

resources are great. He has been in the services of the Eley family upwards of 27 years. Previously he was with Dr. Hood, of Upton House. Mr. Foster points with pride to the fine plantation of Austrain (sic) pine and spruce fir put in by him and his staff-when he first went to the Grange, now grown into a splendid belt of trees. It must be a pleasure to watch the growth to maturity of trees which have been planted by one's own hand. In the grounds of Oxhey Grange there are some choice products, though this is not the time to see them in all their glory. The chrysanthemum is one of the favourite growths of this place, where gardening is looked upon as a delight and cultivated as an art. Right on into the New Year the blooms display their many tints, and give forth their aromatic perfume. When the beauty of this treasure from the Orient passes off, primulas, cyclamens, and cinerarias are ready with their varieties of fresh flowers. The head gardener is modest. He says, very truly, it is the work of the many which keep the place beautiful.

In the first of the cottages over the railway bridge there dwell an aged couple with a history. An old lady may be seen in the summer time tending to her rue and lavender in the little side garden, while her husband, on fine nights, having donned his Crimean medals, leans on his stick by the garden gate. The old soldier makes a striking figure. Were he known to Professor Herkomer he would have served as a model ere this. These ancients are shut in most of the winter with rheumatism, but they soon wake up to the warmth of friendship and the Grenadier pensioner will tell you many a tale of the great struggle before Sebastopol over 40 years ago. His wife will illustrate her husband's yams *with* tit bits other experience as a soldier's wife. She will also produce souvenirs (sic) of the war, among them a mounted purple crocus picked by Corporal Wilkie on the field of Inkermann long after the battle. The flower was growing beside the bleached skull of a poor fellow who had fallen in the fight. Mr. Wilkie enlisted in the Grenadier Guards considerably over 50 years ago.

An episode in his early life as a soldier has never been in print, but it is well worth relating. One morning, while his battalion of the Guards lay at Windsor, Wilkie was on duty on the terrace of the Castle. At the foot of the terrace stood a horse and cart loading up with ice. the horse suddenly bolted, coming along the incline of the terrace at a terrific rate. At that moment Wilkie's eye caught sight of a little low carriage, in which was one of the young princes, right in the path of the runaway horse. In an instant the sentinel had rushed forward, and wheeled the goat carriage out of danger. The horse with the ice cart dashed by, and coming into contact with the stone wall went over. The harness giving way, the horse fell and was killed. Her Majesty the Queen came out to enquire after the young prince. "Quite safe, your Majesty," answered the sentinel, presenting arms. There the incident ended, for Wilkie never reported it and this is the first time it has appeared in print.

In 1854 the Guards went to the Crimea and Wilkie with them. "Don't fret; I shall come back," said he. And so he did, with hardly a scratch, though he went up the heights of Alma; was under fire at Balaclava; fought all day at Inkermann and was in the trenches before Sebastopol. He was close to Captain Peel when that hero of the Naval Brigade planted the British flag on the top of the gabions under the fire of the Russian guns. At Inkermann he had a narrow escape, he was beset by several Russians, but some of his comrades rescued him, only for him to be knocked down a few minutes after in the hasty retreat. But he will tell you in his rich Devon dialect - "We reformed and fowt four hours after that." Mr. Wilkie left the army with the rank of corporal after serving 21 years. He also brought out with him the seeds of terrible rheumatism, first caught during the privations of 1854. He now lives with his wife, to whom he has been married 54 years, on his slender pension, in the little cottage at Watford Heath.

So much for Watford Heath. You may stand on the bridge and see the railway banks covered with primroses on a spring day; or you may stroll down a path over which in April hang the sprays of the larch, tipped with purple plumes; but still the chief interest of this obscure locality will be in its scattered houses, where, unknown to the busy town, men and women have been doing their level best through long years to be honest and true.

Reprinted from The Watford Observer 2nd January 1897.

Illustration : Watford Heath Pond c.1890 from watercolour (Oct. 1983) by L.C. Smith