

Village Echoes

Before the creation of the welfare state, the only way most people could receive financial help in times of illness, unemployment or old age was through membership of a Friendly Society. Members of these societies contributed regular sums of money to the society, and could receive monetary benefit in times of need. Such societies became popular during the 18th century and probably gradually took over the role provided by parish relief and other charitable causes in previous centuries as described in February's Village Echo. However, it was during the Victorian and Edwardian eras that they flourished.

The first such society known to have existed in the parish was the Goudhurst Benefit Society. The date it was established is unknown. However, in 1830 a petition signed by the then Vicar of Goudhurst, William Bagshaw Harrison, and others was presented to the Justices of the Peace for Kent asking for official permission to dissolve the society and distribute the funds among the membership. Their reason for doing so was because at that time, none of the members were receiving or entitled to receive any benefit through "sickness, old age or infirmity" and so the majority of the membership had voted to dissolve the society. Permission was, we must assume, granted because eight years later, on the 1st June 1838, the Society was re-established under the same name.

Although no written records of the Society's transactions appear to have survived, copies of its articles, i.e. rules and regulations revised and printed in 1860 and 1893 do. From these we learn that membership was restricted to those between 18 and 38 years of age who were not members of other benefit societies and who were not already suffering from ill-health and thus likely to become a burden on the funds. Prospective members had to be proposed by an existing member, pay a deposit of 2s 6d, provide a medical certificate and then hope to obtain at least two thirds of the existing members' votes at their monthly meeting. Obtaining less than the required number of votes meant that the person was not elected and their deposit was returned to them.

Meetings took place monthly during which members paid their contributions, the minimum amount being 1s 6d per month. Members in need of benefit were entitled to receive 10s a week for 13 weeks, followed by 5s a week thereafter. Members whose illness was deemed to be their own fault, i.e. caused by their own imprudence or misconduct, received nothing.

Once a year, in June, the Society held an "Anniversary Day". Attendance was compulsory and members were fined if they did not attend. Reports in the local press show that a typical anniversary day began with members assembling for a meeting at 9am in the Star & Crown where they held their regular monthly meetings. A church service came next, followed by visits to some of the local gentry and then lunch. In 1875 the village was "en fete", being decorated with boughs of oak and horse-chestnuts to celebrate the society's 37th anniversary. Despite the "scorching" sun more than 100 members attended the morning service and another 50 non-members joined them for lunch (provided by Mr Fry, the landlord of the Star & Crown) in a marquee erected for the purpose. Musical entertainment followed by loyal toasts completed the event.

As well as the anniversary day, occasionally the benefit society joined forces with other friendly societies in the parish and held an “amalgamated fete” as they called them. Thus in 1907 the members of the Goudhurst Benefit Society, The Ancient Order of Foresters and the Goudhurst Branch of the Oddfellows (Men of Kent Lodge, no 3963) all attended lunch in a spacious tent set up in the field owned by J S Clarke, the Vicar of Goudhurst (i.e. the field in Church Road where the present day fete is held). The day commenced at 6am with the ringing of the church bells, followed by a church service at 10.30am, a procession through the village headed by the “Ceylon Band” from Tunbridge Wells and the banner bearers of the societies taking part, and then visits to the principal subscribers in the district. Altogether 300 members dressed in their regalia sat down to enjoy lunch and the organised entertainment which included songs and instrumental solos as well as roundabouts and other attractions.

Change came in 1912, when the 1911 National Insurance Act came into force. The Act established the national system of insurance for working people against illness and unemployment. All wage earners aged between 16 and 70 were obliged to contribute. Initially the scheme was administered by “approved societies” – i.e. local societies such as the Goudhurst Benefit Society who had been approved by the authorities. However, according to Jesse Martin’s (whose father was a member) account in the 1935 Goudhurst Jubilee Book, the society did not follow this option as their younger members voted instead for a “share-out” of about £10 each, and the society broke up sometime after February 1912.

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