

LIVING IN ALRESFORD A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

by

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1961 has been the year of the census and just as people in a hundred years will be able to read what we filled in on our census papers, so we are now able to study the details which were noted about the people of Alresford between 1870 and 1880. If then you stood on the church tower with your back to the newly built railway station, you could see nearly all the houses of Alresford without moving your feet. (Behind you where most of the town is built today was rolling downland.) According to the 1871 census over 1500 people lived in those houses. Today's electoral roll shows 400 adults in the same properties. How did they all squeeze in?

Other photographs are valuable for showing how Alresford dressed. Much better than we do today: But of course people were better dressed, their clothes were made locally and made to last. The census tells us that there were 31 dressmakers, 9 tailors and 16 boot-makers. So many white dresses and aprons: A lot of laundry with no washing machines, no piped water even: But there were 30 ladies plying the trade of laundress. All of which goes to emphasize what the census shows; that Alresford was a town of craftsmen producing what the locality needed. Today our shops sell the goods of other towns and countries and one has little redress when the thing breaks down. It was a very different matter when the workshop was just around the corner.

There were no playing fields for the children. Perins was still at the bottom of West Street with no recreation ground. I suspect the boys enjoyed themselves in the country pursuits which are nowadays frowned on by the busybodies - birdnesting, ferretting and tickling the trout. At harvest time the farmers could do with all the casual labour they could get and strong lads were encouraged to play truant from school. Entertainment for the adults was more plentiful The Alresford Coursing Club was in full swing, the Bowling Club is a very old one. the H.H. had meets in the town, and cricket was played where the fifth hole of the Golf Club is now sited. In the evening there were lectures at the Mechanics Institute, dances and musical evenings at the Swan and Market House, where the upstairs room had been specially built for large public functions.

But it was a much drabber place. Brick and white plaster made grey by the dust raised from the unmade roads by the horse traffic where paint was used it was muddy brown, green or black - none of the gay colours we have today.

It was a much quieter place; full of country sounds instead of the sound which dominates our lives - traffic, with its all-pervading stink of petrol. What the census cannot describe are the old time smells of Alresford. walk with me and smell the town as it was a hundred years ago in the spring. We're going up the Dean, having enjoyed the scent of hawthorn and spring flowers along the river. Phew: That smell's strong enough to knock out the memory of hawthorn. Oh, yes: the gas works on the right. As we turn into West Street the gas works are forgotten as Hunts Brewery dominates our nostrils. A good English smell. Past the entrance to the Brewery more individual smells take charge - the bakeries, 3 of them mixed up with the meaty, gamey smells of Hasted's butchery and Meakins 'fish and poultry'. Then into Broad Street, whose sheer width is enough to dispel the odours but there is a fine mixture of spice and baking from the shop which was recently the Georgian Tea Rooms. Now we're past the shops and all our noses tell us is that these people keep horses. Start down Mill Hill. What is this dreadful pong? The tanneries of Alresford, of course. No wonder it used to be called Tanyard Hill. For hundreds of years children have been born and brought up around the Soke where the stench of drying leather dominated all other smells. No wonder we're always digging up bits of clay pipe around here. One needed to add a personal stink to overcome the tanneries: