

A TRAVELLER'S FRIEND

from the Evening Express of Thursday July 3rd 1986

By courtesy of Aberdeen Journals Ltd

They used to be a familiar sight in the countryside, wandering the highways and byways at will, making and selling bits and pieces, returning time and again to their favourite haunts. They were the travelling folk, welcomed by some, but shunned by many, part of rural life and yet apart from it.

In recent years the old camping sites have disappeared and the numbers of travellers has dwindled as among growing controversy local authorities have failed to provide sufficient alternatives.

Sheila Hamilton has tracked down Maggie McGregor, from Lumphanan, not a traveller herself, but a good friend to them and one of the few – she is 90 on Sunday – who can recall as if yesterday a unique way of life that has vanished forever.

You might not think so to look at her today, but Maggie McGregor was once a big woman. Big and strong enough to make light work of her self-imposed missions of mercy.



“My goodness, it’s many a drunken tyke I’ve found by the roadside,” she declared. Some might have passed by on the other side. Many of the country people would have given the travelling folk a wide berth. But not Maggie. The victim of his own folly was dragged down to the lodging house in the howe and unceremoniously shoved into the adjoining shed to sleep off his excesses. At least he wouldn’t die of exposure by the roadside.

“I mind coming hame from a dance at Lumphanan and taking Besom Jimmie hame” Maggie volunteered. Besom Jimmie, “a peer, harmless cratur,” was a kenspeckle figure in the North-east and made his living selling heather scrubbers and besoms.

The countryside is quiet now. “I could tell you of 33 houses and crofties that have gone,” said Maggie. It is years too, since the travelling folk came by on the old drove road which snakes away past the farm of Moss-side through the blue, misty hills to Lumphanan. On a hot and hazy summer afternoon with the countryside ablaze with the yellow on the broom, you can see why they chose to break their journey at this idyllic spot. Some would travel by shelt and cart, but for most it was shanks’s pony. “Oh, Maggie, what sair feet I hae; I hae traivelled a’ the wye fae Gartly the day,” she would often be greeted.

There was a lodging house for travellers at either side of the farm that Maggie’s father, Alexander McGregor, took on 74 years ago when she was just a girl of 15 and mesmerised by the glimpse of such a different world on her doorstep.

The travellers pulled cranberries on the hills to sell and the next door farmer allowed them to camp on one of the parks that ran down to the bottom of the hill. “About September, how bonny it was with the tents right down the park,” said Maggie wistfully,. She loved, too, to hear the music of their bagpipes of an evening, though it was the fiddle she played herself till arthritis took a hold.

“My father would say; ‘Lord, girl, you’ll land on the road yersel ae day,” Maggie grinned. But there was never any fear of that. There was too much for her to do at home. “I could dae anything but ploo. I loved the horses. I could yoke a cairt and ca’ a load o’ neeps.” She also clerked to a firm of auctioneers for many years and was postie at Lumphanan. When her father died, she ran the place herself and only gave up working the land 17 years ago when she let it out for grass.

Despite her father’s fears, she was never tempted to go travelling. The only nights she has ever spent away from Moss-side have been in Aboyne Hospital. “I’m content. It would never have crossed my mind to move.” And while Moss-side was a haven to the travelling folk and Maggie was a good friend, they kept very much to themselves. “We had our class and they had their class and they didn’t want any interference. They wouldn’t have wanted to cross over any more than we would”.

“I was dared ever to call them tinkis by my mother. She would have said: ‘They are God’s creatures the same as we are’

There was always in Maggie a tolerance and understanding, a natural acceptance of different ways. “I have nothing but good to say about the travellers. They were a’ very nice tae me. I used tae let them intae the cornyard where they stacked their rags before they carted them awa’.”

That didn’t mean Maggie hadn’t the measure of them. “I can mind when they would have begged some meal from a farmer and then sold it to me for my chickens. Oh, they were cunning. You had to ken them.” By no means were they saints. “Just like oorsels, there were good and bad. There was one coorse lad wi’ ae leg and he would have ca’ed ye a’thing if ye didna gie him something at the door. I have seen some awfy rows among them if the men folk started arguing. And the womenfolk drank as well and smoked the clay pipe.”

The travellers brought with them little dramas to enliven the humdrum pace of rural life. Twins were born down at the back of the hill and one woman almost had her baby in the barn at the back until she was discovered and turned out to give birth in a tent.

Maggie doesn't doubt but that they sometimes went hungry, but they always gave something in return for milk or eggs or potatoes. She remembers them brewing "tinkies tea" by the side of the road in a little black pail.

Year in, year out, they came up the drove road that ran from the Tarland road through to Lumphanan ... the same families, the Lindsays, the Kelbies, the Whytes, the Stewarts, the Keiths. They paid 9d for a bed in the lodging houses. One, run by a farmer called Maxwell Mearns and his sister, Mary, is now a smart dwelling house; the other, kept by "an auld cratur" called Jane Smart was just a living room and bedroom with a shed built on to supplement the sleeping accommodation. That, according to Maggie, is "a' doon noo."

She remembers the night when a great rumbling was heard over at the farm. Before she could investigate, Jane came rushing over to the farm-house shrieking: "Lord, lassie, my hoose has fallen in." Indeed, the roof had caved in, but it was repaired by public subscription. Of a Sunday, Jane would set to and make a massive pot of broth in a "great, three-fitted pot." Into it would go the joints of beef that the various wandering families had purchased from the butcher. Each was tied with a different knot. "That was how they kent their ain bit," Maggie disclosed.

The travellers were sitting ducks for the minister who used to come out and preach in the open every Sunday. "When we heard him coming, we came into the house," said Maggie with some satisfaction. "Nobody bothered to listen to him."

You can take your car down the rough track that leads off the Tarland road just as far as the old farmhouse where Maggie lives ... in much the same manner as she has always done. "I have never gone modern," she announced with pride, sitting in the ingle neuk with the old-fashioned sway still intact and a kettle hissing over the fire. The cosy, wood-lined room is lit by a gas lamp which hangs from the low ceiling and there is a Tilley lamp close by for emergencies. Three years ago, Maggie - 90 on July 6 - was prevailed upon to have water piped to the house; till then water had to be fetched from the well down the field three or four times a day. As far as electricity is concerned, Maggie has stood firm ... though she has yearned for a washing machine. "I won a blender, but I am just keeping it" laughed Jeannie Mess, who came to stay with Maggie for a short visit after an illness. That was half a century ago.

All Maggie's life, people in need have found their way into her heart and home and she has never turned anyone away. No one has ever let her down. Back in 1925, she began boarding the mentally handicapped at a time when this was quite common. "They were gweed tae me and I was gweed tae them." She said simply. She has lost count of the people she has looked after - at one time she and Jeannie cared for half a dozen - and one woman still lives with them. Now that Jeannie and Maggie are both badly crippled and Maggie has lost her sight, it is debatable who is looking after who.

Maggie's home has always been a mecca for visitors from far and near and things haven't changed. Former travellers unto the second and third generation come back to see her. Of a Sunday, the kettle is never off the boil. Even on a weekday afternoon, there was a steady stream of visitors to fill the waiting row of chairs. A neighbour had come in to help with the chores as she does regularly.

Maggie is very special to everyone who knows her and as long as she is around, there will be an open door to all comers at Moss-side.