

HISTORY OF WESTFIELD FARM, BRANSTON

This article covers the period of history from 1881 to the present with a few notes prior to that date when the Nelstrops came to Westfield House, Heath Farm, Branston, later called Westfield Farm.

Robert Nelstrop moved to Heath Farm, Branston as a bachelor in October 1881. He had been a tenant on a farm at High Ackworth, near Pontefract in South Yorkshire. He had to move and find a new farm because his farm was taken for a coal mine and slag heaps. Nothing remains except the slag heaps which have now been graded and planted. There is a memorial to the family in the church yard at High Ackworth.

Prior to Robert was Robert Giles (we have a small wood called Giles Gorse) who had a ~~brother~~ farm next door at Canwick Manor Farm (previously called St. Kathryns Grange). Both houses were installed with a beer pump to pull beer from the cellar. The pump at Canwick Manor survives.

Previous to this was Ian Franklin who erected the wagon shed in 1841. I think it was he who sold the farm to The Church Commissioners for England, who have owned the farm together with several others in the area surrounding Lincoln.

Grandfather married Fanny Bateman of Snelland and during a long and happy marriage they produced 7 daughters and 3 sons.

The eldest son Robert died at 14 days old. The first seven children, of whom father was the seventh and the first boy to live, were born at approximately 13 month intervals with three girls having successive March birthdays!

Life was hard through the late 1890s to the outbreak of the First World War. Life was about hard work, no spending, church twice on a Sunday and self-sufficiency with food being home grown, all clothes made and grandmother held a weekly stall on the Butter Market in Lincoln to sell poultry, eggs, butter, cream, cheese, vegetables, flowers, berries, holly, etc.

Grandfather for a period from 1885 to 1891 approximately was surveyor for the parish highways including Heighington, Nocton and Bardney. I have his book for 1885/86 with names, payment, materials and store accounts. Most labourers' signatures for wages of approximately 10/- to 6/8d (50p - 34p) are a "x".

Later, when the First World War was declared, it was Robert's job to requisition goods and quiet cart horses to go to France to pull gun carriages, supply wagons, etc. He and Walter Hayward of Navenby had to visit all the local farms to meet the farmers and wagoners to select suitable animals and not necessarily to take the wagger's advice

Modern facilities of electricity, mains water and telephone were not introduced until much later, phone 1932, electricity and water approximately 1955. Light was supplied by oil lamp and candles, cooking by a black lead grate and water for drinking was pumped from the well outside the back door. Soft water for washing came from a cistern which collected all the house roof water - 260 pumps filled the tank in the roof, 3 - 4 times a week.

The room in the house now the cloakroom was the dairy with its pansions, racks and separator in its centre. Here cream and butter were produced for consumption and sale.

The farm buildings, several of which have survived, were designed for over-wintered cattle, mill and mixer, home produced feed, carpenter's shop, hay storage, stable for cart horse together with chaff house, root house, bull boxes, etc.

For many years cattle were summered on Trentside grassland or the marshes near the east coast and wintered at home to produce manure and utilise the straw - they would be driven, not taken by lorry.

On Friday 9th September 1911 a disastrous fire took place - threshing was taking place in the yard after the harvest and before the casual Irish workers went home, when a spark from the steam engine set the stack on fire. Unfortunately the straw had been carted directly to the crew yard in preparation for the stock coming in, so the fire spread rapidly, burning the other stacks, all the crew yard buildings and was heading for the farm house. Grandparents were at market and when the fire brigade (and many friends and neighbours who had heard about the fire at market) arrived the fire was well advanced. They soon pumped the pond dry and all available set to evacuate Westfield House - taking all contents down the garden. The Irish casuals first had to rescue their beer from the cellar and take it to safety in the wood (approximately three quarters of a mile) before returning to help fight the fire. Fortunately the wind changed and the danger passed. The stone walls affected by the fire are red and it can be seen exactly where the fire got to.

This destruction of all the winter feed and bedding was very serious and the good neighbours all did their bit including Harry Neesham from next door Lodge Farm, Canwick who sent two dray loads of straw next morning. The two families are still neighbours and the grand children and great grandchildren are good friends and good neighbours 89 years later.

Things began to change with the advent of World War 2. The nation needed food, grass was ploughed up. Sugar beet introduced, potatoes grown and there were great improvements in plant breeding and new varieties, better fertiliser and combined drilling was introduced where wheat and barley were sown with balanced fertiliser placed next to the seed.

Grandfather died on the night of the first bomber raid in 1942 and mother, father, James and I moved to Westfield Farm (grandmother and two aunts moved to our house at Bracebridge Heath.

It must have been a very large culture shock to mother (Bessie Blythman) to move mid-war to a big, rambling, cold house with no water or electricity. Improvements to the house - *Esse, sink units* and all the facilities that go with electricity followed, except central heating which was to come late in 1968 and revolutionised the big house.

My father George Leetham Nelstrop was born in 1893 at Westfield. He was the seventh child and the first surviving son. He was brought up at Westfield and attended school at Branston and later Lincoln - going to school by pony and trap down to the bottom of Cross O' Cliff Hill and then by tram.

He was a good sportsman playing football and cricket and was also a boxer and played tennis until his lameness stopped him.

Sadly there are no records or photographs of his life between the Great War and his meeting mother in 1934. He joined the Lincolnshire Yeomanry at the outbreak of war and had five Christmasses away at the war. As an acknowledged horseman he was in charge of horses and mules in Egypt and Palestine.

The time between the two wars was difficult for farming including the Great Depression when the ownership and occupation of most farms in the area changed with many bankruptcies and much hardship. Survival was by hard work, nil expenditure, milk production and cash sales of potatoes, eggs, poultry, etc.

Father met mother (formerly Bessie ^{*Stovin*} ~~Storn~~ of Welton) and they married in 1936, living at Bracebridge Heath until grandfather's death in 1942 when the family moved to Westfield Farm.

George Leetham Nelstrop's involvement with the village goes back to his childhood. Grandfather was churchwarden in 1897 and father had a long spell as churchwarden in the 1950s. He was instrumental in purchasing and erecting the first Church Hall (bought from R.A.F. Coleby) on the present site.

He suffered for many years from osteo arthiritis and walked with a stick from my childhood. However in his own way he achieved much and is still remembered by many for his kindness and wise counsel.

During the Second World War father served on the War Agricultural Committee (The Waragg!) charged with getting the land to produce more, to plough up the grass and to feed the people when food supplies were desperately short. Mother drove an ambulance and both were together on night patrols for several nights a week.

The agricultural revolution was starting, sugar beet was a new crop but it was still labour intensive and very hard manual work.

The record of Westfield Farm for over 100 years would not be complete without mentioning some of the people who have worked on the farm. I cannot remember any before 1945 but the wage books include Pearson, Frith, Green, Hackney and other well known Branston names.

When I came home to Westfield from college in 1956 there were 8 men on 350 acres including the Frith family in the yard and the Hansons in the cottages. Mrs Hanson came in the First World War as milkmaid with three or four children. Her husband was away at the war. She eventually had 10 children, seemingly having her babies between milkings. Four sons worked on the farm at various times including Chuck and Bob who each worked for three generations for 51 years and received a Long Service Award from Princess Anne at the Lincolnshire Show.

In my first year at home we purchased a combine harvester, tractor with hydraulic loader, sugar beet harvester and two tipping trailers. The Agricultural Revolution was really under way.

This sudden expenditure was quickly followed by diesel tractors, self starting, headlights, tractor cabs, grain handling and storage and was as a direct result of demand and good prices. Together with great advances in seed, fertiliser, agrochemical and technology, old cattle buildings and derelict cottages were demolished, new stores for potatoes and grain and workshops were built, hedges pulled out to make sensible sized fields, being replaced by much tree planting and replacement strategic hedging. (The man who planted the hedges at Westfield as a result of the Enclosure Act was probably permanently drunk - there isn't a straight hedge on the farm.)

All the changes have resulted in farming being an industry employing very few men, each driving expensive and highly complicated machinery. There is very little heavy manual work. All involved are now highly trained and competent operators. From 8 men on 350 acres in 1956 there are now 3 men on 1800 acres.

In May 1997 the surviving descendants of Robert and Fanny met at All Saints' Church to celebrate "Robert Nelstrop Churchwarden April 28th 1881 - 40 relations from my mother (Bessie Blythman), aged 86, to babies in arms gave a screen in the Church, and lunched in the recently extended Church Hall which, incidentally, is built with stone from a demolished cottage at Westfield.

Long may the family association with Branston and Westfield Farm continue.

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