

# **A HISTORY OF ASHINGTON**

This is written by Irene White on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, aged 82 – on her wedding day, which was in 1932. My only claim to fame is I am a direct descendant (Great Granddaughter) of John Stringfellow of Chard – who made steam planes – One in Science Museum London 1848 – one in Smithsonian Museum, Washington 1868 – United States. Also they have the plane engine which started up first time – after being cleaned. John Stringfellow was an air pioneer, his son F.J.S. took on after his death. A book “An Ancient Air” by Harold Penrose came out last year – in which I am mentioned,

## HISTORY OF ASHINGTON

At the Camp men were trained to fly the Piston Engine Planes, which was all they had.

One day I was out and spotted something strange standing up in a distant field hedge. Taking the cartridges out of a shotgun, I was carrying, I hastened to see what it was. In a field called "First Short Woods" (now on the Duchy Estate) I saw that a plane had crashed. I called and shouted, in case anyone was about in the surrounding fields, but no-one answered. I reached the plane. After walking in front of the plane I saw a badly injured pilot (who I thought, in his dazed state, thought I was going to shoot him). He was in a terrible state, with blood pouring out of his mouth and all over his beard. His first words were "my teeth, are they alright?" - I could see some were gone, but I told him they were all right. Then I tried to get him out of his harness - this I could not do - so I told him I must leave him to go to the nearest phone to ring up camp - Middle Farm I went. I returned with the farm people, the Brakes, and other site seers. Mrs Brake I remember was sporting a beautiful black eye, kindly given her by her husband for arguing with him. We arrived at the scene to find my husband, Len White, and a friend there. Then we all waited for the Yeovilton Camp Ambulance. What had gone wrong we did not know: The poor pilot was in agony - the numbness had worn off his injuries - and he was in great pain. Anyway, at last the doctor, and others, arrived, and the doctor put him out of his pain and took the pilot away. Then the police and officials arrived and started questioning me. One officer told me I might have to attend an inquest at Cerne Abbas. Then I began to find out that the front of the plane was loaded with canon shells, and I had walked in front of it! Anyway they put an armed guard on the place - my husband (Special Police) guarded it with a shot gun until the guard arrived. It appeared that the pilot was an instructor from Yeovilton - had attempted to land and had crashed into a deeply dried up pond which he did not observe from the air. They said that he was out of fuel but, for some unknown reason, did not switch on his reserve fuel (in a small tank). He lived for several months before he died - badly injured internally.

Anyone flying over Yeovilton Camp (or any other Air Station) during the 1939-45 war would be unable to see anything to tell them it was there. Everything to give it away was camouflaged, hangers, buildings even the planes were painted to merge into the farmland around. Even farmers with big barns had them painted. They did not want Jerry to mistake their farms as an air station. The Home Guard (local men) were trained to keep their eyes open to signalling lights at night - spies giving facts to Jerry planes - houses not blacked out properly. Also arrows cut out in corn fields - pointing to air stations and other vital places - lit up at night by battery-powered small lights. These men were positioned on the hills and high spots around - one local farmer - John Denning, Drayton Farm, in the Home Guard found his Commanding Officer was one of his farm workers - his Christian name was Hedley.

One day I went to get some hay from a rick, this was in Field Under Cover (Young's Cover) - which we had bought in Draycott. I suddenly saw a plane crash - looking around I saw an old farm worker - together we went towards it. We found that most of the engine had fallen off and was burning. Reaching the other part of the plane, we found it was upside down, with the poor pilot strapped in head downwards - with petrol pouring on him. He was unconscious and breathing heavily "Come on" I said "We must try to get him out of this" - Try as we would we could not shift him or right the pilot. Leaving the old farm hand with strict instructions that if the pilot should say anything to remember what he said - I ran to Draycott Farm where there was a phone. Much to my surprise when I got back with help - all the Camp Rescue Service were there - ambulance men, doctor and a man in an asbestos suit - looking like a space man. They told me that why

they were so quick – they had seen the crashed plane from the air, then someone shouted out “put out all cigarettes – no lights of any sort – we are going to right the plane and get out the pilot. Everyone helped but tragically as we got right way up the poor pilot died. We were upset – poor man – I think he had a wife and child – another instructor from Yeovilton. What they wanted to know was, which way was it flying when it crashed – I could not tell them as I did not see – They said they could not get sense from the old farm hand.

One day my husband (now dead) and his friend Don Harvey (now dead) decided to take the ferrets to Hilly Hooks (on Draycott Farm) to catch rabbits – they had with them two small boys (Don’s sons) – everything was going well, when two planes started a dog fight overhead. They swooped and swerved going up and down and nearly touching the ground – Lord Digby’s keeper came rushing out of the warren (a wood) shouting they were machine gunning the wood, Len and Don did not know what to do – The two small boys were hysterical and bullets were sailing around like hail - They dragged the boys to a dyke, with a damaged plank bridge, pushing the boys under it– they had to hold them down. Luckily none of them were hurt – Neither was the keeper – what happened to the fighting planes none of them knew.

A plane crashed at New Oakley Farm (Chilthorne) it demolished part of a hedge and killed several cows. The big surprise was that the pilot was found dazed walking towards Tintinhull – What a lucky man.

I was indoors one day when I heard a noise like a hooter – Out I went and found a plane had ploughed ruts in a field called Twenty Acres (Broadmead Farm – Yeovil Marsh) and fuel was running down the ruts – anyway the pilot was only dazed – so I took him to Draycott Farm - to ring up the camp. I do not know anything more about this – but the field had patches in it where the grass would not grow.

The biggest land mine this side of Croydon fell harmlessly in a field on the Ashington Road, the other side of the road to Glencroft. It made a huge crater – what Jerry was after I do not know – planes could have been chased and just dumped it. The Water Tower, just off Mudford Road, was a favourite spot. Jerry thought it was something to do with aircraft so the land mine might have been for that.

My husband was going Somerton way one day in his van In or near Somerton were some Barrage Balloons (Early on in the war before they became more general) someone who spotted them said “Look the Zeppalins are coming”.

Lots of Incendary Bombs were dropped – a lot near the Yeo – in Draycott Farm. George Dening found several aluminium sticks, which I suppose they were originally attached. There was also a lot of these Fire Bombs dropped in a row in Keepers – a field in Middle Farm – near my house, below Ashington Wood,

The Americans used to come with big lorries loaded with ammunition which they used to take out and store in Ashington Wood – where they took it from there I do not know. In Ashington Wood there are Saxon banks, they were for keeping livestock from straying. There was also a settlement on the other side of the wood in the Middle Ages (Date: 400 to 1400). There was not a wood there then. There is a pond in Glencroft which has steps in it – probably used as a bathing pool.

My house could be listed, it is a Keepers House – early eighteen hundreds. At one time it had a baker’s oven – which used bundles of wood faggots to heat it. The door still exists and the place where the hot ashes were scrapped out of the oven before the bread was put in. There are four Victorian chimney pots on a stack – one for the kitchen fire smoke – one for the bake oven steam – one for the bread oven fumes and one for a wash copper.

Mr Tom Beaton and his sister told me that their mother was born here. Ask Roy Beaton what his great grandfather’s name was. I know he was a keeper. When the keeper had shooting parties here they used to come in horses and carts. Owing to the slow travel they used to have to stay here, perhaps for one or two nights. Two more rooms were built on – a downstairs room and a bedroom – also a cupboard was put in to

keep the visitors ware and cutlery etc.. When the chimney used to smoke the keepers fired a twelve bore gun up the chimney – to clear the soot. A small holly bush was sometimes used.

There is a burial ground over Forty Acres which cannot be ploughed up. They usually put in calf cows and heffers in it. The gate opens into the bridal path to Limington Road. I should think it is connected with the settlement near Ashington Wood.

Len found what he thought was a piece of pottery in Forty Acres. We took it to Yeovil Museum and it turned out to be a piece out of a drinks bottle of about sixteen hundred – they said it looks like pottery owing to the chemical action of the ground.

At one time White Hills (under Ashington Wood) was covered with sea. A small fossil found there is Belemnite (the tail of this sea animal).

They used to have point to point races in White Hills and one day when Dick Brake was putting in about an area of mangoes seed he found half a spade guinea.

During the 1939-45 war there was an anti-aircraft gun unit near Draycott Farm House, just opposite near the Limington Road – close to Ashington. There was a heavily laden Jerry bomber – which on most mornings paid a visit to Yeovilton Camp and drop its load (or what it could). This plane used to go by about six o'clock in the morning – this continued for some little time – people used to say “Here’s Jerry off to visit the Camp” – the pilot must have been a past master in evasive action – as no doubt ours tried hard to get him.

There were a few men killed and injured at the camp – but not many. Then the noise of the plane in the morning was not heard again – of course there were not any news bulletins – nothing was published as they did not want Jerry to know anything. Has anyone stationed on HMS Heron ever thought how changed has become the method of transport.

Over two hundred years ago farmers having drank more than was good for them were mounted both on one horse – returning from Kingsdon Fair – as they jogged along thinking of the good time they-d had with the moon shining on the landscape. Perhaps they had bought the horse at the fair. With their pockets stuffed with fairings – little did they think that one day man would walk on the moon and there would be a big naval camp and big mechanical birds flying and swooping overhead? How they longed to get home and rest their aching heads They started to cross Ashington Bridge (over the Yeo between Ashington and Chilton Cantelo) suddenly they lost their balance- not a nice warm bed for them that night – just a long sleep in the cold riverbed. Searchers, next day, found them both drowned in the river. The horse was busy cropping grass nearby.

During the 1939-45 war a Wellington Bomber crashes in flames near the end of Yeovilton Air Station runway, close to the River Yeo. The two heroes were Charles Elford - Rugg Farm Limington and Mr. Barthole-Mew who was a Warrant Writer in the Royal Navy (A post which does not now exist). The plane was blazing and likely to explode at any minute – Between them they managed to pull out and save the life of the Rear Gunner – What a brave deed – they were both awarded the B.E.M..

During the beginning of the 1939 war we had a milk round – One day we were delivering milk in St. Michaels Avenue = A Jerry plane came and started machine gunning – I don’t think anyone was hit, but it was not a nice experience.

When Clemie Dening lived at Stone Farm, Stone Lane, Mudford (he fell off his horse and was killed at a point-to-point.) a Jerry bailed out of his plane and went to Stone Farm shouting “Kamarad – Kamarad” – Clemmie , pushed the women of Stone Farm into a room and locked the door and went to the door, armed with a shot gun. Soon some guards arrived and took the Jerry away – they had seen him parachuting down.

One day Ronnie Brake, who lived at Middle Farm, Ashington, who was nearly always over the limit, was driving past Glencroft on the Ashington Road when the wheel of his pony cart came off – on he went for a considerable distance until the cart collapsed, throwing Ronnie out.

Mr. Miller used to live in my house years ago. He used to keep fowls and sell fowls and eggs. He used to supply various pubs around Yeovil with oven ready fowls and eggs – he used to spend the money on drink. His faithful old pony used to take him home, as he was too drunk to drive himself.

One day my husband was out in the fields when he saw some soldiers doing manoeuvres and looking a bit scared at some cattle (steers) in a field they had to go in. “Hey Mister” they said – “Is that Bulls?” What brave men!

A friend of ours George Bull – who lived at Glencroft, was out with some friends and saw what he thought was a dead fox. He picked it up with the tail and slung it over his shoulder - suddenly he gave a yell and dropped the fox, which had given him a good bite on his seat. The fox was stunned, not dead!

One day Ronnie Brake came down to visit Mr. Miller – he left his horse and trap in the field – Two of Ronnie’s sons came on, unhitched the horse – put the trap shafts through a gate and put the horse one side of the gate and the trap on the other. What happened when Ronnie came to go home I do not know – it must have been worth watching as for certain Ronnie had had plenty of drink.

Sid Manning was out with his father-in-law one day with gun and ferrets on Broadmead Farm, Yeovil Marsh. He was bumping the gun butt up and down on his boot. The gun was loaded and suddenly the gun went off with a roar and shot the peak off his hat.

One day Mr. Loder, Broadway Farm, had a cow get his head wedged in an iron garden gate – He said to Miss Rutley “Get a saw” as the cow was frantic as the gate was banging it’s legs. She went home and brought back a wood saw instead of a hacksaw (for cutting metal). Then the band played – they had held on to the frantic cow – him and his son-in-law all that time – They got the cow out of gate to finish – but it was funny.

When my husband and I came to Ashington Wood in Oct/Nov 1940 the fields had a wide strip of very short grass around the hedges. The authorities said they had to be caught, so the Somerset War Agricultural Executive Committee was formed for catching rabbits, moles, rats, foxes and badgers – anything which interfered with food production and storage.

Leonard was told he had to work as pest destroyer – he got his father to help him train his land girls – who had volunteered for the work. Some of them came from Leeds. These girls were not rough girls. So, they set off with Mr. Wish Pest Officer’s blessing. Afterwards it was Captain Daniels: Corn ricks were full of rats; also where there was food for human consumption was stored was also infested – one food store was at Cutsea, near Taunton. Leonard had to go to Cadbury where Sir Archibald and Lady Langman lived with their daughter Elizabeth. They had a lot of evacuees and often Len had to take dead rabbits there for them. The Langhams owned Cadbury Ring – the reputed home of King Arthur – This may be so as oil jars have been found there and that was only used by someone of high rank. There was a good spring of water part way up the hill - They employed an Italian prisoner of war. - One day as Len was going up Cadbury Ring to see what he had in his trap – he met the prisoner who said “You Pig, You Pig!” Len was just going to land him one when he realised what he meant. Len had a badger (Pig) in his trap.

In that area Queen Camel was owned by the Mildmay family. When the Phelips of Montacute House let their property go to the National Trust they had photographs of their family oil portraits taken, what happened to these oil paintings I do not know. I can remember a full length painting of a Miss Mildmay – a very grant looking person, not at all good looking.

When we came here Major Goodford lived at Chilton Canetto House, his ancestors lost their lands through horse betting. Just above Hundred Stone Garage is a house which has been enlarged. This was the holiday home for the Goodfords – The holiday house for the Phelips (of Montacute) was where the Milk Marketing Board had offices on Hendford Hill – Yeovil. Well, the Goodfords had land in Yeovil from Primrose Lane to the Five Crossways - Owing to gambling this land had to be sold – some was called Folly Fields.

The Bates Harbins owned Mudford Manor (Dower House) and land at Mudford – going in the Lyde Road area. Mrs. Bates Barbin met her husband at Cricket St. Thomas. One of the Bates Harbins (woman) was a keen astronomer and found an unknown star.

Newton House (Yeovil) – when we came here Manor Farm was occupied by Henry and Mrs Cox, and their daughter – their two employees spent most of the time in the cellar drinking cider. The Manor Farm fields were from The Manor House to the River Yeo.

One year Henry Cox was late getting in his harvest until after the Church Harvest Festival. The hymn “All Is Safely Gathered In” was being sung to when Henry added “All except Henry Cox” in a very loud voice. One day Henry, with his men, was in Ashington Wood cutting or doing something with wood. Henry took his watch off and put it down on the ground – after they finished Henry’s watch could not be found. Henry grew a lot of flax during the war and had a row of ricks in his fields along Limington Lane.

Ronnie Brake owned Middle Farm, he fell ill of the law for smuggling horses over from Ireland – He was fined several thousand and had to sell the farm to pay his fine. – I think at one the time the farm belonged to his father. Middle Farm was bought by Mr.Nuttall, who at one time was the Conservative M.P. for Birkenhead, on the River Mersey. Ronnie rented it from him. One day David Brake was up in Ashington Wood, climbing fir trees and cutting off the tops for Christmas Trees – He had on a good wrist watch, given to him for his twenty-first birthday. In some way getting up or down the trees he lost it – He never found it again.

George and Mrs.Dening owned Draycott Farm, Limington. I can remember seeing cider being made there with an old fashioned cider press. All the farmers and farm workers drank cider. Harvest Time one could see them staggering about. Heady stuff it was.

At one time there were several houses in Ashington, up in the fields. Quite a village it was. In one field of Draycott Farm was a deep well and John Dening would not go too near it when ploughing – as he said it was deep. After John’s father died he had the farm. He afterwards sold it to the Church Commissioners – They say that Draycott Farm was owned by Manor Farm in the sixteen hundreds.

Our field in Mudford Sock is called “The Genge” – there is also a house in Limington called Genges. Leonard’s father said that years ago there was a well off farmer called Abe Genge. I think he was fond of shooting. A farm he owned in West Mudford, the farm house us where Mr. Parker farm worker contractor lives. What of other farms he owned I do not know.

The farmers made cheese years ago. The tractor had iron wheels – no tyres – no cabs – so they were exposed to the elements with a hard iron seat to sit on – poor chaps who had to use them all day.

During the war I reared pedigree Friesian bull calves – buying them as a day or two old and rearing them for twelve months. We used to put them in pedigree show sales. – Sometimes I got a First. The calves had to be groomed and led on a halter – very docile they were – what they were like over two years I can only guess. I also had to look after pigs and other cattle and fowls as Len was away all day. We also grew flax and corn in our field. The land girls harvested it. They could drive tractors well too.

I forgot to mention that when I lived at Montacute I knew Katie Powys, who had a farm and was sister to the famous novelist brother Powys – his other brothers wrote too. Their father was one time vicar of Montacute – before my time – my mothers.

The Church Commissioners eventually owned Manor Farm, Draycott Farm and Middle Farm – they now belong to the Duchy of Cornwall and the tenant is Clive Hawkins.

Dugal Sandeman, a Church Commissioner tenant, was Conservative candidate for Yeovil Division – he polled a lot of votes – one thousand more than Mrs. Thatcher did in her constituency but he did not get into Parliament.

One of the keeper's wives, who lived here, one Sunday went to church and came home afterwards could not be found! She was eventually found dead in White Hills pond, (now done away with) they do not know if she did away with herself or fell in – picking watercress.

Down on Manor Farm they had hundreds of geese one day - why they pitched there why I do not know, - I bet they ate a lot of grass (in Henry Cox's time).

Part of Ashington Manor is Edward VI who was Henry VIII's son – who lived until he was fifteen – there is a stone stairway and a horn window of that date.

Our British Friesian prefix was the name Ashington.

The American black soldiers were in camp at Marston Magna – one mug of cider and they'd had it. The Half Moon in Mudford was told by the police to only serve them with one mug full.