

# Old Suffolk

## Introduction

**Kedington 1990**

In the past few years, it has become increasingly necessary for the older generation to record life in an agricultural environment as it was in the first half of the twentieth century, and particularly the twenty years that elapsed between the two world wars, because the changes in an agricultural area in those twenty years were dramatic. These changes befell all who lived in the rural areas of the British Isles and this narrative deals with a small village of Thurlow in Suffolk, just a small link in the pattern of life as it was known at that time.

It never fails to intrigue me that in my early childhood of the late nineteen twenties, life in a small Suffolk village had remained virtually unchanged for a thousand years.

Visually that may not have appeared so, but fundamentally all the functions associated with village life were basically the same. All water was procured from the river or dug wells, there was little or no drainage from houses or commercial buildings.

Farming of course predominated whether directly or indirectly, and most of the operations on the farm would be by hand, carried out by unlimited labour, for example a one hundred acre farm would employ six to eight men. All farms of course were mixed, having sufficient livestock to maintain a good supply of nutrients back to the soil as well as providing the staple diet of the community, whether as bread, meat, milk, butter, cheese, eggs, and of course wool and leather. Apart from the introduction of steam to the large estates for tilling the soil, and a few tractors on medium size farms, all the heavy work on the farms was carried out by horses, such as ploughing, harrowing and general duties.

The development of the Smythe seed drill at Peasenhall in Suffolk in the nineteenth century was revolutionary, but even in the 1920's, some farms were still broadcasting some seed by hand, and it was not unusual to see farm workers threshing corn in the barn by flail if small quantities were required and the farmer had not yet had a visit from the threshing team.

Milling and baking of bread, meat processing, clothing manufacture, harness making, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, cabinet making, thatching, building, brewing and other skills made the village self-sufficient for the most part, and only relying on Tinkers, Higglers and Travellers to bring in the additional materials and luxuries not normally available.

It was within this framework of village life that I first became aware of my surroundings in the latter part of the 1920's, and which even today are vivid in my memory.

# Chapter One

## Rose & Crown

Although I commenced school in 1928 at the age of five, these initial chapters deal solely with my memories of happenings prior to that date. At that time my father was employed as Ostler and Chauffeur at the Rose and Crown Hotel, managed by Harry Tilbrook, who only a year or two before had superseded Woottens who ran a very successful brewery on the site which supplied many public houses in the district until bought out by Christmas of Haverhill, who closed the brewery which was transferred to Haverhill.

In the 1920's the Rose and Crown was an extremely busy establishment, always with ten or more travellers or visitors staying with generally the same number of horses stabled in the buildings.

Harry Tilbrook was also a registered slaughterer and butcher, whose shop was situated on the forecourt. He was also generally engaged to kill and dress all householders' pigs for which he charged two shillings per pig.

At home we frequently had the benefit of his activities, when one of our pigs was killed each year. Harry would arrive at eight thirty, to coincide with my father arriving home for breakfast, and his tools of trade were a stretcher on a wheelbarrow, two knives, steel, saw and chopper with scalding tub. With much squealing the pig was brought down the garden, with both men holding ears and tail, we were not allowed to witness these initial events until the squeals ultimately subsided. Thereafter we were allowed to see the gallons of hot water taken from the "Bacus" copper and poured into the scalding tub, and immediately Harry would be scraping away removing all the hair, and pulling off the toenails which would always make one cringe hoping the pig could not feel this barbaric act. After removing all the hair the pig was hoisted to a high beam in the "Bacus" with a stretcher in his back or hind legs. The pig was then opened and dressed with the edible offal asided into clean buckets, and the gut suitable for chitterlings asided to a container for my father to clean in the evening.

The next day Harry would arrive to cut up the pig into suitable size joints for bacon, ham and roasting etc. and at this time each neighbour would receive a joint and some offal, this was a necessary ritual which would be reciprocated at a future date. For our family we seemed to be living on pork for weeks, but it certainly was not considered too frequent in those days. For my part I still recall arriving on leave from the Navy during the war and seeing my mother take a ham from the ceiling hook to prepare a meal for me on arrival. Harry Tilbrook had the vision to purchase a Model T Ford for taxi service, which became part of my father's duties, particularly for journeys to main line stations or weddings etc., and it was my good fortune to travel many miles in this car with my father.

As well as two adult children, a son and daughter, a barmaid and cleaning lady were employed at the Rose and Crown, with Mrs. Tilbrook preparing and cooking all the food.

Generally at this time, Bill or "Bumper" Tilbrook as Harry's son was known, was engaged in the manufacture of huge chicken sheds on the premises which had a ready market at a period in the 1920's, with many people getting into egg production.

Most publicans in these years hired or rented land for farming for additional income, and Harry Tilbrook was no exception, he rented a water meadow in Wratting Road and two acres in Withersfield Road, to provide hay for feed in his stables through the winter. Everyone helped to turn and bring in this hay after it had been cut, with the help of a pony and small cart kept at the Rose and Crown.

In addition sheep or lambs were purchased in July and fattened on the meadows until early spring.

Harry Tilbrook had one great love outside his business, this was as president of Thurlow Football Club, and he had the satisfaction of seeing a team dominant in the district for many years, his son being a powerful captain for several years. This was at a time when scouts searching for young footballers was unheard of in Suffolk, and as it was the main pastime for young men, there was a depth of skill available, which in the present day would have been lured away to fame and fortune. To this day my abiding memory of Harry Tilbrook was of a slight kindly man with a grey moustache, stained brown by incessant Woodbine which he always held in his mouth.

One incident I will never forget was when I was probably about ten years old, and looking wistfully at a pair of football boots in the local shop window, Harry came over and said, "You would like those wouldn't you?", thereupon he opened the shop door and called Arthur Cooke the owner to give the boots to me. The cost was 4/11d and they saw a few years very good service.

Harry Tilbrook had a mongrel dog called "Gip" who sat in the middle of the road cost of the day, with traffic such as it was, having to circumvent his position.

## Chapter Two

### Builder and Wheelwright

My great grandfather Rueben Webb was born at Folly Farm, Chilton, Clare where the family had formed for nearly a hundred years when he was born in 1816, ultimately as with two brothers he became an apprenticed stonemason.

In 1867 he moved to Thurlow with three sons Samuel, Arthur and Harry and set up business as a builder, most of his work was for the Thurlow Estate of W.H.Smith. Among the work he carried out was the building of Gt. Thurlow Bridge and the red brick cottages adjacent the shop, and the re-roofing of Thurlow Hall barn. It was whilst building the cottages that he fell from scaffolding and received injuries from which he subsequently died in 1887.

Harry Webb became building foreman for Bareham's of Clare, while Samuel and Arthur carried on the business, until Arthur, my grandfather became unable to work through illness just prior to the First World War.

Samuel Webb continued the business from Wheatsheaf Cottage with his two sons Cecil and Wilfred "Billy" and initially my uncle Fred Webb, and although much of their work was on local churches, they did build the Swiss chalet type house in Withersfield Road for Mr. Wootten when he retired from the Rose and Crown.

Before I started school I spent many hours with the family, and developed a particular friendship with their pony which was used for transporting building materials. This pony was turned out each night in a small paddock behind our house, and each morning I would await the arrival of Wilfred to fetch the pony for work, rarely before 09.30am, as they were rather an acentric family, who would start work late and finish late. Several times I can recall accompanying Samuel and Wilfred in their pony and cart to carry out repairs to Gt. Wrating, Barnardiston and Lt. Bradley churches.

Samuel Webb had many children and two daughters, Alice and Elizabeth, who were teachers at Gt. Thurlow School, and in later years Elizabeth ran a private school at Wheatsheaf Cottage, probably until the late 1950's.

In later years I would visit her where she lived with a niece at Newmarket until she reached the grand age of 96 and died in 1988.

Samuel Webb liked a drink and would daily visit the Queen's Head, often with William "Bill" Tweed, the village wheelwright who lived opposite Wheatsheaf Cottage. However, they did have a love hate relationship and would frequently go for long periods without speaking to each other. However generally they were both humorous men who enjoyed practical jokes, and Bill Tweed had a reputation for interesting himself in everyone's business, unfortunately he would have periods of drinking for a few weeks culminating in months of abstinence.

Mrs. Tweed was the district nurse for many years and brought most of the children into the world in the Thurlow area between 1900 and 1936. Bill Tweed was not just a wheelwright, but a highly skilled worker in hard wood carving. Two examples that come to mind are the oak door from the street to Lt. Thurlow Grange, and the gate posts at the west entrance to Gt. Thurlow churchyard, along with several of the fencing posts at the entrance to Gt. Thurlow Hall.

He had a hobby of hairdressing which would cost 2d, but I suspect this was more to avail himself of the village news from all his customers. There is an interesting fact about his workshop which was a long low thatched building opposite his kitchen door entrance, and it is a sad loss that this building was pulled down. Bill Tweed said it was probably older than the house and may originally have been the main residence.

This was the building in which Bill did all his work, in a small clear oven near the entrance, and the barber's chair was the wheel "A" frame. The rest of the building was literally full of wood of every description, much of it probably fifty years old, and tools of every known use over several hundred years, the majority of which would be unknown to the present generation.

The loss of this building was a tragedy to the village and would have been a fine museum for the village, but Thurlow as with many other places suffered in the late forties and fifties from the destruction of building by people with no respect for the past.

Adjacent to this building was another structure containing an engine to power saws, planes etc. and in my young days housed two cars and two motor cycles of considerable vintage, as Bill Tweed was very modern in his outlook from the earliest days of the combustion engine. Bill Tweed was a considerable sportsman in his younger days, probably before the turn of the century, as he died in about 1960 at the age of over 90.

He was a very skilled skater, and when the "long pond", a manmade reservoir of water for Thurlow Hall adjacent the Bury Road, was frozen over, Bill was usually the first to don his skates and cutting elegant figures of eight.

This scene I can recall vividly when I was very young, of lanterns at intervals around the pond in the evenings, with many skaters intermingled with young men cutting slides on the ice, and children just enjoying the excitement.

## Chapter Three

### Steam Ploughs

Thurlow Estate probably comprised at least 16000 acres, and covered a huge area from Borough Green to Cavendish, and Ousden to Radwinter, and although each farm in every village was run as an individual unit with equipment, foreman and staff, it was directly responsible to the Estate agent, who in my very early years was Mr. Ward followed by Richard Garrett. There would be general assistance to each farm from the head of the estate at Thurlow, such as the supply of feed for animals from Thurlow Hall mill, and all the tradesmen, bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers, painters etc., emanated from Thurlow "estate staff".

Likewise much of the ploughing and cultivating of the land in the whole estate between August and spring sowing was carried out by a pair of huge Fowler engines, using the dragline technique of hauling the implement back and forth across the field to opposite headland via a steam driven cable drum.

In those days most land was fallowed every four to five years and this land was worked through the summer to prepare for autumn sowing, likewise huge flocks of sheep were kept and after folding off through the winter from kale, clover layer, root crops, beet tops etc., this land was also cultivated for autumn sowing.

These engines could plough or cultivate up to twenty acres daily, which is considerable, but nevertheless the proportion of arable land from 16000 acres kept them very busy for most of the year. However, July and August saw the engines sent into the engineering workshops in Wrattling Road for annual overhaul, where every facility was available for re-tubing boilers, re-plating, re-rivetting, slide valves re-seated. In addition much cleaning and painting would be carried out.

There was a permanent staff of four at the workshop, reinforced by the five men of the engine teams, and probably at the same time, one of the two threshing tackle engines and drums with three staff would also be under repair, so altogether it was a hive of activity and as one can imagine very noisy for the people living close by.

From my earliest years I had a tremendous feeling of excitement whenever the steam engines were around, to see the huge engines turning into the yard where they were driven into a covered yard and to be able to watch all the work carried out, wheels, smoke stack, fire bars and ash pans, valve headwork removed, to gain access to all parts necessitating repair. When I was four years of age the workshop foreman came to see my mother to ask if I could be allowed to be placed through an engine manhole into the tube boiler, the tubes having been removed, to hold a spanner on a troublesome bolt head, because none of the men was small enough, and the blacksmith's apprentice had refused.

Sacks had been placed inside the boiler, and several candles to provide light. Presumably I must have been successful as I was sent home with a handful of coins. To this day I can still imagine the sound of the engines coming home to Thurlow farms after several weeks in the outer villages, with the jangling of the gearing when not under load, I would wait patiently for an hour or two hours because the noise carried for miles.

However I knew that if the engines were to work on the home farms, True Marsh local ....., would allow me to ride on the engine when working in the field. True, I never knew his real Christian name, was a neighbour of ours, he was driver of one engine with his son Percy steersman, whilst a younger son Fred was teaboy or general factotum who kept the sleeping hut clean and the fire going etc., and all the menial tasks.

The other engine was manned by Ted Dawson and Cyril Cornell, incidentally the latter had his legs broken when a drum cable snapped when the engines were cleaning out silt from the canal.

Engines such as these had been used from the 1850's, and sadly in the latter part of the 1930's they were superseded by caterpillar tractors. My last recollection of the two Fowlers was to see them standing forlornly beside Thurlow Hall barn for several years, covered with tilts, until eventually purchased by Conish and Lloyds during the war, presumably for scrap.

I think by this time True had died, and fortunately he would not have seen their ending. Engine drivers were of course men of some standing in the community, always wearing blue overalls, trousers, blue jackets over leather faced waistcoat and leather peaked cap, with a complete replica outfit for Sunday.

The engineer in charge at the Wratting Road works was a Mr. Burrell, who was a member of the Burrell family, the manufacturers of the Burrell steam engines at Thetford which closed down after World War I, and I recall him as a very smart, likeable person who always spoke kindly.

He was a very skilled engineer and trained Sid Chapman through his apprenticeship in the twenties, Sid himself was an engineer of considerable capabilities, who in turn guided me through my apprenticeship in the late thirties particularly in steam.

## Chapter Four

### Sheep and Shepherds

One of my earliest recollections was of my father taking my brother and me to see the new lambs, situated in the sheepyard and surrounding meadows every spring.

The Thurlow Estate had at least four large flocks of sheep, each comprising over 1000 ewes, which were folded on land throughout the year on over twenty farms, which were moved from farm to farm from April to January, when they were all taken to Thurlow Hall for lambing. The actual lambing took place in a special constructed "sheepyard", which consisted of a large square enclosure, bounded by low weatherboard structures having galvanised sheet roofs each of a depth of eight feet running the full length of each side of the square.

Wooden hurdles separated each pen and also formed the front against which straw was placed to replenish the bedding and provide wind breaks at the front.

Three shepherds from the village of Thurlow were in charge of their own flocks, and I believe one shepherd from Hundon named Seeley. The Thurlow shepherds were Harry "Tad" Argent, who lived next door to us, Shepherd Osborne who lived at the top of the hill on the Withersfield Road, the latter really looked the part when he walked home, when his flock was in Thurlow.

He was always dressed in a smock and wellingtons, with his crook aiding his walk, and two collie dogs at his heel.

The third shepherd was Jack "Jute" Alexander, who was quite young, probably in his twenties, who lived with his parents and brothers in a small house in the street, the centre house of three situated between the Queens Head and the Rose and Crown.

As I grew older I began to doubt if "Jute" was a genuine shepherd as he was a rather wild character, who liked a drink to say the least, and in the late thirties drifted into aerodrome construction as did many men from surrounding villages.

My only personal contact with him was when he was folding sheep near Sowley Green, presumably he took me in his horse and tumbril, which was used to transport hurdles from fold to fold. At the time I was probably five or so, and I recall him galloping around the field with me hanging on for dear life in the tumbril, this was his idea of introducing some excitement into his everyday life.

Each of the shepherds had a traditional wooden shepherd's hut, constructed with tongue and groove boards with concave roof, and large cast iron wheels. The interior consisted of a bunk and cast-iron stove for warmth and cooking, and a corner for sick lambs.

One dog would be inside at night whilst another would be in a kennel beneath the hut, to warn the shepherd of intruders particularly foxes. Generally, if the shepherds were in outer villages, they would only visit home on Sundays, it was a very difficult life for a family and I suppose set shepherds a breed apart on the farms.

On about two occasions when Mr. Argent's flock was in Thurlow I was allowed to take him his dinner, with some for myself. I can still recall the excitement of eating in the little hut with the shepherd and his two dogs. Another occupation allied to sheep farming was the trade of hurdle making, and although I don't recall there being a hurdle maker in Thurlow, there was one in Wickhambrook, and one at Gt. Bradley who lived in a small cottage on the corner opposite The Fox public house.



This hurdle maker had a small lean-to shed just down the Cowlinge Road at the end of his garden, surrounded by hazel coppicing, completed hurdles and hazel in the process of manufacture.

On one occasion I went with Mr. Argent to collect hurdles with his horse and tumbril.

## Chapter Five

### Thurlow Fair

It is very difficult in these days, with everything brought to the TV screens from all over the world, to imagine the thrill and anticipation of the days leading up to Thurlow Fair.

Prior to World War I Thurlow Fair had been held in the grounds of the Queen's Head, and it is probable that it had been so for hundreds of years, because a toy fair had been held at Thurlow from the Middle Ages. Of the many discussions with Sid Chapman, he had attended fairs at the Queen's Head before World War I, with side shows and steam galloping horses in the paddock. Year after year Walter "Dusty" Taylor had turned the children's roundabout by hand, providing the owner plied him with a few pints of beer.

At that time the Queen's Head, now a garage, was owned by Charlie Haylock, but in my very young days the landlord was his son Frank, both of course were harness makers, with a workshop situated at the end of a row of buildings which ran endways to the road to a distance to the rear of the premises, and then continued at right angles towards the house, the whole of the buildings formed a large open square with white wooded fencing along the road.

Sweets were also sold at the rear of the premises, being served frequently by Mrs. Haylock senior, most of the items could be purchased for half or one penny.

When Harry Tilbrook of the Rose and Crown died in 1938, the Haylock family became landlords, and the Queen's Head was closed as a public house, and occupied by the Bridgeman family for several years, Mr. Bridgeman being farm foreman at Temple End Farm.

In the early twenties Thurlow Fair came into its own, becoming the largest fair in the district, taking place in the first or second week of July, which by coincidence or design, was the time when many new vegetables were available from most cottage gardens. The preparation of the new showground, which was "The Pasture!" situated behind School Terrace, was financed by the good offices of Mr. C.F. Ryder, and many of his estate staff worked on the showground during the week prior to the show. Capt. Frink of the Grange was the driving force in organising events, being the show secretary.

Two huge marquees were erected for flowers, fruit and vegetables, athletic track and field circuit prepared, a show ring for animal judging, gymkhana ring and pony trotting, with a further large marquee erected to house rabbits and all types of game.

A large area at the top of the field was roped off for the fair which usually arrived on the Friday, and in the centre of the meadow two marquees for refreshments, one of which was for many the pivot of the whole show, the "Beer Tent".

For us children the most exciting day leading up to the show was Friday, and the arrival of the fair. Some seven or eight huge steam engines hauling all the equipment and caravans. These engines would all be unhitched along the Wratting Road, and the engines driven down to the river to refill the engine water tanks and bowsers, before the journey up to the showground. The showmen were very mysterious to us having almost a folklore of their own, most of the children were very nervous of them, as they carried a reputation presumably passed down by our parents, not helped by the fact that whilst on the meadow, many householders of School Terrace lost many vegetables from their gardens.

However they were very hard working people, as from Friday evening until Saturday midday, all the sideshows, galloping horses, swings etc., were erected.

The day of the fair was fascinating, helping father prepare vegetables in the marquee, seeing all the rabbits and game placed in the wire cages and the detail of preparation by all the people who took part, including the children's posies of wild flowers, the best drawings and paintings from the school.

The judging of all vegetables, flowers, fruit, game and rabbits etc. was completed by 1p.m. Towards midday the arrival of the many horses and ponies and culminating in the official opening at 1p.m. of the show, and payment at the little pay office by the blacksmith's shop, 6d for children and one shilling for adults.

My pocket money for the show was two shillings and of course most of this was spent at the fair, and however sparingly one tried most of this was gone by 4p.m., thereafter looking for father for a further 2d to ride just once more on the galloping horses.

A very tiring exciting day, ending for us being allowed to stand in our gardens and watch the flashing lights of the fair until quite past our normal bedtime.

The fair moved off during Monday morning, and the first port of call for children was to look for coins laying on the showground, modern metal detectors would probably turn up many coins.

## **Gt. Thurlow School**

In 1928 I started school, this being a period when the village population was still in the ascendancy, the school attendance at this time was over 100, for the villages of Gt. And Lt. Thurlow, the hamlets of Lt. Thurlow Green, Sowley Green and part of Barnardiston. Lt. Thurlow School, now two private houses, was closed during the First World War. In 1928 Miss Linacre had just commenced as headmistress, having come from Derbyshire, and lived in the centre house of what was Hill House, and in fact until the First World War was occupied by Andrew Boa and family as the Estate Agents residence with several acres of land, stables etc. and several staff.

The other two houses after the war were occupied by Ambrose Williams, Groom and Mr. Burrell, Engineer.

The other two teachers were Elizabeth Webb, middle grades and Alice Webb, infants, both aunts of mine, who lived with their parents and brother at Wheatsheaf Cottage where they carried on the builders business as stated earlier.

Being a nephew of Alice Webb certainly did not encourage favouritism, as I seemed to collect a considerable amount of punishment, which in her case was a severe smacking of the back of one hand, very painful at this age, but I suppose it was justified.

For myself I had a great love of school and was only absent for the normal illnesses of measles, mumps etc. Looking back one has a certain nostalgia for ones contemporaries, but as one became older there was a feeling of sheer frustration and even anger by pupils with ability.

The repetition year after year when one's progress was governed by the slowest learners in each class one passed through.

The curriculum laid down by people without vision in the Suffolk Education Authority was just sufficient to ensure domestic service for the girls, and agricultural labourers for the boys, with moral visits at intervals by the school governors, i.e. the squire's wife and the vicar.

For anyone with ability the 11 Plus examination was not too difficult to overcome, but without financial support to purchase special clothing and cycles etc., higher education was out of the question, and the only children who achieved the transfer were the offspring of people with

organisational connections who knew the legal method of obtaining educational support through certain charities. Furthermore, higher education was to 16 years and not 14 years, and with no children's allowances as has been known since 1945, the loss of two years earnings in a medium size family, with the breadwinner earning 28 shillings was more than most families could bear.

One has to admire the Cambridgeshire education authorities, who in the 1920's began the innovation of village colleges which had a far-reaching effect on education in that county in the 1930's.

In fact for many children in Thurlow we were born one mile the wrong side of the county boundary.

Because of the system, by the time I reached 12 years of age, the last two years of schooling did not add to my knowledge, and learning after 14 years was by reading everything available and one became educated by experience and study which unfortunately was not a passport to higher positions in industry or elsewhere. Therefore, one had to achieve a position with the best possible future that one could in an isolated village.

With hindsight I suppose David Tulloch and I, who sat side by side for the last two years of our education, educated each other by discussion on current affairs, and always being interested in newspaper topics of the day.

## School Days

From the age of about six until ten or so, were probably the happiest period of my years until the early post war years.

Although one had to assist in all manner of things about the house and garden, including the daily running of errands such as the daily milk collection for several people from Thurlow Hall dairy, it was the leisure time which is now recalled with much pleasure and detail.

Generally, 70% of my time was spent with Ron "Pom" Argent, two years my senior, who lived in Hall Cottages, his father being in charge of the dairy. Pom had a neighbour, Harry "Sonny" Adsett, whose father was farm foreman at Thurlow Hall. Sonny was slightly older than Pom.

It was Pom's parents who contribute much to the pleasure of this period. Emma Argent was one of those delightful village women who took everything in her stride, she was totally unflappable. One was always made welcome at any hour, and provided with drink and cake as if I was her son.

Her husband Arthur "Higglar" Argent being a dairyman worked seven days a week from 5a.m. to 5p.m. but was always a cheerful little man whose main interest outside his work was bee-keeping. He always maintained eight to ten hives at the side of his house. He had a moustache and for that reason Pom had given him the nickname of Strube, who was the cartoonist of the day in the Daily Express, and their features were much alike.

Pom had a brother Arthur "Hixie" Argent, who worked on the farm in charge of several thousand chickens and turkeys. Hixie was a quite clever footballer, who played inside right for Thurlow, and was also a very humorous person. His mode of transport was a Velocette motorcycle which took him to Haverhill over several years to meet Nance, his girlfriend. Sonny's father also owned a motorcycle, but it was equipped with a sidecar, and its sole journey seemed to be Haverhill once a week.

Harry Adsett senior always wore breeches and buskins, and when astride his motorcycle always wore his cap with peak turned to the rear to accommodate goggles. He was known to all as "Fly", whether or not this was related to his motorcycling I do not know, for on occasions he would wear a flying helmet with his goggles, shades of Biggles.

Sonny had a sister Winifred who assisted Hixie with the poultry, she was a very jovial person who was popular with all the farm and estate people.

My abiding memory of her was her walk which was a very hurried run with a little skip, and she seemed forever to be burdened with a bucket on each arm carrying poultry food.

It was around this environment and people that the four or five formative years of my life were spent, virtually totally around Thurlow Hall and the surrounding fields.

## **Thurlow Hall Estate**

Thurlow Hall Estate was the most incredible place as I became aware of it initially in the late twenties. Mr. C.F. Ryder had purchased the estate about 1910 from the newsagent family of W.H. Smith, many of the farm buildings were of sound late Victorian brick construction, a massive two storey barn, cowsheds, dairy, stables, cart sheds etc., with a vast number of wood constructed buildings of indeterminate age, including the sixteenth century barn adjacent the road, housing all manner of skills and trades.

It must be difficult for present day people to appreciate the number of people employed from this home farm, they comprised painters, carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers, wheelwrights, sawyers, millers, lorry drivers, engine drivers, horse keepers, dairy staff, gamekeepers, pigmen, poultry staff, grooms, gardeners, chauffeurs and of course at least 15 hall domestic staff.

At any lunch time to see the staff going home for midday meal was akin to people leaving a factory, at least fifty in number.

To the credit of the Ryder family one could count on one hand the number unemployed in the village, whilst pay was low at least one did not go hungry in an age when three million unemployed was commonplace, receiving 8 to 10 shillings per week. The other factor which amazes me now is the fact that as children we were free to roam virtually anywhere within the buildings, on the land, in the woods or on the canal or river, and I cannot recall an accident to a child on this particular farm, although usually the only children around were from Hall Cottages which were sited within the farm area, and their friends, but it is important to recall that this was an age when even the youngest child knew exactly the confines within which he or she must behave, and who also knew the consequences of serious behaviour, which could mean the whole family being evicted from the tied cottage after the dismissal of the breadwinner, however this was something that did not occur at Thurlow Hall to my knowledge.

Nowadays we are accustomed to a sameness about people, undoubtedly as a result of the influence of television, a predominance of jeans, trainers, T-shirts, with most people speaking a peculiar mixture of Cockney, city suburban and East Anglian, and the education authorities must bear some responsibility between the two World Wars of always correcting children whose accents were pure Suffolk, of which I had personal experience.

However in the late twenties and during the thirties, men and women stood out as characters in their own right, they spoke with the same accent as their parents, and whilst there was frequently a hint of modern dress, much of the clothing was Victorian or Edwardian, as it was frequently the proud boast that, "I have had this jacket thirty years", or it could be coats, shoes or trousers. Fashion was unknown, the key factor was that everything was made to last, although of course a tradesman dressed peculiar to his trade. This appraisal therefore of the people that we as children came into contact with, had a lasting effect on one's memory, as did the effects of class at the time.

This class was certainly not restricted to the middle or upper classes, if anything the lower classes in village life carried the class system to extremes. A middle class of the vicar, agent, doctor and retired Army officers, but the lower strata was divided into at least three classes, butchers, farmers, bakers and publicans at the upper level, with artisans, farm foremen, horse keepers at the middle level, whilst the lowest level comprised mainly the labouring classes.

The social life of the village reflected these levels whether it was cricket, tennis, church or chapel. Many of the horse keepings still dressed in corduroy, including waistcoat with red spotted neckerchief, whilst carpenters, bricklayers, wheelwrights etc. wore bib and brace overalls with polished shoes, and always wore a tie. General estate workers wore a black/grey twill jacket and trousers with fawn or brown overall coats, but again always with a tie. General farm workers wore a mixture of all sorts, heavy hard leather hobnailed boots which were totally waterproof, with gaiters or puttees.

Many people wore old Army uniforms, jacket, trousers and greatcoat with buttons etc. removed, but many of the older farm workers wore the heavy black Victorian style jackets and trousers, which of course had originally been "Sunday best".

People of all classes dressed in suits on Sundays, whether to attend church or the public house, and a large proportion walked out on Sunday afternoons with wives and children.

Within the framework of position and code of life and behaviour, there were numerous characters who made village life such a variation with individuals often quoted on each one's reaction to an event.

An example of these individuals centred around the main engine shed which supplied power to the adjacent sawmill through a system of drive shafts, comprising a low level 5 foot diameter saw in a traversing steel bed which cut up all types of trees into plants for seasoning, oak, ash, elm and large softwood trees.

A small saw for cutting planks into manageable sizes and a machine for trimming poles and posts etc. from pine.

In the wheelwright's shop was a driven planing machine, also a morticing machine and drill. A large belt across the roadway from the engine shed, powered machinery in the mill, particularly the grinding mill stones for preparing meal etc. for animals throughout the whole estate, and two sack hoists to raise corn etc. to the first floor.

The engine which was the hub of this activity was a fifty horse power paraffin burner with a single 15 inch cylinder, water cooled from large 500 gallon water tanks which were topped up each morning by hand from the adjacent pond. This engine had been on a ship going to France during the first war, which was torpedoed and sunk, and afterwards salvaged in 1919, renovated, purchased and installed at Thurlow. The start-up at six o'clock each morning six days a week was quite a ritual.

A blowlamp was positioned to a bulb on the cylinder head, to heat up the head sufficiently to ignite the supply of paraffin at such a time that the ignition was judged to be correct. However, two men were positioned either side of the two six foot flywheels, which they had to turn backward and forward against the compression resistance, until the order came "this time", when the paraffin was ignited causing an internal combustion explosion which allowed the momentum of the flywheels to take over, thereafter running for the rest of each day until early evening.

The man in charge of the engine was Albert Allen, who seemed quite old as I recall him, but was dressed for the part, blue overall trousers, jacket and waistcoat with leather topped peaked cap.

The start-up of the engine seemed to be the sole working job Albert did the whole day, apart from occasional oiling duties and checking drive shafts and belts.

He had a seat in a den which he inhabited most of the day. He had a small hole drilled in the north wall of this small den, to enable him to occasionally check if anyone of importance were coming up this main entrance to the farm.

He frequently had all types of tradesmen visitors, who used this spot for a smoke (instant dismissal if caught) and a spell in a warm area, as the heat of the engine and cooling tanks gave off considerable heat.

Albert Allen was a lodger with Nell and George Jarvis who lived in a small cottage attached to the Queen's Head. George Jarvis was also an engine driver for T.W. Tilbrook at Manor Farm, Lt. Thurlow, who had a threshing tackle and team permanently engaged throughout the district. Albert Allen was an obtuse sort of man, not unusual in Suffolk, and in this respect he had much in common with his working neighbour, Mr. Womack the wheelwright. They did not really have a working relationship, rather they kept at arms' length apart from violent verbal outbreaks on occasions.

Albert was renowned for his oft repeated comments, and one example directed at Mr. Womack after a particular argument, "You're an angel ooh dutty wings, thus what you are."

Mr. Womack lived at the former Street Farm opposite the school, with his wife, he had no children.

The sawmill team operating behind the engine room were the most interesting group of three, Jack Paxman, foreman, lived next door to the Womack's with his wife Deborah, his children were married and lived elsewhere in my early days.

Arthur Ashman, a tall clean shaven man with a humorous smile, lived at Fox Cottage, which at the time belonged to Ton Chapman, he was unmarried.

Joe Shanks the third member of the team, came from Withersfield.

The saw shed was quite a large building constructed of timber framed weatherboard, having corrugated roof. Every space seemed to be taken up with sawn timber and sawdust, whilst outside was a large area taken up with trees awaiting the sawmill, and of course neatly stacked sawn hardwood, seasoning for use up to two to ten years. This team had spells when they would be in the woods, cutting down trees and removed by drag wheels to the edge of the wood then loaded on to timberjims, and hauled by two horses to the sawmill.

When this team were sawing timber, the noise of course was horrendous and every order or directive was given in sign language, some of which were quite hilarious antics.

Jack Paxman always seemed to be negotiating the village on his cycle at a time when the public houses opened at 11 o'clock. His cycle was equipped with a rear step on the wheel spindle and he always mounted the cycle by using the step to lift himself on to the seat by his left foot having propelled his cycle forward to two or three steps with his right foot.

The three men who worked in the mill were the largest men on the estate, Arthur Barrett, a single man who lived in School Terrace was a giant of a man, 6' 3" tall and weighing over 18 stone.

Bay Loveday, a married man who lived at Gt. Wrattling, fairly tall and weighing over 16 stone, and Fred Cook, a tall single man from Sowley Green, the son of the Trundley and Wadgell's wood gamekeeper.

These three were well known for playing practical jokes, particularly on children in the area at the time.

As well as grinding corn and beans etc., large quantities of other food was purchased to enable all types of cattle, pig and sheep feed to be mixed. One of these purchased items was broken biscuits in large sacks and as children we usually took advantage of the opportunity to fill a pocket.

Note:-

Nick Webb donated this account of life in the village of Thurlow written by his father Philip Jack Webb.

Philip Jack Webb, grew up at School Terrace, Gt Thurlow; the terrace built by his ancestors.

He did an apprenticeship at Atterton and Ellis, then 30 years at HMP, as a Production Manager, before retirement.

He died in 1993 aged 70.