Pocklington in 1925

JIM AINSCOUGH

POCKLINGTON IN 1925

This evening I want to take you on a journey a century back in time to a small market town in East Yorkshire, Pocklington. Nobody is alive today who can talk to us about life in the town then so we have to depend on whatever evidence we can find and on our imaginations. I think, if we were parachuted into 1925 Pocklington, we would recognise where we were from its buildings and road plan but I suspect we would be startled by just how different it was in many ways from what we know today. But before we begin a detailed examination of the town let's remember what the townspeople had so recently experienced, that is the First World War, the memories of which must have been still very much alive.

In 1925 the Great War, as it was known in those days, had ended just over six years before and Pocklington, like all communities, had suffered grievous losses of its young men during that conflict. It worked its way through its grief in part by creating tangible reminders

WW1 memorial in Pocklington School

WW1 memorial in All Saints Church

WW1 memorial

Just after the mill was demolished and before the Post Office was built

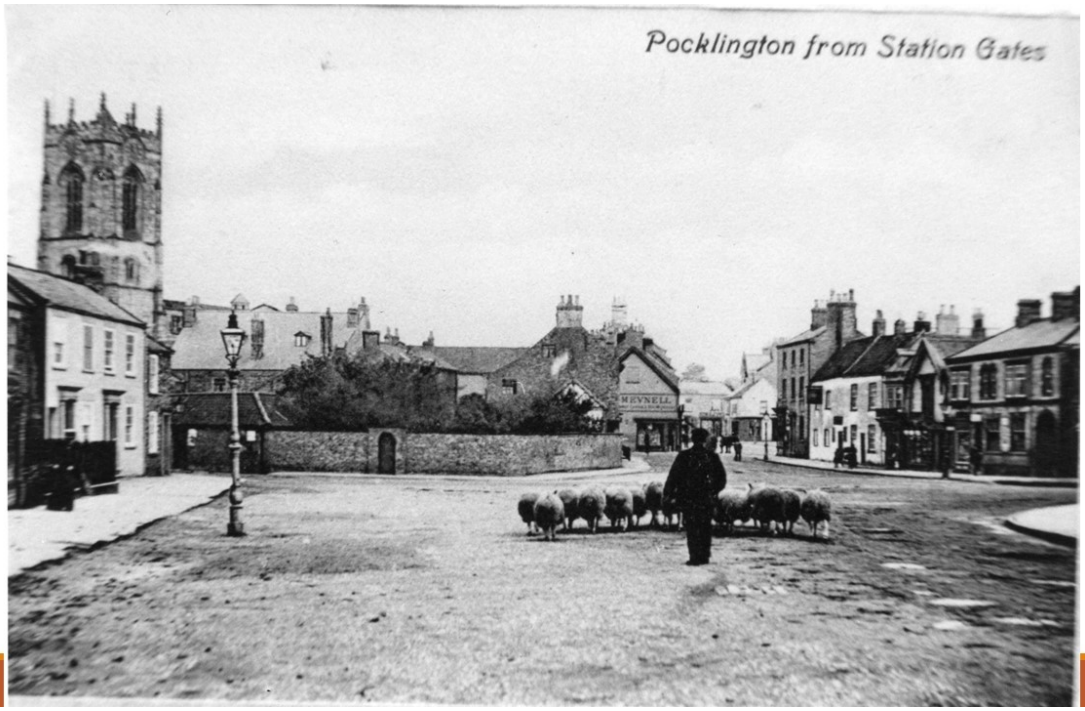
Around 1925

of the fallen - the memorial in the Market Place (by the post office) and memorials in all the churches. Pocklington Grammar School had its own dead to mourn. So Remembrance Day in the 1920s must have meant so much more to people then than today. It brought the entire community, its churches and youth organisations together in a common act of remembrance and shared sadness. Maybe we need to reflect on the overwhelming grief which must continue to have been experienced by people in the 1920s, most of whom would have been impacted in some way by the appalling loss of human life during the Great War.

So, to get us started I would like you to imagine you are standing in George Street just outside this building in September 1925. In front of you is the road dusty after the hot dry days of summer - in winter it would likely be muddy. The road surface was macadamised, small stones or pebbles compacted by the traffic passing over it, suitable for horses but not really for the new motor traffic and not water-proof like today. Looking towards the centre you see the town's oldest building, the parish church and on the road almost opposite the Church one of its newest buildings, Hill's Garage.

Note the electric cable which ran from the garage to his corner shop. A generator was in the garage.

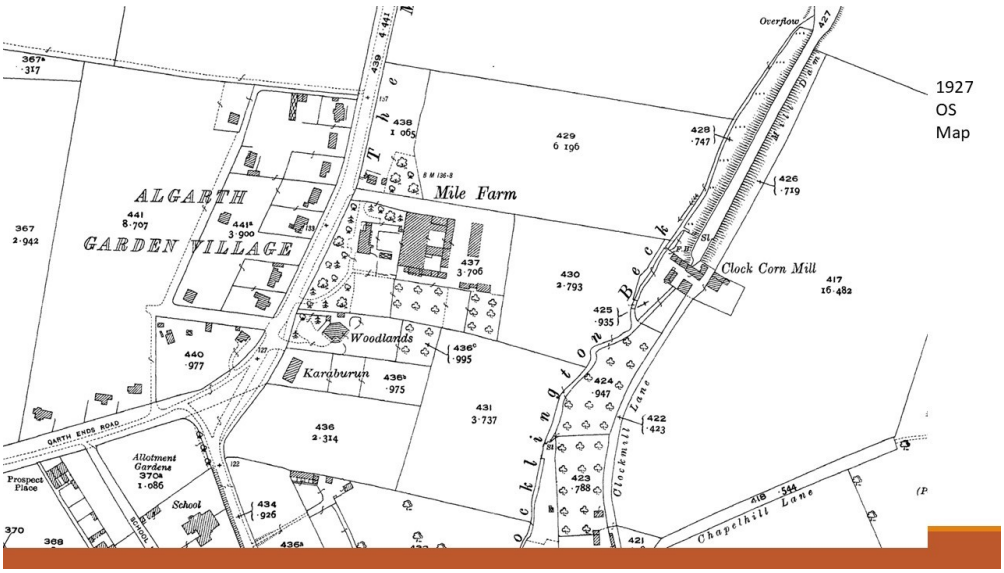
Looking in the opposite direction out of town, at the end of George Street on the corner of Barmby Lane, you can just see another garage, Everingham's, and beyond that - fields. On George Street itself you might catch sight of a motor vehicle, much more common since the end of the war and the development of bus services; but you are more likely to see a bicycle or a motorbike, both becoming cheaper and so within the purchasing power of more people.



You would probably be even more likely to see a horse-drawn vehicle or even cows or sheep. You would most certainly see and smell animal deposits in the roadway. Now turn right, or cross George Street and go into one of the houses. Unlike today, it was almost certainly lit by gas mantles and warmed by coal fires. Electricity was still something of a novelty. For most residents cooking and baking would be done on a coal-fuelled range which would have to be kept going even on the hottest of days. Most properties would not have purpose-built bathrooms and about half the dwellings in the town still had an earth closet in the yard at the back often shared with neighbours. I think it's becoming clear that everyday living for our forebears 100

years ago was considerably different from today. Also apparent from the traffic on the road is that they were, like us, living at a time of rapid change. So let's now burrow a bit more deeply.

Pocklington's reason for existence in 1925 was as a market town. The majority of its working population found employment in the town's shops, businesses and services or on nearby farms. The Kelly's Trade Directory of that year shows us that the town's manufacturing and services were geared significantly to the needs of farming which I doubt one could say today. Although some people who lived in the town used the railway and the developing bus services to work elsewhere such as York or Leeds they were few. Most people who lived in the town worked in the town or close by. So how many people lived in Pock in 1925? The population of the township at the 1921 Census was 2623. Advance a century and the most recent census in 2021 reveals a population of 10123. So in the century since 1925 the population has almost quadrupled although most of this increase, apart from the temporary ballooning of its population in WW2, was to come in the second half of the century.



If you were born and bred in Pocklington, you were likely to know most of the people you came across every day; a massive difference from

today when most people we come across are strangers to us. Another observation walking around 1925 Pocklington is (an obvious one) that there were far fewer houses than today. Few of the “homes for heroes” promised during the recent Great War were being built here and new house building only began seriously in the 30s. Local builder Joseph Allison had made a start building what was known as the Algarth Model Village but he only built houses to order and few had been put up by 1925. During the decade and a half following the war only 82 new houses were built in Pocklington. Larger scale building of cheaper properties for purchase, supported by government grants, like most of the houses on Garth End and the first council houses on George Street and Edward Street were to be the work of the 1930s.

The poor of the town lived in properties which we would know as slums. Grape Lane (100 yards down the road from where we are now) comprised a series of small tenanted cottages fronting Pocklington Beck and therefore liable to flooding. Each property had two rooms downstairs, two bedrooms upstairs and an outside earth closet shared with neighbours. The rent was between 7p and 10p weekly.

(otherwise known as 1/6 and 2 shillings). This information can be detailed because of the survey of the entire country carried out between 1909 and 1914 to value all property with a view to introducing a new property transaction tax - the survey was pretty much completed completed but the tax was never introduced. The occupants of the town's most dilapidated properties on Grape Lane and Church Street were to be among the tenants of Pocklington's first council houses in the mid-30s.

The lodging house in Union St. run by members of the Harrison family

The town also had two Lodging Houses used mainly by itinerant workers often Irish at harvest time. An interesting feature to note is that the poorer properties and the superior dwellings of the better-off were often almost adjacent to each other and certainly no more than a couple of minutes' walk away. This was very different from major towns where slum areas were more extensive and usually well separated from the dwellings of the better-off.

Wilberforce House

For example, just round the corner from Grape Lane is Wilberforce House, a mansion of a property compared with the Grape Lane cottages. In 1925 it was owned and lived in by the solicitor Alfred Summerson whose sister owned some of the Grape Lane slums! (If you look on our website you will find the transcript of a presentation which I did about Alfred Summerson some years ago - he's a bit of a hero of mine, a local lad, son of a blacksmith who won a scholarship to the Grammar School, qualified as a solicitor in York and set up a practice in the town. By 1925 he was not only a successful solicitor but also clerk to the council and a magistrate and one of the town's most respected senior citizens).

So we know that in 1925 the town had its slums and Lodging Houses all now long gone. But what other buildings did the town have which are not here now? Continuing the theme of the poor, the town had a workhouse known as The Institution or The Poplars on Burnby Lane. It served the town and the surrounding district. The regime of the nineteenth century workhouse was made deliberately harsh to discourage the poor from seeking help and thereby burdening the ratepayers. We will all be familiar with the picture of wretched workhouse conditions from Dickens' novels (although Dickens did exaggerate a bit). But the old 19th Century ideas that the workhouse should be seen as a deterrent and that poverty was somehow the consequence of character defect and moral failing were changing as the country edged its way towards creating a Welfare State. The introduction of Old Age Pensions and unemployment insurance in 1909now made it possible to survive hard times outside the workhouse. (However, unemployment insurance was not available to farm labourers until well into the 1930s.) Greater financial security when old or unemployed meant that increasingly the residents of the

Institution tended to be the frail elderly, the infirm and the mentally ill often with no family to support them. The Institution also had a responsibility to help unmarried mothers. The Master at this time was James Curtis who had a reputation for firmness but also sympathy and flexibility. He did his best to keep the residents in good health despite the prevalence of bronchitis and tuberculosis. Those residents who were able were encouraged to cultivate the land around the workhouse and to keep pigs. The money raised was spent on the residents. I think we would say James Curtis' heart was in the right place. He was clearly appalled (two years earlier in 1923) to learn that two elderly female residents had bedsores and dirty feet. When the nurse supposedly responsible for their care lost her temper when questioned she was dismissed. On his advice the local Medical Officer of Health Dr. Fairweather persuaded the Board of Guardians, which was responsible for raising money through local rates to run the establishment and for supervising its work, to buy two air beds for patients with bedsores. This episode is representative of a humane approach by the Board towards the less fortunate in society and a long way from Dickensian descriptions. It's also clear that there was a harmonious and constructive relationship between workhouse and township.

Christmas was a time in particular when townspeople's generosity was on display and the town's shopkeepers and prosperous citizens sent gifts and arranged special food, festive decorations and entertainments for the workhouse residents. There is certainly evidence in Pocklington of the changing attitude towards the poor away from the nineteenth century view that the poor were responsible for their own poverty. To further illustrate this was the "cottage home" on Burnby Lane established to house school age children who found themselves in the Institution. Edith Hadden was the Foster Mother whose remit was to give the children in her care an upbringing in as homely an environment as possible including the occasional holiday. The Home would be closed in 1933 when the owner would not renew the lease but by then there were only 5 children living there. (other arrangements were made for them I suspect foster care which was gradually coming in.)

Residents of the workhouse received medical attention when they were ill but what about health provision for everybody else in 1925?

There was no general “free at the point of delivery” arrangement as there is now. General healthcare was a patchwork. Doctors were self-employed and charged for their services and the medicines they prescribed so if you could afford it you paid. The 1911 National Insurance Act enabled the payer (usually the male bread-winner), to see a doctor but not his family and agricultural workers were excluded from NI until later in the next decade. Some working people and tradespeople were members of Friendly Societies whose benefits would include some medical expenses. There is also anecdotal evidence that kindly doctors would treat poor people without charge. The poor would self-medicate, probably using remedies passed down through the family. I guess if you were poor you would think long and hard before going to a doctor knowing that your family finances were on a knife-edge at the best of times. Hospitals such as York County Hospital provided more sophisticated treatments again on a fee-paying basis. This was used by Pock people and there is evidence of a good deal of charitable money-raising in the town to provide urgent free treatment for the very poor. Perhaps this somewhat “hit and miss” provision may explain the veneration in which many people hold the NHS in our time.

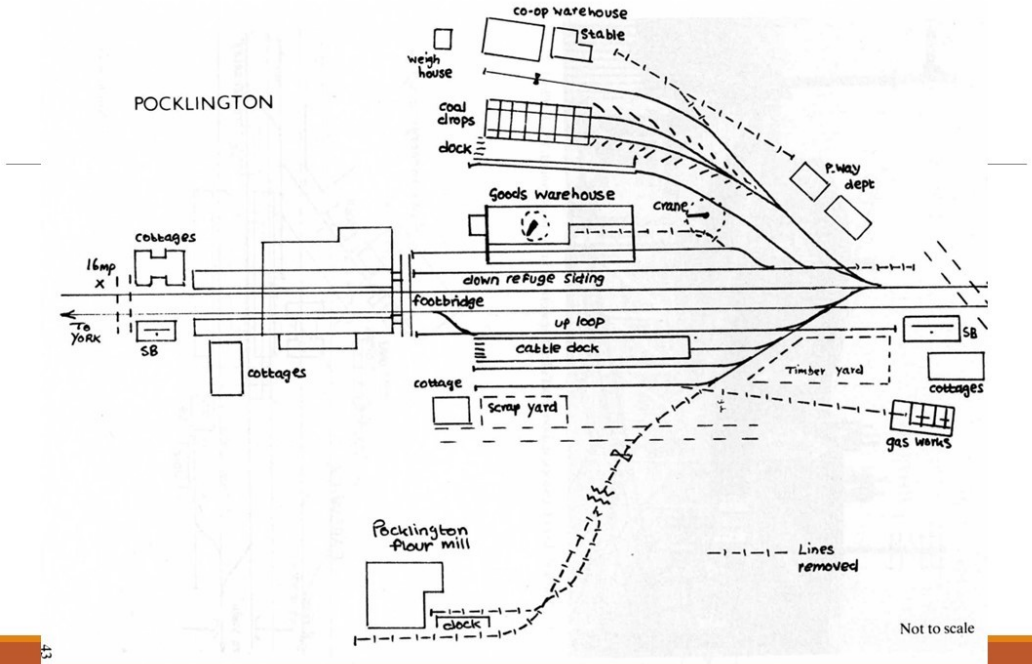
Another sight no longer available for us to see is the Gas Works roughly where Sainsburys is today. The town's first gas works dates back to the 1830s but it was superseded in the 1880s by the New Pocklington Gas Works. The town's streets and most of the houses were illuminated by gas. A regular sight was the gaslighter doing his rounds turning the street lights on and off. Electricity remained a novelty for most people in 1925 mainly used by a handful of shop-owners with their own generators. However, the establishment of the National Grid in 1926 was to lead to a massive expansion of the availability of electricity in the next decade. Interestingly, an unforeseen use of the domestic supply of gas had been during wartime when people were warned about enemy Zeppelins overhead when the Gas Works lowered the gas pressure so home lights dimmed.

The building on the left was previously Victoria Hall before becoming part of English's mill

Victoria Hall

There were two more buildings long since gone, two buildings at the heart of Pocklington cultural life and entertainment in 1925 - the Victoria Hall and the Central Hall. The Victoria Hall was built just before the end of the previous century by Thomas Grant, the town's

foremost Victorian builder, following a fire which destroyed his warehouse. For over 30 years it was used for plays, musical events, dances, bazaars and dinners and of course for showing films. Its heyday was the First World War when many entertainments were attended by troops in training at nearby Ousethorpe Camp. The first record of a film being shown in the town dates to 1900 and it was in the Victoria Hall. I think the Central Hall was always the poor relation of the Victoria Hall, certainly as a cinema. Both Halls came out of the Great War as thriving businesses but although both were still in existence in 1925 they weren't to last. The owner of the Central, Fred Lee, died in 1918 and his widow, Ida, struggled to maintain the Hall and keep the business afloat. Neither hall survived the 1930s.
Although smaller halls were available - the King's Hall in Chapmangate, the Drill Hall and the Masonic Hall (This the only survivor today) - the town lacked a venue with large capacity and facilities for handling dances and whist drives etc.
Following its 1923 renovation, the Victoria Hall was the venue for Alfred Allison's cinema but when he opened his "Majestic Cinema" in Manor Yard, Chapmangate in 1927, the Victoria Hall was to lose its biggest customer. So in our chosen year of 1925 cinema-going was growing in popularity in the town although we are still in the age of the silent screen. We will return to the Majestic Cinema later in the presentation.



The next building I want to refer to remains to this day but no longer serving its original purpose. This was the railway station. Pocklington Railway Station in 1925 was the beating heart of Pocklington as it had been for three quarters of a century. With its goods, coal and cattle sidings it was one of the town's major employers and was central to

the town's and district's transport needs. There was a steady stream of traffic to and from the station mainly involving horse-drawn transport but this was changing as motor vehicles developed. As late as 1925 carriers still plied their trade with horse and cart carrying packages and goods from the station and the town to the outlying villages and beyond e.g. to York. One of the railway company's strengths was carrying bulk cargoes like coal and fertilisers long distances cheaply to railheads like Pocklington where local hauliers or farmers would collect them. The railway would transport animals and farm produce like milk, wheat and other agricultural products to market.

(the opening of the York Sugar Beet Factory in 1926 was to add to the farmers' options). Let's not forget passenger traffic. There were 4 or 5 trains daily to and from York and Hull stopping at all the stations and 3 or 4 more expresses with limited stops so employment, shopping and schooling beyond the town were now all increasingly possible with the development of a growing and prosperous middle class. Living in the town but working in York was by no means unknown in 1925. Perhaps the greatest days of the railway station were still to come when it

proved to be an essential link in the supply chain ferrying bombs and other war materials to the bomber air base opened in Pocklington in 1941. At a time when motoring for the common man was still a dream, we mustn't forget the significance of railways to people and travel in the 1920s.

If you were to walk around the main streets in the centre of the town in 1925 - what we call the shopping centre - you would notice a wide variety of shops but an absence of what we would today call national names or brands. Look through the trade directories for the period (copies of which can be found on our website) and few of the names will be familiar. The major banks are there in 1925 - although they have gone now! - but most of the shops and businesses are local and family-run. (I only found Stead and Simpson and the Co-op as national names). Kelly's Directory for 1925 states, "The local trade includes brewing, malting, rope and twine making; there are agricultural implement manufactories, and in the neighbourhood several corn mills, clothing' factory and pearl barley mills". All these no longer exist. In that year a branch of the Gateshead-based grocery firm Walter

Willson opened in the town adding to the already large number of grocery shops - I counted a dozen in Kelly's, 7 butchers, 8 boot makers and repairers, 4 saddlers, 6 drapers, 5 confectioners and a wheelwright, all for a town of 2,600. And nine public houses! (that's one for around every 300 citizens).

Several of the larger grocery shops operated regular delivery services to local villages and groceries were still being delivered by horse-drawn rulleys. Also included in the list are relatively new businesses stimulated by the inventions of cycling and motor vehicles. It's only when you realise that Pocklington was a market town catering for most of the needs of the farming communities in its hinterland that you understand why, in these labour intensive days, such a large number and wide variety of shops and services existed. And as we still know today, market forces determine whether or not a local business flourishes or fails. During the coming decades most of these businesses would face the cold wind of competition and either adapt and survive or go under.

Another set of buildings which were relatively new to Pocklington were those related to the transport developments of the period. At a time when few people owned one of the new motor cars, cycling and motorcycling were very popular and in 1925 the town was well provided with facilities for their purchase and repair.

For motor cars, garages and petrol pumps had sprung up in the new century. The development of local bus services and motor vehicle haulage after the war was undermining businesses based on horse-drawn transport. Members of the enterprising Everingham family, Sidney and Irwin, started their motor bus service having bought up surplus vehicles cheaply at the end of the war. They used demountable superstructures so vehicles could be used for a variety of purposes.Their grey and light blue buses operated regular services to and from York. William Grainger's and Robert Stark's lorries were in demand for transporting materials like fertilisers, coal and road building materials. With growing amounts of heavy traffic it's not surprising that the UDC's Surveyor, Joseph Butterworth, described the town's roads in 1925 as water bound and in a deplorable condition,

muddy in winter and dusty in summer. As I said at the start, the roads were very suitable for horse-drawn transport but not for motor vehicles.

In 1925 Butterworth persuaded the UDC to purchase a steam road roller and a tar-spraying machine and, with government grants and subsidies, launched a road improvement scheme. In 1932 he reported to the council, ….“since 1925 the whole of the roads in the Urban District have been resurfaced with tarred limestone at an approximate cost of £12000 and the whole of the roads are in excellent condition”. So 1925 saw the beginning of a radical improvement to Pocklington’s roads. Increasing use of motor vehicles was changing the face of the town. Garages, petrol pumps, road signs and markings were visible indications of a new age. And to compensate for the loss of jobs in the disappearing businesses came new employment opportunities such as drivers, bus conductors, mechanics and clerks. Improving transport links with York and the ease and cheapness with which Pocklington shoppers could get to York concerned the town’s businessmen to the extent that they set up in 1925 the Pocklington Development

Association. They wanted locals to spend their money in Pocklington, not York, Leeds or Hull. An effort to develop the town as a holiday destination not surprisingly came to nothing but Pocklington Shopping Week was to be a resounding success. During the Week shops stayed open for longer and most of them took part in a window display competition. Although it was not repeated it does indicate that Pocklington business folk were fully aware of how their world was being changed by new transport developments and were up for the challenge of increasing competition.

The most significant domestic property in the town was Burnby Hall and its extensive pleasure gardens. The occupants were Percy Stewart and his wife Katharine. Percy Stewart had aristocratic connections being descended from the Dukes of Galloway and he boasted Winston Churchill as a second cousin.(although there is no evidence they knew each other). As a young man, therefore, Percy was well aware of his family background,(one of his his godfathers was the Duke of Marlborough hence Marlborough as his middle name) but without landed wealth he could only dream of leading the life of an

aristocrat and he had to make his own way in the world. His father, a vicar near Huntingdon, used his family contacts to secure the bright Percy a good education culminating in a first class honours degree in Semitic Languages at Christ's College Cambridge so a promising career in the church or in academia beckoned. But when his father died Percy abandoned the notion of a career in the Church which had been his father's wish for him but clearly not his, and came to Pocklington in 1896 recruited by the headmaster of the Grammar School to teach Hebrew. And it is here that he met Katharine Bridges. When she was widowed on the death of her husband, the Rector of Goodmanham, Percy and Katharine began a courtship which culminated in marriage in 1901 and the purchase of Ivy Hall later to be known as Burnby Hall.

Katharine was an heiress. Her father was a successful Quaker businessman who owned many collieries in the North East and she received regular and significant payments from the (Priestman) family trusts which managed and distributed the mines' profits. So Percy and Katharine's marriage was a classic example of breeding marrying

money; Percy now had access to an income which enabled a lifestyle commensurate with his aristocratic aspirations; Katharine in return had the companionship of a well-educated partner with social assurance and connections. During the years before the Great War Percy and Katharine developed Ivy Hall and its pleasure gardens (in particular its 2 lakes) and embarked on a series of tours in Europe and around the globe during which Percy indulged his love of motor cars, shooting and fishing. Katharine's travel agenda was more sedate with shopping and enjoyment of gardens high on her list. They both enjoyed the cultural side of travel. When it became clear after several years that, for whatever reason, there were to be no children the decision had to be made, what to do with their property. There is colloquial evidence that Katharine's brothers who administered the family Trusts were keen that, in the event of the marriage being childless, the result of their family Trust's generosity should not end up in the hands of work-shy aristocrats. (The Priestmans were Quakers with a strong work ethic). So Percy and Katharine decided that they would leave their house, land and most of their other assets in trust for the benefit of the townspeople and today of course we are the beneficiaries of their decision.

So in 1925 the Stewarts were socially Pocklington's senior citizens. They were good customers for the town's tradespeople and the townsfolk found employment in Burnby Hall and its gardens (cooks, maids, gardeners). Percy was a keen sponsor of sports clubs having been a talented sportsman in his day and the Stewarts were generous supporters of local charities and often opened their gardens to help in raising money for them. Their generosity was especially notable at Christmas when sit-down teas were organised for the town's poor, especially the children, with entertainment to follow. It's fair to point out that the Stewarts expected their employees and the locals to be deferential, which I believe they were.

However, the Stewarts' plans were about to be tested. And here's why and how. The claim to be a gentleman was associated in Percy's mind with land ownership and in 1914 he didn't have very much land beyond Ivy Hall and its gardens and Willow Waters down Burnby Lane. Then during the war both the major local estates came on the market, the Hayton and Burnby Estates comprising some 3000 acres and 16 farms. And Percy bought them both. And herein probably lies the explanation for the name change to Burnby Hall. However, Percy was no businessman - it was wartime and land prices were sky high but the opportunity to purchase such estates occurred infrequently and Percy was probably driven on by his ambition to become a landed gentleman and anyway income from the Trusts would finance the borrowing required as it had their lifestyle for the last 15 years. After the war, having bought these estates, Percy set about investing even more in his newly-purchased estates to create shooting and fishing facilities fitting for a landed gentleman.

Percy Stewart the hunter

But then the post-war economic depression set in and the decline of

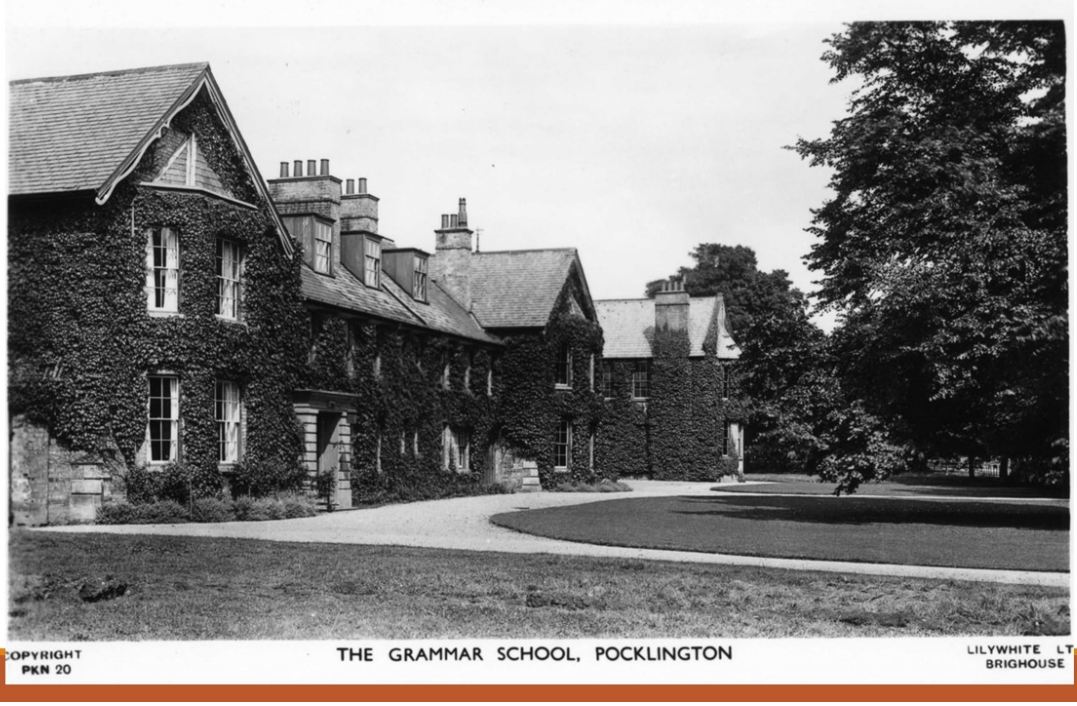
Britain’s heavy industries and a series of damaging strikes in the early and mid-twenties severely reduced the profitability of the Priestman coal mines and the Stewarts’ expensive lifestyle suddenly looked vulnerable. The mortgages to purchase the estates were being financed by income from the Trusts and rents from the farms. But as the demand for coal declined and farmers struggled to earn a living and keep their farms profitable, it became clear that financing their mortgages would severely impinge upon their lifestyle. In 1925 the detail of all this would not be known, of course, to people in the town but the next few months would prove decisive for the Stewarts and their life in Pocklington. The next year (1926) the Miners’ strike - which lasted six months - made up their minds for them. Income from the Priestman Trusts would have almost completely ceased in the second half of 1926 so the Stewarts decided to sell up and move, probably to Florida or maybe New Zealand. They liked both. There must have been considerable excitement and also concern during these months for local people with the ownership of the Hall and its estates in the air. However, the property market was dead and no buyer could be found. Had their sale been successful, then Burnby Hall gardens might not be here now for our enjoyment. (It might have become a housing estate!) The Stewarts had to stay and make the best of the situation. (Katharine died in 1939 and Percy in 1962). Had events gone differently a century ago we may not have had either BH gardens or a heritage centre!

There are 2 groups of buildings we have yet to mention, namely schools and churches.

At the start of the 20th Century elementary education in the town, that is compulsory schooling for all to age 14 (following the Education Act of 1902), was the responsibility of the Education Committee of the County Council. For the town, in practice, this meant that the existing schools continued and there were three of them all established in the 19th. Century by the churches keen to ensure that basic education was delivered to the children of those who attended their church or chapel in line with their religious teaching. The Church of England's school was on New Street (the building still exists but not as a school), the Roman Catholic school was in Union Street and the Wesleyan Day School for the children of nonconformists was in Chapmangate. (the building is still there).

Yet by 1925 only the first two remained. So what happened to the Wesleyan School? For the privilege of delivering elementary education within their religious context the school managers had to provide and maintain appropriate buildings. The running costs of the school were paid out of the local rates provided the annual inspection showed that the premises were adequate and the teaching was up to standard. But in 1904, following several years' of complaints in Inspectors' reports about poor toilets, inadequate heating and overcrowding, the inspectors delivered an ultimatum to the Wesleyan School managers - that without improvements to the premises, public funding would be withdrawn. The managers (we would say board of governors) were unable - or unprepared - to raise the capital required. So the County Council, as the law required, stepped in.

Four years later in February 1908 the County Council opened a new school on The Mile (the building still in use today) and the pupils of the Wesleyan School were moved over. The new County Elementary School operating from modern premises soon proved a success. Herbert Craven had been headteacher for five years in 1925 and had already impressed the inspectors. In a report the year before, the school was described as “one of the best in the East Riding especially in the Upper Standards”. (that is the older pupils). During his time as headteacher (1920-44) many pupils won awards at age 11 to continue their education to secondary level and boys every year won Foundation Scholarships to Pocklington Grammar School. The teachers and pupils at the other 2 elementary schools continued to struggle with inadequate premises. Those who complain about schools today should read some of the inspectors’ reports from this time!



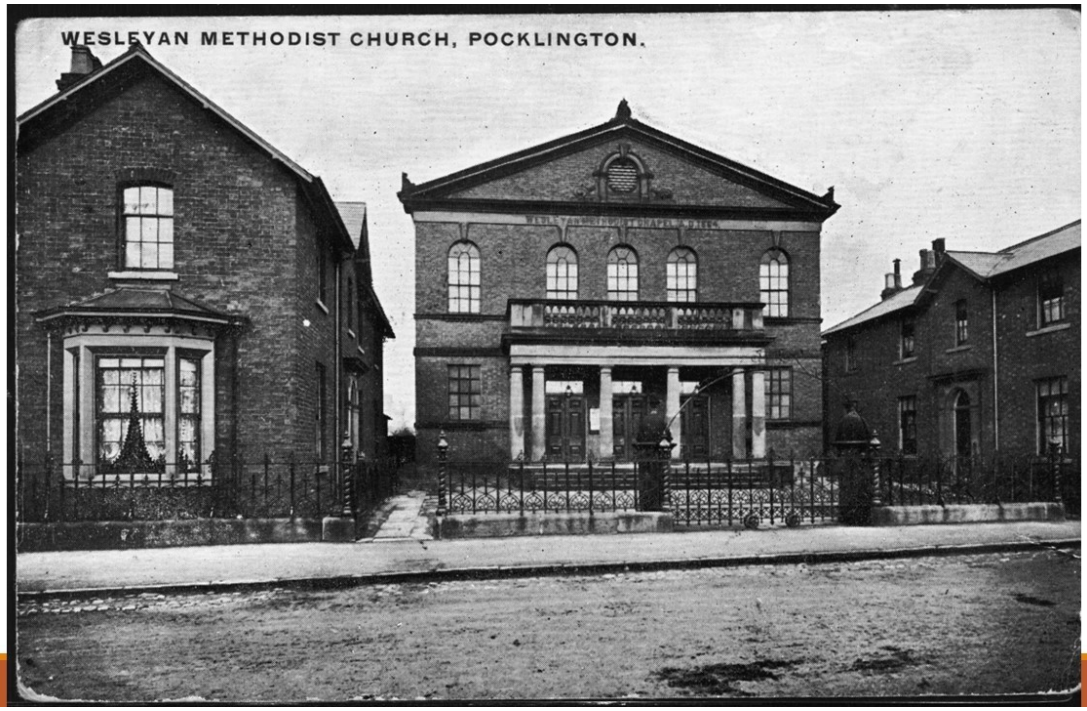
For fee-paying and scholarship-holding boys Pocklington Grammar School was the pride of the town. It was patronised by many local farmers who wanted an education for their sons separate from the children of their labourers but it also had a good reputation further afield.

I must be careful what I say about Pocklington Grammar School with certainly one of its alumni in the audience and I am sure he knows far more about the school's past than I do! But I think I am on safe ground when I say that the School's headteacher in 1925, Percy Sands, (1914-44) left the school in immensely better shape than he found it when he retired in 1944. Although his predecessor, the Irishman Rev Charles Hutton, had his successes in increasing the school roll and sending increasing numbers to Oxbridge, his behaviour became increasingly eccentric but crucially he mishandled the school's finances. Under Percy Sands' leadership the school was becoming recognised in the locality and more generally in Yorkshire as a humane and liberal establishment with sound academic standards and the premises were massively improved. There were

close connections between town and school. Not only were some of its paying pupils the sons of local businessmen and farmers but of course the school was a significant customer for the town's tradespeople and employer for the town's workers. Each Sunday morning the boys could be observed parading to All Saints Church and during the week the boys would be given leave to go into the town, except when there was an epidemic, for example measles in the spring of 1925. Before the School got its new assembly hall in 1928 all its major functions took place in the Victoria Hall. There was clearly much interaction between School and town to their mutual benefit.

The second set of buildings so far unmentioned are the town's churches. The centre of the town was/is dominated by its Anglican Church. A Roman Catholic Church stands in London Street and a Wesleyan Methodist Church in Chapmangate. At the George Street end of Chapmangate was a Congregational Church (now Pentecostal) and in Union Street stood a Primitive Wesleyan Church (closed and demolished after the 2WW). Despite their differences the ministers of

the various churches usually worked harmoniously with each other in the best interests of the townspeople.



Far more than today, religious practice, tradition and ceremonial

played a significant part in the life of the town and the lives of the townspeople. Through their links with their church including the two church elementary schools children and young people were introduced to the Christian religion, taught its moral values and gradually integrated into the religious cycles of church or chapel through baptism or confirmation. Many were introduced to music and music-making, to charitable effort and to supporting moral good causes such as the temperance movement through their connections with their church. Each of the churches celebrated the main Christian festivals with special services in addition to the weekly programme of activities and clubs; the nonconformist churches made much of their anniversaries and children at the time would enjoy the annual sunday school or church outing, maybe a day at the seaside perhaps the first time they had been to the seaside. It was said that on such days the town was very quiet. Whenever any attempt was made in the town to arrange an occasion on the Sabbath, such as a football match or fete) the influence of the churches, especially the nonconformists, stopped it in its tracks. So, to an extent which probably does not exist today, the churches and chapels, despite their differences, played a major role in creating fellowship in the town.

Sir F. Stanley Jackson M.P.

So far we have examined what life was like in the town in 1925 prompted by its buildings. Now let's take a look at other aspects of life including governance and law and order. Most people's lives were probably not touched by their MP. However, people would probably know that in 1925 their MP was the Conservative Lieutenant-Colonel Stanley Jackson. He had been MP since 1914. The Howdenshire constituency never elected other than a Conservative, dominated as the district was by the interests of farmers and landowners. But, the township of Pocklington was almost certainly Liberal in inclination. Both parties had their local HQ in the town, the Conservatives on Railway Street and the Liberals in Chapmangate. So although people of a liberal persuasion never exercised enough support to elect the MP they were able to contribute to the effective running of the town through the Urban District Council. The town had been fortunate to be awarded this status in 1894 because its tiny population hardly justified it - it was the smallest and lowest rated of the 8 UDCs in the East Riding with a rateable value of scarcely £10,000 - and, indeed, the Council did not survive the government's cost-cutting in the 1930s but in 1925 as they had for 30 years Pocklington's businessmen were

exercising their business skills to produce effective and economical local government as we have already noted in the context of road improvements. Three of the nine councillors stood down each year and fresh elections were held and there was a tradition that candidates should not stand in party colours and by and large this was adhered to. Councillors were united in doing what was best for Pocklington irrespective of party. The Council was exercising far greater powers than a humble parish council being responsible for road maintenance, lighting, housing, fresh water supply and waste disposal, fire service and cemetery. The nine councillors were all residents and easily available on a daily basis. During its existence the UDC gained a reputation for delivering local services efficiently and economically.

A mark of its success and appreciation of the townspeople came six years later when, at a meeting held in a packed Victoria Hall to protest against the dissolution of the UDC, only one dissenting vote was cast at the end of the meeting. It must have been very satisfying to have decisions about matters which affect one's everyday living made by one's neighbours subject to your regular vote! And for Pocklingtonians this must have given them confidence and local pride, and engendered a spirit of resilience and "can-do", a genuine example of local grassroots democracy in action. It's no surprise that, when faced with the national crisis of war a few years later when the township became the home for a huge bomber airfield which, with the influx of servicemen and evacuees doubled its population, the townspeople rose to the occasion superbly.

I think it's important to remind ourselves, as we just have, that during the early years of the last century Britain was a developing, not yet a fully-fledged, democracy. For example, at the end of the Great War in 1918 women over 30 got the right to vote and the voting age for women would soon (1928) be lowered to 21. And the 1918 Act extended the vote to all men. Another example of the growing democratisation was the appointment to the bench of magistrates of increasing numbers of business and professional people. It was finally being acknowledged that one didn't need to own land to be an upright citizen capable of implementing the law fairly. This was the case in Pocklington. Before the Great War the families of the three major local landed families - the Duncombes of Kilnwick Percy, the Nunburnholmes of Warter Priory and Calverley-Rudston of Melbourne Hall were all represented on the magistrates' bench - after the war none were and their places were taken by local business and professional people such as the solicitor Alfred Summerson whose father had been a local blacksmith, and Percy Sands, HM of the Grammar School. The landed classes were gradually losing their

controlling grip of the levers of power and control and ceding a share to citizens equally loyal but without landed wealth.

Pocklington Urban District Council c1933

But I want to strike a note of caution here. To create a genuine democracy not only needs a vote for all adults and genuine power-sharing for example with the magistracy, it also requires a fundamental shift in relationships between different sections of society. In 1925 I think old attitudes of deference and social elitism were still strongly embedded in everyday life particularly in country areas. One example from Pocklington comes to mind. In 1925 The East Riding appointed a progressive Chief Constable, Percy Sillitoe, to lead its police force. Sillitoe has left his mark on policing in this country; not only did he severely curtail the activities of the Glasgow gangs in the 30s but he was also responsible for pioneering the use of radio communications within the police force, employing civilians in back-office jobs and encouraging the employment of women police constables, a true progressive. It was an incident in 1925, focused on this room (the magistrates court) where we are at present which I believe limited his time in East Riding to a few months and which

illustrates the point I want to make about underlying social attitudes. In the spring of 1925 police constable Parker was sent out to somewhere near Warter to rendezvous with a senior officer. A shoot was being prepared in the area overseen by Colonel Charles Wilson, the eldest son of the Dowager Duchess Nunburnholme. Wilson appeared concerned that this police constable would likely impede the shoot by his presence and he ordered the constable to leave. But PC Parker stood his ground - he was under orders in a uniformed disciplined service and he was not going to disobey his orders simply because ordered to do so by his social superior. Colonel Wilson interpreted PC Parker's refusal to do as he was told as insolence and demanded of Chief Constable Sillitoe that he should reprimand his constable. After Sillitoe had investigated what had happened, not only did he not discipline his constable, he charged Wilson with using abusive language and the case was to be heard by magistrates in Pocklington in October 1925. The local magistrates took only a few minutes to reach a "not guilty" verdict. Sillitoe may well have concluded that his efforts to apply the law fairly and impartially had been trumped by pressures from the landed interest who insisted on due deference from those they saw as their social inferiors. Full democracy still had some way to go. I think Sillitoe would have regarded the verdict as a vote of no confidence from the magistrates bench and conclude that he could no longer work with a group of magistrates who did not share his interpretation of justice. (the JP's brought a "not guilty" verdict in a case brought by their Chief Constable! It must have seemed to Sillitoe that they were questioning his judgment.) So within weeks he left to become Chief Constable in Sheffield and 5 years later, Glasgow.

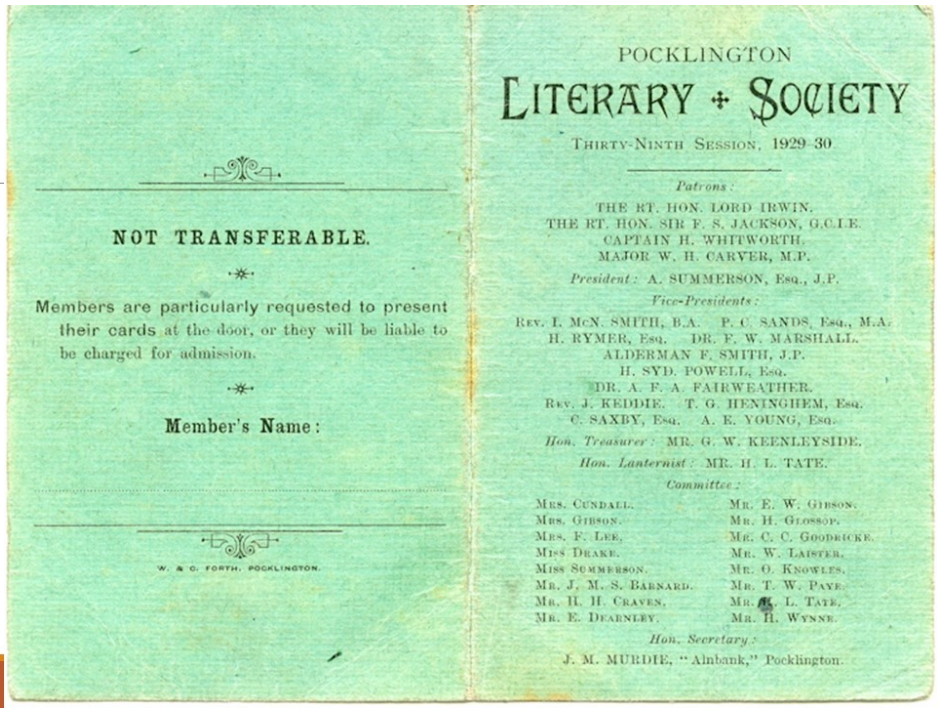
As we have observed, Pocklington was a market town and the activities, sounds and smells of agriculture would be all around. Farm animals would often be walked through the streets. And, although motor transport was increasing, horse-drawn conveyances still predominated. The state of the roads would bear witness to these facts! (It's useful to remember that, despite some developments in motor vehicles, farms remained reliant on horses for traction until after 2WW - in 1939 there were only five farms in the district with a tractor. The area was characterised by small farms and smallholdings and their occupants were tenants without the capital to invest in a tractor or indeed in any major farm improvement). In July the annual Agricultural Show was held I think on the field where the Rugby Club now plays. This was followed in August by the Flower Show. And all these occasions would have their social events such as children's competitions, dances, whist drives, sports, and the town's Coronation Band would always put in an appearance. One of the most eagerly anticipated regular occasions of the year was the Hirings held in the last week of November on or near Martinmas Day. A system of recruiting labour to work on Wolds farms had evolved over time and

seemed to suit both farmer and farmhand. At the Hirings Day each could make enquiries about the other to see if they were suited. Market forces would determine the rates of pay with some individual bargaining to reach an agreement. Then the farmer would give, and the worker accept, a fest - a small advance to seal the bargain, enabling the worker to buy anything essential such as a pair of corduroy trousers, before starting the job. So there was plenty of business for the town's shopkeepers as a prelude to Christmas and for the inn-keepers and lots of entertainment available for everyone at the Martinmas Fair. These big occasions in Pocklington's farming calendar, however, were enjoying their swansong. They were clinging on in the 1920s. Increasing government intervention and regulation like wage-fixing, the impact of the Great Depression and the foot and mouth disease outbreaks in the 1920s and 1931 brought about their demise before the 2WW.

Pocklington Fair around 1925

There was also plenty of sport available in the town in 1925. Rugby union, soccer, cricket and cycling were all well established; with the availability of cheap second hand bikes cycling was entering its golden

age in 1925 and there's plenty of evidence that Pock folk were fully involved. Tennis, golf and bowls were all available in 1925. Many young people were soon to find great enjoyment through involvement with Boy Scouts and Girl Guides which were just about to be established in the town. So the town was no different from any other community in the availability of these sporting and leisure activities although we must remember too that their existence depended on people with goodwill and time to enable them to happen.



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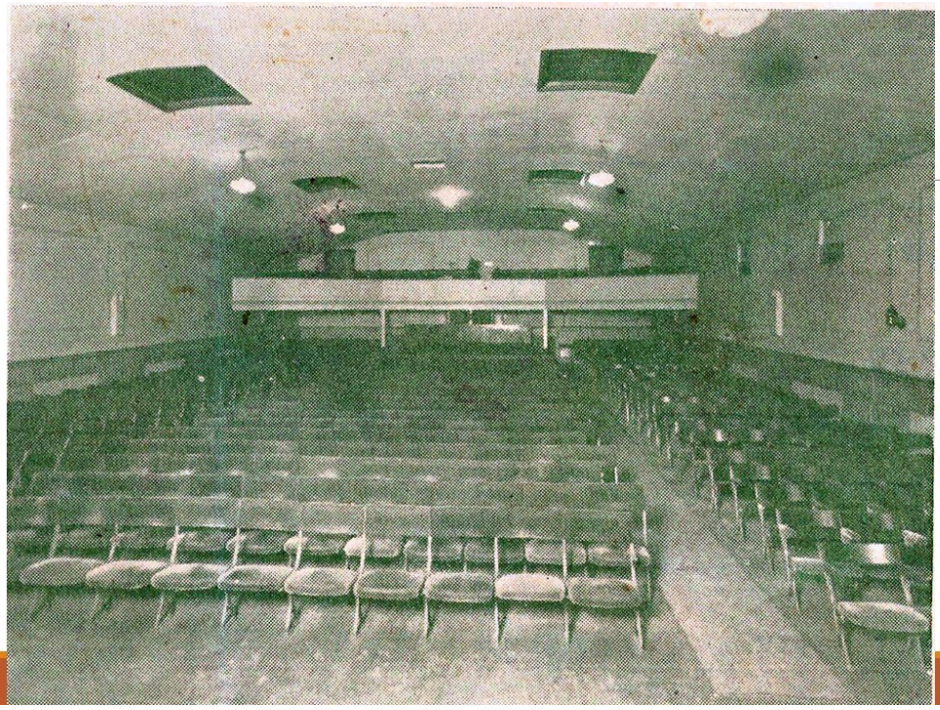
But one activity that is a bit unusual was the town's Literary Society. It provided a fortnightly programme of talks and entertainment during the winter months. Serious talks on science and literature were balanced by play readings, travel talks, folk singing and concert parties. The Literary Society was still going strong in 1925 but it was to come to an end when it ran out of meeting places large enough to accommodate the big audiences it attracted. It moved its venue from the Victoria Hall to the newly-opened Majestic Hall/cinema in 1928. But in 1932 Alfred Allison decided the Majestic Hall's commitment to host the Literary Society's fortnightly evening meeting between October and March was

interfering with the running of the cinema following the boost to cinema attendance by the introduction of the talkies. With no suitable meeting place, the Literary Society came to an end.



The Majestic Cinema

So let's draw to a close. Putting this talk together led me to reflect on how people might have been reacting to what they saw happening in their town. Some of them would be men who had been uprooted from their local jobs a decade earlier and hurled into a war against a foreign foe, survived the bullets and torpedoes and now they were home bearing the scars both physical and mental. There would be few families untouched personally by loss after the Great War. Despite being promised homes fit for heroes, they didn't show up until the 30s and then not in great numbers so as well as mourning fallen friends returning servicemen were likely disappointed by unfulfilled hopes. But things weren't quite like they were before the war which had so seriously decimated the next generation of the landed classes to which I have already alluded. We think of ourselves as living in a democracy but this has evolved; all men had only just achieved the vote in 1918 along with, as we have just seen, women over 30 years

of age and a further 3 years later on from 1925 the town would witness the achievement of adult franchise for all 21 or older. The fighting men and the women who filled their jobs and kept the country going during the war had demonstrated their patriotism and earned their right to a vote. We were maturing as a democracy.
Also I think in 1925 people could sense the beginnings of a gentler sort of society with the softening of the workhouse regime and the flickerings of a welfare state. Just a few years earlier the Booth Report for London and the Rowntree Survey in York opened people's eyes to the reality of life for the urban poor and their findings gradually seeped through into legislation - national insurance, old age pensions, public housing - and peoples' living conditions gradually improved. Disease was still rife. The town suffered outbreaks of diphtheria, measles, TB, and scarlet fever which always hit the slum dwellers hardest but until the 30s the slum housing had to be tolerated in Pock because of the lack of an alternative. But I believe that there is evidence that, because the people of Pock at all levels of society lived cheek by jowl with each other, there was a greater sense of cohesiveness and social solidarity than was possible in larger urban areas where the poor were herded together in extensive slums. People did seem to look out for each other; possible evidence to suggest that this may have been the case are statistics from the Annual Report of Medical Health for Yorkshire which showed that Pocklington had the 2nd lowest death rate and one of the highest birth rates in the county. One factor contributing to the latter was the new Centre for Infant Welfare opened in 1922 whose key aim was to bring down rates of infant mortality through education for mothers.

So how do we conclude? Looking at a photo of people celebrating VE Day in 1945 a tv presenter referred to "people staring back at us from a different age". But how different?

What has struck me most in preparing this presentation is that, compared to our times, life was so much more uncertain a century ago. So many lives were cut short by war and by disease compared to today. Today a prolonged period of peace in Europe and life in an age of antibiotics and a universal health service have maybe weakened our sense of community and responsibility towards our neighbours.

Would you rather have lived in 1925 rather than 2025?

Jim Ainscough

A presentation to the Pocklington & District Local History Group on the 18th September 2025