

The Coalman

by James Platt

No more than fifty yards up Trewetha Lane above the pump, set back behind a small paved yard, Harold Spry the coalman had a tin roofed garage where he maintained his stock of coal and his ramshackle flat backed delivery lorry.

Harold, slight of frame, mild mannered and temperate in disposition, was one of nature's supreme gentlemen. He was a chapel man from head to toe, and a chorister of note. For a long while he was a pillar of a vocal quartet which called itself the 'Four in Harmony'. The four, which also featured John Prout, sang regularly at village concerts. They were great admirers of the 'Inkspots' and included in their repertoire a number of the sweet songs associated with that celebrated group.

For all his spareness of frame, Harold Spry had a broad back and powerful arms, well accustomed to heaving hundredweight bags of coal into assorted cellars, bunkers and some said maybe even baths, up and down steps, in and out of alleys, opes and lanes in every part of the village.

In the full pursuit of his profession he wore a leather apron and leather hooded cape, both of which were invested with the colour and accumulated memory of more tons of coal than could reasonably be counted, delivered on his own back to all points beyond where his lorry could not be induced to go.

A tap on the right hand side of the sliding door to Harold's garage provided water with which he occasionally washed down his sluggish lorry. The uncharitable claimed that he rather more frequently washed down his bags of coal to improve the cohesiveness and disguise the character of the contained slack in making up a 'hunderd' as the measure was locally known.

The lorry, a familiar sight as it crept and crawled on its rounds of the village, moved with such supreme economy of speed that Ted Robinson declared its make to be a 'Rolls Canardly' – 'it rolls downhill but can 'ardly get back up again'. There was a rumour that the lorry had once been passed by a pedestrian, although to give the benefit of the doubt, the latter could perhaps have been running at the time.

When the lorry was out, it was always a magnet for boys intent on obtaining what was known as a 'tow'. This ritual practice involved hanging on to the back of the lorry and trotting (or walking) behind it as it proceeded on its way. When the load of hundredweight sacks of coal was tall enough, Harold was oblivious to the presence of those 'on tow' at the time. The best kind of tow was the province of those with hobnails on their boots, since this allowed them to skid along the metalled road as if they were on skates.

If there were not enough hand holds for all the passengers desirous of a tow, then they linked hands to hold on to one another. It was not uncommon for a chain of as many as twenty such passengers on tow to form up behind the lorry as it weaved its unhurried way about its business. When the lorry stopped, those on tow let go and stood innocently around until it moved off again.



George's garages on Trewetha Lane today



The Old Coal Store before it was renovated by George & Anne Steer

Below: Harold Spry with his son Jack on the motorbike he used in his coal delivery business in the 1930s



Harold in no way approved of the towing practice, but as a one-man operation he was powerless to do much about it. The admonishment of the boys on tow was probably the only occasion on which Harold's gentlemanly demeanour slipped sufficiently to permit imprudent language to break through. However, an unspoken truce existed between him and those who followed the lorry, brought about by resignation to the inevitable on his part and by persistence on theirs.

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