

Leeson Cottage

by

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1998



In the mid 19th century, after the death of his wife, my great grand-father Richard Leeson returned to Northamptonshire with his baby son John, then aged 2 years. He settled in one of the pair of cottages now known as "Leeson Cottage" and operated a carpentry business employing six men in the workshop, still in the garden today. He soon married again a local girl named Charlotte, and later bought the other cottage of the pair, converting the ground floor into one house although the bedrooms are still served by separate staircases.

Richard was something of a musician. He became organist and choirmaster for the church, built himself a wooden organ, and composed music for use in the church. The organ was kept in the workshop and choir practices were held there, as Charlotte did not like music in the house. Unfortunately, after Richard's death the organ was neglected and eventually became riddled with wood worm. It was destroyed about thirty years ago. As a child, I was fascinated by it and often used to take out the individual pipes, and blow into them to make notes.

John, my grandfather, who attended the village school, was rather a rebel and on one occasion, when he had been locked in as punishment, he climbed out of a small high window - no mean feat as my grandfather himself proudly told me. Eileen White recently confirmed this story, in a similar story told to her by her grandfather - no doubt a contemporary of John.

John could not get on with his stepmother and he ran away to join the army when in his teens. He married my grandmother Ellen Gatfield whose real name was Helen but who was always known as Ellen or Nellie. They had two sons who later emigrated to Canada, and a daughter Dora, my mother, who all spent holidays in Wappenham with their grandfather Richard, at about the turn of the century.

In 1914, after Richard's death, John, now a carpenter, and Ellen came to live in the cottage to look after stepmother Charlotte in her latter years. Unfortunately, John was no businessman and the carpentry business failed or perhaps it had ceased to exist after Richard's death, but certainly it did not prosper again and John either worked alone or for Mr. Frank King who lived next door. At different times Richard and John both did work for the church and I have always understood that the two chairs used by the clergy were made, one each, by them. Perhaps this belief might be confirmed or discredited by church records.

My grandparents, John and Ellen, continued to live at the cottage after Charlotte's death and were frequently visited by their daughter Dora and husband George Gasson, and three granddaughters, my sisters Phyllis and Lorna, and myself, Una. We spent all our holidays there in the twenties and thirties. My memories include being sent to buy churned butter from Mrs King next door, served through the stable door near the road, and to choose fancy cakes from Chester's Bakery down the lane. Lorna and I also used to buy a pennyworth of toffee from Archer's stores, which Mrs Archer broke up from the slab with a hammer and tongs. I remember a fair on the village green on Feast Day with swings and roundabouts, and on one occasion a fancy dress parade through the village. Another earlier memory was of a visit to the rectory garden when Reverend Mortimer clouted a large tree in the garden and the children scampered about collecting the walnuts as they fell down. I think I was taken there by Betty Chester the baker's daughter. I took some nuts home to my grandmother only to find that they were all bad. Is the walnut tree still there I wonder? It seemed huge to me, but I was only about three years old at the time.

One Christmas Day I was surprised to see many people leaving the bake house carrying their Christmas Dinner covered in a cloth. My grandfather told me that many of the cottages had very small ovens so their Christmas poultry was cooked at the village bakery.

There was a well in the garden of the cottage but this had been boarded over in Charlotte's time, according to my grandfather she believed the water came from under the churchyard. Because the well was no longer in use, all drinking water had to be fetched from the village spout at the foot of Wild Hill. Every week my father and grandfather would don yokes with two pails each and my sisters and I would carry jugs and cans and go across the fields to get a supply of spring water. Rainwater for washing was collected in butts from the roofs of the workshop and the single story extension, as the main cottage roof was thatched at the time.

One of the treats on our holidays was a visit to Banbury on market day. We would walk to Wappenham station and go by train to Banbury where the cattle were already in the market street tied up to railings. We were warned not to get too close in case we were "splashed" which happened on more than one occasion. We always had a lunch of cold ham (the best I have ever tasted if my memory is to be relied upon) in the upstairs room of a little restaurant near the market. At the end of the day, extra trucks were attached to the train for the cattle, and there were frequent stops for some four-legged passengers to leave the train with a great deal of mooing. In those days, the sun always shone, or perhaps we only went to the market if the day was sunny.

My elder sister Phyllis became very friendly with Mary Pargeter whose parents kept the Bull public house. Mr. Pargeter also carried on a butchers business from a building in the yard. Sometimes I was allowed to join them and I remember seeing the indoor well and afterwards having nightmares about falling in it. I think they must have impressed on me that it was a dangerous place. Generally, Lorna and I played in the spinney, sailing little boats made from grandfather's tobacco tins, in the brook that ran alongside. The spinney, where the lake now is, was a really delightful place in those days full of primroses, violets and bluebells, we spent many happy hours there.

After my sisters had grown up I continued to come to Wappenham with my parents, and now my grandfather often became my companion, walking across the fields to collect mushrooms or to Greens Norton to visit his cousins. He was a great walker right up to a year or two before his death at the age of 95. At the beginning of the war at the age of 84, he volunteered to dig trenches if the Germans ever invaded, but he was only called upon to dig for victory in his kitchen garden.

In 1938 Ellen, my grandmother, died and my uncle Ernest and his wife Alice came back from Canada intending to live at the cottage and look after my grandfather, but Alice soon died and Ernest decided to return to Canada. Then the war came and my sister Phyllis, now married to Len Pailing, made her home at Wappenham and looked after her grandfather while her husband was in the army. Her four sons were born there. After the war Phyllis left to make a home with her husband and my grandfather came to live with us, at first just in winter but later all the year, until he died in 1950. During this period, the cottage was used only for weekend visits and holidays.

In 1952, my father retired at the age of 60 and my parents (George and Dora Gasson) decided to make the cottage at Wappenham their home. They called it Leeson Cottage after my mother's family. During the next ten years, extensive alterations were made. The thatched roof was replaced by tiles, the old ranges were replaced by brick fireplaces and the "ladder passage" was made into a bathroom and kitchen. The garden used mostly for vegetables in John Leeson's days was laid out with lawns and flower borders. Finally, my father set about converting the unfinished extension into another bedroom, but unfortunately, my mother died in 1962 before this was completed.

On coming to live in the village, my parents immediately became involved in village affairs. My father spent much time visiting every house collecting donations for the impending festivities marking the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and my mother made a magnificent crown which the village coronation queen Rita King, wore for the celebrations. I well remember the feast in the barn of Rectory Farm, which had been cleared, cleaned and whitewashed and then decorated with murals painted by Mrs Kay. There was a dance in the school afterwards.

My father also did a lot of work for the church, he repaired the church clock and wound it each day except when he was on holiday or visiting his daughters. He did this until well in his 80's. For many years, he was church treasurer and he always played a large part in organizing the annual village fête.

By then, there was another generation of grandchildren spending holidays at Wappenham. My own children have fond memories of the freedom of being allowed to wander at will compared with the restrictions of being brought up in a town.

Alas, my father became too old to maintain his lovely garden which had been quite a showpiece for so many years. My sister Lorna and I tried to keep it tidy and colourful as well as we could whenever we visited Wappenham, as we knew it would have distressed him to see it become completely overgrown. Perhaps one day, I thought, another Leeson descendant will come to live in the cottage and make his or her contribution to village life.

My father, George Gasson, died in August 1989 aged 97 years. His grandson (my son) now owns and occupies Leeson Cottage taking the family ownership into the 5th generation.