

### For Sale: “Live and Dead”

For the house historian sale catalogues are an invaluable research tool. But looking through the Society's collection in our Muniment Room it struck me that they can shed light on so many aspects of the lives of our ancestors. Our catalogues for houses range from enormous tomes recording sales at great country houses which went on for weeks to modern estate agents' details on a couple of sheets of A4. Houses and their contents give us a glimpse “through the keyhole” but are not the only items to come under the auctioneer's gavel. Farm sale catalogues make for fascinating reading; long lists of implements found only in museums today, ‘capital’ machinery (such as *Samuelson's* self-raking reaper, made in Banbury and a great labour-saving device in its day), crops – does anyone grow “Black Tartary Oats” today, I wonder, like the crop growing on White Gate Farm, Mursley in 1881. We have several catalogues from that time, perhaps reflecting the late Victorian agricultural depression. They often give field-names, helping us map the local landscape. And we don't just have the names of the people – the auctioneers, landowners, tenants etc. Most poignant of all are the lists of animals and especially the names of the horses. George Orwell clearly knew his farms since the name *Boxer* often appears and we can only guess at the characters which inspired names such as *Lively*, *Wag*, *Smiler*, *Dandy*, and *Jolly*. I expect the farmers had pet names for their cows too but they don't appear in these old catalogues. However for the sale in 1963 of the Ilmer Herd of pedigree Ayrshire cattle the catalogue runs to some 76 pages and records the lineage of all 163 lots. What inventiveness, and humour, the breeders showed in their choice of names; *Raisin*, dam of *Sultana*, dam of *Currant*; *Planetoid*, daughter of *Planet*. Indeed there is a strong astronomical (or perhaps confectionery) theme; *Milky Way*, *Galaxy*, *Eclipse*, *Comet*, *Sunspot* etc.

Of course any cautious buyer is going to want to know why property is being sold and some of the catalogues are more forthcoming than others. Mr Attenborough of Ilmer was giving up dairying and changing the farming policy. Thomas Cross was quitting West End Farm at Steeple Claydon in 1881. The Executors of the late William Rogers were selling farms at Swanbourne and Mursley. Charles Brooks was retiring from Church Farm, Swanbourne because of ill-health. James Reeves of The Lane Farm, Quainton was also retiring. The sale at Church Farm, Stoke Hammond in 1881 was “under distress for rent”. An item which caught my eye here was in the dairy – “*Lawrence's*

refrigerator with gutta percha piping and receiver.” As we all know during research one thing leads to another and Google tells me that gutta percha is a plastic like material from the latex of Malaysian trees used for root-canal fillings!

Away from the farming world one of our oldest catalogues, from 1810, reveals another tale of woe. Mr Barton, auctioneer of Eton, was selling household items plus a horse and gig belonging to James Dove of Wexham Cottage, near Slough. We have the handwritten statement of the Sheriff of the County, Thomas Stanhope Badcock, that the goods had been seized in execution of a judgement for £84 in favour of George Phillips and his son. Mr Dove was evidently a man of taste, and an aspiring sportsman. Three oil paintings by Stubbs were under the hammer as well as an extensive library and a gun. The Sheriff was letting nothing go to waste, the final lot being the stable dung. A little Googling revealed that Mr Dove had written to the *Sporting Magazine* in 1808 telling the tale of how his groom was thrown off his horse into a ditch and rescued by his faithful pointer. In 1809 he married a Scottish lady, perhaps not a wealthy heiress, since he was ultimately unable to stave off bankruptcy.

I'm left wondering what stories of human endeavour, folly and unhappiness may lie behind these sales. And after all these musings you may wonder why the title of this piece. Well, perhaps someone knowledgeable in the farming arts can explain why the catalogue for the sale of Bottom Farm, Prestwood, on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1903 advertised “LIVE AND DEAD FARMING STOCK”.

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