

**Object(s):** Milk Float & Milk Van

**Object Number(s):** STMEA:1988-34, STMEA:1988-33

**Researcher details:** John Reed, Volunteer

The Post-Modern world is a world of mass production, faceless corporations and mass media. The majority of milk consumed within the UK comes from between the cold metallic rungs of a supermarket milk trolley. Modern milk has eliminated opportunities for human interaction and the day to day transferral of news, hearsay and small talk. Fifty years ago, Milk carts crewed by local people traversed the narrow country lanes of East Anglia and England. Milk delivery facilitated opportunities for communication and interaction between local people. Furthermore, modern milk has been divorced from reality. The milk sits alone as if it materialised, creamy and luscious, out of a magical milk cloud. Lost are the experiences of dairy farms, local milk care and cows.

The collections at the East Anglian museum hold an old wooden milk cart used by John Booty (also known as Jack). The cart evokes memories of a horse-drawn past where a local milk deliverer went from house to house bringing milk, food products and possibly gossip. Milk deliverers were integral to rural life and thus local communities held them in high regard. Industrious and entrepreneurial spirit abounds in the tales told of milkmen, including in Booty's machinations. Everyday milk deliverers orbited local areas, interacting with their neighbours, spreading milk and perhaps much more.



Figure 1 - Booty & Sons Milk Float, Museum of East Anglian Life.<sup>1</sup>

## The Booty cart

The cart is a two wheeled, horse drawn, milk delivery cart, complete with two brass churns and one brass cream container. It is painted cream with red lettering and was made by Ellwood. The churns were purchased from the King's Cross Dairy, London. Milk from the

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<sup>1</sup> Museum of East Anglian Life. Booty and Sons Milk Float; STMEA:1988-34 [Internet]. 2020, 11/09/20. Available from: <http://eastanglianlife.org.uk/collections/search/ehive/67544/>

churns was unpasteurised and poured into the customers jugs. John rotated between two different horses for pulling the cart, one for weekdays and one for weekends. John's horses knew the milk round route off by heart and moved from house to house independently, while John unloaded milk. John used multiple carts in his time as a milkman. When John began delivering pasteurised milk in bottles, he acquired a four wheeled cart with a roof. The second cart is below.



Figure 2 - Booty & Sons Milk Van, Museum of East Anglian Life<sup>2</sup>

## Relationship between customer and milk deliverers

Past Residents of Timworth, Derek<sup>3</sup> and Tim<sup>4</sup> Presland have been very helpful and forthcoming with anecdotes and memories about John Booty. Moreover, Tim Presland put me in contact with Dennis Seeley<sup>5</sup> who was the son of milkman Jack Seeley based in Walsham Le Willows, who also provided fantastic details.

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<sup>2</sup> Museum of East Anglian Life. Booty and Sons Milk Van; STMEA:1988-33 [Internet]. 2020, 11/09/20. Available from: <http://eastanglianlife.org.uk/collections/search/ehive/67543>

<sup>3</sup> Presland, D., 2020. Memories of John Booty [email Interview]

<sup>4</sup> Presland, T., 2020. Memories of John Booty [email interview]

<sup>5</sup> Seeley, D., 2020. Memories of Jack Seeley. [phone interview]

Milk delivery was performed by local people for local people. Timworth is a small village of around fifty people. Villages the size of Timworth and the surrounding area consist of close knit communities. John would have known everyone in the village.

The mother of Tim and Derek had a special arrangement with John whereby he would open their front door and place the milk in a specific convenient area. Tim and Derek regularly hopped on and off of the Booty cart as John made his rounds. John provided young Tim and Derek with novel lifts when he was going their way. Tim stated that the boys 'got good at jumping on and off the cart' this kind of familiarity demonstrates John's closeness to his customer.

Dennis Seeley recalled a war time story that illustrated his father's relationship with his customers. During the Blitz Walsham Le Willows, like many rural locations, was full of city refugees. A female customer of Jack asked him if she could have an extra pint of milk because the family of the refugees that she was sheltering were coming to stay for the weekend. Rationing meant that the amount of milk each family had was limited. Jack acquiesced to her request and provided the extra milk causing a jealous belligerent neighbour to report him.

The community spirit of the Booty family is demonstrated by the picture below. Glenda sent in the below image of her, her father and the Booty's cart, at the South Suffolk show in 1970. The float was needed for an entry in the young farmers display. John Booty's place in the local community is underlined by this act.



Figure 3 - Frank and Glenda Clarke at the South Suffolk show, Tut Hill, Fornham all saints, 1970<sup>6</sup>

## Services provided

Devoid of convenience shops, communities relied on milk deliverers for services more varied than just milk delivery. Enterprising milk men filled gaps in the local markets for vegetable trading, grocery delivering and more. The status of the milk man as a trusted local person allowed them to successfully operate different ventures.

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<sup>6</sup> Glenda and her Father at the South Suffolk show, 1970, provided by Glenda Stennett, 20/04/2020

The Suffolk countryside provided plenty of space for villagers to maintain vegetable gardens. The occurrence of WW2 led to rationing and national drives to increase the production of food sources by families. The dig for victory campaign began in 1939. The significance of the Dig for Victory campaign is that it 'lasted even beyond the end of the war'<sup>7</sup> with rationing not ending until 1954. Britain was destitute after the war and 'Peace brought little immediate relief'<sup>8</sup> Derek Presland emphasised this in his correspondence and this relates to the relationship between Milkman and client. Booty took advantage of the prevalence of home-grown vegetables by buying surplus vegetables to sell in his Bury St Edmunds town shop. The Booty's ran a shop selling groceries to the people of Bury St Edmunds who would not have had as much space to grow vegetables. The diversification of the Booty family's incomings would provide them with close association with the village and the town. Booty could have provided villagers with town news or gossip.

Derek Presland paints a picture of rural symbiosis, customers paid when they could and helped each other out. News stories including a bank manager who was sacked for helping a blind man demonstrate the gulf in difference between personal service of the past and modern-day impersonal service. The manager was 'sacked after she helped him open his post and pay his bills'<sup>9</sup>.



Figure 4 - Dig for Victory campaign poster

Jack Seeley elevated cliché weather small talk into another facet of his service. The enterprising milk purveyor bought the only Barometer in the village. Before the widespread dissemination of weather and news through the medium of television, people relied on instruments such as barometers. Jack filled Walsham Le Willows need for weather forecasts with the use of a now two-hundred-year-old barometer. Jack moved from house to house all over the Walsham Le Willows area placing him in position to spread information across the villages. The provision of weather forecasts widens the scope and potential for these trusted local people to provide information.

<sup>7</sup> J. Harrison , 2020, Dig for Victory!, <https://dig-for-victory.org.uk/> © IWM Art.IWM PST 0696

<sup>8</sup> M. Jackson, Stress in Post-War Britain, 2016, page 1, Routledge, Oxford

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-53607183>, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020

Hairdressing was another stream of income created by Seeley. Seeley cut the hair of local people and the men from a local airbase. The art of hairdressing or barbering requires a social aspect. Small talk is a classic trope of the art of cutting an individual's hair. The extent of hairdressing small talk has even led to the issuing of government advice. To limit the possibility of the spread of Covid-19 hairdressers are advised to end all small talk. The Birmingham Post wrote that hairdressers need 'to stop the habit of a lifetime' this emphasises the extent of this shared experience. Seeley undoubtedly engaged in small talk and perhaps more with his clientele. Seeley had a position that would have allowed him to be one of the best-informed members of the local community.

Near Walsham Le Willows there was an Airbase built for the American air force and used between 1944 and 1966. The site was used by the RAF and American air force as a location for American bombers. James Holland writes that 'Each airfield was, in many ways, its own small town'<sup>10</sup> Seeley would have regularly heard about life on the airbase and village life.

### **Modernising**

Entering the post-modern world has included the mass production and use of engine powered transportation devices such as cars, vans and motorbikes. The carts of the past became hazardous, especially down dark country lanes. John Booty's cart use ended in a crash where modern car and antique cart collided in a prophetically juxtaposed clash of old and new. Derek Presland notes that the only lights John had upon his cart were bike lights and that he heard that John would often fall asleep while riding his cart. The stark lack of regulation and standardisation highlights the contrast between Johns operating and modern day milk operating. The use of a van to deliver milk is noted by both Derek and Dennis to be inefficient compared to the use of a horse and cart (vans can't move by themselves).

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<sup>10</sup> J. Holland, *US Air Force Bases in the UK*, Amberley Publishing Limited, 2018, Stroud, Gloucestershire