



Simon Barley

Memories of Village Characters in 1940s and 1950s

The project received two letters from Simon Barley. Simon is over 80 years old, but clearly has a very accurate memory of his life at The Old Hall in the late 40s and early 50s. Simon's parents were Maurice and Diana Barley.

Maurice Barley was an academic who produced a History of North Muskham in 1947, with the North Muskham Local History Group of the time.

The 1947 history document can be found in the Village History pages on this website.

In this letter, Simon describes some of village characters he can recall, particularly Mr King, the Charles' brothers, the Gascoigne brothers and his Mother, Diana.

Dear Capturing Memories,

Here are some things I remember about people in North Muskham in the forties and fifties.

My parents, Maurice and Diana Barley rented the Old Hall for £6 a month from a Lincolnshire solicitor called Foottit. The house in 1946 was in bad repair, having been requisitioned by the army during the war, and mistreated, to put it mildly. Anything wooden that could be torn out to make a fire had been indeed torn out (banisters, window frames etc) and one room, lacking most of its plaster, had apparently been used for machine gun practice. Across the garden on the side facing the north road were practice trenches. Government compensation paid for restoring the basics, but much redecoration was done by the family, with the very high ceilings in some rooms being done by Mr Johnson, the decorator who lived in the village. Like many village men, he used a bicycle for his everyday travel, and he was particularly

careful of his own bicycle, 'giving it a birthday', as he put it, 'every week'. The Raleigh logo on the characteristic profile back mudguard had been almost cleaned away.

Billy and Johnny Gascoigne

Billy Gascoigne, one of two elderly brothers, also had a Raleigh bike, in the days when this Rolls Royce of machines was the ultimate of desirability. I remember him once saying that at some date before the war the bottom bracket of his Raleigh had broken, and the firm took it back, repaired it for nothing, but on the condition that he told nobody of this reprehensible breakdown that should just never have happened.

His brother Johnny was a retired woodworker who recalled the building of Cromwell Lock by Norwegian carpenters. The tool they used that gave him most interest was an adze, which they could wield to produce a finish as smooth as he could with his planes. For part of his working life, perhaps pre-1900, he had to walk into Newark and back every day.

Cromwell Lock was at the far end of the postal round on which I was able to earn good money during the Christmas rush. With the owners of the post office, I did part of the village round. I helped to sort the letters (and dipped into the sweets that were far too tempting and easily-to-hand for a young boy whose confectionery intake had only just come off rationing). At that time the post woman was Betty (surname?), who lived in Ferry Lane. She also delivered her post by bicycle. She had succeeded Miss Gibson, who then retired to a house next to the church. Miss Gibson was often visited by Margaret Needham, one of the two daughters of Mr Needham, the enormously tall policeman who used to cycle slowly down the main street (where to?). He lived almost next door to Miss Gibson in the police house on Main Street.

The Charles Brothers

The Old Hall had been built as a farmhouse, the farmland being let separately to Tom and Fred Charles; both unmarried, they lived elsewhere in the village with their aged mother. We only once were invited into their house, on a memorable Christmas Day when they made music with some sort of dancing dolls on a vibrating board –



entrancing, but they could never be induced to repeat the performance. Tom was the brains of the pair; having been at school at Magnus in Newark.

By the way, he could always be persuaded to buy a ticket for the annual Charity rugby match; this involved every class at Magnus competing to sell the most tickets. The first time I met Tom he was ploughing with Dolly, their only horse, with a single-furrow plough in the large field opposite the Methodist Chapel, which was adjoined to our garden; he had an open volume of Shakespeare on the bars of the plough. They also owned a temperamental Fordson tractor, on which they would spend what seemed like many hours fixing road bands over the driving wheels that had spuds on them. I think they needed to make this alternation for their only other field to the north, just beyond the transport business garage and house. When we were older and were about to learn to use a scythe, Tom told me, tongue in cheek I'm sure, the cautionary tale of the man who was riding his bike home with his scythe over his shoulder when a rabbit ran out. He tried to bring the butt end of the stail down on the rabbit, forgetting that the blade was behind his head...!!!

Tom was one of the attendees at the local history class my father ran for several years, and at which he had first heard that the Old Hall was available to rent. The men's widowed sister in law, Dulcie, lived up the lane behind the police house (with Herbert Clipsham between, and Charlie and Mrs Copp in their wooden bungalow beyond her). My brother and I earned a little pocket money mowing her lawn, one pushing, one pulling the hand mower. We also used this machine on the grass paths each side of the church path, and this exercise, with all the bike riding and running around that the nearly empty roads allowed, is part of the reason why we are, at 81 and 83, fortunate to be still fit and well.

Mr Norman King, Head Teacher

One person who lived close by was Mr Norman King, the Headmaster of North Muskham School. When we arrived, my father had made enquiries with colleagues at the University's Department of Education and learned, he said, that Mr King's school did not have a very good reputation. We boys were accordingly sent to the Mount

School in Newark, which led to our family, earning some opprobrium from Mr King.

Whenever we saw him riding his bike with a large basket on the handlebars down the main street to school he did not greet us, and indeed always looked rather cross, his appearance reinforcing our feeling that we had done well to avoid him. When we left Muskham in 1956 Mr King invited me to his house and gave me about half a dozen good (but very old) textbooks, in a gesture that felt like an attempt at reconciliation. I felt very grateful and I wonder now whether it was a big effort for him. Nor did our family do right by him with my sister, who was sent to South Muskham school.



**A day out in Cleethorpes
From Left: Mrs Clem Charles Bill Swanack,
Ms Swanack, Judy Swanack, Mrs Swanack, Sheila
Davenport, Diana Barley**

Diana Barley My Mother

My mother was, in her family's tradition, a very active member of the community. She was an early member of the WI and, through it, made friends, particularly with Barbara Swannack. Mr Swannack hired out agricultural machinery, such as combines, which were beyond the pocket of most farmers. The Swannacks' younger daughter, Judy, became one of my sister Harriett's closest friends, and they kept up letter writing for many years. One year my mother stood for a seat on the local parish council and was very chagrined to be out - voted in



favour of Mr Cockerill, the landlord of the Lord Nelson; the result no doubt reflected the fact that her politics were well to the left of his.

Our Domestic Helpers

I remember three women who cleaned weekly for our family. First was Miss Cottam, who lived in Chapel Yard with three children, said to have been fathered by Mr Thomas, who also lived in the yard but not with her.

Mr Thomas helped with digging over our garden when it was being reclaimed from the army's wartime efforts. John, the eldest boy, was once stricken with meningitis, and lay in Newark hospital for many weeks. The second person who cleaned after Miss Cottam was a young woman called Ada, whose surname I don't recall, but who lived on the main street a bit to the north on the opposite side of the road from the post office. She was not as reliable as my mother wanted; she could be rather fierce at times. Once, Ada arrived late and was quizzed in front of me. Ada went red with embarrassment, and I felt (still feel) that my mother was wrong to make her cringe in front of a small boy.

The third cleaning helper was Mrs Spafford, whose husband Jimmy laboured for Tom and Fred Charles, and whose son Clarence became a high-class woodworker. He made a large plan-chest for my father's architectural drawings, and I have it still. It is a beautifully constructed chest with very large drawers that still, 70 years later, slide in and out with a satisfying 'hiss'. Mrs. Spafford was big and strong, and helped each year with spring cleaning by dragging out big carpets on to the lawn where we helped to beat the dust out of them.

Finally, my father, brought up in smoky Lincoln and a life-long smoker, died at 81 in 1991, but my mother survived to 97; as with her three sisters (97, 101 and 92). Genes obviously help!

Best wishes,

Simon Barley 2019