

THE CHANGING YEARS IN LITTLEHAM-BY-BIDEFORD 1950 - 2007

My first impression of Littleham when I came here in the early '50s was of a truly rural, unspoilt and beautiful area. It was far removed from the busy world of London and the South-East where I had lived and worked.

I look back now on these early years with great affection. There was such a relaxed, calm feeling to life. Time seemed to pass more gently. One had time to explore the countryside, enjoy the wonderful coast and moors and feel part of the land around one. Yes! we were busy too, building up a small Market Garden with flowers, vegetables and fruit - plenty of very hard but rewarding work. Later we moved into pigs and poultry. Then came the children, followed by goats and ponies! All were demanding attention and giving added interest to life.

The children had a wonderfully free childhood - enjoying to the full, all the environment had to offer; and without the fears, alarms and restrictions of today. They rode for miles on their ponies and enjoyed great experiences with the Pony Club. At that time it was run with military precision by the late Col. Gavin Elliott and Vivian Elliott - both good horsemen and huntsmen. They lived in Rose Cottage on Littleham Hill until quite recent years. The Stevenstone Hunt was very active in the area - and it was a great sight to see them 'meet' locally, at the Village Hall, Crossways, Hoopers Water and, most memorably, the 'Lawn Meets' at Heale House, by invitation of the late Col. and Mrs. Churchill-Longman, who lived there for many years, and their daughter Vie.

We also enjoyed the 'services' of a village Bobby - who rode through the village on his bike and stopped to chat to anyone 'about' - especially the children. My daughters recall he used to buy them ice creams at Iris Bryant's shop in Mount Pleasant - possibly 'bribery and corruption', but the memory lingers on. I doubt it happens today!

As we kept ponies, horses and goats, there was a demand for hay. In the early years, we harvested hay from our field and did it the hard way!, with a little help from our friends and village children. We cut the grass with long, heavy scythes. Then it was raked into rows and turned with hayforks until ready to gather. It usually took several days of sweat and toil and a prayer or two for a dry spell. A small rick was built in a corner of the field and one of, the village worthies helped with the thatching - Ernie Clements springs to mind.

How very different from today's speedy operation, cut, turned, baled into huge 'barrels' of hay and covered, all done by machinery -and fork-lifted onto huge trailers to be carted off for storage -usually a couple of days' work and very often a repeat performance a few weeks later.

However, far more silage is made these days and as we all know, it seems to be a frequent event all throughout the Summer season! However, even in today's mechanical age, the weather still dictates the timing and is the fundamental element in all harvesting, whatever the crop may be. It seems that "nature" still holds her own!

The corn harvest has likewise changed beyond recognition. I still recall with deep appreciation the beauty of a field with golden stooks of corn, the straw stacks thatched with skill and the old threshing machine, beating out the grain, up in the farmyard next door. The last of the old farm horses was "Rosie", who worked so hard and with such willingness - we all loved her - even if she did ruin our garden one night when she broke in! She was indeed the end of the old rural era, and I'm grateful I can still recall those golden days.

Life at Nether Boundstone, the 400 year-old Devon Longhouse, was something of a culture shock! In the '50s there was no mains water - which came a few years later. We had a pump in the scullery which drew the water up from the old spring-fed well in the garden. Hard work and very frustrating at times when the well was low!

The village pump was in the hedge, opposite the two council houses known as Boundstone Cottages. The Water Board closed down the old well when the mains were laid, so hundreds of years of communal use and social contact were destroyed forever. Laying the main throughout the Parish caused great upheaval and disturbance. Some outlying areas, such as Edge Mills, did not have mains water for many years after the village.

Surprisingly the roads and lanes are much as they were in the '50s, with very few improvements except for some additional 'passing places' on Littleham Hill and elsewhere. Now the pace of life has quickened and noise seems everywhere. Certainly 'size matters' if one contemplates the farm vehicles which dominate our lanes in harvest time. One hopes that the old Apps Lane - which runs from "Panoramic View", through the reservoir corner at the top of Littleham Hill - could be re-opened and allow a "one-way" system through the village - to the relief of us all! For many years the roads, ditches and drains were tended and kept in good order by frequent visits from the men of the Roads Dept. Not so these days, I fear.

The steep lane from Hoopers Water to Moorhead was once a quiet haven, with little traffic at all. Now it is a 'rat-run' for commuters from Buckland Brewer and beyond and at time more like the M5! With further developments in other villages, this problem is going to increase. By contrast, in the '50s at Nether Boundstone we often saw the Rector and his wife, driving their pony and trap down the lane, and often pursued by our dog at that time. He was usually chased off by a long whip from the driver!

The trees in the area have changed a good deal. They were much more sparse in the village area. The predominant trees were all Elms and I recall we had 14 great elms around Nether Boundstone. Elm disease in the late '50s and '60s eventually destroyed all the mature elms. The hedges survived but as young saplings rose to maturity, they too were attacked and died. This is still happening today. There

are many examples in our current hedgerows. At the end of the paddock at Nether Boundstone, there was an old 'pound' hedged around by great elms, all of which died. There is still an elm hedge and other trees around it today - but a long time since it was used as a cattle pound.

The Village Pond nearby, on the edge of Watery Lane, was flourishing in the '50s and '60s. The cattle came up to the now 'ploughed in' track to the pond to drink and on to Boundstone Farm for milking - a lovely sight. The trees around the pond were few, mostly ash and hawthorn. It was not until years later, when some of us tried to revive the pond, that we planted more trees including the giant willow which now dominates the area. Also a lovely young beech and other smaller trees were added over the years.

There was also a huge white Poplar tree by the gate of the paddock. The poplar was hollow and became home for a family of Muscovy ducks who nested there in the hollow trunk for several years and made the pond their own. We often spotted snipe in the winter by the pond.

The meadow opposite the pond was lush and full of wild flowers. In the corner on the south side grew a small grove of willows, standing in a bog. This was probably another spring - as there was a pipe under the lane into the village pond - which was a constant feed and never seemed to dry up, at least not until the 15 houses were built and the builders insisted on diverting the water away from the pond down through the field below. We pleaded for common sense but the pond was lost. It is now the sad mess you see today.

In the early days of my life in Littleham one looked out on many more fields and hedgerows but by the '70s the great clearance came and 5 fields became one. Others were swept away - with the hedges and habitat of countless birds and mammals of all kinds - to say nothing of the wild flowers.

I recall that the Cuckoo was a frequent visitor in the early days, and also the Nightjar screeching at night - an eerie sound! Many of the smaller birds such as Yellow Hammers, Bullfinches and in the winter, Grouse and Snipe were numerous. A pair of Barn Owls lived in the farm buildings and graced the fields with their lovely flight. Then there were the thousands of starlings that flew in great drifts at dusk. One could hear the 'whirr' of their flight as they passed overhead, making their way towards Hartland Forest to roost for the night. I have seen none of these birds locally for years now. The odd few starlings pop up from time to time but no flocks in their thousands. Where have they all gone - and why? However, Collared Doves started to colonise in the late '60s and are plentiful now. Also the Buzzard, once a rare sight, is around locally and a great sight to see on the wing, soaring on a thermal, their young 'mewing' to each other. In recent years there has been a great increase in the number of Pheasants everywhere. This is due to 'escapees' from two large breeding farms, at Monkleigh and Buckland Brewer. It is a delight to see these very beautiful birds gracing our gardens and fields and many have become quite tame when fed!

Many Rights-of-Way have been lost to the Parish over the years. The first I recall to disappear ran from the old pond, down a deep gully lane, across fields and through the woods to Edge Mill. People started to make a 'tip' at the top end and it finally went in the field enlargements in the early '70s. There is still Apps Lane from behind "Panoramic View" along the crest of the hill but it now ends beyond our old field, called "Boo Down". It used to run through to the top of Littleham Hill, where the lane, known as Abbotsham Lane, turns off towards the 'Roundabout'. The building of the Reservoir and more field development was the cause of its curtailment. One could also go down to Robin Hill at one time. Another path was lost when the Sewage Plant was built on the land below Narracott Cottages.

When Abbotsham Lane was a quiet by-way there was often a small Gypsy Encampment on the grass bend in the lane, opposite the old milking parlour where three great Oaks stand today. They had a colourful caravan and skewbald ponies. The women would go round the village selling violets and primroses or pegs. Another feature of the lanes has moved on

I guess the heart of Littleham is "Mount Pleasant"- (cynically so named in many places as the burial of victims of the plague!) However, our Mount Pleasant is now a very 'pleasant' area, with mostly white cottages, lovingly tended - but this was not always the case, as in the '50s they were mostly labourers' cottages, some very run down and unhygienic! Over the years there have been many changes to become the delight they are today. Now there is a new dimension in the 15 new houses built some years ago. In the '50s, Culver Cottage was the Village Post Office, under the watchful eye of Maud Badcock and home to Lionel, Aileen and Jim; a truly lovely village family who have all served their village and community so well over the years.

The Badcock children, and many others from both Littleham and Landcross, attended the Village School, opposite Red Cottages. In the early '60s there were too few children to warrant the school and Devon County Council closed it down. The School Bus took over and children were all taken off to schools in Bideford. The school building was converted into a 'poultry house' and later into the very pleasant house it now is - so it has seen a few changes.

The Red Cottages opposite had originally been home to the gardeners and groundsmen at the Old Rectory in Victorian and Edwardian days. The other two Red Cottages opposite the Village Hall, where Ernie Clements and his brother lived, were the Coachman and Grooms' cottages.

The school had served both Littleham and Landcross children. Some of them had to walk from Landcross and the Yeo Vale up through the old Rectory Drive and across fields

to the school. The footpaths then were diagonal across the fields but have now been diverted round the edges of the fields to make cultivation easier. I wonder how many of today's children would be prepared to undertake such long walks - in all weathers! I doubt there were many cases of 'obesity' to deal with then!

In the early '60s there were further upheavals in the Village when the Sewage System was introduced. It took many months of bad winter weather before the main sewer and all the house connections and the sewage plant were finally completed. We had a 6ft deep trench right across our front and back garden - with compensation of £20 for the weeks of upheaval and mess!

The '70s saw the 'Battle of the Pylons'. The Central Electricity Board planned to run a very high tension line from Indian Queens in mid-Cornwall to Taunton, via a sub-station at Alverdiscot, East-the-Water. Part of this long line was proposed to run above the River Dunz, on high ground down to the Yeo Vale at Ruddha Bridge. When old Mrs Palmer (Johnny's mother) was asked how she felt about a huge pylon rearing just above the Farm, she said "Well, us is 'oping it will stop all them fuses what we gets."! I wonder if it ever did?

The line then strode down the Yeo Vale to Edge Mill - all in a 'protected area' of outstanding beauty - then up through the woods where 4,000 trees were cleared to make a pathway to the top of the hill again and down over Weare Giffard. The impact on the view from the village here was horrendous - one could count 21 pylons at one point. Eventually we attended a Public Enquiry, held at the Village Hall, with all the 'Big Guns' from the Central Electricity Board and various Ministries. We had done a revised proposed route for the line to be redirected behind Torrington, across to Alverdiscot. The Inspectors did follow it through but finally decided our proposed route would have been more costly. We, of course, had no means of confirming this and had to accept their decision - but at least we tried!

In the '50s and early '60s, Watery Lane and Church Lane were grassy tracks leading down to the Church and Rectory. The hedges and banks were undisturbed and there were masses of primroses, violets, campions and many different varieties of ferns and mosses. There was no traffic. The main entrance was off the main village road, opposite Boob-down field, or the track down from the Village Hall. One of the delights of Church Lane on a warm summer's evening was to see the Glow-worms sending out their tiny glow in the dusk. I wonder where they have all gone now? One never hears of them anywhere.

It was in the Summer of 1963 that the Rector decided to retire and move out, leaving the Church locked and depositing the keys with Solicitors in Bideford. He did not report his actions to either the Archdeacon or the Bishop of Exeter. It was only by a Parishioner's chance encounter with the Rector that the Village heard the news! The Church, Rectory, garden and grounds had long been neglected over the years and were almost derelict. The Archdeacon was informed and called an Extraordinary General Meeting in the Village Hall, to which the Village responded in full force! They gave vent to their feelings and frustrations which had been brewing for so long. The Bell Ringers, for example, had not been able to ring the bells because the 'sallies' had been cut off!

Then swiftly followed a great sense of renewal, and spurred on by the fact that the following Sunday was the 800th Anniversary of St Swithun's death, we wished to commemorate the fact. So the world and his wife turned up with brooms, buckets of water and all kinds of cleaning materials, to 'spring-clean' the long-neglected Church and prepare it with flowers and dignity for the Sunday Service and a very full congregation! From then on there were constant fund-raising events to raise monies for so much necessary restoration to the fabric. We re-roofed the whole Church, as a matter of urgency, to be followed by many other projects. The 12th Century wall-painting of St Swithun in the Lady Chapel was in a state of collapse so experts

from London came and stayed for 2 weeks, rescuing and restoring the ancient artefact. Five other wall paintings had been covered over in the Restoration of 1892 because they were too badly damaged to be repairable, so it was vital that we should save St Swithun in the Lady Chapel.

The Old Rectory was sold off by the Church Commissioners and bought by a Property Developer for £2,000! He knocked down the old Queen Anne Wing, where the courtyard now stands. Much work was done to restore the main building and after 6 months it was sold on, again and again. The 200 acres of farmland, the Glebe, were sold off to the tenant Farmers. We, the Parishioners, had to raise some £400 to buy back the access land to the Church, which the Church Commissioners had taken! We then had to make good the roadway and develop the Car Park. The pleasant green area we bought in as an extension to the Churchyard as we were running out of space. This area was originally the vegetable garden and green houses, etc. for the Rectory. It also housed - behind the present day laurel grove - the Village Poor House, where the young women who had 'fallen by the wayside' were housed and, one hopes, looked after? The Poor House was still in fairly good shape when I first knew it but sadly it was left to decline and finally collapsed. Much of the stonework has been removed by local folk over the years!

Above the Poor House in the corner adjoining the Churchyard stand the remains of the old Georgian "Ice House". It was fed by water from a spring in the field above. The Ice was stored on stone slabs around the inner walls. This was the Rectory's early 'fridge'! English Heritage wanted the Ice House to be preserved but sadly we had no funds to spare. The roof had been a work of art, with beautifully crafted slates.

Before the sale of the Rectory, the Churchwardens found 3 'Treasures' thrown away in the Stables. One was the ancient solid Oak Chest that now stands near the Font.

At the time of "Doomsday", all churches were ordered to have such a Chest in which to keep their silver and other valuables. It was a major operation to get it up to the Church! Also found were the six 17th Century Dutch Candelabra. These were all dismantled and black with burnt on dirt! It took a great deal of time and effort to restore them to their present state, looking so wonderful when lit up for Christmas and other occasions. The third item was the abandoned Brass Weathervane Cockerel (a reminder of St Peter and his denial of Christ before the cockerel crowed). It was pitted with bullet holes, having been used for target practice by the Home Guard, who fired on it from the field above the Church! Thanks to Sir Robert Stapledon's kind generosity, it was restored to its former glory and now swings proudly on top of the Tower.

The Old Rectory Stables, Piggeries and storehouse were converted into Garages, a Studio and "The Glebe", the delightful, residence where Mariel Stapledon lived until very recently. Her brother, the late Sir Robert Stapledon, retired Governor of the Bahamas, came to live in the Old Rectory in the late '60s. It was he and his wife Sue, who made such a tremendous difference to the place. They worked very hard to clear and develop the grounds, make the large pond and create a beautiful garden.

There have been several owners since Sir Robert's day, each bringing something to the old Rectory, until we see the very beautiful environment we all enjoy today. I'm sure we are all grateful to have access to the Bridle Path through the woods to the Rectory Drive. The Right-of-Way originally went past the front of the house but it was, of course, necessary to create a diversion through the woods.

The most noticeable change in Littleham over the past 50 years has been the building of over 80 houses, bungalows and 'conversions'. The Torridge District Council Policy of 'filling in' is almost complete now. All this has meant a great increase in people and traffic.

But there is now a much greater diversity of people and interests - more Village activities and clubs, mostly based on the Village Hall - even a Film show once a month! The annual Fetes in the '50s and '60s were mainly Flower Shows in a large marquee, with other stalls and children's events. Now it is a much larger spread of activities and we have had Gymkhanas and other 'Pony' events - all great fun and very popular. The old site has been changed to the Playing field, another good innovation but sadly not well supported by the children as they say it is too far from the centre of the village. It's hard to please everyone!

The next era of the Fete brought the 'heavy brigade', with Steamrollers, Veteran Cars and Motor Bikes and all types of 'oldies' in the mechanical and agricultural world. There were always, of course, the wonderful Cream Teas, served in the Village Hall and time for a good old 'natter'. Food has always been a great feature of celebrations and fund raising! I recall that at the time of the Queen's Coronation in 1953, the collection raised around the Village was about £75. It was entirely devoted to a 'Feast' in the Village Hall!

In the '60s through to the early '80s, we enjoyed some really wonderful "Harvest Suppers", presided over by the late, much loved, Joyce Mills of Ashridge Farm and Joyce and Claude Nicholls, plus a host of willing helpers. It was a great team effort - and greatly enjoyed and appreciated. I often wondered how the long trestle tables stood up to the weight of 'goodies' and how did we get through all those great bowls of cream, trifles, jellies, pies of all kinds, to say nothing of all the savouries that came before! The eating was followed by a dance or entertainment. Happy days, remembered by we older folk with great fondness.

"The Crealock Arms" public house was opened in the mid '70s by Claude and Joyce Nicholls to popular acclaim. It rapidly became the 'Inn Place' to be and has been well supported for many years. There had not been a public house in the village since 1923, when "Hoops Cottage" was then "Hoops Inn".

I believe the "Crealock" was so named because a member of the Crealock family had lived in Shutta Farm, at one time. They also had a Farmhouse where Oldfield and Langerton Manor now stand. I remember this as a semi-ruin, where cows were allowed to browse around - and beautiful crafted plasterwork was still visible on the ceilings of the downstairs rooms. It should have been preserved and restored - but it was not to be - and it was converted into the 3 buildings we see today.

In Victorian days there were two distinguished members of the Crealock Family. One was General Henry Hope Crealock, whose elaborate Memorial stands in the South Aisle of St Swithun's Church. His brother was Major General Lord North Crealock. Both are buried outside the Church, under the West Window, along with other members of the family. Descendants from Australia and the U.S. sometimes come to inspect the graves and admire the memorial. I recall meeting them on several occasions.

The two brothers took part in a remarkable number of Wars and Campaigns. They travelled to China to the Boxer Rising, to the Crimean War, to Africa and the Zulu Wars. However, they were both excellent artists and must have spent most of their time recording the various actions in which they were involved. Indeed, they were the first Official War Artists as we know them today. Their work is now held in the Regimental Museum, in Lanarkshire, Scotland. Some work has already been made available on the Internet and We are hoping for more to follow in due course. I wonder what the Generals' and indeed the local population of their day, would have thought of the latest innovation to Village life in 2007?

The coming of our own Web Site and Broad Band is a whole new 'ball game', giving the Community a new interest. We all owe a debt of gratitude to all those knowledgeable people who have made this possible! In the '50s there were very few 'phones in the Village and most of us had to share a line anyway!

Our Bideford No. was 450 so must have been an early one. We shared with Lois Garland of "Hollands" - a lady of considerable character. She frequently had very lengthy social calls, whilst we were waiting to use the phone for some more urgent cases!

Most of the Farms in the Parish have changed hands over the years, land bought and sold. East Furlong farm in the centre of the Village - on the double bend - was something of a nightmare in the '50s onwards. The Farmer had a large herd of Friesian cows that were on the road four times a day, going to and from milking to pasture. The double bend was usually a hazard with 'droppings' - apart from the cows who were never in a hurry. I often wonder what it would have been like with today's heavy traffic!

Another fine herd of Friesians was at Furlong Farm in the far end of the Parish, near Grove Cross, Hoopers Water. Here again the house is now a private residence, with Barns converted to a more 'Mediterranean' character. The long hill up to Old Moor takes a great deal of commuter traffic now, from Buckland Brewer and elsewhere, and has made life very trying for the residents of the thatched cottages at the top of the lane near the crossroads.

Down the hill towards Bideford, one comes to Littleham Court and again many changes since it was run as a Farm. Now there are several barn conversions, including what was once the rare Round Barn where mules and donkeys were used to work the great grinding stones for the grain. I was very sad to see this lovely old building converted from it's former glory.

Apps Farm too, has been converted to several new homes and has seen a great many changes in my time. Earlier it was a well-known Brewery. The reason for its development was the very good springs, which were vital to the production of Ales and Mineral Waters. I knew the Farm when Fred and Joyce Withecombe and their 3 sons ran a mixed farm for many years.

Fred was also People's Warden when the Church was restored to life in 1963. We enjoyed some memorable P.C.C. Meetings at Apps Farm - another great venue for refreshments. Today "Apps Springs" is the building which housed the spring, and "Apps Farmhouse" is a delightful home and garden. All the other old outhouses and barns are well converted to new homes. When I lived at Nether Boundstone, we often found hops growing in the hedgerows. An old map of 1847 showed it was then a 'Hops' garden - presumably supplying the Apps Brewery.

The Yeo Vale has remained very much the same as I remember it in the '50s, as an area of "Outstanding Natural Beauty" where building development has been restricted. However, that did not save the area from the Pylon invasion. The cottages at Edge Mill have been sold recently and are now being refurbished. I hope they will keep their original character. It is very sad to see the state of the 'Transport Depot' opposite the Cottages. This was once a delightful haven of small gardens and allotments, with a greenhouse and the vital well for the Cottages. It was a long while before Mains Water arrived at Edge Mills.

In the '70s, Devon County Council was seeking 'landfill sites' and the woodland valley from the edge of the Rectory Drive, on the righthand side going down, was considered as a possible 'tipping site'. This was another battle to be fought and mercifully won. The fact that the stream at the bottom of the valley ran into the River Yeo, and then on to the Torridge, became a major Concern as pollution was inevitable. After very strong protests from our own campaign and the Fishing Lobby, sense prevailed and the scheme was dropped. We are blessed to have the Bridle Path and Right-of-Way over the Rectory Drive - well worth fighting for and preserving.

The lane leading off the Yeo Vale - known as "Scratchy Face", near Kingdoms Bridge - climbs steeply up the winding hill to the Village Hall.

Nearer to Edge Mill is another entrance drive by the Lodge House, to what until recent times was known as "Heale House". This Edwardian House was originally owned by the Bell family and later the Churchill-Longmans who were there for many years. It was a refuge to many during the War and the owners were always so hospitable and kind. I recall a wonderful Barbecue of Roasting Lamb on a turning spit, presided over by Mr Honey, the Butcher. It was a 'Fund Raiser' for the Church and followed by a memorable Dance in the old house! In the later years, after the passing of Col. and Mrs Churchill-Longman, the house saw many changes and occupiers. It is currently a "Rehabilitation Home" and hopefully doing a good job.

Ashridge Farm, once farmed by Albert and Joyce Mills, is still very much a working farm run by the Withecombe family. Dunn Farm has seen changes over the years and now seems to boast of multi-operations: Farm Engineering, Fencing, Tyres, etc. to name but a few. Old School House Farm has long been a private residence and the barns behind used for other purposes, including highly skilled Craftsmanship. Boundstone Farm has expanded a good deal and is still run by Michael Stevens since he took over from his Uncle Wilfred, his father's brother. Wilfred was in command when I came to Littleham in the '50s and he was a great deal more 'laid back' with his farming - as life was in general then. Now progress is a hard master and I'm sad that it has to be so, it has taken so much away from the quality of life.

Littleham has certainly 'moved on' in the last 50 years but I'm glad to say that it is still a very pleasant, friendly place to live and the sense of Community is very present. We are indeed blessed to live in such lovely surroundings. I trust Littleham will still be a very desirable Village in another 50 years - I wonder?

My last thought is of the fairly recent introduction of a realistic bus service - a great improvement from the original Tuesdays and Saturdays Market Day service.

I hope it will continue to be well supported, as it is a great asset for the elderly and those unable to drive - and no doubt I shall be joining the queue one fine day!

I hope these 'ramblings' over the 60-odd years of my life here will be of some interest and revive memories for some of you who may be of my era!

M. Patricia Alvis October 2007