

No 11

# The Chronicle



The Journal of the  
Long Wittenham Local History Group

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No.11

June 2002

## Editorial

This journal, the eleventh published by the Group, brings the village of Long Wittenham of a century and more ago back to life. There are fond memories of the days before television and widespread motor traffic, before antibiotics, plastics and the Welfare State. This was a time people remember with great affection - indeed Freda Collins calls her reminiscences 'Golden Days'.

Freda Collins and her family came to live next to the Plough Inn in 1907. In those days the house was called River Close, today it is known as Eveleigh's. Freda became a well-known author writing plays and stories for Sunday Schools and Brownies. In this charming portrait of pre First World War village life, familiar names from the village past become real people; villagers who lived and worked here before us. Go back in time with Freda and imagine the High Street of yesteryear.

When Pauline Powell began to research her family history some years ago it soon became clear that Long Wittenham would play a major part in her ancestral past. One part of her research has been following the life and times of David Chambers who, with his wife Lavinia, ran the Plough Inn for many years in the second half of the nineteenth century. What emerged was a much more complicated and devious past than one might have imagined. Follow Pauline as she traces the twists and turns of the story.

The River Thames has always played an important part in the life of the village and Dick Eason knew and loved the river all his life. Born into the 'baking Easons' (another branch were blacksmiths) Dick became an accomplished rower, winning the

pairs races at Henley and rowing for Oxford in the 1924 Boat Race. In writing about the Wittenham Backwater, Dick draws on both his childhood memories and on his intimate knowledge of the river. Find out about Mouldey's Hole and Coburn Hill and realise that the river has been a constant even in times of change.

I am most grateful to Pauline for sharing her story with us, to Pat Lay for word processing the articles written by Freda Collins and Dick Eason and to Mercy Ward for the wonderful photographs used to illustrate Golden Days and the Wittenham Backwater which add so much to the evocative texts.

Janet Haylett

Long Wittenham Local History Group June 2002

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## **GOLDEN DAYS**

by Freda Collins

When I visited the Turner Exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1975 I was particularly interested in two early sketches which are intimately connected with my childhood. One was painted about 1807, almost a hundred years before I was born, showing country folk washing sheep in the River Thames at a place which I recognised at once. It is just above Day's Lock and shows the Sinodun Hills in the background.

A number of his pictures show Richmond Hill overlooking the Thames. The one I have especially in mind was painted a few years later: it is a garden party scene caught in evening light before the formal terrace existed. William Turner, like me, must also have soaked in the beauty of those glorious sunsets which, as a child, I could see from my nursery window - for I was born in a house on the top of Richmond Hill.

It happened just after midnight on Sunday May 15th 1904. My father, a retired architect, was already fifty-three years old, and as he had a daughter of almost three and no son it was confidently expected that I would be a boy. Hopefully, my Uncle Jack had sent one of those new-tangled telegrams congratulating his brother on the safe arrival of 'Frederic John'. Making the best of their disappointment my parents called me Frederica Joan, Freddie for short and Freda for more formal occasions. My sister Omie remembers sitting on their big bed with her legs stretched out, and having the new baby laid in her arms.

I never realised until after we left during the First World War, how lucky I was to have been brought up on Richmond Hill. I took the famous sunsets and spectacular view for granted. The house, now part of Hotel Stuart, was then known as 5, Downe Terrace. It stood well back in a drive which separated us from the road and from the Terrace below. Our grey parrot, with his scarlet tail, lived in, or on, his cage which stood inside the dining-room window. During the summer months the whole establishment moved into our country house, 'River Close' in Long Wittenham - a village, then in Berkshire, by the river a few miles above Day's Lock.

My father was a popular, jolly man and a keen member of the Savage Club. He collected the menus illustrated by the artist Peacock. Many of them, framed, were hung on the walls of our house at Richmond. One was very funny, showing caricatures of well-known members dressed as ancient Britons and carrying clubs. I loved it. Long after, I gave the collection back to the Savage Club.

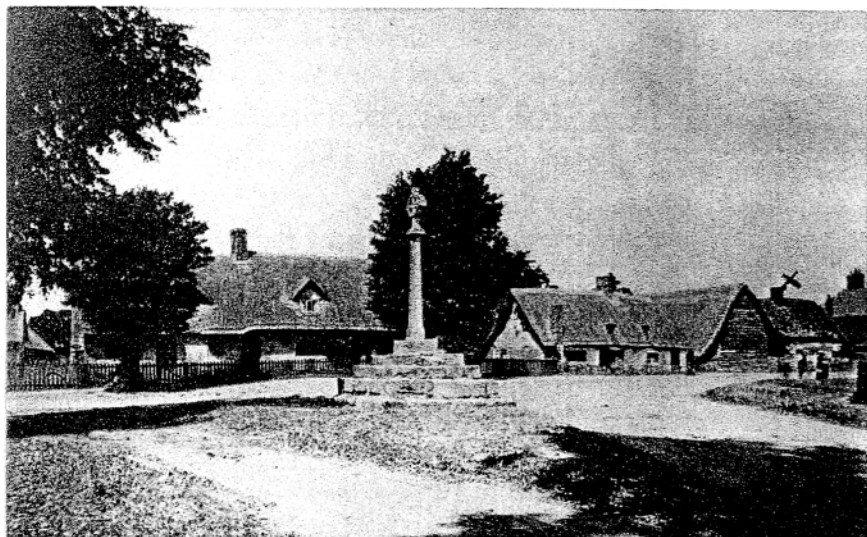
My father also had a deep love of the country and of reading maps. It was after a long walk from Clifton Hampden with my mother on a hot day that they first stayed at the Plough Inn 'for a few days'. They remained for several weeks, and decided to put down roots by converting a cottage next door to the Plough into 'River Close'. This conversion for his own use was probably my father's last piece of work as an architect, ending a distinguished professional career in London as the District Surveyor of the area around Oxford Street and Piccadilly. However, he was a hyper-sensitive man and had a horror of heights and climbing ladders. As, financially, he had no necessity to work, early retirement was almost inevitable: why should he continue to suffer excruciating nightmares? So when

he married Naomi Crispin, his second wife, he decided to enjoy a life of leisure.

Naomi was a beauty in the true Edwardian style. I have a head and shoulder portrait of her drawn by Leigh Hunt before I was born. It is a copy in black and white taken from a photograph and is a striking likeness, gay and sparkling. It shows her wearing a voluminous blouse, and perched on her short, curly, dark hair is a black straw hat trimmed with ostrich feathers and ribbons. She is also wearing ear-rings screwed into the lobes of her ears and she told me that she had made the necessary holes herself! Besides having stoic determination, Naomi was vivacious and a born actress. Indeed, she was once offered a career by J.L.Toole the theatrical manager of the day, but instead she married my father, Frederic Hale Collins. (His name was spelt without a 'k' as my Grandmama considered that letter too difficult for a little boy to write!)

I was very young indeed when I first became conscious of the things around me, for I remember gazing at the violets on the wallpaper which I could see through the protective bars of my wooden cot. The nursery wallpaper at Richmond showed a trellis of roses so I must have been living in River Close then.

In those days the long straggling village of Long Wittenham consisted mainly of old cottages with thatched roofs. Some of these still had bulging walls showing where bread ovens were



*High Street 1877 showing River Close before conversion*



*Long Wittenham High Street looking west 1906*

once in use. There was a milestone on which the ratcatcher used to sit, and a medieval barn near the church with 'king-pin' rafters. We were among the first to convert a cottage into a house for 'the gentry'.

The Plough Inn was once a butcher's shop, and in our day it still kept its 'trade' door, made in two halves, and large iron hooks once used for the meat. The back of the inn, where there was then an old hand pump, was still in use as a slaughter house. When my mother saw the lambs being driven into the courtyard she cried out: 'Oh, poor little things!' To which the proprietress of the inn replied tartly: 'You wont be saying that, Ma'am, on Sunday when you are eating your tender joint with mint sauce!'

Long Wittenham, in Saxon days, was known as the 'town of Woton' from which it derives its present name. The flat country surrounding the village is both arable and meadow land. A group of three small hills, known as the Clumps or, more correctly the Sinodun Hills, make a noticeable landmark on the right hand side when seen from a train approaching Didcot station from London. They have been the centre of English history for three thousand years.

The Clumps have a delightful way of appearing and re-appearing from all points of the neighbourhood: from the surrounding Berkshire Downs or from the winding loops of the reach of the river, from Clifton Hampden bridge (of 'Three Men in a Boat' fame) under which the house martins nest, or Day's Lock, sheltered just below the hills. As a small girl it seemed to me that the Clumps always arrived first at the place where we were going. The Clumps are crowned by very old beech trees, now being replaced by new plantations. Secretly I

called them the King and Queen, and - slightly apart - the Princess and they are the picture I have in mind to illustrate Psalm 121: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills'.



*The clumps pre 1920*

In the seventh century, when this part of England was called Wessex, and the Clumps were heavily fortified as a defence against successive waves of invaders, St. Birinus baptised old King Kynegils (the father-in-law of that hero of many bloody battles, King Oswald) in the river below Dorchester. As the 'village of Woton' is within easy walking distance across the river and fields from Dorchester, St. Birinus is believed to have preached on the Saxon stones at the base of our village cross.

For the first few years of my life our family migrated from Richmond to Long Wittenham for the summer months. In Edwardian days this was no mean task. Weeks before the date of our departure three vast trunks were carefully packed, not only with clothes but also with bed-linen, sundry kitchen equipment and toys.

Besides Nanny, we took with us the cook, a housemaid and the parrot. He travelled to Paddington on the top of one of the closed carriages. For Papa the expedition was horrific, for he suffered from an acute anxiety complex. Each year, on the day of our departure, he worked himself up into a nervous bilious attack. One year my mother spoke to him kindly but firmly 'Fred, if you have decided to be sick I will go ahead with the children, and you can follow us tomorrow when you have recovered'. the panic subsided, and henceforth Papa survived the then four hour journey intact.

We would arrive at Paddington station nearly an hour before the steam engine was expected even to appear. Once we were well established in our compartment, my mother would produce one of our large china-headed-dolls, dressed in the beautifully embroidered long clothes once worn by us. Settling herself into a corner, she would nurse it, making for it whimpers or cries alternating with her endearments. This ploy successfully scared off other passengers from entering our carriage!

Papa would entertain us on the journey with a rabbit which he made out of his large silk handkerchief, turning it into a puppet with long floppy ears. Part of the time I would go to sleep pillowed on his ample tummy, but the crackling of the paper wrapped round the egg sandwiches always roused me. A picnic on the train was the highlight of the expedition.

Having waved to the Clumps on our right hand facing the engine, we were met at Didcot station by a horse-drawn wagonette which pulled us along Cow Lane. Then, it was a rough road over-shadowed by huge elm trees, their hanging

branches flaked with straw caught up from the heavily piled farm-carts. Alas, the elm trees have not been seen for many years in Cow Lane, Dutch Elm disease having destroyed them and many more.

During our holiday Tommy, the pony, sometimes took us for drives in the pony-trap up Sires Hill which led to the Clumps, waiting at the top for his reward - an apple. The larks always seemed to be rising from the cornfields, their song mingling with the plaintive cry of the peewits and the yellowhammers calling for a 'little-bit-of-bread- and-NO-cheese'. Large butterflies and fritillaries settled on the hedges which were festooned with wild roses and honeysuckle. The meadows spilt over with cowslips and tall moon daisies. In spring the woods were thick with bluebells and carpets of white violets. Primroses did not thrive in our part of the countryside, but the roads were edged with broad green verges covered with toad-flax, scabious and cow-parsley.

In those days we had time to 'stand and stare'. So also had the cows, who terrified our town-bred nanny. There was one occasion when, holding Omie firmly by the hand, she dragged my pushchair helter-skelter across the field running for the shelter of the stile with a herd of cows in hot pursuit! After that, we would cling to her long skirts keeping well behind her out of danger, and whenever cattle came into sight we would chant 'Cows, cows, cows! Come and eat Nanny!'

Our father had designed a most attractive house for us. The drawing-room was long and cool, with diamond-paned windows at one end and French windows at the other. These were usually left wide open and looked out upon a well-kept croquet lawn and garden. A silver bowl filled with sweet-scented roses stood on a polished table and a robin often flew in and out from the garden.

There was usually a vase of flowers - preferably sweet-peas standing on the sideboard in the dining room, and I well remember a soda-water siphon with its two rounded parts encased in wicker-work. It made me think of a lady like my mother, who was extremely proud of her slender waistline. This was well demonstrated by the long, swishing skirts that she wore, keeping her soft, sleeved blouses in place. In the country she wore floppy hats adorned with flowers and ribbons. She abandoned the uncomfortable town fashion introduced by Queen Alexandra of wearing a net neck-piece stiffened with whalebone, but like most ladies of her day, even in the country, she was tightly corseted so that her movement, if stately, must have been painful. Once, when she actually ran with me over the bowling green, above the slope to the river, I was amazed.



*River Close - maybe the two little girls are Omie and Freda*

We had excellent fruit trees at River Close. One of my earliest memories is of standing by the front gate near the apricot tree which was covered with luscious fruit and holding one out to a village child saying 'Little girly, would you like one?'

Omie and I played 'cricket' under the greengage tree in the back garden when the fruit was ripe, hoping to knock some down. Nanny had a passion for large gooseberries and was once caught red-handed by Papa who, broadly smiling, watched her helping herself to them. I can still remember the flavour of a special black plum. Harry Woodley, our gardener's boy, used

to lift me up to sit on a bough of the Victoria plum tree. Incidentally, he and I remained friends and at the age of eighty-three he was still giving me plums, but by then from his own cottage garden. The raspberry canes grew beyond the lawn and behind the rose garden. My mother would take us with her when picking them, telling us to stretch out our hands for her to put a 'hat' on each small finger and thumb.

I was fascinated by the henhouse, which divided the main garden from the bowling green above the river. Each hen was known by name: one called Beeney was a poor little bird and was hen-pecked and chased by the larger birds. My parents tried being sensible and use their fowl for food, but it was no good. One Sunday, when the roast chicken was served neither my mother nor my father had any appetite. They sent the untouched bird to the maids in the kitchen and ate cold mutton instead. The next day my mother found that the servants had had no appetite for eating their friend the hen either, so she said 'You are just as silly as we are. I shall have to give it away and, in future, we will stick to eating their eggs!'

All my life I have liked to get away on my own sometimes, so as a small child I would dodge behind the huge Jerusalem artichokes above the bowling green and retreat inside the hen house, where I hoped that the long arms of the grown-ups would not be able to reach me. But the voice of authority soon brought me out: my parents preferred us to have spades and buckets and play on the gravel near the hen run. I liked this, for it was the haunt of large furry black and red caterpillars who sunned themselves on the gravel and curled up when touched.

The river bank below the bowling green was planted with fresh young willow trees, the remains of which are now gnarled with age.

Beside the river my father made a border of trailing nasturtiums, whose brilliant colours were reflected in the clear water. He also planted nasturtiums in the hollow trunks of the pollarded willow trees in mid-stream, taking Omie and me with him in the punt. The boating gear was stored in Robinson Crusoe's hut. Cream roses climbed over the roof. Our boat-house and that of the Plough were separated by a profusion of herb-robert, which grew far out into the stream. We had a wooden landing stage on which my sister and I would lie on our tummies to watch the fleet of boats, which Papa made for us by folding willow leaves, floating down the stream.



*Mr Collins and family in the punt*

Yeand King R.A., a club friend of my father's who also lived in Long Wittenham, made an oil picture of us in our fishing punt just below the trailing nasturtiums, my mother sitting erect reading Peter Rabbit to me (the book fell into the water and the pages stuck together; I still have it). The painting is called 'The Interruption', for my sister holds a fishing rod and three white ducks are swimming up to the punt. The artist turned one into a drake by twisting its tail with his thumb on the paint. A red

flannel petticoat peeps out from under Omie's holland frock (at other times we usually wore long embroidered pinafores and sun bonnets with strings).

When she was very small, Papa once took Omie with him to Poppy-land, a marshy bog beyond our garden and became engrossed in a religious discussion with a friend, quite forgetting his small daughter. Luckily he turned round just in time to see one little foot waving in the air, the rest of Omie having disappeared beneath the mud. After that, Poppy-land was, my mother decreed, 'out of bounds'.

On summer days the river would be so still, especially by the old mill pool, that I have seen a spray of wild roses reflected in it as clearly as the clouds in the sky. There could also be the stillness before a storm when the river would rush madly downstream from the weir. I remember just such a storm during a picnic on Clifton Common. Omie and I sat undisturbed sheltering under the wagonette, eating our hard boiled eggs! Although the river is called the backwater, it is really the main stream. It was while we were living at River Close that the cutting was made between Clifton Lock and Culham Lock. (*The cut was made much earlier so this was probably some work on the weir, read Dick Eason's account of the Backwater.*) Then it was an ugly, muddy gash across the fields, now made beautiful by the banks of willow-trees, briars and rushes. The cutting made the meadows opposite our riverbank into a long island where cows still graze. It was joined to the public footpath by two cattle bridges: only one now remains.

Watching the weir frothing down into the backwater was great fun and for my parents a possible if unlikely source of danger.

Our growing mass of fear complexes was not helped by Papa taking us perilously near the Salter's steam-boat which cruised twice daily through the cutting, rocking our skiff. Many times there were cries of warning to 'sit still and hold tight' as my father skilfully turned the nose of our boat into the swell.

On windy days Uncle Jack sometimes sailed his yacht on the river. Boating was all the rage and self conscious males, dressed in white flannels and straw hats, drew up their punts at the Plough landing-stage, their ladies wearing sleeved blouses and long skirts, reclining on cushions and twirling large Japanese paper parasols.

Papa loved messing about on the river and was a familiar and well-loved figure. His long brown beard was beginning to turn grey and as he was too portly to use a punt pole he had rowlocks fixed to the sides of the green fishing punt so that he could row it with ease, happily back-watering up and down on his favourite beat between two thatched boat houses. These boat houses made safe refuges for the mud nests of the swallows and house martins but are now gone. The martins still pop in and out of the nests built under Clifton bridge.



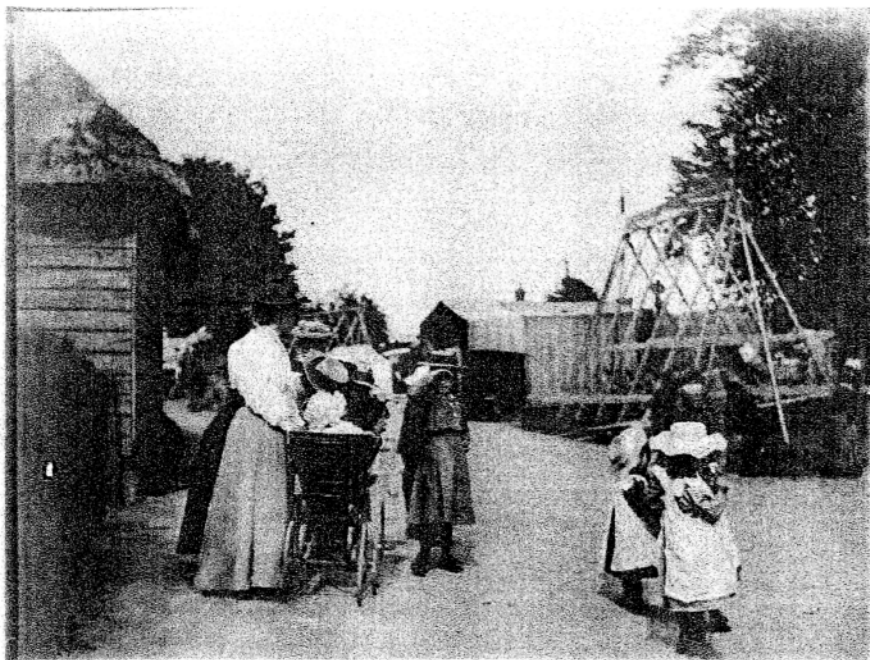
*Clifton Hampden Bridge c 1910*

Besides the fishing punt we had two skiffs. Papa was a perfectionist with sculls and he taught us how to use them correctly from our earliest days. For his river wear Papa wore old grey trousers and his white shirt was always covered by a waistcoat, over which was draped a heavy gold watch-chain, the watch itself tucked into a side pocket. To this attire he added a battered yellow straw hat worn on the back of his head.

Papa was once a keen fisherman. He gave it up on the day he considered the sport from the viewpoint of the poor little gudgeon twirling helplessly on his hook. Many years later, his fishing consisted of making a rod from a willow-wand and a long line made from embroidery thread borrowed from my sister. The hook was a bent pin and only the worm suffered: for even on the day we caught fifteen gudgeon, keeping them in the

well of the boat, eventually they were all thrown back into the river. I remember leaning over the side of the punt to see them swimming away through the clear shallows to join the shoals of minnows hiding amongst the reeds.

Up to the age of four Long Wittenham, which I so much loved, had been the focus of my life. My memories are somewhat dim, but who could forget the excitement of the Summer Fair, which provided stalls all along the village street where one could buy toffee apples, bulls-eyes and paper streamers?



*Feast Day Summer Fair early 1900s*



*May Day celebrations 1924*

Then there was the May Day festival with the village children dancing round the maypole and carrying posies of wild flowers to their elders, making a little bob-curtsy as they did so.

When I was older I was allowed to play in the walled garden of the Manor House where there is a mediaeval monks' fish pond possibly once belonging to the Abbey at Abingdon. I remember the erect, dignified figure of its owner, Admiral Clutterbuck, and another loveable figure, his overseer old Farmer Lovegrove, who wore a coarse, smocked holland overall and rode his plump cob along the village street.

A great friend of mine was the Church Warden Joseph Hewitt. He also wore a smocked overall and he lived in the old Manor House with its colourful flower garden and friendly ghost. When he whistled, a robin would fly to him and sit on the handle of his spade. The house has since been restored from its Victorian hideousness to the early beauty of its Tudor past.

Joseph knew a great deal about the village, and once wrote it all down. His notes can be found in the British Museum. The villagers possessed 'common rights' for grazing animals on either side of the street. At the far end of the village there is a bubbling spring said to cure disorders of the eyes. Both these historical advantages had been neglected until a newcomer tried to enclose the spring as part of his property. He also tried to 'benefit' the village by planting trees on either side of the main street. Coincidentally, goats and donkeys appeared at twilight to graze the verges overnight. Each morning, apparently, it was they who had uprooted the newly planted trees! In the end the benefactor gave up. The locals had made their point: they did not want the trees.

But that incident happened some years after we sold River Close. Precisely why we did so remains a mystery to me. Perhaps it had something to do with my mother secretly learning to ride one of those 'new-fangled bicycles'. If so, I wonder if she wore bloomers. I believe Papa, who had ridden a pennyfarthing in his youth, took to riding a tricycle to accompany her. By now they had both become exceedingly stout and perhaps they found cycling too exhausting. With Richmond as their headquarters, walking over pastures new would be a better answer to taking off weight. Whatever the reason, they decided to sell River Close. During the next few years they succeeded in 'reducing'. Once my mother gleefully told me how, some years later we had returned to Long Wittenham for a holiday and were staying at the Plough. On her own, she had trespassed in a local farmer's field to pick mushrooms. She recognised the farmer striding across the field in her direction, and discreetly hid behind a haystack. But the

farmer remained standing on the other side of the haystack for so long that at last she emerged.

‘Well, Ma’am, and who are you’?

‘I am Mrs Collins from Long Wittenham. Don’t you recognise me’?

‘That I don’t. You bain’t she - her was a fine buxom figure of a woman’.

Well, one can’t please everyone!

The official reason given for our selling River Close was that Omie and I were delicate. The doctor had decreed that we should be taken up Sires Hill each day in the pony trap for a breath of fresh air. My mother pointed out that at Richmond we were already living on the top of a hill and that a breath of *sea* air might be more beneficial. It was sad leaving Long Wittenham, for my parents were much loved in the village. My father had taken endless pains in training the boys to play cricket: he improved their bowling by putting a sixpence on the middle stump. When the team played the neighbouring villages the wagonette was put to good use, and my mother organised enormous piles of sandwiches and cakes for the players and the onlookers. The cricket team became quite famous when the youngsters grew into men and won the county shield. Before we left, each of the village girls was given a silver thimble by my mother, and the church was fitted out with new red hassocks by my parents.

Although my father refused to conform to the Established Church, he had attended Matins regularly. With advancing years he was slowing down, and to my mother’s dismay, was becoming increasingly religious. Everyone knew that she stole

the apples from the tree growing next door in the Plough's grounds, but now Frederic virtuously decided to buy that tree - thus spoiling the taste of the apples thereafter for Naomi.

We received a great welcome when we returned to the Plough Inn for our holidays during the First World War. My father's old river clothes, green with age, had been stored for him at the Plough, and he donned them again with much satisfaction.

Omie and I were allowed to invite in turn a school friend to share part of the holiday with us, so we hired two boats which were kept in the Plough boat-house. Once more we could listen to the shrill pipe of the kingfisher as he skimmed across the stream flashing his blue and orange feathers. It was lovely to be back, and the villagers never thought of us as 'visitors' but it could never be quite the same as the early days when we lived at River Close. Of course, as my mother pointed out, we had done the only sensible thing: 'Who could reasonably need two houses by the river? Remember, we still own a house above The Thames at Richmond.'

How true. But somehow it was never quite the same. The Thames *belonged* to us at Long Wittenham. Respectfully, we just *looked* at it from Richmond Hill.

## THE SEARCH FOR THE CHAMBERS FAMILY

or by any other name

by Pauline Powell

*The story so far:*

When I started my search for the Chambers family late of Long Wittenham towards the end of 1998, I was fortunate enough to be given a head start by the Long Wittenham Local History Group. This welcome assistance was a draft Chambers family tree and the booklet about the pubs of Long Wittenham.

David Lancelot Chambers was my Great Great Grandfather and landlord of the Plough Inn between 1865 and his death in 1897. He was born on 15 March 1822 in Bishopsgate Street, London (Middlesex) and by all accounts his father was an ironmonger at 41 Bishopsgate Street. (*Fig 1*). David Lancelot was baptised at St John the Baptist church in South Moreton on 8 September 1822 and the entry in the Parish Register records his parents as David Launcelot, (actually David Landell) Chambers, ironmonger from Bishopsgate Middlesex, and Frances.

So far so - interesting - but who were Frances and David Landell and why was baby David Launcelot christened in South Moreton? There were a number of clues to follow and my search has led me around North Berkshire/Oxfordshire villages, in and out of London and to not a few Record Offices. There were two candidates for David junior's mother in South Moreton: Frances Gammon, baptised 2 March 1794 and Frances Sherman, baptised 23 November 1796. To find his father, a visit to Guildhall Library, London would be needed. But more of that later.



*Fig 1 Bishopsgate Street, London*

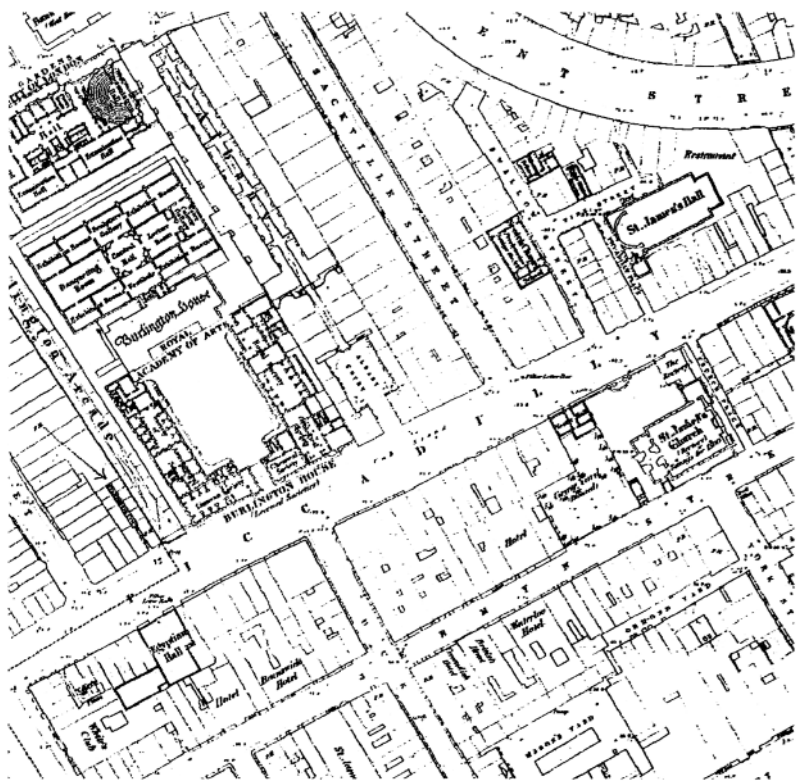
David junior's wife to be, Lavinia Mary Dearlove was baptised Lavena in Aston Tirrold at St James Church on 24 September 1826. She had five brothers and sisters and her parents were James and Martha Dearlove. James was an agricultural labourer. The family moved to Long Wittenham and their last daughter, Elizabeth was baptised at St Mary's on 25 December 1830 and buried there on 6 October 1832. James Dearlove was buried on 7 June 1830 and Martha Dearlove, widow, married

John Green, widower on 12 June 1836. A daughter, Emma, was born to them and christened on 6 Nov 1836.

Lavinia aged seven and her sister Sarah left Long Wittenham School on 17 February 1834 and then a Livinia Dearlove aged 15 appears in the 1841 census of Dorchester as a servant with the Cooperthwaite family. Then on 19 July 1846 the baptism took place in Long Wittenham of Mary Kate Dearlove, daughter of Lavinia Dearlove, spinster. Sadly and strangely the burial of Mary Kate Chambers was recorded in the Long Wittenham Parish Register on 16 May 1850. Her death certificate records that she was the daughter of David Lancelot Chambers of 2 Stanbrook Court Piccadilly (*Fig 2*) and that she died on 11 May 1850 of hydrocephalus (water on the brain) in the Registration District of Saint George Hanover Square. David's occupation was given as Turncock.

The elusive David (Chambers) makes a brief appearance in South Moreton as a witness to the wedding of Charles Wigley and Mary Anne Imrey on 22 January 1844.

I was definitely on the right track but still had found no trace of the marriage of David and Lavinia. (Perhaps I should say here that I have searched the birth, death and marriage indexes in vain.) Curious to know what a “Court” was I was pleased to find a description in Mayhew's London. He describes a court off Rosemary-Lane, which was between the London Docks.



*Fig 2 Stanbrook Court, Piccadilly*

Access is gained to this court through a dark narrow entrance, scarcely wider than a doorway running beneath the first floor of one of the houses in the adjoining street. The court itself is about 50 yards long, and not more than three yards wide, surrounded by lofty wooden houses, with jutting abutments in many of the upper stories that almost exclude the light and give them the appearance of being about to tumble down on the heads of the intruders. The court is densely inhabited; every room has its own family, more or less in number; and in many of them, I am assured, there are two families residing, the better to enable the one to whom the room is let to pay the rent.

But perhaps things were better in Piccadilly.

Following up another clue, I searched the Court Books of the Grand Junction Water Works Company in the London Metropolitan Archives and there he was Turncock for the St James District, Westminster.



### EAST LONDON WATER SUPPLY!

TURNCOCK'S TURNCOCK. "NOW, LOOK HERE, DON'T YOU GO A WASTIN' ALL THIS LEE VALUABLE WATER IN WASHIN' AND WATERIN' YOUR GARDENS, OR ANY NONSENSE O' THAT SORT, OR YOU'LL GET YOURSELVES INTO TROUBLE!"

*The Turncock, from Punch 1896*

28 February 1848

*8th minute*

*Resolved that David Chambers, one of the labourers be appointed Turncock for the St James District upon trial in the room of William Whiten who has left the Company's service and that he be paid at the rate of £1.1 per week as wages.*

(Wages for a male agricultural worker in 1881 ranged from 7s to 10s per week {BFH Dec 2000}.)

I now turned to the Parish Register of St James, Westminster at Westminster Archives having previously drawn a blank in that of St George Hanover Square, and there they were, incognito! On the 25 April 1848 the marriage of David Gammon, Turncock and Lavinia Dearlove took place. His father was recorded as David Gammon, ironmonger and hers as James Dearlove, labourer, dead. It was now looking extremely likely that David's mother was Frances Gammon of South Moreton. Feeling lucky I looked at the 1851 census of the parish of St George Hanover Square at the Family History Records Centre and found the family at 2 Stanborough (Stanbrook) Court, Piccadilly.

David Chambers aged 28 married Turncock of S Moreton  
Lavinia Chambers aged 24 married from Long Wittenham, Berks

Louisa Chambers aged 9 months, born St George's Hanover Square, Middx. (Born June/July 1850 I have yet to find her baptism) and Bethana Curtis aged 11 female cousin from South Moreton, Berks.

The names of Gammon and Chambers are becoming interchangeable.

All looks set fair for the little Chambers family, however storm clouds are rising. Another entry in the Court Books of the Grand Junction Water Works Company reads:

*23 March 1853*

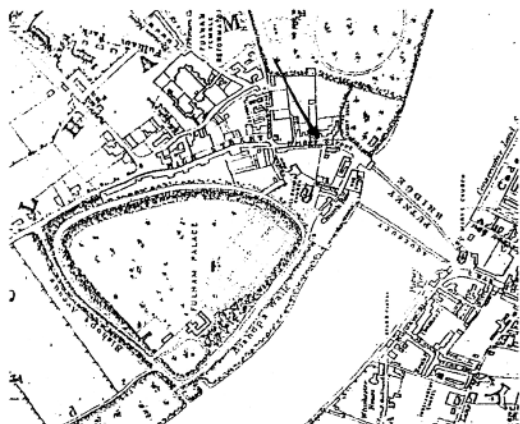
*With reference to the first paragraph of the report relative to the incivility of David Chambers the Turncock to Mr Faulkner of York Street St James' Square on the occasion of an alarm of a chimney on fire in that neighbourhood and to the unnecessary and wilful waste of water from the fire-place the Secretary states that after Mr Faulkner had referred his complaint at the office he enquired of Chambers whether he had used the language imputed to him and having acknowledged that he had the Secretary suspended him from his duties until his conduct had been reported to the Court. It is therefore Resolved that the proceedings of the Secretary be approved, that David Chambers be discharged from the Company Service and that George Crouch, one of the Companies labourers be appointed Turncock of the St James District in his stead on probation.*

Oh dear. Well we'll leave them on the brink of disaster for a while and return to South Moreton.

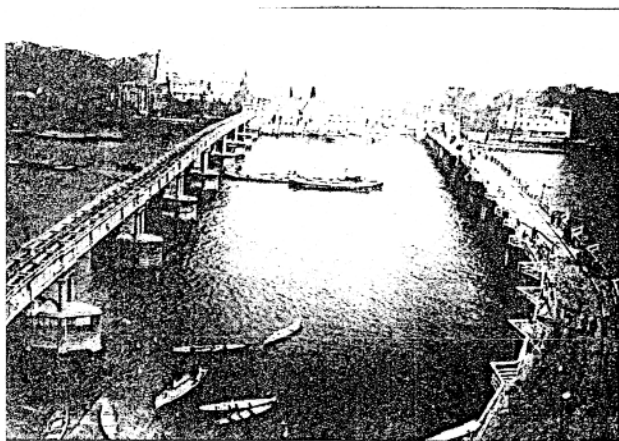
So, from the Parish Register, Frances Gammon daughter of Thomas and Mary was baptised on 2 March 1794. She had a brother John and sisters Mary and Ann. Her parents Thomas Gammon and Mary Lay were married in South Moreton on 10 October 1786, David Launcelot Chambers grandparents. Mary Lay probable came from Hagbourne vis Mary Lay daughter of John and Frances baptised 3 August 1766 which fits with her burial in South Moreton on 10 October 1839 and the family name of Frances. Thomas was buried on 10 June 1846 aged 87! I have yet to find his baptism for certain, perhaps in

Abingdon on 23 November 1760, the son of John Gammon and Mary.

I next caught up with The Chambers family in Fulham in The 1861 census. They were living at 10 Bridge Street.



*Bridge Street, Fulham*



*Fulham Bridges*

⌘ Putney bridge to the right awaits demolition, while Bazelgette's new bridge takes shape to the left. (*The Metropolitan*)

David Chambers	<i>head aged 38 from Middx</i>
Lavinia	<i>wife aged 34 from Aston Berks</i>
Louisa	<i>dau scholar aged 10 from Middx London</i>
William	<i>son (?) scholar aged 9 from Middx, London</i>
Augustus	<i>son aged born Chelsea</i>
Charles	<i>son aged 2 born Fulham</i>

David's occupation is given as Turncock Waterworks boy. He was working for the West Middlesex Water Works Company at this time at '8s a week with Dwelling'.

But where was my Great Grandmother Elizabeth Annie who I knew had been born in Paddington about 1853? I found her in South Moreton with her Grandmother and Step Grandfather. Richard King aged 57 Ag Lab from West Hagbourne? Fanny (Frances) King aged 64 Wife from South Moreton Elizabeth A Chambers aged 6 Granddaughter from Middx Parish London, scholar and daughter of a labourer.

Fanny Chambers married Richard King in South Moreton on 1 June 1834. I have yet to find her previous marriage to David Landell Chambers. In fact David Landell married Jane Brough Hills on 13 September 1824 in Saint Botolph's Church, Bishopsgate, London, so I don't think I ever will! Incidentally their first child, a daughter was christened Frances Sarah, Sarah after his mother but Frances?? David Landell was baptised in All Saints, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Durham on 3 October 1793 (IGI). He had several brothers and sisters. His parents, Richard and Sarah Chambers were married there in October 1785 (IGI). But by 1804, Richard Chambers was an Ironmonger at 41 Bishopsgate Street and his sons David Landell and Richard Shafto had taken over the business by 1824. Their children with equally distinctive middle names were all baptised at St Botolph's Church.

The next success was to find a mass baptism of the Gammon children at All Saints Church, Fulham Palace Road on 10 April 1859.

Elizabeth Ann born 10 June 1853

Augustus James born 20 December 1856

Charles William born 1859

Children of David (labourer) and Lavinia

Another child, William James Dearlove born 9 September 1852 was also baptised, son of Joseph (Coffee House Keeper, Sands End, near Fulham gas works) and Jane Dearlove. So son William in the 1861 census was really most likely Lavinia's nephew. Still no trace of Louisa's baptism.



*Lavinia Chambers in 1860. Edgar Prout of 13 Murray Street, Camden Square, Camden Town, NW took the photograph*

Some time soon after this the family migrated to Dorchester Oxfordshire and David became an Innkeeper (Manager) at the White Hart Inn.



*The White Hart Inn at Dorchester*

Two Chambers children were baptised in the village, Clara, born in Fulham in 1862 and Frederick born in Dorchester on 27 April 1865. They were both christened on 4 June 1865. After a short stay in Dorchester the family moved to Long Wittenham, to the Plough Inn. Augustus, Charles and Clara were admitted to the school on 10 September 1865 and Frederick on 24 February 1866. Their last child Albert Chambers was born in Long Wittenham on 3 January 1867 and admitted to the school on 4 April 1870. The family had finally come back home to Berkshire.



*The Plough Inn 1877*



David and Lavinia remained at the Plough for the next 30 odd years as the census records show. Their children grew up around them, some stayed in the village and others moved away. Frederick went back to Dorchester married and had a family, Clara married and moved to Didcot and died soon after. Louisa, Augustus and Charles stayed on in the village. My Great Grandmother Elizabeth Annie Chambers ran away to London with Evan Arthur Hayward also of a well-known village family and bore him three children. Edith Cicely born in Marylebone in 1873, my Grandfather Arthur Augustus born in Camden Town in 1875 and Evan Francis born in Kentish Town in 1877. But that's another story.



*Annie Chambers*

The 1871 census shows David as a butcher and publican at the Plough Inn with his wife Lavinia, daughter Elizabeth aged 16, son Augustus aged 13, son Charles aged 11, daughter Clara aged 9, son Frederick aged 5 and son Albert aged 4. Their daughter Louisa is married to Alfred Tame a carpenter. In 1881 David is now an Innkeeper at the Plough and his wife is called Mary L. Augustus is a butcher, and Frederick and Albert are also still at the Plough Inn. Charles may be in St Thomas' Hospital in London. Clara is now Clara Greenaway in Didcot and Louisa and Alfred Tame have four children still living on the High Street. In 1891 only David and Mary are still at the Plough Inn with Charles who also gives his occupation as publican. Augustus is married to Prudence (Lovegrove) and is manager of the Co-op Stores and has six children, Louisa and Alfred have five children still at home on High Street.

The death of Lavinia is recorded in the Berkshire and Oxfordshire Advertiser on Friday 9 August 1895. 'On the 1st inst at the Plough Inn Long Wittenham, Lavinia, wife of David Chambers age 68 years.' She has a head stone in St Mary's, Long Wittenham churchyard which reads 'In Affectionate Remembrance of Lavinia The Beloved Wife of David Chambers Who Died Aug 1st 1895 aged 69 Years'. David Lancelot died February 15th 1897; his head stone reads 'Affectionate Remembrance' and 'Eternal Rest Give to Him O Lord And Let Perpetual Light Shine Upon Him'. He certainly earned it after an eventful life. His will leaves his watch and chain and writing desk to his son Frederick Chambers of Dorchester and the rest residue and remainder (£159 9s 8d) to his son Charles William Chambers.

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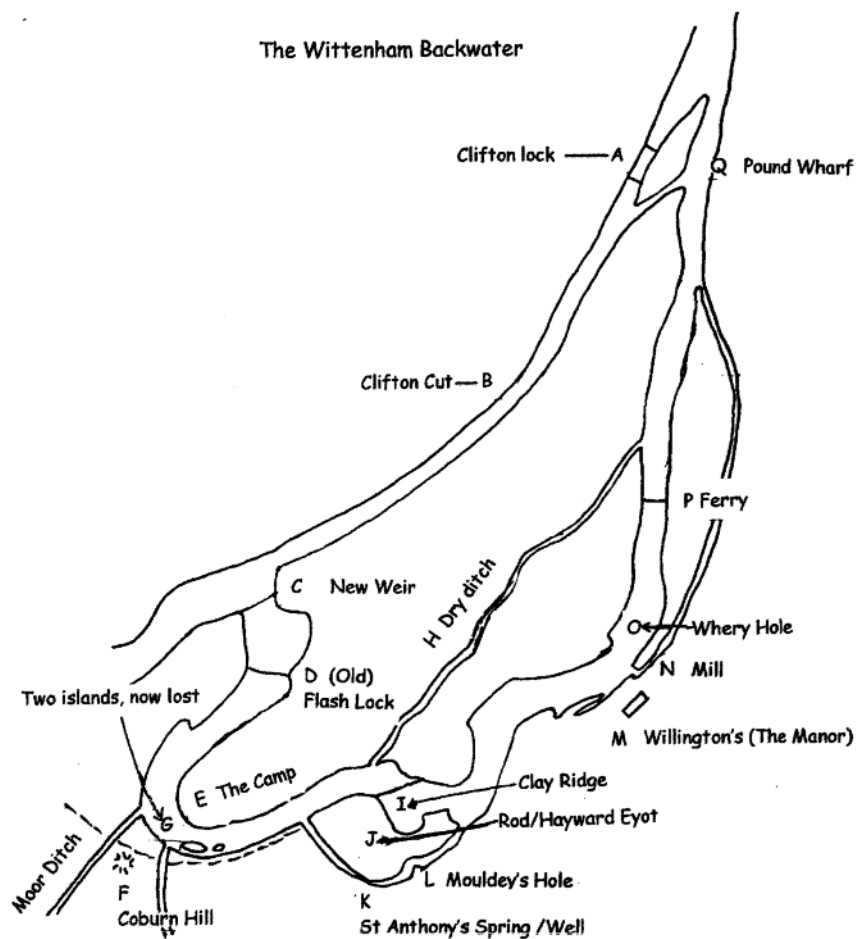
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# The Wittenham Backwater



## **THE WITTENHAM BACKWATER**

by Dick Eason

From time immemorial the free navigation of the Thames has been of great importance and considerable legislation was passed from time to time about weirs, mills and general obstructions. The river from London to Burcot and from Oxford westwards was kept reasonably clear, but the stretch from Burcot to Oxford proved a great hindrance to navigation until, in the reign of James I, the Oxford - Burcot Commission was established to ensure that the river was navigable from London to Oxford. The construction of three pound locks at Iffley, Sandford and Swift Ditch near Abingdon, which were the first pound locks on the Thames, largely made this possible. What we now call the Wittenham backwater was a part of this difficult stretch and one can well imagine that its very winding course with numerous shallows together with the rocky river bed along the Clifton Reach created its fair share of hazards.

The story is long and interesting, but this short article deals only with modern times and is based largely on my own observations.

Before the construction of Clifton Cut and Lock the Wittenham backwater formed part of the navigable part of the Thames and the level of the water was controlled by the flash lock (D) and probably before that by some sort of weir connected with a mill at Willington's Farm, which was the old Manor House. In 1822 the Clifton Cut (B) and Clifton Lock (A) were opened, but the old flash lock (D) remained in action until the new weir (C) was built in 1835. This weir was enlarged about 1877 and a tumbling bay was added at the lower end of the lock cut in about 1920. The weir was completely rebuilt in 1967. In 1884

the two wooden bridges over the lock cut had been rebuilt in oak.

A writer (Bishop) about 1580 refers to a weir in Long Wittenham belonging to Wyddowe Sawyer, which may possibly have been what I have always known as the Old Lock (D), but more probably is a weir at Willington's Farm. The timbers and piles of the Old Lock could be traced all across the river up till about 1920 and the last piles were finally removed about 1930. From about 1900-1914 the site marked (E) was known as 'the Camp'. Here 'General' Stevenson held an annual camp for public schoolboys who came in relays throughout the summer holidays. In the meadows opposite this site, between the two ditches (the larger of which is called Stream Ditch or Moor Ditch) and near the footpath, is Coburn Hill - surely the smallest hill in the country. It is probably an old gravel working or dumped dredgings from the river.



*The Camp 1903*

At (G) were two small islands which were removed partly by floods and partly by dredging about 1930. Passing about a quarter of a mile downstream one comes to a dry ditch on the left bank (H). Since the county boundary runs along it, this

clearly marks the old course of the river. The meadowland between this ditch and the present backwater is in Berkshire and used to be a part of Lower Farm in Wittenham. Hay and farm machinery were carried across in a ferry (P), which was worked by a chain which remained on the river bed for many years after the ferry disappeared.

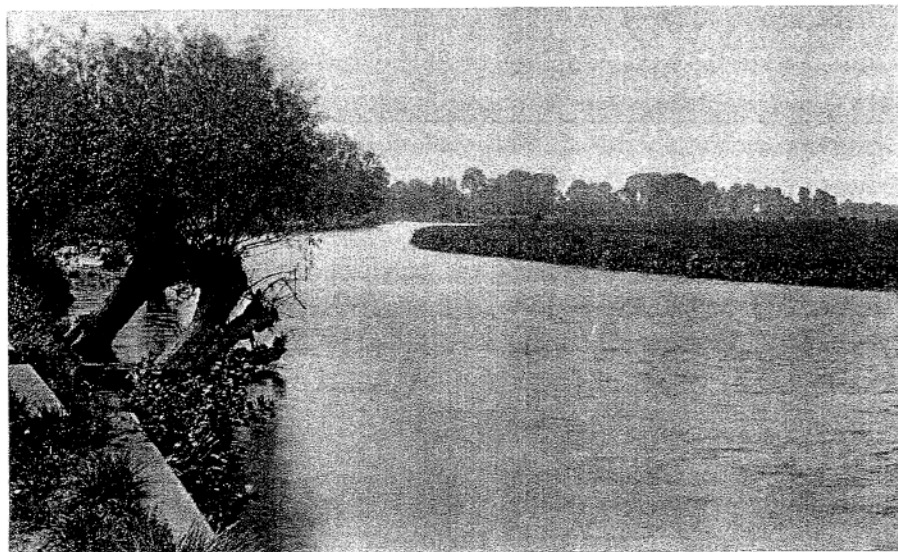
The river bank at the upper end of this ditch was known as 'The Nags Head'. A little below this spot is a peculiar ridge of clay (I) which runs diagonally across the river about eight feet below the surface of the water. On the downstream side of this submerged ridge the water is extremely deep.

The area (J), known as the Rod Eyot or Hayward's Eyot, is a swampy withybed carpeted each spring with snowflakes or Lodden Lilies. It was a favourite haunt of foxes and, before it was enclosed (about 1910), was visited almost annually by the Old Berks Hunt and seldom failed to provide a victim. I remember seeing two foxes killed simultaneously when the two halves of the pack, each following its own fox, met head on and killed the other's fox!

The ditch or stream which bounds the Rod Eyot is partly fed by St. Anthony's Spring (K) traditionally good for bathing sore eyes. Here too, at (L), is Mouldey's Hole where barges came to dig clay for Mouldey's brickworks at Culham.

About half a mile downstream from here is Willington's Farm (M). This was the original Manor House and here was probably the manor mill (N) - the many large stones in the river are an indication of this. Immediately below this is a very deep hole in the river bed called 'The Whirly Hole' (O), which with its downstream shallows is a clear indication of a weir of some sort. The water appears to go round and round, particularly in a

strong stream, as the configuration of the bank causes a very pronounced back stream on the left bank. There is little of interest in the last half mile of the backwater until one reaches 'The Pound' (Q) which was a wharf where barges unloaded particularly coal and flints for road making.



*Wharf 1925*



*Robert Holmes in the doorway of the his shop in what is now Witta's Ham cottage 1870*

### **Lock Keepers**

1822 James Newland (Wages £2 per month)

1823 William Holmes

1856 Robert Holmes. In 1867 he was accused of poaching in the canal and was forbidden to use nets. He resigned in 1868 and thereafter kept a small village shop in the cottage opposite the Vine in Long Wittenham. His widow, Sophia, kept the shop for many years after her husband's death.

1869 James Bookings

1880 Matthew Hickey or Hickley

1883 Thomas Gray

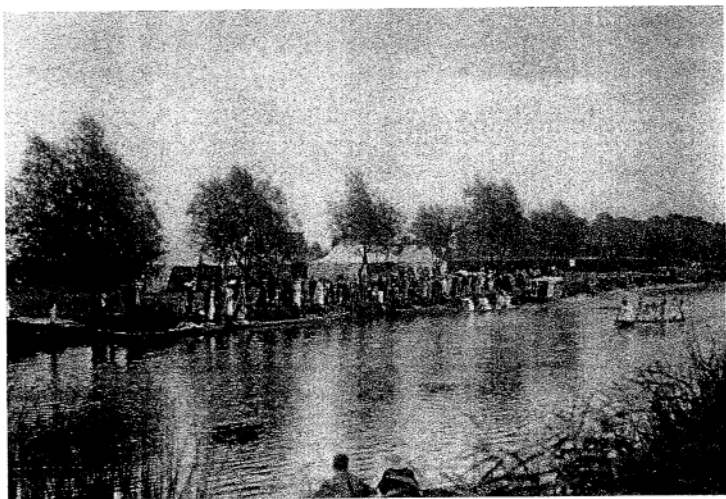
1892 J.Bossom

### **A note on Locks**

Until about 1630 there were no pound locks (ie. enclosed by two pairs of lock gates), but the level of water was controlled by flash locks. These were really weirs with removable paddles or rimers in the middle section to allow barges to pass. When these paddles were removed the pent-up water rushed through like a miniature waterfall, and a considerable time elapsed before the water more or less levelled out and a barge could negotiate such a hazard. A barge going downstream was shot through 'on the flash', while a barge going upstream had to be hauled through by bargees, who frequented the towpath for such purposes, or by means of a winch fixed on the bank at a convenient spot above the lock. Such a method was very wasteful of water and too frequent flashes deprived mills of their head of water, hence the continual bickering between millers and barge masters. Usually the millers had the upper hand for they controlled most of the weirs and the barge masters either had to 'buy water' or await the miller's pleasure.

### **A note on the Manor**

Traces of the old manorial system are still evident in Long Wittenham. Each manor consisted of open fields (usually North, South, East and West) in which villagers had their strips, a wood and communal wasteland or heath. In Wittenham there is a North Field Farm, a West Field Barn, a wood and a heath. This heath, which adjoins the wood on the East side, was common land on which the villagers grazed a limited number of pigs, geese or cattle. When eventually it was enclosed and cultivated the rent therefrom was used to buy 'Heath Coal' which was distributed to the deserving poor of the village.



*Regatta on the River 1912*



**Richard Edward Eason 1902-1978**