

The changing face of Sundays

When I was a boy Sundays were special days – for all classes and regardless of wealth. However they were particularly special for the "not well off", of which I was one. We were restricted in our activities to a large degree by the need to be thrifty. My parents had been brought up "Church of England" but we were not fervent worshippers, nor very "High Church" nor were we ever fussed by the religious denomination of our friends or neighbours. We just got on with life and strove to be better in all respects. Sunday was a day which, because it was Christ's Day, we treated with great respect. It was also the only day of the week when my father was not at work. Mind you, he often spent Sunday mornings tending the garden or his allotment, both of which he was very proud of, just as he was of the produce he was able to harvest from time to time.

But I must write about my Sundays rather than his; and I cannot remember Sundays of my early childhood very clearly.

I must have been about 15 when I was confirmed and this was a turning point in my Sunday activities. St John's Church, Wembley, was my parish church and I was expected to attend communion at 8 am, Matins at the Children's Church at 11 am, Sunday school at 3 pm and evensong at 6 pm. I never found any difficulty in meeting this full schedule mainly because all the prettiest girls in the parish also attended these services. For a few years I was a teacher at Sunday School.

I have fond memories of Children's Church on Sunday mornings. It was run on the lines of the Matins at the parish church by a couple Mr and Mrs Norris, assisted by another couple Mr and Mrs Powell. A frequent visiting speaker was a Mr Kenchington who was an architect and a very good story teller. I kept up a correspondence with Mr Powell during the War and some time after the war years I took Dorothy and John to see Mr and Mrs Powell at Battle in Sussex where they lived. Years later when we had moved to Crowthorne we encountered Mr Kenchington's wife who became an early member of our Natural History Group and for whom John did occasional jobs in her garden to earn pocket money.

After evensong in the 1930s, still in our best clothes, we (my mother, father, sister and I), would go for a walk which invariably started as a sedate affair but degenerated when we reached an open area of grassland when my father would produce a tennis ball and play catches with me.

During the war I was away of course but Dorothy and John like most people were struggling to survive while avoiding German bombs. I returned to a life governed by ration books but for me a growing awareness that I had to improve the lot of my family. So much was happening at once. Sundays had to be shared among our many interests. Because Dorothy and I were still in our 20s we felt we could cope with anything but it meant our Sundays were invariably hard work with our many interests. Church-going suffered though we tried to ensure that John, Peter and Diana went to church and learned something of Christian values, even if we, their parents, were no great example. But Sundays were not what they had been. The children each had particular interests that had to claim our time, sometimes on Sundays. The boys had Cubs and Scout activities; so did I as their Scout leader; Dorothy was the same as Brown Owl or helper with so many girls' activities. Some Sundays saw unusual activities - the day of the great floods in 1953, the day when a dead grey seal was washed up on the beach at Southend, visits from friends and families, vital trips to natural history venues. These demands on Sundays seem to have gone on for the last 60 years and show no sign of abating.

In the last decade or two the pattern of Sundays has been influenced by the advent of the supermarket, the speed of life and the convenience of the motor car. We, like so many other people, often included in our Sunday morning activities shopping in comfort at a local supermarket.

Since I had my stroke in 2002 we have been dependent on our family and friends for trips to the shops - and the family are often forced to visit on Sundays. They took us shopping on whichever day they came. When we moved into Stanton Lodge in 2006 our Sundays changed yet again. However, despite Dorothy dying in 2007 the pattern of Sundays has been the same - family visits to me, taking me to a supermarket, shopping and returning, sometimes having time to attend the church service at Stanton Lodge.

I wonder what my grandma, my parents, my old vicar (the Rev. John William Potts Sylvester), Mr and Mrs Norris, Mr and Mrs Powell, Mr and Mrs Kenchington, my Dorothy and her relatives would have thought of the changed face of Sundays. For in my 88½ years they have changed beyond all recognition.