

HILL HOUSE

Prior to the death of the 4th Marquis of Bristol in 1951 the parish of Playford, almost in its entirety and for some 600 years, had belonged to his family and its forebears. Up to 1719 when Sir Compton Felton died, the owners had lived locally at The Hall but Sir Compton died childless leaving his estate to his niece Elizabeth who some 25 years earlier had married John first Earl of Bristol. The couple had moved away to his family seat at Ickworth near Bury St Edmunds and Playford Hall was left without its ancestral household. The house was no longer the cornerstone of community life and the family's departure made for a seismic change within the village. One or two elderly relatives stayed on but by around 1750 the east wing had been pulled down and the former demesne of 354 acres had become just another tenanted farm in the parish. William Parmenter from neighbouring Rushmere was the first of the new tenants to occupy Playford Hall Farm and on his death in 1791



Hill House, 1859. After the departure of the land owning family from Playford Hall in the 18th century, the house assumed a dominance in parish life that it was never to lose. Its present-day red brick façade was added in c. 1900 Biddell collection

the tenancy passed to his nephew John Cutting. While Parmenter and Cutting took their turns with other occupiers in filling parish offices, the Clarksons and the Crisps who followed them did not. Because of this, and despite their higher social standing, the Hall once again lost its pre-eminence in the village and led to the rise of Hill House where Arthur Biddell had arrived in 1808. Within the space of a very few years, Biddell was to acquire the additional tenancies of both Lux and Kiln Farms and two of his sons were to succeed him as tenants. The family, as sole employers and holders of every administrative post, became the leading figures in the parish and Hill House assumed a dominance that it was never to lose. George Fiske and Charles Lofts

who followed as farmers in the 20th century, both highly active within the community in their differing ways, maintained the house's pre-eminence over The Hall for another 120 years.

Arthur Biddell (1783-1860)

The Biddells originally came from Essex and the family always held a strong belief that they were descended from William Bedell (1572-1642), Bishop of Kilmore in Ireland, who strove for justice for the Irish to his great disadvantage. The Bedells originated from the same part of Essex and later

moved up to West Suffolk where the names of Arthur Biddell's father and his uncles are recorded in the baptism book with the Bedell spelling. Arthur's immediate forebears were established farmers, his father George renting Little Whelnetham Hall from Sir Charles Davers of Rushbrooke. He also rented another farm at Rougham under a Mr Case and owned farms at Great Whelnetham, Stanningfield and Bradfield St George. Arthur was just 16 when his father died and was left the Bradfield farm and, jointly with his brother, a share in the other two that he had owned. It is surprising therefore that, still only 25, the young Arthur left the security of his home to take a farm in East Suffolk under a completely new landlord some 30 miles away and it is equally surprising that the landlord had sufficient trust in him to do so. None of the Biddell farms was more than four or five miles from Ickworth, the family seat of the Bristols and the centre of the 15,000 acres that they held in Suffolk. A small part of their estate in the county however lay isolated in the Ipswich and Woodbridge areas, land that over a hundred years earlier had been acquired through marriage into the Felton family who had come from Shotley in the early 16th century.

The young Biddell must have caught the eye of the 5th Earl of Bristol not only as a suitable tenant for a farm vacancy that had cropped up in Playford but as someone who could look after the wider interests of their Estate in a distant part of their holding. To what extent, if at all, Biddell involved himself in such parishes as Bromeswell, Eyke, Shotley and Rushmere is not known but in his own parish he acted as agent for the family, for example, in the building of farm cottages and in the ongoing problems of finding tenants for the mill.¹ And while it was Thomas

Clarkson's friendship with the Earl that assured him the occupation of Playford Hall Farm in 1816, it was Biddell who eased him into his tenancy by finding suitable accommodation for the bailiff he proposed to bring with him and by carrying out various cultivations in advance of his arrival. Arthur Biddell had also gained the confidence of no less a figure than Arthur Young, son of the rector of the adjoining parish of Bradfield Combust, who in writing on his travels through England, had become an important and trusted source on the state of agriculture at the onset of the Napoleonic Wars and on how its output might be improved. Young was made the first Secretary of the newly formed Board of Agriculture in 1793 in which capacity he continued to work on his *Annals of Agriculture* and his *General View of Agriculture* county series, now the authoritative source for the period. The young Biddell was invited to join him on a tour through Europe but his mother objected and he did not go.



Arthur Biddell photographed in the porch at Hill House, 1859. His great-great-niece Anna Airy wrote on the reverse: '.... photography being against his religious scruples and classified as the making of graven images' Biddell collection

¹ Museum of English Rural Life, Reading. SUF 5/3/1: letter from William Rainbird to Arthur Biddell, 12 February 1812, containing Agreement of lease of Playford Mill for 7 years at an annual rent of £200. SUF 5/1/1/f3: letter from James Case to Arthur Biddell, 8 March 1828, containing arrangements for the lease of Playford Mill. At an annual rent of £200, the mill was a larger enterprise than might have been imagined especially when compared with the rent of £265 for Biddell's 221 acre Hill Farm at a similar date. It was Biddell who put the adverts in the *Ipswich Journal*, interviewed the applicants and, as here, drew up the necessary agreements. Such evidence goes to show how much trust the Estate placed in the young man to look after its affairs when he was still under 30 years old and only five years into his tenancy.

His family and the origins of Biddell & Blencowe, land agents and auctioneers

Arthur Biddell was the youngest of eleven children, seven boys and four girls, but only two of his brothers survived: William (1770-1824) who went to farm in Norfolk and George (1772-1851) who stayed on at Bradfield running the family farm for over 50 years until he died unmarried at the age of 80. George founded the highly successful land agency and auctioneering firm of Biddell & Blencowe that remained a going concern for close on 100 years. An elder sister, Elizabeth, had married a John Blencowe and, having no children of his own, he went into partnership with their son Arthur. The firm operated firstly out of Bradfield and then, as it grew larger, from Bury St Edmunds. On Arthur Blencowe's death in 1856 William Biddell, third son of Arthur Biddell who had married Arthur Blencowe's daughter, became the senior partner and on his death in 1900 it was run by Arthur's nephew George who died in 1916 when, with no one to succeed, it ceased to trade.

His farming in Playford

At 221 acres Hill Farm was not large but Arthur Biddell was soon to make strides. With the country still at war with France, times were good for farmers and, besides, he had been a considerable beneficiary of his father's will when still only 16 years old. He therefore had money which he quickly put to good use: in 1816 he put up the two cottages at the bottom of Hill Farm Road which remain standing to this day, in 1818 following the death of William Branson he bought his small holding on the Butts Road and, following the death of John Gayfer in 1825, he acquired the four acre piece of land to the north of Church Lane which the family have only recently relinquished. Timing was also in his favour. The Lux Farm tenant, Robert Manning, was declared bankrupt in 1821 most probably a victim of the post-war depression, and had to terminate his lease.² Because of the great respect in which Arthur Biddell was held by the Estate, he was able to take on this second, larger, farm in addition to his initial rental and furthermore, on the death of William Gooding of Kiln Farm in 1829, he acquired that acreage as well.³ By 1845 or thereabouts he had also bought a 120 acre farm in Grundisburgh where, after a few years at home with his father, his son William farmed with success. His younger brother Herman followed him there in 1853.

Arthur Biddell's good fortune continued following the death of Henstridge Cobbold (1775-1849), a spinster from the wealthy family of Ipswich brewers.⁴ Henstridge Cobbold had been left the 172 acre Monument Farm in Foxhall by her aunt Mary Routh née Cobbold (1750-1832) with whom she had lived 'as a daughter' in her old age. Her aunt had bequeathed it to her 'for life and then to my

² *Ipswich Journal*, 28 December 1822. Notice to creditors.

³ SROI SC322/8, sale catalogue Kiln Farm contents of house dated 6 October 1829. Born in Playford in 1753, William Gooding was the son of Abraham Gooding 'bricklayer and brickmaker' of Brick Kiln Farm who in 1736 built the new bridge over the 'back river near Playford Hall' (see Bridge Cottage in this series, 8-9). It is presumed that William continued to work the kiln after his father's death but it is not known what acreage he farmed if any. In a rental of c. 1775 the brick kiln was let with Lux Farm. It was still running in 1874 when it was then operated by a Charles Fisk but had ceased working by 1882. (SROI, qS 609), Suffolk Industrial Archaeology Newsletter, No. 32.

⁴ TNA PROB 11/1801/417, will of Mary Routh, 17 September 1831 made six months before she died. Two independent notes left by members of the Biddell family state that Mary Routh also left Henstridge Cobbold the 170 acre Lodge Farm in Foxhall and Brightwell and that it too descended to Arthur Biddell but there is no evidence to support this. In fact just eight weeks after writing her will she added a codicil leaving Lodge Farm to Edward Bacon, a relative on her late husband's side. The Revd George Routh (1740-1821) had been Rector of St Clement's and St Helen's in Ipswich; his grandfather was Nicholas Bacon, MP for Ipswich 1685-87. Monument Farm takes its name from the memorial that Mary erected to her husband in 1831 ten years after his death and a year before she died. An inscription says: 'With a mind deeply impressed with religion and adorned with literature, he often sought retirement on this secluded estate'.

friend Arthur Biddell and, after his death, to his children equally'. Henstridge had lived in a nine bedroomed house in Tacket Street, Ipswich, which stood in an acre and a quarter of grounds; following her death, it was Arthur Biddell who handled its sale.⁵

His estate and land agency work

Arthur Biddell was never going to succumb to the post war agricultural depression as other farmers had done and already by 1816 he had teamed up with an auctioneer from Woodbridge, a Mr Cana, to sell a small estate in neighbouring Bredfield, a move that was soon to make him more widely known as a valuer than a farmer. By 1823 he and his brother George from Bradfield were acting as agents for a family south of Paris looking for tenants to take on a number of farms on their estate.⁶ And as soon as the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 was passed, when tithes in kind were converted into variable monetary payments, he was introduced to the Tithe Commutation Office by his nephew George Biddell Airy 'where he was soon favourably received and from which connection he obtained very profitable employment as a valuer'.⁷ This work absorbed him up to the mid- and late-1840s and, on his death in 1860, the family found working papers in his desk relating to no fewer than 70 parishes that he had surveyed not only in East and West Suffolk but in Norfolk and Essex as well. Interspersed with this work and stretching into the 1850s, he was employed by the Inclosure Commissioners in the late enclosure of open and common fields across the two Suffolk counties.⁸ As if to emphasise where the bulk of his money had come from, he describes himself in his will, which was written only months before his death in 1860, as 'retired land and tithe valuer' with no mention of his being a farmer although he continued in that occupation until the day he died.

His marriage to Jane, daughter of Robert Ransome: Ipswich engineer and Quaker

Arthur Biddell's first nine years in the village were spent as a bachelor with a Mrs Mann as housekeeper and it was not until 1817 when he was 34 that he married. He married Jane Ransome the daughter of Robert Ransome (1753-1830) founder of the world renowned firm of agricultural engineers that was later to become Ransomes, Sims & Jefferies with its base in Ipswich. As with many leading industrialists of the time, the Ransomes were a Quaker family and in marrying outside her faith Jane was expelled from the brotherhood.⁹ As a result the couple married in the parish church at Greenstead near Colchester, the home at that time of Arthur's elder sister Ann wife of William Airy who was employed there by the Excise.

Biddell was already churchwarden at the time of his marriage and a compromise in their children's upbringing seems to have been made: they were all baptised into the Church of England but not until they had reached about 20 years of age when they were old enough to make a decision for themselves. It is of note that none of the children seems to have followed their mother in her Quaker beliefs and indeed three of the boys like their father served as churchwarden in their respective parishes for a great number of years. Although Jane Biddell was disowned by the Society of Friends

⁵ *Ipswich Journal*, 26 January 1850.

⁶ *Ibid.* 23 August 1823.

⁷ Wilfrid Airy, *Autobiography of Sir George Biddell Airy*, (Illinois 2008), 117.

⁸ *Ipswich Journal*, 21 December 1850. As an example, Biddell was employed in the 'Inclosure of the Green and Strips of Waste Land' in the parish of Haughley.

⁹ J.C. Wolton, *William Biddell of Lavenham Hall and Manfred Biddell of Playford* (Lavenham Press, c.2000). A transcript of the Testimony of the Disownment appears on page 3.

she still retained her faith and was visited by Elders until her death in 1856. The births of all their children are to be found in the records of the Woodbridge Society of Friends but above Arthur and Jane's names are the telling words: 'N/B Parents not in Membership'.¹⁰ Throughout her life she maintained close friendships with many Quakers in the area. A poet herself, she was particularly



The Clarkson obelisk in Playford churchyard towards which the Ransome family, being Quakers, declined to contribute but saw fit to pay for haulage costs and its erection on site

close to Bernard Barton (1784-1849) known in his lifetime as the Quaker poet.¹¹ Living in Cumberland Street, Woodbridge, he was a regular visitor to Hill House; his daughter Lucy married Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883), more than 20 years her senior, and a close friend of Herman, Arthur and Jane's youngest child. Disowned by the Quakers at her marriage, she was disowned by the Church of England at her death for, despite attending services every Sunday in Playford church for nearly 40 years, her coffin was not allowed inside the building as she had never been baptised. Such strict application of Canon Law by Willoughby Dickinson, the vicar, could not have been easy for him. Dickinson had married Mary Clarkson, Thomas Clarkson's niece and daughter-in-law, and because of his close Clarkson connections would almost certainly have had sympathy with the Quaker cause. Thomas Clarkson himself, despite being ordained into the Church of England, always considered himself 'nine-tenths a Quaker'. There is only one other recorded occasion when these two faiths came into conflict within the family and that was at the putting up of the obelisk to Clarkson in Playford churchyard. Desperate for funds from a dwindling number of ageing supporters and

acquaintances, Arthur Biddell and his nephew George Biddell Airy invited support from the Ransome family who declined to contribute as 'Quakers do not subscribe to graven images' but Robert Ransome, grandson of the founder, managed to satisfy the tenets of his creed by bearing the entire cost of hauling the stone from Ipswich dock and erecting it in its present position.

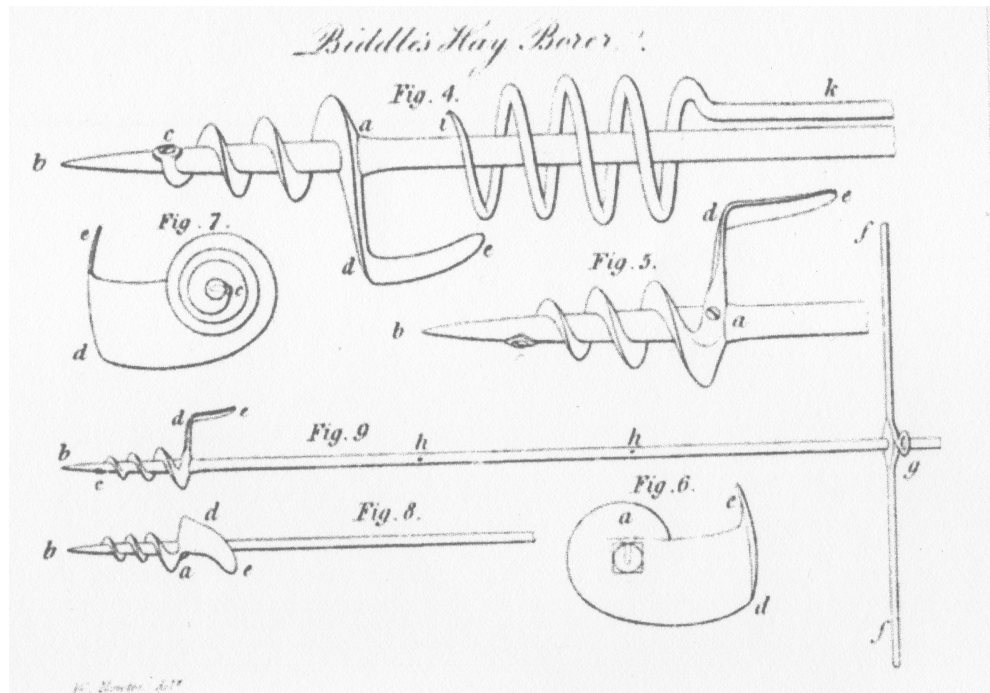
His agricultural inventions

Arthur Biddell was a successful inventor of agricultural machinery and, as with his other pursuit of property valuation, it almost certainly brought him additional income. His earliest invention, for which he was awarded a silver medal from the Royal Society of Arts in 1822, was for his hay-borer, a giant corkscrew device capable of puncturing holes in haystacks to release heat from overheating stacks so preventing their spoiling or even catching fire, a common enough sight in the countryside until the 1950s when the baling of hay took over from its being stored loose in a stack. His award was a notable achievement. The Royal Society of Arts had been founded in 1754 and was committed to finding practical solutions to social challenges; another award winner for the year 1822 was Marc Isambard Brunel, the father of the better known Isambard Kingdom Brunel, for his improved steam

¹⁰ England & Wales, Society of Friends (Quaker) Births 1578-1841.

¹¹ Bob Merrett, *Bernard Barton, The Quaker Poet* (Woodbridge Museum, 2009)

engine while more recent recipients have included no lesser figures than Stephen Hawking and Tim Berners-Lee. Approval for such honours took time as it was back in 1815, seven years earlier, that Biddell first perfected his device. His partner in the early trials, who later had the production rights, was a William Wright a 'maker of edge-tools in this village'. It has to be assumed that Wright operated from the smithy on the higher side of Brook Lane close to the brook. In 1794, together with the Falcon Inn in Rushmere, it was included in the lease of Playford Hall Farm and was then occupied by a Mr Hogger, a family that was to remain in the village as general labourers until 1928. By 1806, a new tenancy had been drawn up, and, as with the mill and the brick kiln, tenants thereafter dealt with the Estate direct.¹²



Made in Playford. Biddell's hay-borer was awarded a silver medal from the Royal Society of Arts in 1822 and was manufactured by William Wright 'a maker of edge-tools in this village'. Its purpose was to drill holes in haystacks so as to release heat and thereby prevent spontaneous combustion Biddell collection

By 1815 output of Biddell's hay-borers had commenced for in July of that year John Thompson of Culpho Hall 'sent for one of these instruments to a Mr Wright, a blacksmith, whom Mr Biddell employed to make them'. Production may well have come to a halt after Wright died in 1821 although the smithy kept going as the following year Hogger was back having agreed an annual contract with Biddell for the shoeing of nine cart horses.¹³ There is doubt however as to whether the enterprise was a commercial success for Thompson was declared bankrupt within a year and Wright died owing Biddell £1 19s 7d the equivalent of four weeks' pay for a working man at that time.¹⁴

Biddell's mechanical inventiveness was broadly based and led for example to improvements in farm corn mills, chaff and root cutters and many other types of machinery but, in the early 1840s, he produced some of his better known creations. Chief among these were his scarifier and the not dissimilar extirpating harrow both of which were well received, breaking up the land when too hard for harrows and 'bringing to the surface all grass and rubbish'. Such implements, with a solid iron

¹² SROB HA 558/3/7/22/21, 10 February 1794, assignment of a lease, John Cutting of Playford Hall. HA 507/3/580, 10 October 1806, assignment of a lease, John Cutting of Playford Hall.

¹³ SROI, HA2/A3/2, Arthur Biddell's Day Books, 5 March 1822. There was another smithy in the village to the north of 'Old Fuller's Cottage' (now Airy's) but it had been converted to a carpenter's shop before Biddell arrived in the village in 1808 (see Airy's Cottage in this series, 4).

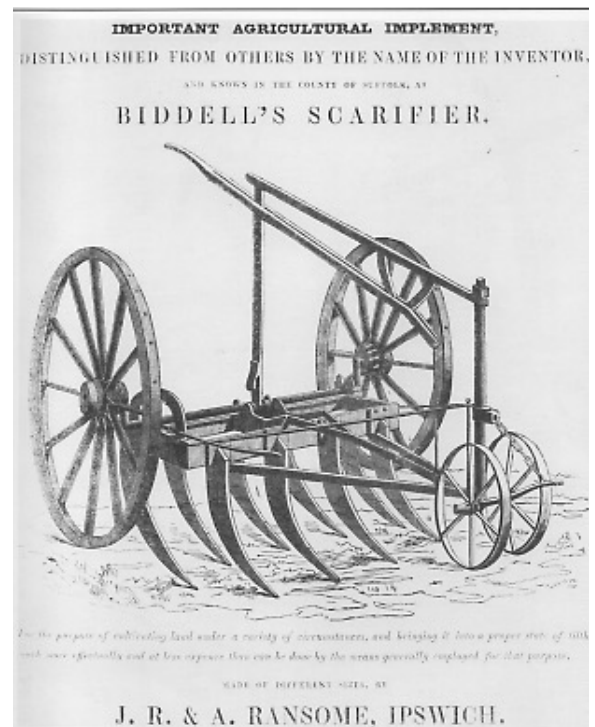
¹⁴ *Ipswich Journal*, 24 February 1816. Thompson was described as a merchant, dealer and chapman, and as he was also a farmer in his own right with a known 55 acres in Playford, he was obviously intent on trying one out before hoping to distribute them more widely.

frame and requiring three or four horses to pull them, were clearly beyond the reach of a village blacksmith and were produced commercially by his father-in-law's old firm of Ransomes where they quickly became one of that company's best selling lines. Biddell's nephew at Greenwich, George Biddell Airy, also employed Ransomes in the manufacture of scientific instruments, the firm providing the Royal Observatory with the mounts for his famous Transit Circle. This came into use in 1851 and redefined the Greenwich Meridian and subsequently the Prime Meridian of the world. It remained in use until 1899 and subsequently was removed to the Science Museum.¹⁵ In addition in 1874 Ransomes constructed the mount for the Tomline refractor at Orwell Park Observatory. Airy's son Wilfrid, father of the artist Anna who lived in Playford from 1912 until his death in 1925, was a civil engineer by training and was responsible for the selection of scientific instruments in that observatory.¹⁶

His friendship with Sir William Cubitt



Sir William Cubitt, a lifelong friend of Arthur Biddell, who was knighted by Queen Victoria for his work as Chairman of the Building Committee at the Great Exhibition of 1851



In the 1840s Biddell's scarifier became one of Ransome's best selling lines Biddell collection

Arthur Biddell knew William Cubitt (1785-1861) when he was a youth and 'low in the world'. He found occasional work for him such as the erection of an iron gate at the entrance to Playford Hall the 'workmanship of which was not entirely to Mrs Clarkson's liking'; he also had the opportunity of recommending him to the notice and employment of the governor of Bury St Edmunds gaol where some repairs of a mechanical nature were much needed. It was while he was working at Bury gaol that Cubitt observed prisoners 'lying around in idleness and was concerned to teach them habits of industry'. From this followed his invention of the treadmill, brought in about 1818, initially to give prisoners exercise in the grinding of their own corn but was later used by the authorities as a means of punishment. Cubitt had come from North Norfolk where his father was a miller and where in 1807 he invented and patented self-regulating sails for windmills allowing them to automatically change their orientation towards the wind which had previously been a constant challenge for the operator of the mill. They were to become the

¹⁵ Ken Goward and Bill Barton, *Ransome's Astronomical Equipment*, <http://oasi.org.uk/OPO/Ransomes/Ransomes.php>

¹⁶ Roy Gooding and James Appleton, *A Short History of Orwell Park Observatory*, <http://oasi.org.uk/OPO/SHOPO/SHOPO.php>

standard for windmills worldwide. He then joined an agricultural machinery maker where they constructed horse driven threshing machines and other farm implements but in 1812 he moved to Ipswich where for nine years he was Ransome's chief engineer becoming a partner in the firm until his removal to London in 1826. At this time he broadened the work of the company to include the construction of a number of iron bridges most notably that at Stoke in Ipswich which lasted until 1924. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1830 and later, when President of the Institute for Civil Engineers, he was Chairman of the Building Committee of the Great Exhibition of 1851 held in Hyde Park and the brain-child of Prince Albert. For this he was knighted by Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle that year. It was while he was at Ransome's that he first acted as a civil engineer but after his move to London he became fully engaged in many important national works principally on the construction of canals and later of railways.

His friendship with Thomas Clarkson

Thomas Clarkson came to Playford in February 1816. He had gone to the Lake District in 1794 with a Quaker friend to recover from exhaustion and here he bought a small 34 acre farm and fell in love



Thomas Clarkson, with whom Arthur Biddell dined at Playford Hall every Sunday for close on 30 years

with the area. He grew a variety of crops, kept an assortment of stock and lived a somewhat bohemian life until 1803 when his wife Catherine became ill and was advised that she should no longer live in the cold wet climate. She moved back to East Anglia to live with her father William Buck, a prosperous yarn-maker in Bury St Edmunds who three years later in 1806 went into partnership with Benjamin Greene the two together founding the present day Greene King brewery there. In Bury Clarkson met and became great friends with fellow liberal and Johnian Frederick William Hervey, 5th Earl of Bristol, who leased him land on which he could continue his farming.¹⁷ He was more of a 'gentleman farmer' now, employing a bailiff but it was he who decided the rotation of crops, bought and sold the cattle and sheep and took samples of corn to market.¹⁸ Clarkson required the income both to live and to pursue his anti-slavery goals as the money brought in from his writing fell well below his needs. He stayed at Bury for a little over ten years and, when

a much larger farm unexpectedly became available on part of the Bristol's vast 30,000 acre estate, Hervey was determined that no one other than his great friend Clarkson should have it.

The vacancy had arisen at Playford Hall Farm following the bankruptcy of the tenant there, John Cutting, who was forced by the terms of his tenancy to vacate the house and farm. This was not a post-Napoleonic War insolvency; Cutting, together with his brother, who farmed Bristol land in Rushmere, had had a brush with the Revenue though Herman Biddell adds from family gossip that his downfall was brought about more by high living than by tax evasion. Whatever the reason he did

¹⁷ <http://www.ickworthchurch.org.uk/hervey-family> Ickworth Church Conservation Trust, Hervey Family: 'Frederick William Hervey (1769-1859), 5th Earl of Bristol,... voted for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807'. The Earl was Thomas Clarkson's landlord.... and personal letters from the Earl to Clarkson are pasted into several of Clarkson's books on slavery held in the collection at Ickworth.

¹⁸ Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography*, (York, 1989), 136.

not go quietly, arguing fiercely about the value of his remaining lease. He had also left the house in very poor condition and the bailiff's house in Brook Lane was on the point of collapse. Being on the spot, it was Arthur Biddell on behalf of the Estate who eased Clarkson into his occupancy, managed the farm following Cutting's sudden departure and made it his business to see that his bailiff had appropriate accommodation in which to set up house.¹⁹

Biddell was no ordinary farmer. Despite an education that was limited to the village school in Rougham, he was a cultured man, a Shakespearean scholar and very widely read. His nephew, George Biddell Airy, was of the opinion that with the same advantages that he himself had enjoyed, his uncle would have risen to the same heights as he had done. Biddell immediately formed a bond with Clarkson, a Cambridge man and ordained deacon, and the two became close friends. Almost from the start, he and his wife Jane were invited to Playford Hall every Sunday for the main meal of the day at 3.00 pm, occasions that would last well into the evening. On her arrival in Playford Catherine set up and ran the Sunday school, then the only education available for village children, but Clarkson himself never entered into local life at all and, despite the prestige accorded to living at The Hall, he was more than happy to let Biddell take charge. As a token of their friendship he gave him the portrait that William Hazlitt had painted of him in 1811, four years after the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, and it was the Biddell family that in later years presented it to Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich where it remains to this day.

His nephew George Biddell Airy, Astronomer Royal

Biddell must also be given credit for helping his young nephew George Airy on his way in the world. The son of his older sister Ann, Airy was about 12 when his father disappeared and, attending the local grammar school at Colchester, he spent much of his school holidays at his uncle's home in Playford. The young Airy's intellect was pointed out to Clarkson who promptly examined him in the Classics and then invited him to meet a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, who tested him in Mathematics. His answers 'excited much admiration' and he duly entered Trinity in 1819. With no father to support him, it fell to Arthur Biddell to provide the money for his studies, a debt that the young Airy was soon able to repay as his academic achievements quickly multiplied culminating in his becoming Astronomer Royal at the age of only 34, a post that he held for 46 years.²⁰ In later life Airy showed his gratitude to Clarkson by raising the obelisk in the churchyard in his memory. Airy was the driving force behind the project, but it was both uncle and nephew together who persuaded local and national admirers to find the money for its erection.²¹



George Biddell Airy who, from the age of 12, was largely brought up by his uncle Arthur Biddell
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¹⁹ SROI, HD 494/156 onwards. Correspondence between Thomas Clarkson and Arthur Biddell prior to his arrival in the village.

²⁰ Notes by Amy Biddell, his granddaughter. Private possession.

²¹ See Airy's Cottage in this series, 8-12.

Airy's mother Ann had married William Airy, an employee of the Excise, who had been posted to Bury St Edmunds where they met but who was later transferred to Colchester. His career was brought to an abrupt end in around 1813 following allegations over a missing sum of £600 after which the young Airy was largely brought up by his uncle Arthur who by that time had moved to Playford.²² Because of his fondness for both his uncle and for the village, Airy later, in 1845, bought a cottage near the church which he used as a holiday home and which was to remain in the family for 120 years. His mother died at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich then the home of her son but is buried at Little Whelnetham where she and her siblings had grown up. She was buried next to her husband who had predeceased her by some 14 years.

His family

Arthur and Jane had ten children, six girls and four boys. All survived childhood but two of the girls died in their teens: Lucy the twin sister of Manfred when she was 19 and Isabella Routh, named



Arthur and Jane Biddell's seven surviving children c. 1890. Left to right standing: George, Herman and Anna. Left to right seated: William, Ellen, Jane and Manfred. Hanging on the wall is a picture of Bishop Bedell from whom the family consider they are descended John Wolton

after Mary Routh, when she was 17. Another sister, Mary died at 42 while the other three girls lived to a good age. Of the four surviving girls only one, Jane, married but her husband died young

²² Airy, *Autobiography*, 66, 68, 69. Airy had lent the money to a friend of his grandfather George Biddell, a Mr Cropley from the Bury area, but he refused to repay him. He died in Fleet prison after which most of the money was repaid.

leaving her a widow for over 50 years. She had married John Potter Everard, a farmer from Polstead who had been selected as Conservative candidate for Bury St Edmunds Town Council. On his death in 1858 she returned to Hill House to live with her family and stayed with them until Herman married in 1870. She then moved to Henley Road in Ipswich with her two sisters Ellen and Anna where they stayed for some 40 years until they died. Ellen and Anna are buried in the Biddell family vault on the south side of the chancel; Jane with her husband in the coffin tomb close to the Clarkson obelisk.

As much for their own achievements, Arthur and Jane Biddell are equally well known as the parents of the four boys of the marriage. All went to private school in Grundisburgh and all made a name for themselves on both the national and indeed the international stage. Manfred, the eldest, became a breeder and exporter world wide of the Suffolk horse; George, the second son, became chief engineer at Ransomes; William became MP for West Suffolk while Herman, whose life in retirement is discussed under Archway House in this series, wrote the definitive history of the Suffolk horse and became a prominent personality in the county both in terms of agriculture and politics. While William moved to Lavenham and George into Ipswich, both Manfred and Herman remained in the parish all their lives. But with the exception of Herman whose male line achieved distinction in the Church, the next generation never matched the standing that their fathers had enjoyed and the family name, once prominent well beyond the village of their birth, all but disappeared. Two branches of Biddells remained in the parish until well into the 20th century and even beyond living off family money in greatly reduced circumstances. Herman's two unmarried daughters, Amy and Rachel, stayed on at Archway House for a few years after their mother's death but moved to Branson's when the money ran out while a third sister, Dorothea also unmarried, having spent her life working among the poor in the east end of London, ended her days in a very modest cottage at The Brook. By 1970 all three had passed on and, with their deaths, the family name in the village also died. On the other side of Butts Road, the four or so acres of land that Arthur Biddell had bought from the estate of John Gayfer descended via his son Manfred and in 1932 passed to his great-granddaughter Margaret Goldsmith. Her son, Owen, who had arrived in the village with his parents in 1935 and, war years apart, stayed on until he died in 2012 at the age of 93. In selling off the last remaining building plots just prior to his death, he severed the final connection that the village had with the Biddell family.

Arthur Biddell's will

Running to over 20 manuscript pages, the will goes to great lengths to ensure fair and equal treatment among the eight surviving children. With his three older sons married and set up for life, his first consideration was that the Estate be asked for permission for his youngest, Herman, to 'reside in and occupy the house and farm I now hold and have held upwards of fifty years'.^{23 24}

²³ When Arthur Biddell wrote his will early in 1860 just a few months before his death, his three eldest sons were already established in business. Manfred had been running Lux Farm for 18 years since he was a young man of 20, George had been at Ransomes for 20 years and had been made Chief Engineer of the Orwell Works seven years earlier while William had moved to West Suffolk where he farmed at Hawstead and was with the family firm of Biddell and Blencowe, auctioneers and land agents, becoming senior partner in 1856. Herman by contrast, then 28, was running the small 120 acre farm at Grundisburgh that his father had bought in about 1845 initially for his elder brother William.

²⁴ SROB HA558/3/7/22/33, a 14 year lease of land in Playford to Arthur Biddell, 221 acres at an annual rent of £265, 3 September 1810, two years after he took the farm and five years before the cottages were built. According to Biddell, keen to point out the good relations that existed between landlord and tenant, this was the only agreement he had in the 52 years that he farmed in the parish. But while the information concerning the cottages might have been added later as an addendum, another lease was in fact drawn up in 1825 this time for 16 years but at the reduced rent of £250.

Permission having been granted, he asked also that his three daughters be allowed to remain in the house with him for such time as 'my said son remains unmarried'. Herman was also to receive all his father's rights in the double cottage at the top of Hill Farm Road, now known as Foxboro', 'the materials of the said cottage being guaranteed to me by the lease of the farm'.²⁵

As was a common investment in those days, Biddell had acquired many cottage properties across the county; George for example came into two at Rushmere, Mary one at Wattisham while Herman inherited a couple at Bradfield St George. But the rents from his major properties at Branson's, Gayfer's, the two cottages at the bottom of Hill Farm Road and six at Grundisburgh near the Meeting House were, for 20 years after his death, to be collected by the executors, William and George, and divided equally amongst all eight children. After 20 years the properties were all to be sold and the proceeds equally divided as before. The Grundisburgh properties were duly sold in 1882 but the others were bought in by the family: Branson's by Herman, Gayfer's by Manfred and the cottages at the bottom of Hill Farm Road by William.²⁶ All these properties remained in family hands for a considerable time after their father's death: Branson's was sold by two of Herman's daughters, Amy and Rachel, in 1934, the Hill Farm Road cottages by William's daughter Bertha Taylor in 1949 while ownership of the former four acre Gayfer property in the middle of the village fell away gradually over a long period of time from the first sale of The Ridge in 1939 to the last building plots in 2012. The Foxhall farm went to Manfred and from him it passed to his son Arthur Blencowe while the Grundisburgh farm went to Herman who, it is assumed, must have sold it. Besides land, Arthur Biddell held money in several railway companies as well as in Ipswich Dock which had opened in 1842. He also held mortgages on three separate farms amounting to £8,100. All these holdings had to be cashed in at the end of 15 years and disposed of equally as before.

Little of this wealth is apparent today, much of the money having been dissipated amongst a large family whilst over the years death duties have taken their toll. Of the four sons, only William with his farms and land agent's business not only had the capacity for making money but of holding on to it, his only child Bertha leaving £75,000 when she died in 1954, a sum that would amount to almost £2m in today's money (2018). Eric Wolton was particularly critical of others in the Biddell family for their lack of thrift.²⁷ ²⁸ His own background was from a well respected and established farming family that had operated on a large scale originally in Newbourne and at Butley Abbey but later in

²⁵ SROI, IC/AA2/130, 285. Will of Arthur Biddell. This information in Biddell's will helps to confirm the ownership of the Hill Farm Road property. George Biddell Airy, whose first visit to Playford was as a young lad in the two to three years prior to the cottage being put up in around 1815, related that his uncle had bought the materials (from the former St Helen's Barracks on Woodbridge Road) and had built the house. But because the site, as opposed to the building, belonged to the Estate and because the property did not appear in the Tithe Apportionment of 1844, it was rightly assumed that it belonged to the Bristol family. It was certainly owned by them in 1866 when the western half became a school and it was certainly owned by them in 1877 as they paid rates on the building (HA 2/F6/1/3). And it was bought from the Estate by Charles Lofts in 1953. At some stage therefore after Arthur Biddell's death, perhaps on the retirement of Herman Biddell in 1892, the Estate must have paid the Biddells for the money that they had originally invested in it. Confusion had been brought about by the fact that, at the same time as Arthur Biddell built the dwelling at the top of Hill Farm Road, with similar materials he also built the two cottages at the bottom of the hill but in the case of the cottages at the bottom of the hill, Lord Bristol gave him the site and he owned the two houses outright. They remained in the Biddell family right up to 1949 when they were bought from Arthur Biddell's granddaughter Bertha Taylor by the then tenant, Harold Burch, father of José Booker. (see Glenham in this series, 4).

²⁶ SROI EG32/L1/19, conveyance of six cottages to Joseph Smith of Thorpe Hall, Hasketon.

²⁷ SROI FC22/D1/5, Playford marriage registers. 10 June 1884, Cordy Samuel Wolton, farmer of Ixworth, to Lucy Biddell second daughter of Manfred Biddell of Lux Farm. Eric Wolton was the son of Cordy Wolton. Lucy was a grandmother of Owen Goldsmith (d. 2012), the last of the Biddell family to live in Playford.

²⁸ SROI, HD 436/7-16, correspondence between Eric Wolton, son of Cordy Wolton, and Amy Biddell, daughter of Herman Biddell, 1947-1949.

Ixworth and had married into the Biddells in 1880. He considered Herman to be ‘not good with money’ while his most severe criticism, understandably, was reserved for Herman’s daughter Amy, profligate in the extreme, who was at one stage declared a bankrupt. Neither did Manfred escape censure attributing his two boys’ lack of drive and initiative to their want of training as farmers.

Manfred Biddell (1822-1894) - the eldest son.



Manfred Biddell, Arthur Biddell’s eldest son, farmed Lux Farm for 52 years from 1842 until his death in 1894 John Wolton

Manfred was tenant at Lux Farm for 52 years from the time that he succeeded his father in 1842, when he was just 20 years old, until he died at the age of 72. But he did not live in the house for the whole of that time. His father had taken on Lux’s additional acres in 1825 following the death of Robert Barry and ran the farm himself for 17 years before handing over to his son. George Biddell Airy, who would have known Barry from his frequent visits to Hill House and known him well as the two were much the same age, relates that Barry was ‘connected with a great firm of manufacturing chemists, Allen & Barry.... in London.... and that he had been a pupil of Mr Biddell’.²⁹ Barry died when he was only 26 whereupon Arthur Biddell came to take on the farm.³⁰ But the house appears to have remained unoccupied at least for a while. Barry would certainly have lodged at Hill House while under training and, being a bachelor, is likely to have continued living there after taking on Lux Farm rather than living in Lux farm house on his own. His predecessor, Robert Manning, had been declared bankrupt in 1821 and had to forego his tenancy. For some reason he managed not to sell his furniture which might

have helped in paying off his debts and it was not put up for sale until well after the final meeting of creditors in 1825.^{31 32} It was sold on 4 October 1830 ‘upon the premises formerly occupied by Mr Robert Manning by the side of the Turnpike Road leading from Martlesham to Rushmere Heath’; a

²⁹ SROI, EG94/B1/2, letter from George Biddell Airy to his cousin Manfred Biddell of Lux Farm, 8 Feb 1882, relating his early memories of Playford from about the year 1810 transcribed and inserted into the Minute Book of Playford Parish Council for 1948-71. The correct name of the firm of manufacturing chemists that he refers to was at that time Allen, Hanbury and Barry. It had been founded in Plough Court, Lombard Street in 1715 very near the present Monument tube station. When it is considered that all three founding partners were Quakers as was Arthur Biddell’s wife Jane, daughter of Robert Ransome, and that at least some of them were involved with Thomas Clarkson in the anti-slavery movement, it becomes more understandable how a young man from the City of London came to be a farmer in Playford. It is of interest too that Robert Ransome’s grandson was named ‘Allen’, an unusual first name at the time particularly with such spelling; there has to be good reason. While the name Allen & Hanbury continues to this day, the firm was acquired by Glaxo (now GlaxoSmithKline) in 1958.

³⁰ Society of Friends (Quaker) Burials, 1578-1841, RG6/1047. Robert Strainge Barry died 1 April 1825 aged 26 and was buried in the Quaker Burial Ground near Whitechapel close by the family home 32 Jewry Street, just off Aldgate and only 600 or so yards from the family business in Plough Court.

³¹ SROB, HA558/3/7/22/23, 14 year lease of Lux Farm to Robert Manning, 1810. The farm then covered 344 acres at an annual rent of £460.

³² *Ipswich Journal*, 28 Oct 1822 to 26 Feb 1825. Many of these notices described Manning as ‘an insolvent debtor who had lately been discharged from the King’s Bench Prison....’.... a reminder that during the 18th and 19th centuries many debtors suffered imprisonment. It was not until the Debtors’ Act of 1869 that the ability of the courts to sentence debtors to prison was severely restricted.

fortnight after the sale George Biddell Airy's mother and his sister arrived as the new tenants.^{33 34} The two women had lived with Airy in Cambridge when he was Plumian Professor of Astronomy and Director of the Observatory there but, on learning of Airy's intended marriage, had moved out and were found accommodation in Playford. They were to stay for nine years moving back with Airy in December 1839 by which time he had been posted to Greenwich as Astronomer Royal. Just prior to their departure, Airy's eldest son George died in the house. He had been taken ill on his way from Greenwich to his younger brother Arthur's funeral in Playford but was unable to make the service. The younger child had died aged five of scarlet fever while the elder aged eight had some little time earlier suffered severely from an attack of measles.³⁵ After the Airys' departure, the house was occupied for 15 years by Ben Garrod, Manfred's farming bailiff, who in turn moved to Kiln farm house when Manfred married in 1854.³⁶

Lux Farm - and how its size varied over the years

Most farms vary in size over the years: a field or two might be purchased from a neighbour or another sold off for building but the acreage of Lux Farm changed more than most particularly with regard to its less useful and unproductive parts. From a survey taken in c. 1770 it is known that it then covered 500 acres precisely and that, from field names, it incorporated a large part of what is now Kiln Farm including the kiln itself. Particularly noticeable in the survey is the very high proportion of arable: 432 acres with only 50 of meadow and pasture mainly down by the river and the remainder, 15 or so, that could only be described as 'waste' made up chiefly of the Alder Carr and the Mere.³⁷ The latter half of the 18th century was a period of great prosperity and 'agricultural enthusiasm' and it was at this time that much of Suffolk's heathland was ploughed up and enclosed in order to feed the rapidly growing population. To what extent Playford Heath reverted to scrub, if at all, in the first half of the 19th century is not known. It might have been a piecemeal process starting in the 20 hard years after the Napoleonic Wars and then become arable again in the period of 'High Farming' after 1837. What is known is that when the great agricultural depression set in in the 1870s, the whole area became little more than sheep walk once more and was not ploughed again until 1939 or, more extensively, until after the war when food shortages continued into the 1950s.

A few years after Arthur Biddell died in 1860 and following Thomas Clarkson III's shameful departure to Jersey in 1868, the 349 acres that had been attached to Playford Hall was shared between the other two farms in the parish - but not equally. The Hall Farm had extended from fields around New Buildings up to the Warren but the river became the new dividing line: land to the north of the Fynn was added to Hill Farm while that to the south, the lion's share, was put with Lux. Yet

³³ Ibid., 25 September 1830.

³⁴ Wilfrid Airy, *Autobiography of Sir George Biddell Airy*, (Illinois, 2008), 127.

³⁵ SROI, FC22/D1/6, Playford Burial Registers. Wilfrid Airy, *ibid.* 127. Airy headstones, Playford churchyard.

³⁶ In the move to Kiln Farm Garrod somehow changed his name to Garwood. A grandson, another Ben, died in South Africa in the Boer War and is commemorated on the memorial in Christchurch Park while a younger sister, Bessie, is a grandmother of Geoffrey Dunnett, gardener at Hill House (2018) having married Walter Dunnett in 1902. Another branch of the family moved to Essex where two generations, father and son, were managers of the large maltings on the waterfront at Mistley that belonged to Free Rodwell and later to Ind Coope.

³⁷ SROB, HA507/3/765. In a similar manner, John Cutting's 1794 lease of Playford Hall Farm included both the blacksmith's shop at The Brook and the Falcon public house just inside the Rushmere boundary (HA 558/3/7/22/21). Such sub-letting was stopped in the early 19th century and the tenants had to deal with the Estate themselves. A large number of the arable fields in the survey are named 'walk', an abbreviation of sheepwalk, indicating their previous use. Thorn Walk and Valley Walk, still so named in the 1950s, are on either side of the northern end of what later came to be called Dr Watson's Lane; the location of Bell Walk is self explanatory.

further acreage was added three years later in 1872 when James Colvin's Grove Estate in Little Bealings was split up and Colonel's Farm on the Martlesham Road was bought by Lord Bristol.³⁸ But unlike the addition of the Playford Hall land, this made no difference to the acreage that Manfred farmed as he was already renting it from the vendor and indeed there is evidence to suggest that those acres were routinely leased by Lux Farm tenants at the end of the 18th century and possibly even earlier.^{39 40} In 1872 they underwent a change of ownership not a change of tenancy.

The Biddells expanding acreage in the parish

The Biddells' ascendancy in the parish came about, at least in part, through the misfortune of others. To the modest 221 acres that he had initially rented from the Estate in 1808, Arthur had added the small parcel of land along the Butts Road following the death of William Branson in 1816 and the even smaller four acre field he acquired in Church Lane in 1825 after the death of John Gayfer. But events in the following years were to considerably eclipse this unexceptional beginning for, following Robert Manning's bankruptcy in 1821 and Barry's death four years later, he acquired the tenancy of Lux Farm and on the death of George Gooding in 1829 he acquired that of Kiln Farm as well.

William Gooding, father of George, had been granted a 14 year lease on a certain 'farm and brick kiln' in Playford in 1810.⁴¹ William was 75 when he died in 1827 and, as no further lease has come to light, it has to be assumed that his son George then took over. George died in 1829 just two years after his father at the young age of 27 and yet again Arthur Biddell was on hand to fill a gap.⁴² It has to be supposed that the separate Kiln Farm extended to the 155 acres that are missing from the 1770 survey, a size that would roughly accord with the list of items detailed in the sale catalogue following George's death.⁴³ The family had had a long association with both the kiln and adjoining farm land that went back nearly 100 years but, now ended, the two farms, Kiln and Lux, returned to the single tenancy that they had had before.⁴⁴ They were farmed together for the next 130 years until, following the death of the 4th Marquis of Bristol in 1951, both properties were bought by the sitting tenant, George Stennett, who quickly sold off the former Kiln Farm land to a neighbour from Kesgrave, E. J. Fenton, while retaining the remaining acreage for himself.

The Biddell family had always laid great store by the fact that at one time Arthur farmed 1,000 acres and this would have been in those years before Manfred took over at Lux. The acreage would have been made up by the 221 at Hill Farm, 500 at Lux and Kiln Farms plus the 109 acres of the Colvin

³⁸ *Ipswich Journal*, 3 August 1872. The sale was at the [Great] White Horse Hotel, Ipswich, on 8 October 1872.

³⁹ 1851 Census, Little Bealings. Samuel Amos and his family were living at 'Colonel Pogson's Old Farm House', the present day Colonel's Farm Cottage on the Martlesham Road which lay just within the parish of Lt Bealings. It was eventually incorporated into Playford in the boundary changes of 1984. Amos was already in Little Bealings in 1841 with no indication as to where he was. SROI, FC22/67/4, List of Labourers above 18 years where Amos had the words Little Bealings written against his name and where he is recorded as working for Arthur Biddell in c.1834.

⁴⁰ Similarly William Frost (José Booker's great-great-grandfather) was born in Little Bealings in c.1797 and was also working for Arthur Biddell in c.1834 (see above). These two instances strongly suggest that the 109 acre Colonel's property was habitually farmed jointly with Lux Farm but until 1872 was under differing ownership.

⁴¹ SROB, HA 558/3/7/22/34. Lease of farm and brick kiln for 14 years, 5 December 1810.

⁴² RG4/1848-9, Tacket Street Congregational Church register, Ipswich. Death of George Gooding, 1829.

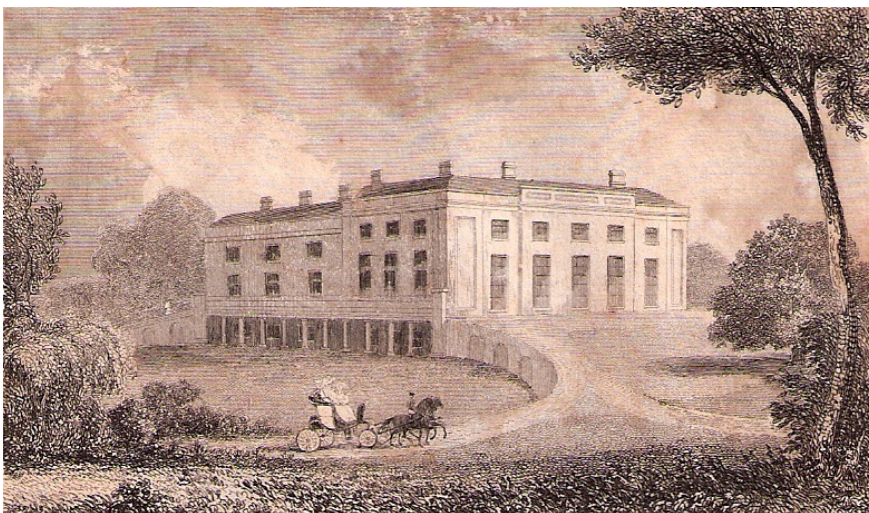
⁴³ SROI, SC 32/8, Wm Gooding's sale catalogue, 6 October 1829. Livestock, which included six farm horses, and farm implements were sold on the first day; domestic goods were auctioned on the second day.

⁴⁴ SROI, HA2/F8/1, agreement between Abraham Gooding, bricklayer and brickmaker, from Brick Kiln Farm, and the Playford Surveyors, 1736. Abraham Gooding was the father of William Gooding.

Estate discussed above, the tenancy of which passed to Manfred in 1842, and the 172 acres at Monument Farm in Foxhall which had been left to him by Mary Routh in 1832. He most certainly would have managed the Foxhall farm for many years before Mary Routh died and quite probably from the time of her husband's death in 1821. It was at around this time too that he bought the 120 acre farm at Grundisburgh from the Revd. Charles Sharpe for his third son William took who took it over soon after leaving school in 1840.

Pogson's, its rebuilding, demolition and disappearance

In 1841, the year before Manfred took over at Lux Farm, Kesgrave House was pulled down. It had stood to the north of the present Colonel's Farm Cottage and had belonged to a Col. Thomas Pogson. Pogson at first rented 'the old mansion' from his wife Emily's first cousin, George Thomas of Woodbridge, but in 1812 he bought it and immediately pulled it down erecting 'a large handsome building on the site'. Pogson died in 1835 and his wife the following year. The property 'erected within about 30 years' was widely advertised, put up for sale in 1840 and bought by James Colvin of The Grove, Little Bealings.⁴⁵ Within six months it had been demolished and the building materials advertised for sale.⁴⁶



Kesgrave House, the residence of Col. Thomas Pogson, which stood in a detached part of Kesgrave parish to the north of the present Colonel's Farm Cottage. Built in 1812, it was pulled down in 1841 Biddell collection

With the house went 84 acres of land which the Biddells had rented and which were later bought by the Bristol Estate in 1872 when Colvin sold the Grove Estate. The purchase extended Lux Farm eastwards along the Martlesham Road as far as Hall Road crossroads. Of the 84 acres 37½ lay in the detached portion of Kesgrave but were not transferred to Playford until 1882.

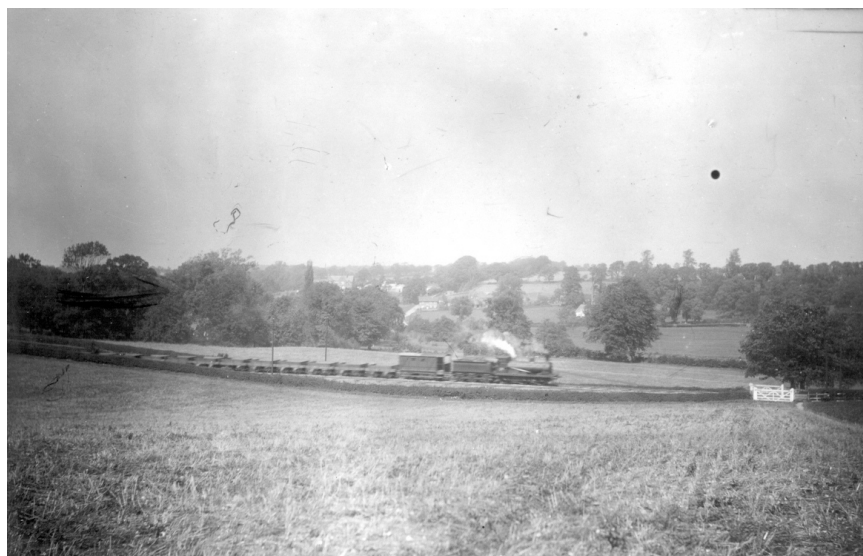
The coming of the railway

At the time of the 1851 census, Manfred was farming 580 acres, that is the 500 acres as recorded for Lux and Kiln farms in the 1770 survey plus the 80 acres that he rented from Colvin. Ten years later, following his father's death when he took over the running of Monument Farm, this figure had risen again but at the same time land had been taken away by the railway. Such figures do not however take into consideration the downgrading of much of the land to the north of the line because of its inaccessibility. Originally planned to follow the river through the parish, the route of the railway was

⁴⁵ *Ipswich Journal*, weekly from 15 August to 19 September 1840. The sale was at the [Great] White Horse Inn, Ipswich, on 24 September.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 27 March to 24 April 1841. The sale was on 30 April and 1 May. Among the huge quantities of materials were handsome and valuable stone staircases with iron balustrades and handrails, 200,000 red bricks and 40 cwt of lead.

changed to half way up the south side of the valley cutting off a considerable slice of Lux land and its neighbouring two farms.⁴⁷



The level crossing below Lux Wood c. 1894. Two others were constructed: one for the road to Ipswich, the other to give access to meadows below Pogson's Biddell collection

In an attempt to compensate for this, the railway company constructed two level crossings, one below Lux Wood and the other further to the east below Pogson's, a crossing that was used up to the 1950s when George Stennett went out of dairy farming. Yet another crossing had to be made to cater for road traffic to Ipswich but this was subsequently converted to a bridge as trains kept smashing into the gates.⁴⁸ One other bridge was constructed 'high enough for wagons of hay to pass under' immediately below Lux

farmhouse allowing access to the meadows. But its foundations on the north side gave way, threatening to bring the whole structure down. Massive piles were driven in but after three such attempts, the bridge was abandoned; it was never removed, just 'covered up and is there in the embankment still'.⁴⁹ Both landlord and tenant received compensation and at least for a while Manfred suffered the 'inconvenience at the time of hay carting and stock having to go round' but over the years the strip of land between the railway and the river became increasingly isolated and unused. The railway, being a far greater barrier than the river, became the new farm boundary when the land was bought by Charles Lofts in 1959 and absorbed into Hill Farm.



The buried bridge that gave access to the meadows below Lux Farm. A painting by Herman Biddell Biddell collection

⁴⁷ SROI, 150/2/5.75A, Ipswich, Norwich & Yarmouth Railway plan, 1846.

⁴⁸ SROI, FC22/A1/4, 12 January 1871, copy of Vestry minute consenting to stop the level crossing and to replace it with a road bridge over the railway line.

⁴⁹ Herman Biddell, *Reminiscences of the Construction of the Railway*, (Unpublished, undated, typescript). Private possession. The line opened 1 June 1859.

Public office - within the parish

Neither Thomas Clarkson nor his grandson played any part in community life and as the number of farmers in the parish declined, so the Biddells' obligations to fill the administrative vacancies increased and, until Manfred and Herman were old enough to take on such duties themselves, their father Arthur shouldered the bulk of these responsibilities on his own. While he alternated the offices of overseer and constable with other individuals 'of good standing', he carried out the functions of surveyor and churchwarden singlehandedly for many years.⁵⁰

The Overseer of the Poor to give the role its full title was, according to Manfred, the most important office in the parish and one that he held for 44 years from 1847 to 1892. In a letter to Frederick Crisp of Playford Hall he writes: 'With him rested the almost uncontrolled relief of the poor. He could relieve who [he liked] and to what extent he thought fit, make and spend the rates, devise and carry out any plan of supplementary relief and if he was ever called to give an account of his proceedings, it was at a Vestry meeting held at the expiration of his year of office when the only remedy against any abuse of his power appears to have been not to appoint him again. The accounts were yearly verified on oath before one or two magistrates but this was a [formality]. He was only required to swear that his accounts were true and correct to the best of his belief'.⁵¹ But, after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which set up Boards of Guardians to administer workhouses, the Overseer's job, if it was retained, was reduced to one of merely collecting the rate. In smaller parishes subscriptions were occasionally called upon to apprentice a poor youth or to assist one to emigrate and in this regard the young William Frost found particular favour. In 1833 he was firstly awarded £1 2s 0d for 11 weeks lodging 'when qualifying himself for a Gentleman's servant' and a little later the princely sum of £21 4s 6d for equipping him to go to America.⁵²

The Parish Constable was responsible for much of the local administration of the militia and, working under the local Justices, for the licensing of inns and beerhouses. They also apprehended criminals and took them to court and escorted paupers to their place of settlement. An example of Arthur Biddell's duties during the wars with France was that, on receipt of news that the French had landed on the Suffolk coast, he was to fire every hay and corn stack and to cut down every roadside tree to hinder the invader's march inland.⁵³ The war over, it seems that much of the Constable's expenses were spent in going to the Magistrates in Woodbridge, arresting fathers of bastard children, moving on gypsies, being called to prevent fights and other disturbances and giving notices of parish matters.⁵⁴ Their duties were largely taken over by the police from the middle years of the century. After the passing of the Beerhouse Act in 1830 the Constable would also have been

⁵⁰ Arthur Biddell was surveyor for 33 years from 1810-1843 and sole churchwarden for 44 from 1816-1860.

⁵¹ Letter from Manfred Biddell to Frederick Arthur Crisp of Playford Hall, 15 January 1884. Private possession.

⁵² SROI, HD 436/3. Manfred Biddell, *Extracts &c. from the Books and Papers of the Parish of Playford*, 104. William Frost was José Booker's great-great-grandfather. It would appear that he did not take up either offer for he was working for Arthur Biddell c. 1834 and his name appears in every Playford census as an agricultural labourer from 1841 until he died in 1875.

⁵³ Osmund Airy, *Napoleonica*, (unpublished 1927), 2. Private possession. Fears of a French invasion had however receded by 1805. Airy was the youngest son of Sir George Biddell Airy and a great-nephew of Arthur Biddell. The written instructions were bequeathed by Arthur to his son Manfred but were lost at the time of the latter's death. In the collections at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, Arthur Biddell is described as Farmer, Land Agent and High Constable suggesting that in later life he took over the Constable's duties for the Hundred of Carlford, the administrative area around Playford that stretched from Wimesham in the north to Newbourne in the south.

⁵⁴ SROI, FC22/11/1, Playford Constable's Account Book, 1817-42.

responsible for obtaining approval of the licence for the village beerhouse. In Playford, this was initially the White Horse, subsequently known as the Eel's Foot, and stood in Church Lane where the council houses now are. It closed in 1871, the same year that the Kicking Donkey opened in the Barrack Cottages in the corner of Archway Field. Arthur Biddell alternated his responsibilities as Constable with others; the young Robert Barry who followed Robert Manning at Lux Farm was, for example, Constable from 1823 to 1824.

The Surveyor had the task of levying a rate for the maintenance of highways, a responsibility that fitted well with the duties of Overseer who was charged with looking after the poor many of whom were unemployed. Thus in Playford in the severe winter of 1814, when Arthur Biddell was both Surveyor and Overseer, Butts Hill and Church Hill were widened employing labourers who would otherwise have been idle and a charge on the parish.⁵⁵ Similar conditions prevailed two years later in 1816 when many men returned to the village after discharge from the military; others in civilian employment in Ipswich and Woodbridge were put out of work following the closure of the barracks there. The two offices, as in Playford, were therefore often combined in one person and Manfred succeeded his father in both roles which were to last the whole of his adult life.⁵⁶ Perhaps the two most notable events during his time in office were the diversion of the footpath across the Rookery (Playford Hall meadow) together with the closing of the Millbank footpath and the building of the road bridge over the railway both in 1871.⁵⁷ The footpath diversion came at a time when Playford Hall was empty following the sudden departure of Thomas Clarkson III to Jersey; it was being re-gentrified in an attempt to attract a class of tenant 'other than a cultivator of the soil'. The path was re-routed further away from the house to make it more difficult for passers-by to look in. In so doing the Millbank was closed and re-directed across the Cricket Meadow where previously it had followed a most attractive line between the river and the millstream.⁵⁸ The bridge over the railway came about because it was not possible for the gate keeper to clearly see when trains were coming as the line was on a slight curve and, before the days of strict time schedules, they kept crashing into the gates. Both these proposals were upheld by the Vestry whose chairman was the vicar, the Revd. Hodgson. As Overseer Manfred was a Vestry member but, following the passing of the Local Government Act in 1894, such responsibilities were taken over by local authorities.

Public office - in the wider field

Manfred's interests and responsibilities went wider than parish level and understandably were dominated by his passion for farming. Soon after his marriage in 1852 a farmers' club was started and met at Lux farmhouse by invitation. The gathering soon blossomed into the Grundisburgh Farmers' Club and used to meet in The Dog later becoming the Ipswich Farmers' Club and then the East Suffolk Chamber of Agriculture of which Manfred was the first chairman.⁵⁹ He was also an active member of the Suffolk Agricultural Association which was founded in 1831 and was responsible for organising the Suffolk Show where he was a keen and successful exhibitor. He

⁵⁵ SROI, HA2/F2/1. Playford Overseers' Accounts, 1780-1828.

⁵⁶ Arthur Biddell took turns as Overseer between the years 1810-1847, but carried out the duties of Surveyor on his own from 1810-1843. Manfred was sole Overseer for 30 years from 1847-1877 when he shared the task with his brother Herman; he was the sole Surveyor for nearly 50 years from 1843 to 1893, the year before he died.

⁵⁷ SROI, FC 22A1/3 and 4.

⁵⁸ SROI, 276/242b, 1870.

⁵⁹ *Suffolk Chronicle*, 20 November 1894.

chaired a public meeting on the Malt Tax in Ipswich attended by 500 farmers and other interested persons having been chosen not only because he was familiar with the subject but because he had never taken any prominent part in politics as a party man.

He was on the inaugural committee of the Woodbridge Annual Horse Show. He was a judge of breeds other than the Suffolk Punch at Royal Show grounds around the country as well as at more local East Anglian county shows. He was on the committee of the Suffolk Agricultural Association. And he was on the fund raising committee to provide a scholarship in memory of James Allen Ransome (1806-1875), grandson of Robert Ransome and senior partner of the Ipswich agricultural engineering firm, who had been a governor of the Albert Memorial College (now Framlingham College) 'in connection with the advancement of Middle Class Education'.

He was an honorary member of the 3rd Suffolk Volunteers who were based in Woodbridge. On the passing of the Local Government Act in 1888 he became, briefly, a County Councillor for the Martlesham Division but, following a vacancy, he was elected an Alderman a position that he held until his death. He was a Commissioner of Income Tax and a member of the Woodbridge Board of Guardians. He took great interest in archaeology presenting to the British Museum in 1883 a 32 ins. long Anglo-Saxon sword-knife that he had found on the farm in almost perfect condition.⁶⁰ He was well informed on local history, an interest that he shared with Frederick Crisp of Playford Hall, his cousin George Biddell Airy and with Edward Moor the rector of Great Bealings.

Making history.

There were two occasions in Manfred Biddell's early life when such a claim could be made: one at local level the other at national or indeed international level. In 1835, when he was 13 years old, he was present at the last official perambulation of the Playford parish boundary, the 'beating of the bounds', a ritual that was held usually at Rogationtide but, according to the Overseer's account book, held at no particular frequency. He records that it was performed by many of the parish's inhabitants walking the exact line of the boundary and cutting marks on certain trees that grew on it. The younger inhabitants who had not previously attended were 'bumped' on certain trees to impress them on their memories. Walkers would call at Kesgrave Bell *en route*, the beer consumed being charged to the parish; in 1835 this amounted to £1 6s 0d, less than half that on previous occasions. After 1836, when parishes were first mapped under the Tithe Commutation Act, the need to maintain the tradition had passed.

And in 1842, the year that he acceded to the tenancy at Lux Farm when he was 20 years old, he made history at the Royal Show at Bristol by 'feeding' Ransome's first steam driven threshing machine while his younger brother George stoked the boiler of the 'self-moving' road engine by which it had been drawn. Threshing machines had of course already been in use for some time and indeed Arthur Biddell himself had a hand operated version as early as 1811 when some of his men were paid by the parish to continue with the flail rather than be thrown out of work and be a charge on the rates. Use of early threshing machines had been the root cause of the 'Swing Riots' in 1830 when their destruction by agricultural labourers was widespread in the corn growing regions of the country. These early models were horse powered with both thresher and engine pulled from farm to farm by horses.⁶¹ But after this demonstration, Ransome's engineering works in Ipswich expanded

⁶⁰ British Museum, registration number 1883, 1212.1

⁶¹ *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 1842, 351.

rapidly while Garret's of Leiston increased their workforce from 60 in 1837 to 600 in 1862 largely on the back of increased demand for steam engines and threshing machines.⁶²

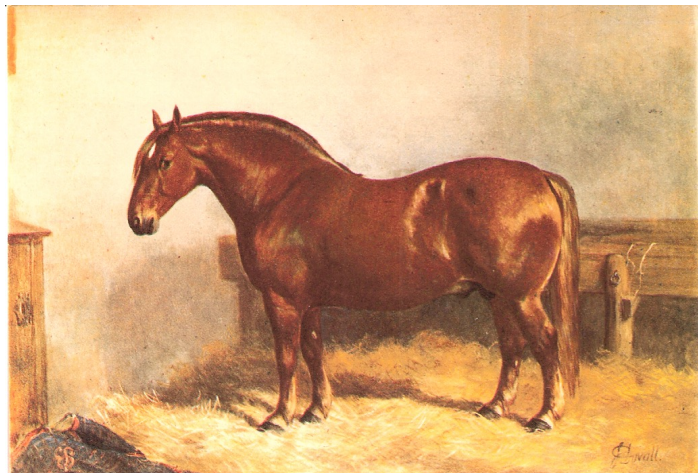
Kesgrave Lamb Sales.

In 1856 Manfred instigated the Kesgrave Lamb Sales which despite their name were held on Playford Heath in Playford parish, part of Lux Farm opposite The Bell. His brother Herman writes: 'The lamb sales in Suffolk give some idea of the number of these animals bred on the light lands. They have now been in operation for many years. The first that was started is held on the heath abutting on the Yarmouth turnpike three miles east of Ipswich and this one is known as the Kesgrave Lamb Sale. In July last it held its 50th anniversary.... The Suffolk sheep fairs, if not totally extinguished like the cattle fairs, have dwindled to mere shadows of what they were forty or fifty years ago. Ipswich Lamb Fair, an exceedingly old institution, originally lasted three days'.^{63 64}

The Kesgrave Lamb Sales were held without a break for over 60 years and were continued after Manfred Biddell's death by his successor at Lux Farm, Sam Sherwood. The last sale appears to have been held in 1917 during the First World War. The sales attracted upwards of 5,000 sheep 'off well-known healthy farms comprising some of the poorest walks in the county' from such parishes as Rushmere, Nacton, Foxhall, Kesgrave, Martlesham, Newbourn, Brightwell and Playford itself. Until the early 1900s the auctioneers were the family firm of Biddell & Blencowe from Bury St Edmunds from whom Spurlings and Hempson took over. The sales were big occasions in the neighbourhood and were held at the end of each July; many local farmers and others gave their staff time off to attend with Kesgrave Bell doing a roaring trade. One gardener, 'thoroughly at home in an inn', confessed to his employer the following morning that 'he never see a lamb'.⁶⁵

His success at agricultural shows both local and national.

Inheriting a comfortable fortune from his father and increasing it by his marriage, he was able to follow farming for pleasure as well as for profit.⁶⁶ His first love was livestock and of these his principal enthusiasm was for horses where he proved to be a successful exhibitor, breeder and exporter of the Suffolk Punch. When the Royal Show was at Chelmsford in 1856 he came second to Prince Albert with his horse 'Major' in a class of 46 full-aged horses of all breeds from every part of the UK and in



Manfred Biddell's 'Ben' painted by Duvall in 1879 Biddell

⁶² E. J. T. Collins, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Vol. VII 1850-1914 (Part II)*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1001.

⁶³ William Page ed., *The Victoria History of the County of Suffolk*, Volume Two, (London, 1907), 393.

⁶⁴ Michael Stone ed., *The Diary of John Longe, Vicar of Coddensham 1765-1834*, (Woodbridge, 2008), 43. G.R. Clarke, *The History & Description of the Town and Borough of Ipswich* (1830), 184. Clarke confirms that Ipswich Lamb Fair was held annually over three days adding that the venue was Corporation Farm just west of Handford Bridge. He reports that in 1791 over 200,000 lambs were for sale.

⁶⁵ Gerald & Margaret Ponting, *The Story of Kesgrave*, (privately published, 1981), 129.

⁶⁶ *Suffolk Chronicle*, 20 October 1894. Obituary, Manfred Biddell.

the year of his death he won first prize at The Royal at Cambridge for a three year old. Probably his best known was his 'Ben' who won many awards notably second prize at the Royal Agricultural Society of England's Kilburn Show in 1879 and whose painting by Duvall appears in the Suffolk Stud Book. An article and copy of the picture appeared in the East Anglian Daily Times 53 years after this achievement.⁶⁷ John Duvall (1815-1892) was an Ipswich portrait artist who, on the advent of photography, turned his attention to animals and was patronised by members of the Royal Family and the nobility. However, he counted the Biddell family amongst his chief patrons providing the illustrations for Herman's *Suffolk Stud Book* published the year after Ben's great success. He also painted many of Manfred's other prize winning horses. In 1875 Duvall became the first chairman of the Ipswich Fine Art Society a position later held by Anna Airy for nearly 20 years until her death in 1964.

Manfred's successes at county and local level were legion and his horses were exported to many parts of the world that included Russia and South America. Visitors from around the globe came to Lux Farm to see his famous stud when, at the time of his death, 46 were listed in a 34 page sale catalogue.⁶⁸ It is as much for Manfred's renown in the breeding and dissemination of the type as it is for his brother Herman's fame in the recording of its history that, atop the village notice board commemorating Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee of 1977, sits the figure of a man ploughing with a pair of Suffolk horses.

Manfred's interest in sheep was considerably less than that of horses. At the time of his death he ran two flocks: a commercial one of 630 pure Southdowns, the other of 50 of the distinctive horned



Manfred Biddell's flock of 50 horned Norfolk sheep. It was by crossing Norfolk horned ewes with Southdown rams that today's Suffolk breed of sheep evolved Biddell collection.

Norfolk breed which he kept mainly for pleasure but which were adapted to thrive on the poor forage provided on the dry heaths of East Anglia. The two breeds were the parents of the black faced Suffolk breed that is still popular today and for which his successor at Lux Farm, Sam Sherwood, was internationally famous as a breeder. Sherwood became not only a co-founder of the Suffolk Sheep Society and later its chairman but also president of the National Sheep Breeders' Association.⁶⁹

were kept for enjoyment. But unlike his sheep, he did exhibit them, winning first prize for example at The Islington Cattle Show in 1876 and at the annual Christmas Show of the Suffolk Fat Cattle

⁶⁷ *East Anglian Daily Times*, 29 March 1932. *Ipswich Journal*, 5 July 1879.

⁶⁸ Sale catalogue: Lux Farm, Playford, 27 September 1895. Private possession.

⁶⁹ *East Anglian Daily Times*, 4 November 1948. Obituary, Sam Sherwood.

Club the previous year. There he won with his 'Suffolk Ox' which, at the great age of 4 years 11 months, weighed in at over 25 cwts. and was bought by a butcher in Grundisburgh. It too was painted by Duvall.

His family.

As previously stated, Manfred lived with his parents at Hill House until his marriage in 1854 when he took up residence at Lux Farm. Two brothers married two sisters: Manfred married Sarah Lucy Blencowe, a cousin, while his younger brother William married Sarah's younger sister Ellen and it was through this close family tie that Manfred's lamb sales on Playford Heath, and much else, came to be run by a concern from far away Bury St Edmunds.⁷⁰ Manfred and Sarah had eight children three of whom died in infancy; another son died when he was 19. A daughter, Mary, remained unmarried and moved with her family into Crescent Road in Ipswich on her father's death in 1894 and when their mother died in 1904 she stayed on as housekeeper to her two bachelor brothers Arthur Blencowe and John Lyall. A younger sister Lucy married Cordy Samuel Wolton and it is from Lucy Wolton that Owen Goldsmith, the last of the Biddells to live in Playford, was descended.

Neither of the two sons approached anywhere near the distinction that their father and grandfather had achieved and in fact coasted through their short working lives both opting for retirement while still very young. After Framlingham College (then termed the Albert Middle Class College) Arthur Blencowe (1856-1923) worked with his father before taking over Monument Farm in Foxhall, Strangely, a cousin Eric Wolton reports that Arthur's father 'never trained him for farming perhaps thinking that he had no bent that way'. True or not, by 1901 within seven years of his father's death he had retired, still only 44, never to work again. And two years after their



Manfred Biddell's four surviving children c. 1895: seated left to right - Arthur Blencowe, Mary, Lucy; standing John Lyall. The other young woman is their cousin Bertha, only surviving child of William Biddell who is holding a picture of her brother Percy who died at the age of 28

sister Mary died in 1921, when he was 67, he married his first cousin Amy Biddell of Archway House (q.v.) but died of an internal strangulation three months later. He was in terms of character more like his uncle Herman than his father being opinionated and holding firm views on any subject.

⁷⁰ Arthur Biddell's elder sister Elizabeth (1763-1850) married John Blencowe (1762-1839). It was their son Arthur (1800-56) who went into partnership with his uncle George Biddell to found the firm of Biddell & Blencowe.

Manfred's other son John Lyall (1866-1932) was of an altogether different disposition: he was tolerant, could see and listen to another point of view and was a very able man in his way but lacked self confidence. He went to the Grammar School at Yarmouth under Canon Dr. J. J. Raven from whom he gained his interest in church history.⁷¹ On leaving school he found employment as a maltster at the Falcon Inn on the Playford Road, hardly a full time job, and at the time of his father's death he is described as a farmer, presumably in partnership with his brother Arthur Blencowe at Foxhall. But, just like his brother, by 1901 and still only 35 he had retired. Whether or not he took paid employment again is not known but ten years later he describes himself as a photographer, his dream of running a shop having been firmly quashed by the family. He stayed on at Crescent Road where the family lived for 30 years until his brother's death in 1923 when he came into the 4¼ acre Playford property in Church Lane and, always a bachelor, took up residence at Gayfer's.

He is remembered in the village as a kindly, intellectual, bookish sort of man who enjoyed chatting to anyone who had the time. He was a person of wide interests covering subjects as diverse as Botany, Geology, Entomology and Astronomy. His obituary in the academic *Journal of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society* said of him that he was 'beloved by everyone whose good fortune it was to encounter his genial personality'.⁷² And as an antiquary he received a glowing tribute in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology & History* by no less an intellectual than Francis Seymour Stevenson himself an historian of note and the former MP for the Eye Division of Suffolk who lived at Playford Mount.⁷³ John Biddell lived at Gayfer's for some nine years and, on his death in 1932, he bequeathed the western half of his property adjoining Butts Hill to his sister Lucy. When she died three years later it passed to her daughter Margaret Goldsmith and, when Margaret died in 1974, the property passed to her son Owen. The eastern half, which included the two Gayfer's cottages 'together with the upland at the back', was bequeathed to Playford church but, not being allowed by the Charity Commissioners to retain it, it was sold and bought by Margaret Goldsmith who then owned the entire field, its four cottages and the shop that her grandfather Manfred had built in 1887.⁷⁴ It was Margaret Goldsmith who sold the first building plot to Edward Collinson for The Ridge in 1939 and, after the war in 1954, she gave the Sevenoaks site to her son Owen. Hassocks followed a few years later and Copyhold was sold to Catherine Broadbent following the death of her husband the Revd Ernest Broadbent, then vicar of Playford, in 1959. After Margaret Goldsmith's death in 1974, Owen sold both Gayfer's and the shop to the sitting tenants. The final three houses to be built on the former Biddell land were not put up until 2013, the year after Owen had died.

Manfred's funeral

Organised by his youngest brother Herman, always with an eye for the big occasion, Manfred's funeral provided one of the last great spectacles to have been witnessed in the parish. No fewer than seven family carriages slowly followed the hearse for the mile and a half from Lux Farm preceded by ten others that had been ordered by Herman to deliver close friends and neighbours from among

⁷¹ Raven's *Church Bells of Suffolk* published in 1890 remains the standard work. His *History of Suffolk* was published five years later.

⁷² *Transactions and Proceedings of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society*, Vol. 2, 1932-34, xlv.

⁷³ *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology & History*, Vol. XXI, Part 1, 77.

⁷⁴ SROI, FC 22/A1/5, Playford PCC Minutes, 28 November 1932, 6 February 1933. The proceeds from the sale to Margaret Goldsmith were 'invested in the same way as the Emma Crisp Trust and were known as the John Lyall Biddell Trust'. Both funds still survive, each producing a small income for the church which is reported in its annual accounts.



Men employed on Lux Farm at the time of Manfred Biddell's death in 1894, a photograph organised by his successor Sam Sherwood who is standing in the centre of the back row wearing a bowler hat Biddell collection.

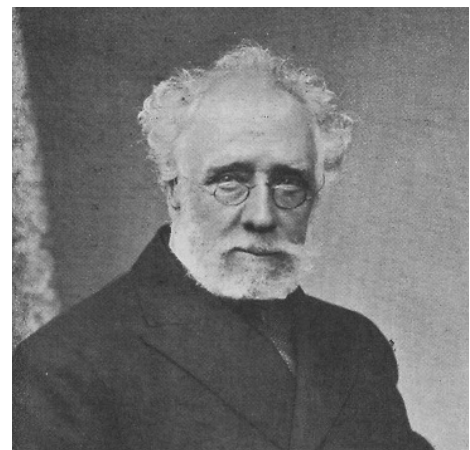
the farming community. Besides these, there would have been an even greater number of less pretentious conveyances that had brought many acquaintances from near and far and from across a wider spectrum of society, all converging into the very narrow space at the bottom of Church

Hill. With no other access to the church until the churchyard extension of 1911, the only means of entry for both the living and the dead was up the steep steps to the south of the church. Coffins were often borne by long serving employees of the deceased and in Manfred's case these came from his three farms: two in Playford and the other in Foxhall.⁷⁵

George Biddell (1824-1901) - the second eldest son.

His Ransome's connections

George was the only one of the four brothers who never went into farming. Instead he found employment at his grandfather's old firm of Ransome's in Ipswich where he worked his way up from the shop floor to become Chief Engineer. In his 'Reminiscences' he recalls frequently meeting his grandfather, Robert Ransome, coming over to Playford from Woodbridge where he lived in retirement in Cumberland Street. There he had a large garden with a magnificent view down to the river.⁷⁶ George would have been between six and seven when he died in 1830 and remembers well that 'he dressed in the manner peculiar to the Quakers with silver buckles on his shoes and a wide brimmed hat'. He generally drove a very fine pair of horses. He remembers too his funeral procession as it passed Kesgrave church which 'impressed



George Biddell, Chief Engineer of Ransome's Orwell Works Courtesy of the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading. Ransome's of Ipswich archive

⁷⁵ *Ipswich Journal*, 27 October 1894.

⁷⁶ The University of Reading, The Rural History Centre, TR RAN SP4/217; George. A. Biddell, 'Reminiscences', (typescript, 1895), passim.

him greatly'.⁷⁷

His apprenticeship there

As with his three brothers, he was educated at the small private school in Grundisburgh, in later life regretting not having been trained in higher mathematics with which, it was considered, he would have made as great a name in the world as he had done in his own neighbourhood. His venture into employment was delayed by prolonged ill health and he was in fact 16 before he first started on probation and nearly 17 before he took on an apprenticeship that bound him for seven years. Such was the concern over his health that it was thought at one time that he would never be strong enough and, as a special reward for his determination, he was left in his father's will two cottages in Rushmere for his achievement 'without assistance from me'.⁷⁸ It was in November 1840 that his apprenticeship started. He was trained by two delegated mechanics, the principal work then carried out by the firm being the contract fitting up of lawn mowers and turnip cutters and the manufacture of ploughs, chaff cutters and horse thrashing machines. The company also had a near monopoly in well pumps and it was at this time that the business expanded chiefly into agricultural implements. A memento of his early days as an apprentice is still to be found in Lux farmhouse kitchen. It is an oblong metal plaque engraved A. BIDDELL 1842 - just the sort of project that would have been given to a youth who was learning his trade.

His early work with the company

In 1789 Robert Ransome (1753-1830) arrived in Ipswich from Norfolk where his father was a schoolmaster in Wells and where his grandfather had been a miller and early Quaker in North Walsham. Robert set up an iron and brass foundry in a disused malting between St Margaret's Ditches (later known as Old Foundry Road) and Carr Street which by the 1840s had outgrown its site. The firm moved to new premises on the Wet Dock which had opened in 1842, the year that Ransome's had exhibited their steam driven thrashing machine at the Royal Show in Bristol. With the coming of the railway to the town just four years later, Ransome's trade took off. The unrivalled facilities at the new Orwell Works propelled Ransome's into the export market and their name was soon to be known throughout the world. The move from St Margaret's, completed in 1849, was effected over a seven year period and George Biddell, an apprentice practically throughout and still just 25 at its completion, 'superintended the moving of the whole of the machinery from the Upper Foundry'. At this time also the large Transit Circle for Greenwich Observatory was made having an accuracy 'within one 30,000th part of an inch'. The work was carried out through the instructions of George Biddell Airy but under George Biddell's direction. Manufactured in 1846, the first observations with it were taken in 1851 when it redefined the Meridian and was used until 1927 to determine Greenwich Mean Time. It was also during his time as an apprentice that Ransome's built their first steam engine, its designer a Mr J. Jones 'with four or five other gentlemen', had earlier formed the society known as the Institution of Civil Engineers with Jones becoming its first secretary. Previous to building this engine, in about 1841 the firm had bought a disc engine, placed it on a portable carriage and used it for working a thrashing machine. This was the first application of a portable engine to steam thrashing. The following year, in 1842, the engine was applied to a frame and carriage and made into the first self moving engine applied to agriculture. This was the model

⁷⁷ Robert Ransome was buried in the Quaker Burial Ground in College Street, Ipswich; his grave and the entire Burial Ground were razed when the area was cleared in 1995.

⁷⁸ SROI, IC/AA2/130, 285. Will of Arthur Biddell, 1860.

that was exhibited at the Bristol Royal Show that year and which George Biddell stoked while his brother Manfred 'fed' the thrashing drum.

Ransome's early railway work

Ransome's played a prominent part in the development of the new railway system that was continuing to spread not only across the country but increasingly being adopted overseas. The firm was heavily engaged in the manufacture of those items that attach the rails to the sleepers (chairs and trenails) and also in the production of crossings (points) where the same manufacturing technique was applied as had been done for plough shares many years previously. There had been a mishap in the old St Margaret's foundry in which a furnace had burst spilling molten metal across the floor but it was noticed that that which ran on to iron plates lying there cooled more quickly than that which ran on to the sandy floor of the furnace room. When the metal had cooled down it was further observed that the material which had cooled the fastest had changed its character and the surface that had been in contact with the metal plates had hardened, an ideal quality for use in plough shares. George Biddell took out a patent in the 1850s for railway crossings to be manufactured in the same way bringing great advantage to the company until they were superseded by steel crossings. In 1845, still serving his apprenticeship, he had charge as an under-foreman in the engineering shop that made a large quantity of trenails and wedges there was a strike among the hand-turners whereupon he worked night and day to produce a machine that did the work instead. And still an apprentice in 1846, he was sent to Tours in France to set up a factory for the manufacture of railway fastenings and was there for 12 months.

The Great Exhibition, 1851

Having completed his apprenticeship in 1847 and now aged 23, George Biddell became a foreman in various departments that were busy on railway work and after three years asked for another



The Great Exhibition, held in Hyde Park in 1851, covered 26 acres and attracted over six million visitors. George Biddell worked there for a year under William Cubitt, the engineer responsible for its erection

Agreement to stay with the firm. He was told by one of the partners, Mr. Charles May, that he had two young sons coming into the business and that there would not be room for him.⁷⁹ George left the company and for a while ran his own little brass foundry in St Margaret's making self-regulating gas burners. Not long afterwards however that same partner bumped into William Cubitt, a former Chief Engineer at Ransome's who had moved on to greater things. Asked if he knew of any young fellow who could help him run the Exhibition of Machinery at Crystal Palace in 1851, he recommended George Biddell and, as Cubitt knew his father and indeed counted him as a friend,

an agreement was reached. Cubitt, together with no lesser figures than Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Charles Barry and Robert Stephenson, was on the committee to select a design for the temporary

⁷⁹ From 1835 to 1852 the firm was styled Ransomes & May.

building in Hyde Park and had also been appointed as the Chief Engineer for its erection. There George Biddell worked hard for a year and ‘had a nice time of it’, showing around royalty and many VIPs. As chief superintendent of the machinery department he had the charge of Queen Victoria’s two eldest children, the eleven year old Princess Royal who was to become the mother of Kaiser Wilhelm II, German Emperor in World War I, and the ten year old Edward who was to become King Edward VII.⁸⁰ He also showed around, not once but three times, the Duke of Wellington, nowadays more famous as a soldier than a former Prime Minister, and was greatly impressed by his interest and the determination that he took in ensuring that he had fully grasped the function of a carding machine used in spinning mills. While there he also met his future wife. Cubitt, already an FRS, was President of the Institution of Civil Engineers at this time and was later knighted for his services.

His becoming Chief Engineer

As assistant to the Chief Engineer of the Crystal Palace machinery department, George Biddell received the Superintendent’s medal for his services but, his short term contract over and with no job to return to, he went back to Playford for a while to live with his parents at Hill House.⁸¹ During this time Mr. Charles May separated from the firm and, with his two sons no longer blocking his progress, George Biddell was asked to return. He had left as a foreman less than two years before and returned in 1852 in sole charge of the Engineering Department subsequently becoming Chief Engineer of the Orwell Works. Over the next 25 years he was pressed on two occasions to become a partner but, ‘having no family I never went in for it’ and in 1876 aged only 52 he left of his own accord ‘the charge of a great portion of the Works’ having become too onerous. By 1849 there were already 1,500 men engaged in the manufacture of ploughs, railway fittings and agricultural implements and since those early days the company had expanded enormously.

On his arrival at the firm in 1840 he had first lodged with Mr Frederick Ransome on the corner of St Margaret’s Road and Woodbridge Road before moving into a house in Carr Street that belonged to the old foundry and there he lived for many years.⁸² He was joined by William Siemens the German born engineer and famous electrician who became the first President of what was later known as the Institution of Electrical Engineers. Siemens was later knighted and a glass window was installed in Westminster Abbey in his memory. Ransome’s manufactured his anastatic press, a forerunner of the photocopier, but it was not a commercial success.

In retirement

On retirement George Biddell undertook a small amount of consulting work and was much in demand in cases of arbitration. However, he gradually withdrew from this sort of work and devoted himself to the study of astronomy and to the improvement of his many and varied patents.⁸³ In 1883 he was invited to join the board of The Ipswich Gas Light Company and in 1895 was elected its

⁸⁰ *The Implement and Machinery Review*, 2 August 1901.

⁸¹ His mother, the former Jane Ransome, died three years later in 1855 aged 67. She is buried in Playford churchyard in the family vault that abuts the chancel.

⁸² 1861 Census. Wilfrid Airy (1836-1925), son of George Biddell Airy and therefore George Biddell’s first cousin once removed, also served a seven year apprenticeship with Ransome’s 19 years later from 1859-1866. By this time Ransome’s were accommodating their ‘graduate apprentices’ in digs on Albion Hill on the Woodbridge Road then a much more up-market area than it is today.

⁸³ Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers, Vol. 146, 1901, 279-280.

Chairman, a post that he held until his death in 1901.⁸⁴ He had married Emma Hine, a Londoner, in Westminster in 1853 whom he had met at the Great Exhibition; there were no children of the marriage.⁸⁵

George had lived in Ipswich for 60 more or less unbroken years and for 46 of them had been vicar's warden of Holy Trinity, the white Suffolk brick church that sits between Fore Hamlet and Back Hamlet and until recently in a down at heel part of town. A new church when he first moved to Ipswich and in the heart of a once densely populated area, it had been built in 1836 just a few years before the opening of the Wet Dock and Ransome's move there from the Carr Street area. George Biddell was its main financial supporter and the leading contributor to a major refurbishment that took place there in the 1890s which included the building of a new chancel, organ chamber and vestry. On giving up full time work in 1876 he had built himself a new house, Upland Gate, just a few hundred yards away on Bishop's Hill yet he still regarded Playford as his home and chose to be buried there. His widow stayed on in the Ipswich house with her three resident servants until she died in 1914 at the age of 93 and after her death the couple's headstone in Playford churchyard, in keeping with George's engineering background, was fitted with distinctive metal inlaid inscriptions.



George Biddell's unusual headstone in Playford churchyard with metal inlaid inscriptions well suited to an engineer

William Biddell (1825-1900) - the third son.



William Biddell in 1863 when he was senior partner in the firm Biddell & Blencowe Biddell

In becoming only the second tenant farmers' MP at a time when owners of the big estates had exclusively represented the agricultural interest in Parliament, it might be considered that William held the highest public profile of the four brothers. He was one of the two members for West Suffolk from 1880-85 and followed Clare Sewell Read, another East Anglian tenant farmer, who had been elected for East Norfolk in 1865.

His early years

Like his brothers, he had been educated at the little private school in Grundisburgh following which he spent some years at home with his father before taking on the 120 acre farm at Grundisburgh. Under his father too he learned the rudiments of surveying and valuation and, while carrying on the Grundisburgh farm, he went into partnership with a John Fox of Ipswich so extending his

⁸⁴ 'Reminiscences', 14. The first gas was lit in Ipswich in the Ransome's old house in Carr Street in about 1815. It was lit by a member of the family using a £1 note as part of the excitement of the occasion.

⁸⁵ *East Anglian Daily Times*, 22 June 1901.

experience as a land agent and auctioneer. With this grounding, he moved to Bradfield in West Suffolk following the death of his uncle George in 1851 and joined the auctioneering firm of Biddell & Blencowe that George had set up earlier in the century and which Arthur Blencowe, a nephew, had now taken over as senior partner.⁸⁶ In 1853 William hired the 270 acre Knew Farm at Hawstead and four years later married his senior partner's daughter, Ellen Blencowe. The first four of their children died in infancy while a son, Percy, who was 'not of a particularly robust constitution' died at the age of 28. Percy had been to Cambridge where he had read law and had



William Biddell's family relaxing after a game of croquet at Lavenham Hall, 1880s John Wolton

become a solicitor and at the time of his death was under training to become a barrister. William's wife Ellen died in 1867 an hour after giving birth to their only surviving child Bertha.⁸⁷

Some very little time later, William was called upon to give professional advice to Mary Scott of Lavenham Hall whose husband had died at an early age and, with a common bond of recent bereavement, they married in 1868 and William took up residence there. There were no children of the second marriage. With the addition of both Lavenham Hall as well as his new wife's family holding at Cockfield, William now farmed close on 1,000 acres but this was not his principal pursuit. In 1856, five years after his uncle George had died and he had moved to join the West Suffolk practice, Arthur Blencowe died and William found himself the senior partner while still only 30.⁸⁸ Agricultural matters took a back seat and were dealt with in the evenings on his return from the office in discussions with his bailiff and were frequently followed by walks around the farm.

His political life

William Biddell was President of the West Suffolk Chamber of Agriculture for many years and at the 1875 General Election was persuaded to stand as the Conservative candidate. He declined on account of the cost that it would incur, some £2,000, but five years later the local farmers won him

⁸⁶ The name of the firm alternated throughout its history between Biddell & Blencowe and Blencowe & Biddell according to who was the senior partner.

⁸⁷ This was Bertha Biddell who married Henry Taylor, the curate at Lavenham, and inherited from her father the Old Post Office on the corner of Hill Farm Road in Playford. She owned it for nearly 50 years from 1900 when her father died to 1949 selling it just before her own death in 1954 to José Booker's father, Harold Burch.

⁸⁸ The senior partners in succession were: the founder George Biddell (brother of Arthur of Hill House, Playford) until 1851, his nephew Arthur Blencowe until 1856, Arthur Blencowe's son-in-law William Biddell until 1900 followed by Arthur Blencowe's nephew George Blencowe until 1916. Both George Blencowe's sons went to Oxford; the younger died in 1903 aged 21, the elder went into the Church and, as William Biddell had no male heirs, the firm closed.

over. He entered Parliament just as Clare Sewell Read, 'the earliest of his class to reach the House', was leaving it. He was returned unopposed. On arrival at Westminster following the election on 31 March 1880, he gave no indication of being overawed by his situation and in fact spoke both early and often. He asked his first question on 27 May and followed it by no fewer than 74 other contributions during the time that he sat in Parliament. In the years preceding his entry to Parliament, he had worked hard in the farmers' cause towards the repeal of the malt tax but the legislation had still not been passed.⁸⁹ In the June of his first year he was able to ask Gladstone, who at that time held the dual roles of Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister, a question on the Bill before it was enacted later that autumn.

**NINETEENTH ANNUAL
GREAT LAMB SALE,
AT KESGRAVE.**
*Three-and-a-half miles from Ipswich, and 1½ from
Bealings Railway Station.*

Messrs. BIDDELL & BLENCOWE
Will hold this highly IMPORTANT SALE as here-
tofore, on the Kesgrave Heath, opposite the Bell Inn,
on Friday, July 24th, 1874. It will comprise about

3,500 SHEEP & LAMBS
From the following well-known Flocks:—

From Kesgrave Hall.
600 Superior Half-bred & Black-faced LAMBS,
100 CRONES!

From Rushmere Hall.
300 Superior Half-bred Leicester LAMBS,
40 CRONES and Cast EWES.

From the Hill Farm, Rushmere.
400 Superior Half-bred Leicester LAMBS,
40 CRONES.

From the Park Farm, Nacton.
540 Superior Half-bred LAMBS,
55 CRONES.

From Newbourn Hall.
140 First-class Black-faced Suffolk Shearling
EWES (first cross between Southdown
Ewe and Norfolk Tup)

260 Pure Southdown Ewe and Wether LAMBS,
40 Southdown CRONES.

From Brightwell Hall.
360 Pure Southdown Ewe and Wether LAMBS,
60 CRONES and Cast EWES.

From Loudham Park.
160 Fine framed Black-faced Shearling EWES,
8 First-class Black-faced TUPS.

From Holton Hall.
200 Superior Half-bred Shearling EWES, the
first cross between Black-faced Ewe and
Lincoln Tup,
6 Shearling Half-bred TUPS.

From Rendlesham Hall Farm.
100 CRONES.

From Luck Farm, Playford.
60 Southdown Shearling EWES.

Luncheon at One o'clock, prior to the Sale.

*To Graziers desirous of obtaining first-class Stock
direct from the Breeders, this genuine Sale, em-
bracing the best Lambs from one of the healthiest
Sheep districts in the Eastern Counties, offers un-
usual advantages. The Half-bred Lambs are large
framed, very well bred, and of good quality wool.
The Southdowns are from noted good Flocks, and the
Black-faced, including the Shearling Ewes, as pos-
sessing the true characteristics of the breed, are not
to be surpassed.*

Catalogues may be had at the White Horse Hotel,
Ipswich; of the Flockmasters; and of the Auctioneers,
Lavenham and Bury St. Edmund's.

**Kesgrave Lamb Sale, 1875, held on Lux
Farm opposite the Bell with Biddell &
Blencowe as auctioneers Ipswich Journal**

doubt found much custom. He was Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Alliance Assurance Company, he was a supporter and contributor to the funds of the General Hospital at Bury and as an active churchman, not only Rector's Warden for his home parish of Lavenham for a great number of years but a regular delegate to the Diocesan and Deanery Conferences. On the formation of West Suffolk County Council in 1888 he was one of the first of the 16 Aldermen chosen and remained a member until his death in 1900. He was also a JP.

As to be expected, Biddell's participation concerned farming and the rural interest but as a Tory he was soon at odds with the Liberal Government over its proposed extension of the franchise. Under a Conservative government the Reform Act of 1867 had granted the vote to working class males in the towns but not to those in the counties and Gladstone's Act of 1884 gave the same voting rights to all. William continued to sit until the end of the 1880 Parliament but did not seek re-election 'under the new conditions'. This was a step too far and he never again sought Parliamentary honours. Throughout his time at Westminster he had continued with his professional work in addition to the management of his farms. As a man of considerable build weighing some 20 stones, he understandably found the additional burden of attendance at Westminster somewhat tiring.

His outside interests

Apart from the West Suffolk Chamber of Agriculture of which he was President, as befits an auctioneer and estate valuer, he was also a member of both Ixworth and Lavenham Farmers' Clubs among whose members he no

⁸⁹ *Parliamentary Papers*, 2 July 1868, 412-3. As part of his efforts in this regard, he arranged for his brother Manfred in Playford to persuade one of his men, Elias Amos, to make a deposition to the *Report of the Select Committee on the Malt Tax*. The result was a most interesting record of the home brewing practices of agricultural labourers at that time.

Herman Biddell (1832-1917) - the youngest son.

Much has already been written on Herman Biddell in later life under 'Archway House' in this series; what follows here will cover his earlier years at Hill House where he was born and where he lived



Herman Biddell, farmer, land agent and valuer, he was highly active on agricultural and political committees in East Suffolk Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich, qS Playford 9

until retirement from farming in 1892.

The youngest of the family, he followed his three brothers to the little private school in Grundisburgh after which he learned the rudiments of farming under his father's wing. When his brother William moved to West Suffolk to join the family firm of auctioneers and estate agents Biddell & Blencowe in 1853, two years after the death of their uncle George the senior partner, Herman took over the small family farm at Grundisburgh where he had great success in running a milking herd of Red Polls on a very limited acreage of meadow land. He was then just 21 and, on his father's death seven years later in 1860, he took over the tenancy of Hill Farm. Here he came into possession of his father's fine herd of the same breed, one that was to remain an important element in his farming until its dispersal in 1888.⁹⁰ At one time it amounted to 100 cows with father and son between them nurturing and developing it over a period of 80 years. It became the finest in the

county winning prizes at the Royal Shows at Windsor, Battersea and Kilburn. Herman, an acknowledged authority on the breed and an active member of the Suffolk Agricultural Association, was frequently called upon as a judge across the country.

The onset of the Great Depression

At Grundisburgh Herman had enjoyed seven years of profitable farming, the so called Golden Age of English Agriculture that ran from around 1853 to 1862; it was a period of rising prices brought on in part by the discovery of gold in California and Australia and, although tariffs had been removed from imported grain by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the impact was delayed for some 25 years by a succession of wars that ensured two further decades of general prosperity. The Crimean War of 1853-56 closed the Baltic to Russian corn, the American Civil War of 1861-65 delayed the breaking up of the prairies while the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 shut off grain from France. But only a few years into his tenancy at Hill Farm, the good times were already coming to an end and, from the early 1870s with the American War over, the ploughing up of the prairies and expansion of the rail network began in earnest. Dramatically reduced freight rates across

⁹⁰ *Ipswich Journal*, 28 September 1888, 12 October 1888.

the Atlantic, brought about by the introduction of steam navigation, caused cheap grain to flood the British market. Arable farmers were the first to suffer but, while livestock and milk producers initially reaped the benefits of lower input costs, the whole industry was soon to feel the effects. The extent of the crash is best seen in the price of wheat: in 1873 it stood at 58s 8d a quarter, by 1894 it had collapsed to 22s 10d. The first cargo of refrigerated meat sailed from Australia to the UK in 1876 and set in motion a depression that was to last up to the Second World War. All enjoyment had gone out of farming and this no doubt whetted Herman's interest in more exciting matters. The hard times almost certainly brought about his early retirement at a still youthful 60 years of age but, by getting out before his time, he managed to escape the worst of the recession which reached its nadir in 1894-1895 two or three years after he had relinquished his tenancy.

His distractions from farming

Like his father before him, Herman diversified into other work becoming an estate agent which rescued him financially through the lean times. He continued in this line throughout his retirement managing to live in some degree of comfort for the last 25 years of his life. His distraction away from farming started almost immediately after his father's death when he had taken on the added acreage and responsibility of Hill Farm. He was not yet 28 when his father died and until then had been completely absorbed in his Grundisburgh business. Times were good and his butter production had become a talking point among the farming community. Socially, he ventured little further than Lux farmhouse where, in 1852, his brother Manfred had started his farmers' meetings. Soon they had outgrown their farmhouse beginnings and developed into the Grundisburgh Farmers' Club with meetings held at The Dog. At this point Herman was elected Treasurer and Assistant Secretary so beginning a lifetime of committee work that stretched well beyond farming and into politics, the Church, sport and education. On any one of these topics he was a frequent letter writer to the press; always forthright, sometimes abrasive, his comments invariably brought strongly worded replies.

His political interest

As his interest in hands-on farming waned so his committee work increased; his time at home diminished and as one of his old workmen commented: 'He wasn't much of a man about the farm; they used to call him a spear-grass farmer'.⁹¹ Finding greater pleasures elsewhere, he was never happier than when holding forth in front of a group of agriculturists or others of any political persuasion. A fierce fighter for the Conservative cause, he quickly became involved in politics at a high level being, for example, one of only two others to join the successful Ipswich MP in his carriage ride to the poll declaration in 1867.⁹² 'Ever ready to break a lance with the most formidable opponent', he was regarded as one who was quick to fire and quick to forgive as his close friendship with his neighbouring farmer in Rushmere bears out. Robert Lacey Everett was a Liberal and a Nonconformist and three times Member of Parliament for Woodbridge. They had fierce differences of opinions but always remained firm friends. Herman himself never sought high political office but it was widely agreed that had he tried for Parliament he would have had a comfortable majority against any opponent who stood against him. For 15 years he was an Alderman of East Suffolk County Council having been elected at the first meeting of Council following the passing of the

⁹¹ George Ewart Evans, *The Horse in the Furrow*, (London, 1971), 182.

⁹² *Ipswich Journal*, 23 February 1867. The party arrived at the hustings from the Great White Horse in a carriage and four complete with outriders.

Local Government Act of 1888. For an even longer period he was an active member of the Woodbridge Board of Guardians and Rural Council.

His committee work

He was on every committee imaginable and, as if to fill his spare time, he became an active member of the Wilford Volunteer Rifle Corps (later the 3rd Suffolk Rifles) where he quickly rose to be Captain Commandant, taking the chair at all its meetings. He was a noted authority and spokesman on all aspects of agriculture. He was Secretary then Chairman and finally President of the East Suffolk Chamber of Agriculture whose meetings were held in The Bull at Woodbridge. He was closely identified with the Suffolk Agricultural Association where his services were frequently drawn on to judge either the Suffolk horse or Red Poll cattle as well as in other departments. He served many times as a member of their committee and was called on to help in similar capacities across East Anglia and indeed at the Royal Show where he made frequent attendances. He was also an active member and judge at the annual Woodbridge Fair and Horse Show which he attended no fewer than 68 times. He was a committee member, judge and exhibitor of the Ipswich Fat Cattle Club and Chairman of the Suffolk Stud Book Association later known as the Suffolk Horse Society. With his brother Manfred and Suffolk MPs in 1873, he was part of a deputation that met the Chancellor at 11 Downing Street concerning the repeal of the malt tax.⁹³ He represented the county at the AGM of the Royal Agricultural Society of England in London and in 1895 gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Agriculture into the effects of the Depression on Suffolk farmers.

The agricultural lock-out of 1874

Just as the recession was beginning to bite, farmers had another, though shorter term, problem on their hands. The Trade Union Act of 1871 had for the first time legalised trade unions and, within two years, the National Agricultural Workers' Union had been formed. In 1874 a strike seeking higher wages in Suffolk and North Essex had been organised and by early April 6,000 men had withdrawn their labour. The strike was broken by a lock-out of union members by farmers who had formed the Essex and Suffolk Farmers' Defence Association and who declared that they would not pay more than 2s 0d for a 12 hour day sacking workers who would not agree to leave the union. The men were asking for another shilling a week, that is 2d a day. Woodbridge became the local centre for both sides in the dispute with the strikers meeting in the Cock and Pye at the top of New Street while employers met in the Bull.^{94 95} At their initial meeting over 150 farmers resolved that they would not allow themselves to be controlled by the Union. Locally, the Wilford Hundred (that area to the north of the Deben) was most seriously affected because of the larger farms in that part of the county and the corresponding numbers that were employed. Samuel Wolton, for example, whose son married into the Biddell family and who farmed 2,600 acres at Butley Abbey employed 51 men and seven boys. But farmers on the Playford side of the river were not immune with strike pay being paid in Grundisburgh and Great Bealings.⁹⁶ While there is nothing to suggest that Playford itself ever became involved, Herman Biddell, as might be expected, took a leading part in the farmers' defence although he was never an officer of the Association. He spoke volubly at the Woodbridge

⁹³ *Ipswich Journal*, 14 January 1873.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18 April 1874.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21 March 1874.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1874. Numbers of strikers in the area were dwindling as harvest approached but three men from Grundisburgh and four from Great Bealings were paid strike money by the union that week at the Cock & Pye.

meetings which were reported in the local papers and wrote letters to the press including one to the London *Times* in reply to James Fraser, Bishop of Manchester and a former vicar of Stradbroke, who had written in fervent support of the Suffolk strikers. The lock-out trickled to an end with the coming of harvest; it was a time of premium earnings for the labourers and the Union was running out of money. Their timing had been bad: most of the spring tilling had been completed at the outset and the crops continued to grow. As far as livestock was concerned, farmers pooled their resources and muddled through. One long term outcome was the realisation that they could cut costs by employing fewer men. Over 4,000 had been put out of work with many emigrating to the industrial north or to the Colonies.

His interest in elementary education

For such a reactionary employer, his interest in and attitudes towards education are perhaps surprising. Speaking at a meeting of the National Educational Union in Ipswich in 1869, he stated that 'labour under ten years old was of no use to the farmer' and that school attendance should be compulsory up to the age of 14 or 15.⁹⁷ At the time, these were radical views indeed for only three months later Forster's Education Act of 1870 made schooling for children compulsory for the first time but only for those aged between five and ten and it was to be another 70 years before the Rab Butler Education Act raised the leaving age to 15 in 1944. Herman was elected chairman of the Board of Governors for the new Board School at Grundisburgh set up under the 1870 Act and gave the vote of thanks to Mr Gurdon on laying the foundation stone there in 1874. His father-in-law, the Revd. Henry Barlow Rector of Burgh, was also a board member, his village coming within the Grundisburgh catchment area.⁹⁸ Herman was also a governor of Woodbridge Grammar School, now Woodbridge School and also became a governor of the new school at Bealings which opened in 1877 and which accommodated those Playford children who had previously been taught in the cottage at the top of Hill Farm Road.

His love of cricket

Cricket was his favourite sport which he 'played all summer'. While he competed at village level against neighbouring teams such as Kesgrave, against whom in 1850 he took 11 wickets in a two innings match, he was also the opening batsman for The Herons, a local side that played against more serious clubs such as Woodbridge, Colchester Garrison and Essex County. He was present at the meeting in 1874 when the Ipswich and East Suffolk Club was resurrected and where he



An All-England Eleven of around 1850

was invited to join the committee in the hope that he would bring in a number of country members. He also became their opening bat.⁹⁹ But his greatest claim to fame surely came in 1853 when he was selected to play against a United All-England XI at Brooks Hall, then a country house just off the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 27 November 1869. Pamela Horn, *Children's Work and Welfare, 1780-1890*, (Cambridge, 1994), 72-74. Nationally, some 3,000 boys between the ages of five and nine were classed as agricultural labourers in 1871 a figure that rose to 71,000 for those between ten and fourteen.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 21 November 1874.

⁹⁹ *Ipswich Journal*, 19 May 1874, 2 September 1876.

Norwich Road in Ipswich.¹⁰⁰ An itinerant all-professional first-class team, The United XI had broken away from the All-England XI the year before and in 1859 the first England national cricket team was formed as a composite of the two and toured North America that year.

Sole churchwarden for 44 years

In 1860 Herman followed his father as sole churchwarden; each held office for 44 years. As sole churchwarden he oversaw the complete 'Victorianisation' of the church interior but, while the west end gallery had been removed 'on the recommendation of the Rural Dean' in 1859 in his father's time, all other changes came later. The new chancel was put up and the high deal box pews in the nave removed in 1873-74, the pulpit was renewed and put in its present position, the earlier one removed from the north wall of the nave, the organ was placed in the new north vestry in 1883 and a new font fitted to the old base in 1894. While strong feelings are still aroused by such sweeping changes, they were in accord with the times and credit must be given to the Victorians for doing the one thing that really matters in a medieval building: keeping the rainwater out. In replacing the chancel, Lord Bristol as Lay Rector had already achieved that aim at the east end while the expense incurred in renewing the roof of the nave 'was defrayed by voluntary contributions from every household in the parish'. The construction of the present open-trussed rafter roof, in celebration of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, came at the loss of the former more attractive whitewashed barrel ceiling.

Herman's temperament got the better of him in 1904 when the newly licensed vicar, the Revd. Clement Wright, insisted on imposing church law that there should be two churchwardens rather than one. Considering the post too narrow a platform to share with others, Herman took umbrage and played no further part in local church matters. His work with the wider Church however continued and he was for example for many years a member of the House of Laymen in Convocation and for nearly 20 years a member of the Norwich Diocesan Conference. After 1914, when the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich was established, he continued as a member of Conference by which time he was in his eighties.

His family

Herman was 28 and still a bachelor when he took over at Hill Farm following his father's death in 1860. At first he lived in the house with his three sisters, the unmarried Ellen and Anna and the recently widowed Jane Everard but, on his marriage in 1870, the three moved out and bought a house in Henley Road, Ipswich. Herman married Harriet Barlow, the daughter of the rector of Burgh, a shy retiring young woman who, quite unlike her husband, was never to get involved in activity outside the house. Their first child died at the age of four but the others,



Herman Biddell's wife, Harriet, the daughter of the Rector of Burgh

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 3 September 1853. <http://www.ipswich-lettering.co.uk/streetnames.html> Brooks Hall was a moated 18th century country house with a grand Queen Anne facade standing in 8½ acres of grounds. In the 1930s it belonged to Capt. Schreiber who was so opposed to the building of the Ipswich by-pass (Valley Road) adjacent to his property that he had it dismantled brick by brick and taken on 17 LNER railway carriages to Templecombe in Somerset where it stands to this day.

four girls and a boy, all lived to a good age. It was in 1876, when the little boy was still alive and when the next baby just a month or two old, that Harriet advertised for a ‘good nurse for two young children’.¹⁰¹ Caroline Pipe was the successful applicant and, like so many nannies over the years, stayed with the family for the rest of her life. On Herman’s retirement in 1892 she moved with them to the newly built Archway House but, developing a heart condition in later life, the single story Lower Lodge was specially built for her as she could no longer climb the stairs. Caroline was to look after the five surviving children: Dorothea who was just a couple of months old when she first arrived, Herman junior who was born in 1876 and who went into the church, Amy born in 1880, Juliana in 1883 and Rachel in 1885. When the family moved to Archway the children were still quite young ranging in age from seven to 16.

The advert had added, by way of enticement, that ‘an under nurse was also kept’ and in this connection it is worth remembering how full of people such houses were in earlier times. Herman’s staffing numbers were modest in comparison with many farm houses but nevertheless, in addition to the two nannies, he employed a resident cook as well as two resident housemaids. Additional help would doubtless have come in from the village on a daily basis. Herman, of course, grew up in the house; in his early days he shared it with 13 immediate members of family and an indoor staff of four. The great majority of live-in staff were of course unmarried girls and women but single men closely associated with the house such as grooms and coachmen were often included. Some lesser farmers allowed their labourers to share their accommodation though the liberal Thomas Clarkson, anxiously seeking somewhere for the bailiff that he intended bringing with him from Bury because his intended house in Brook Lane was uninhabitable, drew the line at letting him live in The Hall.

His entertaining

Closer to home, Herman was a first rate host and one who revelled in the big occasion whether it was putting on a lunch for the Duke of Hamilton’s Harriers or for holding the first recorded royal event in the village - that of the marriage of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) to Princess Alexandra of Denmark in March 1863.¹⁰² The royal wedding celebrations were held on a weekday (a Tuesday) and, starting at 1.30 pm ‘with all inhabitants’ invited,



Hill House in Herman Biddell’s time. The house, buildings and grounds were frequently used for a great variety of entertainment Biddell collection.

¹⁰¹ *Ipswich Journal*, 6 May 1876.

¹⁰² *Ipswich Journal*, 6 December 1877. The Suffolk Estate of the Dukes of Hamilton was based on Easton near Woodbridge and included today’s Easton Farm Park. Easton Harriers are still in existence.

employers had given everyone the afternoon off. Herman was still a bachelor, just 30 years old and less than three years into his tenancy, suggesting that these types of events had previously been held at Hill House before and that it was the accepted venue for such major occasions. While others chipped in with the costs of food and drink, notably the vicar and his curate, Thomas Clarkson III at The Hall and William Howell at the mill, it was overwhelmingly a Biddell family occasion held in one of the farm barns at the rear of the house at which 200 villagers were fed a sumptuous sit down meal. Bottles of beer and 'jars of tobacco' were placed on every table, the celebrations concluding with a substantial tea and finally, later in the evening, a 'monster' bonfire up on The Warren.¹⁰³ Small wonder that the occasion made seven column inches in one of the local papers and that James Frost, writing about the Golden Jubilee in 1887, was still so enthusiastic about the royal wedding some 25 years later.¹⁰⁴

Following his observations on the events of 1863, Frost continues: that 'about the year 1880 another village party was made in which all in the village (with exception one) was invited'. While it is of some intrigue to wonder just who was *persona non grata* at that time, it would have been of greater interest to future generations if more information on the event had been available but he does not elaborate. It could just possibly have been another but lesser royal wedding for there were three around that time, two of them the children of Queen Victoria's well spread out family, but it was most likely the Sunday Schools Centenary that was commemorated nationwide that year to which he was referring. The celebrations for this were indeed held in the grounds of Hill House and, according to the newspaper report, nearly '50 Sunday School scholars attended.... and what appeared to be the entire population of the parish'.¹⁰⁵ This grand event seems to have been the last to have been held on that scale in the grounds of Hill House until recent times, all such future celebrations up to the Second World War being celebrated on the Cricket Meadow.¹⁰⁶ But in the last 12 years of his time at Hill House and with no community hall, Biddell continued to act as host putting on 'lots of parties.... such as concerts and magic lanterns' for smaller groups of villagers. Such hospitality continued into his retirement at Archway House where, for example, he held the annual dinners for the village Quoits Club. These events were a far cry from what today are considered to be dull and boring AGMs, that in 1898 attracting over 50 guests where the sit down meal was followed by a succession of toasts to almost everyone in the village followed by songs and dancing with Harriet Biddell, Herman's wife, at the piano.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Private possession. Newspaper clip, source unknown.

¹⁰⁴ James Frost's remembrances, private possession. James Frost (1835-1906), José Booker's great-grandfather, had been a carter at the mill. When his employer, William Howell, took on the additional responsibility of the windmill at Martlesham and went to live in that village, James Frost operated the Playford mill for the last two years of its life before it closed in 1874. His grandfather John Frost (b. 1773) had been a grazier in Ramsholt where he lost his rights following enclosure there. In the early 1820s his son William, James' father, took work in Playford as a labourer.

¹⁰⁵ *Ipswich Journal*, 31 July 1880.

¹⁰⁶ For Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees in 1887 and 1897, 'the Company' assembled at Playford Hall, processed behind a band to the church for a service and returned not to The Hall but to a marquee on the Cricket Meadow for 'dinner'. 'Athletic Sports, Games, &c.' were played before having tea and there was a 'Promenade Concert, Dancing and Amusements in the evening that were followed by a Grand Bon-Fire on the Warrens at 9.30 o'clock'. Successive royal occasions followed a similar format: for the Coronation of Edward VII in 1902 the Company assembled at 'Bridge Meadow, Hill House' and for the Coronation of George V in 1911 it assembled at The Hall but there is no record for either event as to where the actual celebrations took place. George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935 was celebrated on the Cricket Meadow while the coronation of his son George VI in 1937 was celebrated in the Village Hall with an adjoining tent used as an overflow but sports continued to be held in the Cricket Meadow. The Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 was celebrated in the studio at Archway House; her Silver, Golden and Diamond Jubilees however were all celebrated in the grounds and farm buildings of Hill House by courtesy of Charles Lofts.

¹⁰⁷ *Ipswich Journal*, 15 October 1898

Both Herman and Harriet were keen to encourage the musical talent that then abounded in the village. The Kidbys, for example, all played the violin and one of them played the cello.¹⁰⁸ They



The Playford string band photographed in the Cricket Meadow c. 1890. They walked to Woodbridge once a week for lessons and once a week they practised at Hill House where piano accompaniment was provided by Harriet Biddell Janet Selby

used to walk to Woodbridge once a week for a music lesson from a Mr Cullingford, leader of the Orchestral Band in the town who played 1st violin. And once a week they practiced at Hill House where Harriet provided the accompaniment. The group played popular marches of the day, operatic selections and some of the easier classical melodies; every Christmas they gave a concert which was held in the old studio there.¹⁰⁹ In earlier times, John Woby an agricultural labourer from Lux Farm and husband of Mary Woby the school teacher, used to play the

violin in church from the west gallery until it was taken down in 1859. He continued playing from the floor of the church until the arrival of a hurdy-gurdy. The present organ was installed in 1883. It was reckoned that Woby could play the violin 'as well as Sheldrake at The Hall'. Sheldrake had been trained by the widely acclaimed Nursey of The Grove in Little Bealings while Woby had been taught by the lesser rated Cullingford.¹¹⁰ In those days it was not at all unusual for working men to be able to read music, and to read it well, but at the same time being quite unable to read a single page of text in a book.¹¹¹

David Amoss - his coachman

In what little time he had left for relaxation Herman painted, exhibiting at the Ipswich Art Club from 1876 to 1885 but strangely allowing his membership to lapse in 1897 five years into retirement. Unlike his wife who hardly went outside the door, Herman was never at home, always rubbing shoulders with the great and the good of the county. While longer journeys to London, Bury and Norwich would have been made by train, his never-ending attendance at meetings, teas, dinners, banquets, balls, political platforms, official openings such as those of the new corn exchange in Ipswich in 1882 or the opening of Bourne Bridge in 1891, would have been impossible without his

¹⁰⁸ Edward Kidby (1831-1909) moved from Grundisburgh in 1871 to take the position of bailiff at Hill Farm. He was a great-grandfather of José Booker, his second son Richard having married Mary Ann the daughter of James Frost.

¹⁰⁹ Amy Biddell, 'People in Playford', (unpublished). Private possession.

¹¹⁰ Perry Nursey (1771-1840) was first and foremost a landscape artist but also highly rated as a player of the violin.

¹¹¹ Amy Biddell notes, private possession. Her notes were gathered from her family and from its coachman David Amoss. She was the second daughter of Herman Biddell and a granddaughter of Arthur Biddell.

faithful coachman David Amoss. David had started as a very young boy with Herman's father and was to stay on with his widow and daughters Amy and Rachel after he died; in all he served the family for nearly 80 years.¹¹² When Herman built Archway House for his retirement, he not only included a coachhouse among the outbuildings but built Archway Cottage for David and his family.

An idea may be gleaned of Herman's busy life from a letter that he wrote in 1866, when he was 34, in reply to Horace Wolton, a cousin of Newbourne Hall, who was seeking a favour.¹¹³

I have now before me a busy week or ten days after which I will attend to you. I begin today by trying to get a bargain with my men for the Harvest, ending the day by drilling my little regiment at Woodbridge which is not over until half past nine at night. Tomorrow is Ipswich market; the next day I have promised to speak on the hustings for one of our new members having undertaken to second the nomination of Mr Henniker-Major. How much preparation that ought to have or what I shall say when I get there, I have not the remotest idea. That is only part of my day's performance. At night I have a snug little tea party and entertainment of some 120 visitors - 50 indoors and 70 more on the grass outside. Don't you wish me well through it? The fact is I have undertaken to feed our Riflemen and we have also invited a tremendous indoor party as well.

Then come Thursday when I must be at the Board [of Guardians] and expect company at night. Friday is the Lamb Sale [on Playford Heath] when most likely I shall have my house full until Saturday night. Then on Monday I have to be at Woodbridge again at night to prepare for a great field day with the Riflemen on the Wednesday when we shall be drilling before Colonel Elliott all day after which I will make a day for you.

I don't know how other people make days enough in the week to get through their business. I suppose however they don't all dabble as I do in a hundred things other folks keep clear of. I profess to manage my own business as a farmer - and do after a fashion - I also have nearly two days or evenings a week to military duties. I take up with politics whenever anything is to be done then cram in a little bit of fine arts, painting for pleasure and sometimes also for a little profit, write articles for newspapers and give a gratuitous lecture at a Farmers' Club once in a while, shoot all winter and cricket all summer, read *The [East Anglian Daily] Times* almost through every day and a great deal of other matter besides, visit my friends when they will kindly let me come, attend as Guardian, [I] am churchwarden, assessor and collector of taxes and on Sundays read the lessons for the clergyman! I hope that no one will say that I have nothing to do!

The Biddell Family Archives

The Biddells as a family had an undoubted sense of history and in particular of the part that they themselves played in it. Arthur, Manfred and Herman, all left behind invaluable records of the years that they spent in the parish from 1808 when the family first arrived until Herman's death in 1917. Many of their papers found their way into the Ipswich Record Office where they form a magnificent

¹¹² *East Anglian Daily Times*, 16 December 1930. A somewhat cloying article by Amy and Rachel Biddell appeared in the paper four days after his death in December 1930.

¹¹³ Letter from Herman Biddell to Horace Wolton, 23 July 1866. Private possession.

collection of contemporary farming practice and village life; other lesser documents still remain in private hands but will eventually join them. William and George also saw fit to put their experiences on record but, as they both left the village in early life, these are of lesser import for those whose interests are restricted to the history of Playford.¹¹⁴

Arthur Biddell's Day Books

The extensive Biddell archive in the Record Office in Ipswich is made up of Arthur's family and business papers, showing in particular his wide involvement in the property business both domestic and agricultural.¹¹⁵ It includes his Day Books, a diary of events on the farm: what he sowed, where he sowed it, what payments he made, his Wage Books that listed the jobs carried out on the farm and the amount of money paid for them. It also includes his Work Books which give fascinating details about farming methods of the day. All these have been widely appraised by students of rural history and much of the material written up in book form to become the authoritative sources for the period.¹¹⁶ The collection covers his farm at Grundisburgh which he initially bought for his young son William and which Herman later took over in 1853, the farm at Foxhall which he inherited from Mary Routh and which was later farmed by Manfred and his sons Arthur Blencowe and John Lyall and also the farm at Newbourne where he gave advice to Samuel Wolton who was later to move to Butley. Equally intriguing are his tithe collection and commutation papers covering his work as a valuer with the Tithe Commutation Office. Deposited amongst all this material are the Playford Overseers' and Surveyors' records that are highly likely to be overlooked in this otherwise personal and agricultural archive.

Manfred's contribution

Arthur's two sons, Manfred and Herman, lived in the parish all their lives and in their later years wrote down at least some of their recollections so that they were not lost to posterity. Herman's daughter Amy, years after her father's death, added to his collection by not only recording family stories that otherwise would have been forgotten but in setting down her own exchanges with family as well as with others in the village. While Manfred's contribution is largely made up of key extracts from the parish records, he does include personal memories of his own that are not to be found elsewhere.¹¹⁷ His exchange of correspondence with F. A. Crisp of Playford Hall resulted in Crisp's private publication 'Materials towards a history of Playford in 1884'. But perhaps future generations should be most grateful to Manfred for getting his cousin George Biddell Airy, more than 20 years his senior, to write of his recollections of the parish from the time of his first visit to his uncle Arthur at Hill House in 1811-12. These memories, by far the best record of the early decades of the century, were transcribed by Edward Goldsmith when Parish Clerk and inserted into the Parish Council Minute Book for 1948-71.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ SROB, HD 1322, includes William's diary 1845-47 when he was at the Grundisburgh farm. Museum of English Rural Life, TR RAN SP4/217, *Reminiscences of George Biddell*, 1895, in which he records the years he spent with Ransome's of Ipswich from 1840 when he started as a probationer as a lad of 16 to 1876 when, as Chief Engineer, he took early retirement at the age of 52.

¹¹⁵ SROI, HA 2. Biddell Family Archives.

¹¹⁶ George Ewart Evans, *The Horse in the Furrow* (London, 1971), 87-124. Suffolk Record Society, Vol.1, *Suffolk Farming in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Joan Thirsk, (Woodbridge, 1958).

¹¹⁷ SROI, HD 436/3. Manfred Biddell, *Extracts &c. from the Books and Papers of the Parish of Playford*.

¹¹⁸ SROI, EG94/B1/2. Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1948-71.

Herman's opinionated essays

Herman, by contrast, wrote essays. His greatest work, *Thomas Clarkson and Playford Hall*, runs to some 60 manuscript pages and covers subjects far wider than its title suggests.¹¹⁹ Its great delight is that, like his frequent letters to the press, it is direct and opinionated. A contemporary of Clarkson's grandson, with whom in his younger days he 'was much together', he exposed the debauched life that he led in later life that caused 'sore trouble to his [widowed] mother' and which brought about his sudden departure from Playford Hall. Other lesser pieces include *Reminiscences of the Construction of the Railway* in which he criticises Peter Brough, the responsible engineer, for ignoring his father's plea to initially put the Culpho-Ipswich road over a bridge and for building the line through the soft ground to the south of The Mere so that the tunnel allowing farm access to the water meadows collapsed and had to be filled in. Herman was in his twenties when the line was constructed and well remembers such misjudgments; it is thanks to him that much relevant material has survived in particular his painting of the tunnel that he painted from an early photographic print. His other noteworthy and longer piece, *Playford Hall as it was and as it is*, relates in detail the re-gentrification that The Hall underwent in the years 1867-72 following Clarkson's departure when it ceased to be a farmhouse and became a 'residence of a class other than cultivators of the soil'.¹²⁰ Herman had custody of The Hall throughout its refurbishment and was intimately acquainted with the alterations that took place particularly on the ground floor. Here the huge kitchen, which had been built for the original house before the east wing was demolished in the middle of the previous century, was drastically reduced in size and its ceiling lowered; its immense chimney cut through to make way for a window in the new dining room, apparent from the outside but obscured from the internal eye. He also wrote in 1916, the year before he died, a long article which he titled 'Our Village Trees & Forestry' in which he enthuses and is saddened in equal measure by the trees left standing and those that had been lost. Of particular interest are his recollections of Pogson's former house and grounds across the valley from Hill House, how the house was demolished but the outbuildings retained as an off-hand farm for Lux. He recalls the coach house and how the canary coloured barouche remained there for years after the house had been pulled down.

His description of Playford Hall before the refurbishment of 1869-72

Of greater interest were the changes taking place in the grounds of Playford Hall. To the west of the house had stood the farm buildings which are shown only in rudimentary form on the small-scale Ordnance Survey 'old edition' map of 1838 and on the proposed railway line plan of 1846.¹²¹ They are not shown on the footpath diversion map of 1870 suggesting that they had been removed early in the gentrification process and accordingly are not on the 1881 OS six inches to the mile edition where the detail would have been recorded with great accuracy.¹²² Biddell goes some way to rectify this gap stating that 'the buildings came almost to the west edge of the moat and what are now the well kept lawns.... cover the site of the stable and cattle yards, the barns, sheds and granaries.... the massive structure which now represents the coach house, stables and under-groom's residence was the capacious barn....' adding some much lacking detail of what had once stood there. He also confirms that the mill stream had previously formed the northern boundary of the grounds but, on

¹¹⁹ SROI, qS Playford 9. Herman Biddell, *Thomas Clarkson and Playford Hall*.

¹²⁰ Both articles are in typescript and in private possession. *Playford Hall* was written in 1916, the year before he died.

¹²¹ SROI, 150/2/5.75A. Proposed railway line plan, 1846.

¹²² SROI, 276/242b. Sketch map of Playford Hall 1870 showing The Wash and Mill Bank footpath by the mill stream.

closure of the mill in c. 1874 and the diversion of the footpath a few years before that, the boundary became the river. No sign of the former mill stream remains in the grounds but it can still be seen in both the Alder Carr and Bridge Meadows where no such ‘improvements’ have been made.

His Suffolk Stud Book

But as an author Herman Biddell is best remembered in the wider world for his Suffolk Horse Stud Book regarded as a classic of its type and certainly a first among such works.¹²³ Illustrated by the Ipswich Artist Duval, the pedigrees it establishes go back to 1768 and are the longest of any breed in the world. It took Biddell two years of his life to research and write during which time he did little else. It remains a valued reference book which can trace the parentage of any Suffolk horse alive today. The two brothers also left more visible marks: in 1887 Manfred built the shop on the corner of Church Lane while in 1892 Herman built Archway House, both houses still standing prominently on the approach to the village and providing character where much was lost in its redevelopment of the 1960s and ‘70s.

After the Biddells

Arthur Biddell had occupied Hill House for 52 years from 1808 until his death in 1860; Herman, born there in 1832, stayed on until his move to Archway in 1892, father and son totalling 84 years between them. Two unrelated successors were each to stay for as many years or longer: George Fiske for 50 years from 1896 till his death in 1946 followed by Charles Lofts who was to live there for 70 years. Spoiling this remarkable record of only four occupants in over 200 years, a Harry Showell briefly took possession of the farm and house for a mere four years between the Biddells and George Fiske. Such a short occupation could so easily be overlooked and it is one that raises more questions than answers.

Harry Showell (1869-1933)



Showell's Brewery Co. Ltd. started by Harry Showell's father in the mid-19th century, had up to 200 outlets in the Birmingham area. It was bought by Allsopp's of Burton-on-Trent in 1914

Harry Showell was no farmer; he was more a playboy and young man of great charm. He came from a monied background where his father had started out in life from modest beginnings and had steered the family to be one of the leading regional brewers in the country with a tied estate of almost 200 public houses. The Showells were from the West Midlands and the main outlet for their beer was in Birmingham; after their father's death the family sold out to Allsopps who closed the brewery and supplied the pubs from Burton-on-Trent. Harry's elder brother Charles took control of the company in 1887 and it was immediately after this that Harry moved to Suffolk leaving one other brother behind to help run the company. By the time of its biggest expansion in 1894, Harry was well and truly

¹²³ *A History and Register of the County Breed of Cart Horses', The Suffolk Stud Book, 1880, Volume I.*

established at Hill House and all links with the family firm appear to have been severed. It could well be that there had been strife in the family and that Harry had been paid off to find his own way in the world.

Why he came to Suffolk is not known. Just turned 20, he was playing cricket for Playford in the same team as Herman Biddell in the summer of 1889 and for Bealings the following year with Arthur Blencoe Biddell of Lux Farm, Herman's nephew. And as he took over Hill Farm two years after this, it has to be assumed that he underwent some form of agricultural training and that he did so within the parish of Playford. In 1892 however, a month or so before he took on the tenancy, he is known to have been living at Rendlesham where he was 'founding a Suffolk stud'. The mystery deepens for farms invariably changed hands at Michaelmas, which in Suffolk falls on 11 October, yet the young Harry was installed at Hill House by the July and in August was attending a demonstration of a new American reaper-binder in Great Bealings where he came away with the very model that was being put through its paces.¹²⁴ His sudden elevation to the tenancy raises two questions: how did Herman Biddell come to give up half way through the year and why did the Bristol Estate take on a new tenant with little or no farming experience. The two questions are closely connected. Herman Biddell was considered to be 'not good with money' and had become a victim of the depression. He had just built a large expensive house, he was heavily mortgaged and the farm was losing money. The Estate on the other hand saw 'vacant farms becoming plentiful', young Harry wanted to go farming and had the money to do so and Herman was on hand to keep an eye on him from the security that retirement and estate agency work afforded him.¹²⁵ Accordingly, a Court Baron was held 'at Mr Herman Biddell's Hill House' on 20 May 1892 at which the transfer was agreed and Harry Showell appears to have occupied both house and farm immediately.^{126 127}

Harry Showell busied himself that autumn buying and selling horses. He quickly became an accepted member of the local farming community being elected to the Suffolk Agricultural Association, the Woodbridge Agricultural Club and the Suffolk Horse Society. Here the departure of Herman Biddell from the breeding scene was greatly lamented, the meeting being told that he had now handed over the farm 'to a gentleman from a prominent Birmingham family'. After just 18 months as a Suffolk farmer Harry was invited to the prestigious Bull Hotel Dinner in Woodbridge 'at which the more pre-eminent residents of the town and countryside gather to discuss the public life of the neighbourhood'. Captain Algernon Cobbold presided 'supported in the vice-chair by a junior member of the farming interest, Mr J. H. Showell of Playford'.¹²⁸ Soon however, Harry was showing his true colours: attending every show in the county and beyond, even the Royals when they were at Chester, Cambridge and Leicester, where he successfully exhibited various mares, colts and fillies from his growing stud. Owning 'a nice young hunter' he had also taken an interest in steeplechasing and had retained at least one of the two game keepers that had been kept by his predecessor. He was active in the successful attempts to preserve the Duke of Hamilton's harriers following the death of the 12th Duke without male issue at Easton in 1895. Perhaps the closest he came to farming was winning prizes for root vegetables and hoggets but even those sort of prizes

¹²⁴ *Ipswich Journal*, 13 August 1892.

¹²⁵ When Sam Sherwood retired from Lux Farm in 1928, the Estate failed to find a tenant to replace him and ran the farm themselves for three years until they managed to attract a new tenant in Robert Pain.

¹²⁶ Notice proclaiming the Court Baron, 7 May 1892. Private possession.

¹²⁷ *Ipswich Journal*. 30 July 1892. A two year old Suffolk filly is reported to have been bought at a farm sale by Mr Showell of the Hill Farm, Playford.

¹²⁸ *Ipswich Journal*, 24 February 1894.

fail to bring in the money. Very personable, he had been elected on to the new Woodbridge Rural District Council but with 11 others was disqualified for non-attendance having missed six consecutive monthly meetings. This also disqualified him from the Board of Guardians.¹²⁹ He was also on the race committee of the Woodbridge Hunt Steeplechase.¹³⁰ His mind was clearly elsewhere. On top of all this he was spending a lot of his time playing sport: cricket for Playford as well as Rushmere and Westerfield and football for Kesgrave. Given the economic times, with all these expensive and time consuming distractions it is unlikely that the farm was making sufficient money to pay for these pleasures. The Estate might well also have thought that the farm was being neglected and in the summer of 1896 he traded for the last time before George Fiske arrived later in the year.¹³¹



Loudham Hall near Wickham Market, one of Harry Showell's homes after leaving Hill House, Playford, in 1896

Harry Showell moved to Home Farm, Hasketon, from where he continued to show his horses albeit with far less frequency. And, no longer a farmer, they were now hunters rather than Suffolk Punches.¹³² In 1901 his father died and the following year he married the daughter of a wealthy Staffordshire seed merchant, the ceremony taking place in Kensington rather than in his wife's home village in the West Midlands where she had lived since she was born. His wife's father died just three years later in 1905 following which the couple appear in great comfort first at Pettistree

Lodge, a late Georgian country house near Wickham Market, and then across the road at Loudham Hall a 24 room 11 bay mansion of c.1750 set in 69 acres.¹³³ Now living on private means with a young son, the pair employed a nurse, three resident domestic staff and a footman - much changed circumstances from his earlier days in Playford.¹³⁴

Harry received nothing on his father's death beyond 'his watch and chain, rings and other personal jewellery' adding strength to the view that he had been paid off when his brother Charles took control of the family brewery in 1887. But on his marriage in 1902, his wife was given £10,000 (equivalent to £1.2m in 2018) by her father and left a further £20,000 (£2.3m) on his death three years later. So who was Showell's father-in-law that he could lavish such money on his offspring? He was William George Webb, the head of Edward Webb & Sons, a firm that had been started by his father a multi-faceted business that ranged from glass manufacturing, milling, wool stapling, corn

¹²⁹ Ibid., 8 February 1896.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 18 April 1896.

¹³¹ Ibid., 18 July 1896. Harry Showell bought lambs at Sutton lamb sale, his last recorded farming transaction.

¹³² Ibid., 21 October 1898. A sale of antique and modern furniture at Hasketon. Harry Showell was downsizing.

¹³³ Pettistree Lodge was bought in 1899 by the younger brother of the Earl of Darnley who returned to the family home in Cobham in 1902 on succeeding to the title. It is likely that Showell acquired the tenancy at this time as the Darnley family retained the house until 1925. According to Kelly's Directory the couple were living there in 1908. In the 1911 census they are recorded as being at Loudham Park.

¹³⁴ At Loudham Hall, an 11-bay Georgian mansion (see picture), Showell was a tenant of the Whitbread brewing family who owned it from 1792 to 1921.

dealing, hop merchanting and seed growing, a company that became a household name towards the end of the 19th century and which lives in the variety of lettuce ‘Webb’s Wonderful’ that gardeners still like to grow today. William George Webb was also involved in brewing being a director of Phipps & Co of Northampton and was MP for Worcester. Both families had made money. Harry’s father left £145,000 (£17m) on his death, but William George Webb was in a different league. His estate was valued at £560,000 (£65.5m) and when Harry ran out of his own family’s pay-off he lived off his wife’s inheritance for the rest of his life.

He did return to farming but it was after the First World War and it was in a position that suited him far better than his previous endeavours at Playford. No longer a tenant, by 1919 he had bought Clippesby Hall in the Norfolk Broads ‘a building of white brick standing on rising ground with commanding prospects over a large extent of country’ and in doing so became the largest landowner in the parish. Aged 45 at the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, he served in some capacity in the war coming out with the rank of captain, a title that he retained in civilian life until he died. And to do the day to day management on his new estate, to get his hands dirty and mud on his boots, he was able to employ his own farm bailiff and to live the life of a squire.

George Fiske (1869-1946)

By contrast, George Fiske was a proper farmer from a proper farming background whose family farmed 1,500 acres in the parish of Bramford to the west of Ipswich. The Great Depression that had



George Fiske, a portrait by Anna Airy Margaret Goldsmith

started in 1873 is generally reckoned to have bottomed out by the time that he took up his tenancy at Hill Farm in 1896: the ‘tide of prosperity had turned’ as demand began to catch up with supply. Agricultural imports however continued to rise but farm prices nevertheless moved upwards and confidence returned. Hand in hand with a more buoyant economy went a drift from the land particularly among the younger generation who headed for the towns and the cities. Many went to London and there was a revival in emigration especially to Canada but labour saving machinery, such as the reaper-binder for cereals, mowing machines, horse rakes and lifting poles for the hay harvest, were widely introduced at this time compensating for any shortage of labour. The Edwardian period is often seen as a golden age, one caught between the deep and long lasting economic decline of the late 19th century and the horrors of the Great War and the troubled times that followed it. Agriculture was out of recession and, from the view point of the 1920s and ‘30s, the years preceding 1914 brought back fond memories for farmers.

The First World War

The outbreak of the First World War saw pressures on the labour market increase still further. Men in their thousands rushed to Kitchener's call to arms in August 1914 excited by the prospect not only of supporting King and Country but of brightening up otherwise dull lives by fighting a war that would be over by Christmas: 750,000 volunteered in the first two months and a million had done so by the end of the year. The agricultural sector had yielded up on a voluntary basis 28% of its pre-war



Harvesters on Common Field, Playford, 1908 Margaret Goldsmith

workforce but, as volunteer numbers fell away, conscription was introduced. In January 1916 all single men aged 19-30 were called up; this was extended in April to all married men in the same age group and a lower age limit of 18 was introduced. The upper age limit was also later raised to 51. Despite its critical importance to the war effort, agriculture *per se* was never a reserved occupation and, while farmers themselves were exempt from conscription, their workers were not. Appeals from employers that their men should not be called up had to be put to tribunals on a case by case basis, outcomes varying not only from region to region but on the conflicting demands at any one time of the War Office and the War Agricultural Committees. The War Ag committees had been delegated with the task of increasing home food production especially after the poor harvest of 1916 and by Germany's campaign the following year of unrestricted submarine warfare that very nearly brought the country to its knees. Food prices had already risen by 60% and the only way to increase agricultural output was to abandon existing rotations and plough up grassland for which farmers wanted guaranteed prices. How far this went in Playford is not known but it is doubted that the meadows by the river were converted to arable as they were some 60 years later, in peacetime, under the CAP arrangements of the European Union. Lloyd George and his coalition administration came

to power half way through the war and quickly introduced the Corn Production Act of 1917 giving farmers their guaranteed prices and workers a minimum wage directed by a central Agricultural Wages Board. Farmers were to be paid a government deficiency payment on wheat and oats if their market price fell below a certain level while the Wages Board fixed a minimum wage of 25s a week. Neither ever operated as war time shortages forced prices and wages above these levels.

Unlike at Lux Farm, Fiske did not have to suffer the anguish of any his men losing their lives in the fighting.¹³⁵ But in common with the farming community at large he was compelled to work short handed and the staff that were left were mostly outside the limits of military age. Many farmworkers' sons joined up leaving their fathers on the farm to manage as best they could. Nelson Page, for example, son of George Page junior a general labourer, Arthur Gardiner son of Frank Gardiner horseman and Arthur Phillips son of Alfred Phillips another horseman had all worked alongside their fathers at Hill Farm, all joined the army at this time.¹³⁶ With a high demand for labour in other industries, other young men doubtless found better paid work elsewhere in town as they had done 100 years before during the Napoleonic Wars. Causing even greater difficulties was the shortage of horses an estimated half a million of all sorts having been being requisitioned by the army in the first two years of the war. Unlike men on the farms, no detailed statistics exist for this loss but information from the county of Devon vividly demonstrates the difficulties that farmers were under: that while in 1918 labour numbers had fallen to 71% of their pre-war total, the corresponding figure for 'plough horses' had slumped to a mere 28%.



The 1920s were also a time of enjoyment and of turning one's back on the horrors of the Great War. George Fiske was the third person in the village to own a motor car and followed the Crisps at The Hall and James Read at the shop whose Sunbeam was available for private hire

Post war hopes and betrayal

Following the Armistice both farmers and labourers were further assured of their guarantees. The Agriculture Act of 1920 pledged that guaranteed prices and wages would stay in place and that there would be a four year warning before any changes were made to the arrangement. But such good intentions were not to hold. Introduced in December of that year, the Act was revoked the following July, little more than six months later. Rapid European recovery and production expansion overseas, reduced the price of wheat by almost half from 89s 3d a

¹³⁵ Seven men on Lux Farm lost their lives: two of Sam Sherwood's sons who had temporarily emigrated to Australia died at Gallipoli and a farm pupil who had 'formed an attachment' with his youngest daughter Ruth died on the Somme. Of the four labourers on the farm, two died at Ypres, another on the Somme while one died in Iraq.

¹³⁶ The names of all those who served in the parishes of Playford and Culpho are to be found on a memorial board in the Village Hall. While Nelson Page joined up, he was a sick man and did not fight. The father of Anne Woods, he died in 1930 at the age of 41.

quarter in June 1921 to 45s 8d in December; in these circumstances the Wages Boards proved futile, employers reverted to the pre-war practice of individual farm negotiation and wages fell from 46s a week in August 1920 to 36s by the end of the year and to 28s within 18 months of the repeal. The price guarantees, to which wages were linked, were no longer sustainable, the government taking the view that, as it did not support other industries, it could not support farming. It was a betrayal that rankled with both farmers and farmworkers for a generation. Norfolk farmers, fighting to drive wages down



Harrowing with four horses, 1930s Margaret Goldsmith

to 22s 6d a week in 1923, brought about a momentous strike in the county but, unlike labour troubles of a generation earlier in 1874, such degree of discord did not affect Suffolk. While farmers continued to suffer at the hands of free trade for the rest of the decade with prices in the '20s moving steadily downwards, the workers took some satisfaction that the minimum wage was quickly restored, albeit at the unexpectedly low figure of 25s a week. An agreement had been brokered by Ramsay MacDonald when Prime Minister of the short lived Labour minority government in 1924, the same Act encouraging Wages Committees to specify a weekly half-day holiday 'so far as is practicable' but this was found difficult to enforce without applying overtime rates to Saturday work.¹³⁷ In practice many farmers preferred to pay the extra money and keep their men at work and it was not until 1951 that the half-day holiday was enshrined in law whereby the employee was 'not required to work after one o'clock p.m.' A week's holiday with pay for working class employees was introduced in 1938 but farm workers were singled out for special treatment: where Wages Committees chose to so direct, employees could not take more than three days consecutively.¹³⁸ Until such time, workers were free by arrangement to take time off but rarely did so as they could ill afford to lose the money.

The 1930s

Worse was yet to come. A renewed fall in global cereal prices heralded the Great Depression of the 1930s and, unprotected by tariffs, the UK became a dumping ground for a great variety of farm produce. For farmers this was a financial disaster made worse by the fact that their labour, the largest single cost on the farm, remained sheltered by high state-regulated wages that had been re-introduced in 1924 and which did not reduce in line with prices or with their employers' income but remained at much the same level throughout the crisis. Britain continued to be an import economy: in 1938 three quarters of the wheat consumed, two-thirds of the barley and four-fifths of the sugar came from abroad. Animal products were similarly affected. The small proportion of food that UK farmers did produce was at world prices. There were however certain niche markets that favoured perishable goods, unable at that time to be imported; in particular the price of liquid milk, rather than that of butter and cheese, remained the most buoyant. Vegetables too held their price and, like

¹³⁷ Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act, 1924.

¹³⁸ Holidays with Pay Act, 1938.

milk, were distributed either locally in the retail trade or put on the train for delivery to the large conurbations principally London.

But government policy changed in the early '30s although British agriculture could not be given the full extent of protection as the rest of Europe as a high proportion of agricultural goods from the Empire relied on the British market. Imperial preference continued to allow free entry of all the great staple foods while quotas and tariffs were imposed on a range of third country imports. There were subsidies or deficiency payments on a wide range of home produced foodstuffs and a Milk Marketing Board set up that operated as wholesaler selling on to the large urban dairy companies

that had previously forced down producers' prices to unrewarding levels. In a similar way a Potato Marketing Board was created and the subsidy on sugar beet, which had started in 1925 and was due to expire after ten years, was made permanent. By a combination of such measures conditions slowly improved such that by 1939 farming was in better fettle than at any time since the Great Betrayal of 1921.



A reaper-binder at work, 1930s Laxfield Museum

Rents too had had a roller - coaster ride and, while

evidence is not available of Fiske's private arrangements with the Estate, it can be taken that they peaked at the end of the Great War, declined throughout the '20s and by 1936 had reached their lowest point since 1870. Such low income reflected in the lack of attention that was given to maintenance in particular on the cottages which were to remain in poor shape until their demolition in the 1960s and '70s. What attention they received was carried out by C. W. Parker of Tuddenham who 'merely did a botching job'. It is of note that little land exchanged hands at the time of the recession at the end of the 19th century for the simple reason that there were no buyers: farmers did not then have the money with which to buy and outsiders saw it as a very bad investment indeed. But come the good times at the end of the Great War from 1918 to 1921, farmers had done well and landlords saw their opportunity. It was reckoned that 25% of England changed hands in those four years, a figure that is now considered to be somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless many farmers grabbed the moment but quickly ran into problems in paying their mortgages. While the Bristols had off-loaded much of their land in Shotley, Bromeswell and Eyke between the wars, there had been no major fire sale and, at 30,000 acres evenly split between Suffolk and Lincolnshire, their Estate remained more or less intact. On the death of the 4th Marquis in 1951 the Playford and Rushmere farms were sold off to pay for death duties but again the acreage was not huge. It has been established that it was those estates in the 3,000-10,000 acre size that suffered the most while the larger estates held by the long established aristocracy were affected least.

All farms were 'mixed' right up to the 1950s producing a little of everything; specialisation still lay in the future but farmers concentrated on what they considered brought in the most money. George Fiske's main focus at this time was on fresh milk production and selling into the retail trade in Ipswich. He kept a herd of some 30 cows and, although milking machines were fairly widely introduced in the 1930s, he still relied on hand milking which took the labour of three full time men as well as a relief. Fiske was by then in his sixties and perhaps not given to change. Fed on low priced home grown grain with some additional imported concentrates, the dairy herd was his main source of income through the lean years. The sale of eggs was also profitable and it is known that he employed a poultryman before the war. An orchard to the east of the church provided both cooking and eating apples for local sale.

Government support was not entirely lacking in the 1920s: the one measure of financial assistance that farmers did receive was a subsidy on sugar. Introduced in 1924 for a period of ten years as much for the benefit of rural employment as for the ailing farmer, such financial assistance increased the acreage of this relatively new crop considerably and provided work for the labour force at otherwise slack times of the year. With cereal prices still falling, the crop provided a reasonable return for growers within easy reach of a factory that at Ipswich being built in 1925. Beet from Playford was delivered by rail via Bealings station until its closure in 1956. The growing of sugar beet was then very labour intensive requiring additional casual help at hoeing time in the spring and occasionally at lifting time as well but, as its harvest is more widely spread, from September to February, extra assistance was often unnecessary. Sugar beet continued to be lifted by hand up to about 1960 while the introduction of monogerm seed, which did away with hand singling, was not to come for another ten years.



Harvest on Hill Farm, Playford. Common Field, 1930 Frank Mann

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As well as the growing of sugar beet, both the corn harvest and threshing involved additional seasonal labour but so little had changed on farms that Fiske's regular manning levels at this time were still much the same as those of Herman Biddell 50 years earlier. While Biddell employed 12 men and six boys in 1881, during the 1930s Fiske still had 14 full time men on the payroll. Surprisingly, he never kept sheep which would have reduced his manpower requirement considerably but he maintained an extensive arable acreage despite the low cereal prices prevailing at the time. Feeding cheap home grown cereals to livestock did however produce added value and,

apart from the dairy herd, there were also beef cattle and a herd of some 30 sows as well. His reduced acreage of wheat allowed him to go in for the more specialised crops of peas and red clover. Nationwide some fields came out of cropping altogether notably the heavy clay lands of Essex that were expensive to cultivate. Farmers cut costs and concentrated on those fields and those crops that paid and in this regard Stoney Warren and the very heavy clay part of Big Warren against the



‘Beavers’, 1930s. May Mann of Church Cottage, Playford, brings her husband Bill his afternoon tea to the harvest field Frank Mann

Tuddenham boundary were left idle at this time and not ploughed again until after the war by which time they had reverted to scrub and brambles. Barley was grown for pig feed while oats fed the dairy herd and the 18 working horses. There was a stockman who not only looked after the yarded beef herd in winter but who brought on the young calves and looked after the pigs. He was also responsible for grinding the corn for the livestock using a large single cylinder stationary diesel engine of a type then common on farms and which had replaced the horse driven barn

machinery of Victorian times. Four general farm workers did the labouring work on the farm that included hedging and ditching, carting roots from the clamps in the fields and muck to the muck hills. Fiske employed no bailiff and oversaw all day to day operations himself. With such staffing levels, the social composition of the village remained basically unchanged and it was not until after the Second World War with the advance of mechanisation, increase in wages and plentiful job opportunities outside the village that the numbers of agricultural workers significantly declined. Fiske also rented a farm at Bond’s Corner, Grundisburgh, but when this was or what size it was is not known. In addition each summer he rented grass on the marshes at Shingle Street while at Hollesley he owned land that was later acquired by HM Prison Service Estates.¹³⁹ Cattle were driven there from Playford on the hoof by two Hill Farm employees who, at least from the middle 1920s, enjoyed the luxury of being driven home in a car.

The Second World War

George Fiske was 70 when war broke out in 1939 and might well have retired then but for the hostilities. This was the second war that he had had to face in 25 years but this time both the country and agriculture were better prepared. Unlike the First War, this conflict was seen coming for many years and it became acknowledged that the free trade policy followed by successive governments in the 1920s and ‘30s had driven farming into a very poor state. Many farms had fallen into semi-decay and thousands of acres of land were in poor condition especially those fields that had been ‘abandoned’, hedges had become overgrown and ditches blocked. Buildings had become outdated

¹³⁹ *East Anglian Daily Times*, 28 April 2004. The Prison Service acquired the land from George Fiske in July 1946 five weeks before he died. Under the Crichel Down Rules they are obliged to offer back surplus land to the former owners or their successors at the current market value and were inviting the next of kin to come forward.

and in a bad state of repair. Farms were under-capitalised and in no shape to make the change back to the intensive levels of output that they had risen to in the short period after 1917. Thus in 1937 the government introduced grants for drainage and subsidised fertilisers to increase the fertility of the land and in addition the existing subsidy on wheat was extended to oats and barley to encourage home production of foodstuffs. By 1939 the Ministry of Agriculture could buy tractors and tractor drawn machinery and were offering £2 for every acre of grassland that was ploughed up in the six months before war had even started. It was most probably at this time early in the war that Fiske acquired his first tractor, a Fordson on spade lugs. A villager, born in 1934, could recall the reaper-binder still being hauled by horses, one of the first operations on the farm where the tractor took over because of the hard work it involved at the hottest time of the year. Three horses were required to operate a binder and were changed half way through the day so that a total of six were tied up on this operation alone.

Neither was there a rush to the colours as there had been in 1914 when agriculture lost almost 300,000 volunteers in the first two years of the war. A Schedule of Reserved Occupations had been drawn up early in 1939 exempting certain key workers from conscription and in the case of agriculture it included

farmworkers over the age of 25. By the end of the year the age limit had been reduced to 21. Nevertheless, in that time there had been a considerable haemorrhage from the industry of younger workers who had either joined the forces or moved into higher paid employment elsewhere. But unlike the First War, sons were not following their fathers on to the farms as they had once done. Charlie Ablitt, Fiske's head cowman, had a son who went on the railways while Harry Ball, whose father was also a cowman, did a variety



Haysel, 1930s. The hay harvest on Bridge Meadow, Playford Frank Mann

of jobs in his youth and who after serving in the army in North Africa became a plumber. Farm wages were increased significantly in an attempt to stem the loss and at the same time employers from other industries were forbidden to poach. Moreover, if a farmworker over the age of 18 left his job voluntarily and did not find alternative farm work within 14 days he automatically fell into the service of his local War Ag Committee where he was most likely to be deployed in a gang. In that manner farming became a reserved occupation and as such attracted a few new recruits from among the ranks of conscientious objectors or those who did not wish to fight. Frank Mann born in 1922, son of Bill Mann a horseman on Hill Farm, was one who evaded call-up. An only child, he was most probably persuaded by his ageing parents to give up his gardening job in Great Bealings and work on Lux Farm, a move that went down badly in the village. Matters did not improve either when, as

soon as the war was over, he took on far less onerous work for Suffolk County Council where he stayed until retirement.

Fiske's labour force at the outbreak of war was elderly. Of his horsemen Alfred Phillips was 68, Bill Mann 62 and Frank Gardiner 66. His head cowman Charlie Ablitt was 60 as was his stockman Walter Dunnett. Two of his labourers, Bill Felgate and William Noller were 63 and 70. Even Charlie Pilbrow, his chauffeur/gardener/handyman was 61 but like Harry Ball's father, a cowman who retired at 65 in 1941, not all made it to the end of the war. Fiske himself was 70. It was an old team that faced the challenges ahead. Despite an upper age limit of 65, not one of them joined the Home Guard which was set up in the summer of 1940; they already had more than enough on their plates. With the exception of the new 62 year old vicar, the Revd Charles Houghton, who had to retire before the force was stood down in December 1944, the ranks were filled by younger people mainly



Harvest on Hill Farm, 1930s. Brought up in a farming community, harvest was a time of great excitement for children. Their presence in the fields and stackyards came to an end after the war with the arrival of the combine harvester and the reduction in manpower that was required

from the farms. From Hill Farm were Will Grimsey, tractor driver and relief cowman, Fred Dunnett, cowman and Jack Titshall horseman all in their 20s or 30s, while from Lux Farm there were father and son David Ford and Cyril Ford both tractor drivers, Les Powter a veteran from the First War, the 17 year old Frank Mann and the similar aged George Stennett. Harold Burch, who had been a gardener all his life, was 43 and another veteran of the First War while the 18 year old Harry Ball joined their ranks briefly until he was called up.

One or two however did

manage to leave the land and serve in the forces: Herbert Hales (b. 1912) a cowman on Hill Farm and his brother William (b. 1917) both volunteered but it is suggested that they did so before war was declared and restrictions had been brought in.

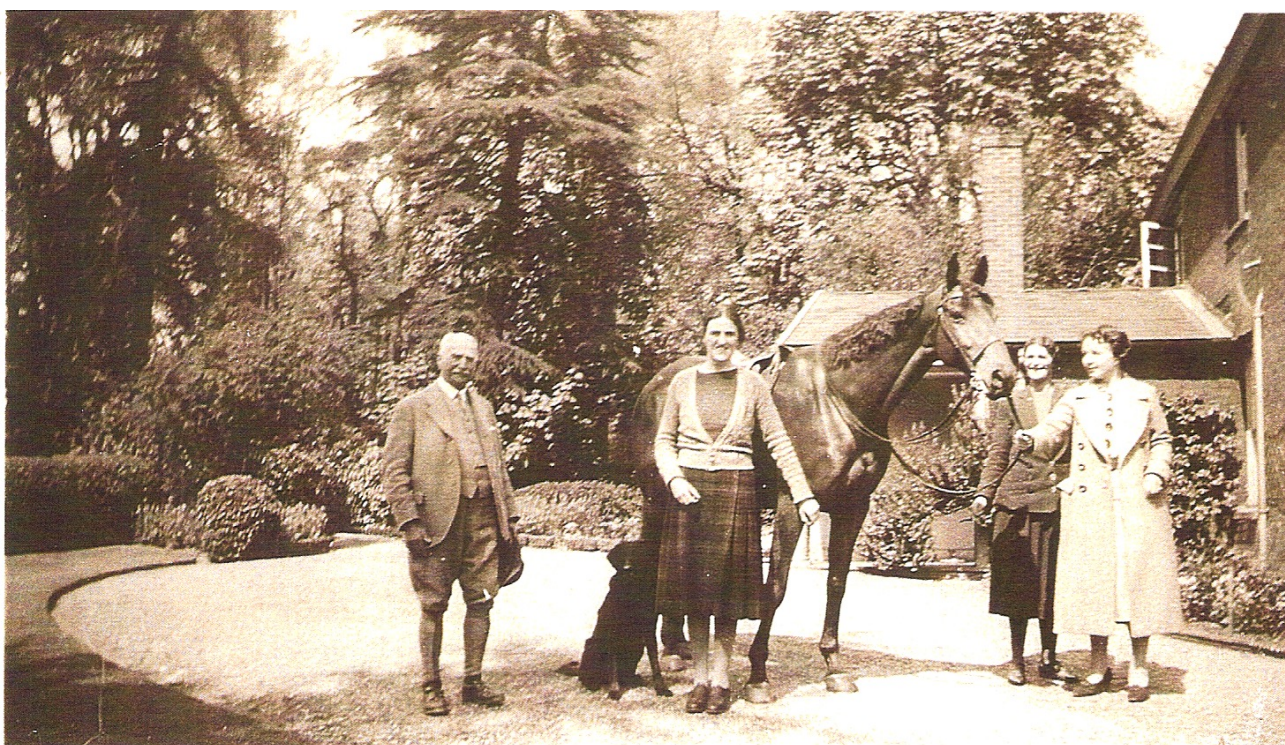
The Women's Land Army was also resurrected but unlike in the previous conflict, it was up and running three months before war started and, after the defeat of the Axis Powers in North Africa in 1943, while German prisoners in the main went to America, Italian prisoners were put to work on UK farms. However, it was universally considered that they shied away from anything not quite to their liking and farmers were only too pleased to see the back of them. German prisoners started to arrive in English ports following the D-Day landings and locally were held at Debach airfield. They were delivered in twos and threes by truck to various farms in the area, including Playford, dropped off in the morning and picked up at the end of the day. Unlike their Italian counterparts, the Germans' work ethic could not be faulted. PoWs were not fully repatriated until the end of 1948 as there was by then a scarcity of labour on the farms; many farmworkers, released from their reserved

occupation status, found higher paid employment elsewhere and food shortages continued until the country had sufficient money to buy imported goods. Rationing continued up to 1954.

Real gains were made in wages at a time of rising prices but, if farmworkers did well, the farmers did even better. Wages doubled over the period of the war as did the price of many commodities yet arable farmers' incomes rose, albeit from a very low base, by a factor of five while mixed and grassland farms went up by a lesser amount. Yet farmers came out of the war standing high in public opinion and were widely regarded as having saved the country from starvation. Such esteem was not to last however as townspeople began to take a greater interest in the countryside and reacted against many of the methods that came to be employed on the land. George Fiske died in August 1946 aged 77. During his few short weeks of illness Jack Titshall looked after the day to day running of the farm; after many years of thankless depression, the elderly team went out on a high.

In retrospect

George Fiske had farmed in Playford for 50 years living through extraordinarily turbulent times. Coming in at a low point and leaving at a time of record commodity prices, his time in the parish was nevertheless dominated by the long hard years of the Great Depression. But, particularly for those not in agriculture, the 1920s were a time of prosperity and enjoyment, a turning of the back on the monumental horrors of the Great War. It was the decade memorable for its fashion and its



George Fiske with younger daughter Peggy (centre) who built 'Roots' in Church Lane after her father's death

dancing and one in which the motor car started to appear on the roads in greater numbers. Despite hard times for farmers, Fiske was among the first in the village to own one. The Crisps at The Hall first had a car in 1924 followed closely by a Mr Read who ran the shop. George Fiske is remembered by many as a jolly man, a generous man and indeed a gentleman, one who would raise

his hat to his domestic servant whenever the two met outside his house. And despite the low wages that were paid at the time, no employee had anything other than a good word to say about him while other villagers unconnected with the farm spoke fondly and even nostalgically of the contribution that both he and his wife made to local life.

The Parish Council had been set up in 1895 the year before Fiske arrived in Playford and the left-leaning Francis Seymour Stevenson had appointed its first members from among the workers in the parish. Despite his standing in the community, Fiske never became a Parish Councillor but was highly active in the affairs of the Village Hall and was churchwarden for over 40 years from the time that Herman Biddell stood down in 1904 until his death in 1946. In 1922, four years after the end of the Great War, the running of the Village Hall was put on a new and democratic footing. It had previously been a men's reading room and was still known as such by some of the older villagers in the 1960s. Its library of highly intellectual books, so obviously selected by Stevenson who had a First in Greats at Balliol, was taken down only when the hall was refurbished in 2002-03. Fiske was elected Secretary of the new Village Hall Committee as well Secretary of the Entertainments Sub-Committee which his wife Irene and elder daughter Joan joined in 1925. The hall was privately owned by Mary Kate Stevenson, Francis' wife, and on her death in 1934 she left it to the village in the care of four Special Trustees of whom Fiske became chairman.¹⁴⁰ He took his last meeting a month before he died in the summer of 1946.



George Fiske's wife Irene (1876-1959). A portrait by Anna Airy Margaret Goldsmith

The inter-war years and perhaps up to 1950 were the heyday of the hall when two bookings a night were not uncommon all of them catering for the village itself rather than for outsiders. Outside lettings were then very few and far between. At a time before most people owned a wireless let alone a television, there were weekly dancing classes, violin classes, singing classes and once a month a village social at which Irene Fiske was MC. It was a busy place. In addition to such routine activity, George Fiske oversaw the building of the first extension to the hall in 1936 when a store room, toilet and coal shed were added to the north end at a cost of £62 10s.¹⁴¹ The following year, the Entertainments Committee organised a splendid function for the celebration of King George VI's Coronation which was held in the hall. Following the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939, the hall was not requisitioned by the military as at one

¹⁴⁰ The other three Trustees were Anna Airy, Emma Crisp of The Hall and Henry Bond, very much a newcomer to the village, who had bought Archway House from the Biddells that year.

¹⁴¹ SROI, GC800/1/1, Playford Parish Hall Minutes, 1922-47, 7 December 1936.

time had been expected and bookings actually increased.¹⁴² It was in fact in constant use by non-paying bodies associated with the war. Running expenses increased because of the extra cleaning and heating but there was no corresponding income to pay for it. At one point there was as little as £2 13s 4d in the current account.

As churchwarden George Fiske oversaw the rebuilding of the tower parapet in 1908, the extension of the churchyard northwards in 1911 giving it access for wheeled vehicles for the first time, the incorporation of the copse between the Vicarage and the church into the churchyard in 1912, an oversight that had left it the property of the Marquis of Bristol after his gift of the land on which the Vicarage had been built in 1845, and the fitting out of the east window with stained glass as well as the placing of the war memorial in the nave in memory of the nine men from Playford who lost their lives in the Great War. Church councils were set up nationally in the 1920s and superseded the Vestry in the governance of local church affairs. As churchwarden and chief employer in the village the churchyard was often maintained in 'farm time'. Following his death, George Fiske was briefly replaced as warden by a Wing Cdr. Claude Merrick who left the village within a year and was

replaced by Will Grimsey, Fiske's tractor driver, who held the post for 21 years until his death in 1968.



Joan Fiske, George and Irene's elder daughter, at Hill House 1930s. After her marriage in 1940 she spent many years in Argentina and Paraguay where her husband managed large cattle stations Lita Edgell

Within two years of his arrival in Playford, George Fiske married Irene Marshall from Plymouth. Her father was a building contractor in the city while on her mother's side there was a strong naval tradition.¹⁴³ An elder sister married an officer in the Indian Army, Col. John Freeland who, on retirement in around 1937, came to live at Bridge Cottage and took an active part in village life.¹⁴⁴ George

and Irene had two daughters Joan and Peggy. Without a son there were no concerns about succession to the farm tenancy which on their father's death fell vacant.

Joan married a Spalding whose father, Frank, farmed at Bell Farm, Kesgrave. Frank Spalding was however better known for the riding school that he ran there and for holding the Kesgrave Gymkhana in his Bell Lane Meadows from 1931 until the outbreak of war in 1939. Joan's future

¹⁴² Ibid., Accounts for year ending 30 June 1943.

¹⁴³ Irene's maternal grandfather was a naval captain while her uncle was Admiral Sir Robert Harris, Commander-in-Chief, Cape of Good Hope Station, in which capacity he played an important part in the Second Boer War (1899-1902). Harris' youngest son perished in 1916 while serving as a midshipman at the Battle of Jutland on HMS Defence which was sunk with the loss of all 779 hands.

¹⁴⁴ See Bridge Cottage in this series, 6-7.

husband, seeing no future in farming in this country, went to manage cattle stations in Argentina and Paraguay. The couple married in South America and their two children were born there. On their return to the UK they bought a small farm at Chelmondiston where the daughter Catherine married the local rector's son and the couple inherited the farm. The son Bob very successfully took to power boat racing winning many high ranking competitions. In 1985 he became the Formula One World Champion.^{145 146}

Peggy never married. In 1948 she bought from the Bristol Estate the two acre arable field on the higher side of Church Lane between The Ridge and Airy properties with a view to building a house on it. However, because of building restrictions in the years immediately following the war, her plans were thwarted and the house was not put up until 1952. The repair or replacement of bomb damaged properties and local authority housing took precedence and, while the local council had plans to put up Playford's social housing immediately to the north of their existing two houses in Hill Farm Road which had been built after the First World War, Capt. Edward Goldsmith who then lived in Gayfers and whose wife Margaret owned all the land on the opposite side of Church Lane, had other ideas.¹⁴⁷ He persuaded the District Council to build on the one acre piece of land further up the lane where William Noller had for many years kept a market garden but which had lain empty since his moving away in 1946. By building the council houses there, Peggy's plans were further thwarted in that she could no longer build her house in the middle of the field as her view was now obstructed. Roots therefore came to be built considerably further to the east than had been intended. In the early '60s she built herself a bungalow in the south-west corner of the field (Spindleberry) and sold off the remainder of the land on which The Courts were built in 1966. Charles Lofts, Fiske's successor, continued to farm the field after its sale by the Estate but ceased to do so once Roots had been built. Peggy had given the house that name thinking it to be the name of the field but it was actually called 'Allotment Field' as in the early 19th century it was given over to allotments for labourers. Because of its closeness to the farm, the field was frequently used for the growing of root crops that were fed to overwintered stock and that is likely to have been the reason for her confusion.

Charles Lofts (1925-2017)

Arriving in Playford in 1946, Charles Lofts was everything that George Fiske was not. He was young - only 21 - inexperienced and with no family background in farming neither had he any money behind him. He was pushy, every bit a go-getter, had a frenetic work rate and was short on the gentlemanly charm that had endeared his predecessor to everyone in the village. Such an abrupt reversal in temperament was most keenly felt by those who were about to work for him. In the weeks before and immediately following George Fiske's death, day to day operations had been in the charge of one of his horsemen, Jack Titshall. Lofts and his then boss at Baylham, convinced that

¹⁴⁵ Gerald and Margaret Ponting, *The Story of Kesgrave*, (privately published, 1981), 136, 142, 170. Bell Farm House stood close to the Bell Inn but was demolished in 1971 to make way for the new developments around the Bell Lane/Main Road junction. The house later came to be known as Kesgrave House - not to be confused with the original Kesgrave House which stood on land now part of Lux Farm. It belonged to Col. Pogson and was demolished in 1841. Neither should Bell Farm be confused with Bell Barn Farm which is still (2017) standing amid the new housing and which later, when bought by E. J. Fenton in 1934, came to be known as Kesgrave Fruit Farm.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 142. The meadows were on either side of Bell Lane about where the primary school now stands.

¹⁴⁷ Capt. Goldsmith RN (1878-1951) retired to Gayfers with his family in 1935 following the death there of his wife's uncle John Biddell three years earlier. He quickly became involved in village affairs firstly on the Village Hall Management Committee but more pertinently on the Parish Council. He was chairman 1937-40 when he was called away to help with the war effort. On his return, he was again elected a Councillor and also made Clerk and Treasurer.

the farm was overstaffed, hid themselves one morning behind the garden wall at Hill House as the men arrived for work at 7.00 a.m. The half that arrived first were retained while the remainder had to find employment elsewhere. The new boss had arrived with a bang and times most certainly had changed.

His background and early years in Playford

Brought up in Henley Road, Ipswich, he had gone to school at Felsted in Essex but left of his own volition at the age of 16 determined to go farming. He spent five years as a farm pupil with Billy Richards at Baylham, a friend of his father and, in a reserved occupation, was never called up. He was keen to start up on his own and by good fortune his father's sister had married George Bonner, agent for the Bristol Estate who was based in Bury St Edmunds. From him he learned that a 385 acre farm in Playford had become vacant following the death of the tenant there on 22 August and that it might just be possible to re-let it in time for the usual Michaelmas handover. At a time when farming was making good money, 40 applicants showed an interest, a situation in direct contrast with the time when Sam Sherwood retired from Lux Farm some 20 years earlier in 1928 when there were no takers and the estate had to run the farm itself for three years until they could find a tenant. Lofts was able to persuade the Estate not to let the farm to another farmer's son as was the general practice but to break the mould and give an outsider a chance. This they agreed to with the proviso



The farm buildings behind Hill House (foreground) in the 1950s prior to their piecemeal demolition and replacement C. D. Lofts

that he would be closely supervised by Philip Woodward a much respected farmer in the county who had given him an excellent reference.

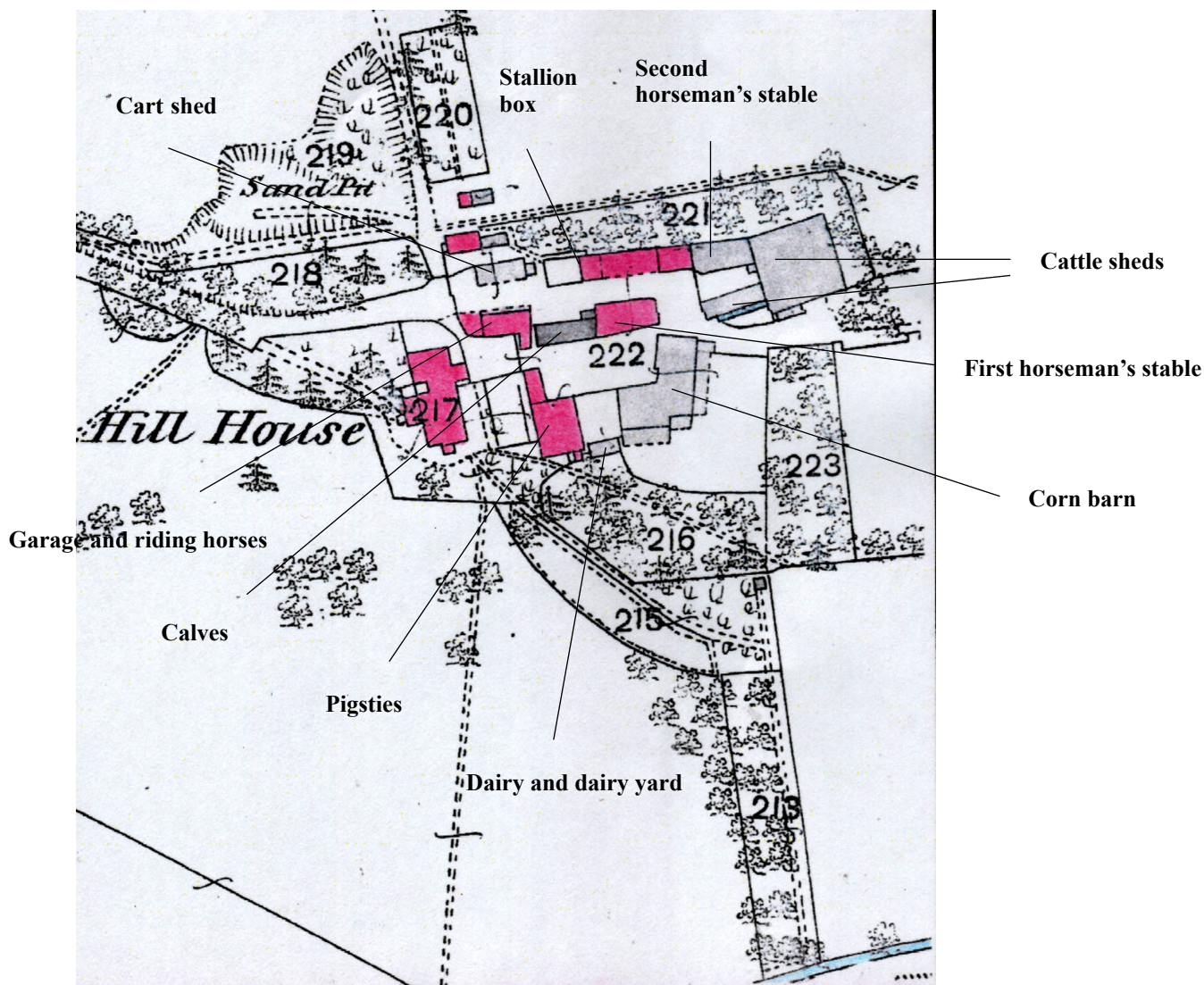
The new tenancy was due to start at Michaelmas 1946 which in Suffolk is 11 October (rather than the more usual 29 September) but Fiske's executors were still getting in the harvest on the second of that month. It was therefore agreed that the new

tenant could not move in until 1 November but was allowed to make a start by ploughing up the stubbles in those fields where harvesting had been completed.¹⁴⁸ The rent of £1 per acre was to include the farm house and buildings and 'as many cottages as have been previously let with the farm'. These numbered six on the initial tenancy agreement but which ones they were is not clear

¹⁴⁸ Letter dated 4 October 1946 from George Bonner to Charles Lofts. Since destroyed.

for, excluding those associated with Lux Farm and The Hall, the Estate owned a further seven or eight within the village.¹⁴⁹

Within days of moving in, by 7 November, Lofts had an estimate in place for extending the electricity supply not only to Hill House but to the farm cottages as well. It had reached as far as the lower corner of Hill Farm Road by 1939 and made no further progress. Just The Hall, Archway House and The Ridge had been connected before the outbreak of war. The Village Hall was added in



OS map 1882, complementary to the aerial photograph on the previous page, showing the uses to which individual buildings were put

1942 no doubt because at that time it was thought about to be commandeered by the Home Guard.¹⁵⁰ Hill House and the cottages were put on the mains over the winter months with other properties following but the church, for example, was not connected until 1949.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Tenancy agreement for the 380 acre Hill Farm dated 21 October 1946, private possession. At the time of the redevelopment of the village in the 1960s and '70s Lofts owned all 16 and it has to be assumed that he bought the additional properties in 1953 at the same time as he bought the farm.

¹⁵⁰ SROI, GC800/1/1, Playford Parish Hall Minutes, 1922-47, 9 April 1942, 20 August 1942.

¹⁵¹ SROI, FC22/E7/4. Faculty for the installation of electric light.

Notwithstanding that only half of Fiske's labour force was retained, not all of them wanted to work for a younger man and new blood had to be brought in. The fresh faces came from Bramford, Hoo and Henley but they were not to last. It was not until 1949-51 when Fred Dunnett's two sons, Basil and Geoffrey, were taken on straight from school that stability returned to the team. And in 1950 Will Grimsey's 20 year old son-in-law, Albert Durrell, was recruited from Tuddenham where he had spent the previous five years as cowman. All three youngsters were to stay on the farm for the rest of their working lives each completing at least 45 years and in the case of Geoffrey Dunnett, now gardener at Hill House, 67 years to date (2018). German prisoners of war provided additional labour but, on their repatriation in 1948, the former War Ag Office in Melton supplied local workers on a seasonal basis. Charles Lofts was also to develop his own good contacts with a team of eight women



Hill Farm buildings, a painting by Geoffrey Buckingham Pocock.
To the right is the barn, centre rear the cattle sheds C. D. Lofts

mainly from the two Bealings who helped out with hoeing and harvesting vegetables up to the 1970s. Four Irishmen also helped to lift beet in the autumn and early winter before mechanisation came in around 1960. The regular team of seven men was usually complemented by two students, an expression of gratitude no doubt for the start that he had been given in his own working life.¹⁵² Much of the work carried out on the farm by regulars and casuals alike was done by piece work: hoeing, beet lifting, hedge paring and even draining being done at so much per chain.

Lofts had to find, completely from scratch, all the working capital for both live and dead stock as he had arrived in Playford with nothing. An indication of how desperate he was for cash was that there were some weeks in which he was unable to pay the wages. His purchases ranged far and wide. The 'only thing worth buying at Fiske's dispersal sale' was his Fordson tractor which was most probably acquired in the early years of the

war. He also bought four of Fiske's 12 horses to add to the two that he had already acquired elsewhere and, in his first autumn, he bought a further two tractors, much updated versions of the model that he had bought at the sale. The horses though were not to last and already by 1949 were

¹⁵² For example Tony Martin, son of an Ipswich dentist, worked for two six month periods either side of his two years National Service from May 1956 to May 1958. He then took a farm of his own at Sibton Green.

on their way to the knacker's yard at Melton. It was a time of great change. Mechanisation had proceeded apace during the war and now, with the engineering industry back on a peace time footing, that change was gathering speed.¹⁵³ Many of the implements that he purchased were for use with horses but were soon out of date. The greatest changes came in the method of harvesting and his brand new reaper-binder, for example, was never used.

In his first year he made a trading loss of £180 mainly because his spring sown crops were a disaster. The severe and notorious winter of 1947 was followed by a wet March and the consequent late drilling suffered from a lack of rain right up until harvest. But, nothing daunted, that summer he started to set up his dairy herd buying a new milking machine and the first of his Ayrshire cows from William Kerr of Easton. That first year also he ploughed up those parts of The Warren that had been left uncultivated since the 1930s but leaving for several years the large crater that had been created when an American plane crashed there in the war. The purchase of three dozen rabbit traps from Martin & Newby adds to a picture of dereliction. Yet the following year, in 1947, they were to become the first fields on the farm to be harvested by a combine rather than by binder but whether all the harvest on the farm that year was gathered in this way is not known. If the new binder was never used, invoices for threshing in 1949 must relate to the red clover that was grown for seed.



Albert Durrell drilling spring barley in the Cricket Meadow early 1970s at a time of huge expansion in the arable acreage. In the background are The Brook cottages immediately prior to their demolition E. A. D. T.

Lofts was not only young and energetic, he was forever prepared to 'have a go' and, in having to borrow so much money to set himself up, he also possessed boundless self belief, a trait that he was to put to use again and again throughout his farming life. He was also lucky for while previous wars had also produced high prices, they had ended in ruinous recessions but the post-war Labour government did something that no government had done before: it guaranteed minimum farm prices in peacetime. Having ensured the supply of food for the duration of

the war, farmers' standing in the community remained high throughout the 1940s and, in reflecting the nation's gratitude and showing a determination that the country should never again be put at such risk by an enemy nation, the Agriculture Act of 1947 guaranteed minimum prices for the vast

¹⁵³ The young George Stennett at Lux Farm had three American Allis Chalmers tractors before the war and not a single horse. In 1938 he had taken over from Bob Pain who stubbornly refused to allow a tractor on his land.

majority of agricultural products. It promised that, when prices fell below a certain level, a deficiency payment would be made out of general taxation to cover the difference. Payment levels were set annually in negotiations between farmers and the Ministry of Agriculture and, with inevitable variations from year to year, gave producers a reasonable return, shielded them from world prices and becoming a dumping ground for foreign overproduction.

The 1960s and joining the EEC in 1973

When the Ayrshire breed went out of fashion, Lofts changed to Friesians building up his herd to 83 cows but, in 1964, on the retirement of his cowman Walter Winearls who had been with him from the beginning and in common with many farmers at the time, he went out of milk production altogether. In place of the dairy herd he ran 50 black and white suckling cows with a Hereford bull on the water meadows and fattened 120 beef animals a year bought in from a West Country dealer. Throughout the 1960s he grew 80 acres of sugar beet, 300 of barley, 20 of potatoes and 40 of beans but when the UK joined the EEC in 1973 a guaranteed price system, operated under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), encouraged output and led to the ploughing up of the nation's grassland and the notorious food surpluses of the 1980s. Practically every acre of grassland in the parish was turned into arable: Alder Carr Meadows, Barn Field (on both sides of the brook), Bealings Meadows, the north side of Bridge Meadow and even the pony paddock in front of Archway as well as the little field behind it all came under the plough. His arable crops increased proportionately. On Hill Farm the only pasture fields left untouched were those parts of Bridge Meadow to the south of the river as well as the land near the house, while on Lux Farm the Hangings, being too steep for arable cultivation, were also left down to grass as was the field to the south of Branson's Lane, not owned by a farmer but let to Charles Lofts. To control over production, in 1988 a system of set-aside

was introduced whereby land was taken out of production at first on a voluntary basis but in 1992 it became compulsory and to help compensate farmers for their loss of income an Arable Area Payments Scheme was introduced. Here farmers could claim support based on the area given over to combineable crops but, in order to qualify for payments, some part of their land had to have been taken out of cultivation. Old Park Hill and Barn Field were given over to set-aside and remained as such until 2012 and 2015 respectively, some 20 years after their sale to John Fenton while all the



Spring Meadow on the eve of its development, 1962. Clockwise from bottom right: Sink Meadow Cottages (a double dwelling), Cobblers (built 1959), Hill Farm Road council houses, Village Hall, Old Vicarage or The Meadows (three cottages), the shop, Copyhold and Gayfer's C. D. Lofts

meadows as well as Railway Field were put back to grass, the Ministry even dictating the seeds mixture that was to be used.

His purchase of Hill Farm in 1953

Lofts' greatest stroke of good fortune however came in October 1951 when, only five years into his tenancy and still only 26, his landlord the 4th Marquis of Bristol died and the farm was offered for sale to the sitting tenants. Of the 30,000 acres that the Bristol family then owned, the Playford and Rushmere properties, being remote from the core part of their Suffolk estate which was based on Ickworth, were chosen for disposal. Lofts was a keen buyer while the other two tenants, George Stennett and Norman Everett of Rushmere, were not but the Bristol family would sell all three farms or none at all. Stennett and

Everett eventually came round but the sale had been delayed. In the event Lofts bought in 1953 but at a price that had previously been agreed. The early 1950s were a good time to buy as property was still cheap and inflated farm prices still lay in the future. With the 385 acre farm came Hill House and 16 cottages, all at the earlier agreed price of £12,500.

'Development potential' was a term that had not then been invented but was one which by the end of the decade was to have a major influence on the price of agricultural land.

The country was still

recovering from war. Building materials were rationed, bomb damage took years to repair, slum clearance was urgent, the only new housing permitted was by local authorities. The decade was also a time of destruction of the large country house. Taxation was high, domestic staff were no longer available and many properties commandeered by the military had been ravaged. Private building, such as that in Kesgrave between the wars, came to a halt. At the same time as Lofts bought the farm, he was offered Playford Hall for £7,500 with its then 15 acres and two lodge cottages but his wife Josie refused to move there. He spent the rest of his life rueing the day that he had not accepted the offer and that he had not bought the Rushmere, Lux and Kiln Farm land as well.



Sink Meadow Cottages, a watercolour by Herman Biddell with much artistic licence, that he exhibited at the Ipswich Art Club in 1882. In 1772 the dwelling, right, was a former yeoman's house on the edge of the Green. Of wattle and daub construction, by 1837 it had been converted to two farm cottages which were demolished in 1959 to make way for Cobblers. The red-brick pair of cottages, there in 1798, were pulled down in 1962. Biddell

By 1955 nearly all the hedges on Hill Farm had been removed; those on The Warren and in Westrupp's on the C324 were taken out later in the early 1970s. Hedge removal on Lux Farm was on a far greater scale and only reference to an early Ordnance Survey map can give an indication as to where individual fields lay in the landscape. Even more 'sinful' on Hill Farm was the cutting down

of 'scores' of mature oak trees many of whose stumps are still to be seen in the old hedge banks. Mechanical hedge trimmers were slow in being introduced and in the middle to late 1950s the only way of keeping a hedge in check was by the use of a hand hook, a job that farm labour was increasingly reluctant to do. In 1959 Lofts bought from George Stennett all the land between the railway and the river much of it waste including the Alder Carr and The Mere. At the same time Stennett sold off the Kiln Farm land to E J & V C Fenton of Kesgrave Fruit Farm as well as the former mill and mill house which had been converted to two cottages in the 1870s when the mill ceased working. John Haywood Smith, an auctioneer and estate agent from Robert Bond of Ipswich, turned the property into the desirable residence that it is today. Charles Lofts however bought Mill Cottage, which was the original mill stables, and sold it on to Daphne Yetton who had originally moved to Playford when her father Henry Bond bought Archway House from the Biddells in 1935. She was to live there for over 40 years. Included in Stennett's sale was the field to the south of Playford Hall (New Park Hill) which Lofts also bought but which he in turn sold on to Sir William Aitken M P for Bury St Edmunds, the first owner since the Bristol sale to actually occupy the house (see Playford Hall in this series, 14-15). In buying the land north of the railway the major benefit, though not apparent at the time, was that it gave Hill Farm exclusive use of the river for farm irrigation which was to come in only a very few years later in the early 1960s.

Lofts continued to buy bits and pieces of land here and there as they became available. In 1960 he bought the small six acre plot that lay in Westrupp's known as Aylescroft, a corruption of the medieval Alice's Croft, that he had previously rented from Archway House (see Archway House in this series, 9). And in 1964 he bought the 30 acre field in front of Playford Mount cottages known as Benjamin's after the Ipswich estate agent Gerald Benjamin who had bought it in 1936 as part of his Playford Mount purchase.¹⁵⁴ In 1972 he bought the small piece of land behind Archway, keeping pigs in the buildings but growing crops that qualified for the CAP subsidy in the little field to the north. His major purchase however was Grove Farm in Little Bealings which he acquired in 1968 having sold the central acres of Playford village to Rushmere Garden Estate for building. An

adjoining farm, its acquisition made a good fit with his existing holding increasing his acreage from the 385 that he started with in 1946 to the 642 with which he finished. Keen to break away from the outdated and restricting farm buildings behind Hill House, he started to build at the top of Church Hill, first a barn and then a piggery but the purchase of Grove Farm halted further development there. To accommodate his herd of 65 Essex sows and their progeny, it had been intended that more and more pig houses would be erected extending as far as the



The L-shaped Old Vicarage, also known as The Meadows, was another casualty of the 1962 demolition. Photographed before the Village Hall was built in 1896, the former Vicarage built in 1845 can just be made out in the background Biddell collection

¹⁵⁴ For £11,000 Lofts bought not only the 30 acre field but the two cottages as well. These he promptly sold on for £10,000 so that the field on its own stood him in just £1,000.

church itself and even beyond but instead he put up a number of huge buildings on his newly acquired premises adjoining Grove Farm House in Bealings.

On his retirement in 1995 he sold off all the arable land retaining most of the pasture for himself. Alan Parken of Waldringfield bought 269 acres stretching from the east of Butts Road to the former Grove Farm in Little Bealings while John Fenton of Kiln Farm had 193 acres that ran from the railway line up to The Warren taking in the waste of the Alder Carr and Warren Wood. Extending up to Back Harrow on the Culpho crossroads, Fenton's purchase also included the reservoir that Lofts had constructed in the 1970s. Fenton also bought the 36 acre Westrupp's to the north of the C324 Bealings to Tuddenham Road for which the Cranworth Estate had 'put in a good price' but failed to acquire.

His middle years in Playford

For the first 20 years of his time in the village, Hill House was divided: he and his family lived in one half while his parents, who had moved from Henley Road in Ipswich, lived in the other. He had married in 1947 the year after his arrival in the village; their son Tom was born the following year. On his father's death in 1965 his mother moved out to a refurbished Hill Cottage at the top of Hill Farm Road, previously two dwellings that had in the 1950s been knocked into one when they were no longer used as farm workers' accommodation. It was Lofts' mother who renamed it Foxboro after Foxboro Hall in

Melton where she had been brought up. She lived in Foxboro until she died in 1988 at the great age of 95. With the house to themselves and now financially more secure, the garden started to receive attention where previously it had been given over to chickens. As in Herman Biddell's time, the house and grounds once again became a venue for village functions;



Charles Lofts with son Tom with whom he had a strained relationship C. D. Lofts

money raising fetes for the village became a regular feature and the Queen's Silver, Golden and Diamond Jubilees were all celebrated there.

The Great Rebuilding

Far more than in any other way, Charles Lofts will go down in Playford's history as the person who rebuilt the village. His timing was fortuitous. He had bought Hill Farm at a 1951 valuation when

prices were low and the country was still recovering from war. Included in the sale were a number of run down cottages but, more crucially, almost the whole of the central part of village between Hill Farm Road and Church Lane. The only pieces of land that he did not own there were the two local authority housing sites, the Village Hall and Playing Field and 'old Mrs Dunnett's orchard' opposite Gayfer's. In addition he owned the land between the Vicarage and Hill Cottage, now known as St Mary's Drive, which until the early '50s had been gardens and allotments but which subsequently were allowed to revert to scrub.

On 27 April 1961 a parish meeting was held in the Village Hall to discuss the offer that he had received from Rushmere Garden Estates 'to build 42 houses at a density of 6½ to the acre in the middle of Playford between Hill Farm Road and Church Lane'.¹⁵⁵ The houses would be 'priced in the range £3-4,000 each and be on a properly planned estate with appropriate access roads'. Unsurprisingly many people were up in arms. Owen Goldsmith, Catherine Broadbent and Anna Airy were the principal objectors but there were many others who welcomed the plan thinking that Playford was a 'dying village' and that the increase in the number of houses would bring with it an increase in services. Charles Lofts had said, quite realistically, that 'whether [Playford] liked it or not, development was going to take place [in the centre of the village] sooner or later' and that people had better get used to the idea. When put to the vote, 17 were in favour of accepting a



Essex pigs on Spring Meadow, 1966 Basil Dunnett

reduced number of 25 houses while a considerable minority of nine voted for the higher density. It has been said that since the war the middle classes have taken over the countryside but in 1961 Playford's time had not yet arrived. It was still numerically a working class village which was reflected in the make-up of the Parish Council at the time. There were then five members: George Ditton, a left leaning commercial artist, was chairman, Harold Burch a gardener, Fred Dunnett general farm worker on Hill Farm, Arthur Gardiner who had lost a leg at Gallipoli and mended boots and shoes in part of the shed to the

north of the village shop, and lastly Charles Lofts himself who, presumably declared an interest and did not vote when the Council approved the plan at its meeting in October that year.

The suggestion of a future increase in population had an interesting consequence. At the Annual Meeting of the parish in April that year, George Ditton thought that two more councillors should be elected in addition to the current five, whereas Charles Lofts thought that one would be enough. It was therefore agreed that the East Suffolk County Council be asked permission for one more councillor to be elected.¹⁵⁶ However, at a Council meeting in July, permission was sought to co-opt two more parish councillors but the meeting objected insisting that the request had to go before a

¹⁵⁵ SROI, EG94/B1/2. Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1948-71.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 26 May 1961.

meeting of the parish. A meeting was called two weeks later at which 11 local government electors were present, the proposal to increase the number of councillors from five to seven was passed and at a meeting in October nomination papers for two more parish councillors were signed.¹⁵⁷ The irony of the situation was that while there was indeed an increase in the number of houses in the parish with a corresponding increase in population, within 25 years the number of inhabitants had fallen back to levels where they had always been since the time of the council's formation in 1895.¹⁵⁸

In January 1963 there was obvious doubt as to the number of houses that had been approved and the Clerk was asked to write to the Planning Officer to clarify the matter. His answer was 23 but in the event only 18 were built within the centre of the village and a further three in St Mary's Drive. While the village had a say in the number of houses that were built and the Council gave its approval to the scheme, no one had any idea what the development was going to look like as Playford Parish Council were not then on the Planning Officer's mailing list, a situation that does not seem to have been put right until 1978 after The Brook had been planned. Whatever the position, no mention whatever of building at The Brook appears in the Parish Council minute book. Cobblers in Hill Farm Road had already been built in 1959 on the site of two former cottages and was independent of the Spring Meadow development which began with the building of the two bungalows further down the hill in 1964. The remainder of the infilling began in 1968 and continued at a rate of about two completions a year. Mains water had come to the village in 1958 but had not progressed far.¹⁵⁹ It had been connected to the Village Hall that year and a standpipe had been erected outside The Old Vicarage in Hill Farm Road by order of the public health inspector who considered the quality of the well water unsuitable for the very young children living there. Sink Meadow cottages continued to draw water from the stream as did the cottages at The Brook to the east of Warren Lane. Mains drainage for the central part of the village came with the redevelopment.

Building in the main part of the village had not finished when work at The Brook began, the first houses being ready there in 1978.¹⁶⁰ Six cottages were demolished to make room for five new homes. Charles Lofts, already owner of four of them, bought the two nearest the brook from a Miss West of Sandy in Bedfordshire



Cottages at The Brook. Demolition started in 1973; the pair on the left remain standing (2018) Biddell collection

¹⁵⁷ The two additional councillors were the vicar, the Revd. Paul Biddlecombe, and Cyril Ford, a tractor driver on Lux Farm.

¹⁵⁸ The population of Playford in census years: 1901 (238), 1911 (230), 1921 (216), 1931 (212), 1951 (207), 1961 (213), 1971 (277), 1981 (252), 1991 (220), 2001 (203) and 2011 (215).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 27 July 1958.

¹⁶⁰ Housing completions in the village during these years were: 1971-72, 2; 1973-74, 2; 1976-77, 2; 1978-79, 5; 1979-80, 2; 1984-85, 1.

whose family had owned them since living briefly at Playford Mount in the late 19th century(see Brook Lane Cottages in this series, 11-14). A pair of two-bedroomed cottages at the southern end of Warren Lane was left standing, a reminder of the type of housing that once was there. Inevitably several inhabitants were displaced, some of whom moved out of the village, although two cottages were already empty and had not been reoccupied. At The Brook, Mrs Nicholls, widow of Hector Nicholls a groundsman at Fison's sports field, had a few years earlier moved to Kesgrave, her neighbour Mrs Felgate, whose husband had worked on Hill Farm and who had lived in her cottage for 64 years, moved very briefly to Playford Lane in Rushmere but died within weeks. Bill Ebdon, an unlikely cowman from London who worked for Johnson at Culpho Hall and who later worked for the Department of Health and Social Security, moved to the council houses in Church Lane, Leslie Addison whose husband worked for a building firm and whose mother was a domestic at Hill House, moved to a council house at Hasketon while Fred Dunnett's widow moved across the lane into one of the cottages that remained. One further cottage was also empty, both husband and wife having died there and it was not relet.

In the centre of the village a similar number had to be rehoused. From the Old Vicarage in Hill Farm Road, Arthur Gardiner moved to Post Mill Gardens in Grundisburgh, Walter Dunnett's widow

Hannah moved to the remaining cottage at The Brook while Basil Dunnett, pig man on Hill Farm, moved in 1962 to the new cottages on the approach to Hill Farm as did Will Grimsey, the senior tractor driver, from Sink Meadow.¹⁶¹



Geoff Dunnett with his young daughter at the Golden Jubilee celebrations at Hill House in 2002. He worked for Charles Lofts for 65 years first on the farm and then, on Lofts' retirement in 1995, as gardener Eric Metcalfe

Every village community up and down the country was undergoing a similar change at this time but, as a former Estate village, the change in Playford was more abrupt than in other open villages that had many owners. Following the death of the 4th Marquis of Bristol in 1951, Charles Lofts had bought most of the village centre and most of The Brook and he had allowed just one building contractor to develop each site. Open village development by contrast would have been piecemeal and invariably spread over time. Additionally, Playford's housing stock was in particularly poor repair with much of it overdue for demolition. Yet had clearance come just a few years later, attitudes might well have

¹⁶¹ Three generations of Dunnetts had long service on Hill Farm: Walter (1879-1960) 60 years starting as a boy of 10; his son Fred (1909-1973) 49 years dying of cancer a year before retirement and his two sons, Basil (1934-2003) 48 years and Geoffrey (b. 1936) photo above, 67 years to date - June 2018.

changed towards the knocking down of period houses and two buildings in the centre of the village, the Old Vicarage or The Meadows and the former yeoman's house on the edge of The Green, might well have been saved.¹⁶² Under different ownership The Miller's House in 1960 and Church Corner Cottage in 1970 were both rescued. But the great majority of properties that were pulled down deserved their fate, their only value lying in the land on which they stood.

It was because of his wife Josie's continued ill health that Lofts retired in 1995 aged 70, a little earlier than he might otherwise have done. The couple had intended to move to Dumfries and Galloway where they had spent many a fishing holiday together. They very nearly bought a house there, a four square Scottish manse type of place that stood in generous grounds but it was not to be. Instead, he kept back 119 acres around the house, putting back to grass that which had been ploughed up, taking great interest in extending The Mere and encouraging its wildlife. A few years prior to retirement, and in partnership with one of the conservation groups, he re-introduced badgers on The Warren. It was still at a time of CAP production surpluses with hardly an acre of pasture in the parish and not one single farm animal to be seen. The risk of spreading TB to cattle was not then a consideration as it would have been 10-20 years later when livestock returned to the fields. By that time it was too late as the badger population, having no predators, had proliferated across the parish and, although no reports of disease were reported in livestock, they were soon seen more as a pest than a conservation success causing damage in people's gardens. But rather than have the pleasure of looking after his own cattle, he let the grass to a grazier from Bredfield while at about the same time William Stennett of Lux Farm started building up his herd of black and white Belted Galloways which he had slaughtered and sold through his farm shop.

Lofts had completed 49 years at Hill Farm and, with good fortune yet again, went out on a high. Within four years of his retirement farm incomes had 'plummeted by 90% from their peak in 1995' and in 2002 were still 72% below their high point.¹⁶³



Charles Lofts as senior steward light horses at the 1995 Suffolk Show the year before he retired after 49 years. E. A. D. T.

His piggeries in Little Bealings reflected this decline: three years after he sold them for £90,000, their value had dropped by more than half.

He was an active steward of the Suffolk Show for as long as he was in farming. Introduced by Philip Woodward, his mentor in his first few years in Playford, he started as a lorry park assistant in 1947 when the show was at Christchurch Park. Promoted the following year to entrance gate steward, he transferred to site maintenance in 1956 when the show moved to its permanent site on Bucklesham Road. Here he organised friends and students to cut and strim the showground grass, borrowing equipment from Ransomes and Qualcast and loaning Will Grimsey, his senior tractor driver, for days on end to

¹⁶² SROI, FC22/C1/1-2, Stipendiary curates' licences. For details of the double cottage that stood on the Cobblers site see 'Glenham' in this series, 4. The 3-dwelling 'Old Vicarage', a photograph of which appears above on page 65, was most likely last used for ecclesiastical purposes by curates in the 1840s at a time when Playford was united with Rushmere and before the present vicarage was built in 1845.

¹⁶³ *The Independent*, 13 October 2000. *East Anglian Daily Times*, 1 February 2002.

cover the broader acres.¹⁶⁴ He was also responsible for the 5.00 am litter pick on the second morning of the show. He was made deputy show director twice - in 1963 and again in 1967. In 1973 he was given the responsibility of senior steward light horses which carried him through the next 23 years until 1996 when he stood down after 49 years, a year after he had retired from active farming.

Within the village he was a Trustee of the Village Hall for 54 years.¹⁶⁵ Appointed in 1953, the early part of his tenure witnessed a considerable decline in the hall's use and a corresponding lack of interest shown by its management. Although activity had picked up in the years immediately following the war with, for example, classes for string instruments, singing and folk dancing, by the 1950s social change was such that villagers had found more exciting things to do. Additionally, after the Coronation, ownership of television sets became widespread and home entertainment became the norm. It was not until the arrival of the new breed of villager in the 1960s that things began to pick up and the hall became valued once again. During the decline, the frequency of management meetings tailed off dramatically such that in 1957 accounts were presented for the previous two years while in 1964 the Minutes were signed for a meeting that had been held five years previously. Unsurprisingly there was criticism. Led by the church, then a dominant force in the village, the Revd. Broadbent went public in 1958 saying that the 'hall had been grossly mismanaged' while others openly criticised the Trustees for not holding meetings. The second major row concerned plans for the modernisation of the hall with the provision of a kitchen, flush toilets and electric heating to replace the open fire, all of which had been first mooted in 1965 and which had made no progress whatever in the intervening seven years despite sufficient money having been raised for the



Charles and Josie Lofts at Hill House on the occasion of their Golden Wedding in 1997 two years after Charles' retirement from farming. Josie died in 2000 aged 77 leaving Charles a widower for nearly 17 years C. D. Lofts

project. In 1972 the Revd. Gordon Steven caused upset by withholding the Village Hall's share of fete proceeds 'until there is some sign of something being done'. In addition, the 'Notes on Playford PCC meeting, 10 May 1973' recorded that 'as one of the few active bodies within the village, the PCC was disturbed at the lack of progress made towards improving the Village Hall and that the meeting had agreed that the Vicar write to the Chairman of the Hall Committee [Owen Goldsmith] asking him if he would agree to hand over his responsibilities to someone else'.¹⁶⁶ On both these occasions Charles Lofts sprang vigorously to the defence of the management but there could be no denying that the whole team had gone to sleep on the job. Following this latest outburst, the work was completed the following year

¹⁶⁴ Christine Clark & Roger Munting, *Suffolk Enterprise, a Guide to the County's Companies and their Historical Records* (Norwich, 2000), 36. Qualcast went by various names including Atco-Qualcast and Suffolk Lawnmowers. Production was based in Stowmarket where, from 1954, the first petrol powered mowers were made including the famous 'Suffolk Punch'. By the 1960s the firm was making 100,000 engines a year.

¹⁶⁵ SROI, GC800/1/2, Playford Parish Hall Minute Book, 1947-75. He was a Trustee from 1953-2007.

¹⁶⁶ *The Parish Leaflet of Gt. & Lt. Bealings with Playford and Culpho*, May/June 1972, 2-3.

and, with new blood on the Management Committee, the hall took on a new lease of life. By the end of the century however the building itself was showing serious signs of decay with grass growing in the gap where the walls met the floor. The major refurbishment which followed was much more competently handled and a £¼m Heritage Lottery Grant enabled it to compete with other village halls for outside custom so ensuring sufficient income to provide the village with a first class amenity whenever it was needed.¹⁶⁷

Charles Lofts was also a Parish Councillor, a post that he held for 53 years serving under a number of chairmen not all to his liking.¹⁶⁸ Quick to flare up yet quick to forgive, his strongly held opinions, forcefully expressed, could enliven any meeting. Never aspiring to become chairman himself because of his standing in the village, as a farmer he was inevitably the butt of complaints, such as mud on the road at sugar beet time or an obstructed footpath, and these were not always well received. And he would defend any farmer regardless of their supposed transgression most notably when a motor cycle scramble track opened in Rushmere and the inhabitants of three surrounding parishes were up in arms over the noise that was made. His last attendance however was the one occasion when he did not support a local farmer. Through the casting vote of the chairman, Kesgrave church was successful in their application to extend their churchyard north of the old A12 on land that was in Playford parish. Defeated and particularly angry that the chairman should have supported such an application, he stood down from public office never to attend another meeting. He was in any case by this time 86 and had had a good innings; true to form he had gone down fighting.

Beyond fetes and Jubilees and helping with Sunday morning working parties, which he could so easily have avoided, and cutting the Playing Field grass before the local council took responsibility, he did much for the village that it was difficult not to take such generosity for granted. He provided storage space for many items which modern housing could not accommodate, allowed soil and rubbish to be dumped in his sand-pit by Dairy Cottage and provided tractor and trailer transport whenever it was needed. As a farmer in the village his presence will be greatly missed by many.

Charles Lofts died on 27 January 2017, aged 91



As was his wish, he died in the home in which he had lived for 70 years but, suffering from serious dementia, he required 24 hour care for the last three years of his life. There was no Playford farewell: his humanist funeral at the Ipswich Crematorium and wake at the Fynn Valley Golf Club in Winesham, were at odds with what the village expected and

Hill House: sale catalogue 2018

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., March 2002. To the great surprise of parishioners - and to the envy of surrounding villages, - the actual sum awarded was £251,704 (equivalent to £396,342 in 2018).

¹⁶⁸ SROI, EG94/B1/2, Playford Parish Council Minute Book, 1948-71. He was a Councillor from 1958 to 2011.

indeed wanted. It was an inappropriate ending for someone who had been resident in the parish for so long and who had contributed so much to local life. His pre-tax estate of £4 million was left in varying amounts to his four granddaughters but none to his son Tom. The amount of money that he left was a reflection not only of rising property prices since he first bought the farm in 1953 but of his thrift, financial opportunism and ability to make money. The house together with Dairy Cottage and adjoining land were put up for sale but found no buyer in the first year. For prospective purchasers the idyllic situation of the house was eclipsed by its state of repair. It had had very little money spent on it during his 70 year occupation and, while many locals considered that it might have to be 'gutted', the two would-be buyers could think solely of demolition. While the core part of the property remained in limbo with Geoff Dunnett continuing to tend the garden and Mrs Rice, a domestic there for some 20 years living in the house full time, one by one little pieces of land were bought up by adjoining home owners but progress in selling off the cottages was slow as investigations were made into their agricultural tie.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ The northern part of the Cricket Meadow was bought by Playford Hall, the southern part having been acquired in the 1980s. That part of Bridge Meadow south of the river was bought by The Miller's House, Railway Field by Mill Cottage and Stack Hill behind St Mary's Drive was split three ways between The Old Vicarage, Brayton and Foxboro.

