

WHILTON ON THE EVE OF WAR

What the parish was like in the run up to the First World War.

The 1911 census shows that, omitting visitors and passing boat people, there were 102 males and 113 females, making a total of 215 inhabitants in 64 households. The census recorded 24 farm labourers in the parish, but 11 of these were over 50, the oldest being 76 year old Frank Hillyard at the Locks. Here I introduce you to just a few Whilton people.

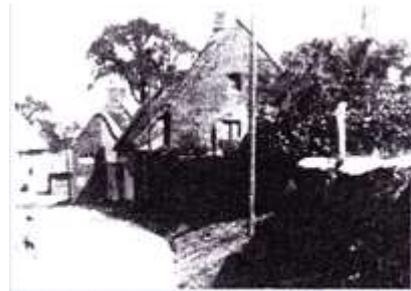
Edmund Henry Bevan, the owner of Whilton Lodge, was a retired cement manufacturer. He, his young wife and two little daughters lived in a world apart from the main parish with 26 people living on his estate and coming from all over the country. Among their many jobs were lady's maid, butler, cook, stud worker, chauffeur, gardeners and coachman. Edmund Bevan was High Sheriff for Northamptonshire in 1912, and steward at the Pytchley Hunt Ball in January 1913, but just before the War he left Whilton. This probably led to the dispersal of his household. His successor Sir Kay Muir used the Lodge mainly as a hunting lodge, and may have just kept a skeleton staff here. This probably means that about 10 men who would have been eligible to fight in 1914 had already left Whilton.

The picture we formed of Whilton showed a depressed poor village. The shadow of the workhouse loomed. John Hillyard had come from a large struggling family in Whilton. As a young man he had been sentenced to hard labour for stealing potatoes, he had worked as a labourer, carrier and farm worker, and had first entered the Workhouse in 1903. He was brought before the Northamptonshire Assizes in November, pleading guilty to an attempted suicide in Whilton. "P. C. Johnson said that the prisoner discharged himself from the Workhouse, and cut his throat because he wanted to lie in the churchyard. Prisoner was discharged, and his Lordship directed the Police to see that he returned to the Workhouse." Widow Ethel Hillyard living in Buckby Lane in 1911 was no doubt a relative. A number of tiny cottages were squeezed into Buckby Lane, among them the home of Joseph Adams and his daughter Isabella. Joseph had lost his wife in childbirth in 1876, and struggled to bring up three children, the family having to resort to periods in the Workhouse in Daventry. Joseph himself finally died in the Workhouse aged 82 in 1924.

Harry Dunkley was landlord of the Plough Inn, living here with his wife Elizabeth and niece Barbara Gammage; he also acted as the village carrier. About exactly 100 years ago tragedy hit this family on 26th May 1914. The witnesses' account of that morning gives us a picture of normal life on the canal at this period. Harry Webb a carpenter for the Canal Company said he was moving material from a shed opposite Whilton Lock, helped by another canal employee Walter Manning. Henry Dunkley was carting stone close by on the off-side of the canal.

About 9.45 a.m. Harry Webb and Henry Dunkley had a chat by the stop gate of the lock, and then Henry Dunkley went off towards the place where he was carting, probably part of his job as the local carrier. 55 minutes later the two canal workers saw a pocket handkerchief and cap in the canal, and then minutes later they saw a body in the lock. They dragged it out, but Henry Dunkley was past help. His death remains a mystery. Henry was sober; his brother James from modern Church Farm said he was in his usual health the day before. The doctor recorded death caused by drowning in the six feet of water in the lock, following concussion.

Opposite the Plough was once the main farm of the village, with its old stone and thatch farmhouse, yard and buildings. In this period the building housed two old spinsters and their servant. Anne and Laura Emery were the only representatives of the family in Whilton. There had been complications over inheritance, bankruptcy of Robert Emery from Home Farm, and a general depression. The main farming Emerys were living in Norton.



The home of Anne and Laura Emery

In part of the modern "Old Post Office" next to Rose Briar (the home of John SL Townley), live George Tomlinson with his wife and baby son Elgar Frank. George worked as a canal clerk, but was an accomplished pianist and composer, publishing some of his works in the 1920's after he had left Whilton.

Tom Essen, a farm labourer with his two sons lived in the Stone House, and also kept an outdoor beer shop here. Behind this was a short lane leading to the Corner House, a stone and thatched farmhouse, but its occupants were ladies of private means and none with local roots. Widow Eliza Loam had been born in Peterhead, Scotland. Her three spinster daughters lived with her, and her niece Helen.

Mrs Loam was the mother-in-law of the rector, Rev William Henry Logan. In the Rectory we find the rector with his interests in education and role as education inspector for the diocese, his wife Eliza, whose three sisters were next door, and the three Rectory children. The oldest, Michael Loam Logan was an articled clerk, an architect and a surveyor, aged 26 in 1911. He had two younger sisters, Helen and Charity. Charity, known as Miss Cherry, was 18 when war broke. She was popular for her work leading the local Scout troop, supported by her father. In later years she married a clergyman and moved to Windsor. Michael enlisted and served throughout the War.

There was an intriguing visitor to Whilton on census night. The Rectory had a guest; Violet Winifred Raynell aged 17 had been born in Kobe, Japan, but it was noted she was a British subject by her parentage. She was on a visit to England and returned alone on the long voyage to Japan in 1912. She had visited England before when she was 7 and came with her mother. There must be another story lurking here, but she was probably a relative of the Logans.



Kate Rose and Olive Higgeson outside Field View c. 1906

The family at Field View are an example of some of the movements of local families and the link with Birmingham. The head of the family was Thomas Higgeson, a railway worker, who had been born in Norton. His wife Kate had come from Birmingham. Her roots, however, were in Whilton, as she was a great grand daughter of the first schoolmaster of Whilton, Thomas Taylor. Thomas and Kate had a number of children, one of whom, Tom, was in the forces by the end of the First World War.

Whilton School was not thriving. Mrs Sharpe the head, resigned in 1911 and her replacement Miss Lamerton was unpopular in the village, using her taws or whip too frequently and failing in her discipline. Some parents sent their children to Long Buckby instead. There were only 24 children recorded in the 1911 census and so the talk of building a new school must have been unrealistic. There were also difficulties because Mrs Sharpe refused to move out of the School House.

Next door in Rose Cottage lived elderly Dorothy (Dolly) Dyer, the daughter of previous schoolteachers, now running the Post Office, playing the church organ and describing herself as a seamstress. Usually dressed in black, she was respected by the village, but seen as a bit eccentric. Sadly she too ended her days in Daventry Workhouse.

Down at the Locks the Spotted Cow was a busy pub, particularly catering for the boat people, with landlord William Elliott and his wife Mary, and further down the canal, Windlass Cottage was the home of Thomas and Kate Rose Adams, with their baby son, Will. Tom was a canal lengthsman, looking after the canal from Whilton until half way to Weedon. With the heavy wear of boatpeople and their horses, this would have been an unending maintenance task. Tom enlisted in 1915 and served as a driver in the Expeditionary Force.

The large double fronted house on the site of the carpet shop was the home of Frank Litchfield with his wife, three children and two living in servants. Frank was a horse breaker and trainer, who had been born in Long Buckby. He became Captain Frank Litchfield and held a position in the prisoner of war centre at Brixworth, living in Brixworth Grange. He later became the secretary of the Pytchley Hunt.

Despite well over 20 men from Whilton serving in the Forces, it is a remarkable fact that no one from Whilton was killed.

The sequel to this meeting will be in the autumn, when we hear about the man from Whilton who won the VC in 1917.



Hilda
Lamerton