

Esther

Looking back over seventy years to our visits to Easing Lane, the first memory that stirs is the echoing, hollow sound as our walking shoes clattered on the bare stone-flagged kitchen floor.

The white-washed walls held only the basic kitchen utensils, and farm equipment hung down from the low oak beams on hooks. A long slopstone stood in the corner like the one we had at home, and the water had to be fetched from a pump in the yard. An old range served for cooking and heating the water in a boiler which had to be refilled frequently with a lading can. Apart from a long hewn table, some hard-backed chairs, a hand-made kitchen cupboard and a few shelves there was little else in the room with no decoration whatsoever.

We visited Esther from time to time on our Sunday morning walks up Morridge. Living with her unmarried brother, eking a bare living like most of the hill farmers of the time, with a few cows, sheep and hens and poor land to boot.

She had worked for my father in the mill when her parents were alive, making the long daily trek to Leek in all weathers. After they died and the slump came she was forced to share the farm work with her brother and him being a quiet man of few words one can only imagine the lonely life she led.

Not surprisingly, when we arrived, her face lit up and she talked non-stop to father while plying us with warm milk not long brought in from the milking. One time, she offered us cake which looked like mother's special Madeira cake but turned out to be full of awful caraway seeds which we had to force down for politeness, getting rid of bits, when unobserved, to the chickens being reared in a cage on the hearth. Never again!

They were hard days for the couple which worsened financially so that they had to sell the farm and move into a tiny cottage in Naylor's Yard in Leek. It must have broken Esther's brother's heart leaving the familiar moors and the only way of life he had ever known, and not too long after, he hung himself and poor Esther was left to end her days entirely alone

Joan