficient villages, from which many never ventured far. It was a world of simple pleasures, home-made entertainment; of lives lived close to the land and to nature. These are voices of a special time and of special places; they speak nostalgically, though in truth life was tough, sometimes very hard indeed."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ANN HEELEY MBE, LOUISE CLAPP AND LIZ SNELGROVE are all Friends of the Somerset Rural Life Museum and have been working together for the last five years, initially on a book featuring Victorian photographs taken by the Revd John Derrick called 'In a Good Light: Holidays in Victorian Somerset with a Camera'. This was published in 2006.

Ann Heeley MBE, a farmer's daughter from Cheshire, and a founder member of the Friends, has been actively recording Somerset people since 1979. Over the years she met many interesting and kind people who have so willingly helped with this project. The Oral Collection now totals over 600 recordings. In 2010 Ann was awarded an MBE for her contribution to the Somerset Oral Archive.

Louise Clapp joined the Friends in 1982 and was a founder member of the Research Group. She has been involved in many research projects culminating in exhibitions, publications and teachers packs which aim to enhance the educational value of school visits to the museum.

Liz Snelgrove, undertook a certificate in archaeology at Bristol University which led to her being involved with a group researching and publishing local history. Liz joined the Friends in 2005 and has found the work with the oral recordings fascinating with hearing the many personal memories of Somerset people.

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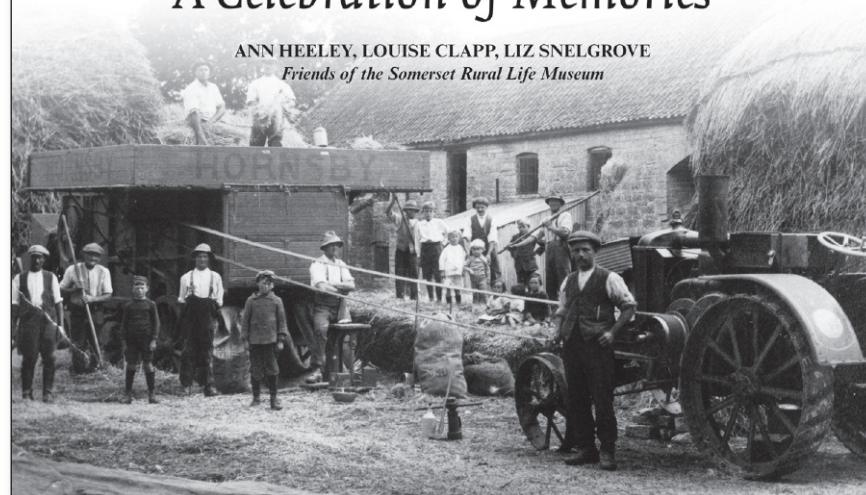
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A Celebration of Memories

ANN HEELEY, LOUISE CLAPP, LIZ SNELGROVE
Friends of the Somerset Rural Life Museum



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SOMERSET VOICES



Above: Margery Brown as a child sitting with her mother, Elsie Little, at their home, Whitelawns, Butleigh.



Top left: Stanley Cook on a Ferguson tractor in the late 1940s, at South Farm, Lymphsham.

Left: Teasels strung up on poles and propped together to dry.



Wassailing the apple trees at the Pike and Musket Inn, Walton, in the 1950s.

Below: Example of a double-page spread.

SOMERSET VOICES

Andrew Hill in March 2003 making a willow coffin in the workshop at Bridgwater



Robert Chambers makes a small block of willow prior to shaping it into a cricket ball at the workshop near Tanton cricket ground, October 2001.



Traditional willow cricket ball-making declined in Somerset but was re-started in 1987 by an Australian barman with two partners. Robert Chambers (b.1970) began as an apprentice and in 2000 purchased the business which is now in a workshop near the Somerset cricket ground in Tanton. He uses a triangular wedge or cleft of seasoned solid willow wood from a mature tree.

Little bit of a strange one! I was contacted out of the blue by Somerset careers office. They said there was an apprenticeship going in Tanton. They didn't actually tell me what it was for, but they just said it was on the subject of woodwork. So I came for an interview and thought 'Ahh! That is interesting, not many people do that!' It just went from there.

The willow merchants have big monopolies with farmers who grow willow for

AT WORK

them. It's about a ten year cycle. The willow merchants will then go and harvest the trees and sell it on to us. It's chopped down into manageable blocks. Basically, from the rectangular block of willow we have to fashion that down to a workable size and to what we do is use a combination of machines to do this. We spend an awful lot of time sanding it down by hand. We've also got a horse's shin bone which gives it a final polishing. Now that's been soaked in linseed oil for six months and is just polished the wood off nicely. The handle is made of a Malaysian cane. It's got three or four rubber sandwiched in between. We have to rasp the handles to take out all the bumps and get a nice oval shape, and spike-shape the shoulders smooth.

Our cheapest bat is £155 and that goes up to about £245 for the top of the range. That's determined from the quality of the wood, which generally means the more grains in a piece, the better the performance, therefore the higher price.

In other parts of the wetlands peat-digging took place, especially in the moors around Glastonbury. The peat was dug in the spring and allowed to dry during the summer months before being taken to horse and cart round the towns and villages and sold as fuel for fires. It is now mainly used as a soil conditioner in gardens. Henry Willcocks (b.1906), of Westing, used to dig and sell peat.

We generally cut the peat from about April until the end of August because if you cut in the winter time the frost used to take the burning value out of the peat. We used to cut it ten inches long, eight inches high and nine inches deep. The blocks



A man cutting peat blocks and lifting them up to a woman who lays them out on mats.



Men at Kilve posing with eels and celebratory drinks as they display their catch of conger eels.