

Piddington - memories

I was born in Princes Street, Piddington in 1956. I left the village in 1975 to go to university in London where I have lived ever since. I have however kept my connections with the village and have many happy memories of growing up there.

You approach the village on the A40 from West Wycombe. It was from West Wycombe that Benjamin North relocated his original factory around 1903 to one of the first Greenfield sites for a furniture factory. The story goes that the move from West Wycombe was prompted because the then Lord of the Manor would not allow Benjamin North to have machines in the village as it would cause too much noise so he moved to the only plot of land in the area not owned by Dashwood but by Lord Carrington (I have written to the Carrington Estate Office to see whether or not they can confirm this – apparently the plot had passed to Lord Carrington in settlement of a gambling debt!). I have never precisely established where the original factory was in West Wycombe but from old photographs I would presume it is either the Browns factory in Church Lane under the arch or where the Village Hall now stands. My father told me that the original Piddington plot of land cost £20 and even in the deeds of my parent's house there is a strict prohibition on running a furniture factory from the site so as not to be competition to Benjamin North!

The factory was opened in 1903 and an article in the Bucks Free Press of the time gives the details of the opening dinner. The speeches were responded to by a JB Robertson – my great grandfather.

I am not sure where the name Piddington comes from. There are of course villages of the same name in both Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire which date back to the Domesday book ('Pidentone' and 'Petintone' respectfully).

I understand that B North & Sons, West Wycombe dates back to at least 1864. I do have a photograph of the retirement party of one John Ing at the age of 90 dated 21 August 1937 taken in the Apple Orchard, West Wycombe on the occasion his retirement after 65 years service to the firm! In its time it must have been a significant concern – it is listed in the 1862 'History and Topography of Buckinghamshire' by James Joseph Sheahan as having 100 workmen and at one time did have showroom offices in the City Road, London. I understand that it exhibited at the Furniture Exhibition in London Agricultural Hall in 1881. The company had registered the pattern of chairs called the 'Wellington', the 'Raglan' and the 'Napoleon'. Benjamin North also made the first 'American Rocking Chair' and the 'Smoking Chair'. Photographs that I have of the original workers show the machine making and upholstery shops. Perhaps one of the best photographs of the factory with its chimney as it would have been is in 'The history of Chairmaking in High Wycombe' by LJ Mayes (page 82) which describes it as a modern 'composite' factory of brick and timber. Both my father and grandfather worked at the factory and were involved in the making of all of the chairs in the Abbey for the 1952 Coronation which each Lord and Earl was allowed to keep. In later years they were involved in the production of oak church furniture. If you look at the original offices and showroom which are on the second floor of the building that runs at ninety degrees to Old Oxford Road there is still visible on the roof some pipe work which originally

had the sign 'Good Save the King' for the 1937 Coronation. The devastating fire in May 1970 effectively put paid to furniture production on the site as all work was transferred to Sands but the cutting and storing of logs and planks continued for several years after.

The A40 road was of course the principal route from London to Oxford prior to the building of the M40 in the mid 1970s. It was a main arterial road and the fast stretch at the bottom of Dashwood hill was the scene of many – some fatal accidents – prior to the motorway taking most of the traffic. Originally the road would have swept past the site of the village, past the Dashwood Arms Public House (which was originally called the Ham probably after Ham Farm opposite) and then up toward Stokenchurch. One presumes that the original route was perhaps Old Oxford Road hence the name which one arrives in after negotiating the curiously named 'S' bend. Originally the sign to the village was on the verge to the left and a footpath used to leave the main A40 to 'cut off the corner' but this was changed after a group of Travellers set up camp there in the late 1970s/early 1980s. On the left the raised embankment is only dissected by the extension to the bottom of Stanmore Lane (pronounced 'Stamber' by many locals). On one of these embankments there is a large stone which we used to marvel at as children – where had it come from? My father used to tell me of a cloud burst over Stanmore Lane in the late 1930s – I have a very unclear photograph of the workers with Lorries clearing the road of all of the mud and stones washed down the hill.

The first building you come to in the village is Lower Farm which I understand is haunted by the ghost of a young child who drowned in the well. The very next house – on the corner of Old Oxford Road and Piddington Lane – is the house built for Benjamin North and is by far the largest in the village. This was occupied after him by the Hunt family and then the Cross family. Originally the house had more land but in the 1960s the Tennis courts to the rear were built on by a local builder, Shrimpton, who had a famous model daughter Jean. As you move along the Old Oxford Road, the older solid built houses before King Street were for the managers of the Furniture Works – one was occupied by the Works Manager Bill Turner and one by George 'Brusher' Lee who the flats in King Street were named after as he was a local councillor and in my youth ran the Sunday School at the local Methodist Church. The bungalow next to North's house was built for George Lee's daughter and her husband Horace Ing. Opposite this row of houses are the allotments – still lovingly tended- and the 'Green' which served as a football field before the playing field was built and was the site of the annual Guy Fawkes bonfire. Between the green and the road there is a lay-by which I think at one point may have had a telephone box on it. As a child I do remember this lay-by being a weigh bridge for lorries on the main A40.

As you reach the bottom of King Street there are further buildings erected in the 1960s/early 1970s. On the left is the bungalow originally built by Mr and Mrs Tebby and to the right overlooking the Green is a pair of semi detached houses which are adjacent to what was the Post Office run by Miss Ackford, who had a wonderful vintage car in her garage rather like one used by 1930s Chicago mobsters. The telephone box was outside the Post Office (old style with button A and B!) and this was important as growing up there were few houses with telephones in the village and those that did have them often had to share the line with a neighbour and eavesdropping inevitably took place. Next door the original Post Office was the bottom shop run by a succession of people including a 'Dad's Army' Godfrey look-

alike! As you entered the shop up the steps there was an enormous brass set of scales on the left, a meat slicer to the right and a refrigerator with frozen goods in front of you. You could buy sherry there by the pint if you brought your own bottle! This is now a private house as the village does not have a local shop any more.

Returning to the bottom of King Street, the major change is the number of cars there are now in the street. This was my route home from school but in my day there were no cars. On the left hand side of King Street ran terraced houses for the workers at the furniture factory. My grandparents lived at the first terraced house - which was a shop in the 1930s – and this also doubled as a weekly surgery for the local GP Doctor Starey on a Thursday. Patients would sit in my grandparents lounge and wait to be seen by the doctor. This house was originally numbered 1 King Street but then the street was renumbered in the 1960s by the council so it became number 3. A house was built in the grounds after my grandfather died in 1989 so now the original first house is the third one! The houses the other side of the road became even numbered and are more substantial than the terraced side. The first house on the right was occupied by Mrs Stevens and her backward daughter Phyllis who used to hang over the gate and talk to us children as we went by. After these houses was what was known locally as the roadman's cottage – more of a prefabricated building –which looked out of place and was knocked down along with the adjacent bungalow occupied by the Stone family and replaced by the George Lee court flats. It is from around this site that the early photograph of the furniture factory from the 'The history of Chairmaking in High Wycombe' was taken.

The junction of King Street and Queen Street is much changed from my childhood. Firstly, the 'top shop' which then became a shop and Post Office was closed I would say in the late 1980s (my children recall it). This was run by Mrs Slade, Mrs Harris and later Mrs Hogg. The wooden and tin Methodist Chapel pictured in the History of Methodism which I attended supervised by George Lee has been replaced by flats and opposite the Council Garages, which housed dustcarts and 'Dirty Dennis' Cesspool lorries, were demolished and the Village Hall built. As children, the absence of a playing field meant that we would endlessly kick balls against the tin doors which must have been a source of great annoyance to the adjacent houses. My father was one of the original Trustees of the hall and the credit for the tireless efforts in getting it built must go to Mr Gray who lived at Fillingdon Farm. I have a photograph of some of the villagers working on the original footings.

Moving up King Street you come to the entrance to Wellfield Road, the first house on the right was occupied by a lady who used to give us children home made crab-apple wine! In the 1960s this entire road was Council Houses and a cull de sac with no access to the top of Princes Street. The houses on Wellfield Road were, as I believe to be the case with Queen Street, probably constructed in the 1930s. As children, Queen Street always had an enormous puddle in the centre which we used to cycle through enthusiastically.

Until the mid 1960s, King, Queen and Princes Street were made up principally of hard stone and flint and were private. My parent's house in Princes Street even had a patch of grass outside it! Then all of the roads were dug up to connect all of the houses on to the mains sewerage as opposed to our having cesspools. Unfortunately this left a significant amount of mud on the roads and eventually the roads had to be made up –

a long process as the original contractor went bust. The cost of making up the road was £300 for my parent's house - a lot of money and meant my mother had to go to work at West Wycombe Primary School to help pay for it. Queen Street is largely unchanged from when I was growing up except at the junction with Queen Street where a local builder, Derek Simpson, replaced the Church of England Prefabricated Church – Holy Angels – with modern houses in the late 1970s. From speaking with Nigel Lacey he has the original invoice for this building!

I mentioned before that I was born in Princes Street in a house built by my grandfather, Ernest A Maunder of Radnage, in 1954. Of all the roads in Piddington it has probably changed the most with many in fill houses being built in the 1960s and 1970s. As a child, there was no access from the top of Princes Street to Wellfield Road with the connection only being made when new houses were built in the late 1960s beyond the last bungalow arguably on green belt land. Wellfield probably derived its name from the reservoir that exists at the end off this field which used to supply all the water to the village until around 1970 when we went on mains water. The furniture factory had what was apparently an ex-marine engine which originally pumped water and provided electricity to the whole village. In my time it was only water that was supplied from the well at the base of the factory chimney which was then pumped to the Wellfield Road reservoir to gravity feed the village. I only recall the pump failing once – the week before we were to switch to mains water! For that week, the village was supplied with water from tankers.

At the bottom of Princes Street, on the first bend is the cottage that once housed another long time employee of Benjamin North, George Latham and his wife. The hedge that he used to regularly cut is still there but there is now a bungalow in the garden. I have a copy of a photograph of the Latham's looking very miserable on their Golden wedding anniversary! My father once told me the story how at the start of the Second World War George Latham had put his car up on wooden blocks due to the fuel shortage and after the war it had started first time! The playing field adjacent to the cottage was the scene of the village's celebration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 – I still have a photograph of my taking part in a pram race! Before the field became the playground for the village it was a cornfield and I do recall coming home from primary school once and there being a combine harvester on fire in the field.

Fires were to be a major part of village life. There was a fire of an enormous haystack at the bottom of Chipps Hill behind the cottages in the 1960s; a plumber set the roof of 10 Princes Street alight with a blowlamp; a barn full of pigs caught fire at Ham Farm and we all cheered when the Green Goddess fire engine arrived as it was during the first Fireman's strike. Perhaps the most dramatic was at the furniture factory itself in May 1970 when much of the original brick and wood buildings were destroyed. I was playing football on the green at the time and watched as water was drawn from the recently filled in reservoir at the end of the green to fight the flames. This reservoir was always green and slimy being only occasionally cleaned out. We accepted as lost any footballs that went over the tall fence but I do recall Mr Jones of Wellfield Road swimming in it on hot day!!

Furniture factory fires were not uncommon in the town given the inflammable nature of the production materials – and often happened when order books were low! The fire ripped the heart out of the B North & Sons furniture operation as key staff –

including my father who was used to walking to work –were forced to relocate to Sands. The picture on the front of the Bucks Free Press at the time was very dramatic – but if you look closely at it there is actually no water coming out of the hoses! The accompanying story was written by the journalist Terry Pratchett, now a famous writer. After this the buildings came to be occupied by other small industrial outfits. In its heyday the tall factory chimney – dismantled in the late 1970s – dominated the skyline of the village. Under the chimney – and I presume it still exists – is the well which I was told was almost as deep as the height of the chimney. The steam engine has long gone. As a child there was always vibrant activity on the site with beech and other logs being delivered, timber cut by band saw and then dried in immense piles in the area between the bottom of the Queen Street gardens and the main factory. This site also originally had allotments and chickens. Workers were summoned by a factory steam whistle blown by the stoker Fred Hall who kept the boilers going as a source of power and heat every day except for the two week summer closure. I have several pictures of the machine shop, chairmaking shop and caning shops from I would say the 1930s. The canteen of the factory was in the absence of any other meeting place the centre of the community and it was here that the annual Pensioners Christmas party used to be held (Mrs Wells of Queen Street being Chief Cook!) until the building was pulled down and replaced by Car Specialists not long after the factory fire.

The main centre of the village was always King, Queen and Princes Streets plus Wellfield Road. It was in these streets that we wandered as children, rode our bikes and took advantage of the hills to propel our carts. The ‘outlying’ roads were always more of an adventure. Piddington Lane, with its tall hedges with blackberries was always an attraction. As you wended your way up, generally pushing your bicycle, you passed the houses built on the North’s house tennis courts followed by older houses perhaps built to house factory managers. One of these houses is Rosedene which was at one stage occupied by Robertson’s – I presume another branch of my family – and who according an early copy of the Bucks Free Press suffered the loss a child Sidney aged 10 years from fits.

Further up the Lane are more modern bungalows and Council bungalows just beyond the passage through to the top of King Street. The great fascination for us children however was the above the top of the field above Wellfield where there lived a man – Jock – in a converted railway carriage on actual railway lines. How it ever got there I have no idea! From here you went further up the hill and to the White House with spectacular views of the village owned by the Avery’s. If you were brave as a child you continued on past the double oak tree out of the village and on to Wheeler End or turned left at Avery’s to the Piddington Farm pond where we used to collect tadpoles and sticklebacks.

Leaving the village in the other direction toward Stokenchurch you past the village pub, now the Dashwood Arms. My great grandparents kept this pub up until the early 1960s when they were attacked by an itinerant worker, details of which were reported in the Bucks Free Press of the time. Another old car in the village – I believe a Ford Model T owned by Mr Wheeler – was often to be found outside the pub actually between the wooden supports to the front porch! My great grandfather Martin, ‘TG’ as he was known combined the trade of publican with chairmaking in a wooden shed in adjacent to the pub. Many landlords have come and gone in the intervening years -

even one called Harry Roberts at the time of the hunt for the same named fugitive who killed three policemen in Shepherds Bush in the early 1960s which used to amuse us children. The Dashwood Arms was also the venue of a Horticultural Society Harvest Festival which raised funds for the Old Age pensioner's Christmas Party.

The bottom of Dashwood Hill was always a dangerous place but there were few cars in the picture I have of my father cycling around it in the 1930s. There were many accidents on the hill including that of a school teacher and West Wycombe resident Mr Willis. The hill was used in the 1941 Will Hay movie, 'The Black Sheep of Whitehall' when a car and trailer parted at the top of the hill at Studley Green and joined up again at the bottom. My father saw this being filmed and it took months to perfect the stunt. The hill was also as my father told me the scene of a freak fatal accident when a lorry valve blew out and went through the temple of a child.

I believe that the current cottages at the bottom replaced earlier ones that appear in a photograph I spotted in the Crown at Radnage of the view toward Stokenchurch probably taken at the start of the last century. Originally there was only one road – the old hill – the new hill having been dug by hand in the 1920s (my grandfather Ernest Maunder helped). Alongside the bottom of the new hill close by the entrance of Ham Farm was the road to the Council stores where all sorts of items – sand, road salt, a gypsy type caravan, road signs, cat's eyes etc could be found to interest us children on what was probably the original road but now is no more than a path.

It was in the field the other side of the Dashwood Hill cottages that the annual Harvest Festival was held in August. A huge marquee was erected and trestle tables were laden with exhibits ranging from home made wine, fruit and vegetables, home made cakes and jams, miniature gardens and even cabbage white butterflies skewered on pins (obviously local predators!). there was bowling for a pig and other stalls. The whole village seemed to turnout and exhibit. Certain of the villagers always seemed to win the prizes – Ken Drower and Len Whitney for dahlias, Herbie Martin for vegetables; my own mother for her home made raspberry jam etc.

The other times the whole village would turn out would be on the annual coach trips to the coast. At the time few parents had cars so a coach laden with R White lemonade bottles headed for the day to Littlehampton or elsewhere (we always seemed to stop at the Wooden Bridge Pub in Guildford). There would always be annual trips to the pantomime at the 'New' Theatre Oxford where I recall seeing such stars as Bruce Forsyth and Flanagan & Allen. These trips were important as most families relied on local buses (37 to Lane End and Frieth Horse Pond, 40 to Radnage and 41 to Ibstone and Watlington).

At various times the village was served by at least two shops and a separate post office. There was also a bread delivery from Gordon 'the midnight' Baker from Wheeler End who we as kids always tormented on his rounds in his van. There was also a weekly delivery service from Smarts the Butchers from Stokenchurch.

Brian Robertson

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