

THE TIMBERSCOMBE FRIENDLY SOCIETY



Pictured above are members of the Timberscombe Friendly Society, proceeding along Jubilee Terrace on their annual Club Walk. The photograph was donated in 2019 by the Timberscombe School. It appears to have been clipped from a newspaper and mounted in a paper frame. Handwritten along the top of the frame is "FOUNDED IN 1823 THIS BEING 1923". Signed on the lower right corner of the frame is "Alfred Vowles Minehead".

The dates given may have been a mistake. 1827 is the year more commonly given for the founding of Timberscombe's Friendly Society (1) and a centenary walk was recorded in 1927 (2). Around 1927 is also when Alfred Vowles purchased a house on The Avenue in Minehead that he used as a studio (3). Regardless of the year, it must be the first Tuesday in June, the traditional day for the Club Walk, with the men carrying floral staves and walking past The Stores at Combe House (which in 1969 will become the site of the village post

office). The well-dressed man on the left may be a fellow from another village, who joined marches every year, wearing a blue swallow-tail coat, yellow vest and white trousers (4). In Britain, Friendly Societies surged in popularity in the 17th and 18th centuries, but their origins were in the craft guilds of the Middle Ages and before that, the artisans of ancient Greece and Rome (5), where tradesmen supported those of their own profession.

Likewise, the Friendly Society was an association that offered social and financial support for their fellow man in the days before national health, widespread insurance or credit unions. Their goal was to provide aid when needed for funeral expenses, unemployment benefits, pensions and cooperative banking, as well as care for the ill or mentally unstable. In a poor village such as Timberscombe, these were things that could happen to almost any family at any time---and did. Men (and they were all men) in the Friendly Society would pay a small weekly sum to help meet these demands (6). By 1892, 80% of male industrial workers were members (7). In that same year, the Timberscombe Friendly Society had around 182 members. On the day of the annual Club Walk, every one of these men who



Alfred Vowles photograph by kind permission of Tim Collins

were healthy and lived within a 15 mile radius (8), were required to participate in this event to not only celebrate the Society but also to raise further (and likely needed) income.

As depicted above, a traditional starting point of the Club Walk was Bickham Manor, just southwest of the village. While undated, this is likely to be post World War 1 when owned by William Gibbs Morel (9). A large number of men, women and children have gathered to watch the beginning of this annual event. Centre left the stewards can be seen with their brass staves.



Photograph courtesy of the St. Petrock's History Group

A photograph of the Timberscombe Friendly Society, also likely at Bickham Manor on the occasion of a Club Walk, but at an earlier date than the previous photograph. It is labeled 1908 and was taken by Herbert John Hole, born in 1873, who identified himself as "Bert", possibly to distinguish himself from his father, Herbert Henry Hole, another well-known photographer (10). The Hole family lived in Watchet but Bert Hole had firm Timberscombe connections. In 1902 he married Alice Maud Williams, who was born in 1881 at Timberscombe (11). Their wedding was at St. Petrock's Church (12), where they also baptized their sons (13). After Bert Hole's early death in 1915, his youngest daughter attended the Timberscombe School (14).

In Mr. Hole's photograph, the Society members stand behind a brass band that will lead their Club Walk. The band is likely from Watchet, consisting of members of the Somerset Second Volunteer Battalion. The bandmaster, Mr. Alfred Wedlake (15) reclines on the left edge of the photograph. The gentlemen standing that are wearing sashes would be

stewards of the Friendly Society. The tall flags may be banners that were presented to Timberscombe in 1876 by the Minehead Friendly Society (16). Several other members of the society hold aloft variations of the famous floral staves. It is a large group.

Traditionally the men of the village made their own staves, collecting flowers on the previous Sunday, often especially grown in their gardens for the Club Walk. On the night before the walk, a stout stick would have newspaper attached to create different shapes. Smaller flowers were bunched and tied on the top, with larger ones on the bottom. The flowers were secured and when completed, the decorated stick would be attached to a longer stick. Ribbons were added to dangle or to be wrapped around the longer holding stick (17). Sometimes matching brass devices would be attached to the top of the stave, so that different societies would have their own characteristic head (18).



From Bickham, the men would walk to the village centre, as seen here in this early Alfred Vowles photograph, dated from 1910 to 1914 (19). They are marching along Addison's Folly (later renamed Bemberry Bank), crossing in front of School House, built in 1805. At the time of this photograph, it likely housed Herbert Shephard, the Head Teacher at Timberscombe School and his wife, Gladys (nee Churchill) Shephard, the Elementary School

Teacher (20). Mr. Shephard would probably be marching and perhaps some of his students are in the group seen following the Society members. This copy of the photograph was donated in 2020 by Bernadette Brunker, the current owner of School House.

Reaching the village around 10:00 AM, a roll call would be taken (21) and the men would proceed to a service at St. Petrocks, after which they would pay for a breakfast (doubtlessly prepared by the women who were not allowed on



the walk), with proceeds going to the Society (22).

In this photograph, taken at St. Petrock's North Door likely after World War I (23), Alfred Vowles indicates the cost of the breakfast was 2s6d and absentees might be fined that amount anyway.

The photograph was donated by Angie Gummer in 2019.

After breakfast, the doors of the Lion Inn were opened. Many of Timberscombe's houses were especially decorated for the day (24). By the afternoon, the Society Members and all the villagers headed to the Church Club Field (where the Glebe houses were built c. 1956). A fair was held there with "roundabouts, swingboats, coconut shies, stalls, etc". Sports and races were held for adults and children and a flagpole flying the Union Jack was hoisted in the centre of the fairground (25).



Later in the day and probably after another stop at The Lion, the Timberscombe Friendly Society members reassembled and finished their Club Walk, often at Duddings Farmhouse, as seen in this 1920's photograph. The building on the upper right is an extension built onto the main house around that time and it's roof is tiled--which will be thatched by the early 1930's (26). If this group began their day with a brass band, they still have one drummer on the left edge of this photograph, which was donated in 2019 by the Timberscombe School.

It is noticeable in the 1908 photograph by Bert Hole, how many more men are present. In that same year, Winston Churchill proposed national unemployment insurance and in

1911 the Insurance Act was passed (27). After that, Friendly Societies had to be approved by the National Health Insurance Joint Committee. Timberscombe was sanctioned under the leadership of John Coles, the Assistant-Overseer of the post office, who is credited for keeping things going (28). Nevertheless with government social services more common, there were only 60 members by 1930. The last Club Walk was held in 1939 and the Society was disbanded in 1948 (29)—the same year the National Health Service was founded. Much was indeed gained but something in the colour of village life was lost.



MR. CHARLES BALE-born in Timbercombe, around 1840. The photograph is undated but at the time it was taken, Mr. Bale was the oldest man in the Timberscombe Friendly Society and had been a member for 51 years. An Agricultural Labourer, he married Mary Ann Winter on 28 April 1870. On the 1911 Census Mr. Bale was 71 years old, served on the Urban District Council and continued to work as a Refuse Burner (30).

NOTES: (1) Victoria County History.ac.uk (2) the first photograph was accompanied by a newspaper article that was cropped so that the newspaper and it's date is unidentified but the article states that the Timberscombe Friendly Society was founded before 1827, faltered and was re-established in 1827 and the centenary Club Walk was held in 1927 (3)"AROUND MINEHEAD From Old Photographs" by Joan Astell, Amberley Publishing, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2010 (4) In "THE VILLAGE OF TIMBERSCOMBE AND ITS CHURCH", by B. L. K. Henderson

and G.O.E. Henderson, printed by E. Goodman & Son, Ltd., The Phoenix Press, Taunton, 1955, the authors write the Timberscombe Club Walk was on the first Thursday in June but most all other sources have it on Tuesday and the unknown well-dressed man is described in the newspaper article cited in Note # 2 (5) Encyclopedia Britannica, britannica.com/friendlysociety (6) "THE VILLAGE OF TIMBERSCOMBE AND ITS CHURCH" (7) Encyclopedia.com (8) VCH (9) Mr. Morel purchased Bickham Manor at the 1916 public auction of Knowle Manor Estate and died in 1951, England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916-2007 (10) "Secure the shadow: Somerset Photographers 1839-1939" by Robin Ansell, Allan Collier and Phil Nichols, The Somerset & Dorset Family History Society, 2018 (11) 1911 England Census (12) Somerset, England, Marriage Registers, Bonds and Allegations, 1754-1914 (13) Somerset, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813-1914 (14) Timberscombe School LOG BOOK, 3 April 1910-25 March 1947 (15) Victoria County History News Letter, Summer 2014 (16) "PROCESSION DAY", a label from a village history exhibition in the 1990's at the Timberscombe School and donated in 2019 to the St. Petrock's History Group and VCH (17) "THE FLORAL STAVES", a label from a village history exhibition in the 1990's at the Timberscombe School and donated in 2019 to the St. Petrock's History Group (18) "THE VILLAGE OF TIMBERSCOMBE AND ITS CHURCH" (19) the photograph is labeled "VOWLES PORLOCK" in the style Mr. Vowles used at the start of his career in 1910 at Porlock, until he left in 1914 for service in World War I (20) VCH and Timberscombe School LOG BOOK (21)"PROCESSION DAY" (22) VCH (23) the labeling on this Vowles photograph

corresponds to his style post World War I and the early 1920's and the man standing in the doorway wears medals that appear to be of WWI vintage (24) "THE VILLAGE OF TIMBERSCOMBE AND ITS CHURCH" (25) "THE VILLAGE JOINS IN", a label from a village history exhibition in the 1990's at the Timberscombe School and donated in 2019 to the St. Petrock's History Group (26) as recalled in 2018 by Richard Tilke, the owner of Duddings Country Cottages (27) Spartacus Education.com, dippan.ac.uk/eppi/documents (28) dippan.ac.uk, nationalarchives.gov.uk, "TIMBERSCOMBE 1910 LIST OF RESIDENTS", minehead-online.co.uk and the newspaper clipping cited in NOTE # 2 (29) VCH and "THE VILLAGE OF TIMBERSCOMBE AND IT'S CHURCH" (30) this photograph appeared in the newspaper clipping cited in NOTE #2 and Somerset, England, Marriage Registers, Bonds and Allegations, 1754-1914