

A LINK WITH WATERLOO ISLAND'S OLDEST INHABITANT

Mr Charles Pratt, the Island's oldest inhabitant, will on Sunday be the recipient of innumerable messages of congratulations, for on that day he will have reached the 103rd anniversary of his birth. To be one of the oldest living persons in the British Isles is a matter of felicitation, but to live to such an age without losing those faculties which enable one to continue to enjoy life is to achieve a distinction denied to all but a very few indeed. No-one would suppose Mr Pratt to be much, if anything over eighty years of age, and indeed his bodily and mental activity is beyond that of very many men a score of years his junior. Except that he is deaf he bears little trace of the passing of over a century. Today he lives the life of a normal person. He sleeps fairly well, his appetite and digestion are but little impaired, and in fine weather he enjoys his daily walk. He has lost some of his vigour since a severe illness which attacked him in the winter, but at the age of 103 he is still a handsome and pleasant old gentleman.

Mr Pratt, who lives at Hillsborough, Well Street, Ryde, was born at Hambledon on May 12th 1809. If there were anything in the old superstition, he would indeed be a remarkable man, for he was a seventh son of a seventh son, and our ancestors gave such persons credit for second sight, and powers of magic. Mr Pratt had never discovered any supernatural gifts in himself, so it must be supposed that the virtue had died out before he came upon the scene. What he did inherit from his ancestors was great vitality and vigour, his father, grandfather and uncle all being in their nineties when they died. Mr Pratt came to Ryde over 70 years ago and his early recollections of Ryde of that time and of his home at Hambledon are naturally very interesting.

RECOLLECTIONS OF WATERLOO

How many persons can there be now who are able to recall any incident connected with the Battle of Waterloo? There can be but one or two others at the outside throughout the whole country. One can scarcely realise when talking to Mr Pratt that one is in the presence of a man whose mind goes back to the stirring times of a century ago.

"Remember the Battle of Waterloo?" said Mr Pratt. "Well, I wasn't there," he said with a laugh, "but I was about six years old at the time and I can remember the festivities at Hambledon as if it was yesterday. When the news came in everybody cheered and shook hands. I went with the rest down to the Church, and the tower was black with people waving their hats and cheering.

"And where do you think they fired the guns from? Why, from the church tower! There was a great dinner for the grownup people, a tea for the children and sports for everybody. I can remember the plum puddings as if I was them last week – scores of them on the long table that went the length of the field."

"We boys used to have some words which we used to fit to the church bells before the Battle of Waterloo", continued Mr Pratt. "It used to be 'Go back Wellington and fight Marshal Ney,' but where we got the words from I don't know."

THE HAMBLEDON CLUB

“Do you remember anything of the famous Hambledon Cricket Club?”

“Oh, yes, I remember seeing them play very well. We boys used to know them all. Of course Lilywhite was the great man then and we used to shout ‘Now Lilly!’ at the top of our voices. We boys called each other by famous cricketers’ names when we played the game. But they never called me Lilywhite. I was not a good enough cricketer for that!” and the old gentleman laughed heartily.

He was a spectator at the historic match between Hambledon and All England, on Broadhalfpenny Down, when the former, through Lilywhite gained a great victory: he recalled the large “Crosstree” which grew at the meet of two roads, on which the Hambledon boys used to climb and hang flowers; and the strange coincidence of Greenman, who kept the “Greentree,” in Green Lane. On a reference being made to the Hambledon Races, Mr Pratt unconsciously showed his wonderful memory by giving the times when the races and the cricket matches used to take place.

Another of his recollections he tells with great glee: One day, when he and a brother were quite boys, they went into the woods to gather Alpine strawberries which grew there. They spent most part of the day finding and stringing them on grass, placed them inside their hats, and returned to tea. Presently the news spread that the travelling mountebanks had arrived, whereupon the boys, snatching up their hats, when to see the fun. One of the mountebanks seated them beside him on the property cart, when the elder brother’s hat fell off, thus dropping the forgotten strawberries. Immediately the mountebank picket them up string by string, and, in the same manner as currants are eaten off the stalk, demolished the lot in a moment. Here the old gentleman laughed again, as he pictured the astonishment on the elder brother’s face at the sudden disposal of a day’s search.

OLD RYDE MEMORIES

Asked whether Ryde was very different when he first came Mr Pratt said “No, Union Street, High Street and Cross Street were much about the same. Of course, very many of the old houses have been pulled down and replaced by new. The greatest alteration is of course, on the front where the Esplanade is now. When I first came to Ryde the sea came nearly up to the houses and I have seen a boat in George Street.

“Most of the old people who were here are gone. I remember Mr E Hartnall as well as any. It was his suggestion that a canal should be built to keep houses from being flooded on the Strand, and it succeeded, for there has never been the same amount of flooding down there since. When I lived at Crescent House, on the Strand, I got out of bed one morning to find myself standing in water.

“Of course when I first came there were no trains or steamboats. People used to laugh at the coaches for being slow just as they laugh at the trains now. Mr Yelf, I think it was, used to run a coach to Ventnor and one to Newport. We were going up a hill on the way to Newport one day when the coachman asked a man in the road if he would like a lift. ‘I am much obliged to you,’ replied the man, ‘bit I am rather in a hurry today.’”

Mr Pratt laughed very heartily at this recollection.

“In those days,” he continued “there were some fine wherries at Ryde and the watermen used to do well taking people over to Netley and Portsmouth, or on picnic trips along the coast. One of the leading watermen was Joseph Kemp. He had a fine wherry and he used to be a favourite with the ladies when they had picnics along the coast.

“One day a party hired his wherry and put hampers and all the rest of it on board, and had a fine long day. When they got back in the evening the lady who arranged the picnic smiled at Joe Kemp and said ‘What a fine set of teeth you have Mr Kemp.’

“I suppose so, but they haven’t been much good to me today’ replied Kemp, who had watched the company empty the hampers and had not been asked to have a bite,” and Mr Pratt laughed again.

“Talking about ladies, Southampton used to be a very gay place when I was young. I forget how many coaches used to stop there from London and other parts, but I know there used to be every so many handsome ladies about the High Street, with open work stockings and sandals.”

SMUGGLING DAYS

“I expect you have some smuggling recollections”.

“Well, there used to be a lot of smuggling by all sorts of people, but I did not take a great deal of notice. Stubbington Lane End used to be the chief place for them. Vessels came there and landed quite big cargoes and get them into Surry in very quick time. When we have been in bed we have heard them going by all night long. There was so much smuggling there that the Government put a station there with an officer and a few men, but it went on pretty much the same whatever the Government did.

“I remember when Mr John Fleming was Member of Parliament. Members used to twit him about white spirit being sold on his land at Binstead. All he replied was that there was no public house there so what were men to do?”

“There was a very smart chap named Charley Barkham who used to go across to France and bring back white spirit. He had a fine craft called the Elizabeth, and though he was often chased and fired on by the Revenue cutters, he was never caught. His craft used to lie alongside the Revenue cutter off Binstead, and the preventative men would go aboard and search for contraband. Of course they never found anything; it had all been landed at Stubbington. Charlie Barkham was a first-rate sailor and much too clever for the preventative men.”

SHIPBUILDING AT FISHBOURNE

“Many of the fisherman used to lie at Fishbourne then?” we remarked.

“Yes,” replied Mr Pratt, “and some big ships were built there too. Fishbourne Creek was wider and deeper then than it is now. I recollect a fine big schooner was built in a field down by the creek, I don’t know how many years ago. I believe it was for the Earl of Yarborough who had her build, but I am not certain,

“Anyhow, the nobleman who built her took some of those who had worked at her round to see the ‘Burning Mountain’ which was Mount Etna, and he gave every man of the crew and some others a cask of the wine that was made from the grapes that grew on the mountain. Some of the men sold the wine when they got home, and a veterinary surgeon at Winchester got hold of a good deal of it. “It was a good wine, I know,” said Mr Pratt with a smile, “because I had some of it more than once when I called on him.”

Mr Pratt has now been a total abstainer or a non-smoker, but has taken a moderate quantity of alcohol, and as he put it “When he wanted a cigar he had it.” He is a great believer in temperance in all things, and therein perhaps partly lies the secret to his wonderful vigour.

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Researched and typed by Ann Barrett and Janette Gregson