



Metheringham:

Home to Fayres and Flights

If the character of a place was defined by its place in 'big history' then Metheringham – known as 'Meg' locally – would be forever labelled the place where the RAF 5 Group, Bomber Command, was established in 1942.

Words: Stephen Wade Painting: David Work

But there is much more to this very old and distinguished village whose story goes back into the mists of unwritten history when a certain Medic had a homestead there, or at least his people did. In the Domesday Book it is Medricesham – 'the settlement of Medic.' In 1193 it was written as Mederingeham, something close to the name we have today. It appears that the man whose name survives in the place today had his home there around 500 AD, and later the Romans settled there, as they did in so many parts of the county.

The modern world of advertising and materialism was seeping into the village by the early nineteenth century: Mr John Elkington, a Metheringham man, was quoted in an advert for 'Blair's Gout and Rheumatism Pills, as available from Mr E B Drury's shop near the Stonebow, Lincoln', and Mr Elkington was apparently 'glad to answer any queries regarding this amazing medicine, having bought half a dozen boxes in Lincoln'. More significantly, mechanisation was playing an important part in the local economy: in 1841, when floods covered much of the borderlands of the Witham, 'The Morning Post' reported that, 'The steam engines erected within the last few years have wonderfully improved the drainage of the Nocton, Blankney, Metheringham and other fens.' The established country ways came head to head with the new machines, and there were casualties, as in the case of a young man called Wallhead who was driving a wagon and team belonging to his employer, Mr Green of Metheringham, by the Durham Ox pub when the lead horses were startled by the noise of an engine, and Wallhead died in trying to stop the stampede.

Looking for the special nature of a village when it is part of a cluster is a fascinating task, and Metheringham is a perfect example of this, as it is close to Nocton, Dunston and Blankney, so its story runs into theirs of course. Yet it has one particular feature in its story that appeals to lovers of English topography: it was reborn after being destroyed by fire in 1599: there were virtually no surviving places there after the fire, which started in the street runnel or 'kennel' (related to the word 'canal') and did widespread damage, including the destruction of the old church, a place which was renewed and re-dedicated three years after that appalling tragedy. The South Door has the date 1602 and the royal cipher, and as Dick and Jean Randall explained in 'Lincolnshire Life' some years ago, there is some local lore related to the former north door: 'The latter, used largely for medieval processions. And at one time called 'The Devil's Door' and left open at

baptisms for the escape of the exorcised evil, is often no longer in use...'

Every place has its hidden stories like that, but Metheringham has many more including its Edwardian fame when it had a miniature rifle range, opened in 1911 by Prince Arthur

of Connaught, a grandson of Queen Victoria. The range was created by Lord Londesborough who had strong views on shooting, in that time of great militarism and preparation for possible wars to come; he told the press that 'Every



Englishman must appreciate the value of such clubs, and to every soldier they were of vital importance.'

Communities are made by their people of course, and Metheringham has had others, less famous than Lord Londesborough, but no less interesting. Mary Mackie recalled one such character in this magazine, writing about her father's uncle, Bill Fox, who represents a long-gone lifestyle: 'He always seemed to wear thick brown corduroy trousers, heavy boots and a shirt with no collar, and he lived in a house at the end of Metheringham Fen amid the flat land and the dykes...' Mary's visits to Bill epitomise the particular quality of travel in Lincolnshire when few had cars: 'My mother used to take me down the fen by train, then across the ferry and over two fields along a path called the Crossbanks because it ran from one great draining dyke to

another, the Delph.'

The railway did come, though, and the late Victorian maps show the Great Northern and Great Eastern Joint Railway line running through Dunston, Metheringham and Scopwick. After the closure of Metheringham station in 1961 (when it was joined with Blankney) there was a gradual movement to re-establish it, and in 1975 it was reopened; 'The Times' reported on the special occasion: 'With due ceremony, which included a specially composed song, the villagers of Metheringham... celebrated the reopening of their railway line... From today, 15 trains to and from Lincoln will make daily stops at Metheringham for the first time in 14 years and it is hoped that about a hundred passengers will use the service each day.' The photo at the time shows the train, with 'Special'

on the destination plate, and a large and animated crowd lining up for a performance of the song.

One curious feature of the railway along the villages to Lincoln in Victorian times was the link between Blankney and the Metheringham station made by Lord Yarborough between Brocklesby Hall and the track: this was a sunken wooden coach-way which made it possible for people to reach the station without using the public road. This is typical of so many local amenities created by the rich landowners to add more comfort and convenience for guests when they entertained and supervised hunts and shooting parties.

If we look to tradition, and often this goes back much earlier than the arrival of the locomotive, then the village has its 'Fayre and Feast.' This was always held on the third Saturday in October to mark



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METHERINGHAM CROSS

the end of harvesting, but by the 1960s the event had died out, then it was revived in the late 1980s. Last year the theme was 'heroes and heroines' and one of the stars was Treo, an award-winning army search dog, and there were the usual attractions, including stalls, dancing, bands and a fairground.

Other survivals of the past are still in evidence, notably the windmill, known as the Old Meg Flour Mill, which was a six-storeyed and six-sailed Lincolnshire mill, having the distinctive white onion-shaped cap; it was built in 1867, in a village paddock, and the mill's working life ended around 1930 and it is now in a ruinous state, fifty years after the loss of the cap and windshaft. However, time has a habit of creating positive and ironical contrasts, and today in Metheringham the firm of A L Cox and Sons continues the work of corn merchants; established in 1958, they now run their own transport fleet and deliver to mills, compounders, crushers and to the new

bio fuel industry.

Of course the church and the life of worship have always been important and eventful in the village: in the parish visitations in the early years of the eighteenth century, the village incumbents were often in debt, and their situation forced them into hiding. The last years of the nineteenth century brought far more typical and culturally satisfying events, such as the drive towards education, supported by the Church of England's Working Men's Society, which held a special service for the local branch in 1889, including the highlight of a 'knife and fork tea' which was apparently something special then! There were also lantern lectures, launched in 1884 with a talk on Norway. Efforts were being made to enlarge the general knowledge of the people of 'Meg.'

St Wilfrid's Church is at the heart of the Christian life, and the mason John Tirrell worked on it when it was rebuilt after the fire; Pevsner the historian liked the bell-openings and tower, but was puzzled by a 'tall attachment against the west wall of the tower.' The church was restored in the Victorian period, when the north aisle was rebuilt, and more recently the oak choir



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stalls, screen and pulpit were added. There are several impressive windows as well, one particularly interesting one has a depiction of the village blacksmith and his wife. One special distinction of St Wilfrid's is that its parish register (now kept in Lincolnshire Archives) is the very first, begun in the year 1538, when the preservation of parish records was established by Thomas Cromwell.

The other building to attract Mr Pevsner was the manor house, built in the late seventeenth century by Sir Thomas Skipworth, and originally it was thatched; as Pevsner noted, it is built in the shape of a Greek cross. After a fire in the nineteenth century, it was taken over by Lord Londesborough, and as well as his interest in shooting, he had the famous Lancashire cricketer, Captain R H Spooner living there as agent. The manor was requisitioned by the RAF in 1942, but today is back in private hands.

The general history and social events of the village have their interest, but it is hard to deny that the RAF presence there has taken centre stage in the past. The air base was opened there in

1943, and although it lasted only until 1946, the importance of its squadrons and their part in major activities in the theatre of war cannot be underestimated. The base was a class 'A' standard airfield, built on 600 acres of farmland; the first squadron based there was No. 106, and was destined to lose sixty-five Lancaster bombers in the course of the war. 106 Squadron, in action for the battle for Berlin, and after 200 operations, then later formed part of the 'Tiger Force' working in the Far East. This was a very long range bomber unit, created after the Quebec Conference of September 1944 when Winston Churchill transferred a major part of Bomber Command to the Pacific, with almost a thousand heavy bombers taking part.

Today there is an Airfield Visitor Centre in the former ration store. As with so many former bases, the importance of the wartime activities and the historical details of action are preserved by enthusiasts, who help visitors to envisage where the hangars stood and what the scale of operations must have been. The Friends of

Metheringham Airfield are always busy arranging events, such as their rolling programme of lectures and in gathering volunteers to work on the restoration of aircraft. They have also refurbished a gymnasium and take a pride in the No. 106 Squadron memorial at the airfield.

As with the sister villages around her, Metheringham is fortunate that local people are working hard to preserve the vestiges of the past and keeping some of the old traditions from a fascinating social history very much alive. The fayre and the flight are surely here to stay.



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