

Extracts from "Those First Affections"*

An autobiographical memoir, by Eleanor Monica Vipan née Westcott, daughter of Rev Arthur Westcott MA, Rector of Crayke 1901-1920

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Chapter 2: The Village

We went to Crayke in 1901 when I was three months old and stayed there until I was nineteen, so that all my formative years were spent there and it is nearly always to Crayke that I go back in my dreams. Crayke was a Crown living and Father was lucky to have been offered it. His income was small but two of his bachelor brothers were very good about helping with the boys' education and at other times of stress.

Crayke stood on a hill overlooking the vale of York. The road ran up steeply between two grassy slopes. Halfway up on the right was the well from which most of the village drew water. It had an arched stone roof but the side was open and the water must have been full of impurities. There was one epidemic of diphtheria while we were in the village.

The Post Office and General Stores was run by the Biltons, a very superior family. Mr Bilton made and mended boots and shoes and Mrs Bilton kept the shop. We occasionally went there to buy sweets or chocolate if we were lucky enough to have been given a penny. Four of the daughters came in turn to work at the Rectory; Mabel, Phoebe, Elsie and Mary. Gwennie, the youngest girl, had fits. The two sons were Norman and Archie. Archie had fair curls all over his head, but he usually had a dirty face and a running nose.

The Hogg family were the carpenters and undertakers. John Hogg was the verger for many years and rarely missed a service. He was very deaf and his responses always came in a muffled far-away voice. I particularly remember his "amens" in the service of baptism when the rest of the congregation were usually tongue-tied. We always had the baptisms as the monthly "Children's Service". John rang the bells, one rope in either hand and his foot in a loop for the third.

John's cousins, John Willie and Charlie, were very big men. They made us some fine wooden bricks of different shapes and sizes with which we could build houses and boats and forts of anything we needed for our nursery games.

The butcher, Mr Knowles, was a very prosperous farmer. He also kept the Durham Ox. He was a Church Warden and a great friend of Father's/ He had six children, three boys and three girls and they all did well when they grew up.

Mr Watson played the organ. He ran the school with the help of his wife. When their only daughter was a baby, she went to school in her bassinet while her mother taught the

infants. She grew up to be a very clever girl and won scholarships and became a Doctor. Her marriage however was not a happy one and she was later divorced. Every Sunday after evensong Mr Watson used to come in for supper with us. He had a large repertoire of funny stories. Father was usually very tired and did not listen, but we rather enjoyed his tales even if we heard them more than once.

A second small shop in Crayke was kept by Miss Smith and her two brothers Harry and Charlie. They were the carriers of the village. The shop sold corn and meal, flour, dog biscuits and chicken food as well as sweets. One could get a half penny square of Fry's chocolate or a Fry's cream bar there. The shop always smelt mealy and Miss Smith herself was quite in keeping with her flour bags. She was a small, stout person with a round, pale face and her hair was done up in a bun on top of her head. She was always pleasant and kind.

Her brother Charlie drove a dog cart and we used to hire it to take to the station when we had luggage. In those days, boys always travelled to school with a trunk and a tuck box. Girls has a trunk and a square hat box, which was not designed to be carried by its owner. The portmanteau could be carried but it was bulky, being made in two parts with a strong flap in between, one side for suits and the other for shirts and underclothes. The flap kept the starched dress shorts from getting crumpled. There was also the Gladstone bag which was easy to carry and the lady's dressing case which contained various glass bottles with silver tops for eau de Cologne, smelling salts, tooth powder and brandy. When we went to the seaside we always took a rug-strap, in which we rolled up winter coats, macintoshes, walking stick, umbrella and cricket bat, inside a tartan rug. Some folk had cancas covers for their rug-strap, but we had to roll ours very carefully and firmly so that nothing dropped out. If a walking stick or something slipped from the middle, then the whole bundle might disintegrate. It was fastened by two straps with a handle between.

We all liked Harry Smith who was a gentle and taciturn man and very dependable. We saw less of Charlie who must have carted round the sacks in the farm cart. All the folk in the village made their own bread so the Smiths must have done a good trade with flour. We had a big, lined, wooden flour bin in the Rectory kitchen. Many of the villagers too kept pigs and we used to often hear them squealing. Possibly the Smiths killed them. We were only separated from their yard by a field and the blacksmith's forge. We saw very little of Mr Grainger, the blacksmith, but could hear the clank of his hammer on the anvil from the Rectory garden.

St Cuthbert's Church stood on the top of the hill. It had a square tower and we used occasionally to climb the worn stone steps which corkscrewed up to the first floor, where the three bells hung. Next there was a ladder to climb to the second floor and the ladder had then to be pulled up in order to reach the trap door at the top of the tower. On one occasion, the boys sent semaphore messages from the top of the tower to the foot of the hill.

The Hall garden adjoined the churchyard. Mrs Matthews and her daughter Eta lived at the Hall. Mr Matthews died when I was still a baby. We were all very fond of Eta. She had a face rather like a monkey's and wore high necked blouses and black button boots. Nearly every morning she used to come across to the Rectory with a cutting from the paper, some village

news, or to tell us how many degrees of frost there had been in winter, or to ask for help with an acrostic. Our little dog, Quis, used to always bark at her and snap at her boots. She and her mother had a much loved Scotch terrier called Gyp. Eta also had two ponies; she drove one in a small dog cart and the smaller one in a round governess cart. She used often to drive us into Easingwold when she went shopping and when we went to school at the Convent she drove us there on Monday mornings and called for us again on Friday afternoons. We were always pleased when she took the small pony and the governess cart on Monday mornings and the quicker pony to fetch us home on Friday. I think really she always reached school at the same time whichever pony she brought.

I remember so well when I was about seven that the lady at the sweet shop in Easingwold gave me a bar of chocolate. It was Lent and we always gave up eating sweets or chocolate in Lent, except on Sunday. I had forgotten about this and started to enjoy my chocolate as Eta and I drove home. Eta did not say anything, but I suddenly remembered and was horrified to find what I had done. Eta said she would take the remains of the chocolate back with her and I could finish it when we came over to tea on Sunday afternoons. We used to enjoy our tea-parties at the Hall. On Sundays the maids went out and Eta used to boil eggs for us. I liked mine hard so it was boiled for five minutes. When we went to teak on a week-day, during the Christmas holidays, we used to play card games – the Golden Egg, Old Maid, Precedence and a history game which was quite instructive. There were picture cards of the Kings and Queens with a list of all the chief events in their reigns. The idea was to collect all the events of the list for one monarch, as one does in Happy Families. The one I remember best was in William and Mary's reign, "Queen Mary died of smallpox".

When the strawberries were ripe we were invited to a strawberry tea in the garden. We sat under the lime trees on the lawn and I always remember the sweet scent of the lime flowers wafted to us while we ate our strawberries. The Hall strawberries were much bigger and better than ours and their hens laid more eggs. Father's hoodans were very beautiful with their tufted heads and black and blue speckled feathers, but they were not good layers. After tea the old members of the party played croquet and we younger ones would explore the shady walk or play games on the terrace behind the yew trees which overlooked "Lovers' Lane".

On Easter Monday, we always went for a picnic with Eta to the Shanty. Eta's father had planted a little wood of larch and fir trees as a cover for his shooting and had a wooden hut built there which was called the Shanty. We used to lop off the lower branches of the larches and clear away weeds and nettles and often had a big bonfire. When we were small, Eta drove us there in the pony trap usually with Pixie, the small pony. After a rest and a good feed of oats, she was difficult to harness and would not stand still for us to get in. If it was damp we had tea in the Shanty where there was a table and benches. We could hear Pixie moving about in the stable next door. Eta boiled the kettle on a spirit stove and we usually shut the door to prevent a draught. Sometimes the sun shone in through the round holes where knots in the wood had been and we could see the motes of dust dancing in the beams of light. There were primroses in the woods and on the banks of the lane. Cowslips grew in the meadow and marsh marigolds by the spring. It was a wonderful place for a picnic. We usually arrived home tired and often very dirty.

In the winter we had another expedition to the Shanty to choose our Christmas tree. We always wanted one that was too big to get into the house; trees always look smaller out of doors. Usually the one the boys carried home reached from the floor to the ceiling.

Another outstanding family in the village were the Gilleards. The eldest brother, Alec, had the farm at the foot of the hill and kept a herd of milking cows. I think his wife must have died young. His old mother lived at the farm and was the backbone of the family for many years. She came to the Church regularly with her grand-daughters, as long as she was able. I remember going to see her at the farm when she was quite old. She sat by the fire in a rocking chair with a shawl round her shoulders and a cat or two beside her. The hearth-rug was made of pieces of coloured cloth. The three grand-daughters were a little older than we were but were rather a similar trio. The eldest kept house for her father, the second one, Margery, became a school teacher and the youngest one, Ethel, was shy and fair, rather like I was.

There was another family of Gilliards where there were two daughters, Ada and Annie, who both came to work at the Rectory. They were extremely good girls, but sadly enough, they had weak chests. Their mother died in the 'flu epidemic during the First World War. Annie developed TB and had to go to a sanatorium. Mother gave her her fur coat as it was winter and Annie had to live out of doors. Fresh air was the main remedy for consumption in those days, but Annie died.

There was also a large family of Lawsons. The father drank and there was never any money in the house. Mrs Lawson was very ill when one of her babies was born and Mother brought the tiny child home to the Rectory. Emily was a source of great interest and wonder to Margie and me. She had pink flannelette nighties. It was about this time that I got nits in my hair – a dire disgrace for which the Lawsons may have been responsible.

Mother also took charge of a Belgian baby who had lost his parents in the German invasion in 1915. Mother was very fond of babies and very good with them. Armand stayed with us for a few weeks. He wore a truss and Mother said it was because he had cried so much in his unhappy little life. Later, a home was found for him. His little sister, Leontina, went to the French sisters in Easingwold. She was given to Sister Alexander to look after. Sister loved her and they were a source of great joy to one another.

Mr Gibson was the village tailor. He made some Robin Hood costumes for the boys for a fancy dress party and a Puritan dress, cap and apron for Hilda Mary. We had some white serge summer coats with pale blue collars made by the tailor in Easingwold. He also made our quilted scarlet cloaks to go to parties in, during the winter.

Mr Roe was the grocer. He had two daughters, Connie and Vera. Connie had her leg in irons and was a little backward.

There were several outlying farms that father used to visit regularly. He liked to take one of us children with him and we were always pleased to go. Our first cook, Mary, married a farmer called Mr Dennis. He had a mentally retarded brother called Leonard, who lived at

the farm. I remember once, Nurse took us to visit Mary and she gave us some delicious cheese cakes to eat.

Another farm was run by two brothers. They were really chapel folk but as there were only occasional services in the chapel they came pretty regularly to church. They sat just behind us and were good singers. Father always used to say that the parishioners he had visited would return his call by coming to church the next Sunday.

Our most remote parishioners were the Mannikins. They lived nearly two miles away on the road to Oulston. Mr Mannikin was very suitably named. He was a short round man, just like a kind dwarf in a fairy story. He had white whiskers all around his face and he wore a frock coat and a tall felt hat when he came to church. He was usually accompanied by several small brown-eyed boys and a little girl called Emily.

Most of the boys between eight and thirteen were in the choir, but Margie and I never took much notice of boys. The school master must have been a good disciplinarian as I cannot remember any trouble with the children.

An old castle crowned our hill. The main keep dated from Norman times. Several families lived in it for short periods but for most of the time it was empty. It was supposed to be haunted and there was a bloodstain on the floor of the hall. When there was no-one living there, we children used to enjoy exploring the old ruined dungeon and looking for treasure, needless to say we never found any. There was an underground passage leading from the castle. The mound of it could be seen from the church. It had been opened up but closed again because the air in it was foul.