

## GLENHAM

(formerly The Old Post Office)

### The names

The name Glenham is quite new, dating only from the 1960s when the house was named after Geoff and José Booker's two young children Glenda and Graham. The two cottages had previously been known as The Old Post Office although they never were a post office in the modern sense of the term. Villagers used to go to the front porch to collect their mail and to buy their stamps from a postman who had walked over the Warren from Tuddenham and who took their out-going letters back by way of Culpho. By 1887 both letters and parcels were being delivered to everyone's door 'excepton of a few that live in the out of the way houses' although plans were already afoot to include these as well.<sup>1</sup> The new shop on the corner of Church Lane and Butts Hill had opened that same year and, described in the 1891 Census as a Post Office, it was at that time that these two cottages acquired their earlier name.



The Old Post Office from a painting of 1890: village mail was delivered to and collected from the front porch. In 200 years the property has been owned by only two families.

### Two farm cottages



Photograph taken sometime before the roads were made up in 1930. The Old Post Office is on the left of the picture with Bridge Cottage beyond

As with the former Barrack Cottages in the corner of Archway Field (demolished in 1892) and Foxboro at the top of Hill Farm Road, Glenham was constructed out of materials from the St Helen's Barracks in Ipswich when they became redundant towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>2</sup> Put up by Arthur Biddell of Hill Farm as a double dwelling for labourers, they were built on land that only a year or two earlier had been common pasture. Until about the year 1812

Playford Green lay in what is now part of Bridge Meadow, the pasture field to the south of Hill Farm Road. It was bordered on the west by the road to Ipswich and on the south-east by the

<sup>1</sup> James Frost (1835-1906) reminiscing in 1887 about changes in the village during his lifetime. Private possession.

<sup>2</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, 13 March 1813, 8 July 1816, advertisements for the sale of demolition materials began in March 1813 before the war had ended. The final sale seems to have taken place in July 1816 when furniture, utensils, fittings and fixtures were put up for auction. In the same month all the buildings and land were also sold.

prominent ditch that is still highly visible today from the entrance into Spring Meadow.<sup>3</sup> The construction of the cottages is unusual in two other respects: that Arthur Biddell, a tenant rather than his landlord Lord Bristol, was permitted to build them and that they remained in his family for 135 years - long after his descendants had stopped farming the surrounding land.

### **Enclosure of the Common**

Without enclosure, building on the Common would not have taken place and it is right that in any history of the house the circumstances that brought this about should receive attention. Biddell wasted no time after the land had been fenced in, a couple of years at the most, before he started to erect the two properties and they remain to this day a witness to the changes that were taking place around that time. Enclosure was going on elsewhere in the parish. In the middle years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Common Field, lying between Church Road and Butts Road, still retained its medieval strips.<sup>4</sup> More than seventy years later, in 1816, much of William Branson's property still lay scattered within this field.<sup>5</sup> And only a few years earlier John Gayfer had exchanged an acre of land in Stack Hill, close to the church, for a similar sized strip in Church Lane where his name lives on in the house that he erected there.<sup>6</sup>

High prices throughout the wars with France had encouraged landlords up and down the country to increase production and enclosure was seen as the way to achieve this. In particular, the passing of the General Enclosure Act of 1801 facilitated the enclosure of common lands and where three quarters of the landowners agreed, villages were now free to proceed.<sup>7</sup> Playford had no need for such legislation as the Marquis of Bristol, being sole owner of the parish, had total control and therefore no need of an Act of Parliament. The legislation however did give him a legitimacy that he might otherwise not have enjoyed. By losing their acre strips and their right to graze on the common, a greater division grew up between the classes. Landlords became wealthier by the appropriation of public land and, with their estates now divided into much larger lots, those tenants who were already well established increased their acreages still further. Nothing was left for the smallholder or the husbandman who invariably became a paid labourer on one of the larger farms or who moved into larger centres of population to find employment there.<sup>8</sup>

Playford's population did indeed fall between the years 1801 and 1811 but, as Manfred Biddell reports, this was a temporary situation as men required for work in the garrison town of Ipswich returned to swell the numbers.<sup>9</sup> Thus by 1821 the population had not only returned to its former

---

<sup>3</sup> SROI, EG94/B1/2, letter from Sir George Biddell Airy to his cousin Manfred Biddell, 1882, copied into the Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1948-1971.

<sup>4</sup> SROI, HA2/B4/1, plan by Henry Gall, 1740, showing medieval strips both in Common Field and Back Harrow (north of Branson's Lane).

<sup>5</sup> SROI, HD436/3, 85, Branson died that year and 'his little farm on the Butts Road' was bought by Arthur Biddell.

<sup>6</sup> SROI, HD11:475/2251, plan by Isaac Johnson of Woodbridge, 1754-1835, showing Gayfer's acre strip lying in Stack Hill (east of St Mary's Drive) and its replacement in Church Lane.

<sup>7</sup> SROI, EG2/A1/1, Enclosure Acts and Awards, locally Westerfield Green was also enclosed at this time (1808) as was Bucklesham, Foxhall, Iken, Nacton, Trimley and Kirton. Reydon Common near Southwold is just another example, *The Southwold Diary of James Maggs*, 1818-1876; W E Tate, *Suffolk Enclosure Acts and Awards*, Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History, Vol. XXV, Part 3, 225.

<sup>8</sup> Resentment aroused by these actions was still rumbling among long-standing families in the village as late as the year 2000. To add to the ill feeling, a plaque on the old chancel wall, declaring that the Common Field was public land, was reputedly 'lost' when the chancel was rebuilt in 1873-74. Booker tapes, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> SROI, HD436/3, Playford's population in 1801 was 216, in 1811 it was 189 but by 1821 it had jumped up to 264.

level but had increased considerably beyond it giving rise to a surplus of labour which presented huge problems in trying to maintain full employment and resulted in a squeeze on both wages and housing in the decades that followed.

## Allotments

Many of those disenfranchised were provided with other smaller pieces of land in a scheme that started nationally in the 1760s. It was however entirely dependent on the generosity of individual landlords and it was not until the middle years of the following century that a reasonable level of progress had been achieved. Lord Tollemache of nearby Helmingham, for example, during the middle years of the 19th century provided the labourers on his estate with 'sufficient land to keep a few animals'. His catch-phrase was '3 acres and a cow' but his sentiments were unusual. Nationally some plots at this time could be as large as 1-2 acres but most would have stuck to the letter of the law of the early 1830s which set a benchmark figure of between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and 1 acre in size.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest evidence for allotments in Playford comes from a plan of 1833.<sup>11</sup> They may well have been established much earlier than this as from a schedule of *c.* 1770 it can be deduced that Allotment Field, where The Courts and Roots now are, was not let out to any agricultural tenant but was held directly by the Estate.<sup>12</sup> There is a presumption therefore that the field may well have been used for purposes other than farming as indeed was the case with the one acre plot of land where the Church Lane council houses now stand which until comparatively recent times was used as a market garden.<sup>13</sup> Other allotments are recorded in 1846 occupying the south-west corner of Railway Field to the south of the track into the mill.<sup>14</sup> And yet further allotments, where a tenancy is not attached to any particular cottage, are to be found in Archway Field in the 1890s and in the early years of the following century in the Miller's Field where the Village Hall now stands.<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> In the early 1950s one solitary allotment remained, the last in the village, and lay in what is now St Mary's Drive amongst gardens that were allotted to the cottages in Sink Meadow below.

---

<sup>10</sup> Standard municipal allotments in towns today are one sixteenth of an acre at an annual rent of around £75. In the 1890s those in Playford, of an indeterminate size, cost 12s 6d (62p) a year while in 1934 'various tenants' in Miller's Field, thought to be no more than six and no doubt subsidised by the Liberal Francis Stevenson who owned them, paid £1 16s 8d (£1.83) between them or about 6s 0d (30p) each.

<sup>11</sup> SROI, HD11:475/2250, Isaac Johnson's plan of the 4 acre field between The Courts and Butts Road, 'late the property of Mr John Gayfer decd'.

<sup>12</sup> SROB, HA507/3/765.

<sup>13</sup> SROB, HA507/2/484, the one acre of land in Church Lane on which the four council houses were built was a market garden at least since the C18th. Two cottages stood on the site, one of which was a beer house called the White Horse Inn later known as the Eel's Foot. A freehold property, it was bought by the Bristol Estate in 1872 and the cottages were demolished as part of its programme of improving the housing stock in the village. The last occupier of the land was William Noller who lived in Sink Meadow Cottages and who moved away in 1946. The council houses were put up two years after he had left.

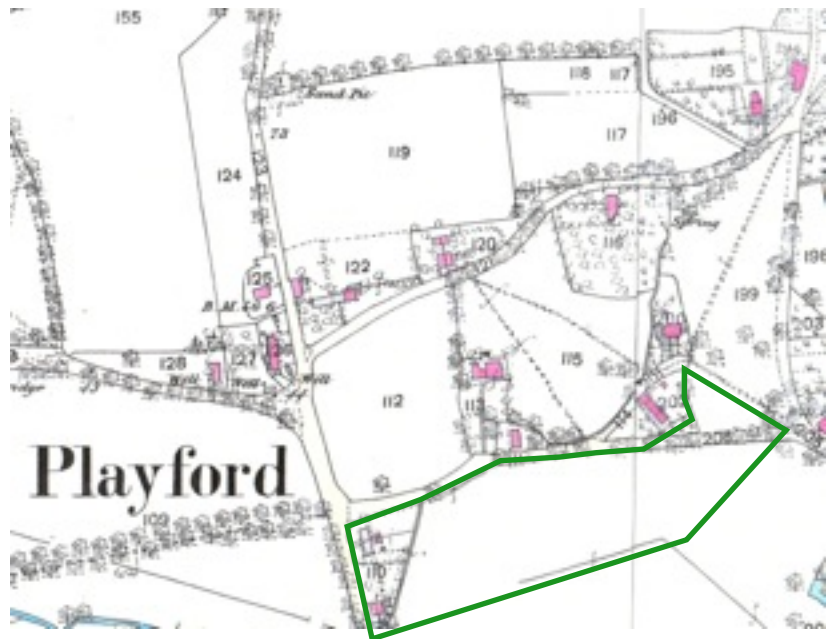
<sup>14</sup> SROI, 150/2/5.75A, proposed railway line plan.

<sup>15</sup> SROB, HA507/2/490.

<sup>16</sup> OS Map 1927, Suffolk East Sheet LXXVII, 25" to the mile. Sale catalogue, Playford Mount, 17 October 1934, private possession. Mary Kate Stevenson, whose death brought about the sale, had built the Parish Hall in 1896 on land acquired from the Bristol Estate by her husband who was MP for the Eye Division. Gerald Benjamin, an Ipswich estate agent, was the purchaser; he sold the field to Playford Parish Council in 1940 'for the purposes of a public recreation ground'.

## Playford Green

The new ruler-straight road up the hill to the farm was made to improve access which had previously followed the 'petty stream' as a 'narrow lane.... through the trees of Bridge Meadow; a bad drive at night'. Standing beside the common was a fine wattle and daub husbandman's house possibly of 16<sup>th</sup> century date but which at the time of enclosure had already been divided into two cottages. It remained as housing for two farm workers up to the 1950s when it was demolished to make way for Cobblers, the first of the houses to be built in the village's 20<sup>th</sup> century redevelopment.



Playford Green c. 1812 as interpreted from Biddell Airy and superimposed on an OS map of 1880. The ruler-straight road leading up to Hill Farm was constructed c. 1814; the route of the former access, heading north-east towards the church, can clearly be made out both on the map and on the ground. Because of its small size, it is quite possible that at one time the Green extended south of the river and had been subjected to an earlier partial enclosure



Looking north from the Green towards the church. Foreground: the medieval wattle and daub former yeoman's house. A single dwelling in 1772, by 1837 it had been converted to two farm cottages, evidence of the social changes that were taking place around that time. The property was demolished in the 1950s to make way for Cobblers. The red brick tenement, there in 1798, is Sink Meadow Cottages which were on the other side of the the 'petty stream' and on the former road to Hill House. Artistic licence has brought them out from behind the other building. Both date and artist are unknown

Still earlier evidence for the existence of the Green is provided by a Licence from the Crown in 1708 to Thomas Felton, lord of the manor, who was seeking to improve his privacy by diverting a right of way that passed too close to the Hall. It authorised him to 'stop up and enclose' the common horseway from The Brook to Rushmere Street, the present RUPP 19 that runs past New Buildings. In its place, traffic to Ipswich was diverted to 'another ancient common highway leading from..... Playford Street and from thence through and across the common pasture called Playford Common on the common high road called

Ipswich Road....'.<sup>17</sup> As the road went 'across the common pasture' rather than beside it, the Common's earlier existence on the very edge of the village is not only confirmed but it is described as unfenced land as would be expected.

Behind this ancient husbandman's house, and divided from it by the stream, was a late 18th century brick-built double cottage lying in Sink Meadow. All four properties, despite sharing a well, drew water from this stream up to the time of their demolition. The two families that were displaced from Sink Meadow were both key agricultural workers on Hill Farm and moved into newly built cottages at the top of the hill in 1963.<sup>18</sup>

The term 'Green' continued in use throughout the 1800s long after the original Common had been fenced in. From about the middle of the century however the term referred to the small triangle of grass at the top of Brook Lane where the telephone kiosk now stands and above which stood an assortment of terraced cottages. Before enclosure and for many years afterwards, this triangle was referred to as the 'Little Green' but gradually this descriptor fell out of use. However, as late as 1848 a conveyance for the Sink Meadow cottages, referred to above, describes the property as facing 'south upon a lane leading from Playford Green to the Church'.<sup>19</sup> And to add to the confusion, Arthur Biddell in his will written in 1860 describes his cottages, now named Copyhold and Gayfers, as 'near the Green'. Caution has to be exercised in determining which Green is being referred to.

When Arthur Biddell arrived in the parish in 1808, one part of Bridge Meadow very close to Hill House belonged to Hall Farm and what is now called the Cricket Meadow, immediately to the north of the Hall, formed part of Hill Farm but these were exchanged soon after his arrival. The newly expanded area of Bridge Meadow, having taken in the former Common and now under a single tenancy, continued as pasture right up to and throughout the Second World War and indeed remained as grassland throughout the ploughing-up frenzy of the 1950s. It finally succumbed to the plough in the late 1960s when the financial incentives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Community led to the over-production of cereals. After about 20 years as arable it returned to grass.<sup>20</sup>

### **Enclosure: The Winners and The Losers**

The Estate, inevitably, came off best: it had gained acres at the expense of the poor and received increased rents from the ploughing up of new land on the heath at the far end of the parish.<sup>21</sup> The large farm tenants too had yet bigger and better-organised farms and, with a ready supply of

---

<sup>17</sup> SROB, HA507/3/759

<sup>18</sup> They were Basil Dunnett (1934-2003) pig man and Will Grimsey (1904-1968) senior tractor driver.

<sup>19</sup> SROB, HA507/2/486.

<sup>20</sup> More land in Playford, as elsewhere, was brought into cultivation after the war than during it. Encouraged by ploughing up grants introduced in 1952, more of Playford Heath, for example, was lost in the 1950s than in the 1940s. In the following decade, intervention by the CAP to buy farm output when the market price of many arable crops fell below an agreed target level, brought about another fit of ploughing-up. The meadows, in common with much other grassland in the parish, remained under cultivation growing wheat, sugar beet and barley until around 1990. By this time excessive output had led to 'grain and sugar mountains' causing the Community to take land out of production in a 'set-aside' scheme or allowed much of the new arable acreage to be put back to grass.

<sup>21</sup> Playford Heath, ploughed up in the mid to late 18th century, reverted to scrub in the agricultural depression that began in around 1870. It remained as sheepwalk until the Second World War and later.

dispossessed husbandmen to call on, there was no shortage of labour with which to farm the land. Here the Biddells were the principal beneficiaries and so too, somewhat ironically, was Thomas Clarkson at Playford Hall Farm. Arthur Biddell with two of his sons, Manfred and Herman, farmed most of the parish for most of the century.<sup>22</sup> Manfred took over the running of Lux Farm from his father in 1842 and Herman took over Hill Farm on his father's death in 1860. And following the eviction of Thomas Clarkson's grandson from Playford Hall Farm in 1867, the Hall land was shared out between the two brothers who between them then farmed every acre in the parish. Well known within the Suffolk farming community, they achieved national or international fame within their respective spheres of interest.<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, a great number of the poor had lost not only their independence but their status within the community as well. From keeping a cow on the Green and working an acre in the common field, many now toiled as day labourers for the more successful tenants on the larger farms. For the first time in their lives they were no longer free to do as they pleased but were at the beck and call of an employer. Typical were two who arrived in the parish at this critical time, both from a background in husbandry. One in 1804 was Edmund Page from Rushmere whose father had been a yeoman in the parish and a property owner in both Playford and Barham.<sup>24</sup> The other was William Frost who arrived from Ramsholt in the early 1820s where his father had been a grazier on the marshes there.<sup>25</sup> Unable to follow their fathers into farming as previous generations of their families had done, both young men found work labouring as part of the '44 men and 15 young men or boys' that Arthur Biddell then employed.<sup>26</sup> Both youngsters remained labourers for the rest of their lives. and both families lived on in the village until very recent times; neither regained the degree of independence that their forebears had once enjoyed. The loss of the open fields had been a blow to the poor; the loss of the Common far less. The area of the Green as described by Biddell Airy was very small, perhaps only three to four acres at the most and incapable therefore of providing much of an income for anyone. It was the arrogance of its taking that hurt. But condemnation of those in power must be tempered by the consideration that the peasant too had enjoyed the long run of high prices and that many would probably have failed in the prolonged and very severe depression that set in after 1813 as the Wars with Napoleon drew to an end.

---

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Biddell was the great-great-grandfather of the late Owen Goldsmith (1919-2012) who lived at Sevenoaks on the Butts Road.

<sup>23</sup> Manfred Biddell (1822-1894) was especially noted as a breeder of the Suffolk Punch. He exported to the US, Canada and Russia and once won first prize at the Royal Show. Herman Biddell (1832-1917) has been described as the historian of the Suffolk Punch being responsible for compiling the first volume of the stud book, 'A History and Register of the County Breed of Cart Horses', *The Suffolk Stud Book, 1880*, Volume I. He was a co-founder of the Suffolk Horse Society in 1877 and its first Secretary until 1889.

<sup>24</sup> SROB, HA507/2/474; IC/AA1/201/53, will of Edmund Page, 1777, the most likely cottage that Edmund Page owned in Playford in 1777 was one of the two on the east side of Warren Lane. It was then occupied by a Robert Jordain but on Page's death in 1782 it passed to his son also Edmund who later took up occupation himself. By 1805 he had sold out to an Edward Bowman, a hurdle maker, and by the mid 1820s he is recorded as a labourer working for Arthur Biddell.

<sup>25</sup> SROI, FC22/G2/18. John Frost examination.

<sup>26</sup> SROI FC22/G7/4, list of labourers above 18 years working for A Biddell. The figure of 15, added here, for 'young men or boys' is taken from the 1851 Census where numbers of those above 18 years remains the same at 44. In the late 1820s Arthur Biddell was farming Hill, Lux and Kiln Farms, a total of 835 acres. In 1832 he inherited a further 172 acres at Monument Farm in Foxhall.

## The Cottage Owners

There were three generations of Biddells from c. 1814 to 1949



Arthur Biddell (1783-1860), besides acting as a link with the Estate, dominated village life until his death in 1860. He was succeeded in this to the end of the century by two of his sons, Manfred and Herman, who between them farmed the entire parish

Arthur Biddell took up residence at Hill House in 1808 when he was just twenty five years old and was therefore only a few years into his tenancy when he set about building the two cottages. He had come from a sound farming background at Little Whelnetham Hall in West Suffolk where his father George was a tenant on the Davers Estate.<sup>27</sup> Also central to his success was that from a young age he had the full support of his landlord, the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bristol, who used him as an aide in this detached part of his holding. It was this trust in particular that allowed him to build not only these cottages in the corner of the former common but Foxboro at the top of Hill Farm Road as well.<sup>28</sup>

### Arthur Biddell (1783-1860) landlord from c.1815-1860

Arthur Biddell was a pre-eminent Suffolk farmer occupying Hill Farm for over 50 years until his death in 1860. For a number of years he also ran Lux Farm until he handed it over in 1842 to his eldest son Manfred. With farms also at Grundisburgh and at Foxhall it was considered that at one time he farmed a thousand acres. He was known throughout the county as a great inventor of agricultural machinery the most successful of which was his scarifier, a forerunner of the now popular chisel tines that are widely used in the direct drilling of cereal crops and oil seed rape.

Biddell had married Jane Ransome, daughter of Robert Ransome founder of the Ipswich based firm of agricultural engineers, and it was his father-in-law's company that took up the production of his various creations. Before the introduction of large scale Ordnance Survey maps, he was also an industrious and successful land surveyor at the time of the tithe commutations in the 1840s undertaking the greatest number of valuations in the county in addition to his work as an assistant tithe commissioner. Despite the scale of his farming operations, he described himself in later life as a 'retired land and tithe valuer' rather than a farmer.

Arthur Biddell had four sons: Manfred (1822-1894) who farmed at Lux Farm, George (1824-1901) who was Chief Engineer at Ransomes for 25 years, William (1825-1900) who farmed at Hawstead Hall and later at Lavenham Hall and Herman (1832-1917) who farmed Hill Farm following his

---

<sup>27</sup> SROB 1627/24, will of George Biddell, Arthur Biddell's father. George Biddell (d.1799) also rented a farm at Rougham under a Mr Case and owned other farms at Great Whelnetham and Stanningfield which Arthur and his brother inherited as well as a farm at Bradfield St George which Arthur inherited on his own.

<sup>28</sup> SROI, FDA196/41/19, Playford Tithe Apportionment, 1844. Glenham is shown with Biddell as the owner and 'widow Rush and another' as occupiers of the ¼ acre plot. Foxboro (at the top of Hill Farm Road) is not shown indicating that it is by then in the possession of the Bristol family. When a landowner was also the tithe owner, as was the situation in Playford, he was in the position of having to pay himself in which circumstances the payment of tithes was cancelled, a process that is termed 'merged'. The property was therefore effectively tithe free and, as no money changed hands, no records were kept.

father's death in 1860. On Herman's retirement in 1892 he built Archway House; he was also a founder member of the Suffolk Horse Society and editor of *The Suffolk Stud Book*, 1880. His father Arthur died a wealthy man leaving in today's money (2014) an estate of some £2 million. Little of this however can be attributed to any benefits from enclosure, rather it was due to his hard work, surveying, engineering creations and his good fortune chief of which was his inheritance of Monument Farm from a friend. A most capable man, he not only served as an officer of the Bristol Estate in this remote part of their holding, he played an active part in village affairs being sole Churchwarden for 44 years and Surveyor for 33.<sup>29</sup>

His detailed will directed that the two cottages on the former common, together with other specified properties, were to be left to Trustees and that the rents arising from them were to be equally divided among his four sons and four daughters for twenty years after his death. Thereafter they were to be sold but could be bought in by the family and, in the share out that followed, the two cottages were acquired by William, the only family member to have moved away from the area.<sup>30</sup>

### **William Biddell (1825-1900)**

#### **Arthur's third son, landlord from 1860-1900**

Like his three brothers, William went to private school in Grundisburgh. His first employment was as a surveyor helping his father after which he ran a 120 acre farm that his father had bought in that village. He later moved to West Suffolk and joined Biddell and Blencowe the family auctioneering firm in Bury St Edmunds. In 1853 he took the tenancy of the 270 acre Hall Farm at Hawstead from where he married Ellen Blencowe, daughter of his senior partner. Their first four children died in infancy, the fifth died at the age of 29<sup>31</sup> and

within an hour of giving birth to his only surviving child, Bertha, his wife also died. He married secondly Mary Scott of Lavenham Hall who had been widowed at around the same time. William then farmed 1,000 acres in the Lavenham area.<sup>32</sup> His strong support for the sugar beet factory in Lavenham, which was the first in England, and his opposition to the Malt Tax led to support from both land owners and tenants alike and he was adopted as the Conservative candidate for the West Suffolk constituency, a seat which he won at the general election of 1880.<sup>33</sup> In 1856 in conjunction with his brother Manfred of Lux Farm and acting as auctioneer, he instigated the annual Kesgrave lamb sales that attracted some 5,000 ewes and lambs. Despite its name, the sales were held on Playford Heath, then part of Lux Farm, opposite the Bell and ran until 1917. It was a great and memorable day out for the whole neighbourhood and a big occasion for the pub. Like many



**William Biddell (1825-1900), MP for West Suffolk from 1880 to 1885**

---

<sup>29</sup> He was replaced as Churchwarden by his son Herman who also held the position for 44 years - from 1860 to 1904 and as Surveyor by his son Manfred who was in post from 1843 to 1892, a total of 49 years.

<sup>30</sup> SROI, R130/285, will of Arthur Biddell.

<sup>31</sup> Having trained as a solicitor, Percy Biddell died unmarried.

<sup>32</sup> In spite of the large acreage that he farmed, he remained fully employed in the family business, interviewing his bailiff every evening on his return from the office. He styled himself a Land Agent and a Valuer, one who specialises in land and farm sales, rather than a farmer.

<sup>33</sup> The sugar beet factory at Lavenham opened in 1868 but ran only until 1884. The Malt Tax was repealed in 1880, the year that Biddell entered Parliament.



servants at the time, one gardener was given time off to attend. 'Thoroughly at home in an Inn', he confessed to his employer the following morning that 'he never see a lamb'.<sup>34</sup>

Following Gladstone's Reform Act of 1884 which gave agricultural workers the vote,<sup>35</sup> Biddell did not seek re-election 'under the new condition' but after the passing of the Local Government Act of 1888 and the formation of the West Suffolk County Council, he was one of the first sixteen Aldermen to be chosen. He was President of the West Suffolk Chamber of Agriculture, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Alliance Co. and became senior partner in Blencowe & Biddell. There is a memorial to him in the Lady Chapel of Lavenham Church where he was Rector's warden for many years. He died in 1900 aged 75 leaving the bulk of his estate, including the Hall and farm at

Lavenham, to Bertha his only child. His first consideration in a six page will that included many small family bequests, was that Bertha should inherit his cottage at Playford 'formerly the Post Office' trusting that 'she will endeavour to preserve the ownership of it in the Biddell family'.<sup>36</sup>



**Wedding group at Lavenham Hall, 25 April 1900: Bertha Biddell's marriage to the Revd Henry Taylor, six months before the death of her father**

### **Bertha Taylor (1869-1950)**

#### **William's only surviving child, landlord from 1900 to 1949**

Bertha was born at Hawstead but brought up by her step-mother at Lavenham. When she was 21, and just six months before her father died, she married the local curate, Henry Taylor.<sup>37</sup> They moved briefly to Bury St Edmunds when he was made curate at St James' before returning to Lavenham Hall for a further six years.<sup>38</sup> In 1907 he was made vicar of nearby Great Barton but died in 1915 at the young age of 44.

William's estate had included a great number of properties that ranged in size from cottages to houses and even included a number of farms spread across some 20 parishes in West Suffolk and

---

<sup>34</sup> *The Story of Kesgrave*, Gerald and Margaret Ponting, 129, privately published 1981.

<sup>35</sup> Urban workers had had the vote since 1867 under Gladstone's Reform Act of that year.

<sup>36</sup> SROB, JS99/19-414.

<sup>37</sup> Henry Taylor, a graduate of Caius College, Cambridge, had arrived in 1897. Lavenham was his first curacy.

<sup>38</sup> When the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich was created in 1914, St James' church was made the cathedral.



**The Revd Henry Taylor who married Bertha Biddell**

north Essex. In 1908, when Bertha and Henry had settled into Great Barton Vicarage, Cordy Samuel Wolton took on the tenancy of the vacant Lavenham Hall Farm. He was well qualified to do so. He had married Lucy, a younger daughter of Manfred Biddell of Lux Farm, Playford, and therefore a first cousin of Bertha. He also came from a very distinguished line of farming stock. His grandfather, and later his uncle, farmed nearly a thousand acres at Newbourne Hall and his father Samuel a similar acreage at Bell Farm in Kesgrave, where Cordy was born.<sup>39</sup>

The family moved from here to Butley Abbey in around 1870, their acreage soaring to almost three thousand.<sup>40</sup> Samuel stayed for some 20 years but in 1883 his son, the 26 year old Cordy, struck out on his own, taking firstly the tenancy of Dairy Farm in Ixworth and then in 1908 that of Lavenham Hall.<sup>41</sup> On Cordy's retirement from farming in 1927 Bertha, now a widow, returned to the Hall but

employed an agent, Harry Steed, to manage the Estate which he did from an office in the High Street. Cordy Wolton was the father of Margaret Goldsmith, mother of Owen Goldsmith, who having inherited the four acre property at the bottom of Church Lane, Playford, came to live in the village in 1935 and so extended the Biddell family's residency in the parish.

Bertha never remarried and died in 1954 a wealthy woman leaving instructions for all her property to be sold and the money divided between her four daughters.<sup>42</sup> The oldest, also named Bertha, married Hubert Cordy Wolton a son of Cordy Samuel Wolton, above, who went on to set up H C Wolton & Sons the firm of Surveyors and Valuers in Bury St Edmunds that now operates from 70 office locations nationwide. One property that was not included in this extensive sale was the Old Post Office Cottages in Playford for, ignoring her father's plea that 'she will endeavour to preserve the ownership of them in the Biddell family,' she sold them to Harold Burch the sitting tenant in 1949 just five years before she died.

## **The Cottage Tenants**

### **Two long-standing village families were at at one time occupiers of the property**

Tenants nearly always outnumber landlords but, because they often leave so little behind, much less is known about them and indeed rarely can lists of them ever be complete. Two names however stand out as principal occupiers of the two cottages. They are in fact the descendants of the two referred to above: the Pages and the Frosts whose forebears arrived in the parish in the early 1800s

---

<sup>39</sup> Bell Farm House, later called Kesgrave House, was in Bell Lane, a derelict property in 1971 when it was demolished to improve the access of Bell Lane on to the main road. It is not to be confused with Bell Barn Farm, later known as Kesgrave Fruit Farm, a property that is still standing (2014) but obscured by modern housing along Fenton's Way. Another Kesgrave House existed until the 1840s; it lay to the south of Playford Mere in a detached part of Kesgrave parish that was absorbed into Playford in 1883.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Wolton followed the great Thomas Crisp into the farm. Thomas Crisp was the great uncle of Frederick Augustus Crisp who came with his family to live at Playford Hall in 1878 and whose daughters Rosa and Emma lived on there until they died in the 1930s.

<sup>41</sup> *East Anglian Daily Times*, 17 June 1946, Cordy Samuel Wolton obituary

<sup>42</sup> Ipswich Probate Registry, contrary to her grandson John Wolton's account that two thirds of her estate was taken in Duty, the net value of her assets amounted to £70,451 5s 8d of which £13,277 15s 0d was paid to the Revenue.

to start a new life. George Page senior, a grandson of the yeoman from Rushmere, occupied the northern cottage for the last 50 years of the 1800s while descendants of the Frosts, through marrying into the Kidbys, rented both sides for much of the following century and managed to purchase the whole property from the Biddells half way through their tenure.

## The Pages

**George Page senior (c.1825-1900) occupied the north cottage for 50 years from c. 1850 to 1900**



**Edmund Page (c. 1790-1875), his father, lived in this cottage in Hill Farm Road before moving up to Crossing Keeper's Cottage when the railway opened in 1859. Sketched by Annat Airy, an aunt of Anna Airy, in 1856**

George Page occupied the north cottage briefly with his first wife Esther, who died in 1851, and then with Clementine until her death in 1897. He was known as Shepherd Page to distinguish him from his son, another George, who followed him on the farm. Over a period of 200 years there were in fact six generations of Pages in Playford all of whom earned their living on the land. Shepherd Page's mother, Emily (1803-1864), was the first person to live in the Crossing Keeper's Cottage; it was her job to open and close the crossing gates when the Ipswich to Lowestoft railway opened in 1859, a duty that she performed until her death.<sup>43</sup> Shepherd Page's father  
Edmund  
junior,

although born with one arm, lived until he was nearly 90 having worked for Arthur Biddell at least from the early 1820s when Hill and Lux Farms were worked together. His grandfather, Edmund senior (born c. 1765), had come from Rushmere as a man of property owning cottages at The Brook as well as in Barham but suffered ill health that could have contributed to a decline in his family fortunes.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to his father's long uninterrupted tenancy of the Biddells' cottage, Shepherd Page's son George junior moved house at frequent intervals living in many of the cottages that have long since been demolished, the Barrack Cottages next to James Mann's beer house (demolished in 1892) and the middle cottage of the Old Vicarage in Hill Farm Road being just two. George junior married Elizabeth Woby, a school teacher in the village whose father John played the fiddle at Sunday services before the west gallery was removed in 1859 and



**George junior (1845-1930), his son, lived in Barrack Cottages and later in the Old Vicarage in Hill Farm Road**

<sup>43</sup> SROI, FC22/A1/2; 1871 Census, she was succeeded in this task by Michael O'Connor, an Irishman, and his wife. These early crossing keepers were not always successful at their job as trains 'kept crashing into the gates'; in 1871 it was agreed that a bridge be built over the track and a new approach road constructed only twelve years after the line had opened.

<sup>44</sup>*East Anglian Daily Times*, 21 May 2011, 48. See John Blatchly's article on his illness and 'cure'.



**Nelson Page (1889-1930). A sick man, although he enlisted, he did not fight**

a barrel organ introduced. His son Nelson (1891-1930) came from that generation which served in the Great War and though he enlisted, he was a sick man and did not not fight.<sup>45</sup> He died aged 41 leaving a daughter just one year old. That daughter was Annie Page (1929-2010) who married Jim Woods, a tractor driver on Lux Farm for 57 years. They were among the last occupants of Mill Cottages before they were converted into an up-market residence in the early 1960s.

## **The Kidbys**

**Three generations starting with Richard & Mary Ann Kidby**

**occupiers from c. 1901 to 1943**

On Page's death in 1900 his part of the property was taken over by John Rosbrook, a bricklayer and most likely the first tenant with no direct connection to the farm. The other cottage remained briefly unoccupied until Richard Kidby (1863-1939) moved in sometime after 1901.<sup>46</sup> Richard's father, Edward (1831-1909), had moved from Grundisburgh in 1871 to take up the position of bailiff at Hill Farm. He lived with his wife and eight children firstly in one half of Foxboro at the top of Hill Farm Road, the other half then being occupied by the school. But within the next ten years he seems to have suffered a loss in status as he was later replaced by his eldest son Joe who was later to move to Culpho Hall. His second son Richard, like most boys at the time, never went to school and started out on Lux Farm at the age of six scaring crows. By 1901, just prior to his moving into the Old Post Office and approaching middle age,



**Gardeners at Playford Hall c. 1900, the two Kidbys, father and son, among them**

<sup>45</sup> He enlisted in the 29th Bn of the Middlesex Regiment which was formed in 1916 but which was integrated into the Labour Corps the following year. Half its personnel remained in the United Kingdom. It was manned by officers and other ranks medically rated below the 'A1' condition that was required for front line service.

<sup>46</sup> In both the 1901 Census and in the Electors' List Richard Kidby is shown as living at The Brook but by 1911 he had moved into the south cottage. Because of gaps in the records there can be no certainty as to when he actually moved house.

both he and his father changed jobs and became gardeners at The Hall.



**Richard (1863-1939) and Mary Ann (1863 - 1943) Kidby: the first of three generations to live in Glenham. Initially rented from the Biddells, the family eventually bought it in 1949**

In 1886 Richard had married Mary Ann Frost (1863-1943), daughter of James Frost (1835-1906) whose father William had arrived in the village from Ramsholt in the early 1820s.<sup>47</sup> James was born in the village and as a young man had taken a job as carter at the mill. But when William Howell the miller took on an additional mill at Martlesham, James was left behind to run the one at Playford. With the mill closing sometime around 1874, James became the last person to operate it. James sent his daughter Mary Ann to the village school for which he paid a penny a week and family tradition has it that it was a girls' school which is incorrect. It is however a telling misunderstanding for most if not all the boys would have been kept away as their meagre earnings in the fields were required to bolster the family income.<sup>48</sup> Education for 5-10 year olds became compulsory only with the Education Act of 1880 by which time the school in Playford had closed and children transferred to the new Board School in Little Bealings which opened in 1877.

### **Harold & Ethel Burch occupiers from 1928 to 1969**

Richard and Mary Kidby lived on at the Old Post Office for some forty years until they died. In 1923 their daughter Ethel (1895-1969), a dressmaker, had married Harold Burch (1896-1975) from Hasketon who had only recently been demobbed from the Great War.<sup>49</sup> The couple spent the first four years of married life in the gardener's cottage above the stables at Playford Hall where their only child José was born. In civilian life Harold became a chauffeur in the early days of the motor car and was first employed by the Revd Champion at Great Bealings Rectory. He frequently drove him to Edale in Derbyshire where the Champion family were large landowners and where both the Revd Champion and his father had been vicars.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> SROI, HD436/3, *Extracts &c. from the Books and Papers of the Parish of Playford*, Manfred Biddell, 104. William Frost was initially destined for work other than agriculture. In 1822-23 the parish paid him £1 2s 0d for 11 weeks lodging &c. 'when qualifying himself for a Gentleman's servant' and a few months later the princely sum of £21 4s 6d for 'equipping him to go to America'. Despite the considerable outlay of public money, he remained in the type of work to which he had always been familiar albeit as a labourer rather than a self employed smallholder where employment opportunities were now far fewer than they were before.

<sup>48</sup> SROI, 1195, Return of schools in Civil Parishes, 1871. Playford is recorded as having one National School attended by 3 boys and 11 girls. It is easy to understand how the misconception arose that it was a girls' school.

<sup>49</sup> He had served in the 3/4th Bn of the Suffolk Regiment.

<sup>50</sup> The Revd Francis Champion (1854-1931) was the Rector of Great Bealings from 1916 to 1929. He was the last incumbent of the separate parish before Great & Little Bealings were merged. He had earlier been vicar of Edale (1881-1891) in the Derbyshire Peak District at the foot of Kinder Scout where his family had an estate and where his father before him had been vicar for 30 years. Francis Champion paid for the rebuilding of the church there at a cost of £3,000 (*cf.* the £600 that the Marquis of Bristol paid for the rebuilding of Playford chancel at around the same time).

Most of Harold's working life however was spent as a gardener and as such he worked firstly for Francis Stevenson, the former Liberal Member of Parliament, at Playford Mount. When Stevenson moved to Felixstowe on his wife's death in 1934 he took a gardening job with the Revd Keightley the vicar of Tuddenham.<sup>51</sup> As a former service man he played a key role in Playford Home Guard during the Second World War acting as runner at times of emergency for Col Freeland who was in

charge of Air Raid Precautions. Freeland, who lived next door at Bridge Cottage, would receive a call from Woodbridge HQ which he would then relay to Harold one of whose jobs was to assemble all ranks on standby, even at night.



**Harold (1896-1975) and 'Effie' (1895-1969) Burch, the second generation of occupiers. It was Harold who purchased the property from Bertha Taylor just before she died**

His rent of 2/- a week<sup>52</sup> was paid not to Bertha Taylor the landlady in Lavenham but to her first cousin Amy Biddell who had lived with her parents at Archway House but had since 'fallen on hard times'. She moved to one of the cottages at Branson's which her family had also owned and ran into financial difficulties when she had a spell at running the shop.<sup>53</sup> In 1949, five years before Bertha Taylor died, Harold approached her with a view to buying both properties and, ignoring her father's explicit wish that the cottages should be kept in the Biddell family, sold them to him for £600.<sup>54</sup> Mains electricity was immediately installed and when the tenant of the north side, Alice Theobold, moved away in 1959, that half of the property was gifted to their daughter José who had married Geoff Booker in 1951.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> The Revd Frederick Keightley was vicar of Tuddenham St Martin for 45 years from 1911. On his death in 1956 the parish was joined with Playford & Culpho.

<sup>52</sup> £4 a year was the rate for an Estate cottage in the 1890s and still only £10 in the 1940s. Frank Mann, who rented Church Corner Cottage from the Airys, paid only £5 as late as 1972 when he moved to Brook Lane.

<sup>53</sup> Amy Biddell (1880-1959), a daughter of Herman Biddell who farmed at Hill Farm and who built Archway House in 1892, was an eccentric but one who played a great part in village life. She was for example the first woman chairman of the Parish Council, from 1927-1935 (SROI, EG94/B1/2), she was churchwarden after the war, she introduced the mobile library to parishioners and, to fill a break in tenancy at the shop, briefly ran the Post Office Stores until generosity towards her customers brought about her bankruptcy. At the age of forty-three she married her first cousin but within little more than three months he had died of an internal obstruction. Archway House was later sold and she moved with a sister into a cottage at Branson's which the family had also owned.

<sup>54</sup> Harold had lost the hearing in one of his ears during WWI and with his compensation he bought his parents their home in Hasketon. On their death, and the subsequent sale of their house, he had money available with which to buy his own property in Playford.

<sup>55</sup> Joshua Theobold (1871-1946) had moved to Playford in c. 1928 from Blue Gate Lodge on the Wherstead Estate where he been bailiff for Charles Dashwood, lord of the manor there for 70 years. On his retirement from Lux Farm in 1936, he and his wife moved down into the village and, following his death ten years later, his widow stayed on in the cottage for another 15 years.

## **Geoff & José Booker** **owner-occupiers from 1961 to 2012**

Geoff Booker (1925-2012) was not a local man. He came from a mining background in Derbyshire and, drafted into the Royal Air Force towards the end of the war, was posted to Martlesham Heath. In civilian life he worked for Ransomes, Sims & Jefferies firstly as a machine tool maker and then as the company's Welfare Officer.



**Geoff and José Booker. They were the third generation of the family to occupy the house**

José (1924-2002) worked firstly as a shop assistant in Vernon Street near the Ipswich docks, cycling in from Playford every day and spending 'half her time in the shelter' as the air raid siren went off so frequently. At 17 she moved to work in the old telephone exchange opposite Kesgrave Bell until it closed and became a private house in 1969.

On getting married in 1951, they lived in Ipswich but on Mrs Theobold's departure they returned to Playford and added the brick extension to the north side of the house in 1963. When José's mother died in 1969, her father moved in from next door and the south side was let out to a succession of tenants. Following the closure of the Kesgrave Exchange, José moved to the exchange in Ipswich next to St Matthew's church and stayed there until her retirement as supervisor in 1985. Paid employment over, she started up a bed and breakfast business and rented out the south side as a holiday let. In 2002 her granddaughter Laura and family moved into the south side becoming the fifth and sixth generations to have lived in the house.<sup>56</sup>

Kesgrave Exchange actually stood in the parish of Playford before the boundaries were moved in 1984 following a large expansion of Kesgrave High School and its playing fields. It was a manual exchange where the customer lifted the receiver and asked the operator to connect his call to a requested number. It had been built in 1927 at a time when the tiny village of Kesgrave had just started to grow.<sup>57</sup> Kesgrave School, opened in 1931 taking pupils from five years and upwards from the village itself and those over eleven from surrounding parishes.<sup>58</sup> Children from outside the village cycled to school on council owned bicycles, those from Playford taking a short cut across the heath. José went to Kesgrave school from 1935 to 1940 and, because she was an only child and enjoyed her time at school, she stayed on for an additional year over and above the normal leaving age. This last year coincided with the first year of the war. Her intention was to learn Esperanto but for much of that year however 'she

---

<sup>56</sup> Laura is the daughter of Glenda Grimwood, Geoff and José Booker's only daughter. She lived in the south half with her partner Ben Welham and their two children Chloë (b. 2002) and Sophie (b. 2006).

<sup>57</sup> The population of Kesgrave in 1921 was 103, 20 families in 20 houses. By 1931 numbers had risen to 869.

<sup>58</sup> Primary school education for Playford children continued to be at Little Bealings.

wasted her time' as attendance was restricted to half days only: evacuees from London, who had their own teachers, took up the the rest of the day for their own education.<sup>59</sup>

## The Kidbys' Contribution to Village Life

Following Gladstone's 1884 Reform Act which extended the vote to working class rural workers and the Local Government Act of 1894 which introduced elected councils at district and parish level, power ebbed from an inner circle of elders that had run local communities since time began. Democratic reorganisation covering all remaining aspects of parish life followed though beyond the setting up of the Parish Council little actually happened before the Great War after which change was rapid. The Church nationally led the way with its introduction in 1921 of church councils that took the place of the vestry and the following year the Parish Hall introduced an Entertainments Committee to develop wider uses for the hall. Twelve months after that, in 1923, a Women's Institute was set up in the village. The newfound participation proved popular and, in an age of simple pleasures and low expectations, was well supported. Uniquely placed at the forefront of it all was the Kidby family, whose outgoing personalities and community spirit greatly helped to modernise the village and give it its present make-up and method of working.

### Parish Council

The first Chairman of the Parish Council was Francis Seymour Stevenson who lived at Playford Mount; he was the Liberal MP for Eye and had helped to guide the enabling legislation through Parliament. His father, Sir William, was Governor of Mauritius but had died when his son was just one year old. On returning to England, his mother married the Revd Foster Barham Zincke, vicar of Wherstead. Zincke was a progressive educationalist who championed the 'oppressed' farm labourer and who spoke at political gatherings in surrounding villages taking the young Stevenson with him. It was this radicalism that rubbed off on the boy and which remained with him throughout his political life.



**F S Stevenson, MP, first Parish Council chairman who lived at Playford Mount. David and Joe Kidby were two of the four villagers he invited to stand when the Council was first set up in 1895**

Rigorously stage-managed by Stevenson, the Council's first meeting was held on 2 November 1895 in the Vicarage. David Kidby and Joseph Kidby were two of the first five councillors chosen. It was at this meeting that it was proposed that the Marquis of Bristol be approached for a site in the Miller's Field for a proposed village hall. Inexplicably, the Kidby brothers soon faded from view and it was not until 1935 that another family member, Harold Burch, was elected to office. He was to remain a councillor for over 30 years finally retiring in 1967. His appointment covered two critical periods in the life of the village: the Second World War and the redevelopment that had its roots in the 1960s. In 1938, in preparation for World War II, he was appointed to the Air Raids Precautions (ARP) sub-committee as a member of the Communications team and

---

<sup>59</sup> The school leaving age was raised to 14 in 1918 and again, under the Butler Education Act of 1944, to 15. In 1940, when José left school, only one other pupil stayed on for the additional year.



worked alongside Col Freeland and Cpt Goldsmith who were both fellow Councillors. And as a former serviceman, he volunteered for the Home Guard when they were first set up in the summer of 1940.<sup>60</sup> During the war the Council had ceased to operate for much of the time and, on reconvening in March 1946, the meeting was ‘supported by the [one] remaining member of the old Council, Harold Burch’.<sup>61</sup>



**The Revd Dr Harry Baylis, the scholarly vicar of Playford from 1929 to 1935, who put the Church Council on to a proper democratic footing.**

Harold Burch was re-elected to the new post-war Council whose main challenge it faced was the proposal in the 1960s to build houses in the centre of the village. The matter of expansion was first raised as early as 1961 and, expecting the future population of Playford to rise considerably, it was at that time that the number of Councillors was increased from five to seven.

Before standing down in 1967, his son-in-law Geoff Booker was voted a member before he in turn was succeeded by his wife José who was already Parish Clerk. For a brief period therefore three members of the family were officially present at meetings. José resumed the position of Clerk for a further ten years in 1987.

### **The Parochial Church Council (PCC)**

PCCs were set up by Act of Parliament in 1921 as a successor to the Vestry Meeting which had had its civil functions removed in 1894 when Parish Councils were first set up. By 1904 when Playford Minutes first become available, the Vestry would appear to have already undergone a change, almost certainly the work of Francis Stevenson who had become churchwarden that year.<sup>62</sup> The last meeting of the old Vestry took place in 1920 but, it was not until 1927 that the first PCC was held.<sup>63</sup> Among those elected to that first meeting were Mary Ann Kidby, wife of Richard and daughter of James Frost; she remained in office until her death in 1943.<sup>64</sup> William Frost junior, younger brother of her father James, had been Deputy Church Clerk and Sexton for 25 years until his

<sup>60</sup> Originally set up as the Local Defence Force (LDV) by Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War, in May 1940, the name was changed to the Home Guard by Winston Churchill in July of that year.

<sup>61</sup> EG94/B1/1, Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1895-1948. The Parish Council ceased to operate during the latter years of the war: their last meeting was held in June 1942 and the next not until April 1946.

<sup>62</sup> FC22/A1/5, Playford Vestry Minutes 1904-20, PCC Minutes 1927-54., the Vestry formed the fundamental unit of decision making in the parish. It appointed parish officers that included churchwardens and overseers. Membership was often restricted by wealth and social standing and was self-perpetuating. By the time Minutes for Playford Vestry become available however in 1904, it appears to have already become more broad based and included Henry Mendham the shopkeeper and William Threadkell coachman at The Hall.

<sup>63</sup> No reason can be found as to why PCCs were not set up earlier in Playford and it was left to the Revd George Kirkpatrick to set them going when he arrived in 1926. He was priest in the parish for just two years in which time he stuck with the annual tradition and it was not until the Revd Harry Baylis was installed in 1929 that meetings were put on the type of frequency that is familiar today.

<sup>64</sup> FC22/A1/5, Playford PCC Minutes, 1927-54., the Council stood for a moment's silence in her memory when she was described as 'a supporter of the church in Playford of long standing'.

death in 1915.<sup>65</sup>

The vacancy that Mary Ann left was filled by her daughter Effie Burch who remained a member for over 20 years until just before her own death in 1969. In turn she was replaced by her daughter José Booker, the third generation to have been continuously in post since the first Council was set up over forty years before. But on her mother's death in 1969 José stood down and was not to seek re-election until the last thirteen years of her life. Her husband Geoff however had been voted on to the Council in the mid 1950s, had become churchwarden for 14 years and stood again as churchwarden for a similar term until his death in 2012.

## Parish Hall

In 1896 Stevenson had hoped that the Parish Hall would be built by the newly formed Parish Council 'conjointly with others' but this did not materialise. It was instead paid for by his wife, Mary Kate who owned it until her death in 1934. She then bequeathed it to the village and throughout this first phase of its life therefore it was in private ownership and, judging from a comment that Stevenson made, up until 1922 it was also under 'private control'. At a meeting on 18 December of that year the democratic Stevenson, only too aware of what was happening in the

wider world, announced that he was putting the hall 'on a new footing'. An Entertainments Sub-Committee was formed to which both Mary Ann Kidby and her daughter Effie were immediately elected. Initially known by villagers as the Reading Room, the hall had previously been used for Council meetings and for 'recreation for the men in the village' but it was now being put to much wider use.<sup>66</sup> Effie Kidby's wedding reception in 1923, for example, was the first to be held there and the newly formed WI met there once a month. The widening of its use must have represented a



**The Coronation of King George V in 1911. The next coronation, that of his brother George VI in 1937, was the first to be organised by the 'village', an Entertainments Sub-Committee of the Parish Hall that included no fewer than five members of the Kidby family**

<sup>65</sup> FC22/A1/5, Playford Vestry Minutes 1904-20, in their tribute, the Vestry wished to place on record their appreciation of his long and faithful service of over 25 years during which time he was never once absent from his duty. Whites Directory, 1892, he is recorded as Parish Clerk.

<sup>66</sup> The glass fronted library cupboard remained in place for over a hundred years and was taken down only in 2002 in readiness for the re- building of the hall. With his first class degree in Classics at Balliol, many of the books in it were a reflection of Stevenson's own interests rather than those of an agricultural readership.

dramatic change within the village for, when Effie's daughter José gave a talk to the WI some 50 years later in the 1970s, she made the revealing mistake of saying that the hall had been built in 1923. That it came into life only some twenty-five years after it was built is further evidenced by a lack of Minutes up to this time.

By 1931 Effie's husband, Harold Burch, had joined the Entertainments Committee and, with all hands to the pump in 1937, there were no fewer than five Kidbys on the committee that was set up to celebrate the Coronation of George VI.<sup>67</sup> Despite the Village Hall being taken over as a First Aid post for Air Raid Precautions (ARP), the Entertainments Committee continued to function during the war until it was taken over by the Home Guard and all pleasure activities ceased. However at the end of hostilities, Harold Burch re-emerged as a committee member and was soon joined by his daughter José. But throughout the 1960s and '70s the hall went through a long period of inactivity that continued until the new generation of villagers breathed fresh life into it. At this point, in 1976, José rejoined the Committee and remained on it for the last twenty-five years of her life.

### Women's Institute

But in the Women's Institute however the Kidby family had no such interruptions to their membership and José and her mother together covered the full eighty years between its foundation in 1923 and José's death. Individually they were both members for some fifty years. The Institute had been set up nationally in Britain in 1915 to encourage country women to grow and conserve food during a time of war; the Playford branch was formed eight years later. Ethel Kidby was a founder member in the year that she married while José joined the year before her own marriage in

1951. Both mother and daughter remained members until they died. No documents survive from the years before the war and as a consequence little is known about the organisation until the 1940s. José went on to become a tower of strength within the organisation and took on the roles of both President and Vice-President as her mother had done.



**1983. The WI celebrates its Diamond Jubilee in 1920s style. José Booker, front row third from left, a member for over 50 years, was President at the time. Her mother had been a founder-member**

Beyond the realm of any parish organisation, José single-handedly initiated the annual carol singing around the village and took an active

---

<sup>67</sup> It is of note that the first recorded royal celebration in the village, that of the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark in 1863, was among James Frost's earliest reminiscences that he wrote up in 1887 (private possession). A fuller account of that merrymaking appeared in the *Ipswich Journal*, 14 March 1863. Printed invitations to all such events in the village, which were invariably held at either The Hall or Hill House, carried the footnote 'By Order of the Committee' but it is unthinkable that in those early days the organisers would have been anyone other than those of 'good standing'.

part in it for over forty years. The tradition lives on and the event has raised many thousands of pounds for local charities in the neighbourhood. More than that, through her easy manner and relaxed style she was able to form warm friendships with many of the new people who had recently arrived so enabling her to carry on her activities in the community where her family had lived and served for almost two hundred years.