

VILLAGE ECHOES

GOUDHURST CELEBRATES THE RELIEF OF MAFEKING

Between October 1899 and May 1900 the small town of Mafeking, in South Africa, was besieged by a force of some five thousand Boers under the command of Piet Cronje. Within the town were about two thousand British troops, under their commanding officer Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, together with some seven and a half thousand black African refugees from the surrounding area. The siege on the town was eventually lifted in the early hours of 17 May 1900, when troops under the leadership of Colonel Mahon broke through the Boer lines. When news of the relief of Mafeking reached the British people at home it was cause for a great celebration.

The news reached Goudhurst on the morning of 26 May 1900 and very soon acts of celebration were under way. A succession of rifle shots was fired in the grounds of Lidwells to announce the news. The church bells rang out and flags of all shapes and sizes were seen flying from buildings and trees throughout the parish.

On the following Monday afternoon, the shops were closed and a torchlight procession was announced for that evening. As always on these occasions, a committee was formed to oversee the arrangements for the celebrations. The church bells were ringing out once again and the children from the National School assembled on the Plain with their master, Mr John Gripper, to sing 'God save the Queen' and 'The Union Jack'. Following this, Mr Wanstall recited Rudyard Kipling's poem entitled the 'Absent-Minded Beggar'. A hat was passed round the crowd and the sum of thirty shillings was collected towards the AMB (Absent-Minded Beggar) Fund for soldiers of the Boer Wars. This brought the total collected by Mr Wanstall, at various such recitals, to £15.

Then came the procession. Torches were lit and the Brass Band led the way from the centre of the village towards Beechurst, down Chequers Road to Etchinghill on the road to Marden, returning to the village centre along North Road. Following the band was the Weald of Kent Steam Fire Engine, its crew members dressed in full uniform with brasses glinting in the torchlight, and sounding the engine's whistle constantly along the route. Behind them marched the Boys' Brigade in

their uniforms. Men and women carrying torches joined the procession, many in fancy dress or wearing brightly coloured scarves or sashes. Cyclists in all manner of fancy dress rode bicycles that were colourfully decorated and dressed with lights. There were pedestrians and men on horseback representing various branches of Her Majesty's Services, and there was even a car with 'Colonel Baden-Powell', alias Mr W Hobbs, in it.

The evening's celebrations were rounded off with a grand firework display after which the gathered crowd gave stirring renditions of 'God Save the Queen' and 'Rule Britannia!'. At around midnight celebrations drew to a close and the crowd gradually dispersed to make its way home.

The above has been taken from various accounts of the celebrations in the local newspapers of the time. However, Amos Mercer, whose recollections of events were recorded in the Goudhurst Coronation Book of 1937 gave a more down-to-earth account of events. He said "Did I ever tell you what a jolly good turnout we had at the Relief of Mafeking in 1900? There were three barrels of beer down on the Plain and you could go and get it as you liked. Not many went to bed before 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. The Fire Brigade was out and went round the village – there was quite a procession of us. We all went on the spree!"

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