

# Willie Tredgett's Diary

By Enid Porter

Many children make a New Year's resolution to keep a diary but, after a few weeks or months, their enthusiasm wanes, the entries become more spasmodic and, finally, are no longer recorded. In the last century, however, a West Wrating boy of nine began, in 1884, to keep a journal and continued the practice faithfully until 1889. The result is a charming account of a village boy's life contained in a 2½-inch thick leather-bound ledger, 15 inches high and 9½-inches wide and illustrated by highly competent pen-and-ink sketches and watercolours. The diary has been kindly lent to me by the boy's nephew, Mr. J. P. Tredgett.

The writer of the journal was John William Tredgett — known to his family as Willie — who was born on 25th February, 1875 and lived in the mill house at West Wrating where his father was for some years the local miller. The ledger was, it seems, not acquired until 1888 but into it Willie carefully copied his earlier diaries as he explains on the fly leaf which is headed, in the decorative writing in which he excelled, *My Journal*. "I mean", he writes, "if I can to write and copy all I can out of my other Diarys into this book which was sold to me by William Charles for 1s. on Sep. 23rd. 1888. 1st I have three Diarys written in lead pencil, first leaf torn out, begun 1884 Dec. 28, ended 1885 3rd Dec. 2nd. Begun 1886 Feb. 25, ended 29 Nov. 1883, 3rd Begun 1887 Jan. 1st . . . not ended." Below he sets down the names of his two sisters, Emma, known as Sissie and Elizabeth, known as Baby Betsy or May, and that of his brother Philip, known as Phil.

To Willie the diaries were precious possessions. He tells us that his mother bought at a sale an old cupboard which she gave to him. "I scrubbed it", he writes, "and put a piece of board in the back and painted it white and on the frunt I put the inscription: *Diary Chest or the Chronicles of the Tredgett Family*." There follows a drawing of the duly-inscribed chest and the note: "I am going to keep my Big Book in it."

Many of the entries in the "big book" record only the trivial day-to-day events in Willie's life: visits to friends and relations in Linton and Haverhill, for example, helping his father to dress the mill stones, working on the mill land which his father farmed. The weather and the bad state of the West Wrating roads are often mentioned and so are absences from school, the reason for the last not always being given although there is one reference to being kept away "because a lot of the children have sores". On another occasion only 30 children turned up at school so these, Willie among them on this occasion, were sent home

for the day.

Willie was fond of animals and there are many descriptions and drawings of his rabbits — which he often sold from 4d. to a shilling each — and of the family cats, pigeons, pigs and horses. He made a fine hutch for his rabbits and named it "The Palace of Rabbits". A drawing of it is in the diary, each part numbered and explained in a key below. No. 1, for example, is "a rabbit — I thought perhaps you could not make out what it was". No. 7 represents "the instruments used in building the above palace"; No. 8 "the daily diet of the inmates" while No. 10 is a coloured "coat of arms of rabbit land".

But Willie was equally meticulous in recording the human members of his family and on 3rd February, 1889 he devoted a whole page to his grandfather, Fuller G. Tredgett, "a real old Essex farmer". He tells us that Fuller was born in Castle Camps, where Willie's father was also born, but that he had moved to a farm at Winsey in Essex and that he had had 15 children, all of whose names and their then whereabouts are carefully entered. On the following day he turns to his mother's family. "Her father was John F. Scrivener and I am proud to say he was a Free Mason. When Mother was born he was a butcher in Reading and Mother was the eldest daughter of his second marriage." There follows the statement, the like of which is so often to be read in Victorian family records, that "his first wife had 5 children, all boys. But they all died in consumption."

## West Wrating Jubilee

Outstanding events in West Wrating figure frequently in the journal. A finely-decorated page is devoted to June 22nd, 1887 when the Jubilee Treat was held in the village, a day after the actual Jubilee day because "the two Mr Frosts went to London to see the Queen yesterday".

Father dined at The Chestnut, Mother and us four went to High Street Farm Barn, but before that we went round the village in waggons all covered with branches and flowers, and then we came back and had our tea, after that we went into the Lordship field and had our sports. Phil won sixpence, I did not win anything. Mr Frost brought a fine balloon into the field but it caught fire. Then the band played down to the Crown and we went to see the bonfire on Challis

hill. It was a very big one.

Mention of Mr. Frost (of Wrattling Hall) reminds us that he was a pioneer of aeroplane building; a drawing of one of his steam aerial machines, completed in 1877, can be seen in the Cambridge Folk Museum, while its engine is preserved in the Shuttleworth Collection at Old Warden in Bedfordshire. Nothing now remains of the silk-feathered wings, however, which were sewn together by the village women. The machine lay for many years in a barn at the Hali but it is impossible to say whether it, or a later Frost model, was the one which Willie Tredgett mentions on 4th April, 1889 when he tells us that he went with his parents to see "Mr Frost's Flying Machine."

Village weddings were of interest to adults and children alike. On October 18th, 1888 Willie writes: "Robert Plumb and Jessey Sparrow were married." At playtime the schoolchildren saw the wedding party arrive in a carriage and pair and were given permission by the schoolmistress to watch the wedding. Willie "Got two pennyworth of rice and afterwards we went down to the Lamb and had some lemonade." It was, he notes, "a very pretty wedding."

In the same year, on November 8th, "James Sanderson (who worked for Mr. Tredgett in the mill) and Susannah Brown were married at 2 o'clock — the first to be married in the new hours." Willie's sisters were bridesmaids and he, too, attended the wedding, the celebration of which seems to have gone on for some hours, for after the ceremony, so Willie tells us:

we went over to Miss Cro's till about six o'clock when we went over to tea, which was very good, then we had desert till supper when the Wedding Cake was cut. Phil and I stopped all night but father, mother and the girls went home about one o'clock. Mr. Alcock sang a lot of songs, so did Mr. Brown and Arthur — twenty in all.

## "Rough Music"

An instance of the old custom of showing disapproval of a neighbour's behaviour by serenading him with "rough music" produced by beating wooden sticks and spoons against tin trays and kettles is recorded by Willie on May 6th, 1889. He and Phil had been picking up stones from their father's field and on the way home "we heard a great noise in the village. Phil and I went up and they were Tin Kettling Mr Belcher because he struck his wife. I never heard such a noise in all my life."

On the same day Willie tells us that his mother went over to Linton where "people are being poisoned by drinking milk they bought at Mr W. Day's. There was one person died while Mother was in Mr Holttum's shop — his house-keeper. There is about 48 cases. Poor old Ned Butt was the first that Died of the effects of Poisoned Milk."

An interesting item of folklore connected with an ash tree between Bartlow and Castle Camps is referred to on May 14th, 1889. Willie had driven with his father towards Castle Camps to meet a horse which Willie's uncle was bringing them to see. The uncle rode it "as far as the Barrack Tree which is said to take its name from a certain Barrack, a highway robber. And the tale goes that he was hung and that his remains were buried by the roadside near the cross-roads and an Ash Stake was Driven through

his body."

Willie and his younger brother Phil were imaginative children and often, in their games, retired to an imaginary land which is described and illustrated in the diary on February 9th, 1889.

Most people live two lives, so says Mother, and Phil and I have a land of our own called The Pampass . . . We have been hunting in this delightful land; in spite of the wind we enjoyed a good day's shooting. I used a rifle called the Devampass Rifle — I made it some time back. Devampass is the King of the land; the Government Houses are called the Casks; Phil and I go by the names of Phillips and Williams. There are lots of Indians in the forests and plains; we had slaves up to 1887 . . . the army is a fine one, one corps still



This old photograph of the Tredgett children with their Mother was taken by Valentine Blanchard in his "Electric Light Studio" in Post Office Terrace, Cambridge.

uses bows and arrows and another consists of men all over 6 feet high, some of them Arabs.

But although Willie could retreat into a dream world he was, for a young boy, remarkably practical in his assessment of his own character. Nine pages of the diary are devoted to "The Life and Adventures of J.W.T.", sub-titled into eight "Chronicles", six of these being descriptions of the family animals. The "Life" begins disarmingly:

I have often thought that I should like to write a tale

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of-some sort but when I do it shall not be of silly twaddle like some of the books I have read. He proceeds to condemn stories which appear to be "jolly tales until the fellow runs sick on some girl — and there you go, it ends up with 'we both looked up at the stars' or some such rot." He is equally critical of books which end at the most interesting part but then decides he must not find fault with other people but "look at home" and goes on to dissect himself.

He was skilful with his hands — there are many references in the diary to the toys, guns and so on that he made — but he confesses to being always in too much of a hurry. He describes a kite he made when he was very small: "It would not fly, so of course I took it to Mother who told me I had forgot to make the tail", though he wonders if, even if he had done so, the kite would have flown for it was made "of green bramble and brown paper". On another occasion he made a boat on rockers but as he used only "green or rotten wood" the rockers came off one day "and

records, probably from local newspapers, such local events as suicides, sudden deaths, fires and robberies.

His journal inspired his brother Phil, born in 1880, also to keep a diary from 1888 to 1890. He did not write in it every day, however, and his entries, many of which refer to events recorded by Willie, are shorter than his brother's. But he, too, lists carefully the names of his family and household for, as he tells us, "I wish I could write some Chronicles like Willie is doing, but I will try what I can do." The small, black-covered notebook in which he wrote is very neat and is illustrated with good pen-and-ink sketches and with water colours which include a map of the area between Cambridge and Haverhill and the "shield of Philip of Wrating."

## Happy Childhood

Both diaries are delightful and from Willie's especially



*An old photograph of the pond and cottages at West Wrating, kindly loaned to us by the Cambridge Folk Museum. Many happy days were spent in this area by young Willie Tredgett.*

the occupants were badly shaken." He tells us that "when my heart is set upon a thing I never rest till I have finished it", but this, he knew, could lead to disaster, as when he built a shed for his rabbits' boxes. "I finished it off in one day and thatched it into the bargain, after a fashion, but next morning the fowls and wind completely cleared my rafters", whereas "if I had spent longer on the task I should have been satisfied with my work."

## Well Illustrated

The drawings in the diary are excellent. There are sketches of soldiers, castles, the school doctor, animals and ships, as well as Willie's own possessions — his toys, guns, magic lantern and so on. He drew the fireplace in his home, the new club house in the village, the train which took him on a day's outing to Dovercourt, indeed there is scarcely a page which is not illustrated. There is a plan of West Wrating with the names of the occupants of the houses marked, and one of the mill with its adjoining property. Young Willie seems to have had in him the makings of a local historian, in fact, for from time to time he attempts a gazetteer of east Cambridgeshire and

there emerges the picture of a very happy childhood. He describes affectionately how Sundays were spent in his home: church in the morning then, after "a good dinner served up by the dear Mater", a walk with Father if it was fine or an afternoon spent with books if it was wet. After tea "we have Bible reading and a text for the week." He writes a charming "family chronicle" for his 7-year old sister May who had "dark brown eyes and a little pink face" and who was fond of those wax images called dolls." He composes poems — not very good ones — in praise of his parents, his brother and sister, his pets and dedicates a page of drawings to his cousin Arthur "who is staying with us, but I am not sure what he likes."

Nowhere, in either diary, is there any hint of friction between the Tredgett children. The two brothers seem to have been extremely generous, giving to and making for each other and their sisters little toys and other gifts, while despite the difference in their ages they played amicably together and did not despise entering into their sisters' games.

Children's diaries as complete as these are, as I have said, comparatively rare and I am grateful to the members of the Tredgett family who have allowed me to make these Victorian annals known.