

CHURCH CORNER COTTAGE

In a biographical note written for a forthcoming exhibition of her work in Christchurch Mansion, Anna Airy wrote that her grandfather George Biddell Airy 'was able to acquire in bits and pieces the little property where she now lived'.¹ He had bought the main cottage at the foot of Church Hill from the Fuller family in 1843-44 and at the same time had purchased the adjacent pair of cottages as well as the extensive garden and orchard where the house Cherry Bank now stands. And to straighten up his newly acquired southern boundary he added a small triangular wedge of land about a quarter of an acre in size that was owned by the Marquis of Bristol.² He then planted an elm hedge on the new dividing line to the north of the cart track leading up to the Common Field which since 1952 has served as the driveway to Roots.



George Biddell Airy's two cottages, left, their rural setting unchanged until the early 1970s

It is not known from whom Airy bought the pair of cottages but at the time of his purchase they were occupied by a John Lord, a master shoemaker, and William Bloomfield a one-time farm labourer who was later to become a market gardener.³ Lord had recently been widowed and was living with his much younger second wife in the eastern part of the property where he remained until his death in 1867 at the great age of 90. A two up and two down dwelling, he would also have had a shed or other workplace in which to ply his trade but it is not known where that was. William Bloomfield occupied the smaller single bedroomed side where he and his wife Mary Ann brought

¹ Letter from Anna Airy to Mrs Lewcock, Secretary of the Ipswich Art Club, giving background notes for an exhibition of her work in Christchurch Mansion, November 1943. Private possession.

² Plan of land sold by Lord Bristol to G. B. Airy, Esq., June 1847. Private possession.

³ SROI FDA 196/41/19, Tithe map, 25 November 1844. Census 1841.

up their four daughters and, described as a gardener in the Census returns, was most probably the one who ran the adjoining garden as a commercial undertaking.⁴ Both occupants were already in place at the time of the 1841 Census but it is not known how long before that they had assumed their tenancy.

The western cottage

The youngest of the Bloomfields' four daughters died at the age of six. One married an agricultural labourer in the village while another married a Robinson from the large family of market gardeners



Thomas Clarkson's grandson Thomas III (1831-72). He married Sarah Bloomfield, a gardener's daughter, who lived in George Biddell Airy's single bedroomed cottage

who lived and worked at Branson's Cottages. Both women lived on in the parish for the rest their lives dying in their sixties but the third daughter Sarah led an entirely different life. She married Thomas Clarkson's grandson, Thomas III, and for ten years lived in the magnificence of Playford Hall until disaster overtook them. Both husband and wife had grown up in the village but, more because of their wide social differences than their geographical separation, it is unlikely that their paths would ever have crossed had they not become neighbours in 1845. Thomas's mother Mary was the daughter of Clarkson's brother John and had married Clarkson's only son so that she was not only his niece but his daughter-in-law. Her husband Thomas II, a London solicitor, was tragically killed in 1837 when he was thrown from his gig 'when with a lady not of good character' and as a widow she and her young son, then five years old, took immediate refuge at Playford Hall. While resident there she met and fell in love with the then curate, Willoughby Willey

Dickinson whom she married in 1843 and two years later the couple, together with young Thomas now 14, moved into the newly built vicarage so becoming close neighbours of the occupants of Airy's two cottages.

Willoughby and Mary agreed to stay in the parish while the elderly Clarksons were alive. Thomas Clarkson senior died the following year in 1846 and his wife Catherine ten years later whereupon they moved briefly to Martlesham and then to Wolferton on the recently acquired Royal Estate at Sandringham.⁵ In retirement they moved to the fashionable spa town of Leamington but chose to be buried in Playford close to the Clarkson family graves.

⁴ The 1901 Census states that each of Airy's cottages had four rooms but this is not correct. The western half, to this day, can be seen to have had a smaller upstairs and indeed between the wars Will Grimsey, a worker on Hill Farm, declined a tenancy there because the accommodation consisted of only one bedroom. Jean Durrell, his daughter, ex. inf.

⁵ Willoughby Willey Dickinson was rector of Martlesham 1859-1861 and of Wolferton 1862-1883 from where he retired.

Sarah Bloomfield's marriage to Thomas Clarkson's grandson

Unlike many girls of her class who went into service away from home, Sarah Bloomfield never strayed far from the family cottage but the young Thomas was frequently absent from the village throughout his teenage years firstly at Rugby School and then from 1850 when he was 19 at Trinity College, Cambridge, where like his father he read law. It was during his school or university holidays that a romance blossomed between the two and they married in 1855. He was then 24 and she was 21. But it was no society wedding. The ceremony was carried out in secret in London and his grandmother was never told.⁶ The marriage took place on 13 December that year and Catherine Clarkson died six weeks later on 31 January. It is not known at what point the couple informed their parents but on Catherine's death they immediately took up residence at The Hall. As the Clarksons' sole descendant, Thomas inherited virtually everything in his grandparents' wills, a fortune that Herman Biddell, a valuer, surprisingly puts as high as £60,000. But the money was not to last.



Sarah Bloomfield (1834-1886) photographed in London at the time of her secret marriage in 1855

Sarah's arrival at Playford Hall must have caused a sensation. Although essentially a farmhouse throughout the Clarkson years, it still carried with it the aura of something far grander both in its appearance and in the extent of its grounds. Coming from a family of six living in a single bedroomed cottage, Sarah had certainly moved up in the world. During their years of residence Thomas, like his grandparents before him, was first and foremost a farmer but nothing is known about how he adapted to the agricultural way of life. While his grandfather had taken a great interest and was highly active in running his estate, his grandmother relied entirely on the services of a bailiff which, according to Biddell, was without great success. Young Thomas too employed a bailiff, a Samuel Cutting from Otley, who lived in at The Hall and who no doubt had little interference from his employer.⁷ And the house was run by the same competent team of resident servants headed by Betsey County, a member of the loyal Sheldrake family who had served the Clarksons for many years. Betsey herself had first worked in the house as a girl of 13 for the old Thomas Clarkson and had witnessed the family's fluctuating fortunes through three generations.

⁶ The couple married at St Mary's, Haggerston, part of Shoreditch in London's East End. A new church, it was designed by John Nash and built in 1826-27 to cater for a burgeoning urban population. It was destroyed in the blitz in 1941. On the marriage certificate Sarah Bloomfield is recorded as being 'resident in the parish' but her 'Rank or Profession' is left blank; that of her father, an agricultural labourer or market gardener at the time, is recorded as 'Gentleman'.

⁷ In the 1861 Census the young Thomas Clarkson is recorded as a 'Farmer of 349 acres employing 14 men and 6 boys'.

Young Thomas Clarkson's downfall



Indoor staff at Playford Hall: Betsey County who was there as a girl of 13

The young Thomas Clarkson would not appear to have taken much interest in day to day matters and instead indulged himself in a life of excess. According to village gossip, 'he drank and squandered his inheritance such that within the space of a very few years his considerable inheritance had run out'.⁸ By 1867 due to his 'furtive and riotous living he had fallen out with the London money lenders and the contents of The Hall were seized and sold by auction'.⁹ The sale comprised all the furniture as well as 'the very valuable theological and historical library of 1,400 volumes formed by the late Thomas Clarkson Esq.'. ¹⁰ Also included was Clarkson's 'cabinet of very unique collection of African and other curiosities'. The cabinet was full of many beautiful and exotic goods, for example carved ivory and woven cloth, as well as produce such as beeswax, palm oil and peppers that he had collected from the trading ships he had boarded in the ports of Bristol, Liverpool and London. Incensed that such gifted people could be enslaved by others he became aware that pictures and artefacts had a far greater influence on public

opinion than mere words alone and his cabinet became an important part of his public meetings. Disturbed that the chest was included in the sale and would be lost, Herman Biddell paid 25 guineas for it at auction (£2,800 in 2017) and secured it for the family.¹¹ It is now one of the principal exhibits in the Wisbech & Fenland Museum.

The couple's disappearance to Jersey

Having run out of money, Thomas and Sarah again went into hiding this time to St Helier in Jersey where five years later at the young age of 41 he died.¹² Playford Hall, suddenly emptied after 50 years occupancy by the family, was given a thorough refurbishment and remained unoccupied for the next five years. The 349 acres of land that went with it were shared between the other two farmers in the parish, the farm buildings where the lawns are today were demolished and a new class of tenant attracted who 'was not a cultivator of the soil'. Thomas Clarkson had died from 'paralysis', most likely a stroke,¹³ and his body was brought back to Playford for burial. His funeral was a very subdued affair. A brief death announcement was



Outdoor staff at Playford Hall: James Aldous, coachman

⁸ Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: a Biography* (York, 1989), 256.

⁹ SROI, qS Playford 9, Herman Biddell, Thomas Clarkson and Playford Hall, (manuscript, 1912), 11.

¹⁰ SROI, SC322/2, Early & Absolute Sale of Genuine Household Furniture.... at Playford Hall, 25 July 1867.

¹¹ Biddell, 11.

¹² They lived in one of three flats at 48 Val Plaisant sharing the house with a carpenter and the lodging house keeper. The street contained many such grand houses that had been similarly subdivided and had seen better times.

¹³ Dr E. Cockayne, medical historian, ex. inf.

placed in the *Ipswich Journal* and the service held two days later but it can be assumed that his widow did not attend.¹⁴ He was buried in the family vault to the south of the chancel but his name was not added to those of his father and grandparents. It was however included later in the medallion and profile that Mary put up in memory of her uncle and father-in-law on the south wall of the newly re-built chancel, a memorial that also commemorates his wife Catherine and their son Thomas II. But it is doubtful if there was ever any intention for Sarah to be buried with the Clarkson family and indeed, although she never remarried, she too lies buried on her own away from the village of her family and her birth.

Sarah Clarkson's return to Suffolk

On Thomas's sudden and early death, Sarah was left stranded in the Channel Isles but at some point found her way back to Suffolk though not to Playford where both her parents and two sisters were still alive.¹⁵ She is next traced in 1881 to accommodation in Station Road, Aldeburgh, where she appears to be acting as housekeeper for a young gardener and his family in return for a roof over her head. She might even have been a paying lodger for she was certainly not destitute and on her death left the not inconsiderable net sum of £286, some £34,000 in 2017 money.¹⁶ And it was in Aldeburgh too where she befriended an Ellen Easter, 20 years her junior, who was living with her mother in the town and who is classed as a 'lady's companion'. It was Ellen Jane Easter who was present at her death five years later not in Aldeburgh but in Campsea Ashe. Sarah was 52 when she died in 1886 of 'hepatic enlargement', a condition that can be caused by cirrhosis of the liver. But whatever brought about her death she did not return from the Channel Isles covered in glory not even in the eyes of her own family where in 'marrying into a class miles above that of her own' she might have been seen have done well for herself. But she was as disowned by her family as she was by the Clarksons and so, while it is understandable that she did not return to Playford, it remains a mystery why she firstly went to Aldeburgh and then on to Campsea Ashe. Bloomfield is a common name in Suffolk and there were Bloomfields living in Campsea Ashe at the time who may have been cousins but all attempts to make a positive connection between the two families have ended in failure.

A contemporary's view from Herman Biddell

Herman Biddell (b. 1832), who lived in Playford all his life, was just one year younger than the grandson. He would have been five years old when the young Thomas first came with his mother to live at The Hall following his father's death in London. He says that as boys they 'were much together'. Having farmed at Hill Farm until 1892, he lived on in the village until his death in 1917 and, there being no direct descendants in the Clarkson line, he was able in later life to write more frankly of the couple than he otherwise might have done. He recalls: 'The grandson's life in manhood was a sore trouble to his mother and all those who had his welfare at heart. His marriage into a class miles below the Clarkson level did not mend matters. It took place before his

¹⁴ *Ipswich Journal*, 28 May 1872. SROI FC22/D1/6, Playford Burial Register 1813-1976.

¹⁵ There was ample time in which a reconciliation could have been made with her own family. Her husband Thomas had died in 1872, she was in Aldeburgh by at least early April 1881 and although her mother died at the end of the following month, her father and two sisters lived on in Playford until the 1890s.

¹⁶ Probate Register, Sarah Ann Clarkson. 3 December 1886. Gross Personal Estate £343 17s 5d; net £286 0s 7d. The will was proved at Ipswich by John Fry of Saxmundham, Gentleman, her solicitor, and Eliza Robinson, wife of Aaron Robinson Market Gardener of Playford, her older sister and the main beneficiary. It was most probably Eliza who prompted the writing of the will which was written just four days before Sarah died on 21 April 1886. It is of note that she was unable to sign her name but whether this was due to illiteracy or to ill health can only be surmised.

grandmother's death but was fortunately kept from her knowledge or she would certainly have called in the help of her legal adviser to adjust her last will and testament and possibly might have disinherited [him] altogether. Perhaps it would have been for his good if she had done so for before death closed his career he had squandered a fortune of 60 thousand pounds and become entirely dependent on his mother.... Painful as was the history of these later years to those of the relations who outlived this branch of the family, it was scarcely less so to the intimate friends who were on the spot'.¹⁷

Sarah Clarkson's burial at Campsea Ashe



A separate burial: Sarah Clarkson's fine headstone in Campsea Ashe churchyard. Her husband was buried in the family vault at Playford

While Sarah was not accorded a burial in Playford, her headstone in Campsea Ashe is nevertheless impressive, beautifully carved in expensive York stone the cost of which was so obviously beyond the reach of her family. That it was paid for by the charitable Willoughby Dickinson there can be no doubt. Thomas's mother Mary had died just one month before Sarah while Willoughby was to live for one more year. Dickinson had money. His rectory at Wolferton was brand new when he arrived there, a reflection that the Royal family in the person of HRH The Prince of Wales had that year become patron, yet he enlarged it at his own expense and within a few years had paid out of his own pocket for the complete reglazing of the east window of the chancel. Other giveaways to the headstone's provenance lie in its wording: the use of the term affliction, Sarah's age overstated by four years - an error that no family member would ever have made - but above all in the use of the Biblical text 'whereas I

was blind, now I see'.¹⁸ The quotation has been interpreted in the literal sense in that Sarah actually lost her sight; others read into it a more spiritual meaning that, while in life she might have been a

¹⁷ Biddell, 54.

¹⁸ John 9: 25 (KJV). The full text is: 'Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see'.

sinner, in death she saw the error of her ways.¹⁹ Herman Biddell, churchwarden, devout Christian and married to the daughter of the rector of Burgh, was one contemporary who lived in Playford throughout Sarah's troubled life and who no doubt like many others took a keen interest in the couple's movements after they had left the village, took the literal view. Much later so did a member of the wider Clarkson family. But Biddell also added that Sarah in her final years was cared for by Mary her mother-in-law but such a statement is not born out by the evidence. Mary remained in Leamington until the day she died just one month before Sarah whose last years, as have been shown, were spent in Aldeburgh and Campsea Ashe. Reports within the Clarkson family say that Mary, and most likely Willoughby, visited her in Aldeburgh staying at the White Lion Hotel there but this falls far short of the care that Biddell suggested.

Clarkson's descendants and Playford's present day links with the family

The grandson died without issue leaving Thomas Clarkson senior with no direct descendants.²⁰ His nearest relatives today derive from his brother John's third daughter Sophia who married the Revd. Forster Maynard, a priest at Melton. The name Maynard lives on but there are other families, notably the Linnells and the Keelings, that have a parallel descent.²¹ The personal link that has existed between the family and Playford church, which mainly concerns the upkeep of the family graves and obelisk, comes from a much more remote branch but one that continues to bear the Clarkson name. That side of the family is descended from Thomas and John Clarksons' uncle Henry and has been responsible for the upkeep of the memorials for perhaps a hundred years.

The last occupants of the western half of Airy's cottages

Sarah Bloomfield's mother predeceased her daughter Sarah by five years while her father lived on in the cottage for another ten years dying suddenly in 1891 at the great age of 87.²² The Bloomfields had occupied that half of the cottage for over 50 years and were followed briefly as tenants by an Eliza Coates, widow of another long standing Playford gardener, the couple having previously lived in the western half of Copyhold. In moving up to her new single bedroomed accommodation in Church Cottage, she took in a young lodger, a game keeper from Sutton, and after her death in 1905 the premises were never again let out but were given over to the storage of Anna Airy's paintings.²³

The eastern cottage

George Airy was certainly not troubled by ever-changing tenants: John Lord, the master shoemaker, had lived in the eastern cottage for more than 30 years while William Bloomfield had lived in the

¹⁹ The words of the hymn *Amazing Grace* were written by John Newton (1725-1807): 'I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind but now I see'. Newton had been a slave ship master before converting to evangelical Christianity, becoming an Anglican clergyman and a prolific hymn writer.

²⁰ In a letter to Augustus Clarkson dated 20 October 1932 Maude Linnell, whose mother was Mary Dickenson's niece, writes that the couple 'had no family fortunately'. Private possession. However Richard Clarkson, senior family member until his death in 1996 at the age of 92, records in his family tree that a son died aged nine.

²¹ Forster Maynard (1893-1976) was an Air Vice Marshall and Air Officer Commanding Malta during the early part of the Second World War. His son, Sir Nigel Maynard (1921-1998), was an Air Chief Marshall.

²² SROI, EC5/34/59, Coroner's Inquests. Death was deemed to be due to 'old age' and that he had died of natural causes.

²³ Frank Mann, whose family lived in the eastern half of Church Corner Cottage from the early 1880s until it was sold in 1970, said that Anna Airy stored her paintings there from 1908. Anna, born and brought up in Greenwich, did not move permanently to Suffolk until 1933 some 17 years after her marriage to Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock in 1916. Previous to that she reckoned that she 'spent part of every year in the village'.

other half for over 50. Both died in them. Unusually, following John Lord's death in 1871, his side of the property was occupied only briefly by an Edwin Skeet who worked on Lux Farm for Manfred Biddell but who within a very few years had moved out to New Buildings. It was then taken by a Robert Webb (1820-1903) in the early 1880s, whose family was to remain there for the best part of a hundred years right up to the time that it was sold in 1970. Robert Webb had moved from Branson's Cottages following the death there of his father John in 1878. John had been born at Colonel's Cottages in 1801, property that did not then belong to the Marquis of Bristol but which, with the accompanying 109 acres of land, had traditionally been let to the adjoining tenant at Lux Farm. In 1834, when John Webb is recorded as working there, that tenant was Arthur Biddell but, early in life, the young Robert decided on something more exciting than labouring on a farm and, at the age of 17, he broke the mould and joined the army.

Robert Webb's early life

In November 1838 he enrolled in Ipswich into the 1st Battalion of the 12th Regiment of Infantry, a unit that was later to become the Suffolk Regiment.²⁴ Within a couple of years it had been deployed to Mauritius where in 1810, during the Napoleonic Wars, it had assisted in the capture of the island from the French. Robert was stationed there for 7½ years and a much faded pen and ink drawing of its return to England in 1848 on the troopship *HMS Resistance* hung on the walls of the family home for four generations.²⁵ ²⁶ A photograph of the Battalion band was another prized possession but what instrument the young soldier played is not known. Always a private, he was discharged at his own request in January 1861 having served 22 years whereupon he returned immediately to Playford and, now aged 40 and recently married, took a cottage next to his widowed father at 'Branson's Meadows' where his two children, William and Elizabeth, were born.²⁷

The previous autumn in Hackney he had married Louisa Bouvier who had been born in Newington, Kent, but as there are confusingly three Newingtons in that county it can only be surmised that she was born in the one close to Chatham where Robert might well have spent time at the infantry barracks there. Family lore has it that 'being too old to serve in the Crimean War [1853-56] he ended his army days as a recruiting sergeant' and Chatham Infantry Barracks in point of fact were at one time a recruitment centre for the British Army. Robert would have been very nearly 34 at the outbreak of that war and, while that may well have disqualified him for active service, the family had firm evidence to support their recruitment story in their possession of a cherished photograph of the couple, presumably taken on



Sgt. Robert Webb and his bride Louisa. Their family lived in Church Cottage for 90 years

²⁴ The Regiment became the 12th (the East Suffolk) Regiment of Infantry in 1752 and the Suffolk Regiment in 1881.

²⁵ TNA, WO 97, 1427/85, Chelsea Pensioners' British Army Service Records, 1760-1913.

²⁶ *HMS Resistance* was a 38-gun fifth rate launched in 1805, converted to a troopship in 1842 and broken up in 1858. In the days of sail, a fifth rate was the penultimate class of warship in a hierarchical system of six ratings based on size and firepower.

²⁷ Robert was discharged on 16 January 1861 and was back in Playford when the Census was taken on 7 April that year.



Robert Webb's daughter Elizabeth who died in London at the age of 24.

their wedding day, with Robert resplendent not only with his full set beard but in his sergeant's scarlet uniform. A recruitment NCO had indeed to be of such a rank but there was nothing to suggest such a promotion in his discharge papers where he is duly signed off as a private, the same rank at which he joined. The omission remains a mystery as does the fact that his discharge was signed off at Walmer near Deal although there is no indication that he was ever stationed there.²⁸ The photograph does however lend credence to the possibility that the couple had in fact met at or near Dartford and that Hackney was where Louisa lived and worked.²⁹ At 33 and already a widow, she had previously lived in neighbouring Bethnal Green; her move to the rural seclusion of Branson's Meadows must therefore have come as a culture shock. Now a Chelsea Pensioner, Robert was immediately back to his former employment on the farm where he had worked as a boy and where he was to remain until he died at the age of 83 in 1903.

His move to Airy's cottage

By the time of the family's transfer to Airy's Cottage, their daughter Elizabeth had already gone into service but their son William moved with his parents although he was not to stay for long. Elizabeth was working for a farmer's wife at Little Wenham in 1881 when the census that year was taken on 3 April but within just 13 months, unmarried and only 18, she had returned home to Playford to give birth to a baby girl, May Elizabeth. Leaving her daughter in the care of her parents, she went off to Greenwich to work for the Airy family but whether this was for George Biddell Airy or for his son Wilfrid is not known. The years 1881-82 were a time of great upheaval for the Airys. Sir George had retired in the summer of 1881 and had moved from the Royal Observatory, which had been his home for the best part of 46 years, to the nearby White House in Croom's Hill while Wilfrid, who had hitherto lived as a bachelor with his father, married in the April of that year and found accommodation in The Circus in Greenwich just a couple of blocks away. But tragedy struck. His wife Anna died just two weeks after giving birth to their daughter Anna in June 1882 and he never re-married.³⁰ Elizabeth meanwhile had her own



Robert Webb's son William, one-time London police sergeant, with young Frank Mann, his great nephew c. 1936

²⁸ There were military barracks at Walmer which had been built in around 1794 and which were relinquished by the army in 1861 (the year of Robert's discharge) when they were taken over by the Royal Marines. Robert Webb received his discharge there on 16 January that year.

²⁹ Of the three Newingtons in Kent, one is only six miles from Chatham making it a possibility that Robert Webb was once stationed in the former Infantry Barracks there.

³⁰ Wilfrid had married Anna the younger daughter of Professor Listing of Gottingen on 27 April 1881. She died on 22 June 1882.

accommodation, a 30 minute walk away in neighbouring Deptford where she classed herself as a domestic servant and laundress but, sadly, within five years she too was to die just 24 years old, her death certificate recording heart disease. Her brother William was in attendance, her daughter May Elizabeth back in Playford with her parents was five years old.

William and other Webbs

During the brief time that Robert and Louisa's son William lived with his parents at Church Cottage, he married a Suffolk girl, a Minnie Hatcher from Saxmundham in 1885. Their first child



William Webb, front centre, a sergeant in the London police in Fulham. On retirement in his 40s, he became a doorman at the Natural History Museum

was in fact born in Playford in 1887 but the couple were soon to move away. William followed the path of many strapping young agricultural labourers and within a year had joined the Metropolitan Police in East Ham.³¹ By the time of the 1901 Census he had reached the rank of sergeant and was stationed in more upmarket Fulham. Retiring from the force while still in his 40s, he took a job as doorman at the recently opened Natural History Museum in South Kensington while at the same time his youngest

daughter Ella worked as a typist at Harrods just down the road, the two of them no doubt commuting together into central London from the family home. Both William and Minnie lived on in Fulham until they died, she in 1931 and he in 1949 aged 87 but they chose to be buried back in Playford despite an absence of some 60 years.³²

There was another Webb who joined the police, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in western Canada, but it is not known who he was. His branch of the family fought with the Canadian army at the Battle of Vimy Ridge in the First World War, visited Playford in the 1930s and remained in contact with their Suffolk roots until at least the 1980s.

The Webbs at Church Cottage

May Elizabeth, the daughter born out of wedlock, was to spend the whole of her life at Church Cottage: from 1882 when she was born and looked after by her grandparents through to her teens and middle age when she in turn looked after them in old age. By the time of their deaths she was nearing 40 and only then was she free to marry but she continued to live on in the house until her own death in 1956 when she was 74. Of her grandparents, Robert was the first to die, the old soldier

³¹ Their second child was born in London a year after the first.

³² William and Minnie's grave is next to that of his sister Elizabeth's illegitimate child May Elizabeth.



Louisa Webb in old age with her granddaughter May

living until 1903 when he was 83 while his wife Louisa, now regarded as the 'caretaker of Airy's Cottage' next door, lived until 1920 when she was 93. The couple's double grave with its fine headstone is at the west end of the church, the first of the four that look as though they are about to fall down the steep embankment into the road below. Within six months of her grandmother's death, May married William Mann (1877-1954), a horseman on Hill Farm. There were at least two other families of Manns in the village in the 19th century neither of which is known to have had any connection with the other: there was that of Abraham Mann, the cordwainer or shoemaker who lived in the corner of Archway Field and whose granddaughter Lucy left £100 to the church on her death in Fulham in 1904 and that of Mary Ann Mann who kept the adjoining Kicking Donkey in the Barrack Cottages from 1871 to 1887 and to whose memory her son erected the lychgate at the foot of the church path.³³

The Mann family of Church Cottage

William Mann's family had a much lower profile than the other Manns in the village and left no such lasting memorials neither could it match the Webb family's enterprise in finding work in London not to mention overseas. But their low-key demeanour and reserved nature carried with it great respect. William's marriage to May was one between two long established and well regarded Playford families and where both their grandfathers had been born in the village.³⁴ William had started out as a boy on Hill Farm working briefly for Herman Biddell until his retirement in 1892 and then as horseman for George Fiske on his arrival four years later staying on until past his pensionable age at the end of the Second World War. His father, William senior (1842-1916), had worked on Lux Farm for Manfred Biddell living firstly at New Buildings where he was most probably a stockman. But trouble befell him in early life. He had married Elizabeth Amos from the village who tragically died when she was 33. Their son William junior was just a few weeks old and a daughter Elizabeth was only six at the time. Sympathetic to



May Mann in later life outside Church Cottage where she was born in 1882 and where she died in 1956

³³ SROI FC22/A1/7. Minutes of Playford Parochial Church Council, 1965-82, June 1975. Lucy Mann's gift appeared separately in the church accounts for many years as 'Mann Trust, 3½% War Stock' but was merged with the General Fund in 1976 when it lost its identity. There was another William Mann who lived briefly at Branson's Cottages but, compared with other Manns in the parish, he seemed always to be on the move. His son, for example, was born in Burton-upon-Trent in 1876 strongly suggesting that he had at one time, like many other Suffolk farm labourers, been a seasonal maltster at the brewing premises of Bass & Co. whose headquarters were in the town.

³⁴ Charles Mann (1816-1881), born and died in Playford, was an agricultural labourer who worked on the Ipswich to Lowestoft railway line in the 1850s 'until it was too far for him to walk each day'. That is probably as far as he ever went while by contrast Robert Webb (1820-1903), also born and died in Playford, served in the army for 22 years and was stationed in Mauritius for 7½. Both his son and his daughter worked in London.

his plight and no doubt won over by his respectful nature, he was taken into Lux farmhouse by his kind-hearted employer where he stayed for seven years until he remarried. Throughout this time the two children were cared for by the Paternosters, long-time family friends who according to the



William Mann senior (1842-1916), groom for Manfred Biddell at Lux Farm

Census reports considered them as their own grandchildren.³⁵ But when Sam Paternoster's wife died in 1882, Elizabeth Mann, then only 13, became the family housekeeper remaining with him until he died in 1914. Her brother William however returned to live with his father and his new wife but when his father had to leave Lux Farm Cottages on the death of Manfred Biddell in 1894, he was 17 and already had a job on the farm. While his father moved away from the parish, William junior went back to live with his sister until he married in 1921.

On remarriage in 1883 William senior and his new wife were the first to move into one of the new red brick cottages that had been built in front of Lux farmhouse the previous year and that is where they remained until Manfred's death in 1894.³⁶ Having worked cheek by jowl with the Biddell family for many years, William's standing had risen from that of general farm labourer to groom and gardener and he had become a firm family favourite. But, unwanted by the new farm tenant Sam Sherwood and still only 54, he was found a job in Crescent Road, Ipswich, to where Manfred's widow Sarah and family had moved

after his death. There he worked as gardener for Horace Wolton, a retired farmer from Newbourn Hall and a relative of the Biddells who were his next door neighbours.³⁷ His wife also worked there as cook. And on Wolton's death in 1912 William senior moved to Sun Lane in Woodbridge where he became a self employed 'jobbing gardener'. He died in 1916 having briefly returned to Playford, almost certainly to be with his son and daughter-in-law at Church Cottage and is buried in the churchyard in an unmarked grave.

Frank Mann (1922-1997)

William's son, William junior, inherited his father's relaxed and courteous manner but he never did domestic work and remained a horseman on the farm for the whole of his working life. His traits were in turn passed on to his son Frank but not without one unhappy consequence. Frank was born in 1922 an only child of the marriage and when war broke out in 1939 he was approaching military

³⁵ As a boy Sam Paternoster had worked alongside his father for old Thomas Clarkson on Playford Hall Farm.

³⁶ SROI, HD436/3, *Extracts &c. from the books and papers of the parish of Playford*, Manfred Biddell, 1882, 17.

³⁷ Manfred and Sarah Biddell's daughter Lucy had married Cordy Samuel Wolton who was a nephew of Horace Wolton. The two Wolton brothers farmed in a big way: Horace had farmed 840 acres at Newbourn Hall while his brother Samuel farmed firstly 1,000 acres in Kesgrave before moving to Butley in c. 1870 where his acreage jumped to almost 3,000. Lucy Biddell was a grandmother of Owen Goldsmith, the last of the family to live in Playford. Owen died in 2012.

age. He had attended Kesgrave Area School (now Kesgrave High School) in its third year after opening in October 1931 and, leaving at the age of 14, took a gardening job with the McEldowneys in Great Bealings.³⁸ But with a likely call-up approaching, he handed in his notice and went to work for George Stennett on Lux Farm in what had become a Reserved Occupation. The move went down badly in the village and was held against him by some for the rest of his life. Matters were made far worse when, in order to accommodate him on the farm, Stennett dismissed the young Ernest Frost, as he was quite entitled to do without reason in those days, who was immediately conscripted into the Royal Artillery and, within a year, was killed at Tobruk.³⁹ Neither did Frank's reputation improve when, as soon as possible after war ended, he gave up the rigours of farm work for less demanding and secure employment with the local authority.



William Mann junior (1877-1954), horseman for George Fiske on Hill Farm

But time can be a great healer and, while there remained one or two who could neither forgive nor forget, the 'stigma' gradually fell away to reveal the true character of the man: quiet, peace loving, unassertive, self-effacing and, above all, much liked particularly by all those unaware of his past. His two war-time friends stuck by him, even the one who Frank had recommended as a replacement for his gardener's job in Bealings only to be immediately called up. As an only child and with such attributes in both father and son, it is not hard to see how things came to such a pass. With a better education and from a different social background he might well have applied to become a conscientious objector but such a step was beyond the family's grasp. There was already in the village a Quaker, Edward Collinson an Ipswich solicitor, builder of The Ridge in 1938 and chairman of the Parish Council, who in 1941 left Playford for London not to fight but to work in London among victims of the blitz.⁴⁰ As a Quaker Collinson carried not one jot of the opprobrium that Frank had to bear and indeed enjoyed the greatest respect for the views that he held. Such was Frank's peace-loving nature that that was the path he should have taken and, as if to prove the point, during the period of turbulent labour relations in the 1970s when local authority employees went on

³⁸ The Area School principle was that all Kesgrave children from five years old and upwards attended plus all those over 11 from the surrounding parishes.

³⁹ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Gunner Ernest Frost, son of Samuel and Dorothy Frost of Playford, was killed on 21 May 1941 aged 22. He is buried in Tobruk War Cemetery. The successful defence of the deep sea port against the siege by Rommel's Afrika Korps, which went on for over eight months from April to November 1941, was regarded as one of the Allies great successes of WW II coming little more than a year after the disaster of Dunkirk.

⁴⁰ Edward Collinson was Chairman of Playford Parish Council from 1940 to 1941 and again after the war from 1946 to 1955. After 1941 he was followed by the vicar, the Revd. Charles Houghton, until 1943 subsequent to which the Council did not meet again until Collinson's return after the war.

strike across the country, rather than get involved in any such confrontation, he took the relevant time off work as his holiday entitlement. But as might be expected of the man, only a very few were aware of that at the time.

Frank in the Home Guard

As a farmworker Frank did however serve in the Home Guard which was manned by those either too young or too old to join the services as well as by those who were in reserved occupations.⁴¹ Although a volunteer force, pressure was often brought to bear on individuals who were slow to



Frank Mann (1922-1997), employed on Lux Farm during the war, spent the rest of his working life with the County Council

sign up and George Stennett, Frank's employer and a lieutenant in the Playford platoon, was one in a position of such influence. The Home Guard had been set up in May 1940 at the time of Dunkirk but once the threat of invasion had passed following victory in the Battle of Britain in October that year most of the risk attached to their role had been removed and in fact, following the D-Day landings of June 1944, the force was stood down. Perhaps ironically, Frank's only encounter with the enemy came, not when he was in uniform but when he was ploughing on Lux farm. He and another young lad, Jim Woods then 17, were working to the south of New Buildings when a V2 rocket landed in the adjoining field, only one of four to do so in Suffolk. Jim was blown off the front wheel of his tractor on which he was standing in order to re-fill the fuel tank and, 'never having heard a thing', assumed that the fuel had ignited. He was surprised however on looking around to see a large plume of soil being hurled towards Rushmere and some half a dozen corn stacks set alight. He immediately realised what it was. The blast was also well remembered by others in the village for, while Playford Hall was sheltered from the explosion, many windows at both Archway House and the shop were blown in as was the door of a bumbie (outside toilet) while its occupant was comfortably seated inside.⁴²

Despite such a dramatic and hair-raising experience and despite his undoubted interest in all things historical, Frank never once discussed the incident with anyone nor indeed did he ever make mention of anything that happened between the years 1939 and 1945. The war was a taboo subject and one that perhaps caused him great pain. He did however once let slip that he was present at Playford Mount on the evening that it was hit by an incendiary bomb and that the Revd. Houghton,

⁴¹ Initial conscription into the services was limited to single men between the ages of 20 and 22 but after September 1939 all males between the ages of 18 and 41 had to register.

⁴² *Fynn-Lark News*, April 2017, 12. The article gives not only greater detail of the incident itself but also a brief history of V1 and V2 attacks on south-east England. It also outlines the differences between the two weapons which, though quite distinct, are often confused.



Cyril Gardiner calls at Church Cottage to collect Frank Mann for Home Guard duty. Awaiting call-up, Cyril was to drive a Sherman tank at the battle of El Alamein in 1942

the then vicar, had taken it upon himself to keep sightseers at bay.⁴³ But that was the sum total of Frank's war. Apart from the V2 incident there would have been so much to say: the numerous bombs intended for Martlesham airfield that fell on the heath between Playford Road and the former A12 - land which at that time belonged to Lux Farm on which he worked, the three aircraft that crashed in the parish, the evacuees from West Ham, the formation of the Home Guard and who served in it, the commandeering of Playford Hall by the military and its use by USAAF officers stationed at Martlesham and so much more. But not a word.

With both sides of his family having deep roots in the village, he took great interest in its history though, sadly, there were times when he had been misinformed. While he was acceptably accurate over the date on which the mill ceased to operate, which he put at 'about 1870' based on the fact that a great-uncle [William Webb] born in 1862 could remember it while an aunt [Elizabeth Mann] born in 1868 could not', he was way off the mark in maintaining that the mill stream was fed from the river Fynn three quarters of a mile to the west of

Playford Hall and that the same mill stream went in and out of Playford Hall moat when in fact it ran parallel to the river and formed the northern boundary of Playford Hall grounds.^{44 45} Such examples go some way to emphasise the dangers that historians face in accepting hearsay evidence without at the same time corroborating the facts in written records. An impossible task.

Frank had been born in the eastern part of the two cottages in 1922 and had lived there with his parents until they died in the '50s. He remained there as a bachelor until the property was sold in 1970 throughout which time there



Frank Mann on tractor drilling corn on Lux Farm c. 1946

⁴³ SROI HD3071-2, *Air raids in Ipswich and surrounding area*. Also a website now taken down. Playford Mount was most likely hit on 3 November 1943 by German aircraft jettisoning unused bombs on their way home. They fell in a line from Culpho Corner to Boot Street following an early evening attack on Ipswich at 1705 hrs, one of the biggest raids on the town during the war. Twenty German planes dropped 5,000 incendiary and 36 high explosive devices on the north and east of the town. Support for the month and time of day of the Playford Mount hit comes from José Booker who recalled village children watching a 'Bonfire Night display' as the bombs rained down on the field to the north of the village and support for the year comes from a War Damage Commission claim by Gerald Benjamin, then owner of Playford Mount, dated 4 December 1943. Private possession. The Revd Houghton served briefly in the Home Guard but, aged 65 in the summer of that year, he should officially have retired though the age limit was not always strictly adhered to.

⁴⁴ *Suffolk Mills Group Newsletter*, October 1991, 10. Letter to the Editor from Frank Mann.

⁴⁵ The mill closed in 1874. Both Ethel Burch (1895-1969), whose grandfather was the last man to operate the mill, Herman Biddell and William Howell, whose great-grandfather was the last tenant at the mill, all stated that it was fed by springs in the Alder Carr, evidence supported by the lack of any surviving water course further up the valley. Quarter Sessions Order Plan, 1870. Private possession. The map clearly shows the river and mill stream running parallel to each other some little distance to the north of Playford Hall and its moat.

had been no adjustment to his rent which remained at £5 a year. He actually moved out in the previous year and, perhaps with a little financial help from the Airys, was able to buy Lower Lodge in Brook Lane, a property that had come on to the market following the death of Olive Pipe, niece by marriage of Caroline Pipe for whom the little house had been built by Herman Biddell in 1914. He lived there in spartan conditions for 28 years until he died in 1997 and, with no close relatives apart perhaps from his Canadian cousins with whom he had maintained a slender contact, left his considerable estate of £140,000 (nearly £250,000 in 2017) to charity.⁴⁶

The sale in 1970

George Biddell Airy had bought the properties in 1843-47 in three separate lots and it was perhaps fitting that after 125 years of family ownership they should have been sold in exactly the same way. Anna had died in October 1964 and her husband Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock four years before



Frank Mann (left) with visitors in the late 1960s, the last photograph to be taken of the property before its sale

that; there were no children of the marriage. The main house where they had lived remained empty for six years and was bought by a builder, Gordon Nunn, who later put up the four new houses at The Brook. Frank Mann's cottage and the one next door were bought, made into one and greatly extended towards the north by David Allen who worked for an agricultural chemical company. And the orchard was bought by Chris Penn who worked for an Ipswich firm of timber importers and who immediately built a house on the plot. While the latter property has to date had just the one change of ownership in the 45 years since the initial purchase of the plot, both the main house and the two cottages have changed hands many times in sharp contrast to the years when they were in the ownership of the Airy family.

⁴⁶ At probate the house was valued at £70,000, the other £70,000 being an assortment of savings.