

Nettlebed: The Godwin Family

During the Second World War

The Godwin's can be traced back to the 1600s in Nettlebed Church records.

During the war years (1939-45) my family lived in the property next to Stable Cottage at Joyce Grove. My father Tim had worked for the Fleming family and stayed on as Caretaker when the Grove was passed on to St Marys Hospital Paddington around the end of the 1930s. My Sister Betty worked there for a time too. They originally lived in one of the houses at the bottom of the lane but then moved nearer to the House.

Tim was not deemed fit enough to be a fighting man because of an injury he sustained as a young man in an accident, so he joined the Home Guard but as the war progressed he joined up and served as a batman for an Officer in the Army. My eldest brother Leslie lied about his age, he was not quite 16 when he volunteered for the Royal Navy and saw active service, including sailing on Arctic Convoys. Fortunately he survived the war and continued to serve for a total of 15 years.

Brother Ivor, now 85yrs, still lives in the village and has many stories to tell of these years. He was 11 or 12 when he would sneak out of the house after dark and join the soldiers at the Searchlight Battery positioned at the place the villagers called The Boxes (not far from where the sawmill is now). One night he found them a little worse for drink and they allowed him to man the searchlight! It wasn't long before, Ivor said, he felt a tap on his shoulder and it was his very angry Dad. He marched him home (I'm sure after giving the soldiers a piece of his mind), explaining that had a German aircraft spotted the light he could well have been targeted... He never did it again!

Ivor was a thorn in the side of Mr Morby the Head Gardener. Apparently my sister Betty's soldier boyfriend showed him how to set off a tiny explosion...not the sort of thing to show a young boy! Ivor would set one beneath one of the Rhododendron bushes and just as the poor man was entering the house, he would ignite it. He was dumfounded but never found out the cause!

Jim Goodchild worked at Joyce Grove as a gardener, his parents and siblings living in one of the cottages down the Lane. He became pals with Neil Belson who also worked there, they were both 16. Jim recalls the two of them and Henry Mooring, around winter 1942, going sledging in a tin bath in the field at the back of Soundess. Also he remembers one of the camps being built and the arrival of the American soldiers. There were 2 Camps, North and South. At the age of 18 Jim joined the Army. In 1943, he was sent to 21st Army Group Headquarters as a clerical worker. He then transferred to D C L I and was then sent to Palestine. He was demobbed in 1947 four years to the day from when he joined. It was shortly after his return he married Joyce Bowditch. Joyce worked for many years in the Estate Office for the Fleming family.

A shepherd, Jim's father was always known as 'Shep'. Many people were given nicknames... Like 'Tiggy' Dennis The Headmaster at Nettlebed School. My brother Cyril recalls walking to school one morning when he took the opportunity to sneak in to the orchard and pick 2 apples putting one in each pocket. When he arrived at school he found Tiggy, 'Copper' King (The local policeman) and Mr Morby the Head gardener waiting for him! He was asked to empty his pockets. The kindly policeman asked him why he had taken the apples? He replied 'because sir I was hungry, I only had a slice of toast for breakfast'. They allowed him to join his classmates and no more was said about the incident.

Apparently the day that Mr Dennis left Nettlebed School he handed out a sweet to each pupil telling them that they were a parting gift from 'Tiggy' Dennis, much to the surprise of the children who were unaware that he knew his nickname!

When the American soldiers moved away from the village Cyril and some friends found what remained of a Nissen hut and parts made of wood that they thought were possibly fuselage's for gliders and in another parts of scenery and props that had been used in their Theatre/Music Hall. The villagers had often been invited to join them at their productions. Ivor remembers going to one once and seeing a very well known film star appearing there.

In the Village, soldiers were billeted in many places including the Village Hall. A great tarpaulin covered the dance floor to protect it. They were also in Nags Head Cottage (Now known as No6 The High Street), where my family moved to on their departure. I was born in 1946 in the living room of that house,

delivered by the greatly respected, Nurse Fowler. (She apparently suggested I be named April the month I came into the world. Mum opted for the French version Avril instead). My family remained in that house until they moved to Wanbourne Lane in the early 1970s.

There were many shops and businesses in the village in those days.

On the side of Red Lion Cottage were:

Mr Wells, Shoe Repairs.

Polly Lamb, Sweet Shop.

Mr Mead, Barber, his wife ran a small store adjoining.

The Bull. Hotel and Public House.

Café, Mr Rees Clarke.

Then on the other side:

White Hart Hotel.

Shurey's Garage.

Pearce's, Grocers and Bakers.

Saunders Stores, with Reg Sparrowhawk the Baker behind it.

Butchers Shop.

At the corner of the High Street and Watlington Street:

Brown's Garage.

An old lady, Granny Smith, (the mother of Brenda Novak) and her husband always known as 'Gunboat' Smith, would sell fruit and veg to their neighbours from their cottage in Watlington Street and 'Gunboat' would do deliveries in his van to local villages.

The Sun, Public House.

Post Office.

Estate Yard, the manager Jimmy Johnson.

There was also a Builders Yard in Chapel Lane owned by Harold, Alec and Cecil Brown. When Ivor left school, his first job was with them.

Ivor as a youngster would help old Mr Saunders with his grocery deliveries by horse and cart. It's a wonder he survived long enough! The things he got up too. A few years earlier he had been amongst a group of boys who thought it would be great fun to build a raft and launch it on Wanbourne pond. They strapped together 4 old barrels and tied a few planks on top. It was after they had climbed aboard and pushed away from the bank that they realised a hole in one of the barrels was letting in water and it was Ivor that they decided should put his finger in the hole while the others frantically paddled back to land!

My sister Gwyneth still remembers the day Canadian soldiers gave her, Cyril and their friend Freddy Warner a lift in a tank along the Carriage Drive dropping the thrilled youngsters at the Grove gates. Cyril says he can still remember it today, though he wasn't very old. The driver sat him on his knee so that he could look through the observation slit. The soldiers were always very kind and Gwyneth recalls going in to Rees Clarke's Café with a very young Cyril and the men asked if they could buy them something to eat, Cyril beamed and much to the amusement of the soldiers, said yes please, a 'matta samidge'.

Betty being that much older, would sometimes bring an American serviceman back to the house for tea. It was then that Mum's welsh cakes became popular (she was born and lived in South Wales before coming to Nettlebed). Often the men would supply her with currants and other ingredients so the family and their new found friends could enjoy them.

Bill Leverett is another who says he remembers Mum's welsh cakes. When Bill and my brother Les were youngsters, they were playing near Wanbourne pond (where the children's play area is now). Bill fell in and Les pulled him out with the help of Bill's brother Freddy, saving his life. When my father Tim died, in his wallet we found a newspaper cutting from the Henley Standard titled 'A plucky lad' relating to this rescue. Dad was obviously so proud of his boy he had carried it with him always. Bill was in the R A F during the war years. He was stationed at RAF Halton as a Flight Mechanic and also served in North Africa and Italy being demobbed in 1946.

The Observer Corps were stationed on Windmill Hill and one day sighted some strange balloons flying over the village. A villager who was around at the time believes it was reported to a higher authority and he says that when the objects

were identified, were not amused! Apparently some of the American servicemen had handed out some chocolate bars to a group of young boys and also some small packets to give to their parents. The boys though decided it would be fun to inflate these 'things' and proceeded to set alight the rubbish tip near Priest Hill, where the heat wafted their 'balloons' high in the air. *Members of the Observer Corps*: Charlie Durham, Ron Cummings, Reg Hill and Ralph Norcut.

One afternoon Ivor was walking home from school, at the back of Joyce grove near the Ha-ha, he heard a strange whirring noise approaching above him and he nervously watched as a doodle bug travelled in the direction of Stoke Row. It then went silent and within seconds exploded, apparently coming down close to the Star Brush Factory on the edge of the Stoke Row.

Many of the local girls would cycle to Stoke Row to work repairing aircraft parts in a factory in Busgrove Lane, my sister Betty tells me they would all meet up and cycle together. They would also have to fire-watch overnight sometimes.

Another doodle bug was seen by Pat Sparrowhawk as it passed over coming to rest and miraculously not exploding in the side of a barn at Red Pits Manor. It was very fortunate as Mr Dove a very elderly blind man was asleep in his house close by.

Ivor said this brought to mind the day a Wellington Bomber crashed over at Redpits Manor on Its way back to RAF Benson with sadly the loss of all on board. He remembered too hearing what he believed was an aerial torpedo which came down in a field at Swyncombe.

It was winter 1944 the weather was dreadful with heavy snow and terrible visibility. The family heard a plane go over obviously in trouble... It was a Royal Canadian Air Force Halifax Bomber with a full bomb load, all but two of the crew bailed out safely. The two remaining men sacrificed their lives to guide the plane away from the built up areas. Those brave men going down with the plane in fields at Crowmarsh.

Two Spitfires from RAF Benson collided over Nettlebed on the 6th June 1943. One came down amongst the trees near Ting Tong killing the pilot, the other plane crashed near Black Wood, to the left of Port Hill. The pilot did manage to

bale out but sadly he was too low for his parachute to open properly and the poor man died as he hit the road near to the Police House.

Based at the Bull Hotel yard were the Auxilary Fire Service. The butcher, Jim Sutton was in charge of the men, which included: Reg Sparrowhawk (Baker) Harold Sadler builders labourer, Edward Clark farm labourer, Frank Lloyd Builders labourer, Eric Wiltshire painter, Bill Medhurst barman at the Bull and Alf Skilman chef at the White Hart. Their training sessions included pumping water from the pond adjacent to the recreation ground on to the cricket pitch!

In 1939 when war broke out the first to enlist were the Territorials.

John Godwin my father's younger brother was amongst the gallant young men who left the quiet Oxfordshire Village for the ravages of war with the 4th Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

The men arrived at Cassel, tired, worn and hungry to find the buildings in ruins, dead and wounded men in the streets. There was no hot food or drink to comfort them.

It was May 27th when the weight of the German advances fell. Fighting raged on but the men showed great valour. Michael Fleming the Adjutant gave encouragement to his men as he rode his motorcycle handing out cigarettes.

On May the 29th they were ordered to abandon Cassel as the Dunkirk perimeter was now well manned and the Navy had begun its task of evacuating the British Expeditionary Forces.

It was 8 miles from Cassel at Watou that tanks, guns, mortars and motor borne Infantry enclosed them. Tough savage battle raged. Michael Fleming was amongst those badly wounded. Uncle John was the first to get to him and carry him to cover, but sadly he died from his wounds a few days later after being taken by his captors to hospital.

The last fragments of the Battalion were scattered some firing their few remaining rounds from a ditch.

On the 30th May 1940 the remaining brave men of the 4th Battalion of the Ox & Bucks were captured and taken to Stalag 8B in Poland, but within a short time they were split up and sent to different camps.

These men spent the duration of the war in POW camps in Poland. It was no surprise that John at the end of the war and his return to the village, plumped for the outdoor life which he loved. He married Kathleen Hands and they had one son Richard. Apart for a brief time working for a local builder, John spent the rest of his days working contentedly as a gardener.

Amongst the men who survived their time in the Ox & Bucks and returned to the village were: Bill Sarney, who was also captured and incarcerated in POW camps including Stalag B for the duration of the war.

The Godwins were very fortunate that they lost no family during the war years. Sadly this was not the case for other villagers and a Memorial to those lost can be found at the Lych Gate of St Batholamews Church. The wood of which, was cut from the Nettlebed Estate, by my grandfather Herbert Godwin and was erected by local builders, H. J. Butler of Crocker End.

Engraved on a plaque within the Lych Gate those sadly lost in World War11

Roll of Honour

Capt. M. V. Fleming.	Capt. J. H. Venables.	Albert. J. Belson.
Cpl. S. Green.	L.Cpl. W. Lloyd.	William. H. Clements.
Pte. V. Brown.	Pte. S. F. Green.	Richard. F. Salter.
George Smith.	Patrick. R. Spicer.	

Thankfully those who returned home

Prisoners of War

Sgt. Mjr. J. Godwin.
L. Cpl. A. Brakspear.
Pte. A. Eades.
Pte. A. Richardson.
Pte. W. Sarney.
Pte. J. Wheeler.

Serving Men of the Ox & Bucks

Q. M. Sgt. G. Harwood.
Pte. J. Challis.
Pte. H. W. Green.
Pte. Venables.
Pte. L. West.