

THE CHEEKY TRAMP



The highways and byways of Lancashire were well trodden by "tramps" until the start of World War Two -- mainly men, but also a few women.

There were various reasons for people being "on the tramp". When there was little public transport, people accepted walking as the only way to visit distant friends and relatives. Also there were the "tramp labourers", able and willing migrant workers, selling their labour where it was needed. These included construction workers and seasonal farm workers. On the road were other people who were genuinely homeless and penniless, perhaps whole families walking hopefully on to where there were rumours of finding work.

However, there were a few people who were professional vagrants, living on their wits and the charity of others, and having no thought of doing any sort of useful work.

These professional tramps picked up anything thrown away, including cigarette ends which were many, as more people smoked and walked the footpaths. These "fag ends" as they were known, were dismantled, and the tobacco accumulated was smoked in a pipe, carried by most. All their worldly possessions went with them, including a rolled blanket for sleeping rough. They often wore two pairs of trousers, extra jackets, giving extra pockets, and had old army mess tins for cooking. A brew can for tea was usually seen swinging from a waistbelt. They were mostly unshaven and of unkempt appearance.

Apart from petty thieving, they were just a nuisance, going from door to door begging, "Can you spare me a little tea and sugar?" At the next house, "Will you brew my can and have you a drop of milk to spare?" -- "Have you a crust of bread?" -- "Can you spare something to spread on it?" Any kindness shown was rewarded by an oft repeated, "God Bless You". Some would perform as street singers before knocking on doors, expecting a few coppers to be dropped in a hat. I think that people of those days had greater sympathetic feelings towards their more unfortunate fellow human beings.

To children including myself, tramps were objects of curiosity. They did not seem to mind our inquisitiveness. It was said that they made secret marks, on walls and pavements, to indicate to those that followed the places where they had been well received. We knew them by the nickname of Milestone Inspectors.

Most workhouses, and the Local Authority Hospitals that came later, had a Vagrancy Ward. There a tramp could have a meal, a bed, and breakfast next morning in return for doing some job of work before leaving to make his way to the next Vagrancy Ward. The Chipping district was between places such as Preston, Ribchester, Clitheroe and Lancaster. I believe one month had to elapse before an individual could revisit any Vagrancy Ward.

Tramps could also stay at Common Lodging Houses for a few pence per night. There were two lodging houses in Longridge and at least one in Hesketh Lane, Chipping.

In the early 1900's my Uncle and Aunt, William and Mary Amelia Marsland were resident at Thornley Smithy, where William was blacksmith and farrier. Every Sunday morning he walked to Lee House Church to mass, being absent from home approximately two hours, while my Aunt was at home with their baby daughter.

A tramp had commenced calling every Sunday morning, my Aunt being the only adult in the house. He was always treated kindly, but he became progressively more persistent in his requests, asking for tea, sugar, milk, brew his can, a crust, etc -- then asking to sit by the fire for a while. My Aunt was unafraid of the man and eventually he would knock on the door and enter the house not waiting to be invited.

At this stage my Uncle had to be informed of what had been happening during his absence on Sunday mornings. A plan was made. My Aunt went to church whilst William stayed at home. From his concealed position in the kitchen he saw the tramp approaching. The tramp entered the house and seated himself by the fire in the living room. William then entered the living room and fixed his gaze on the tramp. He rolled up his sleeves and put on a blue and white striped butcher's style apron. He was a heftily built man, with muscular arms, and had a big moustache which gave him a fearsome villainous appearance. He took a large carving knife from a drawer and began to sharpen the blade, slowly and deliberately, looking intently at the tramp, no words spoken. After some minutes he put down the knife and went across to where the tramp was sitting. He lifted the man's beard to examine his throat from side to side very carefully. William returned across the room, picked up the knife and at that stage the tramp ran out of the house and down the road. Needless to say he did not call again!

This was told to me as a true story many years ago.

Thomas H. Marsland. (born 1917)