



Bishopstone Thomas Turtle Blind from Birth

But Mr. Tom Turtle is Happy and Contented
BISHOPSTONE VETERAN

Here's the happiest man in Bishopstone – Mr. Thomas Turtle. He's happy for a number of reasons. Not least of which appears to be that he is blind and has been since birth.

The reasons for his happiness are roughly:

He doesn't know how old he is "leastways, not to a twelvemonth";

He's a bachelor;

He can't read or write,

He was born on Christmas Day;

He's a philosopher,

Tom lives in a thatched cottage – one of the many which embellish this pretty village.

Sense of Direction

From within a loud " 'ullo" answered when I tapped the door, writes a North Wilts Herald reporter. I asked permission to come in; Tom granted it with a smile, and he pointed to a chair which he could not see.

Wearing a trilby hat, and seated by the side of a dead fire, he was having a meal, but his smile showed that he did not resent the intrusion.

I told him I wanted him to tell me something of his sightless life. He hunted a piece of potato round his plate, and, with that marvellous sense of direction, forked it, and swallowed it, and then he started.

As to his age - "I couldn't tell you, leastways, not within a twelvemonth, but 'tis as nigh as 70 last Christmas Day, or 7- next Christmas Day. I've sort o' lost count.

"Yes, I was born when the plum pudding and the whiskey were about! Bishopstone I were born in, but 'twas a near squeak as I were't born in Wanborough" he added as though to convey that Wanborough was the loser.

"My father kept the Brewer's Arms and " - as he sipped a cup of tea - "brewed his own beer and drank it".

Basket Making Work

Tom Turtle's "apprenticeship" to the craft of basket-making seemed rather haphazard, and in any case, it was a case of the blind learning from the blind.

First of all, he went to the village school till he was 12 years of age, but what he learnt there is rather a mystery, for, as he told me later, he has never read, nor written a word in his life.

"Basketmakers were on the road in them days," he reflected; "they used to do occasional jobs in the villages they past through, and many of them would rather be on the road than at work. I picked up a bit of the game from them, and then I started on my own".

"I picked up a bit more from a man who was apprenticed at the Blind Institutions at Bristol," he went on, adding "he did 'planner' tuning as well".

With obvious relish, he related how, when working for a man in the village, he had been told that there was a pension for every blind person over 60 years of age; how numerous unending forms were filled in, and then how, months after, he got the pension, and I realised with no uncertainty what a great boon it was to him.

But returning to the subject of his work "I don't do much of it now," he told me "I am getting on, and I can't get on with it so well – bending and twisting about, I can't do it, and I'm not going to. Sometimes I like a job, just to amuse me in the day".

Early To Bed

With the air of a man who has lost a keen competitor, he told me that he had heard that a basket maker had left Swindon for good, and this would no doubt make a difference to his trade. "But there ain't much watercress growing in Bishopstone now, not like there used to be," he observed, "there is only about one man here who sends to Birmingham, and of course, he wants baskets – I've got two or three to make now – but most of 'em just send it in bunches to Swindon.

Early to bed and early to rise has made Tom Turtle healthy if not wealthy, "I usually get off to bed about nine o'clock, 'taint up good bidin' up moonin about, and then I gets up about eight o'clock. Of course, if I got anything on the board, I gets up earlier, but if I haven't, well I just bides and rests.

Good health he has always enjoyed, he smokes, and occasionally "I 'as a pint, but who's going to pay 6d a pint "Tisn't for what good it does you now".

Time Does'nt Matter

Braille and all modern inventions for this well being of the blind have been denied this philosopher, but he had no compunction in talking of his affliction. "I gets on as well as I can," he said. "sometimes it makes me look silly when I speak to the wrong people, but then that don't matter. I've lived here alone for 20 years, I suppose it is, though I don't take much count of time. But I all is looks after myself, does my own washing and mending, makes my own bed and gets my meals.

"Since these yer darn motey cars and bikes have been about, I don't get about so much as I used – prevention is better can cure you know.

"I've got me wireless set, and of a night, I can listen to Jack Payne, and hear what's going on, and that's pretty good for anybody as can't read!".

With a smile, he wished me good day, indicated where the door was, and resumed his meal with a placid air of contentment.

Source: North Wilts Herald 15 September 1933