

A LIFE IN AN OXFORDSHIRE VILLAGE



**REMINISCENCES OF HERBERT GODWIN
ABOUT HIS CHILDHOOD AND WORKING LIFE
IN NETTLEBED 1870 – 1956**

RECORDED FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH

Dr ROBIN WILLIAMSON

EDITED BY MALCOLM LEWIS

Dr Robin Williamson

We are fortunate to have the reminiscences of my grandfather Herbert Godwin and it is all thanks to Dr Williamson who spent so much of his spare time encouraging Herbert to write down his memories of the village and its inhabitants and then transcribed it in such a way it did not lose the simplicity and style in which it was written.

The late Mrs Williamson kindly passed on to me the transcribed version and a few years later the original pencil writings done by my grandfather were found by their daughter and I am delighted to have them in my possession.

Dr Williamson was a greatly respected GP, caring for the people of Nettlebed from 1946 to his death in 1969. The East window in Nettlebed church dedicated to his memory was designed by John Piper.

Avril Bryant (née Godwin)

Reminiscences of Herbert Godwin (1870 – 1956)

One time Head Woodman on the Nettlebed Estate, Oxfordshire

INTRODUCTION

Herbert Godwin's parents were James and Anne Godwin and he was one of six children of a long established Nettlebed family. He grew up and lived in the village all his life. He worked on Nettlebed Estate for several landowners including Lord Camoys, when it was part of the Stonor Estate, and then Mr. H.H.Gardiner of Joyce Grove, who bought much of the Camoys' Nettlebed Estate land in 1894. He was later employed by Mr Robert Fleming, the merchant banker, who bought Joyce Grove and Nettlebed Estate from Gardiner after Gardiner's business in London failed in 1903.

Herbert would have seen many changes in the way of village life; he lived through the time of the Boer Wars (1880-1881 and 1889-1902), The Great War 1914-18 and the Second World War 1939-1945. He saw the decline in farming with its consequent loss of jobs on the Estate, including the eventual closure of the Nettlebed brick and pottery works; the phasing out of heavy horses and the introduction of motorised machinery for haulage and farming work. In his early days he worked for his father as a builder before employment on the Nettlebed Estate. From all accounts he was also something of a handyman around the village for much of his life.

Herbert was responsible for forestry on the Estate. Timber was always in demand as fuel for the local kilns as well as for sale to merchants in London. It was also supplied to furniture makers and bodgers turning chair legs in village workshops and in the local woodland. Much of the wood used in the kilns was in the form of faggots made from bundles of coppiced wood. Coppicing of timber required careful management to ensure there was a steady supply over a nine year cycle for each tree. Such trees could provide supplies for a hundred years or more.

In his lifetime the village changed for the better with improved housing, a new and larger school, a mains water supply, electricity and eventually mains drainage.

These are the memories of an elderly Oxfordshire man in his eighties as recorded by Dr Robin Williamson, a much respected village GP, in the early 1950s. They are in no particular order but just as they came to Herbert's memory. I am grateful to his granddaughter Avril Bryant for making them available and for her assistance in providing more details of her family history and photos.

Where some explanation of events recalled by Herbert and the locations of places is thought helpful, I have endeavoured to identify these without interrupting his wonderful flow of words. It is important to record and capture these reminiscences so that they are not lost forever.

Malcolm Lewis, Nettlebed. March 2013.

Early days.

I recall that coaches used to run from Oxford to London in 1870 – 80. They changed horses at the Bull Inn in the High Street (*now closed and converted to apartments*). **Mrs Giles** kept The Bull at that time, her husband being dead. Her daughter Constance is still living in Henley. She's now **Constance Pearce** with the jewellers shop. She has a son Ted living in Reading.

I remember **Harry Tranter** throwing a pail of water over **Tom Bosley** and Tom's father Joe in the pub yard. This started a fight which went on up and down the street. Harry Tranter kicked young Tom's bottom as he dived under the stable door trying to get away.

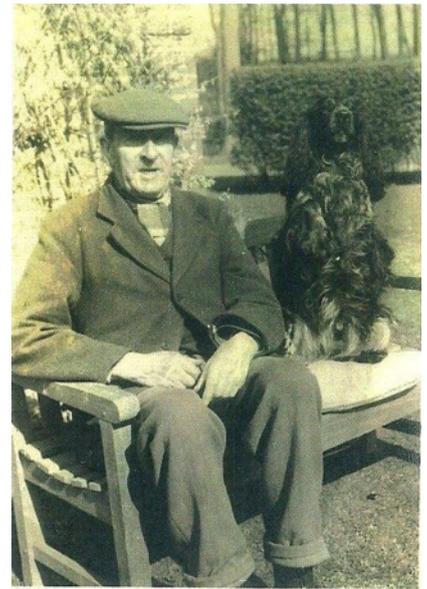
Joe Bosley was a harness maker and used to play the fiddle for the Maypole dancing on the common.

The highwayman never came through Nettlebed as I remember in my time, but I have been told he used to put up at the Golden Ball in Assendon when the coaches ran that way down the old road. He used to cover his horse Black Ben in whiting so the cops should think him white. He used to hide in a cupboard up the chimney at the pub and also hid under a hollow tree...still there. The coaches used to run that way in the old days. (*Herbert is going back to the 18th/early 19th centuries here. The present Bix to Nettlebed road was built as a turnpike in 1736 and the old road fell into disuse.*) The fair came to Nettlebed every October (*it probably had its origins as a hiring fair when farm labourers and domestic servants would make themselves available for work*)...there was a disturbance at the fair and a fight and the fair people used their 'saloon rifles' (*from the shooting range stall*) and three notorious local men and others threw some of the fair peoples' caravans over. I remember seeing some of it. The old constables were a bit busy that day. Nettlebed used to be a rough place in those days – fights a plenty. (*there were eight pubs in the village at that time – The Bull, The White Hart, Cross Keys, Red Lion, Rising Sun, Nags' Head, Fox and Hounds and the Carpenter's Arms. Most were small rooms with barrels of ale against the wall and benches for their customers who helped themselves.*)

Stocks were used by the old constables to put the criminals in for being drunk and other crimes and was kept in **C.Phillip's** carpenter's shop by Wanbourne Pond (*Watlington Street*) which I pulled down before 1907. I don't know what became of them after the last time I saw them. They were used at some festival, I can't remember when, on a heap of stones in front of the Manor House by the old finger post – a man went in voluntary for a time.

Mummers and dancing bears.

The Mummers used to go round to the houses and pubs before Christmas and play instruments and act the fool with faces blacked and dressed in finery. The Nettlebed band used to play in church and it consisted of **my father James, double bass, Uncle Fred, flute, William Godwin, tenor, Mr Francis** and others I don't remember. When it broke up in 1875 another was formed and consisted of **W. Godwin tenor, Panter Goodall bass, Adam Sarney drum, Bob Bennel cornet and David Fawcett opoclyde** and that's a far as I can remember. (*Herbert meant, ophicleide – a keyed bugle, a forerunner of the cornet*).



— Herbert Godwin and Paddy

People often referred to the Bear Pit. As far as I can say in 1870-80 Frenchmen came round the village with brown bears and they used to chant ‘dady-dady-dum-dum-dum-dum-day’ to make bears dance on their hind legs. On one occasion I saw one climb the sycamore tree by the Red Lion Inn – I think it still stands. Once they stayed the night in the big pit west of Newlands Corner (*near Newlands oak at Crocker End*) and I expect that was why it was named the Bear Pit. Perhaps **Mrs Susie Smith** can tell you more about this as she is a trifle older than I am, but I doubt if her memory is quite as good. (*Interesting this reference – in 2002 a large sink hole, some 20-30 feet deep, appeared at this spot and a whole beech tree disappeared into it. The pit was probably for chalk extraction for lime burning.*) The Common used to be a mass of gorse and when in bloom looked lovely and beech trees used to reach up above the road to Newlands corner. The one down near the Henley road was named Burnt Beech as there was nearly always a fire on the common.

Herbert talks about the ‘Old notables’

I think you will find in the Oxfordshire Directory that my father **James Godwin and**

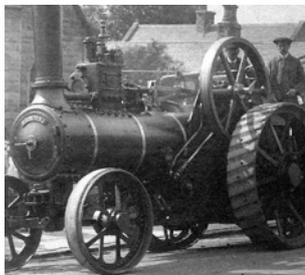
J. Saunders were builders. **John Godwin**, my grandfather, lived at The Firs (*was St. Swithin’s now Flint House*) and his scaffoldry (*sic*) was stored at the back of the house with lime cement etc. In the shed on the common just where the hedge ends and where there are a number of cherry trees on the common. **Saunders** lived and kept the Nag’s Head pub in the High Street where **T. Godwin** lives now (*Herbert’s eldest son*). They built Soundess Farm buildings for Captain Lyons; and I expect also the kiln, now pulled down, as the bricks were made beforehand. The lime was burnt in the kiln on the northeast side of Soundess Wood by Stocking’s Field,



Coppiced woodland.
Faggots (bundles) of coppiced wood provided fuel for the brick and pottery kilns.

which was a rough wood. They also built some of Nettlebed Pottery including the high dome kiln. (*Probably demolished in the 1970s. The bottle kiln, built in the late 17th century, is conserved today*). My grandfather John Godwin built and kept pigs in the shed by the road to Magpies in front of The Nest (*now Tudor Cottage*) as now; on land opposite were three cottages, The Kennels, The Knole and Beakhouse. Farmer Saunders rented those three. J. Saunders had the garden, where The Nest is built, took off the common and claimed it for a number of years and then sold it to Nettlebed Estate by his son Fred. Three pieces of garden at The Hollops (*in Woodcutters Lane*) were taken off the common, by the brothers Godwin, no relation to me! (*They were actually related being sons of Herbert’s great, great uncle*) Their names were William, Harry and Tom – the land later sold to the Estate. (*An interesting account of early encroachment of common land*)

Builder **John Godwin**, my grandfather, died at The Firs in 1874 and couldn’t be got down the stairs so the undertaker and bearers got him through the window and down a plank. My Uncle Peter lived there for several years. Then it was taken over by **William Bird** who used to keep a shop where **Mr Pearce** is now. By weighing his fingers (*putting his fingers on the scales to add weight*) shopkeeper Bird saved enough money to take Satwell Farm and buy two traction engines and a threshing machine and to do harvesting and threshing (*probably as a contractor*).



His engine used to stand in the barn whose doors are still there. Where the bungalow is now at Newlands Corner his son **Alfred** shot himself. **Joe Richardson** used to drive one of the traction engines. He was born in a thatched cottage joining my granddad's on the east side

Traction engines were used for road haulage and on farms. They would have continued in use until the 1940s.

A bowl of flowers for Queen Victoria

John Jones and his parents and their uncle **John Freeman** used to live at Beechwood House. Jones kept greyhounds and Uncle **James Freeman** kept cows in Bushes Barn (*remains of the barn can still be seen in Bushes Lane*) and used to ask me "seen the cows my child?" He once handed a bowl of flowers to Queen Victoria as she was passing through the village. Her guard drew his sword but the Queen held up her hand so all was okay for poor James Freeman, a nice old man.

John Jones was a good cricketer and died at the age of 84. The Jones family used to keep two ponies, Tom and Dick. Dick won a lot of races. (*Herbert doesn't say where the races took place but probably at informal events on the common*). Father Jones died about the same time as my Granddad or soon after.

Charles Phillips was a carpenter, wheelwright and undertaker. I helped him stoke the kilns at The Firs. I also helped him bear a good many corpses including the **Reverend Baumgartner** (*Vicar of Nettlebed 1881-1908*). He was very heavy as he was in a lead shell. Phillips became Estate Carpenter for Mr. **Robert Fleming**; an efficient man and used to learn apprentices in the early days in the carpenter's shop I later pulled down.

Holly and Butler took on the family builders business after Godwin and Saunders, including the yard and stables where village hall is now. **J. Butler**, the present, is a grandson. Holly carried on and rebuilt Joyce Grove for Mr **John Cory Havers** (*d. 1891*) and the cottages down the lane.

Langton lived at Crocker End and kept greyhounds but died when I was young. He had two sons and two daughters. His wife remarried a **Frank Maynard** and lived to a good old age. **Teddie Bennel** was a carpenter and worked for **Holly and Butler** in the early days and then for Nettlebed estate. He had two sons **Johnnie and George** and two daughters **Maggie and Kate**. Johnnie fell off a ladder at the Vicarage (*at Crocker End*) and was killed. George was an imbecile and used to like beer and picking up stones off the road, poor chap. His father used to chase him home. Daughter Maggie was also a bit touched and the other daughter went to Canada. **Jim Bennel** was a pig killer and lived in the street above the shoe shop.

Bread wrapped in a pair of bloomers.

Tom Saunders junior and sons kept the bakers shop below the butchers. I went there on my way to school and left a cloth, as I thought, for wrapping up two loaves of bread for me to collect on my way home. When I called later **Frank Appleby**, the shop assistant, laughed at me. The cloth I had left was a pair of bloomers and for devilment he put a loaf in each leg and put it on my back. Off I went over windmill hill much to the amusement of passersby. I was only six years old at the time (*c1876*) or it would not have happened. When I got home I got a smacked ear.

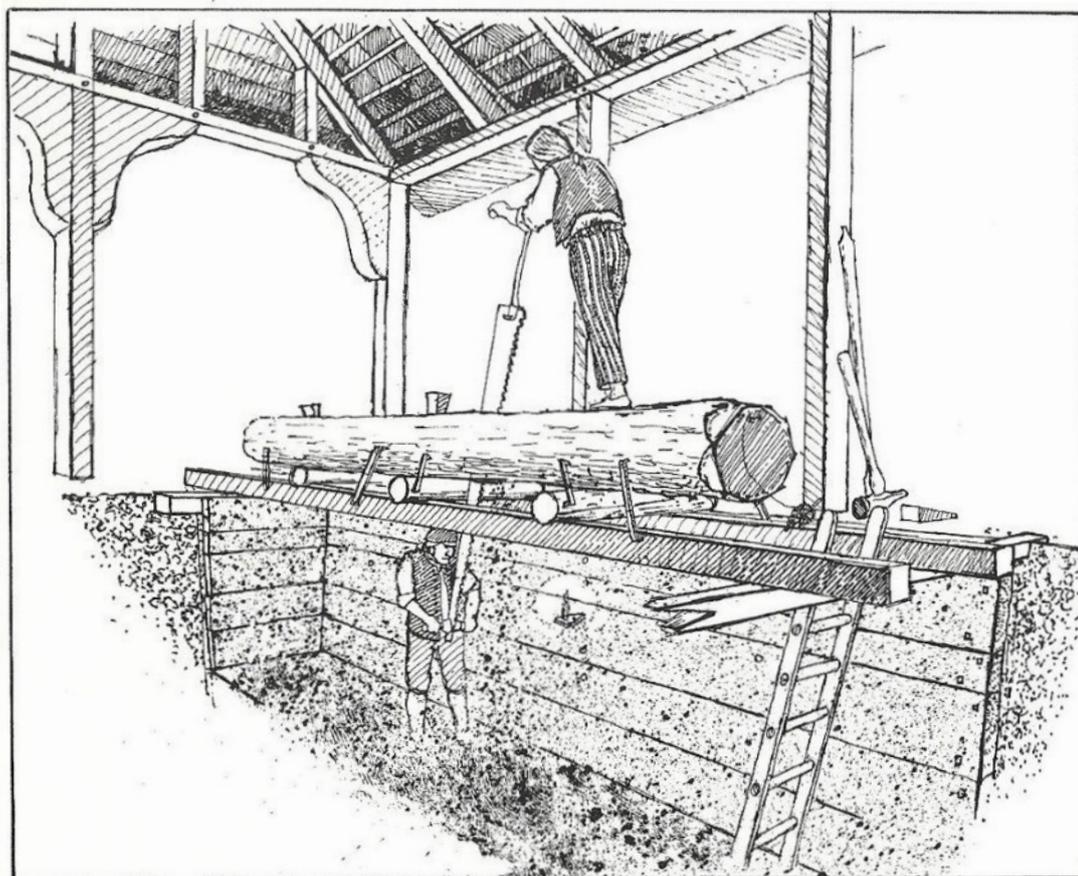
Collins was a harness maker and his shop was where **Miss Saunders** is now. And I do well remember **Champ**, the policeman, coming out and giving me a clout with a piece of leather as I had hit his daughter – we were only school kids. **Jenny Tranter**, an old house dwelling gypsy, came out of The Bull inn and hit Champ in the stomach. That made him cough and she said “And if you hit that boy again I’ll give you another”. My mother used to read and write letters for Jenny and that was why she protected me.

Appleby the shoemaker.

Appleby was a shoemaker and lived where **Will Sarney** is between the old Fox and Hounds and the Nags Head pubs. He also used to sell coal and deal in fowls (*or maybe foals*) and he kept two ponies. He let his stables on Watlington Street under the wall of the Manor House (*now Manor Cottages East and West- this small building still stands and has recently been renovated*).

Steptoe was an old barber and lived at the corner of Watlington Street as you turn for Crocker end – it was pulled down to widen the street. His son George married widow **Hester** who used to run the Fox and Hounds in the year 1870. She was a **Vernon...** ask old **Tom Vernon** at Wells.

Timothy Phillips and his wife Jane lived down below the old Red Lion shed. (*This is probably The Barn today, by Joyce Grove gates*). He was sexton at the church in 1875. Jane used to have children to teach – very small children; you would call her a nursery teacher today. I went there when I was five years old and all I learnt was A B C. **J.Sarney’s** late wife, who helped her at the school, used to send me to the Red Lion for gin, unknown to Tim, and I had many a wet knee.



Sawyers cutting timber. Many sawpits were in open woodland.

There were two cottages on the track to Joyce Grove. Champ, the constable lived in the lower one and below was the road to the back of Saunder's bake house and gardens. Beyond was another cottage and **T. Purver** lived there. He went to Canada with his family; my brother often sees his son George out there. (*Robert Fleming provided assistance to young families to emigrate to Canada to seek employment and a new life*). Below that again was the gateway to The Bull meadow and footpath across Deadman's Lane. When that was done away with it was cut through one of the rooms of Purver's house and later altered to the churchyard but before that went through the garden where **Herrige** lives now.

Another cottage was below and in the corner by the old fence of Joyce Grove. **William Benwell** lived there and his wife used to make sweets. From the cottage ran a wall to the Lodge and carriage gateway by the chestnut tree, now standing down the drive. The old drive used to run in a line of the Malthouse, the late Bidders, (*Colonel and Mrs Bidder for whom Herbert's son Tim did the gardening*) with white posts on the side from the old Reading road.

I remember a carriage and pair driving down it and one of the hosses (sic) dropped dead before it got to the gateway. I helped skin it and the meat went to the Bix pheasantry. Between the old Reading road and the cottages were two gardens with a path between and an open space all round. There was a road at the top and towards the Red Lion was a sawpit and heaps of dirt where the Carriage Drive is now. Wilsons, the fair people, paid to have the sawpit filled in and levelled. Tranter and old **Bucklin Heath** did the job with their horses and carts.

Fun at the fair.

At fair times Bucklin Heath used to stand by the sycamore tree next to the Red Lion with nine pins. He'd shout out "five nuts a pin" and "five times nine are forty five, come on, roll up!" **Elisha Wheatley** used to put coconuts on sticks three feet high and you had to throw two foot sticks at them to knock them off. They would also stand just off the road that went past the cottage near The Grove (*Joyce Grove*). When The Grove was altered all this was done away with – shame! (*He is referring to the row of cottages below the Red Lion, apparently known as Toovey's Lane, which were demolished when Robert Fleming rebuilt Joyce Grove*).



George Freeman from Fox & Hounds (on left) and donkey "which liked beer and trotted well", on King Edward VII's Coronation day 1901 - see P12



Children playing in Watlington Street c.1900

Previous roads to The Grove were one from the old big trees in a line to the top of the wood and the Henley road where some pine trees were planted in Mr Gardiner's time in 1886. (*To commemorate the Battle of Lucknow, India in 1857. Herbert's brother in law fought in that campaign*) Another road was below the beech trees on the common and through the top of the wood to the Henley road; probably not visited now for there was broom seed sown on it after the common was grubbed up in 1905-6 by Mr Fleming. From the Iron Gate leading to the cottages down Toovey's Lane there were other big trees.

In front of The Grove was common land and where Joyce Grove lodge stands there were sheds, stables and pigsties rented by **Biggs** and his sons. The field was known as Russell's Close and in 1857 there was a festival there with racing etc. **Mr Pollock**, the agent for the Estate, sent a man to Nuffield to engage a travelling German band and get them to come to Nettlebed to play – and play they did for they were given plenty of free beer and food. When they were full they nearly blew their instruments straight and knocked a hole in their drum. Where they slept that night no one knows.

There was a walking race around the field. **Wilcox** pulled up his slacks and was disqualified. I had a new pair of boots on that hurt my feet. J.Sarney won and I have no doubt he has not forgotten.

The chestnut tree by the side of the drive was grown from nuts in Holly Grove Wood, Bromsden, by **Mr Kenfield, Lord Camoys' woodman** in 1878. I helped move them to Bromsden farm when they were about 6-9 feet high. After several years they were moved to their present position by the lodge at Joyce Grove.

James Goodall was an old tinker and clock mender. His shop used to be in front of The Sun pub under the wall over the road. There were two whitethorn trees by the side of it.

Alfred Bennel and his wife kept the Post Office where it is now for a number of years (*on the High Street*). It was then moved to the cottage below The Sun. **Basley** went into the old post office and did saddling and kept sheep and cows.

Tragic accident on the High Street.

'**Shakey Earl**' lived in the room above the Post Office. He was an old sawyer. One day one of his children, a little girl, run out and fell under the draw bar of a passing traction engine that was plying for **Thompson** and she was run over and smashed. Like other kids I got between the legs of the men to see what was going on but I did not want to see any more. Riding on towing bars was a frequent habit with children in those days. Men had to walk in front of the traction engine with a red flag but they could not see what was going on behind, although the children had been told many times to keep off the tow bars.

The old Wanbourne cottages which stood in the middle of Watlington Street where **Crook, Tom Walden and Jenny Kerns** lived, were pulled down and replaced by Mr Fleming with the two now standing. Crook worked mostly in the woods, sawing etc. Walden was an invalid and Jenny Kerns used to take a milk round for **Mr Glasspool** at Nettlebed Farm. A man called **Rivers** used to be Glasspool's foreman.

Richard Strange was an old vet and blacksmith. He lived above Wanbourne Pond and kept cows. Mr. Strange used to stick up for Commoners' rights and would fetch out trees from Lower Common Wood. No one interfered with him. This was in **Lord Camoys'** time, which was not so strict then. There was talk that he had the main timber and the parishioners had the "lop and top" (*the trimmed off branches*). I helped the vet try to drench (*administer a large oral dose*) a horse on the common by the walled garden. The vet stood on some logs to reach the horse but slipped and he broke the bottle spilling the drenching fluid and said "That will do the tree as much good as for the horse as he will be dead in the morning" – and he was right; the horse died in the night.

The Eustaces were chair leg turners and had a workshop at the Malthouse. Edwin, John and George were good cricketers and used to play on the old cricket ground on the common in front of Joyce Grove. Old **John Shurey** was another good hand at the game.

There was also a chair making factory in The Bull yard. **Mrs. S. Goodall** from the Sun inn used to cane the chair bottoms there in her younger days and later worked at home at The Sun.

Lamb's pastries and pies.

Ted Lamb was a pastry cook and made good cakes and Banburys. He used to travel to Bix and Highmoor and would sing out "Who will buy?" Poor old Ted, not quite dead; he had a job getting about. His son, also Ted, kept The White Hart. He supplied dinners for the annual Estate rent auditors and good stuff he used to dish up.

James Banks kept the Cross Keys where K.Pearce is now. He was the church sexton and his wife kept canaries for showing.

Harry Saunders and his son Henry lived at the Whitehouse Garage. They were wood hewers and also sold coal. I used to take firewood and coal around the village with a donkey and cart when I had finished school for the day. Harry and his son used to walk to Reading and back every night – (*some 18 miles*) – to hew the coal which had been landed at Reading Wharf.

Richard Beakhouse lived up Mill Road and was Mrs. Beasley's gardener and handyman at Nettlebed House. He kept cows and pigs and his shed and pigsties were on the common opposite the house. He had a son called Tom.

"**Sugar**" **Goodall** loaded pottery on his pony which he got from Thompson around 1876. He used to shout out "Sugar my sop" and that was how he got his name.

Joe Burton was an old shoe bodger. He lived rough in the stable at Windyridge as it is now. He mended shoes there when I was young and got his leather from rubbish pits. He charged very little – around three of four (*old*) pence a time.

Charles Lamb lived at the Laurels (*Appletree Cottage*) on the Crocker End road. He kept cows and pigs on the common. The sows used to have good litters. I remember one straying for three days to the bottom of Nettlebed Wood at Highmoor. She was found in a ditch full of leaves with plenty of water and a litter of thirteen piglets. The pigs would grub for beech nuts and these encouraged new trees. These trees were the best for miles for making into chairs. As children we were really scared of the sows as they could be very spiteful. Charles Lamb kept a horse which he used for driving the Reverend Baumgartner and his wife around the village; the Reverend had a carriage but did not keep a horse.

“Spratter” Saunders kept a little shop below The Sun inn and sold meat. I remember a sheep hanging outside in 1876 or 1877 when I went into the village with my Dad.

On our way home the Police were at the shop as apparently the sheep had been stolen; it was never found nor were the thieves. I heard in later years that they had hidden the carcass in a saw pit in Nettlebed Woods for a day or two and then moved it to a chalk pit in Soundess Wood, where the old lime kiln used to be. Here it was cut up and sold. I did hear who had a hand in it and there was a nasty gang of men about here at the time. Their names were Silver, Daughter (*sic*) and Turk, who were not too friendly towards Spratter Saunders. There was a Police warrant out for Turk at the time but he was never caught.

Tom Stratford was a carpenter and wheelwright with his workshop in The Bull yard where he also lived. Tom picked a fight one day with a sailor who was drinking in the yard but the sailor was too quick for him. They both decided to finish the fight in a nearby sawpit where Tom was able to hold his own. **Tom Stretford Junior** took over his father’s business and he move to Reading where he built caravans, carts and delivery vans. He eventually came back to Nettlebed and became head carpenter on the Fleming’s estate. Tom Junior’s sister (now deceased) married John Sarney.

Curtis lived at The Walnuts (*Walnut Cottage*), where **Mrs. Ollivant** is now. He worked in Reading at that time - 1878-80.

Joyce Grove – the new tenants

The first tenant I remember at the old Joyce Grove house was **Mr Nogworth**. Then there was **Mr John Cory Havers** who had the house rebuilt. His sons were good cricketers and used to play for the village on the ground on the common near the house at that time. I remember a ball being hit nearly over the top of the fir tree and into the front door of the house. Another time a ball was hit by **Mr. T. Vernon** down Toovey’s lane – it took three men to throw it back to the wicket. Mr Vernon was a steady player and a great hitter.

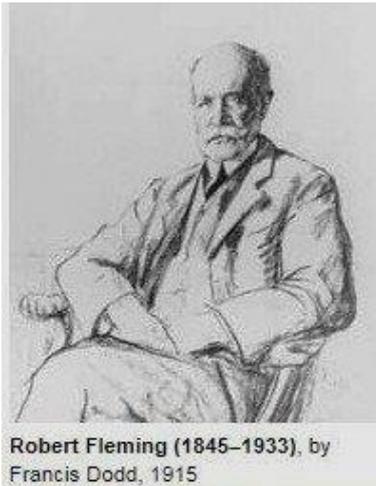
After Mr Havers came **Mr Gardiner, the Scotch clothier** (*sic*), who did a lot of alterations to the house in 1894 -5 as well as in the village at Bromsden. (*Gardiner bought the Camoy’s 2000 acre Nettlebed Estate land in 1894. When his business in London failed Robert Fleming bought Joyce Grove and the land in 1903.*) In 1938 the mansion was given by the Flemings



Parade of coaches outside The Bull c1900. Coaches were available for hire from here.

to St. Mary's Hospital, London for use as a nurses training college.

In Lord Camoy's time he had a field sown with gorse for fox cover called 'the furze ground' at the back of Holts now. I remember someone setting fire to it about 1875-6. We lived in an old thatched cottage called the Hollops (*Woodcutters Lane*) nearby. The wind was blowing from the south-west and sparks kept settling on the thatched roof. I dragged the cradle with the baby in it out into the garden. When my parents, who were not there at that time, heard about the fire they ran home with lots of other people to help. As it happened the roof was old and covered with moss. When my parents arrived it began to rain which saved the situation but I bet the man who started the fire was a bit scared. I heard afterwards that it was **Ben Watts** and if ever he got caught he would get five years in prison, but he was never caught.



Robert Fleming (1845–1933), by Francis Dodd, 1915

Mr Valentine Fleming used to keep a pack of beagles on the common where he had kennels built for them; they used to afford good sport. They were done away with when the 1914 war broke out. Part of the kennel house is still there – what used to be the cook house, now **Mrs Vanduzer's**. Mr Valentine was MP for South Oxfordshire and was killed in the war. **Captain Michael Fleming** was serving with the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry covering the British Army withdrawal at Dunkirk in 1940. He was wounded and my son **John Liege Godwin** dragged him to safety until help arrived. He died of his wounds later and my son was taken prisoner. The Flemings were nice people.

There were a lot of young men and boys in Nettlebed around 1880 – 90 who went squirrel hunting on Sunday afternoons. Probably about fifty of us and some of the boys had gone to church beforehand (*probably the choirboys*). The RSPCA had a hand in stopping the squirrel hunting, which although fun was actually cruel. The common was a fine place for adders and it was nothing new to see three or four in a day. **David Heath** used to go there with two sticks and he put them in a glass bottle live. I saw two in a bottle once. Heath used to sell them to Italians stopping at Beechwood House. I caught them in a rat trap using potato as bait. One was so fat that I opened it up and there was a mouse inside, quite fresh, and another one partly decomposed. One day us boys found a blackbird's nest in a tree stump about a foot off the ground with four eggs in it. After school we went back to see if any eggs had hatched but there were only broken bits of shell. In the nest was an adder with her young. She hissed at us and my friend hit her with a stick and crippled her. **Mr. Beasley** came along and said "What have you boys got there?" He took the adder to open ground where he killed it and opened it up. Inside were twelve young about three to four inches long. This is the gospel truth. I read in *The Gamekeeper and Country Life* that adders do not swallow their young and do not have legs. Well, I saw that they did have legs, or a sort of feet, which you could not call legs 'cos they were only an inch long and had toe nails like short hairs. Their legs were splay footed; if I had one alive I could prove it. It would be interesting to send this to the magazine with my name to



Typical thatched cottages in the 1800s-picturesque but they provided poor and often overcrowded accommodation.

prove adders got legs. I caught an adder in a trap one day and it was 32 inches long. This was witnessed by **Mr. B.Smellie and Mr. Harwood**, the postman. Mr. Harwood and me hung it up in an apple tree.

The oak timber in the Lych Gate came from Ipsden Heath and was sawn by me in 1898.

Thompson's house burnt down in 1877, I think. We were woken in the night by the fire engine bell ringing and through the skylight we saw a bright light in the sky. Dad and I got up and went to have a look. The fire pump was the old fashioned manual sort with long handles. It was worked by six or eight men, which is when they were not too drunk to work it as there was always plenty of beer and spirits about. **Tom Spring** was the chief fireman and he went inside the building. The other firemen had to go in and get him out of the side door of the house. They said he was overcome with the heat and smoke but when they laid him on the ground by the fence you could see the drink run out of him. There was not much left of the house but it was rebuilt a few years after. *(Fire fighters were employed by insurance companies at that time and were supplied with beer to ease the task of hand pumping. Bystanders often joined in and it became a merry event. Firemen and volunteers were also issued with tokens to be spent in the local pub.)*

The old Malt House used to be up the lane towards the Congregational chapel and the kiln. We used to live in the middle house in 1880, the **Richardsons** in number one and the **Harwoods** in number three. Hops were grown down the old Oxford road in fields below the wood [*close to Bromsden Farm today*]. The house called The Malthouse (later Bidders) used to be three cottages: the tenants were **Shipway** on the front nearest Nettlebed village, **Lewis Heath** next to the front and **Edwin Eustace** at the back in 1878. **James Lewis** was a plumber and painter and lived up the lane, back of the Surgery as is now. He cut his throat in early 1883. His son took over the business and was in partnership with **Brown and Sons** about that time. He also cut his throat and his sister Ellen was a dressmaker.

There were two Benefit Clubs in the village, one at The Bull and the other at The White Hart. The Clubs held festivals every Whitsunday. Everyone met up in Watlington Street and formed a procession and, with the eldest Club members carrying the banners, marched to a service in the church. After church there was always good spread of food and drink. *(These clubs were Friendly Societies into which workers subscribed a regular amount from their wages to provide for assistance in times of ill health and in retirement. Herbert says they were superseded by Prudential Insurance Company schemes in 1881, when 'The Pru' became a limited company).*

The Ponds on Nettlebed Common.

The big pond on the Common was called 'The Sea'. I remember clay being dug there in 1876. A pipe track was later laid from the pond to the potteries and to Joyce Grove for a pond dug there in the grounds. I made a raft and mowed weeds on The Sea in later years. I had Tom



The Sea pond today. Originally a clay pit that later supplied water for the brickworks and the pond at Joyce Grove.

Sarney from Highmoor to keep the raft steady but the fool walked up to the fore part and the raft began to dive forward. We should both have been in the water if he had not moved back quick – what he said is not printable. The pond was good for skating on in winter. A boy called Summerfield was drowned there.

The pond called Whittings Hole was where the Recreation Ground is now. **Rose Steptoe** of Brissell Hill [*opp. Hill Rise*] used the water from it for her laundry business. Everymore Pit, now a rubbish pit, it was never a spring as it used to run through pipes from a clay hole above the road from Wanbourne Pond to The Firs. I remember clay being dug there and **Augustus Thompson** standing by the men and boys all day to keep them working. The men dug the clay and the boys would wheel it in barrows to the pottery. A boy called '**Pikey**' **Howard** laid a plank across the pond. As he wheeled a barrow across the wheel came off the plank and it almost went into the water. Augustus warned him that if it happened again he would dock him his pay. The very next time he went across the plank it happened again and Pikey and the barrow had to be rescued from the pond. He lost his day's pay.

The Wanbourne Pond (*Where the playground is today and filled in during 1956*) was very deep on the side by the Common. I have never seen it empty; I saw it cleaned out once and it took weeks to do. Years ago before it was cleaned out water used to run out of it into a ditch alongside Watlington Street. From there water ran across the Henley road and then the old Reading Road, now done away with, into the Hopgarden chalk pit. I've seen fish go down the road from the pond on occasions.



Wanbourne Pond c1890. The cottages in the middle of Watlington Street can be seen.

A curate from Watlington was driving his pony and trap one day to Henley Regatta and as he was coming down Priest Hill the pony shied at a split tree near **Mr Pearce's house**. The pony ran straight towards the pond and although the curate pulled on the bridle to stop it the animal went straight into the water. If it had been given its head it would have swum out. Instead the curate kept pulling and the pony turned on its back and was drowned. The curate had to swim out whilst young **Willie Powell** ran to his thatched cottage and stripped off. He came

back and swam into the pond to fasten a rope to the trap and I helped pull it out. I skinned the pony and the flesh went to Bix pheasant farm and the skin to Reading.

Penny Royal was not really a pond but only a boggy place at the back of Devereau's covered in pond weed. When it had ice on it broke easily but because it was so shallow you did not get your feet wet. Another was called the Black Hole at the back of the old blacksmiths where J Richardson's house now stands. It was of no use for drinking water but I did see **Albert Giles** add some water from it to a can of milk so he could sell more for extra pennies for himself – bad boy!

The Stradwell Pond had a fence around it and was the main supply of drinking water for the village. No horses were allowed near the pond and only hand drawn barrels or buckets with yokes were used to keep the water pure. The Little Stradwell pond was used for dipping sheep. It wasn't very deep and horses used to drink there. It froze over one winter and Tranter's horses got onto the ice and they sent for me to help get them off again. I managed to push one

off but the other one slipped and fell over and we both went through the ice. I had to get a beatall (*sic, probably a beetle - a large mallet*) to break the ice to let her out of the water; she was none the worse only very wet. There's a chalk angle running under this pond which lets the water drain out.

The Clay Hole pond is now dug out. One of miller **Charles Silver's** horses went into it trying to get at the rushes and grasses. He got stuck in the clay and couldn't move so old Silver got some ropes and sent for me. It was a Sunday afternoon as it happened and I was still in my best suit but I took off my coat and went into the pond. I then got stuck as well and folk had to pull me out. I took off my boots and went in again and got the horse free of the mud and turned her on her back. I put a halter on a rope and then around her body just in time as she was well underwater except for her head. There were a good few people gathered by this time and they all helped to pull us both out; I had to jump out of the way quick to avoid the horse falling on top of me. I actually jumped into a furze bush and oh, my poor feet but the horse, although cramped, was no worse for all of it.

There were several other small ponds, in particular one in the brickyard by **Miss Jenkins** house, used by the potters, and another by the old Soundess kiln towards Cherry Trees at Magpies.

There were many horses and donkeys around the village. Frizzie was a foal from a noted mother and she won many races for Tranter. He sold her to Thompson and she used to work hard pulling clay trucks from the common. I once threw Frizzie over a wall between a garden and a bungalow for **Ted Giles** to clip her. **John Wheeler** also used to bring clay down the railway track from the common to the brick making machines. **G. Freeman** at the Fox and Hounds had a donkey which trotted well and used to like beer (*see picture on page 5*).

G. Phillips, the undertaker and carpenter, owned a donkey which he used for drawing wooden coffins. Phillips parents from Crowmarsh had a kiln in the fir trees by **L. Holts**. I once fell over their neddy as I was running up the lane where I lived, as he was laid in the road. Over I went and the old brute went 'hurk'! **Farmer Saunders** had a big strong jack and I used him to draw coal about in my spare time after school. He could get along with eight or nine hundredweight. I would collect him from the common where he was grazing with ten or more other donkeys; not an easy job as the common was full of donks and their foals.

Nettlebed windmill - a big job replacing the sails



(Herbert talks about the smock mill on the hilltop above the village. It came from Watlington in 1826 and replaced a mill that had stood on the hill for a hundred years. The old story goes that there were two windmills in Watlington but one was moved to Nettlebed because there was only enough wind in Watlington for one of them.)

The old mill stood on the hill and was getting very shakey. In 1878 James, my father, used to go up to the mill on windy nights from Hollops where he lived to stay with **Charles Silver** the miller. It was not safe to be alone up there in rough winds and between them they had to fetch the sails around quick if the wind changed direction. If she was not in the wind he could sometimes lose one or possibly even all of the four sails. In my

Nettlebed Mill showing the great 40 foot stocks which Herbert helped to replace.

time I helped supply the wood for two new sails after the originals had been blown to the bottom of the hill. These were fitted by Silver and his son Charlie. In 1896, as I remember, a new stock and two sails needed replacing. The wood for these was cut from oak trees in Westleaze Wood at Bromsden. I worked with **J. Wise** the woodman and **Oliver Perrin** from Bix. The wood was drawn on a timber hob along the old road from Bix to the bottom of Mill Lane at Nettlebed. Here **C. Perrin** and '**Juffer**' **Jarvis** sawed it to the proper length of 40 feet. It was 11¾ x 12½" at the centre and (*tapered*) to 7x5" at each end. When it was ready it was pulled up and I was on top of the mill and guided it through the hub. It was a tricky job as the old mill was shaking some but we managed. The sails were then drawn up and I bolted them in place; there was not another man that would go up above the first floor.

We could have had plenty of beer and wine but it did not do to have too much working above the ground.

In 1903 I had to help with another new stock for the mill. This was cut from an oak in Park Wood, Huntercombe, as we could not find one suitable on the Estate as it had to be cramped in the middle (*assume this was to put a curve in the beam to avoid it hitting the curved base of the smock mill*). The timber was carted to **Mr Hollies'** yard and sawn by T. Jarvis and his mate of Port Hill. It was sawn to a length of 40 feet and J. Earl drewed it up to the top of the mill with a Fowler steam engine winch. It was a shakey job as the engine made the mill shake and the weather was rough and wet. I fixed the second stock and sails with bolts. I was wet to the skin and rain water ran out of my boots and clothes. My wet cap blew off and landed at the bottom of the meadow – **John Lloyd** fetched it back.

Exciting viewing from the mill.

You could see a long way from the top of the mill (*695 feet above sea level*). On a clear day you could see the Devil's Dyke near Brighton as well as the windmill at Copston Hill near Ibstone. The post mill on staddle stones at Stokenchurch was also visible. In the summer of 1876 one day, when there was no wind, a young man called '**Ripper**' **Jarvis** asked to be tied to one of the sails so he could try and see even further. The miller tied him upside down to the sail and then pulled it round steady so Ripper got to the top, but he got too dizzy and asked to be got down again quick. About the same time a dog called Skarper from the Bull Inn was running around outside the mill and got caught on one of the sails which carried him up and right over – he was alright in a few days.

After about 1905 the poor old mill was not worked again as it was getting unsafe, even for a viewing site. In 1912 it accidentally burnt down, or that's what people said, caused by sparks from a fire on the common. I say they must have to say that to someone else other than me 'cos it was "accidentally on purpose". I am sure I am not mistaken as we often had bracken fires not far from the mill and they never caused any harm.



High Street showing the Red Lion on the left and the Fox and Hounds on the right

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations



On the common are two oak trees which were planted to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on August Bank Holiday in 1897. The trees were dug up on Cat Common by **J and A Sarney** and me on the Saturday and Sunday before. We worked into the night to get them ready. It was a hard job on account of all the flints and having to make a hole through the roots to fix a plank. They weighed at that time, with dirt and all, some three to four tons. On the Monday they were transported upright by traction engine to their proper places where they were planted and wetted with beer. The event was well advertised so there were a great many people there. When the trees were securely in place they were christened 'Victoria' for

The 'Dutch Dolls' Carrie and Anne Strange who Nettlebed and 'Alexandrina' for Bix. (*or 'Alexandra', the daily pushed an old pram to Henley and back to Anglicised version of Victoria's first name; as a young collect villagers' shopping.* *child Victoria was called 'Drina' for short by her family as 'Victoria' was thought initially to be too foreign a name).*

(Bix Parish at that time came as far as Nettlebed. Herbert mentions that Charles Young Junior planted the tree on behalf of Bix but does not say who planted the tree on behalf of Nettlebed.)

Everybody there had what beer they wanted. I remember **Mr Pollock, the Estate's agent**, saying "Now Godwin give them two old ladies a drink". They were the two 'Dutch Dolls', **Carrie and Ann Strange**. I told him we had not a glass left and he replied "Never mind, perhaps they won't mind a drop out of the can". It was a three gallon water can and when I held it up to their mouths I had to laugh as I nearly drowned them – that caused a lot of amusement to all.

It ended a hard day for us but everyone enjoyed themselves on what was a very hot Bank Holiday.

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More history of Nettlebed can be found on the website www.nettlebed.org

The Victoria County History is currently producing a history of Nettlebed and other villages in the Ewelme Hundred which is due for publication in 2015. The history of Nettlebed is available now in draft form and can be found on the VCH website:-

www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/oxfordshire/work-in-progress/nettlebed

VCH welcomes comments and contributions to their work currently in draft.

The Nettlebed windmill which burnt down in 1912 was known as a 'smock mill'. Anyone interested in the construction and working of such a mill is well advised to visit the restored smock mill at Lacey Green, Bucks (near Princes Risborough). www.laceygreenwindmill.org.uk

For a history of windmill technology refer to:-

Power from Wind by Richard L. Hills, Cambridge University Press 1994.

Other sources :

Oxfordshire Mills by Wilfred Foreman

Windmills in England by Rex Wailes

6" Ordnance Survey map of Nettlebed – 1897

This is the map of the village when Herbert Godwin was 27 years of age. Things of particular interest to note are:-

Toovey's Lane – cottages on the lane from the Red Lion to Joyce Grove (later demolished).

The large Brick & Pottery Works where the brick kiln stands today. Also the railway track from the Old Clay Pits into the works yard.

The cottages on the narrow strip of land on Priest Hill near to Hill Rise. Later demolished and the road widened.

Wanbourne Pond where the children's playground is today (filled in 1956).

The windmill on Windmill Hill, height 694 feet above sea level and burnt down in 1912. A windmill had stood on this hill for over 400 years.

The many sites of brick and tile works on Nettlebed Common and the rough diggings where the Recreation Ground is today. Many of the works were one man businesses using clamp kilns. It would have been an area always filled with smoke from wood and charcoal burning.

