

Note from the web editors: *this is a transcript of a conversation with local farmer John Willet whose family moved to East Bergholt from 1923 and who worked the land around Flatford all his life.*

We do not know the date of these 'walk around' recollections but because he made a video of his recollections of East Bergholt in 2002, we are assuming this transcript dates from around the same time.

The transcript contains some inconsistencies and occasional inaccuracies but are very interesting to read.

JOHN WILLETT

Narration by John Willett of Life in and around Flatford between 1920 to the present

Valley Farm

As you go through the gate towards Valley Farm, there used to be, firstly, horse stables for the working horses, then there was a cowshed and a cattle yard; the pigs were kept further down and beyond that still to the back of the house, was the stack yard where they used to build all the hay ricks and corn stacks etc.. There used to be a large row of walnut trees at the back too, which were very old, but they fell down in one of the gales.

The farm buildings just mentioned, in front of Valley Farm were burnt down and the house was slightly damaged. It caught fire, and no-one is supposed to know how it happened. Mr. Richardson owned the place then, in the 1920s, when several buildings were being burnt down at the same time. They always reckoned that it was for insurance reasons. The fires destroyed all the barns etc. in the garden vicinity.

There used to be a cattle-drinking pond in the corner, which is also still here and surrounded by willow, albeit very overgrown. Behind the house was always a field of approx. 2 acres, and the large field to the left of the farm (looking from the road) was called Church Field. That was in two parts until 1939, when my father made it into one big field, and it still remains today.

My family moved to East Bergholt in 1923, from Fingringhoe in Essex. We lived and worked Clapper Farm, and I left school at 13 years old to help my father who was not in total good health. When I married I moved to Orvis Farm, which I worked until I retired.

Standing by Church Field

In this field, I can remember a little wooden chapel and that stood just about 30 yards into the field and all I can tell you is that the framework was still there when I was a boy.

Mr Richardson sold Church Field to the National Trust in the late 1920s. It was in a very wild condition, and the National trust came to my father and said he could have it rent free for 3 years if he would clear it, after which he could keep it for a very cheap rent - only 10 shillings an acre.

My father proceeded to clear the scrub and because the chapel was falling down, he pulled the remains down with the aid of horses; there were no tractors, and they laid the timbers near the pond on the bank by the cattle pond, where they stayed until I went to Orvis Farm. Over the years they have rotted away. This occurred in 1924-25. Hence the name Church Field.

The next field, which is now a meadow, (to the left of Church Field from the road) was Glebe Land and they said there was a Roman/Saxon church there. During the war, in 1940, every inch of land had to be ploughed up for food. I was working for my father, and a Mr. Allen owned the land at the time. He was a poultry farmer and couldn't feed his chickens because there was no grain to feed them on; so we said we'd plough the meadow up. We ploughed it up, and when we got nearer the roadway, we hit the foundations of this church I'd heard so much about, and we had to cart a lot of rubble out of the field. I don't think there were any records kept about it, but they were put in a disused sand pit in the far corner. We found only one thing of interest, and that was "the font". No record of the church's name has been made. Mr. Allen thought the front was interesting and said it ought to be kept.

At that time of day, Old Hall as it is called, was a Nunnery (1940) during the war. The Father of Old Hall came to have a look at it, and said it was of great interest and he'd like to take it down and stand it in their church, which was very small, in Old Hall. - Due to the war, everybody forgot about the font. At that time, the 8th Army inhabited the Old Hall, and of course no-one knew where it had gone.

Then, at the end of the war, the Franciscan Monks took over and they seemed to think that the Nuns had taken it with them. I couldn't find a trace of it however hard I tried. It was a very small font, built with flint stones. I don't know how it was kept together - with some kind of mortar.

Standing outside Willy Lott's Cottage

When I was a boy, the first time I ever saw Willy Lott's cottage (which was always known as Gibbons Gate Farmhouse), there was an elder tree growing out of a part of the roof. There was no glass in the windows and it was generally derelict before Mr Parkington took it on in 1926.

There is a footpath opposite Willy Lott's house, and to the left of the bungalow, neither of which were there in the 1930s. In 1937, the working horses on the farm were dying out and we bought our first tractor. It had all iron wheels (the old fashioned type). I was ploughing, and I came round the corner (the bend in the footpath to Cattawade) and the wheels were right up near the hedge. The rear wheels went down suddenly, and I could hear stones going down into water. I wondered what was happening, so I got off because the tractor wouldn't move. What I found was a deep well of which there was no trace on any of our maps. It was filled in the same year and forgotten about. This was all arable land then and the present bridleway did not exist. The footpath at that time of day went up to where the bungalow is now, and followed straight through to Cattawade. This doesn't exist anymore, but right along the hedgerow were farm buildings. There was a large grain store, and a hay barn; then there was a cattle yard - all in derelict condition in the 1920s. This was all part of Gibbons Gate Farm, which was Willy Lott's Cottage as it is now. In those days, it was quite a large farm. The farm buildings started about 10 yards from the gate, into the site, and went the whole length. What are the bathrooms now, used to be all farm buildings, except for the end part which was used as a caretaker's cottage (for the mill) and has a chimney. The bungalow was built for the caretaker when the National Trust took over. A Mr Parkington reconditioned all these places and gave them to the National Trust.

There was a huge cowshed to the back of the car park, at the side of Willy Lott's, and there was a little path running between the river bank and the cow shed. The rest of the area, which is inundated with comfrey, used to be a clean and tidy meadow until about 1947, and most of the trees have grown since. There used to be a line of elms with a rookery along here also, but the elms had to be taken down due to Dutch Elm Disease.

The Moat

Beyond the car park is an area called 'the moat' which used to cover quite a large area and join up onto the river, and in the middle, on the island as we call it, there was a house. I don't know too much about it, but all I can tell you is that when I was a boy, the chimney still remained, which was made of flintstones. The chimney had fallen over, and the young vegetation had taken over but, in 1929-30, the caretaker had the orders to pull it down, which he did, and a lot of the flintstones went down to build the track up. But I think a lot of stones are still left over there, covered up by the vegetation. When he dismantled the chimney he found a little cupboard in it, which contained a man trap and a flint gun. The old people of the village told me that this was a terribly dangerous spot down here; at that time of day, there was much smuggling going on. They came up the river by boat and here is where they used to unload or load up the loot!!!!

There is a driveway over to the moat from the path and there used to be a huge pipe which went under the driveway which, as boys, we used to crawl through and play robbers etc..! When I was a boy there was water in the moat and it was always kept clean with 6-8 feet of water in it. It joined up with the river and then just after the war when they barricaded the "white bridges" as we called them at Cattawade, near Manningtree, then the River Authority came along and filled all these other places in. So, of course, no flood water goes in it any more. But they said it was made this way due to the house being very important.

The land beyond the Moat was once called "the River meadows". (Looking towards Cattawade, the rabbit-grazed area). It was sold off to a chap called Mr Frisswell who was living in Flatford Mill itself, and who was using the land as a poultry farm. Incidentally, the downstairs rooms of Willy Lott's cottage were used as

storage and packing areas for the eggs. Mr Frisswell went bankrupt, and when everything was sold off, a fence was erected to partition off this rabbit grazed part from the big field. It has been Flatford Mill land ever since.

The old horse drawn hay wagon in the corner of the rabbit grazed field was put there by me in 1950. Dr Ennion, The Field Centre Warden at the time, had this old wagon given to him from a Mr Keeble at Brantham Hall, and he wanted it put there and it has never moved since. I ploughed up this rabbit grazed field for the Field Centre when it first started. The ploughed ground was left purposely to see what sort of weeds would grow there. There were hundreds of species which made a great deal of interest for the students. !

Standing in front of the Mill and pond

The road used to lead into the river here (where the cart is featured in the John Constable 'Haywain' painting). The bank was made up in approximately August 1923 but before that it was a ford. They used to take the wagons through the river and out the other side into the hayfields as they call them. I personally never saw a wagon go through the river here, but the track was still here until about August 1923, and it has been built up

ever since. It was a wonderfully hard road through the river. We, as boys, used to walk through and come out the other side, but only at low tide when the water came up to our knees. Of course, the river was tidal then; long before it was stemmed at Judas Gap.

The locks used to hold the fresh water back, to work the mill, and also for the barges which used the river a lot. Even in my younger days there were one or two barges every day coming up the river. But, they didn't only stop at Flatford. They stopped at Dedham and Langham Mills also.

When the tide was low, they used to put the water under the Mill to work the water wheel to grind the grain. The little locks at the back of the mill used to be closed to force water through the mill to produce the power. In doing so, the water could cause the alarm bell to ring (to warn the Miller that milling could start) by rising above and operating the alarm wheel to which it was connected. The water would then be forced out through both culverts into the mill pond/stream at the front of the mill, which would flood. When the tide was high, they had to stop milling because the water wheel wouldn't work due to the force upstream. Water flowed through the culverts, up to about 1950, when the back of the mill was blocked off.

The Granary

In 1923, the large house known as the Granary Museum today, was still in operation. My father used to bring the grain down here to be ground up for cattle food. But this stopped in approximately 1925-26. It became derelict and was then turned into a boatyard, which was a very flourishing trade then. The large shed beyond Flatford Mill and before the Granary, used to house the coaches and store grain. Flour Wagons also. The large shed to the right of the wagon house was the stables where the working horses used for pulling the barges and taking out the flour were kept.

There used to be a very tall chimney attached to The Granary. I never knew what its true use was, and no older people I asked could ever give me a proper answer. I don't know why the timbers were there, or what for.

Standing up the lane beyond the The Granary looking at Church Field

In 1930, we had a tractor for the first time. I was ploughing Church Field near that big oak tree over there on the field edge, and for a small area, I ploughed up several tombstones. They were too old to decipher any writing. But, all we could see on one stone was 1608. I laid the stones near that oak tree and they might still be there. So, the churchyard for the old wooden church would have stemmed as far as the old oak tree. We didn't think it went any further because we never found anything else further out. For a number of years, it had always been ploughed by horses, 6" deep at the most, so of course, when tractors came along, they ploughed twice the depth, hence we found them.

The woodland over to the right of Church Field has always been known as Dodgeson's Wood in recent times, but never seemed to have any other particular name. The hill adjoining the wood was called Devil's Hill which goes back to the Doomsday Book. On the edge of the wood, there was an old cottage - only the chimney and a few parts of it were left when I was a boy in 1923. It was pulled down when I was 14 years old and that was when they put those electric cables right across the land. I helped to take a lot of the flint stone away and put them in the bottom of the foundations of the electric poles. There used to be a lot of flint around here but it had all been used much earlier on, i.e. put into the roads and all forgotten about.

The field next to Church Field separated by the footpath to Haybarn, was turned into a car park in 1940-50, to take all the visitors who had come to see where John Constable painted etc... I was told that Haybarn was built as a Rectory hundreds of years ago, but I am not sure and have not seen any records.

Hubblets Field is situated at the other side of the lane and was named after the humps in the field which were many. But during the war, these humps were levelled off and it's just one hilly field now.

Standing above Bridge Cottage looking towards The Richardson's

From here, right the way along to Hubblets, is called "Hangings". I haven't seen it done, but the old people told me, when I was a boy, that they used to come down here and see all the wool hanging out to dry, because this was a sheep shearing part of this area, and where they collected all the wool. I have been told that there is a connection with The Mill, but there again, I cannot say for sure.

Barges

When I was a boy, I and some other boys, used to run across the fields to Manningtree and catch a barge back. The old barge-hands knew us well and would always give us a ride as far as we wanted to go up river. Sometimes they were bringing up grain, and other times, it was coal for the different mills. But, one particular old boy I can remember, he was one of the last, had a barge on the river. I don't know what his proper name was but we called him 'Blackjack'. I think this was because he had never washed in his life. He had his wife and the both lived on the barge. They had an old steam engine on this particular barge of which they used to use the open fire to cook on, before they hooked on the horse.

At times, his wife used to say "Boy, would you like some food?" Of course, it's a wonder she never poisoned us, but she didn't - she'd bring out an old shovel that she'd been shovelling coal with, dip it in the river, then stick it in the fire and put on a large piece of dropping or fat and she'd cook us eggs and bacon on the shovel. I always used to wash my plate first in the river before I dare put the food on it! But we really enjoyed it.

We used to stop at Flatford Lock for half an hour, and then the horses arrived at Dedham, walking on their own along the tow path, to tow them to Dedham. All the barge owners had their own horses and they always arrived at the coach shed on time. Most of the barge horses were Shires. Suffolk Punches were bred for farm work. Whether the Shire Horse was a bit heavier, and more suitable for the job, I don't know.

The Mill

Mr Parkington bought Flatford Mill and, in the early days when the Mill was derelict and not in working order, he removed the machinery, and sold it to a scrap iron dealer in Ipswich - a man named Sacker and they were down at the Mill for about 6 months removing the machinery for scrap metal. Then, of course, they had to repair the walls where they'd dragged this huge machinery out of the brickwork.

By the time the Mill was repaired and put into good order, Mr. Parkington was a very old man. Rather than see the Mill go to waste, he gave it, and Willy Lott's, to the National Trust and it has belonged to them ever since.

The Lock

The lock was in a terrible state during the 1930's and they never had the type of machinery that they have now for repairing them. But these repairs lasted for about 30 years, when they were redone in the sixties; then, the latest repairs took place in 1975.

Farming

When I was a boy, there was about 23 farms and small holdings in East Bergholt. Now, I think there are 4. Two big estates and two little ones. That shows the difference. When there used to be a lot of farms in the area, everyone kept a cow, or perhaps 5 or 6 sows. Pigs and sheep along with the cattle were all kept in a wide area. Now, I don't think there's a pig in East Bergholt. There's a lot of sheep but very few cattle. Of course, there used to be more horses to do the work. The manure was always put on the land because there was no fertilizer at that time of day. The animals were put on the land at night and taken off during the day. The farms were smaller; for instance, a farmer owning over 1000 hens had a large farm. Now, 40-50,000 hens wouldn't go down as anything out of the ordinary. Consequently, all the manure is in one place, so concentrated, that it drains into the rivers as nitrates and we get major ecological problems which are bad.

Looking across Bridge Field on the start of the Towpath towards Dedham

We used to pollard the willows for hurdles, coppice, hedge lay, and do all that type of country work. Everything we harvested was utilised in some way, like the willow/hazel hurdles were made to bolster up the hedge-layed stock proof fencing, because in those days, of course, electric fencing was never used. It all looked very nice! There was no grubbing up, or 'bush whacking' at that time.

Pollarding was always done to get timbers. The pollards here in this meadow known as Bridge Field, should have been pollarded 5 years ago! Then you'll get willow for hurdles, branches for thatching, and the actual pollarded willows showing land boundaries, in this case, the boundaries for the towpath. But now, the river has crept in, but the banks haven't been looked after, because there isn't the money to do it. A Mr Lennox presently owns most of the land/meadows here. He's about the largest landowner around here and owns more beef cattle than anyone in a long distance.

When I was a boy of 10 years old, I used to be asked by Joe Ratcliffe, the head-stockman/drover for cattle at Flatford, to help him drive 100 bullocks from Flatford to Ipswich Market for 2 shillings. (A lot of money in those days).

Joe lived in an old wooden hut on the site of where my bungalow stands today on the Gandish Road. He was known to be a bit of a poacher and later in life changed his name to Joe Ratlee or Ratley, after being caught! He would catch all manner of game from pheasant, rabbit, hare, to duck and other wildfowl.

We used to start out at 3:30am and run at a trot all the way to Ipswich on a Tuesday (market day). I would help get the bullocks into the market then run to Ipswich station, to get a train to Manningtree for 4d. then run to East Bergholt to school. I was invariably 10 - 15 minutes late and was severely punished by my strict schoolmaster who picked me up by my shirt collar and beat me, whilst kicking and struggling around the room. It never stopped me from carrying on with droving though - come summer or winter in snow etc. for 2 shillings!

Joe Radstock (Ratcliffe? etc.) died, when quite old, whilst sitting on a stile by the large pollarded willow in the flood meadow known as the 'penning area' along the river just a little way from Flatford Bridge. It was known to be his favourite spot! He was buried in the East Bergholt churchyard as Joe Ratcliffe, though his headstone is not clearly seen now.

The 'Penning Area' was the flat floor meadow by the Bridge at the start of the Dedham tow path. The bullocks were driven into this field on the Monday to spend the day grazing it, so that they looked a bit fatter for Market on the following Tuesday.

When I was a boy, it was a lot harder work; for instance, I was 7 years old when we moved from Finchingfield to East Bergholt, Clappers Farm. I drove a horse and cart full of belongings on my own during the move, which took 2 days. At 7 years old I was already helping out on the farm before and after school. At 16, I was doing a man's work and when we were thrashing, in the days of steam, we used to put the corn into hessian sacks and we had to carry them on our backs up to the Granary where we stored it up for the animals throughout the winter. This was up about 20 steps with 18 stone on my shoulders. Of course, there's none of that today. The hard work has become less and less, and I don't think the present generation could even do it because we were brought up gradually, to carry heavy loads from 8 stone to 18 stone. I shouldn't want to see the young generation work as hard as we had to.

I also wouldn't want to see the poor old farm horses having to pull up the hills like they used to have to. The young people were brought up with horses. The horses were valued for their work and the people who looked after them loved them, though some didn't care for them properly. Once they took up the horses, they were a seven day a week job; they had to be fed, watered etc. on Sundays too.

Women mostly worked on the farms at harvest times, picking up potatoes and peas. When I was quite young, I did see women picking up big stones from the fields (stone picking) which was Autumn or Winter work. But then I was about 12 in 1927, that job died out. I think they used to get 2d. a bushel of stones! It took a long while to earn 2d. like this.

Horse drawn Ploughs

I learnt to use a horse-drawn plough on Gibbons Gate Farm in the field where the new lake is now. In fact, that field is where I first learnt to plough. I went along with a man named George Birds. He taught me how to turn, hold and draw the plough, and make a straight furrow. The furrows had to be straight in the old days. If we ploughed about 5" deep, we thought we were going to Australia! Now, if they plough 18" deep, nothing is thought about it.

I started actual work on the farm for my father at the age of 13. I was doing a man's job for a boy's wage, working an 18 hour day, particularly at harvest tie.

Dry Dock (near the Cafe)

I can remember an old barge tied up in the locks over there and they wanted to clear the river, so Mr Richardson and his men, along with men from the mill, got the barge out of the lock and pulled it with ropes into the dry dock. One owner of the barge said he'd have it repaired, but never did, and it laid in the dry dock for 2-3 years. Then a Mr. Benniworth, who owned this area (the Granary) etc., had all the cinder dirt from WX Plastics filled into this dry dock and a shed built over the top of it to store rowing boats. Now, of course, the sheds have been pulled down and the dry dock excavated. I should say the dock was filled in around 1927-28, but I might be a year or two out. There should be records of this. The men who helped were from the Granary Mill, not Flatford Mill. The Granary of course was still working then.

This dry docks was in a poor old state. I reckon I must have been 7 or 8 years old when the barge was put in it. It wasn't worth dragging the barge out again when they filled it in.

Burnt Oak Corner

Burnt Oak Corner is near the King's Head Pub, and got it name because there was a huge oak there which was struck by lightning. I was told that it got very badly burnt, but part of it lived after that and that is how it got its name.

Gandish Road

When I was a young man, I used to talk to an old man, aged 90 odd, who remembered his father driving ganders down from Norfolk to London and stopping off for a rest along the stretch of road now called Gandish Road. There were ponds there, which are still there today, which were used as rest stops/watering holes for the birds. The whole area was seen to be covered in white feather down. The female geese were left behind to produce eggs and the ganders were driven through hot tar and sand to make shoes for their feet, to walk the whole way. This must have occurred some 160 years ago.