

AIRY'S

The house was owned by the Airy family for three generations: from the time of its purchase in 1843-44 by George Biddell Airy the Astronomer Royal until the death in 1964 of his granddaughter, Anna Airy, one of the leading women artists of her generation. For the first 70 years of that ownership it was used only as a holiday retreat, perhaps just once a year, and was never let out to third party tenants. It was cared for by the occupants of the adjoining cottages which Airy had bought at the same time as the main house and it was not until the time of the Great War that it finally became their fully lived-in home.

Airy had family connections with the village and had spent much time in his youth with his uncle at Hill Farm. He bought the house from the Fullers who had occupied it since at least the early years



Old Fuller's Cottage, Playford. Bernard Barton, *POEMS* (London, 1825), title page. Biddell collection

of the century. They had most probably lived there well before that as they are first recorded in the village as early as 1728 but it is not known where they lived. Certainly neither Airy's uncle Arthur Biddell, who came to Playford in 1808, nor Thomas Clarkson, who arrived in 1816, knew of anyone other than 'old Fuller' having lived there. 'Old Fuller' was John Fuller (1749-1834) a carpenter whose name first appears in the churchwardens' account book in 1794 doing odd jobs in the church but the record starts only in the previous year.¹ But before owning the property the Fullers had rented it from the Meadows, a family that had arrived in the village at around the same time but

¹ SROI, FC 22/E1/1, Playford churchwardens' account book, 1793-1845.

about whom very little is known.² Old Fuller had purchased the property before he died in 1834 and left it in his will to his widow on whose death it was to be sold with the proceeds divided between their four children.³ His widow Mary (1752-1845) was still living there in 1841, at the age of 91, but she was shortly to move to Nacton to be with her eldest son John.⁴ The terms of her husband's will stated that 'in case of sickness or old age when she may stand in need of support, she can raise money on the premises' and indeed Airy had acquired the property by 1844 at least a year before



Coffin tomb in Playford churchyard where two generations of Fullers are buried; it was from John Fuller junior (1778-1854) that Airy bought his country retreat. In the background are the Airy family graves; those of Clarkson are to the left.

she died.⁵ It is most likely that he bought it privately in 1843 the year that young John Fuller put the two adjoining cottages up for auction, property that his father never owned.⁶ Indeed, until purchased by Airy, the two separate premises, house and cottages, had a differing history: the two cottages had freehold tenure while old Fuller's house was copyhold. In a biographical note Anna Airy wrote that her grandfather 'was able to acquire in bits and pieces the little property where she now lived' confirming that the original ownership had been in several hands for in addition to the house and two cottages there was a quarter of an acre piece of land that was bought from the Marquis of

² Jonathan Meadows, who died in 1828, was the last of his family to live in the village; he had been born in Playford in c. 1746. The family are not connected with The Rev. Philip Meadows, Rector of Great Bealings, who acted as curate between the years 1823 and 1830 and was therefore a regular visitor to Playford church who would have stabled his horse in The Hollow opposite old Fuller's house..

³ SROI, IC/AA1/263/63, will of John Fuller dated 21 December 1829.

⁴ 1841 Census.

⁵ SROI, FDA 196/41/19, Playford Tithe Apportionment map, 1844. Dated 25 November of that year, Airy is shown to be the owner not only of the house but also of the adjoining pair of cottages and extensive gardens.

⁶ *Ipswich Journal*, 4 November 1843. The cottages were auctioned at the Post Chaise Inn in Ipswich which was at the town end of Woodbridge Road close to where the Odeon now stands. It was closed in 1926 but not demolished until the late 1930s. It was a former coaching inn from where Arthur Biddell used to collect his mail before the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 and the completion of the London to Ipswich railway six years later.

Bristol and added to the large garden that is now Cherry Bank.⁷ The two cottages had most probably been enfranchised only a year or so before following the first Copyhold Act in 1841 while Airy himself probably bought the freehold of the main house at the time of his purchase.⁸

Sir George Biddell Airy (1801-1892), KCB, FRS

His family background and academic achievements

Airy's father William was in the Excise and at one point in his career had been quartered at Bury St Edmunds where he formed an acquaintance with the Biddell family who farmed at Little Whelnetham. He married Ann Biddell in 1800; son George was born in Alnwick, Northumberland, the following year.⁹ Ann Biddell's brother Arthur moved to Hill Farm, Playford, in 1808 and at around this time William Airy was posted to Colchester. However in 1813, following allegations over a missing sum of money, he lost his tax collector's job and went into obscurity. From that point the young Airy was largely brought up by his uncle and it was while attending Colchester Grammar School that Airy spent his summers at Hill Farm. Arthur Biddell was much more than a farmer: he was a man of learning and a greatly respected land agent and valuer with an extensive library of books on chemistry, optics and mechanics all of which had a great influence on the young Airy and were to be a major factor in his pursuance of an academic career.

Biddell was particularly friendly with Thomas Clarkson, the slave trade abolitionist who lived at Playford Hall and who had an MA from Cambridge. Biddell begged Clarkson to examine the boy in the Classics which he did also inviting him to dinner on his 18th birthday to meet a Fellow of Trinity College who examined him in mathematics. Airy duly entered Trinity in 1819 as a sizar meaning that he paid a reduced fee but worked as a tutor to make good the reduction. Even so his Cambridge education was possible only because of his uncle's generous support. Airy graduated Senior Wrangler (the top First Class student) in 1823 and the following year was awarded a fellowship at Trinity so starting him off on an illustrious path. From here his rise was meteoric. In 1826, aged only 25, he was appointed Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge a position once held by Sir Isaac Newton and Stephen Hawking, beating Babbage, father of the computer, to the chair. In 1828 he was appointed Plumian Professor of Astronomy at Cambridge and Director of the Cambridge Observatory and in 1835 he was appointed seventh Astronomer Royal, a position that he was to hold for 46 years until his retirement in 1881.

His purchase of The Cottage

In July 1846 Airy's diary notes: 'For the first time I lodged in my own cottage. I had bought it some time before, and my sister had superintended alterations and the addition of a room. I was much pleased thus to be connected with the happy scenes of my youth'.¹⁰ From the small area of land

⁷ Letter from Anna Airy to (presumably) Mrs Lewcock, Secretary of Ipswich Art Club giving biographical notes prior to an Anna Airy Exhibition in Christchurch Mansion in November 1943. Private possession.

⁸ From the 1840s onwards the Bristol Estate, who owned practically the entire parish, set out on a programme of buying up copyhold cottages with a view to improving its housing stock. That young John Fuller was able to buy the two cottages and Airy the main property suggests that there was some understanding with the Marquis of Bristol that allowed them to do so.

⁹ George Biddell Airy's parents William (1750-1827) and Ann (1761-1841) are buried in Little Whelnetham churchyard as is his unmarried sister Elizabeth (1803-1879).

¹⁰ Wilfrid Airy, *Autobiography of Sir George Biddell Airy* (Illinois, 2008), 169.

that was advertised in the sale of the two cottages, it has to be assumed that the orchard and garden to the west was sold with the main house but, as Airy had neither the time nor the interest in looking after it, he quickly let it to one of his tenants and it became a market garden. The lay-out of paths can be clearly seen in the 1881 OS map. In 1847 he bought an additional quarter of an acre of land from the Marquis of Bristol which became the garden for the two cottages at the same time planting the elm hedge that still delineates the property's border with Roots on its southern side.



Church Cottage, Playford. Drawing by Airy's wife Richarda, July 1852 showing the dominant extension that he added on purchasing the property in 1843-44. The church lychgate, despite appearances, was a much later addition to the scene not being built until 1948. Airy family collection.

Shortly after purchasing the property Airy laid claim to The Hollow on the other side of the road but was warned off by Arthur Biddell following a letter that he had received from Thomas Clarkson.¹¹ In it Clarkson reported that his wife Catherine had recently discovered that there was, perhaps 70 years earlier, a blacksmith's shop not in The Hollow but adjoining the [north] end of the house that Airy had just bought and that when old Fuller came to Playford that same blacksmith's shop was turned into a carpenter's shop to suit him. But when he wanted a saw-pit the parish officers gave him leave to make it on the other side of the road in The Hollow but old Meadows, Fuller's then landlord now residing in Ipswich, forbade him to build it there because their rights did not extend across the road. Fuller then built his saw-pit adjacent to the former blacksmith's shop so that there were then two shops on the north end of his house. Clarkson reasoned that if Fuller had no right to build a workshop in The Hollow then the piece of land in question belonged to Lord Bristol's

waste.¹² He was concerned on two counts: that Airy might 'erect buildings in The Hollow.... and that they may be all pulled down for there are malignant persons always ready to give information' and that both Biddell and he may 'get into scraps with Lord Bristol for not having taken better care of of his right'. However, in the end Airy seems to have got his way for in his reminiscences that he

¹¹ Letter from Thomas Clarkson to Arthur Biddell, undated but c.1845. Airy bought the property in 1843-44; Thomas Clarkson died in September 1846. Private possession.

¹² Manorial waste was land that was neither let to tenants nor did it form part of the demesne land that was farmed by the manor.

wrote down in later life he refers to the 'site claimed by old Fuller the carpenter.... which has since descended to me'.¹³

The proceeds from the sale of The Cottage were divided among the Fullers' four children: three boys and a girl with all three boys working as carpenters like their father. One lived in Ipswich and the other two in Nacton. Young John Fuller, one of the Nacton boys, prospered and is described in the 1851 Census as 'cottage owner' suggesting that his days as a carpenter were long over. In the announcement of his death three years later at the age of 76 he was referred to as 'John Fuller, gent., greatly respected'.¹⁴ By then he was in possession of no fewer than seven such properties in Nacton village besides his own less modest residence of Cove Cottage standing in half an acre of grounds and boasting 'two front parlours and three sleeping rooms'.¹⁵ It was from young John Fuller that Airy bought the two cottages at auction in the Post Chaise Inn and it would have been with young John Fuller that he negotiated the private purchase of his mother's former house. Despite his relative wealth, young Fuller never turned his back on his humble origins. Of the four children in the family, it was he who looked after his elderly mother in her final years and indeed such was his devotion to his parents that he chose to be buried with them in the same grave in Playford churchyard.

Airy the public figure

Airy was already an established international figure and in middle age by the time he purchased his cottage but he went on to achieve even greater recognition. It was while at Playford in 1848 that he developed his first plans of his Transit Circle, a device that was to define the Prime Meridian 0° or longitude that divides the globe into eastern and western hemispheres as the equator divides it into north and south. The Prime Meridian has been the reference point for Greenwich Mean Time but was not ratified internationally until the Washington Conference of 1884. Airy's preoccupation with the need for accurate time, driven in the main by the advance of a new railway system across the country, led in 1852 to the introduction of hourly Greenwich time signals being sent out by electric telegraph from a master clock whose precision was checked daily against the stars through his Transit Circle. The Greenwich Time Signal, or the pips as they are popularly known, has been sent out by the BBC since 1924.



Sir George Biddell Airy, Astronomer Royal for 46 years from 1835 to 1881. Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Today Airy would probably have been called the Government Chief Scientist. He became involved in many of the great engineering projects of the burgeoning Victorian age working with both Robert Stephenson and Brunel. He was Chairman of

¹³ SROI, EG94/B1/2, letter from Sir George Biddell Airy to his cousin Manfred Biddell of Lux Farm, 1882, copied into the Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1948-1971.

¹⁴ *Ipswich Journal*, 17 June 1854.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24 June 1854. His properties were auctioned at the Sorrel Horse Inn in Fore Street, Ipswich (now closed); the contents of his cottage had been sold on site ten days before.

the Commission for re-establishing the Standards of Length and Weight after the destruction of the old standards by fire. He was one of only three members of the Royal Commission on Railway Gauge whose report in 1846 led to the adoption of the 'narrow' as opposed to the 'broad' thus preventing the establishment of various gauges being used on the English railways. In 1838 he devised a compass correction system for the Royal Navy for use in iron ships. He assisted in laying out the boundary between the Maine-New Brunswick boundary in North America. And following a defect with his sight, he was the first to design glasses to correct astigmatism. The Airy Function is today used in many fields of physics. For 55 years he was a Fellow of the Royal Society being its President in 1871 and in 1892 his obituary in their Proceedings ran to 21 pages. He was four times President of the Royal Astronomical Society. His published papers exceeded 500. Airy was given the Freedom of the City of London 'in recognition of his indefatigable labours in astronomy and of his eminent services in the advancement of practical science whereby he has so materially benefited the cause of commerce and civilisation'. He declined three offers of knighthood but finally yielded in 1872 when he was invested KCB by Queen Victoria at Osborne House.¹⁶

Airy the villager

Much has been written about Airy the public figure while achievements outside his work have often gone unnoticed. Always extremely busy and travelling extensively throughout Europe, he took little holiday and visited Playford only infrequently. He therefore played no regular part in village activities yet he left his mark in a number of ways. One such example, that lies buried in a Parish Council Minute Book, is a vivid description of the topography of the parish in the early years of the 19th century which gives particular mention of roads and footpaths as well as intriguing insights into some of the prominent people in the parish at that time. For an understanding of the village as it was in the decade 1810-20 there is no better source. It was written as a letter to his cousin Manfred Biddell of Lux Farm in 1882 in which he reminisces about his early years in the parish.¹⁷ Other matters, equally hidden from sight include:

1. His intervention in the preservation of the Felbrigge brass

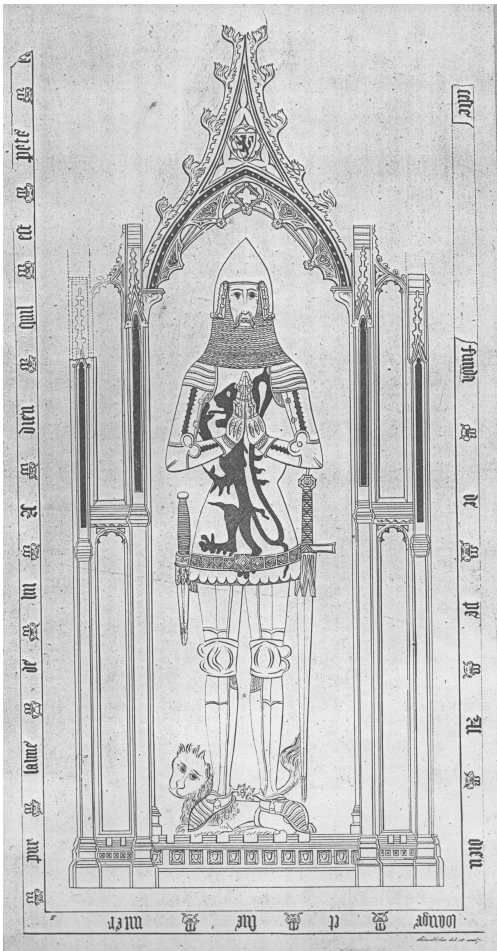
Airy had always taken a keen interest in antiquarian matters and in 1838, shortly after his appointment as Astronomer Royal, he complained to the Bishop of Norwich about the mutilation of the Felbrigge brass by the incumbent and curate.¹⁸ Why he did so and not his uncle Arthur Biddell who had been sole churchwarden since 1816 is not known but it can only be assumed that Biddell, having to live and work with the two priests on a daily basis, felt more comfortable if the complaint came from outside the parish.

The brass originally lay in the floor of a chantry chapel in the north-east corner of the nave and had in its later years become covered with pews. Airy had witnessed his uncle uncover it around the

¹⁶ For a fuller appreciation of Airy's academic and scientific achievements see his obituary in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, 51 (1892), i-xxi, by E J Routh FRS, his son-in-law and distinguished Cambridge mathematician. See also 'The published works of Sir George Biddell Airy', *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* (December 1988), 355-361. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*, Vol. cviii, 1891-92, Part ii. Airy's papers that accumulated during his time as Astronomer Royal are in the Royal Observatory Archives catalogued under RGO 6.

¹⁷ SROI, EG 94/B1/2.

¹⁸ Sir George Felbrigge (1346?-1400), a descendant of the Bigods, who were the Earls of Norfolk, acquired the parish of Playford by purchase in the 14th century. For some 600 years it passed down the family, three times through the female line, and finally to the Bristol family of Ickworth who sold it following the death of the 4th Marquis in 1951.



The Felbricke Brass (c. 1400) before the destruction of both the canopy and the surrounding text in 1837-38. Reproduced by kind permission of The National Trust.

year 1817 to show an enquiring visitor. It was 'about December 1837 or January 1838 that the Revd Mr West, Incumbent of Rushmere and Playford, and the Revd Mr Sanders, Curate of Playford, went to the church with tools and with their own hands ripped off the canopy which covered the figure and the whole of the inscription which surrounded it'.¹⁹ The two had imagined foolishly that the commercial value of the few ounces of metal thus torn off was so great that it would enable them to mount the figure in a more splendid manner.

It was no doubt due to the Bishop's involvement that an effort was made to repair the brass. No attempt was made to restore the canopy but some of the inscription formerly at the sides were placed at the foot and other fragments were inserted in other places but all the bases of the letters, instead of being inwards as they originally were, are turned outwards.

The slab was then placed within the communion rails in a north-south position where it was seen by Boutell but after the rebuilding of the chancel in 1872 it was transferred to the new vestry where it was mounted on a table.²⁰ It did not remain there for long as in 1883 when the present organ replaced the portable barrel organ all available space was taken up and it was then set in the north wall of the new chancel. Airy concluded: 'I shall be happy if by this step I have contributed to preserve a record'.

2. His alterations to The Cottage

His most obvious and perhaps best known legacy within the village is the cottage itself which he transformed from the mean and steeply roofed rustic dwelling into the iconic residence that it remains today. Named 'Church Cottage' in a drawing by his wife Richarda in July 1852 some six years after the extension had been completed, it was known in more recent times as 'The Cottage' but this changed to 'Airy's Cottage' in the 1980s and more recently (2015) simply to 'Airy's'. At the time of the Millennium the then owner aroused much interest in the local press and so re-connected the house to the Airy family in the minds of the local community.²¹ While many alterations and additions have been made notably in the 1980s and by the present owners in the first decade of the new century, Airy's large extension to the south with its castellated brickwork remains an unspoilt

¹⁹ SROB, 941/79/2. The legend in Anglo-French read: 'Sir George Felbricke knight founded this chapel to the glory of God and of the Holy Mother. Pray for his soul to God that he may have mercy....'.

²⁰ The Rev Charles Boutell (1812-77) was a Norfolk archaeologist, antiquary and clergyman. He was married to the daughter of the Rev John Chevallier of Aspell near Debenham famed for raising the variety of barley that bore his name and which was universally adopted throughout the 19th century in the brewing of beer.

²¹ *Ipswich Evening Star*, 31 December 1999. The front and two inside pages were given over to Airy and his work on the standardisation of time.

and dominant feature of the building. The view from the church path clearly shows how the original dwelling has been dwarfed by later additions.

In July 1846, when Airy first lodged in the cottage, he gives no detail as to the building work that had been carried out beyond mentioning that his 'sister had superintended alterations and the addition of a room'. The alterations must have been considerable for, judging by the drawing in Bernard Barton's book, the original cottage was completely re-roofed at a much shallower pitch and, presumably, the then thatched roof replaced with slate or other material.²² Intriguingly Airy recalls in his 1882 letter to Manfred Biddell that, with no clerical residence in the village at the time, one of the clergy 'for occasional visits built a room (now my bedroom) on the south end of Fuller's cottage' meaning that Airy added to an already existing extension. This clerical extension would have been for either the Revd Charles Day or the Revd Thomas West, both incumbents at Rushmere at a time when Playford was joined with that parish between the years 1826 and 1848 and before the present vicarage to the south of the church was built in 1845.

3. His involvement with the 'Woodbridge Railway and its passage through Playford'

Among a miscellaneous set of works on engineering and inventions held at the Royal Greenwich Observatory are a number of papers showing the work that Airy did in 1853-54 in calculating the levels through numerous cuttings and embankments that the proposed line might take through the parish.²³ An earlier railway plan dated 1845 shows a cheaper route following the course of the river and Airy's involvement in the alternative line half way up the side of the valley suggests that he may have been part of a lobby group to push the railway further away from the village.²⁴

4. His initiative in erecting the Clarkson obelisk

His greatest achievement however is the placing of the Clarkson obelisk in the churchyard though there are few, if any, who are aware of his involvement in that project. Airy had never forgotten the help that he had received from Clarkson in his younger days and was keen to express his gratitude by taking a full part in establishing a lasting memorial to that great man.

Within weeks of Clarkson's death on 26 September 1846, a meeting was called of 'friends and admirers.... at the Shire Hall in Woodbridge to take into consideration the propriety of erecting some testimonial in Playford church to mark the burial place of that eminent philanthropist'.²⁵ Robert Newton Shawe of Kesgrave Hall was to be in the chair and, it might be presumed, instigated the meeting but, while there was great support for such a course of action, there was no agreement as to the form the memorial should take. The project eventually lapsed and it was to be almost ten years before the proposal was taken up again.

Prompted no doubt by the deaths of Jane Biddell, his aunt and the wife of Arthur Biddell, in July 1855, that of Robert Newton Shawe, the instigator of the earlier attempt, in the October of that

²² Bernard Barton (1784-1849) lived in Woodbridge where he worked in Alexander's bank and was known as the Quaker Poet. He was friendly with the painter Thomas Churchyard (1798-1865) as well as with Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883) translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. He was a frequent visitor to Playford where he had much in common with Jane Biddell, the wife of Arthur Biddell, a fellow poet and Quaker.

²³ Royal Greenwich Observatory, RGO 6/453 covering dates 1853-54.

²⁴ SROI, 150/2/5.66, 4, Railway plan, 1845 and 150/2/5.75B, 31, Railway Plan 1853. The line opened in 1859.

²⁵ *Ipswich Journal*, 5 December 1846.

year and that of Catherine Clarkson, Thomas' widow, in the following January, Airy and Biddell set about resurrecting the initiative of 1846-47. And, to 'avoid the evils of indecision as to the plan', they laid down fundamental principles that the monument should be a simple obelisk of granite to the largest dimensions which their funds would allow and should be erected in a 'well seen part of the somewhat secluded churchyard of Playford in which the body of Mr Clarkson was interred'.²⁶

Airy's original proposal of 1847 was that a plain obelisk 'without any plinth or basis, merely standing on a flat floor in orthodox Egyptian arrangement [as with Cleopatra's Needle erected in London in 1878], should be placed on Playford Green' but this had now been abandoned.²⁷ In the spring of 1856 he called at the stonemason's in Aberdeen from whom he had at first intended to purchase the stone and came away with a new idea: that, as it is not possible to obtain granite shafts more than 10 or 11 feet long, it could sit on a series of three plinths each increasing in size step by step which would give added height and 'look well, simple and majestic'.²⁸ By the summer he had further firmed up his specification: that the monument be of granite, that it be simple, as for instance an obelisk, and that it bear a simple inscription such as 'Thomas Clarkson the Friend of Slaves, died —, aged —'. He also considered that it might be preferable to add: 'during thirty years a resident of Playford Hall' or something equivalent 'else folk would wonder why in Playford'. He also reiterated his insistence for a succession of square plinths to form the base.

Because of earlier disagreements, Airy laid down that the design of the memorial be non-negotiable but divisions over where to place it remained. Catherine Clarkson's brother, Robert Buck, who was the main contributor having already paid £40 or about 40% of the cost while others were invited to pay only five, wanted it in a public place and not in the churchyard. Airy agreed and if not on Playford Green he was happy with Biddell's suggestion of placing it 'on the hill by the Old Road close to the intended Rail Road.... to give travellers a notice where Clarkson is buried that they may if they please visit his grave'. However, the additional cost of enlarging the monument thought necessary if it were to be in a public place together with the additional £15 required to provide the necessary palisades to surround it proved to be too much.

Those two decisions made, the pair appear to have sat on their hands as correspondence between them came to a halt for eight months. Roused into action in early December when informed that the stones had arrived at Ipswich Docks, they arranged that Ransomes land them with their 'powerful crane'.²⁹ No thought seems to have been given to their conveyance to Playford. Wheeled access to the churchyard was then unknown and it was not until 1911, when the churchyard was extended northwards beyond the two existing large lime trees, that this became possible.³⁰ There was no recognised means of entry across the arable field as it then was. Additionally, a ditch seems to have separated the two properties and that and many graves had to be crossed before the church could be

²⁶ Herman Biddell, *History of the Obelisk*, undated but c.1916. Private possession. Herman Biddell was the youngest son of Arthur Biddell; he inherited the tenancy of Hill Farm on his father's death.

²⁷ Letter from Airy to Arthur Biddell, 2 August 1847. Private possession. By the middle of the 19th century the term Playford Green usually referred to the triangle of grass at the top of Brook Lane where the telephone kiosk now stands. It could also have referred to the original Playford Green which was enclosed c. 1815 when it was included with Bridge Meadow, the pasture field to the south of Hill Farm Road. See Glenham, p. 5, in this series for the confusing nomenclature at this time.

²⁸ Ibid. 18 April 1856.

²⁹ Arthur Biddell had married Jane Ransome, the daughter of Robert Ransome founder of the world renowned Ipswich engineering company.

³⁰ SROI, FC 22/E1/13, Playford churchwardens' memorandums and accounts, 1816-1960, 132. Item showing Notcutt's account for 'trees, shrubs and quicks' [quickthorns], £5 9s 6d.

reached. Such were the obstacles to entry from the top of Church Hill that Biddell wanted to raise the stones up the steep bank from the road while Airy preferred the option of the arable field. Signs of frustration began to creep into his correspondence and the usual deference shown to his uncle was abandoned: ‘my difficulties in suggesting anything are very much increased by the misunderstandings between you and Robert Ransome. I am sorry there has been fresh reason for it.... there has been no time when I have wanted your cordial assistance as much as at the present. You know that I have gone into the whole matter only because it seemed quite clear that if I did not the thing would last to all eternity and I always relied on you for local help. I now want it urgently....’.

Discussion ensued as to whether or not assembly of the stones should be left until the spring and, if the spring, whether they be left at Ipswich or brought to Playford. Airy continued: ‘if brought to Playford your cordial help is wanted. Will you therefore undertake your plan (of raising from the Church Road) and direct the present deposit of the stones accordingly. This would please me better than anything else. Or if that is inconvenient, will you aid my plan of carrying the load over Church Field and select a place of present deposit proper [for them]. I only take this plan because I see my way through it but I do not doubt that you would manage the other better and more cheaply and I should be glad if you would. But consider the difficulties which I am in at 70 or 80 miles off’.³¹



The completed obelisk the raising of which gave Airy ‘much trouble during the years 1856-58’. The subjects in the photograph are unknown. Biddell collection.

In March 1858 the small piece of polished granite bearing the inscription was sent by goods train from Aberdeen to Ransome’s Orwell Works and the following month the quarry owner was able to submit his final account which totalled £107 6s 6d against the £110 0s 0d that had been raised by subscription. On the brick foundation is laid a very hard flagstone into which is cut the names of the subscribers - in alphabetical order. A few of their personal details have been added here:

George Biddell Airy (1801-1892)

Richard Dykes Alexander (1788-1865)

a Quaker banker in Ipswich who retired from business at the age of 40 and devoted himself to public works. He became chairman of the newly formed Ipswich Dock

³¹ Letter from Airy to Arthur Biddell, 11 December 1857.

Commission and a director of Ipswich Water Works.³² It was Richard Dykes Alexander who made land available to the north of Handford Road for development in the 1850s stipulating that some streets be named after leading abolitionists. Thus there are Benezet Street, Clarkson Street, Granville Street and Wilberforce Street.

John Barry - nothing could be found with any certainty about this man.

Arthur Biddell (1783-1860)

Frederick William, Marquis of Bristol (1769-1859)

the 1st Marquis, whose 30,000 acre estate included the parish of Playford, was responsible for securing the tenancy of Playford Hall Farm for his friend and fellow Johnian Thomas Clarkson.

Henry Lord Brougham & Vaux (1778-1868)

He took up the fight against the slave trade in the House of Commons, was Lord Chancellor and one of the founders of University College, London. Through him the seaside resort of Cannes, then a fishing village, became very popular and it was owing to his influence that the beach front promenade at Nice became known as the *Promenade des Anglais*. A statue of him stands on the Cannes waterfront. He was the designer of the brougham, a four-wheeled horse-drawn style of carriage that bears his name.

Robert Buck (1788-1860)

Brother of Catherine Buck, the wife of Thomas Clarkson. Their father was a well-to-do yarn maker in Bury St Edmunds who, on the downturn of that trade, in 1805 reopened with Benjamin Greene an empty brewery in Westgate, later the home of Greene King.³³ Robert, a bachelor, farmed 600 acres at Nowton Hall.

John Harmer (1782-1866)

An alderman, he lived at Crane Hall, St Mary Stoke in Ipswich. A Trustee of the Savings Bank in Queen Street, Ipswich of which the Alexanders were also Trustees.

Robert Ransome (1830-1886)

Grandson of Robert Ransome (1753-1830) founder of the Ipswich engineering firm. In 1856 the young Robert was made a partner in the family business then known as Ransome & Sims. Arthur Biddell had married his father's sister Jane.

Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867)

Born in Bury St Edmunds, he became a lawyer, diarist. and socialite. He was a close friend of Catherine Clarkson. His diary contains reminiscences of William Wordsworth whose sister Dorothy was a lifelong friend of Catherine Clarkson.

Fanny Newton Shawe (1786-1856)

Widow of Robert Newton Shawe of Kesgrave Hall, large landowner, builder of

³² When Ipswich Dock was opened in 1842 it was the largest enclosed dock in the country.

³³ Richard G Wilson, *Greene King, a Business and Family History*, London 1983, 19-20.

Kesgrave District School in 1840 (see Foxboro in this series), magistrate and MP for East Suffolk. He was the instigator of the first attempt in 1846-47 to raise a memorial to Clarkson in Playford.

Anne Sheepshanks (1789-1876)

Unmarried sister of Richard Sheepshanks FRS and a friend of Airy and his wife. Sheepshanks was an astronomer who had worked with Airy establishing a standard of length for imperial measures and, after his death in 1855, his sister contributed a legacy to the Cambridge Observatory which funded the purchase of a modern telescope which was named after her as is a crater on the moon one of a few with a female eponym.

Joseph Sturge (1793-1859)

An English Quaker, founder of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (now Anti-Slavery International), campaigner for peace and extension of the vote. A memorial was erected in his memory in Birmingham in 1862 and was restored in 2007 for the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

Biddell and Airy had shared out the task of writing begging letters, Biddell covering those in the near neighbourhood while Airy wrote to those of national standing. At £40 Robert Buck's was by far the largest single contribution followed by Miss Sheepshanks who gave £20 while all others made donations of £5 a piece. Many were Quakers who had their doubts about subscribing to 'such things' but in the end yielded. One exception was Robert Ransome for whom 'the obelisk savoured of graven images'. He accordingly declined to subscribe but 'apparently satisfied the tenets of his creed and everyone else by bearing the entire cost of hauling the stone from Ipswich dock and placing it in its present position'.³⁴ Nine years had elapsed since the first attempt at raising a memorial heightening Airy's concerns that several potential subscribers would not be around for much longer. Not only had Robert Newton Shawe passed away but so had his widow (in 1856) raising unfounded fears about her promised contribution. John Barry had had a stroke and was 'very ill'. Of the others, the Marquis of Bristol (Clarkson's great friend) lived for only a year after the monument's completion as did Joseph Sturge while Arthur Biddell and Robert Buck, two of the greatest supporters in terms of organisation and financial support, were both gone within two years.

Airy's diary entry for 1858 records that: 'In this year was erected in Playford Churchyard a granite obelisk in memory of Thomas Clarkson. It was built by subscription amongst a few friends of Clarkson's, and the negotiations (*sic*) and arrangements were chiefly carried out by Airy, who zealously exerted himself in the work which was intended to honour the memory of his early friend. It gave him much trouble during the years 1856 to 1858'.³⁵

Of passing interest also in the year 1858 in his correspondence with his uncle in June, he makes reference to the Great Stink in London. The obnoxious odour that pervaded those areas close to the Thames had come about when the hot weather exacerbated the smell of untreated human waste and the introduction of water closets had added to the problem by 'making the sewage difficult to carry

³⁴ Anna Airy, *Playford Church*, 1956. Reprints of her small leaflet are still (2015) selling at the back of the church.

³⁵ Wilfrid Airy, 214.

off and [had] rendered it valueless'.³⁶ The incident set in motion plans to build a sewerage network in the capital for which the civil engineer Joseph Bazalgette will forever be remembered.

5. His renowned lectures presented in Ipswich and Bury

Airy never lost his affection for the county of his youth and his connections with Playford brought him into touch with Ipswich where, in 1846, he was one of the six founders of the Museum. Two years later he was asked by the Patrons, one of whom was John Stevens Henslow of Hitcham best known for mentoring Charles Darwin at Cambridge, to give a series of popular lectures on astronomy. The Museum's remit was to 'educate the working classes in natural history' and, as the numbers of craftsmen, engineers and mechanics expected to attend exceeded the Museum's seating capacity, the Temperance Hall was chosen as the venue. The six lectures were delivered on six successive evenings, Monday to Saturday, commencing at 8.00 pm, the one on the final day not finishing until around 11 o'clock at night.³⁷ Airy's biography declares that he had 'never seen such a sea of faces; about 700 I believe' though the seating capacity of the hall was stated to be 500.³⁸

In 1858 Airy gave one other talk in the county at The Athenaeum in Bury St Edmunds entitled 'The observations, ordinary and instrumental, on which the fundamental points of Astronomy are established'.³⁹ This lecture also attracted large numbers of people with the local paper reporting: 'that of all the crowded audiences which have filled the Lecture Hall.... that which assembled on Tuesday last to hear the learned Astronomer Royal was by far the largest.... Every available spot in the museum, passages and lobbies from which a word could be caught was filled....'.⁴⁰ By a most remarkable coincidence, Airy's talk took place at the same time as Donati's Comet appeared in the night sky, a happening that will not be repeated until the 4th millennium. It was following the happy chance of these two events that authorisation was given to build an Observatory on the roof of the Athenaeum; it is still there and has been described as a Victorian astronomy time capsule.⁴¹

His infrequent visits to the village

Apart from such isolated bursts of activity Airy took no part in everyday Playford life as, in stark contrast to his schoolboy days, he seldom visited the village. Following the death of his father in 1827, his mother shared house with him in Cambridge, this at a time when he was Plumian Professor of Astronomy and Director of the Observatory there. But, on announcing his intention to marry, both his mother and sister moved out and took up residence at Lux Farm in Playford then in the occupation of his uncle Arthur Biddell.⁴² Both women lived on there until 1839 at which time they moved back to share accommodation with him and, this time, with his wife who were now installed at Flamsteed House in Greenwich, the original part of the Observatory that had been

³⁶ Letter from Airy to Arthur Biddell, 28 June 1858.

³⁷ *Ipswich Journal*, 25 March 1848.

³⁸ Wilfrid Airy, 182. Ken Goward FRAS, *Airy's Lectures in Ipswich*, Orwell Astronomical Society, <http://www.oasi.org.uk/History/ALI.shtml>

³⁹ *Ipswich Journal*, 16 October 1858.

⁴⁰ *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*, 19 October 1858.

⁴¹ *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, **115**, 5, 2005.

⁴² Airy married Richarda Smith, daughter of the vicar of the Derbyshire village of Edensor on the Chatsworth Estate. He had met her while on a walking holiday in the Peak District.

designed by Christopher Wren and completed in 1685.⁴³ In their 12 years at Lux Farm there is not one mention in Airy's diary of his ever seeing them there despite the odd reference to visiting his uncle and the frequent, almost yearly, mentions of trips to Edensor to visit his in-laws in Derbyshire. Many of Airy's trips to Playford were, sadly, to attend funerals. In the months before his mother and sister left Playford, his two eldest sons died: Arthur at Greenwich aged five and his elder brother George, who was taken ill whilst travelling to the funeral. He died just a week later at Lux Farm aged eight.⁴⁴ They were buried at Playford because of Airy's strong ties with the place and where he no doubt had in mind that one day he would buy a cottage as a retreat from his busy life. Thomas and Catherine Clarkson's only son, Thomas, had been killed just two years before at the age of 41 when thrown from his gig in London and Airy chose a site for the two boys adjoining the younger Clarkson's burial place. Both Airys and Clarksons surrounded the graves with iron palisades which later were to enclose many other members of their respective families.

From the time that Airy actually made the purchase of his cottage in 1844 until his retirement in 1881, he usually visited Playford only at Christmas and the New Year staying on until around the middle of January; rarely did he make visits at other times. He was unable to be present at the funeral of his former mentor Thomas Clarkson as he was on sick leave at the time; he spent some two months on the Continent with his wife and her sister 'as my nerves were shaken by the work on the Railway Gauge Commission'.⁴⁵ In 1852 his eldest daughter Elizabeth died at Southampton 'on her return from the Island of Madeira to her home at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich'.⁴⁶ She was just 19 years old. And in 1860 his 'venerable friend' Arthur Biddell died: 'he had been in many respects more than a father to me. I cannot express how much I owed to him especially in my youth'.⁴⁷ And in August 1875 his wife Richarda passed away. For the last five years of her life 'she been very helpless from the effects of a paralytic stroke.... and had been continually nursed throughout this time by her two unmarried daughters with the greatest self-denial and devotion'.⁴⁸

Airy had made a visit to Playford in April 1840 when he went with his uncle to examine the damage that had been caused by a serious fire on the Eye Estate that Biddell had bought for him only three years before: 'the farming buildings of every kind are as completely cleared away as if they had been mown down'.⁴⁹ Damage was estimated at £350. This is the only reference that is made to the property and nothing more is heard about it; there is no record of its reinstatement nor for how much longer Airy owned it. With four sons of his own, it is a measure of how close Biddell was to his nephew that he should have bought such a property for him and goes a long way to explain why at the time of his funeral Airy considered him to have been 'more than a father'.

Airy was twice in the village in quick succession in 1843, in April and again in December. This was the year in which the double tenement adjoining old Fuller's cottage was put up for auction and

⁴³ 1861 Census. In the provision of domestic servants, Airy's Playford connections stood him in good stead for at one time he employed as cook not only the daughter of a previous occupier of his house, Jonathan Fordham, but also a girl from Little Bealings as housemaid and a footman from Woodbridge. Staff with Suffolk surnames also appear in later years.

⁴⁴ Headstone inscription, Playford churchyard. Letter from Airy to Manfred Biddell, 4.

⁴⁵ Wilfrid Airy, 169.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 287. *Bury Free Post*, 21 August 1875. *Ipswich Journal*, 21 August 1875. Funeral of Lady Airy at Playford. The two unmarried daughters, Christabel (1842-1917) and Annot (1845-1924), are also buried in the family grave at Playford.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.

most probably the year in which Fuller's elderly widow moved out to Nacton. By the time that the Tithe Map was published in November of that year, Airy is seen to have bought both properties but there appears to have been an intermediate owner: an entry in the church rate book of April 1845 shows 'Langdale Esq now Airy, Geo. Esq' but who Langdale was is not known but he could not have owned it for long.⁵⁰ Interestingly, the occupier is recorded as the Revd T D West, the vicar of Rushmere, Playford church at the time being united with that parish. Although a succession of curates was licensed to Playford in the first half of the 19th century, at least two of whom were required to be resident, there was no fully fledged incumbent living in the village. While West was recorded as occupier, albeit for occasional visits, he would have been using only the single room that Airy later added on to, with the rest of the house presumed to have been empty. But almost immediately after Airy's purchase and subsequent enlargement of the premises, the need to accommodate travelling clergy had passed for, when Thomas West died unexpectedly in 1848, the two parishes were split with Willoughby Dickinson the curate becoming Playford's incumbent in his own right. Dickinson, then a bachelor, had previously lodged with Jonathan Fordham who had briefly become a tenant in old Fuller's house after Fuller's widow Mary had moved to Nacton in about 1842. But when Airy bought the property and set a refurbishment programme in motion, the two had to move out. Fordham found other accommodation in the village while Dickinson conveniently got married and moved with his wife into the new vicarage across the road. They were its first occupants on completion of building in 1845.⁵¹

His retirement

In May 1881 Airy wrote to Lord Northbrook (First Lord of the Admiralty) and to William Gladstone to resign from his position of Astronomer Royal after 45 years in post and retired from office three months later in August at the age of 80. He went not to his cottage in Playford but took a lease of the White House at the top of Croom's Hill just outside the gates of Greenwich Park where he remained until his death.⁵² The pressures of work over, his visits to Playford became more frequent and he came regularly



Sir George surrounded by his family, son Wilfrid and granddaughter Anna far left, c. 1887 most likely at Crooms Hill, his retirement home at Greenwich. Reproduced by kind permission of Ipswich Arts Society.

twice a year staying for up to a month at a time. But by 1890 his powers had greatly faded; he was still able to enjoy his 90th birthday celebrations in July the following year when the clock at St

⁵⁰ SROI, FC 22/E1/13.

⁵¹ Dickinson married Mary Clarkson who had previously been married to the Clarksons' only son Thomas; she had been widowed in 1837 when he was thrown from his gig in London 'when with a lady not of good character'. Mary Clarkson was the daughter of Thomas Clarkson's younger brother John who lived at Woodbridge and was therefore both a niece and a daughter-in-law of Thomas Clarkson snr. She lived with the Clarksons at Playford Hall between the death of her husband and her marriage to Dickinson.

⁵² Wilfrid Airy, 308.

Alphege Church in Greenwich was illuminated for the first time.⁵³ In 1891 he made his usual two visits to Playford but they were to be his last. He took a fall in his bedroom in early November and it was a full three weeks before he could be removed to the White House where he died on 2 January. His body was brought to Bealings station from where it was conveyed by open hearse to his former home. Heavy snow had fallen during the early part of the afternoon making travelling difficult along the ice-bound roads; the start of the funeral, which was quiet and simple fitting the noble simplicity of his life, was considerably delayed.⁵⁴

Wilfrid Airy (1836-1925)

Wilfrid was Sir George's eldest surviving son. His life in many ways was overshadowed not only by an illustrious father but by his only child who by the time she was 30 had become one of the leading women artists of her generation. While Sir George and Anna are well known to large numbers of people both in this country and the wider world, there are few who will have heard of Wilfrid. This is regrettable for he enjoyed an exemplary career in his own field and left his mark in many, but different, ways. He was a much respected civil engineer and publisher of numerous erudite and scholarly books and articles that are now housed in no less an archive than the Business School at Harvard University.⁵⁵ Locally he was commissioned to design the telescope and observatory and



procure the scientific equipment for George Tomline's venture at Orwell Park which today serves as the home of the very active Orwell Astronomical Society.⁵⁶ Tomline was a landed proprietor of almost limitless wealth; he was the owner of all but 20,000 acres, builder of the Felixstowe Railway and pioneer developer of that town and port.⁵⁷

Wilfrid Airy was born at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, the fourth child of George and Richarda; two older brothers and a sister predeceased him. After school in Clapham, he entered his father's old college, Trinity Cambridge, in 1854 and graduating five years later was placed as a 'gentleman apprentice' at the works of his

Wilfrid Airy (1836-1925), civil engineer. He was the eldest surviving son of Sir George Biddell Airy, Astronomer Royal, and father of Anna Airy, a leading artist of her generation. Biddell collection.

⁵³ *Kentish Mercury*, 31 July 1891.

⁵⁴ *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, 51, xxi, obituary notice. East Anglian Daily Times, 5 January 1892.

⁵⁵ Harvard University Business School, Baker Library, GB/NNAF/P144806 (former ISAAR ref: GB/NNAF/P270), Professional papers of Wilfrid Airy, civil engineer and author, 1862-1916.

⁵⁶ Goward, K., 'Founding of the Orwell Park Observatory'. <http://www.oasi.org.uk/OPO/Founding/Founding.shtml> Gillian Bence-Jones of Orwell Park House is the granddaughter of Tomline's heir, Ernest George Pretymann. G. Marriott, ed., 'A brief history of the Orwell Park observatory', (privately published 1992), 5. Wilfrid Airy, 'The Orwell Park Observatory', *Engineering*, 2 October 1874,

⁵⁷ David Allen, Victorian Suffolk's Great Eccentric: Colonel George Tomline 1813-1889, *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology & History*, Vol. XLI Part 1 2005, 79.

father's old friend Robert Ransome.⁵⁸ There he served his seven years at the Old Foundry in Ipswich lodging at a house in Albion Hill on the Woodbridge Road'.⁵⁹ It might be wondered why he did not stay with relatives in Playford but Jane and Arthur Biddell had both died by this time and his cousins Manfred and Herman were not yet ready to accept guests: the one had only recently married while the other was still a bachelor. There was in any case the matter of transport and a young graduate setting out in the world would, as now, have had to rely on others. By 1871 however he was fully qualified. At the time of that year's Census he was staying with his sister Hilda Routh in Cambridge but, as another sister Christabel, was also staying with them, it could be assumed that his was a social visit rather than anything connected to his work.⁶⁰ His mother having died after a long illness in 1875, he briefly moved back to the Observatory with his widowed father and younger sister Annot and in 1881 he married Anna the younger daughter of Professor Listing a friend of his father from the Göttingen Observatory in central Germany.⁶¹ Wilfrid's daughter Anna was born the following year but tragically his wife died two weeks after giving birth.⁶² Wilfrid never remarried. By this time he had moved to The Circus in Greenwich with young Anna who was raised by her maiden aunts Christabel and Annot at the home of her recently retired grandfather just one block away in Croom's Hill. When she was 19 Anna went to the Slade and it is likely to have been at this time that she and her father took a flat in Southampton Row within easy walking distance of the art school.⁶³

Anna married in 1916 and at the same time Wilfrid, now 80, finally retired to Playford where he died in 1925. Until his move to Suffolk he had always lived either in Greenwich⁶⁴ or in central London with the Playford house remaining virtually empty since the death of his father in 1892. At that age and with so little previous connection with the village, it is unsurprising that he never integrated into local life. It was in any case a time when such organisations were still run by the few and full democratic involvement had yet to arrive.

Anna Airy (1882-1964), R.I., R.O.I., R.E.⁶⁵

After her father's death in 1925, the house remained unoccupied for a further eight years until in 1933 she and her husband Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock moved from London. The two had met at

⁵⁸ His two younger brothers also went to Trinity: Hubert (1838-1903) who became Medical Inspector to the Local Government Board and lived in Woodbridge and Osmund (1845-1928) who taught at Wellington College before becoming Inspector of Schools in Birmingham and later Divisional Inspector of Training Colleges. As a respected historian, he was a contributor not only to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* but also to the *DNB*. His son, Captain James Osmund Airy, was killed in Ireland in 1920 'after four years continuous service in the fighting line during the Great War' and is commemorated in a plaque on the north wall of the nave of Playford church.

⁵⁹ Census 1861. That part of Woodbridge Road then housed a different class of people than it does today. His landlord was a 73 year old militia officer on half pay while the neighbours on either side were two young unmarried 'gentlewomen' each with their live-in servants. Ransomes appear to have used the address to accommodate apprentices as there was another 'engineer's apprentice' living in the house at the same time.

⁶⁰ In 1864 Hilda, the eldest surviving daughter, had married Edward Routh the distinguished Cambridge mathematician.

⁶¹ Wilfrid Airy, 317. 'Throughout his tenure of office Airy had cultivated and maintained the most friendly relations with foreign astronomers.... all of whom had most probably visited Greenwich'.

⁶² Wilfrid Airy, 326.

⁶³ The Slade School of Fine Art is the art school of University College London in Gower Street, WC1.

⁶⁴ Until 1889 Greenwich was in the county of Kent.

⁶⁵ The letters after her name as they appear on the stone tablet in her memory on the north wall of the nave in Playford church: R.I. stands for Royal Institute of Painters in Water-Colours of which she became a member in 1918; R.O.I. stands for Associate of the Royal Society of Oil Painters of which she became a member in 1909; R.E. stands for the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers of which she became a full Fellow in 1908.

the Slade and had married in 1916; they had shared a studio in Haverstock Hill, Hampstead, on the other side of Regent's Park from Southampton Row where she had earlier lived with her father. Between these long periods when The Cottage was empty, she made regular visits to Playford stating that she had 'spent a part of every year of her life in the village'.⁶⁶ The family house had been unoccupied many times before but, between 1892 when her grandfather died and 1916 when her father retired, she began to use the western half of the two adjoining cottages for the storage of her paintings and continued to do so until her death in 1964.⁶⁷

Her professional life

Anna never knew her mother and though brought up by Annot and Christabel she continued to live with her father.⁶⁸ Both aunts were competent artists and it was through Anna's upbringing with them that her interest in art developed.⁶⁹ In later life she commented that : 'I had an adorable father. He was very generous and very good, I can remember him saying to me that if I persisted in going in for art when I left school that he would give me the finest art education either in this country or on the Continent that could be had at the time after which I must stand on my own two feet'.⁷⁰

As with her grandfather Sir George, much has been written about Anna and her achievements in the field that she chose to follow.⁷¹ Suffice to say here that she excelled at the Slade where she was awarded not only the Slade Scholarship but also the Melville Nettleship Prize for three consecutive years. She also won all the first prizes awarded at the School. In about 1905 she moved into her own studio in Sherriff Road in West Hampstead, the year in which, at the age of 23, her first painting was accepted for the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy where she continued to exhibit every year until 1956 with the exception of 1931. In 1908 she held her first one-woman exhibition. In 1917 she was commissioned by the Munitions Committee of the Imperial War Museum to create four paintings representing typical scenes in munition factories. Through her regular visits to Suffolk, she became involved with Ipswich Fine Art Club becoming a member in 1903 and from the early 1920s her work was accepted for its annual exhibition. But following her



Anna Airy (1882-1964) an oil painter, pastel artist and etcher.
Biddell collection.

⁶⁶ Anna Airy, Biographical notes, 1943. Private possession.

⁶⁷ Frank Mann, ex. inf. whose family lived in the eastern half from the 1880s until the properties were sold in 1970. The family maintain that the last tenant of the western half moved out in 1908 while another family in the village says that the cottage was at one time offered to Will Grimsey, a worker on Hill Farm who married in 1925, suggesting that there were no paintings stored there at around that time. However, in a letter to Ipswich Art Club Anna stated that owing to the London Blitz she had removed the 'whole of her work to her studio at Playford' indicating that there was no tenant there during the war.

⁶⁸ Census returns. In 1891 and 1901, when aged eight and eighteen, she is recorded as living with her father at 2 The Circus, Greenwich while in 1911, seven years after finishing her studies at the Slade and five years before she married, she lived with him in Southampton Row in Bloomsbury.

⁶⁹ Annot Airy had work accepted by the Ipswich Art Club (established 1874) between the years 1882 and 1895. Ipswich Art Club and Ipswich Borough Council, Retrospective Loan Exhibition catalogue for *Anna Airy*, 1985, 17. Three works by Christabel Airy were shown.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., passim. Andrew Casey, *Anna Airy 1882-1964*, (Ipswich, 2014).

permanent move to Suffolk in 1933 she began to play a more active role. In November 1943 she held a special exhibition of her work at Christchurch Mansion and two years later was elected the first woman President, a position that she held until her death in 1964.⁷² In 1952 a retrospective exhibition of her work was held in London and opened by the President of the Royal Academy; many of the paintings shown there hang in famous museums and galleries throughout the country and the wider world. Some were also bought by royalty. And in October 1994 Bonhams, the London auction house, held an exhibition of her works from the Ipswich Museum Collection as well as others privately consigned for sale. In recognition of her important contribution Ipswich Art Club established in 1965 the Anna Airy Award to promote the work of young artists aged between 16 and 20, a prize that is running today (2015).

Many Playford villagers were the subjects of Anna's paintings. Before the war these included individual portraits of George and Irene Fiske of Hill House while another was that of Col. Freeland, Irene's brother who lived at Bridge Cottage. After the war Josie Lofts, whose husband Charles succeeded Fiske at Hill Farm, posed for her in 1958. There was also a small water-colour of José Booker whose involvement in local life stretched from the church to the Women's Institute and the Parish Council and whose family had lived in the village since the 1820s. But there can scarcely have been a youngster, boy or girl, in the village who had not posed for her at one time or another and many relate stories of how they had to stand for hours perhaps biting an apple or climbing a



***Earth's Ministers* by Anna Airy shown at the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition 1930. The men are workers on Hill Farm in Playford. Private collection.**

wall for which they received half-a-crown a day. The Coles family at Railway Cottage (demolished c. 1967) were particular favourites because of their good looks and dark brown eyes. Locally, perhaps her best known work is '*Earth's Ministers*' portraying farm workers on Hill Farm c. 1930.⁷³ But while the village could not fail to appreciate that they had a highly talented artist living among them, Anna's national and international fame was

lost on many of them. Most would have been unaware for example of her earlier work that she had done in London and few, if any, had seen other examples of her paintings in exhibitions or museums.

⁷² She took over from Lord Ullswater (1855-1949) who lived at High House, Campsea Ashe, a house that was pulled down in 1956. Lord Ullswater had been Speaker of the House of Commons 1905-1921. She was also Chairman of Ipswich Museum's committee.

⁷³ It was shown at the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition in 1930.

Anna the villager: her involvement with the Parish Hall

While familiar with country life through her frequent visits to Playford, Anna was essentially a city person: born in Greenwich, educated at the Slade and working in central London until she was over 50. Yet on coming to live permanently in the country, she threw herself into village life with gusto being principally associated with the Parish Hall. Mary Kate Stevenson, the wife of Suffolk MP Francis Seymour Stevenson, lived at Playford Mount and had built the hall with her own money in 1896. It remained in her possession until her death in 1934, the year after the Pococks arrived in the village. Stevenson bequeathed it for 'the benefit of the inhabitants of Playford' and under the terms of her will her Executors (her husband and their solicitor) nominated four 'Special Trustees', of whom Anna was one, who were to 'hold such devise.... as if they were absolute owners.'⁷⁴ ⁷⁵ Not only did she become one of the very first Trustees but she also took on the considerable responsibilities of Secretary, Treasurer and what would now be termed booking clerk. The Minute Book, in her bold and confident hand, bears witness to the enthusiasm and rigour that she brought to the job; it also brings out a side of her character with which many in the village were all too familiar. At a meeting of the Entertainments Subcommittee in March 1942 a new committee member was proposed and seconded for immediate election, an action that Anna as Secretary duly recorded in the book. But in a glaring footnote in red ink when writing up the Minutes she added: 'This being entirely irregular and customarily rendering such election abortive'. Her letter of resignation was delivered the next morning. Such minor outbursts aside, she did an enormous amount of work for the hall at the height of its activity: village dances or socials were held regularly every month and, according to folklore, there were numerous occasions when, to accommodate demand, early and late bookings had to be held on the same evening. On top of all this, the Management Committee took on the considerable task of organising village celebrations of the Coronation of King George VI and at the same time put work in hand to add an extension to the hall for the provision of a store room, coal shed and toilets at its north end.⁷⁶ Anna's considerable contribution in both of these assignments is plain to see. Despite expectations to the contrary, the war brought no respite and things carried on as they had before with the added concern that the hall was in constant use by non-paying bodies associated with the war.⁷⁷ In many ways the work load increased: more bookings had to be taken, more cleaning had to be done and more fires lit by the caretaker. But there was no corresponding income to pay for it and at one point money held in the current account dipped to £2 13s 4d.⁷⁸ A further concern that the hall was to be completely taken

⁷⁴ SROI, IC/AA2/204 fol. 353, will of Mary Kate Stevenson dated 6 April 1933.

⁷⁵ The other three Trustees were: Henry Bond, George Fiske and Emma Crisp. Henry Bond was very much a newcomer to the village having moved to Playford when he bought Archway House from the Biddell family only a year earlier. He ran a large engineering business on the Woodbridge Road in Ipswich which continues to this day (2015) still trading under the same name of H F Bond but now based at Clopton Commercial Park. His daughter Daphne Yetton lived on in the village at Mill Cottage until 2007. George Fiske had lived at Hill House since 1896 and farmed all the land in the parish to the north of the river as a tenant under the Bristol Estate. Emma Crisp had moved to Playford Hall with her parents in 1878. She died just ten weeks after her official appointment as a Special Trustee and was replaced by Gerald Benjamin an Ipswich estate agent who had bought Playford Mount from Francis Seymour Stevenson in 1934. See 'Playford Hall' in this series for details of the Crisp family in Playford.

⁷⁶ SROI, GC 800/1/1, Playford Parish Hall Minutes, 1922-47, 7 December 1936. The cost of the extension was £62 10s.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 29 September 1939. Anna anticipated a complete shut down of events, entering her personal interpretation in the Minute Book: 'Social activities having ceased owing to the War and in consequence no funds coming in and also the hall being taken over as a first aid post and for Air Raid Protection....'. The caretaker was stood down only to be re-employed days later.

⁷⁸ Ibid., meeting of Management Committee 23 July 1943. Balance at end of financial year ending 30 June 1943.

over by the local Home Guard did not in fact materialise.⁷⁹ Anna retired from the twin posts of Secretary and Treasurer in 1947 stating that ‘the exigencies of her professional work prevented her from carrying on beyond the early appointment of a successor’.⁸⁰ She did however remain a Trustee until her death in 1964 having been in post for 30 years.

Anna the villager: her involvement with the church

Anna was a regular churchgoer and indeed for many years sang in the choir where, in her broad brimmed hats complete with ostrich feathers, she drowned her fellow choristers. She was elected to the Church Council in 1936 soon after her arrival and in 1941 was appointed Secretary but resigned just three years later.⁸¹ After a gap of some 20 years and following the death of her husband in 1960 she rejoined, straightaway expressing a wish to place a memorial to him on the north wall of the nave. The Council demurred saying that ‘in view of the esteem that the village holds for Mrs Pocock it is felt that they would probably want to put a tablet up in her memory at some future date and would like to include details of her husband’s record in that memorial’.⁸² There was no offence taken for within six months she had presented the church with a fine pair of silver alms dishes that she herself had designed and which were to be used only on special occasions.⁸³ Anna had previously put up memorials both to her father and grandfather on the north wall of the nave, the plaque for her father including reference to his marrying the daughter of Professor Listing of Göttingen.⁸⁴ It is from this that many in the village will have wrongly assumed that she learned German from her mother as she was frequently to be seen around the village in the immediate post war years talking to prisoners in their native tongue at a time when they were working on the farms.

The Women’s Institute in Playford, which was set up in 1923, holds no records for its first 30 years but, despite having over 40 members from across the social spectrum in the early 1950s, there is no evidence that Anna ever joined them. Neither was she a member of the Parish Council at any time in her 30 years in the village.

Her husband Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock (1879-1960)

By contrast Anna’s husband maintained a much lower profile. Referred to affectionately as ‘Old Pocock’, he enjoyed considerable sympathy being perceived as the underdog both in his art and in the partnership. And while the village rarely stopped talking about Anna years after her death, ‘Old Pocock’ was rarely if ever mentioned. An unsigned biographical note thought to have been written as background information for Anna’s 1985 exhibition by some long-term acquaintance was found among some old catalogues. It perhaps sums up his situation and ends: ‘she was [really] Mrs Pocock but I do not remember either seeing or hearing of her husband’. Yet in his early years in the

⁷⁹ Ibid., meeting of Management Committee 20 August 1942. Maj. Guy Lemprière, whose command extended to eight villages surrounding Playford, stated that the only alternative to refusal by the committee to allow full time and immediate use of the hall by the Home Guard was commandeering by the Army. Lemprière lived at Heathlands on the Martlesham road near the entrance to Lux Farm.

⁸⁰ Ibid., meeting of Management Committee 6 August 1947. She was replaced the following year by Duncan Lofts, father of Charles Lofts of Hill House.

⁸¹ SROI, FC 22/A1/5, Playford PCC Minute Book 1927-54, meeting 27 January 1944.

⁸² SROI, FC 22/A1/6, Playford PCC Minute Book 1954-65, meeting 16 July 1961.

⁸³ Ibid., meeting 15 January 1962.

⁸⁴ Andrew Casey, 18. It is more likely that the marble plaque and bust in memory of Sir George was put up by her father Wilfrid. The stone plaque in memory of Wilfrid Airy states that it was erected by his daughter.

village Old Pocock did take on a couple of modest jobs. Three years after his arrival he was elected on to the Entertainments Subcommittee of the Parish Hall, a group that Anna as Secretary scathingly reported in a 1947 footnote as having ‘faded out and no longer exists’.⁸⁵ But the



Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock (1879-1960), a portrait by Anna Airy 1906.
From the invitation to a collection of his paintings at the Haste Gallery, Ipswich, 1987.

Entertainments Subcommittee had in the meantime in 1937 carried out sterling work in organising the celebrations for the Coronation of King George VI. There were no fewer than 34 of them each of whom was given a job: Pocock was allotted food while Anna was responsible for beer and sports.⁸⁶ And in the preparations for the outbreak of war, as a man of considerable military experience but now 60 years of age, together with Col. Freeland of Bridge Cottage and Capt. Goldsmith R.N. of Gayfers, he was ‘attached’ to Air Raid Precautions (ARP). Quite what those responsibilities were is unclear as there were already three active ARP Wardens in

the village; it has to be assumed that the three officers acted as links with the outside world, in particular with East Suffolk County Council who were coordinating procedures in the parishes.⁸⁷ Although within the official upper age limit of 65, ‘Old Pocock’ never became a member of the Home Guard.

Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock was born in 1879 in Ludgate Hill within the City of London close to St Paul’s Cathedral. The son of a substantial milliner, he was educated at Merchant Taylor’s School and in January 1900 joined the City Imperial Volunteers, a company that raised 5,000 men to fight in the Boer War for which he was given the Honorary Freedom of the City of London. On his return from South Africa he registered at the Slade School of Art where he studied from 1901 to 1903 pursuing his studies as an oil and watercolour painter, etcher and pastelier. It was here during these years that he met Anna. In the First World War he served as a lieutenant in the East Yorks Regiment and married in 1916. He taught at Battersea Polytechnic School of Art and at the London County Council School of Photo-Engraving and Lithography and exhibited at the Royal Academy regularly

⁸⁵ Playford Parish Hall, Entertainments Subcommittee Minutes. Footnote added in 1947 to list of 1936 members.

⁸⁶ SROI, GC 800/1/1, Playford Parish Hall Minute Book, 1922-47.

⁸⁷ SROI, EG 94/B1/1, Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1895-1948. Inserted into the Minute Book is a full copy of the reply to East Suffolk County Council’s Air Raid Precautions enquiry signed by the Parish Representative H F Bond, 7 June 1938. Bond died at the young age of 45 within weeks of signing off the ARP document and was replaced by Col. Freeland of Bridge Cottage.



Brook Cottages, Playford, a watercolour by Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock, 1938. The cottages were all demolished in the 1970s.
<http://www.suffolkpainters.co.uk/index.cgi?choice=painter&pid=499>

from 1909 to 1936 working from his studio at 5, Parkhill, Hampstead.⁸⁸

Despite his comparatively low profile in the village, he quickly became a familiar figure painting the local scene but also venturing further out into the surrounding parishes. With his watercolours he captured those ‘pre-war halcyon years’ particularly of buildings and farmsteads in the manner of the day. An exhibition of almost 100 of his paintings was held at the Haste Gallery in Great Colman Street, Ipswich, in 1987 and five of his works were given to Playford Parish Council in 2014 which, when sold at auction, raised £810 for parish funds.⁸⁹

Envoi.

Writing to a former pupil in March 1964, Anna complained of having had ‘a good six months of what the doctor said was bronchitis’ adding that it was ‘a most shattering affair, I never knew a mere human body could cough like that without something vital busting’.⁹⁰ However, she remained active throughout that summer and opened the Ipswich Art Club’s Annual Exhibition in July but found it hard to paint.⁹¹ On the 23rd October she had got ready to go out to teach a local art class but she never reached it. A friend arriving to collect her found her sitting in her chair having passed peacefully away as she waited.⁹²

There were no children of the marriage and her particular family line came to an end. The Playford property passed to a second cousin, Col. Eustace Aubertin Airy, whose grandfather William, a younger brother of Sir George, was the vicar of Keysoe in Bedfordshire. In 1970, six years after Anna’s death, Airy sold it in three lots: the house, the pair of cottages, which were promptly knocked into one and extended at the rear, and the large garden to the west which, being within the village envelope, was offered as a building site.⁹³ When Airy died later that year the principal family contact with the village became his son James who has since worked assiduously in

⁸⁸ Jack Haste, *About the Artist*, an invitation to the exhibition of Pocock’s work, May 1987.

⁸⁹ *Benefice Newsletter* of the parishes of Gt & Lt Bealings w. Playford & Culpho, June 2014: the paintings were: Brook Lane (1935), Alder Carr (1938), Brook Cottages (1938), Dairy Cottage (1943) and Sink Cottages, 1947.

⁹⁰ Webber, *Anna Airy*, 9.

⁹¹ Founded as the Ipswich Fine Art Club in 1874, it became the Ipswich Art Club in 1925 and the Ipswich Art Society in 1993.

⁹² *The Times*, 26 October 1964. *East Anglian Daily Times*, 24 October 1964. Anna Airy obituaries.

⁹³ SROI, SC 322/11; SC 322/13, Later sales catalogues of Airy’s Cottage in the 1990s (Gobbitt & Kirby) and 2000 (Bidwells). The premises has been extensively enlarged by the present (2015) owners.

maintaining the graves and ensured that flowers are placed in the church each 27 July, Sir George's birthday.⁹⁴ At the time of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in March 2007, which was well celebrated in Playford, the Clarkson plaques in the churchyard and the obelisk were completely re-lettered. Similar attention was given to the adjoining Airy graves: the railings were repainted and all headstones and footstones re-lettered, a considerable task given that seven members of the family are buried there.



And in October 2014, at the instigation of the Ipswich Art Society, a blue plaque was erected on the former family home to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Anna's death and, because her grandfather was arguably the more famous of the two, it included his name also. Three family members, with whom the village remain in touch, were present for the occasion.

The blue plaque commemorating Anna Airy and her grandfather, Sir George Biddell Airy, set up on Airy's Cottage, Playford, in October 2014, the 50th anniversary of Anna's death.

Left to right: Elizabeth Amati, a cousin of Anna; Nicola Lillywhite, householder; Paul Bruce, Ipswich Art Society; Kristian Perry and Nicole Swengley, great-great-grandchildren of Sir George.

⁹⁴ James Airy, an architect, married Frances Cockerell the daughter of Sir Christopher Cockerell (1910-1999) inventor of the hovercraft. On the 100th anniversary of Cockerell's birth a 20 ft limestone column, designed by James, was erected in the village of Somerleyton, Suffolk, where Cockerell once owned a boatyard and where his development work was carried out. Frances Cockerell's grandfather, Sir Sydney Cockerell, was director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge for nearly 30 years from 1908 to 1937.