

My Memories of Curbridge.

By Bill Mills

(Up-dated version)

This is an account of my memories of Curbridge and the people who lived here in the years immediately after WW2.

On approaching the village from Witney the first place you came to was the hostel, a wooden building built to house prisoners of war who helped on the land. This was the only place in the village connected to a sewage system, it had its own sewage works on land the Witney side of the building.

Behind the hostel is Manor farm, Mr & Mrs Winfield lived here with son Percy and daughter Mary. Their other son Perin lived in the cottage at the end of the drive near Main Road with his wife Edna and daughters Jen and Jill, Edna's brother Terry Coggins lived with them. I was visiting the farm one day when Mr Winfield was about to embark on a long journey in his Ford car, he was going to Bampton. Mrs Winfield came to see him off 'now take it steady' she said none of this thirty miles an hour. Perin also had a Ford car and Percy had a motor bike a BSA 250.

My brother Fred worked for the Winfields when he left school, he was bedding down some cattle and hung his jacket on a post when one of the calves pulled it down and a £1 note fell out of a pocket, the calf was chewing it and Fred was able to retrieve only a small part of it. My mother took it into a bank and asked if anything could be done and they gave her some forms to make a claim to the bank of England. Forms were filled in and sent with remnant of pound note. Several weeks later a motor cycle policeman came to our front door and he had brought with him a new £1 note.

Over the wall from Manor Farm is Charity Farm. Mr and Mrs Woods with their sons John and Norman, and daughters Mona, Eileen and Hazel lived here. Mr Woods had a Humber Super Snipe car. The large barn in the yard was used for dances and whist drives, popular events then.

Across the road there were two thatched cottages. Tommy Longshaw lived in the first one and he worked for the Woods family. The roof on Tommy's house caved in but he still lived there for some time after, it never was repaired while he lived there. In the other cottage lived Walter Hickman with his wife and sons Sid, Fred, and Percy and daughters Rose and Ruth. Walter was the local odd job builder. Behind these cottages was a farm run by Walters brother also called Percy, he still used horses for all the farm work. With his wife Elsie they milked (by hand) a small herd of cows and supplied the village with milk. The milk was delivered daily to the door usually by Elsie carrying two large cans on the handlebars of her bicycle, she didn't ride it. The milk had to be delivered daily as it wouldn't keep any longer. Percy had some fields off the Downs Road and either side of the bridle track where he grew corn and hay.

When the corn was ripe it was cut with a horse-drawn binder which would tie it into sheaves, these would be stacked into groups of six or eight and left to dry. These stacks were called stooks or shocks. When dry they would be loaded onto horse-drawn wagons and taken to the farmyard and stacked into ricks. When all the corn was home the ricks would be thatched to keep it dry.

In the spring Bill Fowler and his son also Bill would arrive with a large thrashing (threshing) machine and bailer, these would be set up with great precision close to the ricks. They had to be exactly in line as they were driven with wide canvas belts, one from the tractor to the thrasher then one from that to the bailer. It was very dangerous as these belts were up to forty feet long and wheezed round at very high speed with no guards around them.

Thrashing was very labour intensive needing a man to feed the thrashing drum, his job was to cut the strings of the sheaves and feed them in. Sometimes he would miss the string and drop a whole sheave in, often causing the belt to come off, causing a big cheer from everyone else. Two men would be on the rick throwing the sheaves into the feeder, another man to change the sack of corn and two men on the bailer, one to thread the wires that the bales were tied with and another to stack the bales. Bill Fowler and his son worked for Bob Brickell who owned the thrasher and bailer, he was a well-known farmer and property owner.

In the cottage (Stanhope) next to Walter lived Eva Barker, she had kennels behind her cottage, sometimes the dogs would bark for ages but I don't remember anyone complaining. You could see Eva riding her horse around the village most days. She was our Sunday-School teacher in the Chapel (now the Parish hall) it was well attended by most of the children in the village. Next to Eva's cottage was a barn and next to that was the blacksmiths shop which was no longer in regular use but used by a farrier when he visited the village. Across the road is the Chapel, services were held here every Sunday evening and were well attended.

In the bungalow next door lived Mr & Mrs Ern Silman with daughters Margaret and Marlene. Mr Silman later became landlord of the New Inn Pub, Crawley. In the adjoining bungalow lived Mr. & Mrs Isaac Aldsworth with daughters Beryl and Doreen and sons Gordon, Ken and Richard. Mrs Aldsworth ran the post office at her front door. Parcels had to be tied firmly with string, all knots and wherever string crossed had to be sealed with sealing wax or they would not be accepted for posting. Isaac was a big strong man with a barrel chest, red face and huge feet; he always wore hobnailed boots (you could hear him coming a mile off!) He was a strong Chapel man, on Sunday afternoons the whole family would cycle to other villages to attend services. At the bottom of the hill on the same side is the cottage where the post office was run for many years previously by Isaac's mother. Mr Tommy Pratley with his wife Margaret and son Michael lived there then. On the end of the cottage was an out-house that must have subsided as the door and window frames were several inches lower on one side than the other. It was later demolished when the road was widened. Across the road is the old school house, Mr & Mrs Barker, (Eva's parents) lived here they had another daughter Margaret, she was a nurse and worked abroad. They also looked after a young girl named Barbara Squires. Mr Barker worked at Clinche's brewery and rode a motor bike and sidecar.

Moving over the road is the Malt house, Mr & Mrs Oliver Barrett lived here, he was affectionately known as Oxo, he acquired this title as he bought a van that once belonged to OXO and still had their signs on it. The Barretts had four daughters Phoebe, Agnes, Gladys and Heather. If anyone had a pig they wanted killed and butchered Mr Barrett was the man to call. It was common to fatten a pig in the back garden, it was said that when you had a pig killed, friends you hadn't seen for ages would suddenly appear at your door. Backing on to the Malt House drive is Church row. At the far end lived Bob & May Illingworth with daughter Ann and son Pete. Bob was a bus conductor and worked for the Oxford Bus Company. Next was Mrs Jones (Gladys) and son David. Next to them was Mr & Mrs Fields with sons Ray and Stewart and daughters June and Pauline. Nearest the road lives Mr and Mrs. Townsend with son William. Mr Townsend (Teddy) worked at the Pressed Steel Company in Cowley.

Crossing the road again is the cottage called Willow Farm, people never seemed to stop here long, perhaps it was because the floor was a foot lower than the yard and garden so every time there was heavy rain the house flooded. Mr & Mrs George Hambridge lived here for a while with daughter Joyce and son David. George worked for Bob Brickell who owned the cottage. George was affectionately known as Digger as he was always going to emigrate to Australia but never did. In the garden were several plumb trees right against the wall near the road, when the plumbs were ripe we would stand on the wall and pinch them. If Mrs Hambridge caught she would tell us off for not asking for her permission to have some, but they wouldn't taste the same then would they!?

Moving on to Curbridge Farm, Mr & Mrs John Castle had a fine herd of Friesian cows. Every Sunday morning two men would exercise the bull up and down the road, it was a huge beast and must have weighed a ton, its shoulders were as high as the men. Isaac Aldsworth worked at the farm, he never swore but the English phrases he taught the German prisoners of war could not be found in any dictionary!

The church attracted a much larger congregation then, it even had choir of six or more village boys and the same number of young girls, all of whom dressed very smartly in gowns. In the cottage by the church gate lived Mr & Mrs Guppy. During and just after the war Mrs Guppy (Mable) was a post lady, she never looked very confident on a bicycle but was always smiling. Mr Guppy (Albert) was an electrician and worked at Brize Norton Aerodrome. Some years later they turned their front room into a shop and ran a very prosperous business here for some years. Next door at Honey Suckle Cottage lived Billy and Constance Gotobed with son Ron. Mr Gotobed, worked as a farm contractor; he built up a large business, with three tractors and several pieces of farm machinery.

Across the road again stands Packhorse Cottage, it had a thatched roof then and belonged to Curbridge Farm. Mr & Mrs Crook lived here with daughters Rose, Jean and Margaret and son Ron. Crossing again is Batts Row, Percy Wise lived at number one, after losing his wife, his niece Mildred came to look after him. Percy had some fields near Lew Bridge either side of the railway line and a small field on the Brize Norton road. He had some cattle and a couple of goats on the Lew road fields and he kept hens and pigs in his garden. He always had two boiled eggs for breakfast, they were boiled in his kettle, he then used the water to make his cup of tea. He used a pony and trap as his transport, the horse was called Ginger. When Ginger got too old to work Percy bought a tractor, well a rotavator with wheels on and a trailer that had a seat on it which was attached to the back, he would travel down his drive and stop at the top of the slope about ten yards from the road climb off then walk to the gates open them then stand at the kerb, look both ways then when road was clear walk back to tractor open the throttle to max, engage gear and drive straight into the road, there were lots of skid marks in the road either side of his drive but he always got away with it.

Two Batts Row was where I lived with my parents, brother Fred and my grandfather Gabriel Smith. My father (Fred) was a carpenter and worked at Brize Norton Aerodrome, my mother (Hilda) worked at Lew House for Captain and Mrs Radclyffe. At number three lived Fred Hickman his wife Bet and sons Ron and Les. Fred had a transport business running two lorries, a three ton Dennis and a five ton long-wheelbase Austin. Lorries weighing less than three tons un-laden weight were allowed to travel at 30mph, those over three tons were restricted to 20mph. Fred was a great practical joker always catching everyone on April fool's Day and still laughing about it a day later.

Standing on higher ground and well back from the road are two cottages belonging to Curbridge Farm. In the first one lived Mr & Mrs Leech with daughter Beryl and sons Derek and Bryan. Although Mains water was in the village, a lot of houses still drew all their water from a well as did these cottages until somehow paraffin was spilt and found its way into the well, then they had to be hurriedly connected to mains supply. Mr Leech kept bees, his hives were next to Mr Hickmans wall, we all got stung several times. In the adjoining cottage lived Mr Hussey, he was Mr Castles' cowman, he started work at five in the morning, when we used to go on seaside trips he would give us a call on his way to work as you had to start out early or it would be time to come back as soon as you got there. Standing even further back on its own is the cottage where Mr & Mrs Bert Laurence lived with their daughters Joan and Beryl. Bert was a keen Witney Town Football Club supporter. Then there is the Merry Horn Pub, Mr Fields was the landlord, his wife and sons Jack and Gordon and daughter Joan also lived there. Jack bred rabbits in the yard at the back, he sold me one for two shillings and gave me a hutch.

The bus stop was in the same place as it is now, on Saturdays' a group of us, (as many as eight) would go to Witney cinema for the matinee on the one o'clock bus. On Saturdays' there were four buses, three regular and a 'Yanky' special, laid on for the American service men from Brize Norton Aerodrome. The bus company charged them three times the price to use this service, so the first three buses were full to the brim with mostly Americans, so it drove straight past us, the 'Yanky' special would come along empty but would not stop and pick us up so we would walk into Witney. On the last Saturday of the month there was always room for us on the first bus, I wonder why? Across the road was an army camp, the Royal Signals were based here. When they moved out at the end of the war, squatters moved in but not for long. It was knocked down when they moved out. The Brize Norton road runs through the middle of where the camp stood, the old road was in line with the Downs Road and had a ninety-degree bend towards Brize Norton. Off of this bend was the bridle way

track to Peashell Farm. Opposite and in line with Brize Norton Road was the bridle track towards Witney, cars and buses would often miss the turn and drive up it, especially in fog!

Half a mile on towards Brize Norton, at the bottom of the hill is the drive to Caswell Farm. Mr Tommy Joslin, his wife Maud and son John lived here, Mrs Joslin always drove a big posh car but Tommy only rode a bicycle. He could be seen most Thursdays cycling to and from Witney Market; he never looked very steady on the way back. A little past the drive and opposite, and one field from the road was a wood called the Cuniger, there were several large plumb trees in here. Every year when the plumbs were ripe we would go and pick lots of them and be eating them for weeks. Mr Joslin never seemed to mind us having them but when his son John took over the farm he had them all cut down.

A row of telegraph poles ran from Witney through the village and on to Brize Norton and beyond, they were right on the edge of the road and carried about fifty wires, a real eyesore, some of the poles leaned dangerously and were probably only held up by the wires. There were few sign posts after the war and people would often ask to way to Brize Norton, we told them to follow the wires.

Now for Well Lane, it was called West View then. At the Main Road end was a triangular piece of grass in the middle of the junction, traffic would pass either side of it, in the middle was a sign post for Lew and Bampton. In the lane there were only eight houses on the left.

In the first lived Mr and Mrs Harry Joiner with sons David and Fred and daughters Joyce, Nelly and Margaret. Joyce later married Terry Coggins. At number two lived Mr and Mrs Silman they had four children all of them had left home by now. Ern Silman was one of their sons and Gladys Jones their daughter. At number three lived Mr and Mrs Busby. Jack Fields and his wife moved into number four from the Merry Horn, Jack was a postman. At number five was Mr and Mrs Tanner with daughters Rosemary and Jennifer. Next door at number six lived Mr and Mrs Combes with sons Bill, Arthur and Sam and daughter Edie. At number seven was Jack Smith, his wife Mary, daughters June and Doreen (Dimp) and son Tony. In their front garden was a large tree by the gate. June played the piano at Sunday school; Jack worked at Caswell Farm and later built the garage on the Lew Road, called Grey Gables. In the last house lived Percy and Elsie Hickman with son Chris. Chris later married Barbara Squires. Percy would walk between house and farm several times a day whistling all the way. Over the fence is the 'Rec' just an open field then. Beyond the Rec the road was flanked by thick hedges and large Elm trees overlapping to form a tunnel.

While walking down the lane one day I noticed some young cattle charging across the field with their tails in the air, they gathered in one corner puffing and panting with eyes bulging in fear, then suddenly they would all charge off again, this was a sign that the Gad Fly was about. (Hence the term he's got the Gad, describing an active child that was always dashing about). This fly would sting nearly all cattle during the summer. It would lay its eggs usually on the underside of the cattle then its grubs would burrow their way through the animal coming out on its back, the grubs were about an inch long and as thick as a man's finger. A treatment was developed that involved pouring a white paste on the back of the cattle and scrubbing with stiff brush killing the grubs.

Near the bottom of the lane on the left was a large stone-built barn with tiled roof, near this was a round Dovecot. Mr Gotobed used the barn as a workshop and to store his machinery. The barn belonged to Mr Bill Lewis who with his wife lived in the house behind the barn on the Witney-Bampton Road. At the front of the house were two large Holly bushes with lots of red berries on them every winter.

Heading towards Lew, the first house past Well Lane on the right is Vine Cottage where Harry and Muriel Hickman lived with daughters Margaret, Maureen and Valerie and son Pete. Harry worked for the council repairing the roads. Further down on the same side lived Bill Provis in what was just a small cottage then. During wet spells water would run off the higher fields behind and through his cottage. Across the road is the Lord Kitchener pub, Bill Trafford was the landlord and lived here with his wife and daughter Diane. When Percy Wise returned from his fields by Lew Bridge he would often tie Ginger, still in the shafts of the trap, to a ring set in the wall by the front door while he popped in

for a pint. On the end of the pub were two cottages, in the one nearest the road lived Mr and Mrs Bill Harris they had a large family, daughters Daisy, May and Rose and son George were married and had left home, sons Bill and Fred with their sister Betty still lived with their parents. Next door was Mrs Peacock, she was Muriel Hickman's mother. These Cottages had large gardens where the pub car park is now. Over the wall is the Rec, (Lord Kitchener Field) only used for grazing then. The other side of the Rec standing well back from the road is the house where Mr and Mrs Meggett and Mr Jo Hunt lived. In the cottage close to the road and facing towards Lew lived Mr and Mrs Lafford with daughters Mary and Helen.

The King family lived at Duttons Farm, Mr and Mrs King and sons Michael and Peter. Across the road Mr and Mrs Simmons ran the village shop, they had a daughter Janet. Every time you bought something from the shop you had to have your ration book with you, you couldn't buy much without it then. Next to the shop is Beechams cottage, Fred and Eva Taylor with daughter Pam and Eva's brother Cyril Pierce lived here. Fred worked at Brize Norton Aerodrome.

The four cottages facing Lew were the last buildings on the right, at the far end lived Tommy Costello and his wife. Tommy was a jockey in his younger days, it's said he once rode the Grand National, he worked at Crawley Mill. In the third from the road lived Mrs Fowler and son Tony, and in the second were the Cole family, with sons John and Eric and daughter Margaret. Mr Cole worked at Walkers Mill. Nearest the road lived Mr and Mrs Bert Harris with sons Roger and Roy and daughter Joy. Bert was a barber when he was in the army, for a few old pennies he would give us boys a short back and sides, the only style on offer. Opposite these cottages in Duttons Farm rick yard was a large Conker tree (the only one in the village) one day William Townsend, David Jones and myself were trying to crawl through the bottom of the hedge to get some conkers when Peter King came along we all thought we are in trouble now, he shouted to us YOU BOYS, IF YOU WANT THE CONKERS WHY DON'T YOU GO THROUGH GATE LIKE NORMAL PEOPLE DO, we felt such fools we didn't bother.

Further on towards Lew on the left at the end of a long drive is the thatched cottage where Mr and Mrs Jarvis lived with daughters Yvonne, Esme and Valerie and son Derek. Mr. Jarvis ran a bicycle repair business from here. Mrs Jarvis was Mrs Fowler's daughter. Down the same drive a little nearer the road is the house where the King family lived before moving to Duttons Farm. After they moved Mr and Mrs Richardson lived here. Mr Richardson was a school teacher at Witney Grammar School.

A quarter of a mile towards Lew on the right is Abby (Abingdon) Lane, down here is Abby Wood. Every spring families would go there to pick Blue Bells and Primroses. Red Squirrels were a common sight then and Rabbits by the hundred. Next to Abby Lane is the railway bridge, several trains a day would travel from Witney through to Fairford on a regular timetable. Men working in the fields in view of the line would know the time by the trains, they were that reliable. There was also a bridge on the Ducklington Road (Starnham Lane). We would often walk to one of these bridges to watch the trains go by and wave to the driver and fireman. There were only steam trains then giving out lots of smoke. As the train went under the bridge smoke would billow over the top, it had a different smell to the smoke from household coal, we would stand in the smoke and become completely engulfed for a few seconds. we must have smelled as our mothers always knew where we had been!

Bill Mills

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