

History of the Parish of Gestingthorpe

[Editorial note.

This a copy of VEO's ms undated. I think it was written between 1932 and 1948 because she quotes 1932 in the text. However she (and her sister Lilian) sold Gestingthorpe Hall in 1948. She may have written it up after leaving Gestingthorpe .*

She died in 1965.

As she was usually good with dates I conjecture this was 'Work in Progress'.

She has paginated every other page 1 – 8 although in fact many of the verso sides are written on as well.

**Violet and Lilian were left Gestingthorpe Hall by their Mother CAO on her death in 1936. BEGO]*

History of the Parish of Gestingthorpe.

A history of G. has been already published in "Notes on the parish of G. therefore it would not be fair to take copy from these notes in writing this essay. In view of this the writer is confining the facts to what has been written down or told, chiefly by one of the parish wives whose parents were scholarly folk and much respected in the village during the last century.

"As far back as I can remember conditions in our parish were very primitive compared with the present times. For one instance, and there are many, take the state of the roads which were then ankle deep in mud throughout the winter; the women wearing palters(?) to protect their feet from the wet"

They worked in the fields a great deal both women and children would be employed by the farmers picking stones off the fields at so much per bushel. These were carted & piled in heaps besides the roads ready for repairs. Every farmer was supposed to provide a certain quantity for the upkeep of the King's Highway. With reference to this, an old bill dated 1856 from the surveyors of Gestingthorpe to Sam. Rayner contains the item 27 1/2 yards of picked stones at 3/6 a yard £4 -16s.- 3d. Carting ditto at 9 per yard £1-0s.-7 1/2d. Each parish at that time settled its own affairs which were fought out at the annual vestry meeting, this being always held on Easter Tuesday, which occupied the whole day, the farmers all taking a lively interest in parish matters.

The village was noted for the straw plaitery industry. All the winter the women, children & often the men would sit at home and plait rather than work out of doors as they could thus earn more than by farm work, wages then were 8/- per week. When this was raised to 10/- this was riches to them. One of the parishioners states that his father married when 26 years of age in 1821 received (*VEO page 2*) wages 7/s per week. Small boys were paid about 2d. per day

Gleaning Bell This was rung at 8a.m. – again at 5p.m. between which hours gleaners might often harvest, gather the remaining ears of corn. A parishioner, Aubrey Chinney, remembers 70 years ago his mother, who lived near the church, rang the bell morning & evening, the gleaners each paying 1d.each to the ringer for her trouble. "I have heard my father talk about 'four course shift' whatever that may mean. That method seem always to have been used in farming.

Gleaning was an important part of harvest. The corn gleaned was threshed out & sent to the mill for grinding & the resultant flour would last the housewife several weeks. There are a number of old brick ovens, still to be seen in the village, where the bread was baked but none are now in use, which is to be regretted as the flavour of bread baked on bricks after the wood has been raked out gives a delicious flavour to the loaves.

Farming. "Women helped the men with farm work, following and taking out the corn as it was reaped & tying it up. My mother helped to milk a herd of 16-18 cows twice a day at Forty Acres (Belchamp Walter). Quite young children were employed from early morning until dark, scaring birds, keeping pigs, cows & sheep for which they were paid the merest trifle; for example the Coes of Delays came from Rattleden Suffolk. Mr. & Mrs. Coe & several sons all worked on the farm, they were all uneducated never having gone to school, and the youngest son Joe, the machinist, used to tell how, as a very young boy, had to keep pigs until it was so dark he was afraid to go home when his elder brothers went to meet him. This was before the family came to Deloyns. They all worked very hard doing most of their own repairs, they were schemers, although ignorant.

A few picked men were employed all winter threshing corn out in the barns with flails. These men so engaged were fortunate as being sure of a winter's employment. The threshing was hard work but they at least had shelter. There then followed the process of corn dressing & afterwards the measuring, sacking & loading up of wagons for an early start, often to Colchester, to be unloaded into barges & so to a further destination. These journeys occupied two days, the drivers pulling up at a wayside inn for the night & returning next day with loads of coal.

There was no compulsory education. The children of the better classes would attend a private school, mostly in the neighbouring towns. To understand the three Rs was considered a great accomplishment. If, after the penny post was established a person wanted particularly to send a letter he would ask someone who could write to do so for him and one of the present parishioners remembers her father writing many such letters, in fact he was the principal letter writer. His wife remembers the introduction of the penny post in 1840 & the excitement of receiving the first letter with 1d. stamp affixed. The daughter of the parishioner still has the stamp in her possession it is obliterated by a black mark, apparently the then date stamp. Previous to this the receiver of (a letter) had to pay 4d. to 8d. and, in the event of their not having the amount, the letter was forfeited.

Funeral customs have changed considerably. Formerly the coffin was carried on the shoulders of bearers. If the distance was a long one eight bearers would be engaged, or six for shorter distances to relieve them from carrying the body. It was customary to supply bearers with black gloves (*VEO page 3*) and flowing hatbands and after the return from the burial a substantial meal was provided, cold joints, bread, cheese – ale.

The church services were lengthy, often lasting an hour & three quarters. Music was supplied by the village orchestra, violins, bass viol, flute and clarinet. An oil painting of the six men who composed the orchestra was in the possession of the late Mrs. Branwhite, Moat House but unfortunately in 1903 was sold at her death. It went out of the village. The six men were seated round a table on which was a bowl of punch, with a dog at their feet.

The parson preached in a black gown, taking off his surplice during the singing of the second hymn. There was also a dograpper who used a long stick to wake those who snored during a sermon, by giving them a rap on the head. The meaning of the name "dograpper" is apparently unknown. A parishioner remembers one Joe Finch the dograpper, 'Old Joe Finch' as he was called. This old man, when he heard a snore, would march out of his seat & with his long stick give the offending one a rap on head or shoulders. At that time it was the custom for the men to sit on the south side of the church and the women on the north. This was customary in all village churches.

Beating the bounds was an ancient custom here every ten years a party of parishioners would walk the entire boundary of this parish. This unfortunately (*VEO page 4*) has not been carried out for several years.

Brick and pot making were important & distinct industry providing work for many. The population being much larger in those days than the present time. An old bill dated 1866 is preserved by George Finch Earthenware manufacturers. Old Established Pottery Gestingthorpe. There were of course many more houses in the village. About 1853 a row of cottages was pulled down when the iron foundry was established on the site. There was also a celebrated iron foundry: Downs Ploughs & Shares being known all over the country.

All farmers brewed their own beer. Hops were grown freely. The names of fields The Hop Ground & Hay-Meadow Hop Ground being proof of this & an owner of Overhall had a large malt kiln. The price of beer in 1871 was 10d. a gallon. Two kinds of beer were brewed: "Best Beer" and "Mild" or "Small". The "Best Beer" being used by the Master, the small for the workmen who were allowed a certain quantity per man. But when wages were increased free beer was cut out. A parishioner remembers Joseph Arch lecturing in the villages & the labourers going on strike for more wages, marching through the streets singing Joseph Arch's song. The chorus of one song being: "Strike Boys strike for better wages etc."

A small house in the village, now a private dwelling was once the Compasses Inn, a stopping place for the coaches from Norwich to London.

Another old house 'Edys' belonging to the owners of Hedingham Castle was used by them as a banqueting hall.

A curious case in the village was of a cripple Sarah Pearson with club feet who could walk as easily as a normal person. Another character was a dwarf Sammy Nice, a short fat rosy faced little man who wore on Sundays a full circular black cape buttoned close up to the throat and a small black cap. A village hero was Billy Keys who fought in the Crimea and would tell terrible tales of the war. He was wounded and nursed in hospital by Florence Nightingale whom he spoke of as the "Dear Lady". At that time at home (*VEO page 5*) bread & flour were very dear. Bread being 1/- per loaf. No wheat was coming from Odessa, the port from which much wheat was sent to England.

Apropos of the price of wheat an old parishioner remembers as a boy and young man his mother made bread from barley meal and pollard as she could not afford wheat flour.

Tom Finch who was in his 100th year in 1932 remembered seeing the stocks just where the vicarage gate & wall now stand. He had very little schooling as a boy but after his marriage attended a night school & was taught to read & write by the Rev. Elwes & Mr. Sam Rayner at the present School. This man was hearty with a fresh complexion up to the age of 98 when he became too arthritic to move about.

A secondary school was conducted by Mrs. Elwes, wife of the rector who became incumbent in 1849 The girls of the Sunday School were dressed in uniform, all wearing round white capes with blue & straw bonnets.

"A favourite summer game amongst the children was "Foxes & Hounds" played in the evening over the haycocks. Another at all times was 'knuckle-bones' or 'fives'; also a game called 'Cat' resembling today's cricket.

Guy Fawkes Day was exciting J., a parishioner, remembers an effigy of a notorious woman being carried thro' the streets & afterwards burned. Huge bonfires were made in various fields, the lads collecting faggots days beforehand & on the night of 5th. Nov. fires would spring up here & there. Amongst old superstitions, seeing the new

moon through glass & walking under a ladder was unlucky, also to turn back for anything forgotten. Never to pass by a piece of coal lying in the path without picking it up. Again the burning of elder wood is most (*VEO page 6*) unlucky foretelling a death in the family. An old custom told by a parishioner was that of placing her pot flowers in the window to keep from frost. She said a pot of water placed beside the plants would prevent them from freezing, the frost drawing to the water and not to the plants.

A parishioner, Ernest Turner remembers his father telling him the bell ringers used to go over to Belchamp Walter to ring a peal on May Day. Doubtless it was done in Gestingthorpe, but at that time the bells here could not be pealed owing to the state of the belfry woodwork & two of the bells cracked. Turner was born in 1805.

Old remedies were as follows. For sore throats a stocking foot first wrapped round the sufferer's throat was a sure cure.

To cure a 'stie' on the eye; rub the inflamed eye three times with a wedding ring.

Medicines & cures were found in the common herbs gathered from the hedgerows.

A cabbage leaf tied round the head of a sufferer who had headache pains.

Epidemics

A case of small pox which proved fatal, occurred in the village about 1870 to a man, one Hazel, he was buried by night at the north side of the churchyard and not taken into the church. Mrs. John Smith of this village, who lived at Belchamp Walter before her marriage, states that her mother died of small pox in 1874 which she caught from another family. She was also buried by night – no one attending the funeral. She was a widow and had no allowance from the parish but was given field work & and made a little over straw plaiting. She waked to Halstead to sell her plaiting & on one occasion Mrs. Smith remembers her mother gathering the bread crumbs from the empty bread trough & soaking them in water for her breakfast before starting. (*VEO page 7*)

A reference is made in the notes on the Parish of Gestingthorpe to the Manorial Court Rolls a series which began in 1518. The following will which has not been published may be of interest.

Last Will & Testament of Joanna Steele of Gestingthorpe in the county of Essex widow twentieth day of Nov. 1690

I give to my beloved sister Susannah Cook of Halstead in the County of Essex widow, and to Abraham, John, Richard Jacobus Joseph Susannah and Mary the several children of my said sister to each & every (word undecipherable 'child'?) sum of five pounds of lawful money of England..... Best testered bedsted (*sic*) to my niece Susannah before named who is now the wife of Nehemiah King my bedsted which I usually lie on with the curtains & valance thereunto belonging & also my cloak poss. (*clock?*) with appurtenances. Item. I give to Mary Glothro my maid servant 20 shillings of lawful money of England and my worst feather bed and one bolster & my bedsted which stands in a chamber over the chamber where I usually do lye..... I give to the said Mary Glothro my red mohare (*sic*) petticoat... the rest of the will is written in Latin.

There a number of Rental rolls the names of property therein of much interest to the history of the parish. In 1731 the Moat Farm is termed Mott. There is mention of Goddards which apparently does not exist now. A Rental roll of 1724 specifies School Farm, does this refer to Ashley Cottage, also the name Ramages, Tibolls & Marrions. The scholars paid 2d. per night for schooling.

There is a bill dated 1865 for stationary supplied to Mr. Samuel Rayner which evidently was a connection with this school.

There was a dames school at Ashley Cottage kept by a Miss.Hale to which Mrs.Samuel Rayner attended as a girl from Belchamp Walter about 1845. When the Post Office was first established, Mr. & Mrs.Downs, who afterwards lived at Ashley Cottage, held this office until 1865 when Samuel Rayner took it over where it remained a post office until his daughter as Post Mistress resigned.

Ashley Cottage is the subject of a bill in the Court Roll for 1774

“At this court the third proclamation is made three times for some person to come & be admitted to the lands & tenements called Ashleys otherwise Spinks in the room & stead of Mortlock Coldham but no one came.” In a previous court Mortlock was convicted of willful & corrupt perjury & have since been fled & is now in parts beyond the seas.

In 1771 George Brooks of Halstead paid fine for cutting down a tree in the Highway near Ramaken Wood.

A Doctor's bill dated 1856 shows items

A journey 2/6

Mixture 3/0

Pills 3/0. The doctor lived at Castle Hedingham & rode over on a pony to visit his patients.

A clothiers bill of 1859 is interesting as regards material & prices

Be(a)verteen Chesterfield coat £1

Doeskin trousers 18/-

Drabbett trousers 5/-

Drabbett appears to be a thick twill which was used in making men's smocks.