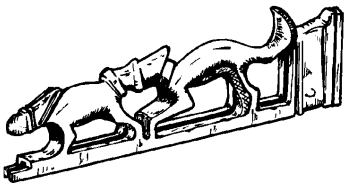
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

Recollections of a Flitwick Man

My life and times

1926-2006

Bill Palmer

www.adalhs.org.uk

Foreword

Bill Palmer was a well known Flitwick character, who lived there all his life except for the war years when he fought for his Country. He had a remarkable memory and was able to identify children on photographs who were at school with him. He was an enthusiastic member of this Society and was always ready to share his knowledge at our meetings. Towards the end of the last century he was persuaded to write down his memories by our Secretary Peter Wood who typed them up in three parts.

It has been my pleasure to collate this work, as I believe it is a valuable contribution to the history of Flitwick. He mentions his involvement with the British Legion of which he was an active member, but his interest in things military also extended to owning a fully restored Bedford truck used in WW2. It is illustrated below as it appeared at the "War in Bedfordshire Exhibition at Ampthill Parkside Hall on 4th March 2000.

Kevan Fadden FSA. Chairman.



Bill Palmer's Bedford restored truck, over a quarter of a million Bedford trucks were supplied to the military during the six years of the war.

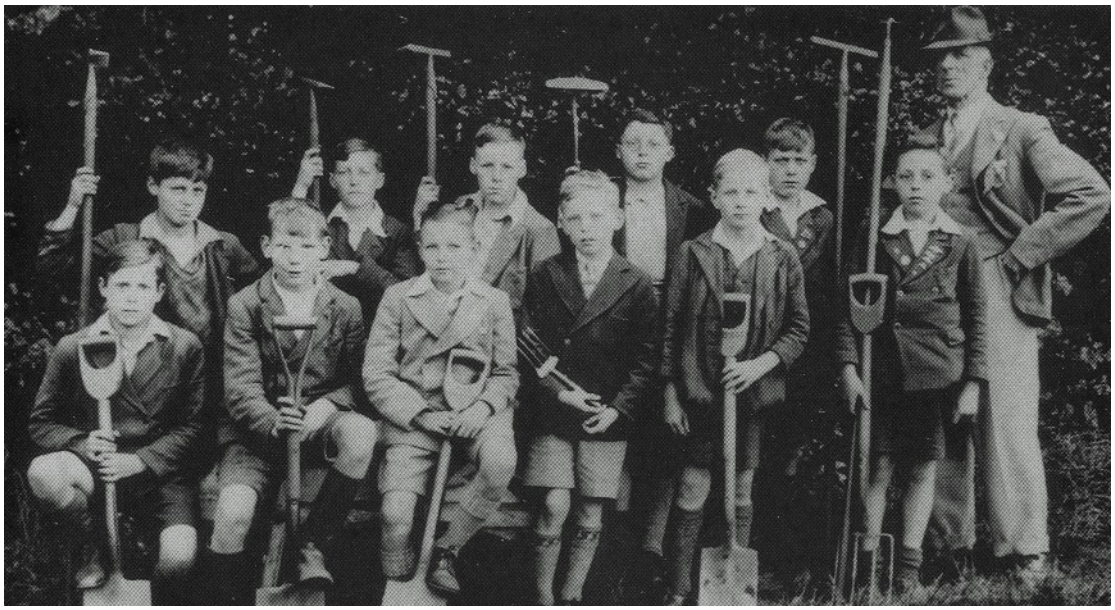
Photo Peter Wood.

Bill Palmer's Recollections of Flitwick

I was born on the 31 st January 1926 at Folly Farm, Flitwick with the worst blizzard of the year blowing.

Schooldays

I attended the infant school in Station Road until the age of 7 and then I moved to the school at Church End, Flitwick which seemed a big jump. The walk from home to the new school was a good two miles and I went home at 12 noon for my midday meal and then back to school at 1.45pm until 4 o-clock.
The route was up the "Alley", now called Gravel Pit Road, under the little railway arch and then down what is now called Vicarage Hill by the pond and past Mr. Carr's Blacksmiths shop to school. I often used to buy a big bulls-eye sweet at Mrs. Britchford's shop on the opposite side of the road to the school, she was a homely, short and fat lady, but would let you have anything on tick if you hadn't a halfpenny with you.
The Headmaster was Tommy Strickland who was very strict. The gardens were at the back of the school where Vicarage Hill is now and when you reached the age of 11 years you were given your own plot where we grew vegetables, potatoes and tomatoes.



School gardening Club 1937. Back row Eric Smith, Peter Leggart, Colin Robinson, John Walker, Bill Palmer, Mr. Thomas Stickland (headmaster). Front row Jack Izzard, Bill Dix, Ken Groom, Jim Worsley, Robert “Bebe” Daniels, Ted Brightman.

Houses and Shops

Starting from home the first house was the big house called Eastmoor. To the west side of the road were gravel pits and the east side was arable land worked by Tom Fowler; a nice man and kind to his men. Moving by Moor Lane you came to Kings Path which was a footpath until 1938 with very few new houses. At the bottom end of the path was a house called Daphne Villa which housed the parents of Bill Cotton the "Wakey Wakey" band leader and also the sister of Bill called Primrose who we nicknamed Polly Prim because of the make-up she wore. Passing into Station Road the first shop was the bakers and provision people. It was owned by Bumpy and Pussy Cousins along with two sons Leslie and Brian.

Further along was Bill Thompson's shop, next to The White Horse. He sold fruit and sweets and fish - not a good mix! Moving along Station Road we came to the Crown Inn, the landlord being John Cox who appears in the Flitwick History book*. Moving further along the road we came to Horace Dix's paper shop that sold provisions as well. With these local corner shops they fed the people of the village, with money or without ready money - you don't get that at Tesco's! There were no more houses in Station Road bar the old ones until you came to Short's shop which sold hats and garden seeds. On the other side was the Iron Room which was the H.Q. of the Home Guard in 1940 - no bank then. Over in Station Square was Mr Parsons grocers shop (now Flitwick Jewellers), next door was the Post Office owned by Mr Jackson, a very strict man who would never admit a mistake. Over the old Avenue, the shop run by the Cousins family was always called the top shop, and it sold provisions and vegetables etc. Moving north along the High Street you came to Barclays Bank, only open on a Thursday; next door was the Barbers shop owned by Bill Billington and run by Phil Smith who could cut a man's hair in 5 mins. (apron on and off - some record - charge 6d). Next door was Mr. Jones house now the ex Nat. West bank, then Alec Goddard's Builders yard, next door was the bungalow where Miss Buzzens and the District Nurse lived. Then the garage owned by Fred Lake who later formed the Flitwick Oil Company. The shop and garage were taken over by Bill Sharp whose widow still lives in Church Road. Next door was a milliners shop and tailors whose name escapes me at the moment, then there were the big houses in the High Street including The Hollies which was the Doctor's surgery. The Doctors I remember were Brown, Howe and then Parkes.

Going further down the High Street was the sand pit which is causing so much trouble now. Then you came to the Ridgeway, the butcher's shop on one corner owned by Bert Barker and on the other corner was Riddles provisions and they sold everything. The shop was owned by a man we called Puffer Riddle owing to the fact that he used to polish the counter and puff at the same time. Next door was Dawson's Outfitters who sold ladies and gents clothing,

prams, push-chairs, furniture of all kinds (in fact everything for the home). On the other side of the road was the railway cabin shop of Mr Bolt who was the cobbler and bee keeper as well. On the same side is the Blackbirds Public House and then opposite was a draper's shop called Inskip's where again you could buy anything for the home. And boy could he measure you for a suit, when he made it then it was a perfect fit. You had to travel nearly to the Ampthill boundary to find the only shop which opened on Sundays. It was owned by Chris Monk who had bad eyesight but would soon tell the difference between a shilling and a florin.

Going back to Windmill Road on the corner with the High Street was the fish shop owned by Fred Elston at that time in the thirties. On the other side was the small shop owned by Bill Wynn the Electrician and Wireless engineer. Going west along Windmill Road you went through the Railway arch and there was Pepper's Timber Yard. They used to bring the tree trunks in with 6 horses on the wagon - a wonderful sight - afterwards they had a steam engine to do the work. Steppingley road remains about the same apart from in-filling and, of course, the housing estate in Major's field where Tesco's is now. By the way I worked in that field gathering rhubarb before all the building took place.

The Victory Hall, built in 1920, stood about where the entrance is now to the Tesco car park. The caretaker in the thirties was old soldier Dave Odell. At the rear of the hall was a club which cost 2/6d to join for the year. It was said that it had one of the finest full size snooker tables in the county. The question is where did the table go when the hall was pulled down about 1963?

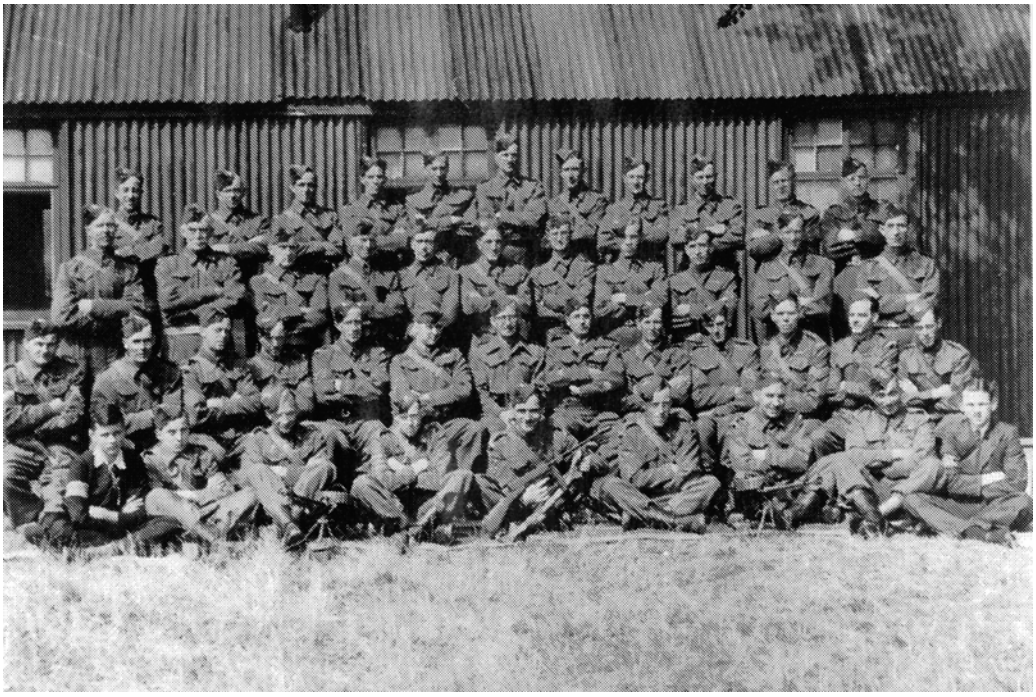
Football

There was a good football team in the village in the thirties. Their name was Flitwick Rovers, and they played in red and white squares. They won the cup in the 36-37 season and the league in the 37-38 season. They were a first class team, feared in the area. Names I can remember in the team were Wilf Izzard in goal, Tom Burrows and his brother-in law the full-backs, Don Pepper and Jack Giles on the wings, Tucker Jones and Tom Fazey half-backs, centre-half Jock Thompson or Skinny Gillett. The forwards were Tom Cherry, Dick Roberts and Gus Lowings.

Wartime

It is now 1939 and war clouds gathering. Mr Strickland retires and Mr AlIen takes over as Headmaster, three of us got the cane the first morning for looking at brick lorries going by. It was Ken Parker, Bert Battams and myself and it set your bottom on fire for about 10 minutes. On Sept 3rd war was declared. The Rovers was disbanded owing to call up for the forces. I left school at

Easter 1940 at 14 years and went straight to work for my Uncle, A.J. Woodward (£1 per week) a big market grower at that time who had farms at Maulden and Lidlington. As soon as I was 15 I joined the Home Guard and was soon given a U.S. Army Remington rifle and 50 rounds of bore 300 ammunition and all the kit. We used to do guard duty on the railway tunnels including the long Ampthill tunnel.
I stayed in the Home Guard until I registered for Military Service at 17. Before one was 18 you had the medical at Bedford and you were ready for call-up at 18. I was called up in March 1944 and sent to Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk to



No. 7 Platoon Flitwick Home Guard, in front of the "Iron Room" in Station Road.

Back row – Crisp, Groom, Saunders, Woolhead, French, Richardson, Carr, Price, Beale, Crawley, Cole.
Second row – Beale, Capon, ? Evacuee, Bottoms, Beale, Gulliver, Walker, Stringer, Carr, Washington, Warren.
Third row, Pepper, See, Hills, Harris, Fazey, Lamb, Allen, ? Evacuee, Dix, Purvis, Beale, Martin, Cox.
Front row – Ruskin, Woodford, French, Bagnall, Bishop, Cole, ? Evacuee, Brightman, Groom.

join the Beds.& Herts. Regiment. After 4 months training, the France and Germany campaign was in full swing and with the same old story of the shortage of Infantry Soldiers I was sent straight to France to join the Worcestershire Regiment. I was wounded once, in the foot, by a sniper (a poor shot people might think). But that's another story.
After VE Day I was sent to join the Warwickshire Regiment who were moving

out to join the American invasion force for the invasion of Japan. VJ day came and we were sent to Palestine instead for the troubles in that region. Demob. came in June 47 and a return to Blighty and home via Wrexham and York. I worked for my father at Folly Farm and took over in 1955.

Personal

I married Betty in 1949 and we had Peter who was born on Christmas Eve 1950 and Julie who was born in June 55. We would have been married 50 years last March 1999 but for Betty's untimely death in October 93 from the dreaded breast cancer. Still life goes on and I am a committee member of the Royal British Legion and a member of the Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society, also a member of the Flitwick History Society and no doubt you will see me with a Poppy tin in Tesco's in November. And as my father used to tell me "always look forward and hold your head high"

Business Activities



Digging peat on Flitwick Moor.

The land at the Folly, where the Gun Club is now, was looked after by Mr. Richardson and he would grow vegetable crops and apples, pears, plums and most fruits which he would harvest on a Thursday and take up to Flitwick station on a Friday with a pony and cart for his bosses who were the Whites of Mineral Water fame who lived in London.

We had a private school in the village run by a Miss Hetley of Ampthill which was near where the Medical centre is now, but the pupils never mixed with us village lads, perhaps we were too rough and ready for them.

There were 4 butchers in the village in the 30s, also there were 3 Bakers, 3 Cobblers, 3 Undertakers, now there are none. We haven't advanced very far in over 70 years.

Peat was dug on Flitwick Moor and transported to the Midlands by rail to purify the coal gas. It was dug by Alf Cox the son of John Cox the Landlord of the Crown. The peat was dug in the moors and pushed up to the loading

place by light railway a ton at a time in the truck. Then it was transported to Flitwick Station by Horse and cart, the carrier was George Palmer but the driver who loaded and unloaded was Blackie Line who lived in Maulden. He drew his week's pay on Saturdays at about 1 o-clock, the sum of perhaps £ £1.12s.6d, go straight to the White Horse and get half drunk and at turning out time at 2.30 p.m. the other men who were sober enough would put him on his bike, give him a push and away he would go towards Maulden but most times would end up in the ditch by Abbey lane to sleep it off.

Gravel was dug all over the East End and Kings Path area of Flitwick. There was a large pit where Brooks Road shops are now being filled in in the early part of the war and then built on in the 50s and 60s. Not a good practice I think after such a short time. The same thing happened in Kings Road in 1938 with the soil dug out where the road was to be built and then transported by light railway to a hole just west of the Cotton's house and worse still was built on before the war started after about a year. The houses have walked about ever since. Another big sandpit was by the side of Steppingley Road where Robsons is now and the sandpit everyone hears about is in the High Street. The largest one of all was a gravel pit by the west side of the Maulden Road which stretched from Eastern Road and took in most of lvel way and Hatfield Road. The gravel was used from these pits to repair the roads. Another large gravel pit and sandpit was in Elmwood Crescent and took in most of Willow Way as well. So we all know what the East End of Flitwick was built on.

The shops in Flitwick kept open until 8 o-clock on weekdays and 9 o-clock on Saturday when people would come in on their bikes to do the shopping late to try and get a bargain.

The gas was laid through Flitwick from the Westoning area about 1937; all the trenches were dug out by hand. Labour was from the coal mines of Wales or the North of England who had tramped to the area to find work. The electricity having been brought the year before by the Luton Electricity which, by the way, was an AC supply, Ampthill's coming from Bedford was DC so at Flitwick one couldn't buy a kettle from Ampthill, as it wouldn't work.

The main sewerage came to Flitwick in 1952-53 put in by a firm from London called George Bell & Co. The roads seemed to be trenched at the same time, it was a mess. The worst part was East End when the contractors hit a river of white flowing sand, and pumps and lorries were kept at work night and day for weeks and weeks carting the stuff away. The area was below the Crown Inn. I believe the firm of George Bell went bankrupt after the work at Flitwick.

At Folly Farm there would be about 8 or 10 heavy horses and I would have to take some of them to have new shoes at the Blacksmiths. I would take one in the morning as I went to school and then bring it home at 12 o-clock for my midday meal with all four new shoes. My pay would be 1/- a horse and by going over the Station Bridge when a steam train was going under it was like

riding on a circus horse and one had to hang on tight.

Village Highlights

One of the highlights of the year was when Flitwick Rovers played Flitwick Ramblers on Boxing Day. It nearly always ended up with some of them having a friendly fight. The Ramblers were a team that were based at Froghall Farm under a Mr. Gazeley who was the farmer there at that time. They played football in the winter and cricket in the summer. Mr Gazeley played cricket until he was over 70 years of age but at that age he was forced to have a runner as he was a fine batsmen but couldn't run as he got older.

Another highlight of the week was when the Fish and Chip van came on Wednesday night and Saturday night at about 8 o-clock. The owner was Bays of Bedford. We used to ask for a tuppenny and one, which was 2d for a piece of fish and 1d for the chips, as much as you could eat. The van would stop outside the White Horse for nearly 1 hour and people would come from far and wide with their own newspaper for the wrapping.

The fair would come to the field by the side of the Blackbirds pub which is now a car park. About three times a year it would attend. The large showman's engine would stand near the road and with the large swinging boats and the 4 abreast galloping horses run by its own steam engine, the catwalk which once you got on you didn't get anywhere.

The Band of Hope was formed in 1935; the leaders were George Richardson and Peg Kingham. Paper Chases would be held in the summer time, which would be held around Moor Lane and Flitwick Moors, but it wouldn't be allowed in the nineties. In the winter months we would be entertained in the Baptist Chapel with games and parties. In other words things were done for us that we couldn't get at home in those depression years of the 30s.

A professional concert party used to visit the village twice a year; their name was the Kingsway Players. They did good plays such as "Murder in the Red Barn" etc. They must have been good as some of them used to act at the Royal County Theatre in Bedford.

We would go to the pictures in Ampthill which was in Saunders Piece, afterwards it became the library. The films on a Saturday were nearly always cowboys such as Hop-a-long Cassidy, Buck Jones and Gene Autry. We would go in the week as well, but if it was an "A" film the lady that took the money would come out and take us in as you had to be accompanied by an adult for an "A" film. The price would be 3d on a Saturday afternoon and 6d in the weekday for admission.

The Silver Jubilee of George V and Queen Mary in 1935 was an exciting time with the fetes and party in the field in front of the Manor and then at the end we had to queue up for our mugs and a bag of sweets (a real treat). The same thing happened at the Coronation of George VI in 1937. The celebrations were

held in the Rec. (Recreation Field) where Tesco's petrol station is now. This meant another mug etc. (Oh where are the mugs now?)
The British Legion held a fete each year down on a field at Denel End Farm with sports for the children and a tug-of-war for the men from East End, Church End and Denel End. East End would win each year, as they were the bigger men. I can remember a group of us lads went up on the stage to see who could pull the most ugly face. And I won a small prize as the winner!

Village Characters

There was a family named Stringer whose mother lived in a small bungalow in Water End where Tyburn Crescent is now. There were four sons whose names were as follows: - The oldest son was called Tommy-Dod, the other sons were Bugle Hompy, Pottle and Pigeon. These sons did mainly casual work about on local farms. Another man called Stringer, a slight relation of the other family, who did some casual work for my father back in the thirties was told that he would have to put the £25 cash in the bank which was a lot of money in those days. So somebody saw him digging a hole in the bank in his garden to put his £25 in.
Another man called Chapman who lived in Water End wanted a housekeeper, so he put an advert in the local paper as follows: "Housekeeper wanted must be high up on the leg" meaning, I should think, a tall person. Another character who comes to mind was a man who liked his beer and if his wife said anything to him which he didn't like he would get hold of the 4 corners of the tea or dinner table cloth and throw it out into the back yard.
The Gypsies would come to the Alley, Gravel Pit Road now, and live on spare ground just up from Station Road. A horse dealer called Barnes lived in the Alley and the gypsies would come from miles around to buy and sell the ponies. They would do the dealing in the road outside the Crown Inn doing the usual hand slapping. A man called Line was killed in a fight with one of them outside the Crown one night.
Then there was the murder of Mr. Stapleton in 1936 who worked for Charlie Barnes of Ruxox Farm. It happened in Flitton parish, but it was news all round the area, and the murder was never solved as far as I know.
Another character in the village at that time was Jessie Ellis a relation of Ellis Billington, a member of our Society. He was a porter on Flitwick Station and would wear two left shoes or right ones as the case might be to save buying new ones. He would sit in the Swan with a small drop of beer in the glass hoping that someone would buy him a beer (which someone usually did).
The man who owned the Hat and Milliners shop, which is Unwin's now, the name was Tom Tibbit. He was a first class workman but would often be seen in the Swan.
Three local farmers used to go to the Swan every day from about 11.30 a.m.

to about 2 o-clock, A.B.C. that was Abbiss, Britain and Cole. Abbiss lived at Church Farm, Britain lived at Wood Farm and Cole lived at Priestley Farm.
When people were going from East End to Church End they would say they were going "up town".
There were three families that lived at the back of the Crown Inn for a number of years in caravans. The first family were called Carey; the father was a horse dealer and he had 3 daughters and a son. The oldest daughter was married to Walley Smith who lived next door in the next caravan and he was a scrap dealer and odd job man. In the next caravan lived Mr & Mrs Crow, he sold fish and black pudding that his wife made. Later he took over the fish and chip shop by the Old Sun in Ampthill and his wife carried on making black pudding to sell in the fish shop
In the next hut lived a man called Jack Hopkins, a very poor shelter compared with these days, it wouldn't be allowed today. His work was odd jobs on the farms in the area and he always wore wellingtons all through the year. A man who did casual work in those days would earn about 5/- or 25p per day and could get by on that amount.
Major Crawley was Landlord at the Swan and also was the local taxi man with a very old Ford car. The Landlord at the Fir Tree was China Dix (but don't call him China or he would go mad). He would sit by the fire in the Taproom eating Bread and Cheese and if a customer came in he would curse in having to get up and serve. Charlie Beale was a self-employed coalman who had customers in Eversholt as well as Flitwick and he always carried a loaded shotgun in the cab of his old Ford to shoot pheasants or rabbits on the roads around Eversholt and Flitwick.
Maurice Stringer was a local youth who was called up soon after the outbreak of war and was sent to the 1st Batln. Beds & Herts. Regt. in Palestine. They were part of the 70th Infantry Division who had been in India and the Middle East since the early thirties. They were part of the force to defend the Tobruk garrison and served throughout the first siege of Tobruk, and of course Maurice Stringer was part of that force throughout the long siege. He was, in my opinion, a hero in every sense of the word. After the siege ended he was sent to Greece for a time, until the army withdrew. Whilst serving back in Palestine he volunteered to man the air defences on the transports bringing troops from Crete to the Middle East. This is where he was killed in action (a true Flitwick hero).

**Flitwick: A Short History* ADALHS 1973.