The driver crashed his gears again as he went into another steep bend. We had been climbing steadily now for the last fifteen miles or so, moving closer to the distant blue swell of the Pennines. I had never been in Yorkshire before but the name had always raised a picture of a county as stodgy and unromantic as its pudding; I was prepared for solid worth, dullness and a total lack of charm. But as the bus groaned its way higher I began to wonder. The formless heights were resolving into high, grassy hills and wide valleys. In the valley bottoms, rivers twisted among the trees and solid grey stone farmhouses lay among islands of cultivated land which pushed bright green promontories up the hillsides into the dark tide of heather which lapped from the summits.

A young James Herriot is making his way towards Darrowby in the Yorkshire Dales. Sitting on a rickety little bus, he takes in his first views of North Yorkshire, which instantly dispel his expectations of a dreary landscape. He is enthralled by the wild beauty of the fells, the grassy hills and windswept moorlands, which couldn’t be more different to the grey industrial landscape of his home city of Glasgow.

The James Herriot stories are set in the Yorkshire Dales, which lie astride the Pennines in North Yorkshire, where sheep and cattle graze in rich green valleys or up on heather-strewn moors, separated by countless miles of ancient drystone walls. The location is about thirty miles to the west of Thirsk, which is situated in the Hambleton district of North Yorkshire, close to the North York Moors. This too was the domain of the small hill farmer and Alf took great pleasure in driving through the beautiful landscape and villages, coaxing his little car up and around the Hambleton Hills. Around the flat plain of Thirsk there is more arable farming than in the valleys and hills of the Dales, but cattle and sheep are farmed in both areas.

Alf was very familiar with the Dales. The Thirsk practice covered a large area and, as we’ve seen, he and Donald frequently travelled to the Dales to undertake tuberculin testing of cattle, having been offered the work by Leyburn-based veterinary surgeon Frank Bingham (recreated as Ewan Ross in the books). Not only did the government-paid work provide Donald and Alf with much-needed income but it also gave Alf an introduction to the majestic beauty of the Dales, which captivated him for the rest of his life. ‘The first thing that enthralled me about Yorkshire’, he wrote, ‘was its wild beauty, the feeling of remoteness and solitude, which keeps one’s sense of wonder alive.’

In It Shouldn’t Happen to a Vet, the year is 1938 and James has been in Darrowby for

twelve months. Looking at the view from a high Yorkshire moor, he muses upon how he has changed and how fortunate he is to be driving across the fells and hills of the Dales every day.

How on earth, then, did I come to be sitting on a high Yorkshire moor in shirtsleeves and Wellingtons, smelling vaguely of cows?

The change in my outlook had come quite quickly – in fact almost immediately after my arrival in Darrowby. The job had been a godsend in those days of high unemployment, but only, I had thought, a stepping-stone to my real ambition. But everything had switched round, almost in a flash.

Maybe it was something to do with the incredible sweetness of the air which still took me by surprise when I stepped out into the old wild garden at Skeldale House every morning. Or perhaps the daily piquancy of life in the graceful old house with my gifted but mercurial boss, Siegfried, and his reluctant student brother, Tristan. Or it could be that it was just the realization that treating cows and pigs and sheep and horses had a fascination I had never even suspected; and this brought with it a new concept of myself as a tiny wheel in the great machine of British agriculture. There was a kind of solid satisfaction in that.

Probably it was because I hadn't dreamed there was a place like the Dales. I hadn't thought it possible that I could spend all my days in a high, clean-blown land where the scent of grass or trees was never far away; and where even in the driving rain of winter I could sniff the air and find the freshness of growing things hidden somewhere in the cold clasp of the wind.

Anyway, it had all changed for me and my work consisted now of driving from farm to farm across the roof of England with a growing conviction that I was a privileged person.

The sense of gratitude and wonder that James feels working in the Dales, especially when he takes in its wondrous views, never diminishes over the years. In The Lord God Made Them All, an old schoolfriend Andrew Bruce drops into the practice and James takes him out on a call to a local farm. Andrew works in a bank and is happy with his lot, until he's introduced to the splendour of the Dales and all of a sudden office life is not quite so appealing.

It was a golden afternoon in October and beyond the stone walls the fell-sides, ablaze with their mantle of dead bracken, rose serenely into a deep, unbroken blue. We passed under a long canopy of tinted leaves thrown over us by the roadside trees then followed a stretch of white-pebbled river before turning along a narrow track which led up the hillside.

Andrew was silent as we climbed into the stark, airy solitude which is the soul of the Dales, but as the track levelled out on the summit he put a hand on my arm.

‘Just stop a minute, Jim, will you?’ he said.

I pulled up and wound down the window. For a few moments he looked out over the miles of heathery moorland and the rounded summits of the great hills slumbering in the sunshine, then he spoke quietly as though to himself.

‘So this is where you work?’

‘Yes, this is it, Andy.’

He took a long breath, then another as if greedy for more.

‘You know,’ he said. ‘I’ve heard a lot about air like wine, but this is the first time I’ve realized what it means.’

I nodded. I always felt I could never get enough of that air; sharp and cool and tinged only with the grass scent which lingers in the high country.

‘Well, you’re a lucky beggar, Jim,’ Andrew said with a touch of weariness. ‘You spend your life driving around in country like this and I’m stuck in a damned office.’

‘I thought you liked your job.’

He ran a hand through his hair. ‘Oh yes, I suppose playing around with figures is what I’m best at but, oh hell, I have to do it all inside. In fact,’ he said, becoming a little worked up, ‘when I start to think about it I live and have my being in a bloody, centrally heated box with no windows and electric light blasting down all day, and I share what passes for air with a whole crowd of other people.’ He slumped back in his seat. ‘Makes me wish I hadn’t come out with you.’

‘I’m sorry, Andy.’

He laughed ruefully. ‘Oh, I didn’t really mean that, but honestly, this is idyllic.’

Andrew Bruce was in reality based on Alf’s schoolfriend Monty Gilbert who used to join Alf as he walked around the hills of Glasgow when they were both at school. Monty worked and lived in Glasgow and was similarly enchanted by the scenery in Yorkshire when he came to visit. He also left a lasting impression with Alf’s children, Jim and Rosie, principally because he had the unusual skill of being able to walk on his hands, making for an unusual sight in the corridor of 23 Kirkgate.

Once the summer months pass, it’s not long before the cold north winds pick up, bringing with them snowfall, particularly in the hills. The 1930s and 1940s saw plenty of snow across Yorkshire, sometimes arriving as early as November. While a blanket of snow made for magical views, wintry conditions made life extremely difficult for rural vets like James Herriot. The thin wheels of their cars spun on the ice, blizzards were all too common and snowdrifts blocked the roads. ‘To a young Glaswegian like myself,’ wrote Alf Wight, ‘it was almost unbelievable. Yorkshire, I decided, was the snowiest place I had ever known.’

The treacherous conditions meant Alf often had to abandon his car and walk to remote farms, snowstorms sometimes blinding the path ahead. In It Shouldn’t Happen to a Vet snowfall comes early in November and yet James and Siegfried must do all they can to make it out to their clients. The following story was in fact experienced by Alf’s son Jim, who related it to his father afterwards, but it illustrates the considerable challenges rural vets faced in the winter. Jim had to abandon his car and walk to Tom Cornforth’s farm at the top of Hambleton Hills, wading through snow that was waist deep. When he arrived in a howling blizzard, with visibility only two or three yards, he was frankly relieved to have made it.

This was my second winter in Darrowby so I didn’t feel the same sense of shock when it started to be really rough in November. When they were getting a drizzle of rain down there on the plain the high country was covered in a few hours by a white blanket which filled in the roads, smoothed out familiar landmarks, transformed our world into something strange and new. This was what they meant on the radio when they talked about ‘snow on high ground’.

When the snow started in earnest it had a strangling effect on the whole district. Traffic crawled laboriously between the mounds thrown up by the snowploughs. Herne Fell hung over Darrowby like a great gleaming whale and in the town the people dug paths to their gates and cleared the drifts from their front doors. They did it without fuss, with the calm of long use and in the knowledge that they would probably have to do it again tomorrow.

Every new fall struck a fresh blow at the vets. We managed to get to most of our cases but we lost a lot of sweat in the process. Sometimes we were lucky and were able to bump along in the wake of a council plough but more often we drove as far as we could and walked the rest of the way.

After a night of continuous snow, the practice receives a call from Mr Clayton who has a beast ‘with a touch o’ cold’. When James enquires what the road to his farm is like, he gives the typically airy response of a hardened Dales farmer: ‘Road? Road? Road’s right enough. Just tek a bit o’ care and you’ll get here without any trouble.’ In fact, after driving over ten miles, James’s fingers throbbing painfully with the cold, the road into Mr Clayton’s valley is blocked solid, the snowploughs having not even attempted

to clear it. James is forced to hitch on his rucksack and hike the rest of the way.

The flat moorland on the fell top was a white immensity rolling away to the horizon with the sky pressing down like a dark blanket. I could see the farm down there in its hollow and it, too, looked different; small, remote, like a charcoal drawing against the hills bulking smooth and white beyond. A pine wood made a dark smudge on the slopes but the scene had been wiped clean of most of its familiar features.

I could see the road only in places – the walls were covered over most of their length, but the farm was visible all the way. I had gone about half a mile towards it when a sudden gust of wind blew up the surface snow into a cloud of fine particles. Just for a few seconds I found myself completely alone. The farm, the surrounding moor, everything disappeared and I had an eerie sense of isolation till the veil cleared.

It was hard going in the deep snow and in the drifts I sank over the tops of my Wellingtons. I kept at it, head down, to within a few hundred yards of the stone buildings. I was just thinking that it had all been pretty easy, really, when I looked up and saw a waving curtain of a million black dots bearing down on me. I quickened my steps and just before the blizzard hit me I marked the position of the farm. But after ten minutes' stumbling and slithering I realized I had missed the place. I was heading for a shape that didn't exist; it was etched only in my mind.

I stood for a few moments feeling again the chilling sense of isolation. I was convinced I had gone too far to the left and after a few gasping breaths, struck off to the right. It wasn't long before I knew I had gone in the wrong direction again. I began to fall into deep holes, up to the armpits in the snow, reminding me that the ground was not really flat on these high moors but pitted by countless peat hags.

As I struggled on I told myself that the whole thing was ridiculous. I couldn't be far from the warm fireside at Pike House – this wasn't the North Pole. But my mind went back to the great empty stretch of moor beyond the farm and I had to stifle a feeling of panic.

The numbing cold seemed to erase all sense of time. Soon I had no idea of how long I had been falling into the holes and crawling out. I did know that each time it was getting harder work dragging myself out. And it was becoming more and more tempting to sit down and rest, even sleep; there was something hypnotic in the way the big, soft flakes brushed noiselessly across my skin and mounted thickly on my closed eyes.

I was trying to shut out the conviction that if I fell down many more times I wouldn't get up when a dark shape hovered suddenly ahead. Then my outflung arms touched something hard and rough. Unbelievingly I felt my way over the square stone blocks till I came to a corner. Beyond that was a square of light – it was the kitchen window of

the farm.

After James thumps on the door of the farm, Mr Clayton appears and takes him over to the calf house where there are four long-haired little bullocks, along with a fifth one with a purulent discharge coming from its nose – the patient. The freezing blizzard conditions are of no concern to Mr Clayton.

As my numb fingers fumbled in a pocket for my thermometer a great gust of wind buffeted the door, setting the latch clicking softly and sending a faint powdering of snow into the dark interior.

Mr Clayton turned and rubbed the pane of the single small window with his sleeve. Picking his teeth with his thumbnail he peered out at the howling blizzard.

‘Aye,’ he said, and belched pleasurably. ‘It’s a plain sort o’ day.’

In The Lord God Made Them All James resorts to using skis to get to some of the more remote farms. The winter of 1946–7 was particularly brutal across the UK, and much of the country was swathed in a blanket of snow and ice. In the Dales, sub-zero temperatures persisted well into mid-March as James remembers.

That was in 1947, the year of the great snow. I have never known snow like that before or since and the odd thing was that it took such a long time to get started. Nothing happened in November and we had a green Christmas, but then it began to get colder and colder. All through January a north-east wind blew, apparently straight from the Arctic, and usually after a few days of this sort of unbearable blast, snow would come and make things a bit warmer. But not in 1947.

Each day we thought it couldn’t get any colder, but it did, and then, borne on the wind, very fine flakes began to appear over the last few days of the month. They were so small you could hardly see them but they were the forerunners of the real thing. At the beginning of February big, fat flakes started a steady relentless descent on our countryside and we knew, after all that build-up, that we were for it.

Eventually, even in North Yorkshire, the snow recedes and normal life resumes. Throughout the year, a typical routine for Alf was to take a quick break between farm visits, stopping the car somewhere remote and picturesque to take whichever dog companions he had with him for a walk. With not a soul around, he could unwind properly and take in the scenery around him – a short respite from what are often busy days for a rural vet.

I drove gingerly down through the wood and before starting up the track on the other side I stopped the car and got out with Sam leaping eagerly after me.

This was a little lost valley in the hills, a green cleft cut off from the wild country above. One of the bonuses in a country vet's life is that he sees these hidden places. Apart from old Arnold nobody ever came down here, not even the postman who left the infrequent mail in a box at the top of the track and nobody saw the blazing scarlets and golds of the autumn trees nor heard the busy clucking and murmuring of the beck among its clean-washed stones.

I walked along the water's edge watching the little fish darting and flitting in the cool depths. In the spring these banks were bright with primroses and in May a great sea of bluebells flowed among the trees but today, though the sky was an untroubled blue, the clean air was touched with the sweetness of the dying year.

I climbed a little way up the hillside and sat down among the bracken now fast turning to bronze. Sam, as was his way, flopped by my side and I ran a hand over the silky hair of his ears. The far side of the valley rose steeply to where, above the gleaming ridge of limestone cliffs, I could just see the sunlit rim of the moor.

In such hidden spots, time often feels like it stands still. When it came to rural life in Yorkshire, Alfred Wight also witnessed something of a vanishing world. When he arrived in 1940, the hills and moors around Thirsk and in the Dales were still full of small farms, some with a herd of sheep, a few cows and perhaps the odd pig or horse. Over the subsequent decades, many of these small farms struggled to makes ends meet and were sold. Isolated farms and smallholdings, many of them without even a road or track leading to them, gradually vanished, as did the presence of the draught horse. In the wake of the tractor, the great Shire or Clydesdale horses no longer pulled the ploughs or provided the heavy labour on farms, although many farmers kept them on. Nonetheless, in just a few years, Alf would see the numbers of horses in the region plummet.

While modern life is gradually making itself felt in the Dales, there is still the odd household which has been entirely untouched by modernity. The Bramleys – made up of three brothers and a sister – who feature in It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet are a prime example of one such family. There is no road to their farmhouse, which doesn't bother them as they rarely venture into the outside world. Miss Bramley only visits Darrowby on the odd market day and the middle brother Herbert last came into town in 1929 to have a tooth out. James is one of the few people to venture to their farm, when he calls in to treat their vast collection of much-loved cats.

After twenty minutes of slithering in and out of the unseen puddles and opening a series of broken, string-tied gates, I reached the farmyard and crossed over to the back door. I was about to knock when I stopped with my hand poised. I found I was looking through the kitchen window and in the interior, dimly lit by an oil lamp, the Bramleys were sitting in a row.

They weren’t grouped round the fire but were jammed tightly on a long, high-backed wooden settle which stood against the far wall. The strange thing was the almost exact similarity of their attitudes; all four had their arms folded, chins resting on their chests, feet stretched out in front of them. The men had removed their heavy boots and were stocking-footed, but Miss Bramley wore an old pair of carpet slippers.

I stared, fascinated by the curious immobility of the group. They were not asleep, not talking or reading or listening to the radio – in fact they didn’t have one – they were just sitting.

I had never seen people just sitting before and I stood there for some minutes to see if they would make a move or do anything at all, but nothing happened. It occurred to me that this was probably a typical evening; they worked hard all day, had their meal; then they just sat till bedtime.

James and Siegfried also witness the last days of the small dairy farm, each typically made up of ten or so cows, all of them named and kept in a cobbled byre or sent out to graze in the fields. The bigger, more industrial dairy farms which are replacing them are more productive in terms of milk yield but, as James laments, they are far less welcoming. In the late 1930s, farmers were still hand-milking their cows, many of them the red or brown shorthorn breed which once predominated in the Yorkshire Dales before the advent of the black and white Friesians. In Let Sleeping Vets Lie, James calls in on the small dairy farmer Mr Pickersgill who just about makes a living from his smallholding and whose cows are suffering from mastitis.

I had happened in at the little byre late one afternoon when Mr Pickersgill and his daughter Olive were milking their ten cows. I had watched the two at work as they crouched under the row of roan and red backs and one thing was immediately obvious; while Olive drew the milk by almost imperceptible movements of her fingers and with a motionless wrist, her father hauled away at the teats as though he was trying to ring in the new year.

James deduces that Mr Pickersgill’s heavy-handed milking method is the cause of the problem and he now has the tricky task of telling the experienced farmer that he must try a more gentle technique.

It wouldn’t be easy because Mr Pickersgill was an impressive man. I don’t suppose he had a spare penny in the world but even as he sat there in the kitchen in his tattered, collarless flannel shirt and braces he looked, as always, like an industrial tycoon. You could imagine that massive head with its fleshy cheeks, noble brow and serene eyes looking out from the financial pages of The Times. Put him in a bowler and striped trousers and you’d have the perfect chairman of the board.

I was very chary of affronting such natural dignity and anyway, Mr Pickersgill was

fundamentally a fine stocksman. His few cows, like all the animals of that fast-dying breed of small farmer, were fat and sleek and clean. You had to look after your beasts when they were your only source of income and somehow Mr Pickersgill had brought up a family by milk production eked out by selling a few pigs and the eggs from his wife's fifty hens.

It is Darrowby of course where James and Siegfried live and work, a fictional town that Alf Wight largely based on Thirsk, although it also contains, as Alf wrote, 'something of Richmond, Leyburn, Middleham and a fair chunk of my imagination'. On first arriving, in If Only They Could Talk, James is immediately taken with the small market town.

Darrowby didn't get much space in the guide books but when it was mentioned it was described as a grey little town on the river Darrow with a cobbled market place and little of interest except its two ancient bridges. But when you looked at it, its setting was beautiful on the pebbly river where the houses clustered thickly and straggled unevenly along the lower slopes of Herne Fell. Everywhere in Darrowby, in the streets, through the windows of the houses you could see the fell rearing its calm, green bulk more than two thousand feet above the huddled roofs.

There was a clarity in the air, a sense of space and airiness that made me feel I had shed something on the plain, twenty miles behind. The confinement of the city, the grime, the smoke – already they seemed to be falling away from me.

Darrowby is a bustling place, with at least one weekly market, and plenty of shops, inns and various facilities for those living in the town and its environs. Dr Allison – a character based on Alf Wight's family doctor Harry Addison – is just a few doors down from the Skeldale House practice and there's at least one bank, a dentist, along with Howarth's the chemist, Pickersgill's the ironmonger and the Darrowby Plaza, the location for James and Helen's disastrous date at the cinema. Houses vary in size and age and there are still Dickensian-like yards and tiny streets in the old part of the town, accessed through an arch and narrow passage where the likes of old Mr Dean and his Labrador Bob live.

Like many towns across the UK, Darrowby also has an abundance of public houses and inns – Thirsk had at least nineteen when Alf worked there. Farmers would head to the pubs, especially on market day, and many villages had at least one ale house or inn, where locals could swap stories and unwind in front of a fire after a day's hard labour. In the post-war years, pubs in Yorkshire, as opposed to the large hotel-like inns, typically had no bars, only a stone-flagged kitchen-like room where the largely male regulars would sit at oak tables or on high-back wooden benches in front of a fire burning in a range. They were often quiet places, with the landlords supplementing their usually meagre incomes with a smallholding of a few animals.

Pubs were often judged on their fires, the food and, most importantly, their beer, and

local breweries – Tetley's of Leeds, Cameron's of Hartlepool and Tadcaster rivals Samuel Smith and John Smith – competed for customer loyalty. Alf, Donald and Brian, like their fictional counterparts, enjoyed relaxing in a local pub, where they could enjoy a good beer, a roaring fire and pleasant company. During or after rounds, they were also useful places to escape to, where, half-starved and frozen from wrestling farm animals out in the fields, they could warm up and fill their bellies with home-cooked meals prepared on the range. During Alf's courting days, a drink at a pub often preceded a trip to a local dance or the cinema. On returning from the RAF in 1943 he briefly lived with his wife Joan and her family in the village of Sowerby. Their house was conveniently located next door to the Crown and Anchor pub, which is still trading, and Alf shared many pints with his father-in-law and other friends there.

Brian was a great frequenter of the local pubs, just as Tristan is in the books. Like many Yorkshiremen, Tristan considers himself something of a beer connoisseur, and he'll often carouse long after James and Siegfried have turned in. In The Lord God Made Them All, James and Helen have just had their daughter Rosie and Tristan is keen to celebrate at a local pub. He mentally goes through all the options, including the pub they frequent most often, the Drovers' Arms, which was based on the Golden Fleece in Thirsk. It's clear Tristan, who has a sharp mind and bags of charm, has an encyclopedic knowledge when it comes to the pubs of Darrowby and beer drinking.

'We've got to wet this baby's head, Jim,' he said seriously.

I was ready for anything. 'Of course, of course, when are you coming over?'

'I'll be there at seven,' he replied crisply, and I knew he would be.

Tristan was concerned about the venue of the celebration. There were four of us in the sitting room at Skeldale House – Siegfried, Tristan, Alex Taylor and myself. Alex was my oldest friend – we started school together in Glasgow at the age of four – and when he came out of the army after five years in the Western Desert and Italy he came to spend a few weeks with Helen and me in Darrowby. It wasn't long before he had fallen under the spell of the country life and now he was learning farming and estate agency with a view to starting a new career. It was good that he should be with me tonight.

Tristan's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair as he thought aloud. His expression was fixed and grave, his eyes vacant.

'We'd normally go to the Drovers' but they've got that big party on tonight, so that's no good,' he muttered. 'We want a bit of peace and quiet. Let's see now, there's the George and Dragon – Tetley's beer, splendid stuff, but I've known them a bit careless with their pipes and I've had the odd sour mouthful. And of course we have the Cross Keys. They pull a lovely pint of Cameron's and the draught Guinness is excellent. And we mustn't forget the Hare and Pheasant – their bitter can rise to great heights

although the mild is ordinary.' He paused for a moment. 'We might do worse than the Lord Nelson – very reliable ale – and of course there's always . . .'

'Just a minute, Triss,' I broke in. 'I went round to Nurse Brown's this evening to see Helen, and Cliff asked if he could come with us. Don't you think it would be rather nice to go to his pub since the baby was born in his house?'

Tristan narrowed his eyes. 'Which pub is that?'

'The Black Horse.'

'Ay yes, ye-es.' Tristan looked at me thoughtfully and put his fingertips together. 'Russell and Rangham's. A good little brewery, that. I've had some first-rate pints in the Black Horse, though I've noticed a slight loss of nuttiness under very warm conditions.' He looked anxiously out of the window. 'It's been hot today. Perhaps we'd . . .'

'Oh for heaven's sake!' Siegfried leaped to his feet. 'You sound like an analytical chemist. It's only beer you're talking about, after all.'

Tristan looked at him in shocked silence but Siegfried turned to me briskly. 'I think that's a pleasant idea of yours, James. Let's go with Cliff to the Black Horse. It's a quiet little place.'

And, indeed, as we dropped to the chairs in the bar parlour I felt we had chosen the ideal spot. The evening sunshine sent long golden shafts over the pitted oak tables and the high-backed settles where a few farm men sat with their glasses. There was nothing smart about this little inn, but the furniture, which hadn't been changed for a hundred years, gave it an air of tranquillity. It was just right.

The local inns provide not just beer and company but also a communal space for auctions, games, such as dominoes or darts, or meetings. In The Lord God Made Them All, one pub regular even offers haircuts at his local, the Hare and Pheasant – a character based on the Thirsk barber John Wallace. Even at his own premises, as Jim Wight remembers, he'd frequently disappear in the middle of a haircut, only to return twenty minutes later to inform you that he'd just eaten the best ham sandwich ever.

Josh Anderson was one of the local barbers. He liked his job, but he also liked his beer. In fact he was devoted to it, even to the extent of taking his scissors and clippers to the pub with him every night. For the price of a pint he would give anybody a quick trim in the gents' lavatory.

Habitués of the Hare and Pheasant were never surprised to find one of the customers sitting impassively on the toilet seat with Josh snip-snipping round his head. With beer

at sixpence a pint it was good value, but Josh's clients knew they were taking a chance. If the barber's intake had been moderate they would escape relatively unscathed because the standard of hair-styling in the Darrowby district was not very fastidious, but if he had imbibed beyond a certain point terrible things could happen.

Josh had not as yet been known to cut off anybody's ear, but if you strolled around the town on Sundays and Mondays you were liable to come across some very strange coiffures.

In Every Living Thing James is saddened to see the Lord Nelson, a typical Yorkshire pub of Darrowby, refurbished, its traditional features swept away. The new pubs are more profitable, noisier and attract a younger crowd, but they drive some (but not all) of the local clientele away.

Bob Stockdale was the sole survivor of the cataclysm which had struck the Lord Nelson inn. In dirty Wellington boots and flat cap, he sat there on a high stool at the end of the bar counter, seemingly oblivious of the endless torrent of piped music and the babel of voices from the jostling pack of smart young people.

I fought my way to the bar, collected a pint of bitter and, as I stood surveying the scene from a space against the wall, my thoughts drifted sadly back to the old days. A year ago the Lord Nelson was a typical Yorkshire country pub and I remembered an evening when I dropped in there with a friend from Glasgow, the city of my youth. There was just one big room then, rather like a large kitchen, with a log fire burning in a black cooking range at one end and a dozen farm men sitting on high-backed oak settles, their pints resting on tables of pitted wood. Those settles were a draught-proof refuge from the cold winds which whistled along the streets of the village outside and over the high pastures where those men spent their days.

The conversation never rose above a gentle murmur over which the ticking of a wall clock and the click of dominoes added to the atmosphere of rest and quiet.

'Gosh, it's peaceful in here,' my friend said. Wonderingly, he watched the proprietor, in shirt and braces, proceed unhurriedly down to the cellar and emerge with a long enamel jug from which he replenished the glasses, regulating the flow expertly to achieve the required head of froth.

'A bit different from West Nile Street,' I said.

He grinned. 'It certainly is. In fact, it's unbelievable. How does a place like this pay? Only a few chaps here, and they aren't drinking much.'

'I think it hardly pays at all. Maybe a few pounds a week, but the owner has a smallholding – there are cows, calves and pigs just through that wall – and he looks on

this as a pleasant sideline.'

My friend took a pull at his glass, stretched out his legs and half closed his eyes. 'Anyway, I like it. You can relax here. It's lovely.'

It was indeed lovely and most of the pubs around Darrowby were still attractive, but as I looked at the modernized Lord Nelson I wondered how long they would stay that way.

When the new owner took over he didn't waste any time in starting his revolution. He wasn't a farmer, he was an experienced landlord and he could see rich possibilities in the old inn in the pretty village of Welsby tucked among the fells. The kitchen range disappeared and was replaced by a smart bar counter with a background of mirrors and gleaming bottles; the antique settles and tables were swept away, and horse brasses, hunting horns and sporting prints appeared on the walls. The end wall was knocked down and people ate in an elegant dining room where once I calved the cows and tended the pigs.

Two things happened almost at once; droves of young people swarmed out to Welsby in their cars from the big Yorkshire towns, and the old clientele melted away. I never knew where those farm men went, probably to pubs in the neighbouring villages – just Bob Stockdale stayed. I couldn't understand why, but he was a quiet man, a bit of a loner, and maybe he felt that he had sat in that room several nights a week for years and, despite all the changes, he didn't want to leave it. Anyway, whenever I called in, he was there, perched on the same stool, with his old bitch, Meg, tucked underneath.

Dancing was also a common form of entertainment and, in the days of James Herriot, most of the villages and rural communities held dances on Saturday nights in simple wooden-built structures, the village institutes. (Most now have been pulled down and replaced by brick structures.) Locals would gather to whirl around to music and help themselves to the great quantities of food on offer while musicians played the tunes of the day. They were full of life and Alf and Joan often attended. In If Only They Could Talk Tristan and James take two nurses, Connie and Brenda, to a dance in the village of Poulton. Tristan suggests they first have a drink at a pub – 'We'll just have a little toothful to get us in the mood.' The landlord plies them with draught Magnet beer, poured from a tall white enamelled jug, and before they know it, they've consumed pints of the stuff, before they decide to head to the dance.

After the brightness of the inn the darkness pressed on us like a blanket and we groped our way up the steep street till we could see the institute standing on its grassy mound. Faint rays of light escaped through the chinks in the curtained windows and we could hear the music and a rhythmic thudding.

A cheerful young farmer took our money at the door and when we went into the hall

we were swallowed up in a tight mass of dancers. The place was packed solidly with young men in stiff-looking dark suits and girls in bright dresses, all sweating happily as they swayed and wheeled to the music.

On the low platform at one end, four musicians were playing their hearts out – piano, accordion, violin and drums. At the other end, several comfortable, middle-aged women stood behind a long table on trestles, presiding over the thick sandwiches of ham and brawn, homemade pies, jugs of milk and trifles generously laid with cream.

All round the walls more lads were standing, eyeing the unattached girls. I recognized a young client. 'What do you call this dance?' I yelled above the din.

'The Eva Three Step,' came back the reply.

This was new to me but I launched out confidently with Connie. There was a lot of twirling and stamping and when the men brought their heavy boots down on the boards the hall shook and the noise was deafening. I loved it – I was right on the peak and I whirled Connie effortlessly among the throng. I was dimly aware of bumping people with my shoulders but, try as I might, I couldn't feel my feet touching the floor. The floating sensation was delicious. I decided that I had never been so happy in my life.

After half a dozen dances I felt ravenous and floated with Connie towards the food table. We each ate an enormous wedge of ham and egg pie which was so exquisite that we had the same again. Then we had some trifle and plunged again into the crush. It was about halfway through a St Bernard's Waltz that I began to feel my feet on the boards again – quite heavy and dragging somewhat. Connie felt heavy too. She seemed to be slumped in my arms.

She looked up. Her face was very white. 'Jus' feeling a bit queer – 'scuse me.' She broke away and began to tack erratically towards the ladies' room. A few minutes later she came out and her face was no longer white. It was green. She staggered over to me. 'Could do with some fresh air. Take me outside.'

As a young man in his twenties, James makes the most of his new home and he certainly feels he has landed on his feet when it comes to Darrowby and the Yorkshire Dales. Such was the case with Alf, who soon became part of the community, describing Thirsk as a 'happy town', with 'an abundance of good shops with smiling people behind the counters and some splendid inns with welcoming landlords'.