

FARMING FAMILIES IN FULBOURN: THE WHITE FAMILY

This was the last in a series of articles on Fulbourn's farming families, and tells the story of the WHITE Family, who, like the Wombwell family, came to farm in Fulbourn in the early part of the twentieth century. From about 1900 to the present day, five generations of Whites have farmed in Fulbourn and can be associated with six farms - Barnsbury, Caudle Corner, Fernleigh, Highfield, New Shardelowes and Northfield farms. Of these six, three are still in White hands.

In 1900, some twenty six years before the first Wombwell came to farm in Fulbourn, George Frederick White moved to Fulbourn from Cambridge where his father, Thomas Elijah White, whose family originally came from Gressenhall in Norfolk, had been running a successful dairy business in St. Philip's Road. Thomas, who died in 1918, had set up the business with two of his sons, pasturing his small herd of 20-30 cows on Midsummer Common, on common land rented from Cambridge County Council. He became a successful dairy farmer, but he also dealt in property, becoming wealthy enough for his sons to go into farming and to buy their own farms. In 1900, George Frederick, (born in 1872), bought Barnsbury Farm in Cox's Drove, transferring the dairy there and taking the cows from Cambridge. Bert joined him in about 1911 and for a while they farmed together, buying some more land in Teversham Road, until 1912 when they split up: Bert bought the land and farm at Fernleigh Farm, while George stayed on at Barnsbury Farm.

Bert's descendants continue to farm at Fernleigh Farm. The brothers also rented some land from the church in Fulbourn Fen, but acquired no more land until 1929, when George Edward, George Frederick's eldest son, moved into Highfield Farm. In 1953 Bert bought Caudle Corner Farm from Fulbourn Hospital, and in the same year, Northfield Farm was bought from the Chaplin family. Finally, in 1989 Bert's grandson Frederick Bertram Basil bought New Shardelowe's Farm. It is the descendants of Bert who remain farming in Fulbourn at the beginning of the 21st century - i.e. his grandson Frederick and the son and grandson of his granddaughter Jane, both of whom chose to retain the White family name: Frederick still farms New Shardelowes, while his nephew Timothy and Timothy's son Daniel run Caudle Corner Farm.

As for George Frederick and his descendants, he continued to farm at Barnsbury Farm, living there and farming in partnership with his four sons until his death in 1955. His youngest son Harold continued to live for a while at Barnsbury Farm but the other two sons (Thomas Frederick and John Basil) had moved out, and in 1967 farming activities ceased there altogether. Some of the land was then sold off and eventually the farmhouse was bought by Horace, one of Thomas Frederick's five sons, together with a couple of acres of land. Horace, who still lives in the farmhouse, did not stay in farming but became a publican and the landlord of The Six Bells public house. When George Edward took over Highfield Farm, with its 88 acres and the 44 acres of church land, he was living in the old farmhouse on Apthorpe Street, but when in 1964 that house was sold, (its outbuildings and land had already been sold in 1957 and the site is now occupied by Greater Foxes), it ceased to be a working farm. He left the village and went to live in Felixstowe, leaving his two sons, Ted and Derek, to continue farming what was still called Highfield Farm, though farming activities continued from their houses in Apthorpe Street and Shelford Road.

THE FARMS

1. **BARNSBURY FARM** in Cox's Drove was originally known as either Spring Hall or Cock's Farm (after John Adolphus Cock who died in 1868). This farm is of some antiquity, with its thatched cottages dating back to before the Enclosure Act of 1808. When it was bought in the 1870's by Richard B. Holmes, a property developer who lived in Barnsbury, London, it became known as Barnsbury Farm. He also built nearby the larger Barnsbury House. In its heyday under the White family, the farm, while also growing arable crops, was the centre of a very successful dairy business. Fathers and sons ran this business in partnership, first George Frederick and three of his sons (George Edward, Thomas Frederick and Harold Humphrey) then Thomas Frederick and his family. Thomas Frederick or 'Tom' was born in 1903 and had eight children, but of them only John, his brother David and his sister Sheila, remained in farming. John worked for his great uncle Bert at Fernleigh Farm from the age of fifteen and then for Bert's son (his uncle) until 1959, when for the next eight years he went back to work and run Barnsbury Farm. He did not live there, however; between 1959 and 1967 he and Pat were living at Northfield Farm which had been bought by the Whites from the Chaplins in 1953. From 1967 to 1969 he was farming in Devon with his brother David, and then returned and continued

farming until his retirement in 2005.

THE DAIRY: John recollects “there was a big dairy unit at Barnsbury Farm - at one time they were milking 100 cows - and they had big milk rounds, in Cambridge (and that included a couple of Colleges), Romsey Town, Cherryhinton, the Wilbrahams and Fulbourn. There had been other dairies at one time: the Lacey’s, who had quite a big herd at Queens Farm, and the Stalleys, who had eight or nine cows at Home Farm, were selling milk up till the end of the 1960s. But they never had a milk round. Miss Stalley, later to become Mrs Beeton, sold milk through the window at Home Farm, opposite Hall Farm, and people would collect it from there. They had little cowsheds round at the back. At Barnsbury Farm, my father’s cows were kept in a big cowshed. The cows were of all sorts, including Shorthorns which they mixed with Friesian and Guernsey cattle: when you sold milk on milk rounds, a lot of people used to like their rich Jersey or Guernsey milk - you kept them separate and bottled them separate because you’d get a penny a pint more for that. (When I first started, milk was 4 pence halfpenny a pint - it must have been getting up to 20 pence when I stopped and now it’s at least 67p!).” The cows were pastured on the land at Highfield Gate, and the Whites also rented some pasture land from Cambridge Water Company - it went right down from Cox’s Drove to Teversham Road. “That land was all pasture meadows. I think there were about a hundred acres left as grass, and they used to grow crops for the cows such as mangolds, cow cabbages, beet tops and things like that. They also made hay for fodder.” As a boy John never got involved with the cows but “I used to have to go behind as a little lad and strip out. You’d get some milk in a bucket and then the cow would tip it over and you’d get sworn at.” But when milking machines came in in the 1940s, it led to a great change in the daily routine. Two men could then milk a hundred cows while before that it needed 11-12 men to do the milking. As for bottling, “we had a bottling machine but we sold a lot in churns and cans because during the war, you couldn’t always get enough bottles. They bottled the milk out of the churns and sold it on the rounds. People would come out with a jug. You had a half pint measure and a pint measure in a can.” John remembers how a lady in Cherryhinton would produce a jug and ask for two pints, only to be told it wouldn’t hold two pints: “Mr Prior [who had a farm in Ventress Court] has been getting two pints in there for the last two years”, she protested. John admits that on occasions the thumb would go in (hygiene

was not often an issue), thus reducing the milk in the can, so it could go further. When milk was short, extra supplies would come in by rail from Stetchworth dairies which, in hot weather, could have turned sour. Also, there were some very strange and often grimy receptacles which were offered when milk was ladled from the churn, which had to be first washed. The Whites' dairy was the last one left in Fulbourn ; the end of their dairy business came when Horace bought Barnsbury Farmhouse and the business, together with the arable land, was all sold off in about 1960. Even though they had quite a lot of machines for their 500-600 acres of arable land, the Whites also used and kept horses. When John started working on the farm as a boy, aged seven ("you always worked on the farm in school holidays"), like other farming boys he would lead the horses at harvest time, and he remembers horse-raking and harrowing "and getting your toes trod on by the horses". The horses were kept at Highfield Farm, some six of them - Suffolks and Shires. But by the time he was about fourteen, the horses were got rid of as more machinery was bought for use on the farm.

2. FERNLEIGH FARM on Teversham Road was, like Caudle Corner Farm and New Shardeloves, with its house and buildings, a post Enclosure farm, situated outside the village boundary and surrounded by its own fields. It was the second farm acquired by the White family - as mentioned above it was bought in 1912 and was first farmed by Bert and then by his descendants, who continue to farm there to this day. Bert's grandson, Frederick Bertram Basil, is now the owner.
3. HIGHFIELD FARM on Apthorpe Street was the third farm bought by the White family, was situated in the heart of the village and has a long history as a farm. The farmhouse itself, still called Highfield Farmhouse, is one of the oldest houses in Fulbourn, being originally a 14th century hall house. Members of the Payne family lived and farmed there from the late 19th century until the 1920s. In 1929 it came into the hands of the White family when George Edward White and his family came to live there until 1954, when it ceased to be a working farm. The farm buildings were then demolished and the land was sold for building (which is where Greater Foxes now is). Later, the house itself was sold.
4. CAUDLE CORNER FARM off the Teversham Road was another of the post Enclosure farms, situated very near Fernleigh Farm. It was bought off Fulbourn Hospital in 1953 by Bert White. It is still in the hands of the White family, being farmed by Bert's great grandson, Timothy.

5. NORTHFIELD FARM was known, since the beginning of the 19th century up till about 1912, as Chafy's Farm. This farm and farmhouse stood on what is now Northfield and, like Highfield Farm, has a long history as a farm. For fifteen years, from 1953 to 1968, it was owned by the Whites who bought it off the Chaplins. Between 1959 and 1967, John and his wife Pat lived there. "It was a lovely old house, surrounded by outbuildings" where they kept dry sows, as well as bullocks. But "now nothing is left of the farm". In 1968 it was sold to the Lacey family who, while continuing to farm the land that went with the house, demolished the fine farmhouse and sold the site for housing.
6. NEW SHARDELOWES FARM was the sixth and last farm to be bought by the White family. With its yellow brick farmhouse, it, too, is a post Enclosure farm. Situated along the Balsham Road, a good mile to the south east of the village, it was bought in 1989 by Bert's son, Basil, who continues to farm it. Previously, it had been owned by the Wombwell family who had farmed it from 1952-1982.

The four farming families - Wrights, Wombwells, Chaplins and Whites - came to farm in Fulbourn in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after the Enclosures Act of 1808, supplanting families who for generations, perhaps, had lived and farmed there. These include such names as the Oslars, Battyls, Kings, Paynes, Furbanks, Mannings, Hancocks, the story of whom should eventually be told after a lot more research has been done. The Cambridge Enclosure Award, in particular, needs to be consulted to work out how the incomers bought their way in and what happened to the old farming families and to the land.

Present farming families (other than those written about) include the names of Bullen, Stalley, Lacey, Rolph, Barnes, and also of the Townleys. The latter, were of course as much landowners as farmers who, as lords of the Manor since the late 18th century, have farmed their estate both before and after the Enclosure Act. They have experienced all the different changes that the four families covered by the articles have seen - whether the introduction of mechanisation and technology and of new crops and fertilisers, the purchase and sale of land, or the disappearance of livestock from the land. Farming families have experienced many a change in fortune as well as the vicissitudes of the agricultural situation in the country as a whole, among which the

weather, too, has played a considerable role. The story of the Townleys as farmers must be part of a wider account of their estate and their role in the village and in agriculture in general.

As for the changes witnessed by all of the farming families described, these include the introduction (from as early as the 19th century) of new machinery, which was hastened eventually after World War 2, resulting in the disappearance of horse driven machinery, but also the introduction of new crops and ways of improving those crops by weed control and fertilisers. The reduction in the work force employed on the land has been striking, so that while farming still continues on the land and fields around the village, the number of people employed on the land has declined dramatically and farming is no longer a major employer of labour. Fulbourn can no longer be called a farming community.

Apart from Hall Farm, which no longer has any farm buildings in use, all the farms are situated in the outlying fields to the south, west and east of the village. In the village, all the farmhouses have become private dwellings. And while tractors continue to pass through the village streets, gone are the carts and, more significantly, the livestock. The farm buildings are empty, having for the most part been demolished or converted to other uses. No herds of cows or sheep pass through the streets (the sheep that pasture on the Manor lands and the cows brought in to control the pasture in the Nature Reserve are brought in by truck and belong to a farmer from outside the village). No pigs squeal, no cocks crow, no cows moo, no sheep bleat. The village sounds have changed completely in this now motorised age.

At one time, every farm was a mixed farm. As John White recalls “most people had their own cow for their own purposes and everybody had pigs, chickens, ducks and geese. Barnsbury Farm had cows, horses and hens, but no pigs until after they packed up the cows. There were pigs at Highfield Farm and at Hall Farm in the stackyard opposite.” While he and Pat lived at Northfield Farm, they kept dry sows and bullocks, but now there is nothing left of that farm, neither house nor outbuildings. With the concentration on arable crops, the village has become silent, except at harvest time when the sound can be heard of the combine harvesters ceaselessly at work in the fields around the village.

Also gone within living memory are the trades that depended on agriculture - saddler, blacksmith, farrier, wheelwright and carter. For example, the Knights family who lived in Highfield House (where to this day David Knights still lives) from where they ran their carpentry business, derived fifty per cent of their business from agriculture. Although they made their last cart in the 1920s and wheels up till World War 2, they also made fences, pig arks and chicken houses, until all this gave way to their undertaking business. Farming continues, however, in the fields surrounding Fulbourn and the farming legacy lives on in the names given to many of the streets in Fulbourn.

This work was derived from an excellent article originally prepared by Ursula Lyons on behalf of Fulbourn Village History Society with input from John and Pat White. I have made some amendments and reformatted it for posterity on Our Family History website.

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