

## A Victorian Christmas in Farnsfield

The local newspapers in the Victorian era delighted in detailed descriptions of local village life and at times of major celebrations their reporters were at their most flamboyant. Christmas is no exception with the decorating of the church and the meat displays in the butchers' windows drawing the most lavish outpourings. Here is a glimpse into what the papers said about Christmas in Farnsfield.

### Church and Charity

On Christmas day there were several services at the parish church and at chapel a morning service and a large tea meeting in the afternoon. There was usually a comment about the

**CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS AT THE CHURCH.**—The Christmas decorations this year are more beautiful than ever, and the artistic taste is above all praise. The whole has been under the direction of the worthy vicar, assisted by the following ladies:—Mrs. Wilkins, Mrs. Parkinson, Mrs. Skeels, the two Miss Shacklocks, Miss Jackson, Miss A. Bell, and others. Over the windows is the inscription, "He shall save his people from their sins;" north side, "God with us;" south side, "Let the people praise Thee, O God;" over the children's seats, "Alleluia." Over the pillars of the arches are five handsome crosses, between the crosses emblems of the Trinity; over the communion table is a triangle arranged with great artistic taste. The organ is very beautifully and tastefully decorated, and so also is the Font. On the top of the font, in small everlasting flowers, is inscribed "Suffer little children to come unto me." A very neat cross and triangle by the belfry door in moss are beautifully arranged. The wreaths round the arches have a very pretty effect. In the sills of the windows there are aprons of ivy leaves. The whole must have taken much time, and does great credit to all who have assisted in this work in the house of God at this festive season.

level of attendance and how much was raised in the collection that day, but the most detailed description is saved for the church decorations. The display described in 1865 seems to have been particularly fine.

On Christmas Eve the villagers were woken by the ringing of the church bells followed by a party of people with hand bells which had a 'very pretty effect in the dead of night'. On Christmas morning the Wesleyan singers would visit various houses at an early hour and 'their singing sounded very sweetly

during the stillness of the night'. What time this was isn't mentioned, but clearly not much sleep was to be had by the villagers!

Christmas was always a time to consider the needs of the poor and many charitable donations were made. In rural England there was a tradition of going 'Thomas' on 21<sup>st</sup> December (St Thomas's Day), begging from door to door. The Victorian ethos of the 'deserving poor' was clearly evident here. In 1852, it was reported:

**ST. THOMAS'S DAY.**—The begging which takes place in this village on the above day increases every year. We believe that the widows on the present occasion have been well rewarded, but other women obtained very little encouragement.

Charitable donations to the poor were funded by the church, village charities, local farmers and landowners and each was carefully noted in the press. Money, bread, coal, soup and

beef were all typically given, recording the amount and by whom. In 1854 local farmers also sent hams to the soldiers in Crimea. The strangest charitable tradition was described in the paper in 1861:

*Curious Will at Farnsfield, Notts.*—An old record says : “Samuel Higgs, by his will, bearing date 11th May, 1820, gave £50 to the Vicar and Churchwardens of this parish, and directed that the interest should be given every year on 21st December, in equal proportions, to ten poor men and women, who could repeat the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, before the Vicar or such other person as he should appoint to hear them.” —The Charity Commissioners found that “the interest is applied according to the donor’s orders, and the poor persons appointed to partake of the charity continue to receive it during their lives.”

The fact that it provided life-long support must have been an incentive to ensure word perfect delivery.

### Feasts and Fun

Entertainments were arranged for the children including readings, songs and recitations. In 1851 a party of schoolchildren were invited to Hexgreave Hall by Mr John Parkinson. They were treated to ‘furmenty’ (or frumenty, a kind of grain porridge) and plum cake followed by a magic lantern show.

Most of the village farmers gave dinners for their workers and their families at Harvest time, but two local farmers, Mr Charles Doncaster of Riddings Hall and Mr Burnley of Lower Hexgreave, held these dinners at Christmas serving roast beef, plum pudding and nut-brown ale. In 1866 it was reported, *‘The dinner was served in the most liberal style of old English hospitality; and many were the hearty wishes that Mr Doncaster’s health might enable them all to meet together for another year’*. This wish was realised as Mr Doncaster was still holding his Christmas dinners in 1875.



In 1901 Mr Pogson, a wheelwright who ran a carriage works in Farnsfield, held his annual New Year dinner for employees, wives & children in the Wesleyan Schoolroom where they tucked into roast beef, turkey, jugged hare, plum pudding and mince pies. This was

followed by games & music. Proceedings were ‘enlivened’ by a visit from the Farnsfield handbell ringers who contributed selections on the bells & 1 or 2 musical items.

## The Butchers and their Beasts

Farmers would display and sell their animals at the Nottingham or Mansfield Christmas shows. This is where the butchers would buy the best beasts they could afford for their shops.

**CHRISTMAS CHEER AT FARNSFIELD.—**The show of meat amongst the butchers of this populous village did great credit. Mr. Cook, butcher, killed two prime four-year-old heifers, one bred and fed by Mr. William Hage, of Bilsthorpe, weighing upwards of 70 stone; the other bred and fed by Mr. Hutchinson, of Westborough Lodge, weighing over 60 stone; he also killed, besides other sheep and pigs, two very fine Southdown wethers, bred and fed by his Grace the Duke of Portland, being the two finest sold in the Mansfield Christmas market on the 17th. Mr. James Stendell, butcher, killed a beautiful four-year fat heifer, bred and fed by Mr. C. J. Neales, of Rodmanthwaite, near Mansfield, weighing about 60 stone; also two fine prime fat wethers, bred and fed by Mr. Marshall, of the Cotton Mill farm, weighing about 120lbs. each. The

The butchers' shop window displays were greatly anticipated and no detail is missed in the description of the fine beasts killed for the Christmas table in this report of 1869. For those who could afford it, beef seems to have been the favourite on Christmas day. Mutton, hams, sausages and pies would also be on

display. Although turkeys had been introduced to Europe by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was very much a luxury food. The coming of the railways made turkey more affordable as the birds could be transported more easily to market. By 1901, Mr Pogson's employees were thus treated to a wider variety of delicious seasonal fare.

The grocers' shops and Mr Singleton's newsagent and fancy goods shop usually had Christmas displays which occasionally caught the eye of the local reporter. In 1893 the grandly named Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Co was also singled out for its windows prettily arranged with boots, shoes and slippers.

There was one exceptional year in the many reports of Christmas festivities in the village and that was 1874 when it was reported that, *'Christmas in Farnsfield this year has been very dull, there being no amusements in any shape whatever for the inhabitants.'* Although there were decorations in the church, there were no night singers, no tea meeting, no festivities and the bells only rang once on Christmas morning. The explanation for this was the death of the Vicar on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1874 aged only 52. Reverend Wilkins had been both curate and then Vicar of St Michael's Church since 1849. He had been the driving force behind the rebuilding of the church, was dedicated to supporting the poor and was much respected in the village.

## Finally, did you know....

The Christmas cracker began as an idea developed by a London baker and confectioner called Tom Smith in 1847. Inspired by seeing tissue-wrapped 'bon bon' in Paris, he decided to wrap his sweets in paper treated with chemicals that made a small explosion when unwrapped. The idea caught on, the sweets were replaced by paper hats & small gifts and the Christmas cracker was born. What I would really like to know is who is responsible for the inclusion of all those awful jokes.....!