

☞ Making Our Own Entertainment ☞

Finmere is too small to merit a cinema or commercial bingo hall and villagers have always made their own entertainment. Before radio, television and the motorcar, they looked forward to the annual Village Feast and the occasional play or operetta. Royal weddings and coronations also provided occasions for celebration. This tradition has continued in our modern, entertainment-rich world; recent parties have included commemorations of Victory in Europe (VE) day in May 1995 and FMMMM in May 2000.



Children dress as evacuees for VE Day, May 1995

The photograph above shows the children in the playing field.
The photograph below shows Josh Lepper in the parade to the playing field.



A gurner and joustier at FMMMM, May 2000

Finmere's Mad May Millennium Mayhem (FMMMM), the most light-hearted of the village's Millennium celebrations, recreated a medieval jousting tournament with wheelbarrows, toilet seats, poets, tea bags and much more.

Finmere Feast

It is not known whether Finmere Feast was sponsored by a Friendly Society.

Alf Lepper recalled Finmere Feast in 1971:

We used to have a good do... Finmere Feast, the first Sunday after the 11th of October, when there was a fair [that] used to call and we had all sorts of celebrations like the greasy pole and the leg of mutton on the top... At the [Kings Head] pub now, when they dig the garden, they still dig up... some of the old coins that were lost during the fair. (Hello Finmere, BBC, 13 June 1971)

Shortly after the Second World War, a local newspaper bemoaned the disappearance of 'feast days':

The age-old custom of the 'club' or 'feast day' in village life is fast becoming extinct and there are now few villages which observe these occasions. Older people can remember when such annual celebrations were held in almost every village in the neighbourhood, but one by one in the last half-century they have disappeared. (Bicester Advertiser, 6 June 1947)

A hundred years earlier, every village in the neighbourhood held an annual feast. Most were held after the harvest, though some were held in the summer months. Many feasts had their origins in village 'friendly societies,' which supported members in times of hardship or illness; these societies, or 'clubs,' would periodically share out any surpluses and sponsor an annual feast or club day. In Tingewick, the Crown Union Friendly Society, founded in 1845, and White Hart Union Friendly Society, founded in 1874, sponsored the club days; both were named after the public houses at which they were based. Finmere school children were given full or half-day holidays to attend Tingewick Club in June and the more commercial Tingewick Feast in August.

Finmere Feast was initially held on the second Monday and Tuesday of October. School pupils were given two days holiday for the Feast until 1898, and a single or a half-day holiday was given until 1915.

Finmere. The Annual Feast was held on Monday last and the attendance of holidayists surpassed that of previous years. There was an abundance of stalls, etc., and the dancing booths especially appeared to do a good trade. The weather was fine, thereby considerably enhancing the enjoyment of the villagers. (Buckingham Advertiser, 18 October 1879)

In 1893, the Cricket Club provided the impetus for the event.

The Annual Feast of this village was celebrated on Monday October 16, and thanks chiefly to the Committee of the Cricket Club, the day was of a very enjoyable description. Though somewhat late in the season, it was decided to play the closing game on the Feast Day, which took the form of Eleven v. Twenty-two... After a very pleasant game, which was witnessed by a large number of spectators, the twenty two scored an easy victory... At the conclusion of the game, the players retired to a large granary kindly let by Mr Keen, where a capital spread was provided by Mr and Mrs J. Shaw [of the Kings Head]. Nearly 40 sat down...

Later in the evening, a successful smoking concert was held in the same room... There was a large attendance, and a plentiful supply of good songs and singers... The following evening, Tuesday, a dance was held on behalf of the club... It is mainly owing to [the energy of Mr Keen] that the match, concert and dance proved so successful in all ways. The usual feast accompaniments were present in large numbers, and the feast was one of the best held for some years. (Buckingham Advertiser, 21 October 1893)

Sometimes, the villagers enjoyed themselves too much. In 1899, Finmere labourer William Venstone was fined 1 shilling with 8 shillings costs for being drunk and disorderly outside the Kings Head on the night of the Feast.

Finmere Village Feast continued until 1915, when the pressures and shortages of the First World War led to it being suspended. It was not resumed after the war.

In 1857, the Buckingham Advertiser moaned:

On the occasion of those annual affairs called 'Feasts' but are in reality times when drunkenness and all the sensual passions are allowed unlimited scope, there is almost invariably something for the magistrates to do...

| | |
|------|------|
| 1899 | 2000 |
| 9s | £31 |

Garlands at May Day

May Day, one of the oldest rural festivals, celebrates the coming of spring and the passing of winter. Originally a pagan festival, services were held at St Michael's church to celebrate May Day until 1929. The festival was a school holiday and lessons the previous day were often disrupted by preparations.

30 May 1877. The elder girls assisted alternately with the infants, Mrs Davis being required to dress the May Garland.

1 May 1896. A holiday was given yesterday afternoon to decorate the May Garland. The usual May Day Holiday was given today. (School log book)



A May Day parade under the Cross Tree in the mid-1930s

The elaborate garlands, woven with flowers and foliage from fields and gardens, were paraded around the village where the children's work was rewarded with cash gifts from villagers.

5 May 1884. Reverend Seymour Ashwell visited and divided the money got by the children on May Day.

1 May 1897. The children handed in a sovereign having been round with the Garland.

| | |
|-------|------|
| 1898 | 2000 |
| £1 4s | £87 |

3 May 1898. Result of May Day collection £1 4/- was distributed amongst the children. (School log book)

A May King and May Queen were crowned each year. The last May Day holiday recorded in the school log was in 1914, though May Day was regularly celebrated in Finmere until the Second World War. During the War, evacuees joined in the celebrations—for many May Day 1940 will have been their first experience of this country custom.



Villagers did not need an excuse to make entertainment: Four musical boys on Valley Road, about 1935

Back row (left to right)
John Horwood Ray Davis

Front row (left to right)
Frank Hitchcock Fred Barnes



May Day 1940

The left photograph shows the May King, Fred Barnes, and May Queen, Joan Gibson (then Joan Davis). A number of evacuees are also pictured.

Celebrating Royal Coronations

For the residents of Finmere, the crowning of a new King or Queen provided welcome opportunities for sports, dances, beef and plum pudding, and plenty of ale.

King Edward VII

Following the death of Victoria in 1901, the coronation of Edward VII was an occasion for prayer and an excuse for fun, though the Coronation was delayed for three weeks due to the King's ill health. Seymour Ashwell described the events.

19 August 1902. This being the Coronation Day of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, the event was duly celebrated in the village. The fixture [planned for] June 27th had to be abandoned as it was found necessary for the King to undergo a serious surgical operation before and Sunday June 29 was a day of special prayer for the King's recovery. That recovery was so satisfactory that it was considered the King could undergo the strain of a Coronation Service at this early date.

We began our observance of the day with a special service in the Church at 11 am—after that a cricket match was begun in Mr Lepper's field—at 3.30 a dinner of Beef and Plum Pudding and ale was given to all adults and a tea to the Children in Mr Lepper's barn—after which the health of the King and Queen was drunk with enthusiasm. Then races and sports with Prizes for the winners took place—these were followed by dancing in Mr Lepper's barn till 11 o'clock. All the children received a medal in commemoration of the event. (Rectors' Book)

King George V

Edward VII was King for just nine years and died after a series of heart attacks in 1910. Finmere residents were soon celebrating the Coronation of his son. Rector Henry Trower recorded the details.

22 June 1911. The Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary was observed as a day of rejoicing in the parish. The Church Bells were rung in the early morning and throughout the day. At midday there was a special service in the Church ...

A tent was erected in Barn Meadow and at 3 all the Parish was entertained to a substantial meal, tea and ale with Cakes and strawberries and the health of the King and Queen was loyally and heartily drunk by all. A band was provided and the rest of the day was spent in games and races—prizes being given to all the winners—dancing was enjoyed by some.

Commemoration Plates were given to all the children. Those who from sickness or infirmity were unable to be present had their share of good things sent to them and the day was happily spent by all. (Rectors' Book)

While some Oxfordshire villages cancelled their June celebrations, including Finmere, a greater number went ahead 'to comply with the expressed desire of his Majesty that the country festivities should be proceeded with, especially the children's treats.' (Jackson's Oxford Journal, 5 July 1902)

King George VI

George V died of pneumonia in 1936 and was succeeded by Edward VIII. After just eleven months, Edward abdicated to marry American divorcee, Mrs Wallis Simpson. All the villages and towns of the area celebrated the Coronation of his successor, George VI, on 12 May 1937. By this date, Finmere Rectors were only making occasional entries in the Rectors' Book and we turn to the Buckingham Advertiser for a description of the day's events.

The bells were pealed at 6 am on Coronation Day by Finmere ringers. Changes were also rung later in the morning by the Rev. A. Wheeler (Rector) at the Parish Church at 1.30 pm. Sports were organised for children in the field near the 'Kings Head' kindly lent by Mr Coles. After the children's tea the 54 Coronation mugs, given by Mr C Tredwell , Bacon's House, were distributed by Miss Tredwell to the children.

The adults' tea was held at 5.30 pm, after which their sports were completed. At a social held in the Village Hall music was supplied by Mrs Turner, Mr Garinge and Mr Hinson; M.C. Mr C. Andrews. (Buckingham Advertiser 22 May 1937)

In Finmere, villagers posed outside the village hall for photographs (opposite).

A Golden Wedding

Villagers did not need the excuse of a national event to have a party. The entire parish joined in the golden wedding celebrations for William and Anne Barrett of Finmere Grounds in 1903. A correspondent to a local newspaper described the events.

William Barrett was ten months old when he arrived in Finmere seventy-nine years earlier accompanied by his two-year-old sister Elizabeth. His parents had previously lived at Preston Capes in Northamptonshire and in Finmere became tenant farmers for the Duke of Buckingham at Finmere Grounds House.

[Thursday] March 29th was the fiftieth anniversary of the wedding day of Mr and Mrs Barrett of Finmere Grounds. Mr Barrett having spent all his life there, and as Mrs Barrett came as a bride, there is naturally a closer relationship between them and the village than is often the case in these changeable times... On Sunday, the church bells rang out merrily both before and after the services, which Mr and Mrs Barrett attended and received many congratulations from their friends and villagers. At the church-yard gate, their pony trap was awaiting them, which they found had been gaily decorated by some enthusiastic friends with flowers and ribbons.

The golden wedding celebrated William's marriage to Anne Sharp<None>. They were married at St Peter's Church, Brackley; William was then thirty and Anne thirty-two. They lived at Finmere Grounds throughout their married years and took a close interest in village life. William also combined his duties as Overseer of the Poor with those of a churchwarden. In 1897, in a typically generous gesture, the couple entertained the children from the village school. Teacher Mary Rae recorded the treat in the school log book.



Back row (left to right)
Mr Parrot Mr Wakelin Bert Davis Arthur Horwood
Percy Davis Eddy Cumnady Phoebe Davis

Front row (left to right)
Walter Aris Unknown Louie Davis



Back row (left to right)
Harry Beale Percy Davis A Davis C Andrews

Front row (left to right)
Maggie Cumnady Agnes Davis Miss Paxton
Mrs Andrews Harriet Horwood Mrs H Beale
Mrs Frank Bull

Celebrating the Coronation of George VI at the old village hall



Anne Barrett in 1903

18 May 1897. Work began earlier this afternoon in order to dismiss early as Mr and Mrs Barrett had kindly invited scholars & teacher to tea at their home.

19 May 1897. Children enjoyed their 'treat' very much. After tea, they played different games, ran races, etc. & went home very happy.

Six years later, when William and Anne celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, a local newspaper noted that they took a pragmatic view on England's temperamental weather.

Mr and Mrs Barrett wished to celebrate their golden wedding by entertaining the whole parish, but the weather at this time of year being so unreliable, instead of doing this they decided to present each family in the village with a golden gift in the shape of a half sovereign of 1903, especially procured for the occasion together with a card in gold lettering giving the original announcement of their wedding and asking acceptance of the gift with all good wishes. Mr and Mrs Barrett drove around each house and delivered them on Saturday evening.

All the members of the family met at Finmere Grounds [on the Monday evening] and found Mr and Mrs Barrett in excellent health. Earlier in the day, Mr Leonard Varney took a photo of Mr and Mrs Barrett and family.



William and Anne Barrett at Finmere Grounds, possibly in 1903