It's all about...
ASHLEY

edited by

Peter Wright and Nick Turnbull

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I've lived in Ashley all my life and I can honestly say that a happier place and a more likeable bunch of people, you'd struggle to find. Things will change. They always do. But my hope is that, here in Ashley, we'll somehow make sure that they always change for the better.

I hope you enjoy this book. It's all in a good cause to support the Church. And thanks to Pete and to Nick for putting it all together.

Now, before you go, did I tell you the one about .....?

Peter Jackson

First published 2013

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A NATIONAL TREASURE

The Welsh Zoo that began life in Ashley

By David Wyke

It all started one sunny afternoon, a very long time ago.

On Tanyard farm, to be precise. For it was there, back in 1943, that the young Robert Jackson met an equally young, Margaret Wrigley. Both of them working on the land as part of the national food production programme and both of them finding love at first sight. It must have been, as they were married the very next year.

Naturally enough, they started their new life together in Robert's cottage on Back Lane, where there may or may not have been fairies at the bottom of the garden but where there was certainly something equally exotic. A greenhouse. At first sight, just that. A greenhouse. But, as with the good Doctor's absurd police-box, a greenhouse whose appearance was delightfully deceptive. And, once they found out what was inside it, the greenhouse quickly became an irresistible lure for the kids of the village.

"Lizards. Frogs. Toads. Tropical fish. I think there was even a snake."

The voice of one still young at heart, recalling the very first Robert Jackson zoo.

Not that the creatures were confined to the greenhouse. In later years, Margaret would look back – with affection, it is hoped – to one of the cottage's two bedrooms also being home to "fish and such things."

In 1945, their first son, Tony, appeared and it was now time for the Jacksons to move on. There is only so much room in a farm labourer's cottage for a family and a zoo. And, sad though their neighbours were to see them go, no doubt, hindsight must have surely provided them with some measure of relief. Moving first to Timperley and then to a farm on Delahays Road in Hale, Robert and Margaret now set about taking their zoo-keeping more seriously. Doubtless, the frogs and toads still had their place but larger and larger snakes appeared, along with, unbelievably, a crocodile. Heaven only knows what Health and Safety would make of it nowadays but, back then, no one seems to have batted an eyelid.

Robert went on to forge a highly successful, if somewhat unusual, career in the animal world. On one hand, catering for the aquatic and tropical needs of the good denizens of Cheshire, amongst them, Lord Egerton, no less. And, on the other, travelling the world with Gerald Durrell hunting down the rare and the beautiful for collectors and zoos in Europe.

In 1952, the indefatigable Robert founded the grandly titled Zoological Exhibitions. In effect, a travelling zoo that visited every resort from Morecambe to Margate and all points in between. And, in view of the quite extraordinary furrow that Robert ploughed, it's perhaps not too surprising that the film world also came knocking on his door and names such as Michaela Dennis, James Robertson Justice and Diana Dors joined the Jackson story. And if you haven't seen An Alligator Called Daisy, you haven't lived.

However, many and varied though his achievements were through those years, the greatest was yet to come.

On May 18, 1963, Robert Jackson and his wife, Margaret, opened Colwyn Bay Zoo. An overnight success, the zoo grew steadily over the years and, in time, would become a major player on the animal landscape. Tragically, the man himself would never live to see it. Robert was killed by a falling tree in the spring of 1969 and, but for Margaret and her sons, Tony, Chris and Nick, that would have been that. However, they soldiered on and the rest is history. Converting to a trust in 1983, the zoo was formally recognised, in 2003, as the National Zoo for Wales.

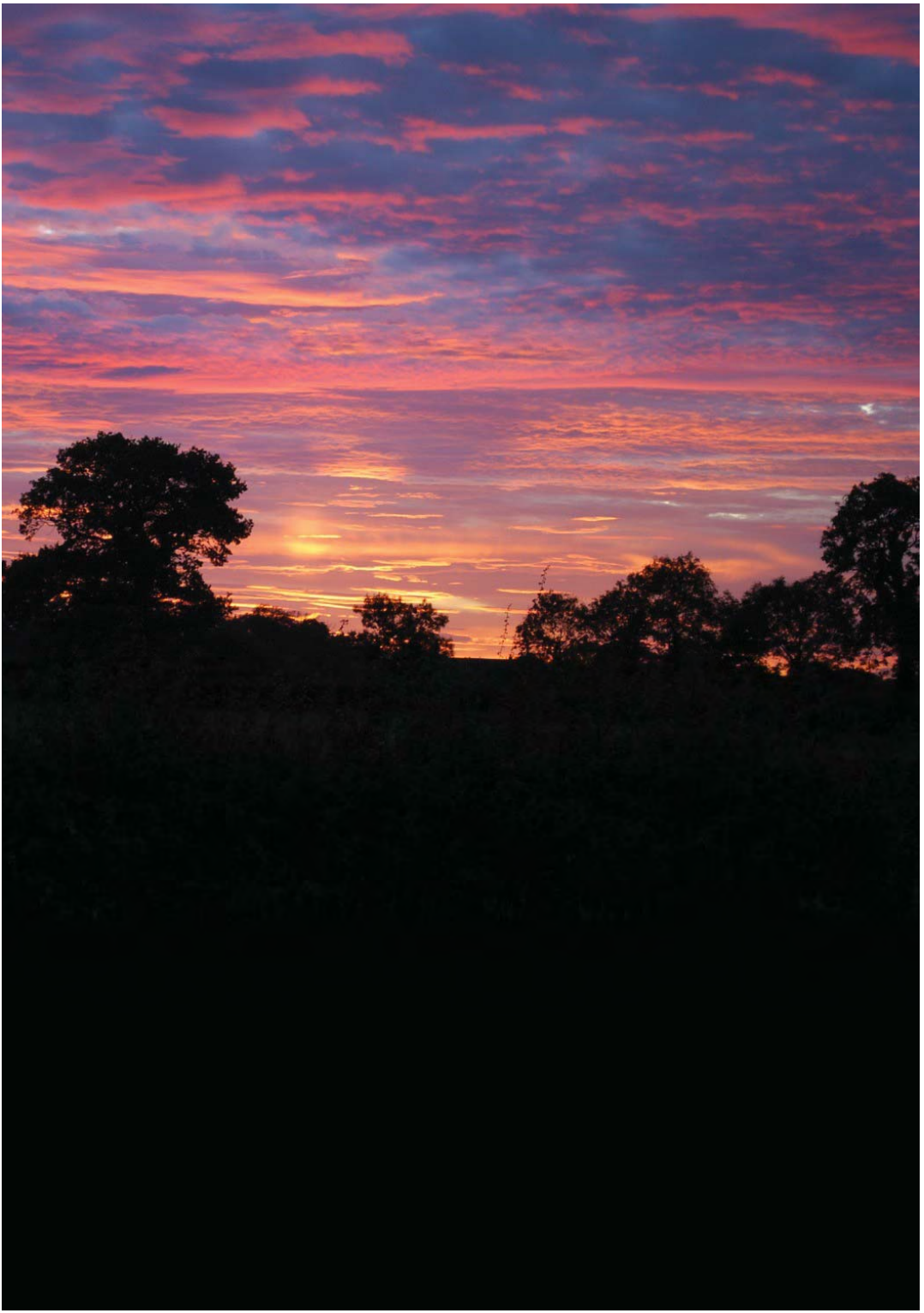
Quite a story, quite a family. And quite a man. And it all began in Ashley.

On Tanyard farm. And in a greenhouse.

To wake each morning with a smile brightening my face. To greet the day with reverence for the opportunities it contains. To approach my work with a clean mind. To hold ever before me, even in the doing of little things, the Ultimate Purpose toward which I am working. To meet men and women with laughter on my lips and love in my heart. To be gentle, kind and courteous through all the hours. To approach the night with weariness that ever woos sleep and the joy that comes from work well done.

This is how I desire to waste wisely my days.

Thomas Dekker



THE COPPY BARN

Nobody seems to know just how old the Coppice Farm tithe barn actually is.

The august South Trafford Archaeological Group suggests it's a typical fifteenth or sixteenth century building and then goes on, helpfully, to point out that this form of construction was known in England from the twelfth century. So, take your pick

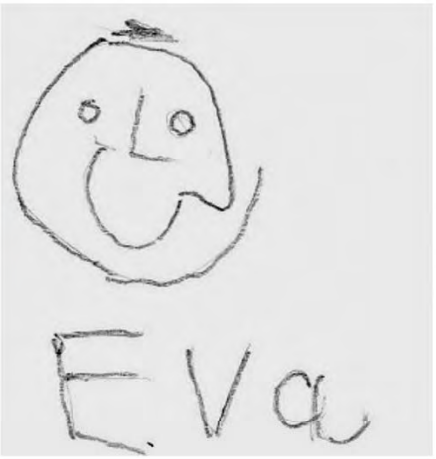
What is certain is that the long-suffering building has been more than just a little knocked about over the years. But given the robust nature of its crock-frame – or A-frame – construction, there was no way that a few centuries of odd-jobbers and handymen were going to do any lasting damage.

Originally built to store the local tithes - one tenth of the local farm produce appropriated, for reasons best known to themselves, by the Church - the building has been nothing if not versatile during its life. Home to anything and everything from cattle and crops to the Clibrans, the twentieth century market gardeners, 'Coppy' Farm's splendid barn hasn't just stood the test of time. It seems to have invented it.

"They don't make them like they used to."

Indeed they don't.


Mia


Eva


Ava May Gibbon
age 2


Sam
5


Elly Leigh Aged 7


Evie J
age 8


Anna Jones
Aged 13


Alex Eslam
age: 9

LIVING ON A FARM

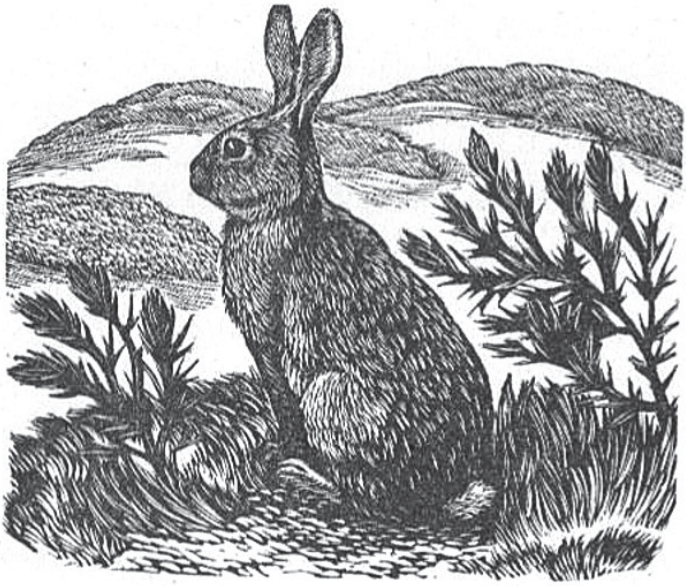
By Natalya Erlam

I am Natalya Erlam and I live at Sugar Brook Farm in Ashley. I am 8 years old. I love living in the countryside.

Living on a farm means there is always work to do looking after the animals. Sometimes there are horrible things happen like when the fox killed all the cockerels the other night. Sometimes there are beautiful things happen like when the lambs are born. I help my dad collect the eggs and put them in boxes to sell at the door. I have two ponies, one called Charlie. He is a little monkey sometimes. Charlie is 14 years old. He is grey but sometimes he is brown because he has been messing around in the mud. His best friend is Stebbsie who is black and white and a lot bigger. My Mum looks after them but sometimes I help.

On the farm life and work are dominated by the weather. Everybody knows how wet it was last year. It made the ground very soggy and a lot of work could not be done. Lets hope we have a lot of sunshine this summer and loads of butterflies, flowers and swallows. (My Dad's favourite bird).

I hope you have a great summer too!



WONDERFUL

Memories of Ashley Hall

by Nick Turnbull

The kitchen is quiet.

Cassie has long since tired of barking at the stranger and is now curled up under the table, dreaming of cats. A large clock-face, white, edged with wood, hangs from the kitchen wall, gazing down serenely as tea is taken. There is a motorway nearby. And a dual carriage-way discreetly feeding it. And yet both are oddly muffled. Maybe it's a time warp.

Certainly, the relentless, imperious drive of the 21st century with all its boasted techno-pomp and circumstance has been left parked outside with the dustbins. In the kitchen, there is now the timeless charm of the country, where stories are told and dusty memories brought back to life.

"We had wonderful times there. Wonderful times."

She talks of Ashley Hall, the slumbering fifteenth-century giant that gazes benignly over the cottages, farms and fields of Ashley Parish. She was born there, grew up there and, in 1958, was married from there. And has rarely been back.

"I like to remember it as it was."

And how was it?

"Wonderful, I loved my childhood."

For many, Laurie Lee has the monopoly on the bucolic idyll that was the English countryside in the years before the Second World War. 'Idyll' might be overcooking it just a tad, given the images of real poverty in Cider With Rosie, along with the fact that people get murdered for no very good reason. But Rosie does look back to an age of innocence and making jam, which now seems all but lost to us, save for the odd episode of the Archers. Did it ever really exist, outside of Lee's imagination? Absolutely, it did. And the proof of that is sitting at the other side of the heavy, wooden kitchen table, slowly stirring her tea.

In 1939, she was no more than a slip of a lass when Europe once again went mad and started tearing itself to pieces. Was she frightened?

"No. I don't think so. Apart from the rationing, we just got on with it."

"It" was a childhood in the Cheshire countryside, where the memories are of long, summer days, cycling down country lanes and building wooden rafts by the ponds. Windows open in the summer evenings, listening to the pigeons, cooing in the tree branches. And later, as the skies darkened and the first stars sprang into life, to the owls hooting in the night.

True, there was always the odd incendiary bomb to disturb the innocence of the countryside. Or the six o'clock evening ritual of the family listening to the news from the battlefront. And even, on occasions, the odd German prisoner of war peeling potatoes for her mother.

But otherwise, six years of war did little to dampen her enthusiasm for life.

"Self-sufficiency was the order of the day. I think that was true for everyone."

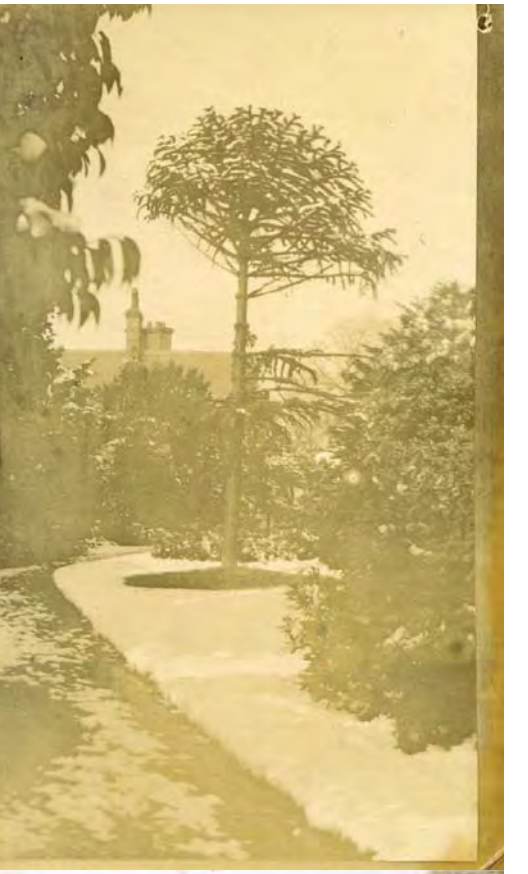
And if that conjures up pictures of the diligent patriots tending their twelve square yards of allotment, then transpose that same

sense of endeavour to the acres of Ashley Hall and self-sufficiency becomes an art form.

Apples. Pears. Raspberries. You name it, they grew it in the vast orchards that ran away from the side of the house. Happily, the stoic warriors of Ashley's Women's Institute were on hand to help but it's difficult not to think that the jars of jam must have lined the drive from top to bottom. Mother also bottled the fruit, squirreling it away for the winter. And, in that national spirit of a shared experience, large quantities of the fruits and produce of Ashley Hall were simply given away.

Eventually, the war ended and, perhaps sadly, so too did childhood. The long hot summers and snowy winters, so cherished as magic in the eyes of a child, became simply weather. The long cycle rides to school in Altrincham no more than a distant memory. In time, she would leave the hall, travelling first in style to her wedding at St Elizabeth's and, ultimately, to a future of farming in Daveyhulme. There would be new adventures, new memories. No doubt every bit as cheerful and adventurous as those of long ago.

But, perhaps, without that touch of fairy dust. For although the kitchen is once again quiet, Cassie still asleep, for a few moments it had been filled with the sound of children.



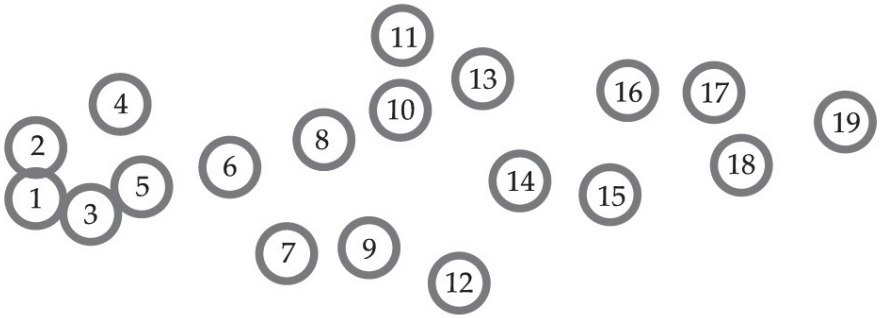
THE NATIVITY

Not quite the original. But nearly.

It's 1946. The bleak years of wartime over, the British arts world was once again on its triumphant march. The Arts Council of Great Britain was founded, the BBC launched The Third Programme, the Stratford-upon Avon Memorial Theatre re-opened .....

....and the kids of Ashley staged their first post-war Nativity Play.

Old Father Time's forgotten one or two of the names but most of them are still up there on the wall.



1. Anth Hewitt
2. Ann Moss
3. ?
4. Anne Gardner
5. Trevor Jones
6. Jennifer Corbishley
7. Geoff Hunt
8. Kathleen Bowland
9. ?
10. Margaret Blackburn
11. Donald Bailey
12. ?
13. Richard Freewater
14. Peter Wright
15. ?
16. ?
17. Mary Moss
18. Kathleen Hunt
19. John Sadler

THE RESTORATION OF ROBERT

In December, 1923, Nobel prizes were awarded to Robert Millikan. Fritz Prego. Sir Frederick Banting. John McLeod and the great WB Yeats.

Many will be familiar with Ireland's favourite poet but, Yeats apart, the other names mean little. Which might also be true of another man, who picked up an award that same month. A colourful and delicately crafted, glowing testimonial to thirty-eight years of "valuable services." Services which included his tenure as Headmaster of the Parish School, Choirmaster, Patron and founding member of Ashley Cricket Club and Assistant Overseer in the parish.

This glorious tribute was presented by "the past and present pupils and inhabitants of Ashley and District". And the object of their affection and admiration?

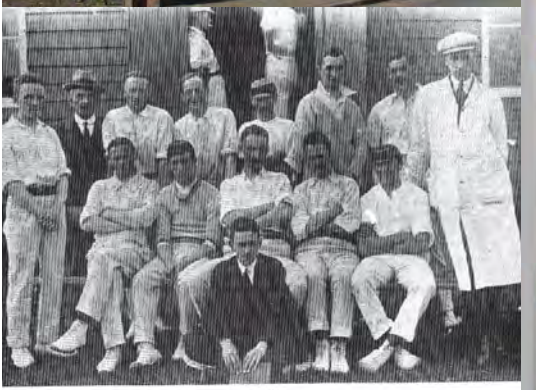
Mr Robert Hall.

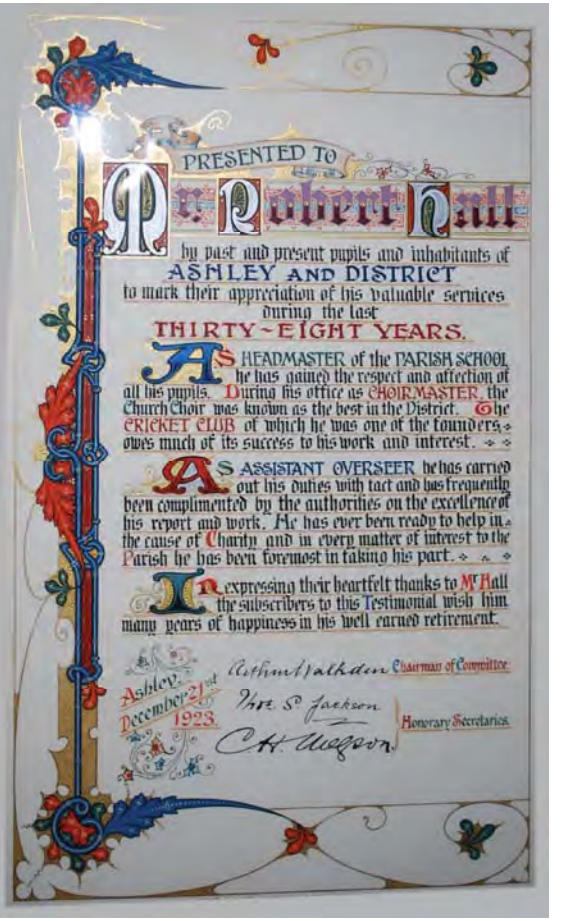
A name that history, or more precisely, the local Council, all but consigned to oblivion, when they set about cleaning out the school, shortly after its closure in 2004. With an indelicacy and

indifference most certainly inappropriate to the honour and memory of the man, Robert's celebrated Testimonial was summarily dropped into a skip.

Ashley being Ashley, however, this grisly oversight was quickly corrected and Robert's dignity restored. Villagers retrieved the document and its frame and, after trawling the Internet, caught up with the Headmaster's grandchildren. And, a few weeks later, a presentation to them in the Greyhound duly brought closure to the story.

An award and Testimonial that's been presented twice. Now, they don't often do that. Even with the Nobel prizes.





JUST A BIG BUNCH OF FRIENDS

The WI years in Ashley

By Nick Turnbull

"It was Mrs Clegg who started it all."

There's something very positive about Sheila Norbury's approach to life and revisiting the heady days of the Ashley Womens' Institute proves no exception to the rule. Yes, she's sorry to have seen it all disappear, some two years ago, but that's not going to cloud her memories and enjoyment of the days of wine and roses, when the WIA was one of the biggest shows in town.

"Apparently, she started it because she thought there was absolutely nothing for the women of the village to do. And she was probably right."

Indeed, she was. The redoubtable Mrs Clegg held her first WI meeting at her home, Arden House, back in 1932. And it would grow like Topsy, the women of the parish flocking to the cause.

Sheila smiles as she reads down the list of names that made up that first committee.

"Mrs J. Norbury, my mother-in-law. Mrs J. Erlam. That's Fred's mum. Mrs T. Jackson. That's Peter's grandma. Mrs A. Walkden, a lovely woman."

It's called bringing the past back to life. Names on a yellowing piece of paper now joining us in the room. Looking back through the years, quite literally, Sheila takes a small magnifying glass to an early group shot of the Ashley ladies in the 1940's. Some sixty or seventy of them in four rows, staring at the camera. A little po-faced, perhaps, most especially Mrs Clegg and her committee at the front. But look more carefully at the ranks behind and, suddenly, the smiles appear.

"That's my mother in law. That's Mrs Warburton. I'm not sure about this one. But just look how many there are. And they're all members."

A later photograph, this time from the 60's. Much more relaxed, as might be expected. Filling the stage in a Hale Barns hall, dressed to kill and relishing the prospect of a girls' night out.

Sheila joined in 1953 and would remain a member until the Institute's eventual demise. An enthusiastic member.

"We all were. It was just a big bunch of friends together."

By then, Arden House had given way to Ashley school as the meeting-place of choice. And, on the first Thursday of every month, the ladies would gather for country dancing, cake demonstrations, embroidery, knitting, sewing.....

"It all sounds a bit old-fashioned. But, you know, it was very interesting."

And it must have been, since membership numbers remained high, enjoying outings to such places as Windermere and Llandudno, visiting country estates and woollen mills. Even, from time to time, opting for the rather more uncertain delights of a Mystery Tour. Heady days, indeed.

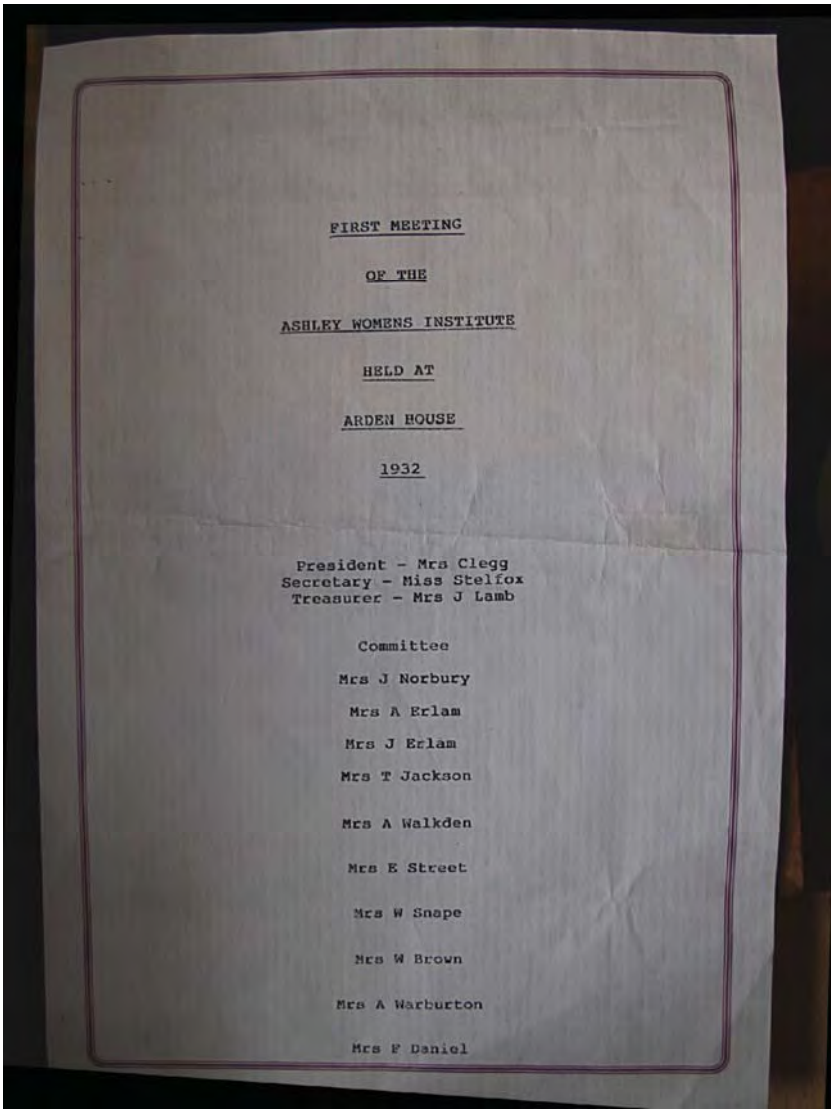
“One big, happy, family. Never any falling out. Always there for each other. Especially if anyone was ill. Despite having seven kids and a farm, I hardly ever missed a meeting. None of us did.”

Until the 1980’s came along. Older members appeared less often. Others moved away. And the new generation didn't pick up on the message. All things, sadly, must pass and the Ashley WI was to be no exception. By the time the last committee meeting was held, there was only one person from the village on it. Jean Dolan.

Officially, the shutters went up just before Christmas, 2011. But the truth was that the writing had been on the wall for some time. That, however, is not how Sheila Norbury would remember it. Rather, her’s would be the view that, for over seventy years, the Ashley Women's Institute had been a force in the land and, always, a force for the good.

And would Mrs Clegg have been proud of that?

“Oh yes. I'm sure she would.”



FIRST MEETING

OF THE

ASHLEY WOMENS INSTITUTE

HELD AT

ARDEN HOUSE

1932

President - Mrs Clegg
Secretary - Miss Stelfox
Treasurer - Mrs J Lamb

Committee

Mrs J Norbury

Mrs A Erlam

Mrs J Erlam

Mrs T Jackson

Mrs A Walkden

Mrs E Street

Mrs W Snape

Mrs W Brown

Mrs A Warburton

Mrs F Daniel

What seems to grow fairer to me as life goes by is the love and grace and tenderness of it. Not its wit and cleverness and grandeur of knowledge, grand as knowledge is, but just the laughter of little children and the friendship of friends. The cosy talk by the fireside. The sight of flowers and the sound of music.

John Richard Green

CASTLE MILL

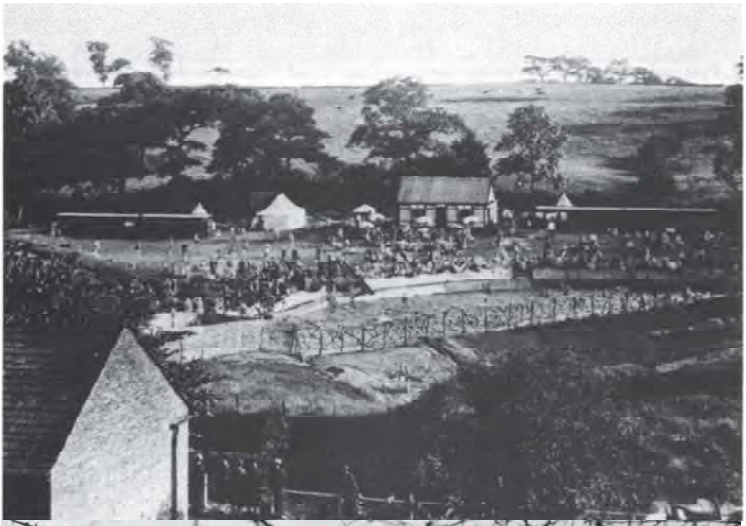
There are fond memories, posted all over the Internet, of the open-air swimming pools at Castle Mill.

Many remember the disinfectant foot bath, which was de rigueur before jumping into the water, but all seem to remember the pools with affection. And why not? Swimming pools in the middle of nowhere with not a runway in sight. The Bollin River swirling gently round the sides and the whole of the summer holiday ahead. OK, so maybe they were cold, dirty and crowded but, for the kids of the 1930's, 40's and 50's, when package holidays in the sunshine were yet to be invented, the Castle Mill pools were El Dorado.

It's all gone now. The pools closed and were filled in during the 1970's and, perhaps in recognition of their almost exotic reputation, a Spanish style villa was constructed in their place.

Walk down the road that curls past it. Ignore the Jets lifting off Runways One and Two. And the rat-race of cars finding a shortcut to Wilmslow. Then pause, listen to the echoes of a small corner of Cheshire at play. And reflect on the nature of human progress that first builds a small Anglo-Saxon fort on a parcel of land. Then a farm. Then a mill. Then a swimming pool. Finally a hacienda.

And, no doubt in time, a car park for a high-speed railway line.



ASHLEY AT WAR

The village probably wasn't too high on the list of preferred targets for the Reich Air Ministry but it did have the misfortune to be not too far away from Manchester. About ten miles, as the crow flies, from Trafford Park and the city centre and the consequence of that was more than its fair share of bombs. On reflection, perhaps that should read 'as the Junkers Ju 88 flies,' since that's what Goering's merry men were driving at the time.

Happily, apart from the odd broken door and window, the village didn't have too many problems. True, if you take a walk around the local fields, you'll find many a bomb crater but, in all probability, the hole that you're looking at is actually an old 'marl' or clay pit.

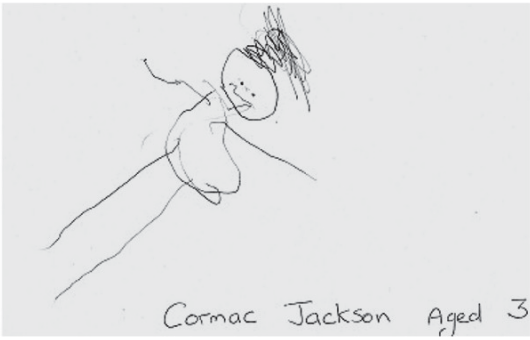
Never one to resist a challenge, however, Ashley had its own anti-aircraft and searchlight battery, which was sited in a field on Castle Mill Lane, between Thorns Green and Lane End. Home to some forty personnel, it remained there until the end of the war.

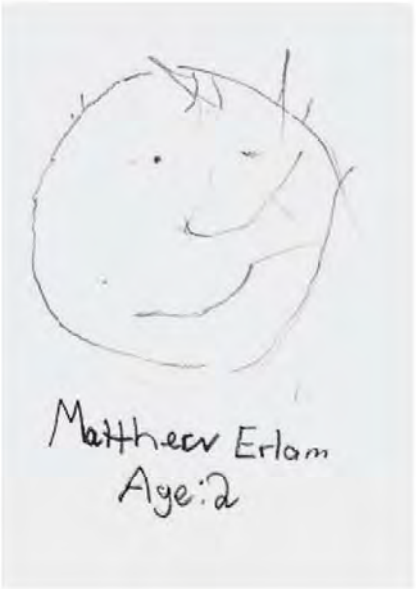
There's no record of them ever actually having hit anything but, as the unfortunate Union soldier, Major-General John Sedgwick allegedly said just before a Confederate bullet felled him, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist ……"


Natalya Erlam
Age 8


OLIVIA
5


Katie 9


Cormac Jackson Aged 3


Matthew Erlam
Age: 2


Madeleine
Chalker
13


L
2 thy : Age = 7


L
Sasha Erlam.
Age 11

EIGHTY YEARS AGO

At first sight, it's simply a bill of sale. An auction. John E. Braggins of Knutsford has been asked to sell what is, basically, a farm. Cattle and sheep. Horses and hens. A tractor, tools and the various bits and pieces that go with a working farm in 1933. No land. Back Lane, like so many farms in this corner of Cheshire, was a tenant farm on the Tatton Estate.

But, as with so many sales, there was a sadness behind it. Five years earlier, in a tragic farming accident, Sarah Wright, the farmer John Wright's wife, had drowned. And. four years later, John himself died. Their children had moved on. The farm closed.

Back Lane Farm is still there and it's probably still a ten minute walk from Ashley Station but there's still a poignancy to this notice of farewell.

Wednesday Next, 25th October 1933

BACK LANE FARM ASHLEY

(About 10 minutes walk from Ashley Station)

Highly Important Agricultural Dispersal Sale of

67 GRAND YOUNG DAIRY & STORE CATTLE

2 Working Horses. **21** Store Sheep.

100 Head of Poultry.

Large Quantity of PRODUCE.

"International" Tractor. Excellent Collection of **Implements.**

Gears and Harness. Dairy Vessels.

Poultry Appliances, Etc.

JOHN E. BRAGGINS & CO.

are favoured with instructions from the Exors. of Mr. John Wright, TO SELL BY AUCTION, as above

SALE TO COMMENCE at 12 o'clock promptly

Catalogues from the Auctioneers :–Knutsford, Wilmslow, Macclesfield and Chelford Cattle Market.

Printed by THE BOLLIN PRESS, Wilmslow. 'Phone 39.

Sheila's Farm

SHEILA'S FARM

and it seems like yesterday

by Sheila Norbury

Ashley was a very small village, when I first came here as a land girl, aged 17, in 1948.

I was used to going to the pictures, twice a week, and dancing, three times a week. Here, there was no picture house. No dance hall. Only one dance, once a year, in the school, and one or two whist drives. And, once a month, the Women's Institute. Not a lot for a teenager to do. So, I used to go to Altrincham on my bike, dancing once a week, and to Hale pictures. And I used to watch wrestling in the Drill Hall, which is now a hotel in the middle of Hale.

Well, getting back to Ashley in 1948....

There was one pub and one post office-cum-shop. A blacksmith who shod horses, made gates and hinges, sharpened tools and repaired farm machinery. There was a new council estate starting to be built and there were two more houses for estate workers on Tatton and a police house. The pub was called The Greyhound pub and, behind it, there was a piece of land that

it owned on which all the village played football, since, back then, there was no playing field at the school. The children loved it. But it will have to remain no more than a memory because it's now got houses built on it.

Opposite the pub, there were three cottages and the barn that is now a house. Beside the barn, there were two brick-built cart sheds. The pub was also a small farm where they kept a pig. They also had a lorry and delivered coal that they brought up from the station, where there was a small coal yard. At one time farmers used to take the milk down to the station, where it was put on the train and taken off to a Manchester dairy. It was all steam trains in those days, the sound of which the horses hated and would always run away. And before we leave 1948, let me remind you that food was still rationed, as well as sweets and tobacco.

I stayed on the same farm until I was married in February, 1951.

I got married in Ashley church, on 10th February. My husband, John Norbury, was a farmer's son. He farmed on the outskirts of Ashley with his father and mother. His father was a big shire horse breeder and President of the Shire Horse Show. At one time, they had no less than seventeen horses. They grew potatoes, swedes, mangles, wheat, oats, carrots, onions and beetroot. And they also kept pigs and cows. Quite a collection. They won a lot of prizes at Altrincham and Mobberley shows with their horses and roots.

When my father in law passed away in May,1954, there was a sale. We bought a tractor, two lorries, a plough and harrows, various tools, a sow with ten followers and fifteen hens. For various reasons, John couldn’t simply take over the farm, so we had to apply for the tenancy, along with everyone else. Because there were a lot of farmers interested, we didn't really think we stood a chance but eventually, we got an interview in February, 1955. And, as it turned out, we were lucky. All went well and we

ended up with the farm. But we couldn't take over until August, so we set about doing up the shippens and making a new dairy, so that we could get some cows. It had to be done, since at that time, all cows had to be tested for TB and cleanliness was very much the order of the day.

We started farming on our own in February, 1956. At that point, we had three children and my mother-in-law lived with us. She was a lovely lady and a great help to me, setting me free to do jobs on the farm as we only had one man, my husband.

When we started selling milk, we filled the small shippen with fourteen British Fresians. I used to carry buckets of milk to the dairy, where they were poured through a sieve and into a large, steel tank. Opening a tap at the base of the tank, the milk then dribbled slowly over a series of water-cooled pipes, before finally ending up in a large milk churn. We managed to fill four of these churns and that was a good start. When they were filled, the milk lorry collected them at 730 in the morning, taking them to a dairy for bottling. After a month, we got our first milk cheque. Very exciting. We then bought four more newly-calved heifers and then some more. And more. And more, until we'd filled the big shippen. By the time we'd filled the shippens with cattle, we were getting one hundred gallons of milk and we were over the moon, as that was exactly the number John had wanted.

But, by now I had another baby on the way and it was getting harder to carry the milk down to the dairy. So, we divided the garage up and made a new dairy, so that John could do it himself. Which left me only having to feed some calves and some hens, although we did actually increase the number of hens to push up the sales of eggs.

It was also my job to wash the milk units and buckets. We had a Barco boiler to scald everything. Everything had to be spotlessly clean, as you never knew when the inspectors were coming to take samples. After the new baby, I got back into the swing of

things and, once again, we decided to bag swedes for the Manchester market. We used to hog them for the winter. You made a trench and put all the cattle swedes in and then cover them with straw and soil, leaving a gap at the top for air. The small ones were banged up and we also used to hog mangles. When you wanted to use them, you opened one side of the hog. As simple as that. It's how we kept potatoes as well.

In the summer, we used to harvest the corn with the reaper and binder and stook the sheaves. After four or five days, we carted them, that's if the weather stayed dry, and then stack them in the shed. Heads to the middle and stalks to the outside, The sheaves were stacked in a circle, the stackers making their way round in a clockwise direction. A large bag of straw was left in the middle, so that, when the circle was complete, it could be removed, leaving a large hole where it had been. That hole made sure that circle would be aired.

The thrashing machine and baler came in the winter. A man stood on the thrasher box with a sharp knife to cut the strings, when you passed in the sheaves. The corn was thrashed out and bagged. Meanwhile, the straw went through the back into the baler, where it was tied with wire. They were heavy bales. And there was a man that used to carry the chaff away. I didn't have to do any of that and we always had plenty of help. In those days, everyone helped one another with the thrashing and, by way of saying thank you, my mother-in-law and I fed the men with lots of potato pies, followed by apple pies and custard, which she had made.

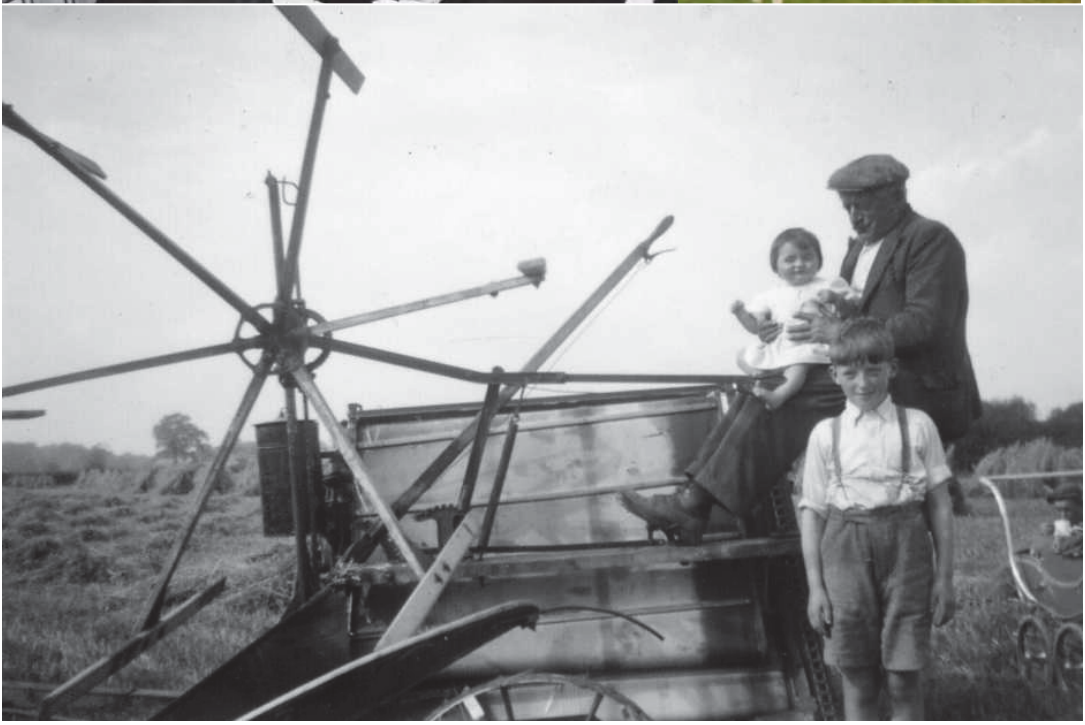
In 1957, we had our crops combined by Eric Warburton. It was to be quite a few years before we could get around to buying our own combine. In 1958 I had another baby and another in 1959. And then a gap, before I had my last one in 1963. Seven children, four boys and three girls.

I'm now retired but I still live at the farm, which is now a bed and breakfast as well. My youngest son, David, grows winter barley and hay and he keeps a small herd of beef cattle.

In order, my children are Sheila, James, Joan, Maureen, John, Malcolm and David.

Sheila Norbury

A speech prepared but not given for the occasion of the 80th birthday of the Ashley W I. Sadly, the Institute had pulled down the final curtain some months earlier.



MY LIFE IN THE VILLAGE SHOP

by Lewis Oliver Francis Norbury

My name is Lewis Oliver Francis Norbury and I am 7.

I live at Ashley Village Store and we sell a lot of things as we are a convenience store. When my Mum goes to cash and carry, I sometimes get to go with her and I push the trolley.

I'm allowed sweets whenever I want some.

I have to taste everything that there is.

I like to ride my bike, do gardening and watch tv.


A. Norbury
Ashley Village Store

Yes, I have said it before. And felt it. Starlight is better than moonlight a million times to me, whom the full moon scares. Nothing so dreadful as moonlight on a garden wall have I seen. And to look at her in a swollen fullness is to be near losing faith and reason. Desolate, dead thing she is and the light from her, deadly. She is Medusa, I know, and turns all to stone. But starshine is like carols in heaven at the Nativity.

Edward Burne-Jones

THE WHITE LADY

by T. Ottway

In the mid-19th century, one Mrs. Meredith lived in Ashley Hall, a wealthy widow with a love of the good life and good company. As a result, the Hall was frequently filled with guests and so it was, one summer weekend, when her daughter arrived home from Cambridge, bringing with her a young lady friend.....

When the song birds were hushed and darkness surrounded the Hall, the guests took their candles and retired to bed. The young lady in the Cedar Room slept soundly enough until, at some time in the night, she was suddenly awakened. Opening her eyes, she saw, at the foot of her bed, a woman dressed in a long, white gown. Her hair was long and dark, falling around her shoulders and framing a face that might have been beautiful were it not ravaged by sorrow, with dark eyes brimming with tears.

Strangely, the girl in the bed was not greatly alarmed. The intruder looked gentle in her manner, possibly another guest who

had lost her way in the dark. Or even a servant. Before she could speak, the figure turned and vanished into the shadows.

The incident was forgotten in the pleasures of the bright day but, when night came again, so did the visitor in white. This time, the figure was much closer, leaning over the bed with her long hair brushing the covers. Instinctively, the girl thrust out her arm to ward off this intruder but her hand met nothing. This strange visitor with the tearstained face did not belong to Ashley Hall. Or to this world. But to another.

The girl in the Cedar Room, now thoroughly frightened, sat huddled until the first light of dawn and the sound of pans, clattering in the kitchens below. Then she dressed, packed her bag and went downstairs. There she told her hostess of the events that had taken place and said she must leave Ashley Hall at once. Mrs. Meredith listened sympathetically, expressed her regrets, ordered the carriage for the young lady, but did not believe a word of her story. Her much loved home, standing proudly on the banks of the River Bollin, had no ghosts. Of that she was certain.

Some weeks later, her sister, Lady Pierrepoint, arrived with her three children. There was no nursery at Ashley Hall but Lady P., a woman of strong character, decided that the Cedar Room would be ideal. Despite the objections of Mrs Meredith, who had not entirely forgotten the story of the young lady from Cambridge, the children's cots, toys and other belongings were installed and Mrs Meredith waited, in some trepidation, to see what happened. Nothing did. The children seemed quite happy and it was soon apparent that her fears were groundless.

Or so it would seem.

At the end of the two weeks, Lady Pierrepoint and the children were packed and ready to start for home, the carriage waiting at the door. When the last farewells had been said, a small head leaned from the carriage window and said, “Dear Aunt, we look

forward to visiting you again and, when we do, will the lady in the white gown still come to see us every night? Fred and I tried to talk to her but she would not answer us." Then the carriage rolled away, leaving a totally dismayed and horrified Mrs Meredith, frozen still in the driveway.

It is said that, from that day, she became a different person. Her good spirits deserted her and, although guests continued to come and go at Ashley Hall, the house was never to be the happy place it once had been. Orders were given for the Cedar Room to be locked and the doors never opened again. Mrs Meredith began to fail in health until one day, some years later, she made a decision. She would face this intruder herself, once and for all.

The room was opened, dusted and cleaned. A bed was prepared, just as it had been for the young visitors of happier times, and Mrs Meredith retired to face the unknown. Unable to sleep, the night seemed endless until she rose, exhausted, at the first rays of the sun and, sitting at the dressing table, she began her toilet. There, in the mirror and looking over her shoulder, was the 'Woman in White,' the sad unhappy face close to her own.

In a poor state of health, the shock was too great and Mrs Meredith became very ill. It is said that some of her good spirits returned, knowing that she herself had faced the unearthly intruder. But it seems her health never did. I quote, "A few weeks later, she quitted Ashley Hall for ever - for the grave."

Taken from a publication called News from the Invisible World *by T. Ottway of Cambridge, written in 1853, its facts being researched and confirmed by John H Ingram, in 1896.*

THE ORRELL ARMS

Many years ago, it seems that there was a man called Robert Orrell, 1683-1753, who lived at Arden House.

Who Robert Orrell was, what he did and where his family went, are for you to Google during the long winter months. His legacy, however, for the village might have been the name of the pub, for The Greyhound was originally called The Orrell Arms. Time, however, moves on and so do families and succeeding years brought the Egertons into the frame.

In time, Ashley was subsumed into the Egerton Empire and, perhaps inevitably, The Orrell Arms became The Greyhound, in honour of the incumbent Lord Egerton's favourite dog. It's called paternalism. Or even, droit de seigneur.

Maybe it’s just as well that the man’s favourite creature wasn’t a frog.


Ashley Village, near Altrincham.

Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything.

Muhammad Ali


BUPA


ashley
ROSE QUEEN

CAST YOUR FETE TO THE WIND

Past Rose Queen Fetes, the countryside at play.

Let me tell you, scholar, that Diogenes walked on a day, with his friend, to see a country fair, where he saw ribbons and looking-glasses and nut-crackers and fiddles and hobby-horses and many other gimcracks. And, having observed them and all the other finnimbruns that make a complete country fair, he said to his friend, "Lord! How many things are there in this world of which Diogenes hath no need?"

Izaak Walton.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ASHLEY ROSE

MEMORIES OF A ROSE QUEEN

by Madeleine Chalker

The sun was shining when I became Rose Queen.

Everyone was having so much fun. I said my speech. I thought it would go all wrong. Thank goodness it didn't. Everyone cheered as the fair opened.

The cakes were delicious, especially with your family there. We didn't think we would get my grandpa on the field. We did. He loved every minute of it. We all did! Then the tug of war started. The girls gave it all our might. I also wrote to the queen. It was a busy day.

Then, my next job was going to the Christingle. I read a bit from the bible. I also acted a little. We said goodbye to Alan Dawson with cake, drinks and a little gift for him.

Mothers day was good. I said to my mum nothing would go wrong but, it did. We had some technical difficulties. The flowers didn't show up but, Mrs. Walker had as great idea to give the mothers a drink and biscuits. Instead of the flowers, we gave hugs to each other which is even better.

I really enjoyed being a Rose Queen.

EVERY VILLAGE SHOULD HAVE ONE

by Steve Johnson

It's true. Every village should have at least one. And preferably one or two more. And I would even go as far as to say that without them, a village is no more than a collection of houses, parked in the middle of nowhere.

Strong words, indeed. And who, or what, I hear you say, are these people or things, without which no village is complete?

Why, the answer is simple, as anyone who listens to The Archers will tell you. Eccentrics. No more, no less. True, Ambridge is rather overburdened by them but the Beeb is always liable to do things to excess. However, the truth is that, just as the English literary canon needed its own John Clare, arguably the greatest-ever poet of the countryside and yet a man who turned quirkiness into an art form, so every country hamlet needs its very own Joe Grundy.

Now, I can't speak for Ashley. But I shall make mention of one or two of the perhaps more enigmatic folk of my own village and you must then ask yourselves whether or not Ashley also passes the litmus test.

First off, there was the ambulance man. A stout, elderly chap who liked to sit on the stone wall at the entrance to the village, carefully monitoring everything that passed by. Those who knew him understood. But for the stranger to the parish, the purpose of this lonely, if somewhat irascible, vigil was unclear. Little could they have guessed that he was actually waiting for an ambulance.

Not for himself you understand. Despite sitting there in all weathers, the old chap seemed healthy enough, if somewhat overweight. Nor did it really seem to matter who the ambulance might be looking for. It was simply enough that it was an ambulance. And the moment that such a thing loomed into view, klaxon blaring and engine roaring, our hero would leap from the wall and chase the thing through the village, whirling his arms about, legs pumping up and down, wild-eyed and hugely determined in his pursuit. Until finally, gasping and wheezing, grinding to a halt, as his quarry fled into the distance.

He never actually caught one but, as with all great dreamers, he lived in hope. What would he have done if he had caught one? And why did he want to catch one anyway? No one ever asked him. It seemed impolite. But there's no doubt that he added a rich sense of variety to our lives.

And we shall miss him. For one day, he did catch his ambulance. Or rather, in a sense, it caught him, bearing the old chap off to the great stone wall in the sky. And I was about to say that we shall never see his like again but that, of course, would be nonsense.

There is, for example, the jigsaw lady. A woman for whom jigsaws are the bread of life, if not life itself. She spends her entire time visiting every charity shop in the county, buying up these

things. Having completed them, she then returns them to the shop, carefully writing her name on the box. Why? So that she'll know she's already done it, if ever she chances across that particular jigsaw again. What future collectors of early 21st-century artefacts will make of it, heaven only knows.

Or the couple who buy second-hand books, purely on the basis of their size. Regardless of either its author or its subject, their only interest is in the book's proportions. Which is why they go shopping with a tape-measure.

Shall I go on? Shall I really tell you about the Monopoly man who….but, perhaps, I'll leave it there. Ask him a question about the game and you're stuck there for the day and I begin to glaze over, even at the thought. But, I'm sure that, by now, you've caught my drift.

How impoverished is that dull, urban landscape, safely in the distance. And how rich the countryside, where true British eccentricity happily lives on. It is on my doorstep and I embrace it. And I trust it is the same for you in Ashley.

Part of an illustration by Henry Holiday of Lewis Carroll's Hunting of the Snark, *engraved by Joseph Swain*

ASHLEY'S COBBLER

At the start of the twentieth century, Ashley still had its own shoe-maker.

William Baker.

He lived and worked in what is now Chinley Cottage, at Lane End. Sadly, we don't seem to know too much about William but a contemporary account tells us that his price for a pair of working boots - clogs - was eighteen shillings. To put that into perspective, a week's wages, at the time, was about sixteen shillings and the price of a pint of beer at The Greyhound, sixpence. Which was, by the by, expensive but that was the work of the unlikely Welsh teetotaller, David Lloyd-George.

William's son, William Walton Baker, went on to become Mayor of Altrincham in 1920, where he presided over the absorption of parts of Carrington and Dunham Massey into the burgeoning Altrincham mix.

And did you know that the patron saint of cobblers is Saint Crispin? Another first for Google.

No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease

No comfortable feel in any member.

No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees.

No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds.

November.

A Letter Game
By
Elsa Jackson, 7

Ashley is very small but good to live in
Some people live in Ashley
Home is Ashley
Lovely Ashley is friendly
Everyone is kind in Ashley
You can't find a better place to live in than Ashley

and by
Faith Jackson, 8

Ashley is small but very happy with people all around
Some people prefer towns but for me it's the village Ashley for living in
Hail, snow, rain or sun Ashley's smiley and fun
Living in Ashley is what you'll want to do when you hear what we do
Everything is perfect here and there, all of Ashley knows how to share
You can go to all the other places you like but the village Ashley is the one you'll want to stay in

'The Ashley Owl on Cow Lane.
By Thomas, aged 8.

SOPHIE'S STORY

by Sophie Parker

I am Sophie Parker and I am twelve years old.

I had a lovely morning with my grandma and good friend, Shirley, the other weekend. Firstly, we visited St. Elizabeth's Church, which was built in 1880. When I walked into the church, I immediately noticed the stunning, stained-glass window. It looked beautiful with the morning sun shining through it. I was also delighted to see my brother's and my name on the Baptism Scroll, he was christened in 1999 and myself in 2001.

Once outside, we noticed the first white snowdrops and little, cute, yellow Daffodils. Also, we saw in the garden of the church a flash of a wild rabbit. When we walked out of the Church gates, we noticed the views across the fields which is rolling countryside and it was very scenic.

The Church and its grounds are situated between Ashley village crossroads and the remains of Ashley Hall which was built in 1492. It was where, in 1715, the Barons of Cheshire met to decide whether to join the Stuart Rising (Scottish) or remain faithful to King George 1 (who was German).

From the Hall, there was a secret tunnel to Bowdon. The Hall also boasted the ghost of a white lady.

At the end of our fabulous morning out we went to the quaint, little village shop and purchased a delicious bag of sweets which included my favourite, a gummy snake, Vimto strip, Haribo's and the MOST disgusting, SOUREST, sweet EVER!!!! Which was called the Centre Shock and it certainly gave me one!!! I will remember this trip to Ashley for a long time to come.

Kind regards,

Sophie Parker


A. Norbury
Ashley Village Store
Guardian
JENNY IS MAY QUEEN ELECT


Beryl


Jessica
5


IRIS UNWIN
AGED 18
MONTHS


faith Jackson
aged 8 years old


Elsa Jackson: 7


James Jackson Aged 4


Isaac
Leigh


Jessica Evison-Williams 6

SHE'S WAITING FOR YOU

A short story

by Nick Turnbull

The meeting broke up shortly after nine.

Apart from Item Six, nothing on the evening's agenda had given any cause for concern. A brief discussion of the problems of mice in the vestry. The Treasurer's report. Rarely anything other than gloomy and, this evening, even more so. Penny had done her best to sound cheerful as she told them about the new Parish initiative, Grounds For Action. It had been the committee's view, however, that the words Grounds For Action had a very hollow ring. Item Six had seen to that.

As she now closed the heavy, wooden front doors of St. Mary's, twisting the thick, iron key in the lock, then hiding it beneath the papers scattered on the small table to her right, Susannah knew they had lost.

She walked slowly down the central aisle of the empty church. The setting sun of the June evening was now suffusing the tall church windows with a warm, orange glow. On a happier evening, Susannah might have stopped to admire the effect, another example of the beauty that was to be found in the world, if you were prepared to look for it. Her faith had always been born of a very simple, very straightforward instinct. But this evening, it had deserted her.

When she reached the altar, she looked up, almost as if hoping, perhaps even expecting, that the angels in the stained glass world above it would say something. Some words of comfort. Even of advice. But they said nothing. Simply

continuing to gaze into the middle distance, their harps silent, their limbs and lips frozen for all time.

But that time had run out.

Susannah wondered briefly what happened to stained glass angels. Were they simply broken up? Coloured shards of glass thrown into a bin. Or were they reinvented as table-tops and room dividers for a money-broker's den.

A money broker. Susannah smiled. Once upon a time, no doubt reviled as one of the sons of Satan. More recently someone they would dearly have liked to have had on their side. But they hadn't found one. They'd prayed. But God, presumably, had never heard of a money broker.

Susannah turned away from the altar and opened the door to the vestry. Suddenly, twelve pairs of eyes now stared at her. Did they blame her? Maybe. But all except one of her twelve predecessors as vicar of St. Mary's, whose pictures hung on the vestry wall, were now dead. And the lone survivor, a man called Everard, had long since given up the faith and was now living with a commune in mid-Wales. And then there was the unknown woman, who hadn't been a vicar and yet whose small portrait also stood above the fireplace. She too seemed to glare.

"But it's not my fault," whispered Susannah to the pictures. "It really isn't my fault."

Turning away, she unlocked the church's small back door and stepped out into the evening. Quickly.

It didn't take long for the news to spread through the village. It was true that very few of the people who lived in Rishley actually ever went to St.Mary's but bad news turns to flood water and within days, not one of the farmers, commuters,

pensioners and children, who made up the Parish numbers, hadn't heard about the church.

"But they can't."

"They say they can."

"I blame it on the bishops."

"Why didn't they say anything?."

"When's it happening?"

The curious thing is that, although very few of the farmers, commuters, pensioners and children normally ever gave St. Mary's a second thought, they could now talk of nothing else. Someone called a local newspaper. Someone else wrote a letter to the Times. And someone made a poisonous phone call to the vicarage.

Which was unkind. The last thing Susannah had wanted was what she was now being asked to do. By the Diocese. The unhappy body responsible for the many churches and cathedrals of which St. Mary's was no more than one. A very small one at that. And also one that had run out of money. Susannah's husband, Ned, had very little time for the Diocese and when he'd heard of their decision, he'd simply told Susannah to resign.

"Why have anything to do with them? They've got all the vision of a hedgehog and they're just about as appealing."

"But I have to do what they say."

"Why?"

"And anyway, I can't resign. You know that. I've got work to do."

"Ah, yes." Ned knew he could never get past this particular obstacle. "The work of the Lord."

There were those who had, at first, wondered why Susannah had ever said yes to Ned. At first sight, they were entirely different animals. Susannah, a shy, quiet woman who, although dedicated to her life as a priest, was otherwise happy always to

put others' interests before her own. On the other hand, Ned had little time at all, if any, for anyone else's interests. Apart, of course, from Susannah's. A lecturer in English, he had an opinion on more or less anyone and anything from the assassination of Julius Caesar to the rights of gypsies in twenty-first century Europe and he wasn't afraid to make his views known. Not that anyone took him very seriously. Most especially in The Throstle's Nest, where Ned would often call by at the end of yet another day spent drumming Elizabethan metaphysics into the heads of his no doubt reverential students.

"Evening, Ned. Usual?"

"Certainly."

"So, what's she going to do?"

"Who?"

"Susannah. About the church."

"I've told her to resign."

"Bad idea."

"Why?"

"Ned, who else is going to lead the fight?"

Susannah had never thought of herself as having anything in common with St. Joan. At school, she had always shied away from confrontation. As, indeed, she had done throughout her life. Not because she was afraid. Nobody who could spend many nights of the year walking the back streets of the nearby cities, seeking out the drunk, the drugged and the derelict to offer help and support, could ever be accused of fear. It was simply that she thought confrontation a waste of time. It simply engendered bitterness. Even hate. Neither were welcome visitors to God's world.

And yet, she was now being asked to lead the fight. To stand up for what the villagers of Rishley perceived to be their right. True. They only ever used the place when one of them died. Or got married. There might even be carol-singing on Christmas Eve, fuelled by an evening spent in The Throstle. And there might be the odd christening. But that was it.

How strange then, now St. Mary's was to close, that they should be quite so agitated.

Such were her thoughts as Susannah now walked along Bridge Lane. The sun was low in the sky, another evening beckoned. Ned was at home, cooking supper. Susannah had needed time to herself.

'Item Six. That on the direction and instruction of the Diocesan Office, the Parish Church Committee of St. Mary's, Rishley, should consider the immediate closure of the church, there being neither the funding nor the congregation to support any credible future.'

One week ago, on a summer's evening in June as beautiful as this one through which she now walked, the Committee had, indeed, considered. Seven women, five men. John, the Treasurer. Thomas, the Secretary. And Susannah, vicar of St Mary's for no more than a year. Her first appointment. And now her first closure. Her first failure. The setting sun had little warmth.

At first, she didn't see the woman.

Bridge Lane ran through the fields, each guarded by tall, broad-leafed oak and ash and bordered by tumbling, matted hedgerows, now shadowed as the sun slowly disappeared. Against such a background, Susannah, deep in thought, had not seen the woman.

She wore a long, green coat, tied at its neck and flowing almost to the ground as she walked. On her head, a small, dark bonnet. Susannah stopped, waiting in the evening sunlight, her

shadow thrown down the dusty lane towards the woman, who now walked slowly towards her. Her gaze was steady. The gaze of bright blue eyes, buried in a white face, whose lips barely moved as she stopped and now spoke.

"Good evening."

"Good evening," said Susannah, trying to smile but without conviction.

The woman stood silent for a moment, watching Susannah. High above, in the branches of an oak, a young owl called for its mother.

"I do hope you're not going to close my church."

"She seemed vaguely familiar."

"You'll have seen her in the village."

"I don't think so."

"Goodnight, Susannah."

"Yes. Goodnight, Ned."

Exactly two weeks after the St. Mary's Parish Church Council had considered Item Six and then decided that they had no choice but to close the church, once again the building was playing host to a meeting. The difference was that, this evening, the church was full. Everyone in the village, it seemed, had decided to put in an appearance and it was generally agreed that the last time the place had been quite so busy had been for Ellie Taylor's funeral. At one hundred and eight, Ellie had been

Rishley's oldest-ever resident and the rumour was that most people had turned out simply to be sure that she was dead.

This evening, there was no Ellie to bury. Only the church to close.

"You can't do it!"

"It's against the law!"

"We need the church!"

The officer from the Diocese, sitting with Susannah at the wooden table facing this congregation, was baffled. Brian White knew perfectly well that very few of the two or three hundred people, shouting at him from the rows of wooden seats that filled the church, ever went near the place. Which is why it didn't have any money. He'd expected disappointment. Even the odd raised voice. But outright hostility hadn't been on the agenda and certainly not on this scale. He'd even heard someone mutter the word 'bastard,'

Then he'd felt tempted to smile. Pleased to have taken the call from Elliott earlier in the day. Elliott Reardon. This baying, insulting, hypocritical rabble in front of him might think they could bully him into abject submission. To go back on the Diocesan decision. To say 'No, I'm sorry. It's all been a big mistake. Of course you can have your church back.' In a pig's eye. Brian White held the ace card in the pack and, this evening, these ridiculous people had sealed his decision to play it. He may have felt tempted to smile. But he didn't. It might have turned the ranting farmers, commuters, pensioners and children into a lynch mob.

In time, Susannah had managed to bring the meeting to order. Patiently, she explained that the Diocese had reasons for their decision and that Brian White should at least be allowed to spell them out. Which he then tried to do. A poor speaker at the best of times, this evening no more than a second-rate cattle auctioneer.

He said first that closing St. Mary's was the last thing anyone in the Diocese had wanted to do. It was a lie and everyone knew it. Then he tried to draw a picture of the Church as a whole. That wherever you looked, there was no money. Even some of the bishops had spoken of taking a pay cut. Or even selling off some of the family silver.

"So why haven't they done it?"

"Why not just get rid of the bishops?"

White soldiered on. He chewed his way through statistics, demographics, congregation numbers and rising costs and he might as easily have been any manager from any bank in the land, calling time on a loan long overdue. And he spoke with all the humanity of just such a person. When he'd finished, there'd been silence. Broken, at last, by one angry voice.

"Is that it?"

White had nodded. "I'm afraid it is. There's no money. And that means no church."

It wasn't altogether true. As he left St. Mary's, the meeting over, White knew that there was, in fact, a great deal of money. All of it Reardon Elliott's. And now he allowed himself to smile. What was true, however, was that there would be no church.

Reardon Elliott couldn't believe his luck. Two acres of real estate in the middle of commuter land, country views in all directions and yet within minutes of the motorways. And even the airport. And all for a song. He'd always suspected that the Church authorities probably knew a great deal about God and such things but that, when it came to business, they almost certainly hadn't moved on a great deal since Noah built his ark. He'd promised the poor fool White that all he wanted to build

was a stylish, high quality restaurant, preserving the church buildings and taking the greatest care to ensure that its proud history would live on. Even if only as a restaurant rather than as a church. And he'd gone on to explain that, because he was lavishing such care and attention on the buildings, it meant that his offer for St. Mary's might have to be a tad lower than the Diocese might have hoped for. At first, White had demurred but had, at last agreed. Partly because of the sudden appearance, one morning, of two thousand pounds in cash in the top left-hand drawer of his desk.

All of which meant that Reardon Elliott had a very broad smile on his face as he now stood in St Mary's churchyard, revelling in the morning sunshine, watching as White now got out of his car and walked towards him.

"Morning, Brian."

"Good morning, Reardon. Very pleasant, isn't it?"

"Very pleasant, Brian. Very pleasant indeed."

The two men began to walk round the church, White carefully explaining its history, its fabric and the rules. That the Garden of Remembrance could not be moved. That the stained glass windows must be preserved. That the tower should remain.

He spoke of the Ellington family who had built St. Mary's in 1872. For the people of Rishley And of the last Ellington to die in 1957, leaving the church and its land to the village.

"On condition that they continued to pay for its upkeep," said White, taking off his glasses and polishing them on the cuffs of his shirt. "If they couldn't. Or didn't. Then ownership passed to the Diocese. And since we told them to close it, that's exactly what's happening. Very simple, really."

From a distance, Susannah watched them. She stood outside Betty's, the small village shop. Betty had died some years ago and the shop was now run by a lady called Hermione but her

name, the village felt, didn't have quite the same ring. The two men were now going into the church. Into the vestry, where, no doubt, the eyes would greet them. It didn't seem an especially kind thought but Susannah hoped the eyes were glaring.

She was aware that someone was standing beside her. At first, she didn't turn her head, almost as if hesitating to see who it might be. Frightened, even.

"I said I hoped you wouldn't close my church."

The voice was even. No malice. No ill-temper. No sense of threat. Susannah continued to look at the church.

"I'm afraid I could do nothing. Nobody could."

"Why not?"

"There was no money."

Susannah now turned, slowly. The woman was staring at her. Still the blue eyes, the porcelain face, the small, dark bonnet.

"No money?"

"We needed money. To keep the church going. There just wasn't any. We'd run out."

Still the blue eyes stared and then narrowed slightly, almost as if in rebuke.

"Don't you think I should be the judge of that? After all, it is my church."

"Hello?"

"Good afternoon. I ….er….I wonder if I could speak to the vicar…?"

"She's not here. She's gone for a walk. I'm Ned. Can I help?"

"Well, it's …er…Brian White here and I …"

"What the hell do you want?"

"Well…I'm not very sure…where to start…It's all very difficult and …well, embarrassing really."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Well, you see…..we've just received a cheque."

Susannah stared at the small vestry fireplace. Above it, hanging on the wall, the twelve pairs of eyes. The vicars of the past. The vicars who no longer seemed to glare at her. And, below them, on the dark, wooden mantelpiece, the woman. Who wore a small, dark bonnet.

'Mary. Beloved wife of the Fifth Earl of Ellington. Born November 18th, 1844. Died April 8th, 1892. Dear Mother of Albert, Ruskin and John. Rest In Peace'

Susannah had found the words carved in the grey marble of the gravestone.

Quarter of a million pounds. A cheque for quarter of a million pounds from the Ellington estate. Having heard of St Mary's impending demise, one of the Trustees had suddenly remembered something about a legacy. To do with the church. Most especially to do with the church in trouble. And he'd been right. A memorandum, drafted in 1892, had made provision for funds to support the church should such funding ever be needed. It had been the Trust's view that such was, indeed, the case and, accordingly, a cheque had been issued. What had made the man remember? He was never able to say. Simply that 'the thought just came into my head.'

Brian White had been surprised. As had Reardon Elliott. And, indeed, the farmers, commuters, pensioners and children

of Rishley village. But not Susannah, for the same thought had also entered her head.

There was now a tapping on the vestry door. Susannah turned, looking towards the door as its handle twisted and the door slowly opened. Harry Evans. The gardener.

"I'm sorry to disturb you vicar."

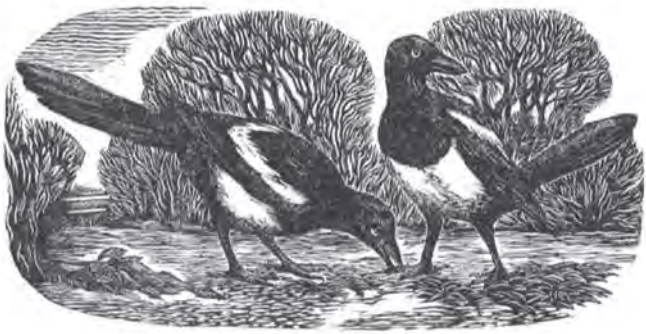
"Please, don't worry."

"But there's a woman in the churchyard. Says she'd like to see you." Ernie paused. "She says …"

"She says what?"

"She says she's waiting for you."

"I know," said Susannah. Because, in truth, she did.



Goodbye