

OLD FROME

B.J. March

My memories of Frome were during the First World War, 1916, or thereabout. I lived in Broadway in a house that is not there now, just above the two big doorways of the steam wagon shed or building. The big doors are still there. The owners lived on the other side of the road higher up. I used to watch the men in the big doors working with black hands on the engines and driving them.

Then Badcox, the soldiers, any cigarette cards mister? Sometimes you were lucky, if as sometimes happened out would come his case, with two or three he had saved up for when he was asked, for a few minutes such friendship.



Badcox in 1912 showing The Parade and the narrow entrance to Vallis Way with The White Swan on the lefthand side.

Doctor Harris's surgery on the corner, bottom of Weymouth Road, had a card hung up over the fireplace.

"A man's a fool.

When it's hot he wants it cold,

When it's cold he wants it hot.

Always wanting what is not."

He had a very gruff voice.

I remember the blackout, no lights anywhere. My father and I were coming back from the allotment in Park Road. When we got to Badcox (there were) two policemen on duty. My father went and spoke to one of them and someone shouted out "Where's his light?" and of course I was pushing a trolley so kept going, should have had a light on it I suppose. Some people used to wear illuminated badges on their coats.

Then there was Dykes Bazaar, at Xmas Time lovely to look around. I went down town one day and I was too late, some boys told me they had been scrambling for halfpennys and pennys thrown by Australian soldiers. A big man with a leather thonged whip hung around his neck hanging down the front of him stood at the top of Stony Street.

There was Mr. Lewis the Pork Butcher, top of Catherine Hill, lovely streaky bacon, and Cottles halfway down, piles of sweets on the counter, hard boiled aniseed drops, shrimps, butterscotch, acid drops, and I bought two doenuts for a penny there, they were small with currants so I suppose they were bakers as well. There was queuing up for margarine at the Home and Colonial shop in Cheap Street, a man used to pat it up on the counter. Mr Holloway kept the paper shop Cheap Street, he used to fetch the football papers Saturday nights and sell them on the way back. He used to serve me with a paper for my father, a weekly called *Justice*. One night his wife with a big white apron on served me and gave me *Jester*. I had to take it back.



Broadway about 1957 showing the Red Lion Inn with carved lion above the door. This side of the street was demolished in the early 1960s.

I think my first memory of Frome was looking from North Parade, the entrance to Welshmill Road, and seeing the people at the Cheese Show, by the railway line the bottom of Welshmill Lane. A little later we moved to the top of Broadway near Cottle's Oak. There was two coal hauliers living there, horse and cart to Radstock and selling it to people. I remember the Welsh miners coming to the town, well you would see two of them, they would face one another and sing in the street. One day we had some soldiers billeted on us for a few days an officer came and arranged it.

In the summer and weekends we would play football at the Leaze which belonged to the United Brewery I believe. One day a big Handley Page double wing aeroplane two engines and propellers, that was really something to see very high off the ground, when it was started several boys had their hats blown off. That was many years before the Plastic Works was built and the Leaze was a big field. One day in the summer Mr. Bruzas and Windham Haines, both professional footballers came on the leaze for a kickabout, that was really something to us boys.

First time we went to the seaside it was Bournemouth, my sister and I sat up with the driver. I can't remember the sea but I remember a cart spraying water on the road to keep the dust down just outside Bournemouth.

Saturday mornings very often I would go to the cinema bottom of the Church Steps and Eagle Lane and the stamping of feet was terrific sometimes for the hero. Another place we went quite a lot was Vallis Vale. At that time they were working in the first quarry getting stone, and they had small trucks and a small steam engine lovely to look at and to see it moving. The first quarry to us was from the bottom of Egford Lane entrance. We used to do a bit of bird nesting for eggs too. I found a wren's nest once and put my fingers in and the bird pecked me. Another time I thought I had found a scarce nest and it was not long before I saw some bees coming out of there.

I used to go to Coleford Eastertime and stay with my aunt for a week and one day (a) young lady of the village came to me and said, knowing I was a Fromite, "Hey, Tudder, let's go in the Union Jack and have a ha'penny cup of tea and a ha'penny bun." I remember the Union Jack, it was a restaurant in Cork Street about three shops along from Stony Street. I thought to myself that ha'penny tea and bun was a few years before my time but I had heard the word Tudder a few times.

Another interesting thing we used to watch was the Council men tarring the road, an iron square tank which held the tar with a fire to heat it and a sprayer on the end, and a man, seemed to be the same one every time with a pair of goggles on, would spray the road all over, then two men would shovel stone chippings evenly over it.

I remember an army tank coming up Park Road on its own engine going to the park (First World War) where it stayed for a few years. About that time, or just a few years before, the Park grass was not cut but left to grow, like mowing grass, and we boys were crawling about in it and I nearly put my hand on a skylark's nest. The skylark was lovely to hear and I haven't hear one for years.

I can remember one or two German prisoners of war working on nearby farms, and the man who used to hammer the stones on the side of the road and break them smaller, quite big heaps.

Also the penny dinners at the Council school in Milk Street. I think it was three days a **week**, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, split pea soup and Shepherd's pie. Mr.Saunders the Head Master used to put it on the plates and the boys picked out would take it to the boys. Shepherd's pie was only on Fridays. I think I am right when I say it was done voluntary by the Ladies down in the cookery, where the girls learnt cookery. Marvellous ladies.

I remember Robert Knight who had four shops next to one another in Catherine Street, ladies clothes etc. At Christmas time (he) would advertise himself as Father Xmas for children. My! I went down but couldn't get anywhere near for the amount of children. I believe it was an orange each.



The remains of the steam waggon lying in the bed of the river Frome after the accident at Hapsford Bridge about 1930. (Miss B. Starr).

After the war was over Catherine Street and Hill would be a blaze of lighted shop windows Saturday nights and Mr. Francis who had a vegetable and wet fish shop about halfway down Catherine Hill would sit in his shop, hand on his walking stick, and call out prices to the people, no glass windows, and a lady used to serve.

It was some years later, maybe 1930, a steam waggon crashed through the wall on the bridge at Hapsford into the river below I should think quite twenty feet down. I went there on a Sunday and went over the wall the opposite side of the bridge looking in the river and saw quite a big fish about 18 inches long just stationary in the side about two feet of water helpless. I suppose it was stunned with the crash. A man picked it up no trouble and took it away.

I remember Welshmill because my father had an allotment there, quite a long piece of ground stretching the length of the wall by the road right hand side going to the river bridge as it was then, about the site of the children's playground. A family lived in a house with buildings at the back which belonged to or was being used by Messrs. Houston's, cloth manufacturers Robin's Lane. They had a mill there for milling the cloth. I am pretty sure it would be worked by the river water as the river was kept back by a very high wall with some mechanism to control the height of the water and this building was quite near the river, The cloth was going round and round between two wooden rollers.

I also remember Lord Bath the father of the late Lord Bath laying the Memorial stone at the Memorial Hall, the walls being perhaps four feet high and quite a crowd of people.

I remember the first crystal set radio, a friend of mine's father had one and I had a look at it, marvellous, and they did say that Frome Town Band did play at Bournemouth and it was broadcast, and picked up on the crystal set. There used to be a Radio Shop on the Church Steps. They did - I believe - make Radio Valve Radios, and sell spare parts, as people used to make their own sets and they could make a crystal set in a match box. Marvellous!