



Minety

An Old-time Policeman

INTERVIEW WITH A BATH NONAGENARIAN.

ARCHELAUS HERCULES BARRETT

(A Native of Minety)

How time flies. It is eighty-five years since Victoria ascended the throne, a maiden of 18. And now she has gone, and not only she, but her peace-loving son Edward also, and her son's son, George reigns in their stead, and King George's children are now of marriageable age. It is a long vista of years that is thus presented. And yet the subject of our present article was born in the reign of William IV, and was a boy of five years of age when Victoria came to the crown. To interview a person ninety years of age is by no means an easy task. Memories come in fitful waves, and in anything but chronological order. The events of several years ago are fresher to mind than the happenings of yesterday. And then, as times of stress and hardship recur to mind, the nonagenarian is apt to break down at these "tales of horror" and perchance to weep.

The person interviewed was ex-Supt Archelaus Barrett, formerly of Chippenham, but now living with his daughter and her husband, Mrs and Mr G W Beeke, at 3 Southville Terrace, Lyncombe Vale. As he has been living there since 1899, when he took his farewell of the police force, he may now be claimed as a fairly old inhabitant of Bath. The interview was carried on, with some difficulty, either by direct statements volunteered by the old man himself, or through the useful assistance of his daughter.

He joined the Police Force when he was a youth of 18 at Durrington, on Salisbury Plain.

THE ORIGINAL UNIFORM

"We had white duck-trousers," said the old superintendent, "but these were only for special days. At other times, we had a top-hat – a boxer – and a tail coat. We had a stock under our chin and round our neck, enough to choke a donkey. We had trousers sometimes that came to the top of the shoes, and at other times, they were much too long. We had to pay for them. The Police Force was new in those days. The clothing I have mentioned did not continue many years."

Then his daughter broke in, "He got 12s a week, and one week's money kept back."

"Whatever was that for?" asked the interviewer.

“For his clothes in case he ran away,” was the reply.

“They hadn’t much faith in us at that time,” said the old gentleman. “We were the first police they had in that part. There was one other man there when I joined, an older man than myself. As soon as they found I was any good, I had to go somewhere else, so I was not at Durrington long.

I remember that I had a wooden sword, for excise, and we drilled on Salisbury Plain. If a box hat came anywhere near a sword, off it was sure to come. From Durrington I was put somewhere, I now forget the name, but it was a rougher place. There was a lot of poaching then going on about the Plain and the Downs. I was on Salisbury Plain when I was made a sergeant. Later I went to Cricklade as inspector and then for many years I was at Corsham. On being promoted to superintendent, I proceeded to Chippenham, where I finished my time.

TWO OLD CRONIES

“I was at Chippenham for twenty years, and during that time I was a great friend of the late Mr James Gane, who was then master of the workhouse there. After his retirement, Mr Gane came to Bath and lived there. He celebrated the 50th anniversary of his wedding and then his wife died. And now Mr Gane himself has just joined the majority at the age of 92 – only a few months ago.”

Bathonians do not require any further information about Mr Gane. He is well remembered for his excellent work on the Board of Guardians, and also for the cordiality with which he used to enliven the social gatherings at the Workhouse with his songs, such as “The bells they are ringing for Sarah,” “Put it in the hands of my solicitor “, etc.

Mr Barrett proceeded, “I also had my golden wedding day, but my wife died at this residence eight years ago this month.”

THE OLDEST POLICEMAN

44 Years Without a Holiday

“I suppose I am the oldest man that has been in the Police Force,” he resumed. “I had 44 years in it before I retired at Chippenham, and I had never had a stain on my character. There was never a mark against me, and I never had a day’s holiday.”

“No,” said the daughter, “the only holiday he ever had in his life was once when we packed him up some things, and sent him off. Mother said he should have a holiday. But he was back again the same afternoon.”

“He had several murder cases,” resumed Mrs Beeke. “There was a murder at Purton.”

“Those were rough times,” continued Mr Barrett, “but of course I never kept much account of them.”

“No,” said Mrs Beeke, “Supt Mackie, of Marlborough, used to get his reminiscences. He had been a constable under father, and father gave him his first start as a policeman. When Mackie first came, he was a raw-boned youth, with plaid trousers on, but he made a fine policeman.”

“The man who was murdered at Purton,” said Mr Barrett, “was John Grimes. Now who murdered him? Oh, it was a half-witted man, who was always hunted by a rat. He was not hanged, but he confessed on his death bed. I took him up. He was discharged because there was not enough evidence.”

A LONG WALK TO GAOL

“We used to have to walk ten miles from Chippenham to Devizes with our prisoners until the railroad was started. There were of course, coaches, but not for prisoners. When we had two men that required two policemen. I once knocked a prisoner down. But they were blackguards then. Of course,

I was superintendent, and did not always go with them. I had a lot to do with the capture of Fowley and Milsom (the Muswell Hill murderers). I heard they had been on Chippenham Station, and tracked them to Bath. The rest had the praise, but I had a letter from the London police thanking me for my assistance in the matter.”

Here the interviewer was shown a portrait of all the members of the Chippenham Police Force, presented to Supt Barrett some years ago. In those days, even the policemen were a rather tough-looking lot, their clothing none too smart, and if the men were in London at the present day, they would have to run the gauntlet of “Beaver”. Their beards, in fact, were unrestrained, and even the superintendent’s beard was not then kept as neat and well groomed as it is today.

Then there was a portrait of three poachers and their dog, a villainous, unkempt trio of rascals. Those men, when captured, had 70 rabbits on them. “I was young then,” said the superintendent, “and feared no, man. I went out for them, and caught them, and told them to walk on to the police station. I kept on one side of them, and said “Now then, go ahead, or else down you go.” And they went on to the station. I did not know the men, and I was by myself when I got them. They were charged with night poaching and they went to prison for a good term.”

“I left the force in May 1899, and was presented with an illuminated address, and a sum of 50 guineas by the magistrates and residents of Chippenham.

“Supt Mackie,” said Mrs Beeke, “always used to come and see father every year. He was a very fine man, and his end was extremely sad and unaccountable. He was here some time before his death, and was talking about what he was going to do. We were, in fact, expecting him when his sad death was announced.”

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Miserable 60’s

Supt Barrett continued, “When I left Chippenham I had a little pension from the Union. I used to relieve the tramps , the vagrants. The pension was £3 a year. I don’t know of anyone else who ever received the pension, because the police stopped relieving vagrants.”

“I had a rough time during the rinderpest outbreak in the sixties, also during the swine fever epidemic.”

“I remember a time when bread was very dear, 1s 2d a loaf, also, when potatoes were very diseased. In those days, poor people could have had a 100 acres to dig potatoes from, but the rot was so general that no potatoes could be got from the land. I was quite a boy then, it was before I joined the Police Force.”

Here, at the recollection of the miseries of those times, the old man began to break down, and had to be recalled to himself by his daughter.

BOYHOOD DAYS ON THE FARM

“I was brought up as a farmer,” proceeded Mr Barrett. “My father was a farmer at Minety, about seven miles from Malmesbury. We used to go to Malmesbury market in those days. Of course, I remember old Jones at the hotel there. He died only a few years ago. Also, I remember Lord Methuen at Corsham, and the Earl Cowley at Draycot Cerne. They were very good to me. My memory is not what it used to be. But I remember there was a lot of rick firing at one time. Once, after a fire, footmarks were traced across the snow and were found to belong to a policeman. That was over fifty years ago. He got out of it, but I don’t know how. I do not know any man who was alive when I was a young constable, they have all died.”

“My father and grandfather were graziers, etc. My uncle was a soldier in the Indian Mutiny and the Crimean War. When I first started on the farm, I had 2d a day. There were two farms, and one by

Minety Church was a dairy farm. My grandfather fed his cattle for market on another farm, where there was different pasturage. I had to be up at 4 o'clock in the morning, for the cattle had to be milked by 6 o'clock. The dairymaids had to help to make cheese. We went to bed when we had the chance. There was no rule as to bedtime, but there was at the time of getting up. We kept all the milk on the place. My mother used to make butter when she was over 80 years of age."

"You will perhaps want to know why I am lame. I was walking over the bridge at Chippenham station. It was in the daylight, but I stepped aside and crippled myself. I went to the doctor, who said it was a simple strain, but the knee was out of joint and has never been right since."

"I have had seven children, one died in Canada, and another in Africa. Then there are a few grandchildren, and about five or six great grandchildren."

TINDER-BOX DAYS

"Of course I remember the time when dogs used to draw carts. One man, a rag and bone collector, had a couple of dogs which once ran away and upset the cart."

"I remember the first matches. We used to have flint and steel and tinder. That was what I first recollect. The first matches were very smelly. They were, I think, tipped with sulphur."

On reference, one finds that lucifer matches were introduced about 1834, but it must have taken some years, at that time of day, for them to have reached Salisbury Plain, where the old flint and steel must have lingered for long after the innovation was introduced.

Continuing, Mr Barrett said he remembered a dog cart (i.e. a cart drawn by dogs) being upset when loaded with salt. The present generation would be surprised to see dogs drawing carts, although they are so commonly used for the purpose on the continent. In this country, cripples and others used to be drawn by dogs to fairs, races, etc.

A CURIOUS GHOST STORY

In the old days, superstition and the belief in ghosts appear to have been more general than at the present time. But there was one curious happening which Mr Barrett remembers. "There was a blacksmith's shop, and after the blacksmith died the anvil used to sound out at night. I and another man were out, and we heard the hammering in the shop. We broke out in a perspiration. The blacksmith was lying dead at the time. We were frightened, but the blacksmith's wife came for us, and we went into the smithy. There we saw something go through the window. It was like a great black dog. We both saw it, but we could not find anything else.

Mr Barrett does not get much into Bath now. It is a little bit too far, and he cannot walk very well. So he takes his exercise in the garden.

In conclusion, Mrs Beeke has a curious little incident to relate. Just after her father had retired from the police force, she chanced to be riding in the railway train. Two men were in the carriage, and one of them happened to say, "Old Barrett is retiring." "Well," said the other, "they never enjoy their pension long. They always drop off after they have had it a short time." "But here is father, after 23 years, still in the enjoyment of splendid health and very full of vigour and taking an interest in all that goes on," says Mrs Beeke. He is a lively nonagenarian today, and with luck should hold out well for his century.

Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette 2 September 1922

AGED BATH RESIDENT'S DEATH AFTER ACCIDENT

An inquest was held by the Bath City Coroner (Mr F E Shum) yesterday at 3 Southville Terrace, Lyncombe Vale, on Mr Archelaus Barrett, aged 90.

On January 6, deceased attained that great age, and on Feb 14, he slipped down indoors and fractured his leg. For five weeks, he was in the Bath Hospital, and was discharged on March 22 as incurable. He returned home and gradually became weaker till his death on Sunday evening.

Dr Bennett said that but for the accident Mr Barrett would probably have lived two more years; his health was wonderful for his age.

A verdict of "Death from senile decay and heart failure, hastened by the accident," was returned.

Western Daily Press 18 April 1923

OPC Note: Archelaus Hercules Barrett was buried at Bath Abbey on 19th April 1923