

Reminiscences of the Glaven Valley: Care of the Dying and the Dead in the First 50 years of the 20th Century

by Monica White

Synopsis: an account of local nursing and funeral practices in the first half of the 20th century with reference to the customs and personalities as recalled by some of the people who lived in the Glaven villages at that time and was collected by the author at the suggestion of the present Rector, the Rev. Philip Norwood.

During the first half of the last century most people died in their own homes. Few died in nursing homes or hospitals, although during the first three decades some, usually the very poorest, died in the institutes (or workhouses) at Walsingham and Gressenhall. Before the discovery of antibiotics and the development of modern surgical techniques, there was little medical help for the chronically sick or dying. Often all that could be done was to alleviate their pain and make them comfortable. This could be done at home and so it was in the home that most dying people were cared for.

There was some professional nursing help available from nursing agencies based in Norwich and Cambridge and, after 1920, from the District Nursing Service. This Service, which was instituted, I believe, soon after the end of the 1914-18 war, was operational in North Norfolk in the early 1920s.

The nurse was based at Cley and was a familiar figure, dressed in a royal-blue uniform with a blue pill-box hat perched on her head, riding round the villages on a heavy, upright, bicycle. One of the first nurses, if not the first, was Nurse Flatt who married three times, becoming in turn Nurse Weston and Nurse Docking. She seems to have been a woman of considerable character who is remembered with respect rather than with affection. Many young women whom she attended when they had their children were said to be terrified of her.

Nursing services, like all other medical services at the time, were not free. Indeed they seem to have been surprisingly expensive. As with doctors' practices, there was a club or fund into which small sums of money could be paid each week, to be used when necessary. The money was collected by a woman in the local community. But, during the first half of the 20th Century, incomes in North Norfolk were low and often seasonal. Many people could not afford to save on a regular basis. Even those who could seem to have preferred to use the District Nursing Service only for childbirth care, or for nursing during short, acute illnesses. Few could afford to pay for nursing help for the chronically sick or for the dying.

The nurse was, however, always willing to advise patients without making a charge. Janet Harcourt, for example, remembers being told that soon after her birth her parents became concerned about her health. So her father saddled a horse and rode from Wiveton to Cley to ask the nurse for her advice. She gave it willingly and freely. A number of other people recalled being told of similar incidents.

Nevertheless, the burden of nursing care for the dying fell on the families, and it must have been a considerable burden for many. Cottages were small and families, until well into the 1930s, were large, often consisting of three generations. Beds were shared as a matter of course, and most, if not all, rooms were used as sleeping quarters. Labour-saving domestic appliances were scarce, and, in any case, few homes had electricity before the mid 1930s and many not until after 1945. No houses were connected to the mains water and sewage systems, until after the 1953 floods. Before that, in many homes, water had to be pumped up by hand from communal wells. All toilet facilities were outside. It must have been difficult to care adequately for both the healthy and for the chronically sick or dying. It is probably for this reason that a significant, though small, number of people, mostly the elderly, spent their last few months at Walsingham or Gressenhall where, incidentally, they were unlikely to have received medical care.

Very often the need to give the dying continuous care and nursing meant that couples with young families had to welcome sick relatives into their own homes. Sometimes, young women had to

leave their jobs, or even their own children, to return home to nurse elderly parents. Most women seem to have done this with good grace, perhaps partly out of respect and love for their parents, but, perhaps, also because they realised there was no alternative. But others resented the necessity to return home and the consequent loss of financial independence.

There was help and support from the local communities. The rector, or vicar, and his wife made regular visits to the dying and sometimes gave material help. The doctor called, often waiving his fee, and gave reassurance. Within each village there were women, often the unmarried women from the more well-to-do families, who took an interest in those most needing help. They provided luxuries for the dying, particularly if they were children. Neighbours helped to care for children; provided hot meals; worked on the allotments; and, perhaps, most importantly, would sit with the dying. It was considered wholly wrong that anyone should die alone and unattended, so this was a most valuable service. When it was clear that death was imminent relatives, friends and neighbours would come to the house to share the vigil over the dying person.

Author's note: It is perhaps easy to overstress the amount of help and support given by local communities fifty or more years ago. People tend to remember particular incidents, not what happened most of the time. But it does seem that there were many people ready to lend a hand and share in the care of the dying and that, in the past, the community did supply much of the care now given by professionals.

Care of the Dead

When a death occurred, preparations for the funeral took place within the home. The body was not taken away to a chapel of rest. It would seem from the recollections of the oldest in our communities, who recall stories told them by their parents and grandparents, that during the 19th Century each family laid out their own dead. It was the family who prepared the body to be coffined, and young children were expected to help. But by 1900, or probably a little before, there were women in each village who were willing to undertake this task for the families. In Wiveton and Cley there seem to have been a number of such women during the first years of the 20th Century, but after 1920 the task was usually done by the District Nurse or by members of the Red Cross. In Blakeney, too, there were several women ready to lay out the dead, including Mrs Daghish from Temple Place who was the local midwife. But there was one woman above all who was willing to turn out at any time of the day or night to prepare the body to be placed in the coffin. This was Mrs Dinah Jackson who, together with her sister (who moved out of the district when she married) learnt the art of caring for the dead from her mother. Dinah was a woman of character who is remembered with affection by all who knew her, even those who only knew her when, as children, they saw her pushing an old pram up and down Blakeney High Street.

Dinah was rarely given money for her services; she was mostly paid in kind. Gladys Jackson, Dinah's daughter, born in 1903, remembers her mother being given

a small bag of coal, or wood, a loaf of bread, or produce from an allotment. But most often she was given clothes or effects of the deceased which she then sold. However she did sometimes receive cash. One summer, for example soon after the 1939-45 war an old gentleman died on Blakeney Point. His body, wrap-ped in a tarpaulin, was rowed to Morston Quay by Ted Eales, the Warden. On the quay the body was transferred to the back of a builder's van, and taken to an outbuilding attached to the gentleman's home in Blakeney High Street. It was there that Dinah laid out the body and she was given the loose change in the old man's pockets. Gladys believes that this was the custom when someone died unexpectedly, not in their bed.

Dinah washed the body, dressed it, combed the hair, weighted down the eye-lids with old pennies, and did all the other tasks necessary to prepare the body to be laid in the coffin so that it could be viewed by neighbours and friends. The deceased was dressed in a shroud or in clothes chosen by their family. The shroud consisted of a long white cotton or linen gown, rather like a nightgown, and white knitted stockings. In the early years of the century it sometimes also included a white cap or bonnet and white slippers.

The shroud, if provided by the undertaker, represented a significant part of the cost of a funeral, so most people made or acquired a shroud during their lifetime, when they could afford it. The shroud was then wrapped in cloth and put away until it was needed.

Funeral expenses were a great worry for many people, particularly for the elderly who did not wish the cost of the funeral to fall upon their

families. So most saved regularly throughout their life. Some took out life insurance for themselves, and often, also, for their children. The insurance man was here, as well as over most of the country, a familiar sight on his weekly or monthly visits to the villages to collect the premiums. Those who could not afford to take out a policy put money aside when they could. The money was given to a reliable neighbour or hidden in the house, surprisingly often under the mattress. The state gave no money towards funeral costs until the early 1920s when Lloyd George introduced a death grant of £50. In many parts of the country the grant was known as "a Lloyd-George" but I do not know if that was the case here.

There were no specialist undertakers in the coastal strip of North and Northwest Norfolk until the late 1950s. Local builders or boat-builders doubled as undertakers, and it was the builder's men who organised the funerals and bore the coffins from the house to the church and from the church to the grave. There were two firms locally – Meadows-Grimes at Wiveton and Starlings in Blakeney. They served a wide area – Blakeney, Cley, Glandford, Hindringham, Langham, Morston, Salthouse, Stiffkey and Wiveton, and even as far as Burnham Market. As soon as possible after a death had occurred, the builder/undertaker's men were called to the house to measure the body so that a coffin could be made. Although pre-formed coffins and coffin-packs were available in big cities in the early 20th Century, none seem to have been used here until the 1960s. Coffins were made to measure, so to speak, in the builders' yards, in

sheds or cottages in the villages. They were made from solid wood and lined with cloth. The quality and type of wood and cloth used depended on how much the family could afford, but all had brass handles and breastplate on which the name and age were engraved. Coffins were usually plain and the lining very simple, but one woman recalls seeing a coffin lined with white velvet and with a pillow of white flowers. She was only about seven years old at the time (in about 1926) and does not recall whose funeral it was. She believes that it was that of a young woman. In the early part of the century coffins were not made for the destitute. Instead their bodies were shrouded and wrapped in material, but this practice became rare after the end of World War I.

After the body was placed in it, the coffin was taken to a downstairs room. The lid of the coffin was not screwed down until the morning of the funeral, unless the nature of the illness which had led to the death made it necessary. Instead, the lid was laid on the coffin and removed when friends and neighbours called to view the body and to pay their last respects. When visitors came the drapes covering the face and body were folded back. Quite young children were taken to see the dead. One woman remembers that when she was six or seven years old she was taken by her mother to see the body of the old lady next door, a great friend of the family. She felt no fear or apprehension, but she remembers clearly that the old lady looked beautiful in a blue dress and with her grey hair neatly curled, and she still recalls the feeling of peace and tranquillity in the room.

The stairs of many cottages at that time were steep, narrow, and often twisty, so it could be very difficult to carry a coffin down these stairs and many subterfuges were resorted to. Sylvia Claxton remembers that one day, on her way to school, she saw a coffin being lowered through an upstairs window of a house in Blakeney High Street. If it proved impossible to get the coffin downstairs, one of the men would take the family into a downstairs room, shut the door and discuss details of the funeral arrangements with them, while his colleagues manhandled the body down wrapped in a blanket, often in a most undignified way. The men preferred to do this soon after the death had occurred before the onset of rigor mortis. The problem was so serious that people sometimes brought the dying person downstairs in the days immediately before their death. This was particularly so if the sick person was unusually tall or heavy.

Usually the coffin was placed in a room that was rarely used, but in many homes this was impossible. One woman who was seven years old when her mother died, remembers that the coffin was put on the table in the kitchen-cum-living room. She asked her father if it could not be taken to the church. He replied that it was her mother's home and that she would remain in it until she was taken to her final resting place.

But although the coffin was usually kept in the home until the day, or the eve, of the funeral there were times when coffins were placed elsewhere. Bodies that were washed up on the beach or marshes were put in coffins in Blakeney Guildhall, while attempts were made to identify them. Many

remembered going into the Guildhall on their way to school in a high state of excitement, although whether they were hoping to see a dead body, or a skeleton, or a ghost they cannot now recall. Sometimes coffins were placed in the north porch of Blakeney Church (and probably in the porches of other churches in the area). The porch was ideal for the purpose. It was cool, could be locked, had a grill for ventilation, and was not used as an entrance to the church. A number of people recalled that the porch was used in this way, but not why. Some suggested that it was done if the deceased had no near relatives in the village; others that the bodies were those of people whose family could not afford a funeral; others that it was due to the nature of the fatal illness.

There were many customs that were observed following a death. Gladys Jackson told me that her mother opened a window as soon as she entered the room where the dead person lay, to speed the exit of the spirit from the body. No-one else mentioned this custom. Perhaps the family did not know that Dinah did this. The curtains in the room where the death had occurred and, later, in the room where the coffin lay, were drawn as a mark of respect for the dead. It was also a signal to the neighbours that the sick person had died. In some houses, the curtains in all rooms facing the road were drawn.

As soon as possible after the death the church bell was rung to tell of the passing of a christian soul. It tolled a measured stroke for each year of life of the deceased. Many people described, most movingly, how they would stop whatever they were doing in the home,

street or field, and listen to the news told by the bell. In many parts of the country the bell announced the death of a parishioner by a peal of three times three for a man, or three times two for a woman. These were followed by the years of the dead person. Dorothy Sayer's novel, "The Nine Tailors" suggests that this was the custom in the fenlands of East Anglia, but no-one can remember whether it happened here. The custom of ringing the church bell was discontinued in 1939 when the pealing of church bells was to be a signal that an invasion had occurred and was not renewed after the war.

Graves – Burials – Funerals

Although the first crematorium was opened in London in the early 1920s, locally almost everyone was buried, not cremated, and most were buried in a churchyard, not in a cemetery. Before the 1930s the graves were dug by the sexton, perhaps assisted by the builder/undertaker's men. After this time, and particularly after 1940, the graves were dug by the undertaker's men. The graves were lined with real turf, not artificial grass or baize. Sometimes the turf was studded with flowers provided and put in place by the "Brancaster Girls". After the early 1920s these were Girl Guides from the company run by Lady Cory Wright in Brancaster. Lady Cory Wright was a keen and very skilled gardener and she had a plot of land in Brancaster on which she grew flowers for sale. She supplied her own florist's shop in Burlington Arcade, off Piccadilly, in London, and flowers for local funerals and weddings. She was, I believe, the only commercial flower grower in

North and Northwest Norfolk at the time. There are many amusing stories associated with the "Brancaster Girls". Once, for example, the girls were working in a grave close to a stone tomb. While they were busy the grave-diggers rapped on the tomb. The girls were startled and rather frightened, particularly when the men said that they had not heard anything. When the grave-diggers rapped a second time, the girls shot out of the grave and refused to go down again. The turf had to be pulled up and spread on the ground before the girls would return to their work.

There were areas in the churchyards purchased by particular families. Generally, wealthier parishioners were buried on the south side of the church; the poorer members of the parish on the north side. But this was not invariable. When the rector's wife, Mrs Lee-Elliott died in 1936 she asked to be buried on the north side because "there are no poor or rich in the sight of God". Paradoxically she asked for her coffin to be made by a specialist undertaker in Norwich. Ted Grimes who organised the funeral maintained that it was of very inferior quality compared with a locally made coffin.

There does not seem to have been a special area set aside for the destitute who could not afford to pay for a funeral. This is very different from large cities which, until the death grant, had paupers' graves – large, shallow graves which held many bodies. Such burials were often not properly recorded. No-one could remember who paid, locally, for the funerals of the destitute, although it was suggested that the rector or vicar did so himself.

Funerals took place, for obvious

reasons, as soon as possible after death, usually within three days. If this was not possible, the coffin was lined with lead and securely sealed. For example, the body of a German sailor was washed up on the shore at Blakeney soon after the end of the 1939-45 war. It was placed in a coffin in the Guildhall and arrangements made for the funeral. On the morning of the funeral the body was identified by the German Embassy. Mr Starling arranged for the coffin to be lined with lead and sealed, and the coffin was driven down to Felixstowe on the first leg of its journey to the man's home in Germany.

The coffins were conveyed to the church in a number of different ways. Ted Grimes' grandfather could remember a time, at the end of the 19th Century when a coffin was carried from the home to the church on the shoulders of four bearers, accompanied by two men carrying stools. Every now and then, the stools were placed on the ground and the coffin lowered on to them to give the bearers a rest. Round about 1900 each of the churches in the area, with the exception of Glandford Church, acquired a wheeled bier or bier carriage. These were used to bear the coffins from the home to the church for the funeral and from the church to the grave. Glandford Church used the bier belonging to Cley Church. The biers were slatted rectangular frames mounted on four wheels with a steering handle or device at the back. A coffin was held in place by leather or canvas straps. The biers were made by local craftsmen and vary considerably in shape and quality of workmanship. They were pushed (or pulled up hills) by four men, two on each side. A fifth man at the

back steered them. The undertaker walked in front of the bier from the home to the church.

Although biers were used for most funerals, the coffins of the more wealthy families – the farmers and the gentry – were carried to church on a horse-drawn hearse, which was drawn by regular carriage horses, not by the special jet-black horses used in big cities. The hearse moved at a walking pace, preceded by the undertaker. As early as 1926 motor hearses were used very occasionally to carry coffins from distant villages or towns, particularly when the men employed were not of the village.

The bier or hearse was followed by a procession of relatives and friends, men and women, dressed in black. Most people had black clothes, put aside to be used at funerals, but black garments were often borrowed, particularly by the poorer families. As the procession moved through the village people would come to their doors and stand in silence. The men would doff their hats. Anyone who was in the street as the procession passed would do the same. Vehicles on the road would stop or drop behind the procession and proceed at the funeral walking pace. They would not overtake. The blinds or curtains of windows facing the road were often drawn. It was almost as if the whole village was in mourning.

The coffins were often carried through paths rather than along the main roads. This was particularly true of Cley where coffins were carried from the Coast Road to the Fairstead through the grounds of Hall Farm, and it was commonly believed that if a path was used by bearers carrying a coffin it became a legal right-of-way.

At Blakeney and Cley the coffin was taken to the Great West Door and carried through it into the church while a muffled bell was tolled. Many of those who were choir members during the first 50 years of the last century and so were involved in many funerals, cannot recall that sound without a shiver. The atmosphere was intense and very moving.

The coffin remained on the bier throughout the funeral service. Then it was either wheeled from the church to the grave, or carried on the shoulders of the bearers. After the ceremony at the graveside, the mourners returned to the house of the deceased for refreshments. The bearers were invited back and were given some beer as a token of gratitude.

The care of the dying and the dead changed gradually during the first 50 years of the last century, but the rate of change was accelerated by the Second World War and the subsequent changes in society. The National Health Service and improved health care meant that people lived longer and often died in hospital or residential home. In the mid 1950s Starling's funeral business was taken over by Mr Sutton, a specialist undertaker, of Stiffkey – later of Wells – and in the early 1970s Grimes sold his business to the same man. Suttons opened a chapel of rest at Wells and bodies could be taken there soon after death. The body was carried from there to the church by motor hearse, though for many years Sutton would, if asked, take the coffin to the home of the deceased, and then get out and walk in front of the hearse for about a hundred yards in respect for the dead. Mourners drove to the church in their own vehicles.

Many of the pre-war customs disappeared, so by the mid 1970s funerals were very similar to those of today, with the community involved in only the very last act – that of the funeral service.

Author's note: This account is necessarily an incomplete one, partly because the events described happened a long time ago when the people I talked to were young, and partly because the memories recalled depended on the questions I asked, and I only discovered what questions I needed to ask as the study proceeded. But I hope that it does give a picture, however incomplete, of the way in which the dying and dead were cared for 50 or more years ago.

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