
Daily happenings - traction engines and other machines

Back now to the daily happenings, no artificial entertainment, or boredom for that matter. Just the problem of finding more hours in the day.

Virtually anything going on would entertain us if only for a short time. One day some men arrived and concreted posts into the ground at two points in the village. Soon after signs were fixed to them, one on each saying "school", and on the same posts saying, "bends for a quarter mile". We must have arrived on the map at last.

A puff of smoke on the horizon could herald the coming of the road tarring gang or the threshing box, either of which could send us into fits of activity just watching the proceedings, or in the case of the threshing box, some rat catching was allowed. We didn't always have great success at this, not because of any shortage of rats, as they would emerge at high speed, heading for the nearest building in droves, or if they were lucky, to an adjacent corn or straw rick to live in luxury until that one also came to be used. There was occasionally a chance to do small jobs, but this rather depended on your age. For instance you had to be at least fourteen years old to feed the hopper on top of the threshing box normally known as the "drum". This box would shake constantly, and your job was to pick up the sheaves fed to you from the rick and cut the string while holding it over the top of the hopper. Even with the safety precautions taken, the number of possible accident sources was virtually unlimited, as all belts and pulleys were unguarded.

These belts were all flat and joined together with a kind of "buckle" that facilitated adjustment, running on flat, or slightly crowned pulleys. The speeds varied enormously, from the heavy fast engine, to box the slow ones driving other parts.

I once saw a lad get his thumb or finger caught in a slow one, there was nothing else to do but wait for the offending digit to emerge at the end of the revolution, any attempt to have stopped the machine would have made matters worse as it took some time for the machine to stop after the mower had been disconnected. He was not badly hurt and would return to rat catching or whatever.

A time to make yourself scarce was when the driver released the large belt at the "close of play". He would do this by forcing it off with a crowbar while it was still running. It could cover a considerable distance in its "death throes".

This was presumably done to stop anyone interfering with, or running the machine in his absence. He would damp down the fire and cover the chimney before leaving each night.

Some of the other work didn't involve much thought or skill, but was important to the smooth running of the job.

The emerging straw had to be quickly moved, it would probably be built into a rick. "Cavings", the by-product of the now threshed heads of corn would come out from somewhere underneath and certainly had to be moved quickly or a mighty "jam up" soon occurred. This was hard and very dirty work and consisted of raking or sweeping them into a large wicker basket, "cavings scuttle" and dragging it to a new heap.

The job of watching over the emerging threshed corn required both skill and strength. It had to be monitored for quality and the machine, "the drum", adjusted to give the optimum output.

The corn comes out down a number of channels, or chutes, which are controlled by a series of shutters; these are opened or closed to send the corn into the correct sack. This corn emerges in varying size and degree of cleanliness, the dirty, small stuff known as "tailings", would be used later for animal feed. Obviously the operator has the final say as to what this standard is and the profits are very much governed by his performance. The sacks would have to be weighed, two and a quarter hundredweight being the order of the day, with wheat other cereals having different weights per sack. It was also important that as soon as a full sack was removed that a new empty one was put in its place. One place that we were always given stern warnings about was the Granary with its open topped corn bins. Corn stored in this fashion is dangerous because corn in a large volume acts in a manner similar to quicksand, anything dropped in quickly sinks to the bottom, and these bins were quite deep.

Having completed the job the machine would move on to the next farm, a somewhat ponderous business on occasions, particularly if it had been wet. These Traction Engines were not the most agile or manoeuvrable vehicle, being very heavy, and the iron wheels not providing much grip. In the event of one sinking axle deep into the "Mire", then a number of plates known variously as "Spuds", "Grouzers", or by the more descriptive name of "Biters", could be bolted onto the wheel rim. These acted like snow chains and provided enough extra grip until normal progress was resumed, when they would be removed. I recently spoke to the "Crew" of a steam ploughing outfit, at a steam rally I may add, and they told me that the correct names are, "Spuds" on a steam Engine, "Grouzers" on tracked vehicles and you take your choice as to when you use the term "Biters".

Having taken my life in my hands by casting a "Slur" on these great machines, I have to say that at the time they were probably the only one capable of doing the job. Later would come heavier tractors, though not till late in the War. These would have differential locks, many gears and winches, the only real problem being a lack of weight, with the box and sometimes towing a baler and trailer as well. The overall load would be much heavier than the tractor causing problems when travelling up the steep hills particularly on a hot day.

I remember the R.A.F. crane from Westcott being confronted by such a catastrophe on Lynch hill when returning from Wotton station, the driver was able to tow the entire load clear to the top without any damage to the road.

The road Tarring Gang would arrive with their steamroller, caravan, horse drawn "Tarpot" and some strange looking wheelbarrows for spreading the Chipping's. Their

arrival would have been preceded by the appearance of heaps of stone Chipping's, see who could run or cycle over the top, for us then the work would commence.

First the road would be swept by hand, or sometimes by a horse drawn sweeper, then all potholes or cracks would be filled in.

The hopper of the "Tarpot" would now be filled by the simple act of rolling a barrel of tar up to the hopper of the machine, the fire lit underneath and now with the horse, usually with nosebag in place, pulling slowly would pass over. Mean while a team of men with brushes attached to the "Tarpot" by hoses to feed the molten tar would spread it over the area to be covered.

Now would come the men pushing the spreaders, first having filled them at the nearest heap, they would carefully join up each new pass and any "weak" spots being filled in by hand.

Then would come the mighty steamroller all it's metal parts shining in the sun, which if we are to believe everything we are told, always shone in those days. Taking his time the driver would cover every inch of the road several times before moving on. This would then finally be swept; any loose stones being picked up for further use. No risk to any vehicle windscreens in those days, had there been any vehicles that is!

At night the driver would damp down the fire, cover the chimney and close the side curtains on his engine, if as was most likely it had a canopy, he would normally live in the caravan. The horse would be tethered to a suitable area of the bank to graze. On completion they would slowly move on to the next place of action.