

Memories of Childhood in Boughton (circa mid 1950's) – Paul Rix

These memories are not only fairly random in nature, but also in the order I have written them down! They are no doubt shaped by perception too, my Dad might have been Mr Fix-it on a farm, but I looked up to him, I still do. If I end up half as good a man as my Dad then I will indeed have done well!

As 'kiddies' our gang was into everything, fishing, bird nesting, you name it! Come harvest time we would help out on the farm, and again when it came to threshing, this was just before the advent of combines, more of this later.



'Elf and Safety' would have had a 'hissy-fit'. Roger Robinson [R.G.], my Dad's boss, was the first to have a combine harvester, an old Massey-Harris, which went barely at walking speed, it was driven by Claude Chapman. The Drier on the farm was designed by Bill Chapman, an engineer from Denver Mill, and he and Dad built it. Our favourite place to play was

the 'pit' into which the trailers tipped the grain, going to the edges when a tractor tipped it's 'petit' trailer load into the 'pit'. If it was the old Commer lorry, driven by Ted Smith [also landlord of the White Horse pub] then we would get out to avoid being buried! I may be wrong but I can't remember any of us ever losing a toy in the sinking grain which behaved like quicksand in the middle.

It was also Bill Chapman and Dad who assembled the pipe organ in the big farm house [Poplar Farm, now Harwins]. Roger Robinson was also the Church organist and usually took my grandmother to church in his car as she had serious arthritis. He was one of the very few car owners in the village.

The first thing I can clearly remember was a knock on the door one evening. There stood R.G., tapping his polished leather gaiter with his stick, snow collecting in the brim of his old brown trilby, the collar of his coat turned up against the weather, 'Tim [Dad], can you just...'. I think it was the pump on the well at the back of the 'big house', it often threw off its' big belt although on this occasion it may well have been frozen. This well, later replaced by a borehole, supplied most of the water for the farm. Of course Dad went and fixed it, he usually did! If anything in the village broke, the call was 'Tim, can you just...'

Originally Dads mobile workshop was an old war surplus Chevvy 4*4, slow, noisy and I can't recall it having a heater! This was later replaced by a long wheelbase Land Rover, with a heater! I can only remember Dad ever having one row, that was with old Jimmy Fryat, something about a turkey? Yet they were usually good friends. Village life was like that, everyone helped everyone else, that is just the way things were.

We, along with the rest of the village, didn't have electricity, I did my homework by the light of a Tilley lamp! Drinking water came from a shared tap on the end of Claude Chapman's outhouse [1, Manor Cottage] at the end of the lane. Water for washing was collected from the pond if your water butt was low. Most people had to collect it in buckets. Dad being Dad had a demountable tank on a set of wheels!

This was in the days of 'coppers' to boil the washing and heat the bath water. The trick was to place the tin bath as near as possible to the open fire box under the 'copper'. Too close and you could burn yourself, too far away and you'd freeze. I can still remember the draught under the back door when the wind was in the north! It defeated all efforts to stop it.



Then came the luxury of light at the flick of a switch and clean water at the turn of the tap, no more torch lit trips to the outside loo, sitting there watching the shadows of spiders cast by the flickering candle light.

For Dad, it meant no more Friday evening cycle trips to Ernie English's Garage in the Hight Street at Stoke Ferry with the 'accumulators' to get them charged so we could listen to the 'wireless'. He used to take four in a rack, ours, Grans, Uncle 'Hub' his brother, and Claude Chapman's.

Mentioning Uncle 'Hub', he was the head 'pigman' on the farm. He and Dad designed and built what was for then a large modern piggery, the 'secret' was the narrow passage up the middle with feeders either side. Along the outside walls was a wider passage, accessed by gates from the main pens, these gates just happened to be exactly the same width as the passage. The advent of tractors meant to 'muck out' all the pigman had to do was close off all of the gates and reverse a tailor made bucket through the passage. At the end was a pit, with a trailer backed into it so all the 'muck', in reality more like slurry, went straight into the trailer. All this was fine, very efficient. A job which used to take an hours hard work now achieved in minutes with the help of a Ford 'Dexta'.

Fine, until you came to empty the trailer which was a standard petit 2 ton tipper, I'll leave you to imagine what happened when you opened the tailgate to tip it out! Hub

was pretty quick on his feet, but not that quick! I can remember him complaining to Dad about it, 'can't you do something about it?' The solution he found was to cut the back off a new trailer and replace it with a fixed sloping back, problem solved! One of Roger Robinson's sons was a Director of Weeks Trailers, he saw this 'wondrous invention', patented it and the rest is history.

Back to our early years. A favourite pass time was to sit on the railings of The Chapel wall collecting car numbers. As there were only about six or seven in the village, a new one was a real prize! If we had a couple of hours to spare then our usual 'hideaway' was the 'newt pit', opposite the end of the church yard, we used to sneak in through Mr Kellingray's overgrown garden at the bottom of Ted Smith's plot.

If we went through Ted's garden there was the danger that Winnie might see us, as we weren't really allowed to go to the 'newt pit. I suppose it was quite dangerous, it was very deep under the tree trunk we used to sit on and none of us could swim! Our 'spot' was an eye shaped hole formed where two trunks had grown together, split, then grown together again. We would put a tiny tail of a brandling worm on our bent pin hooks tied to a piece of black cotton and lower it into the depths. Our usual prize was a stickle back, our 'keep net' was the obligatory jam jar.

Sometimes a 'monster' would loom out of the shadows and grab our worm, the ultimate prize was a male great crested newt! As we grew, we got rods of one sort or another and began fishing the big pond which was much safer as the water was shallow and the bottom hard. Our quarry being the bright rudd which were abundant.

In time many of the small ponds, like the 'newt pit' were stocked by us with these jewels, so we had our secret little hideaways. I remember being very sad when one very hot summer the fish in the 'newt pit' died, among them a huge eel.

It wasn't long after this I started fishing for eels in the big pond. I actually caught a few weighing around 2 pounds, absolute monsters to us kiddies. Of course the others had to try! A certain David Cooper (alias Golly) got a bite off one, dropped his rod and ran away! Leaving me to land it! Nicky Reeve, a shepherd, from Eastmoor, who worked a lot for Roger Robinson came along and bought it off Golly for 2 shillings (10 pence) as I recall!!

We, by we I mean Golly and I, often used to go to the back of the White Horse and buy a bottle of Manns Brown which we would share on a hot afternoon fishing, keeping it cool between the reeds. My fishing/bird nesting mate Golly was one of the most accident prone kids I've ever come across, if he wasn't falling out of trees, it was fish hooks in his fingers, or breaking an arm or leg! He always seemed festooned in bandages or was sporting a plaster or stitches.

Even at about five or six years old some of us used to go on long bike rides, the usual route being down Fen Road [now Oxborough Road], across Eastmoor to Barton Bendish and back to Boughton. We would rarely meet a car, there was so little danger then, the worst risk was falling off and getting gravel rash. We all took a sandwich and a drink in a glass bottle, no plastic then! Carried in our parents old gas mask bags! You could tell which farm our Dads worked on by the colour of our bikes, tractors came with a tin of paint in those days to keep them smart, blue for Ford, green for John Deere, orange for Alice Chalmers, grey, later red, for 'Fergies'.

Other early memories like going to Richard's [Clarke] at the Post Office to watch television a couple of times a week, flicker black and white, well shades of grey. Bill and Ben, The Wooden Tops, did we really like Andy Pandy? Then there were such heroes as Roy Rogers, The Cisco Kid and Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger, no Derby winner could have caught them up! A little later there was the game changing 'Crackerjack' with Eamonn Andrews and Double or Drop, why would kiddies want a cabbage? Then we got a tele of our own, 'About Anglia' with Dick Joyce, anyone remember 'Byegones'? Oh! And Michael Hunt with his bow ties and weather forecasts. No more homework by the light of a Tilly Lamp.

Then there were apples! Miss Quadling's 'Beauty of Bath' tree was our number one target, it was always the first to be ready. We always got caught by P.C. Westwood who would be there near the hole in the hedge when we tried to sneak out laden with our loot. Eventually I asked him how he always knew, I can still remember his reply, "the tree was older than he was and he grew up nearby".

We also used to help with apple picking in the large orchard on R.G.'s farm, most of the pickers were ladies, many from other villages. Then they all had to be graded and packed, this was done in the large barn [now a converted home]. These were Bramley apples, all the best were individually wrapped and packed into wooden crates, branded R.G. Robinson and Sons, Boughton. Before these crates could be used they needed soaking, the empty crates were stacked on a four wheel cart, pulled by a horse to the pond and pushed off into the water, the previous load would be retrieved, stacked on the trailer and taken to the barn ready to use.

Once full the boxes were stacked on the Commer lorry and taken to a cold store on the farm of R.G.'s brother at Terrington, driven by Ted Smith. I'll bet that by today's standards that old lorry was way overloaded. Any broken boxes were repaired by 'Click' and 'Wilker' the two carpenters on the farm, life was much more leisurely then.

The times changed very quickly, spraying the orchard was done by hand lances, fed by a network of pipes. Richard's mum [Annie] was one of the main spraying operators, it was heavy work dragging those hoses around. It was a wonder they weren't poisoned! The network was primed by a pump in a shed halfway along the top of the orchard, this was kept primed by Claude Chapman and fixed by Dad when

it broke. Scattered through the orchard were pig huts, a couple of large ones, each with a group of little huts with single sows in them. Mucking out these little ones was simply by chucking it out of a small shutter at the back, these small heaps were a mecca for bait hunting for kiddies off on a fishing trip, they were full of Brandlings. One job we helped with was clearing up the prunings, have bonfires with the twigs and stacking the thicker branches for firewood.

With the advent of tractors, a Dexta was assigned to the orchard, a rotary cutter went with it to cut the grass, it was also used to cut the Churchyard, many of the old grave stones were moved to the edge of the graveyard to make it easier to cut. A power sprayer was also purchased, it blew a high pressure mist out of a bank of nozzles on one side only, I



I believe this was one of the first in the country. The tractor for the orchard had smaller wheels to get under the trees, Ted Smith guarded this as though it was his own.

Again, I've got ahead of myself, harvest was a job for binders, horse drawn, driven by gears on the wheels. Then the tractors took over. Wheat sheaves were too heavy for us 'littl'uns' but we managed barley in spite of the 'barley harnes'. Of course this meant stacks and then thrashing tackle, who could forget Dick Brown's thrashing 'train' rumbling and puffing up from Stoke Ferry, all on iron wheels! The thrashing machine, dresser, chaff cutter, buncher and elevator. The last time I can remember seeing such a collection working it was driven by a field marshall tractor, a strange single cylinder machine known as 'Popeye'. Staff Proctor had one. Noisy smoky things, but less likely to set fire to the stacks than a traction engine. Another favourite pastime was chasing the rats between these machines driven by flailing belts, if we had a good haul R.G. would give us sixpence, even a shilling on a good day! Our 'battle ground' was the grass field at the bottom of Johnny [Spindle] Carters, now I mourn its' demise. It was a carpet of wild flowers growing over all the humps and bumps, more of this later. Looking back, life was simple then, full of fun, just as childhood should be. Most households grew their own vegetables, kept a few chickens, some even an odd pig, Life was good but now I realise it must also have been damned hard for our parents to make ends meet. School was more than learning the alphabet or times tables, lessons under the double red hawthorn on the green, ducks quacking among us. Patch, the smelly old dog belonging to Miss Handbury, getting too close to the fire in winter. Miss Flint looked after the infants in the 'little room'. My first teacher was Miss Stebbings who left to get married. I didn't hear anything about her for many years. In 2003 I had my first book published, there

was a piece in the newspaper about it. I received a letter from a Mrs. Simpson [Miss Stebbings]. That was one of the nicest things in my life, that my first teacher still remembered 'little ol' me'.

I gradually got to know the Paynes and we became friends, indeed Mike was best man at my first wedding. There was a big advantage in being friends with them, the Holy Grail to us kids was 'the wood'. To get there without being seen by Wilf Goodall, the Foreman and Gamekeeper on the farm, we had to make a wide detour to the south side of the wood, now I could go via Fen Road, much easier. Even at about ten years old I would be given the .410 and a couple of cartridges, 'go get tomorrow's dinner'. As long as I asked and stuck to the no pheasant or partridge rules, Mr Payne would say yes and point me in the direction of the most rabbits. You soon learned to shoot straight.

Back to the early years, life centred around what was happening on the farms, potato picking, all done by hand into baskets, tipped into two wheeled 'tumbrils' pulled by a strong horse, tipped into long heaps called 'hales', covered with straw then a layer of soil. Then the cold job of riddling them later, into bags and off to market. Sugar beet 'chopped out' by hand to the right spacing, squeezed out of the ground when ready by a heavy 'sledge' pulled by two heavy horses. Topped and cleaned by hand, left in small heaps to be collected into tumbrils and tipped on the headland to be loaded onto the lorry before being taken to the factory. It kept Ted 'Fruity' Smith busy! How the advent of machines has changed things. I can just remember hay being stacked on frames [Stooks] to dry it thoroughly, there was a bit more to it than that, as well as the hay there were two types grown for seed, timothy grass and cocksfoot. I can remember helping throw it into the front of the combine to 'thrash' it. Another labour intensive activity was stone picking, tons of often large flints were picked and carted off the fields below the orchard to make up the farm tracks and foundations of 'muck' and beet pads, which are still there today.

Village Characters.....Stafford Proctor lived alone in the big farmhouse beside the farm with his gundogs, probably best remembered for washing his 'paunches' for the dogs to eat! A stout man with a red face, liked to be seen as a 'Country Gent'. He moved in later years to the former stockman's house [Horseman's Cottage] at the west end of the village.

The dominating character in the village was Ali Greenacre, us lads were terrified of him. He lived in a ramshackle old caravan beside Fen Road, in the corner of the main farm yard. Piercing blue eyes, a large hooked nose with a permanent drip, tattoos and an old trilby hat. My enduring image of Ali was standing on top of the threshing machine in his leather waistcoat, cutting the strings on the sheaves being pitched to him by two men with pitchforks. Ali cussing and urging them to work harder, yet still having the time to throw his spare knife, killing a rat we'd missed! 'Have I got to do the work of you damned kids as well', he boomed. I was petrified! I have no idea

where he came from, I presume he died when I was young, although he might have moved, he simply wasn't around anymore.

Charlie Rix, universally known as Charlie 'Huh' as this was his usual response to any comment. He kept himself to himself but was fine with us kids, he even gave us a double white lilac bush to plant in the school garden. He lived next to the school, I will always remember his luxuriant white moustache, stained with nicotine in the middle. There were of course many others, proud men, Arthur Cooper, David's uncle, the gamekeeper on a farm in Oxborough. Edward [Ted] Rix, Ernest Rix to name but a few.

Then there was old Mrs. Seymore, mother to 'Lenny' stockman for a couple of outlying 'crewe' yards on Robinson's farm, known as Sharpes and Sampsons sheds respectively. Her grandsons are two of the famous 'Strollers', the area's top group for a generation.

Another of the characters was Alfred Rix, the oldest of four sons and a son of May and 'Hinny' Rix. Alfred was the foreman on Robinson's farm. All I can ever remember him doing was his daily rounds of all the sheds on the farm to feed the numerous cats! Only one or two would allow us youngsters to approach them and rarely stroke them. Some would even stand their ground, hiss and spit, even scratch and bite if we were daft enough to give them their chance. Yet to Alfred, they were as docile as cats can be. He did his rounds on a light cart pulled by a small horse, not big enough to work properly, her name was Peggy.

The community experienced its share of disasters, two bouts of fowl pest. After the second infection Jack Proctor, Mr. Ambrose and many who had kept just a few hens never did restock. I still remember my tame Rhode Island Red had to go, along with all the others. It changed the face of the village, as did 'Foot and Mouth', the place stunk of the funeral pyres for a couple of week. Miller's never did replace their dairy herd.

Terrible times, along with tractors, electricity, tap water, changes indeed! As Charlie 'Huh' was heard to observe, 'no good will come of it!' Robert 'Poof' Carter, from the poorest family in the village was killed falling out a trailer when I was about twelve, I suppose that was when I realised I wasn't immortal. I had discovered Mr Stannard [Horry's Dad] laying in his potato patch when I was little, he looked so peaceful. He loved his garden, next to ours. So death wasn't totally new to me, but 'Poofs' death subdued all of us.

As to the history of Boughton, I have a feeling there has been a settlement in the Parish for a great deal longer than is generally supposed. The lumps and bumps in our 'battleground' for one thing. With the benefit of hindsight over many years, I believe they could well have been all that remained of very old houses. Certainly the

oldest houses in the village were nearby, [Uncle Ted's and Mrs. Seymore's] these were almost in a state of collapse. Built of chalk blocks and covered with thick plaster, time had taken its' toll, I don't think they had the original roofs either.

The sunken lane [Crab Lane] to the north of the church is the sort of thing associated with very old settlements. Then there is the name of this part of the village, Dublin. Dub-Lin is, I believe, Norse / Anglo Saxon for black water / pond. In the field to the west of our 'battleground' at the bottom of Carter's garden was a small pond, the water was black, it was deep and never dried up. Food for thought?

One thing is for sure, there were people living in the area long, long before this. A perfect Bronze Age axe head, complete with socket and lugs to tie it on was found in a nearby field. A fine gold torc, still perfectly coiled was also found close by. Both of these finds were made by my Dad and given to Lynn Museum.

I believe they are still there. I know to within a few yards where he found the axe head and more or less where the torc turned up. There is another interesting thing about the Parish of Boughton, it appears along with Thompson, near Watton to have had the greatest concentration of 'Pingos'. These are small, usually circular ponds, not spring fed, yet rarely dry up. I suspect with the march of modern agriculture all, except the big one, the one in front of Field Farm Barn and the one near Armsby's on Gibbett Lane have now been drained and filled. When we were kids there were at least ten such ponds, plus the big one.

One was halfway up the hill going towards Stoke Ferry, about fifty yards off the road. There was another in 'Tom's field' near to Roger Robinson's bungalow [now Bell Meadow] which he had built in later life and a third on the south side of the farmyard, I can remember that being filled in and a large chicken shed built over it. The 'horse hole' beside Fen Road, nearly to Payne's farm was the most easterly. North of the road through the village one had been 'squared off' with brickwork, just on the north side of the drier. Then there is the big pit, a couple of hundred yards away there used to be one outside the Blacksmith shop, just south of the big converted barn. The field at the end of the White Horse had two, one near the back corner of the plot with the 'new' shop on it, the other the 'newt pit'. There was one in the edge of our 'battlefield', at the bottom of Carter's garden, this had been trodden in at either end by generations of cows. The 'black pond' was in the middle of the next field. On Gibbet Lane there was one in the corner of the second field on the left and another about a hundred yards out in the field opposite. Two others were just outside the Parish boundary, one in the field just west of the Fincham turning and another right beside the road where Rolfs used to live, latterly Cliff Armsby's contractors yard. There is another where Cliff lives now, Thurlbourns old smallholding, yet another in the field just before the main road and the last of the line halfway up the hill going into West Dereham, again right beside the road.

I must do a bit more research on the 'Pingos', how they were formed etc., a strange quirk of clay and chalk combination.

A couple of other significant memories have occurred to me, one was the arrival of three 'refugees' from the floods which struck the Fens in Coronation year. Mr. & Mrs. Banham from Terrington lodged with my Gran, who lived next door. They were there for about a year before they could return home. The other evacuee was Daisy. Daisy stayed in what had been the garage under the conker tree [Hall Farm], just inside the eastern gate to 'The Hatcheries'. Us kiddies used to pop in to see her on our way to school every morning with a handful of grass. Daisy, by the way, was the Banham's Jersey cow, gentle old thing, we really missed her when she went 'home'. I can still remember Gran and Mrs. Banham making butter in Gran's kitchen, this was before the houses were modernised.

I suppose the greatest physical challenge the village faced was the winter of early '63. That was seriously cold! Four of us, Suzanne Clayton, Richard Clarke, Alan Rix and I had to cycle to Stoke Ferry to catch the No. 15 bus to Downham Market to get to school. By the time the holidays ended, the road into the village was blocked, the drifts taller than I. The fields however clear, all the snow blown off onto the roads! As everything was frozen solid we simply cycled over the fields. As the cold intensified the buses stopped running, the diesel had frozen.

After that it got really cold! The water main from Stoke Ferry froze deep underground and life got a bit tough. Eventually the road to Stoke was dug out using a couple of R.G.'s tractors with rear loaders, releasing three snow ploughs, one a huge American thing, a Studebaker Super Chieftain, if I recall correctly. It didn't help much as the buses still ran erratically, if at all. Yet thanks to Billy Newell the milk got through with his horse and sledge from Wereham, he even brought the mail, which Doris Clarke, sometimes helped by her Dad, then delivered. I can't see such dedication happening today somehow. 'Elf and Safety': 'Far too dangerous!' Insurance: 'Unacceptable risk!' The biggest casualties were the fish, hundreds in the pond died, frozen into the ice. The survivors grew fast and bred quicker than rabbits, so it quickly recovered. That's about it really, you could write several books on our fishing adventures and falling out of trees whilst bird nesting. Once I got interested in the wildlife I was totally hooked on it for life. It would fill volumes of what lives in the Parish, often unnoticed beside us 'uprights'. So much has been lost over the years and no doubt will continue to be lost, some things for good.