

# **Bygone Bokesbourne**

## **The Rural Past of an East Kent Village in Flowers and Photographs**

St



**Peter's Church (Chris Stamp)**

**presented by the Friends of Bokesbourne Church  
September 2006**

**Entrance and Programme Free – Donations welcome**

## Fruit Farming

The first orchards appeared in Kent at Teynham during the time of Henry VIII and by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fruit growing was well established in the county. Bekesbourne's orchards were largely to the north of the parish where Messrs Amos, Wallis and Mount had their businesses in the 1930s to 1950s. Fruit from these orchards was picked and packed by the local people (mostly the ladies) and sent by rail from Bekesbourne station all over the country.

Fruit growing continues to be a thriving business in Bekesbourne and Patricxbourne and at this time of year the apple and pear orchards are bursting with fruit. There are still plums, strawberries and Kentish cobnuts to be harvested and cherries, apricots, and blackcurrants have all been picked earlier in the season.

Where once the local people picked the fruit, nowadays seasonal workers from Eastern Europe are welcomed on to the farms and live in temporary accommodation such as caravans. In most orchards the large trees of the past have been replaced with smaller trees which can be picked from the ground without the use of ladders and mechanised units have replaced the old hand sprays. Transport by train has been replaced by road haulage.



Girl power - blackcurrant picking on Woolton Farm 1950s (Mark and Rosie Mount)

## Shops

Over the years Bekesbourne has had two shops, a post office, a bakery and delivery services from the grocery shops in Bridge and Ickham. There were also two pubs and an off-licence. One shop was at Godden House in The Street and the other on the Aerodrome at the house known as Fairview. The shop at Godden House was also at one time a tearoom known as *The Bow Window* and was licensed as an off-licence. In the 1960s the proprietor was Mrs Constance "Conny" Foster. The proprietors at the Aerodrome were Mr and Mrs Graham. They ran their shop in the 1930s and continued into the war years. The pubs were *The Prince of Wales* and *The Unicorn*. Of all these only *The Unicorn* remains as an important amenity for the village.

## Post Office

Bekesbourne's first sub-post office opened in April 1854. John Sutton, its first postmaster, received a salary of £3 per annum. The Ordnance Survey map for 1873 shows the post office in The Street. However, this office was closed in 1880 and a wall-box was installed for the collection of letters. The Victorian wall box in School Lane was probably installed at the same time, but the post office itself moved to the railway station where a Post & Telegraph Office was opened in February 1881. The station master, Mr Ryder, took on the role of sub-postmaster. In 1929 the Post Office moved to the timber-clad, single-storey building in School Lane. It remained there until it closed on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1960. The sub-postmaster throughout this time was Mr Edwin Crouch who played a prominent role in village affairs. Mrs Crouch did most of the work in the post office. Business was usually done on the doorstep through a door surrounded in the spring by lily of the valley.

## Hops

Hop growing in Kent has flourished since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was introduced by Flemish brewers. Hops are not easy to grow: they are subject to a number of pests and diseases and the gardens have to be furnished with poles and a complicated system of wires for the bines to climb. Before the use of hydraulic lifting vehicles, the stringing had to be undertaken by men walking on stilts or with long, hand-held poles. In 1932, Mr Ernest "Buff" Baker of Parsonage Farm said, 'Now there are only 15 acres of hops in the whole of Bekesbourne parish, over 40 acres have been grubbed out during the past year. It remains to be seen whether the last hop will disappear in the near future.'

Fortunately hops have continued in Bekesbourne. Tom Ash came to Parsonage Farm in 1952 when all the hops were being picked by hand. Tom Ash planted a further four acres. The majority of the crop was sold to local breweries for beer making. At that time Tom Ash introduced barley for malting on the downs which also went to the brewing trade. In 1956 he installed one of the first hop-picking machines in Kent which revolutionised the picking process – now all the whole bines were carted in to the machine for mechanical picking. At the height of Tom's hop-growing, local breweries were in demise and national breweries were taking over. The majority of the crop was sold for many years under contract to Bass Charrington. Rigorous quality controls were in place and, as there was not yet any readily available farm machinery capable of reaching the top of mature bines, in the early 1960s a particularly heavy crop necessitated the spraying to be done by helicopter.

In 1966 Tom Ash employed Chris Stamp as hop man in charge of both growing and drying. Chris would string all the hops – reaching the top wires from stilts. At harvest time Chris, who was the youngest hop drier in Kent (and told by his grandfather that with the skills of a hop drier he would never want for anything), would spend three weeks living in the Oast House. Many visitors would join Chris during those weeks to sample the brew in the barrels in the Oast and drink in the aroma of the hops combined with the sulphur used to keep their appearance bright after drying. – an excellent lung decongestant! Dried hops were then pressed into 1½ cwt sacks known as 'pockets' before leaving the farm.

In 1972 Tom's son, John, took over the tenancy of the farm from the Church Commissioners. The poles and wires were replaced by taller more modern wirework which no longer necessitated the use of a man on stilts. By the 1990s bitter beer was in decline with the introduction of imported lager and fewer hops were grown in England. By the mid 1990s huge swathes of existing hop gardens were being pulled out and it was at this time that John's eldest daughter, Amanda, returned from Australia and stopped her father pulling out all his hops. She marketed the whole bine as garlands to decorate pubs and homes. Now Amanda has the farm tenancy and with her husband Mike Barker continues the hop tradition growing thousands of bines a year sold all around the country from *Essentially Hops*.

## Women's Institute (WI)

The WI in Bekesbourne was founded following a public meeting held in the schoolroom on Tuesday, 21 October, 1919. The opening meeting was held on Tuesday, 11 November, 1919 in the Vicarage Room. There were 49 founder members and by 1936 this had swelled to 69 members. The new Institute was started with much enthusiasm and in 1923 the activities included choral, dancing and dressmaking classes. Singing and acting were also key activities. The banner was made in 1926 and won awards at an exhibition in London. On Monday, 7 July, 1969 there was a dinner in the Village Hall to mark the Golden Jubilee. The grand menu included *Crème Parmentier*, *Suprême de Turbot Condorcet* and *Dindonneau de Norfolk roti au Chipolatas* with *Charlotte Russe* to follow. The WI in Bekesbourne continued into the 1970s but faded away through difficulty in forming a committee to take it forward.

## The Hunt

Bekesbourne lies in the country of the East Kent Hunt – a country which has been hunted since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but for which the earliest records date from 1814 when Sir Henry Oxenden was the Master. The hunt kennels are now at Elham, but in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century they were at Underhill and after that at Waldershare for nine seasons under the mastership of Lord Guilford. He built kennels and stables for some £30,000 and hunted the country four days a week at his own expense. The photograph on display shows the hunt leaving Highland Court, the family home of Mr Walter Whigham who was Master of the Fox Hounds just after the war. Mr Whigham moved soon after his marriage to Mrs Lois Whigham to live at Cobham Court in Bekesbourne. One Bekesbourne resident remembers an occasion when the hunt met at Cobham Court. She recalls the commotion which

occurred when the hounds streamed off down the church path and one leapt into a pram pushed by a mother in the watching crowd at the gate.

Since the Hunting Act came into force on February 18<sup>th</sup> 2005 the hunt has met for trail hunting. The hunt shares its country with Wye Beagles and several of Bokesbourne's current villagers go out regularly with the Beagles.

### **Chalkpits and Limeworks**

Once every farm had its own chalkpit which provided lime to put on the soil. Chalkpit Farm and Chalkpit Hill take their names from the chalkpit in the woods on the eastern side of the hill. The name Chalkpit Farm was in use before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century so, the chalkpit must have been in use then. There were other small farm chalkpits nearby on Keeper's Hill and at Garrington and there were two large commercial pits which sat either side of the railway line on the Bramling Road. The pit to the west of the railway line was bought by Mr George Weller from the Ministry of Defence in 1921. Mr Weller was a retired Colonial Civil Servant - a Civil Engineer who had worked on the West Coast of Africa - and it was he who established Brambling Limeworks. Chalk was dug from the chalkface by hand and barrowed to one of two kilns where it was burnt and then ground into lime which was sold to neighbouring farms. In WWII the chalkface was used as a firing range and never worked again. The pit to the east of the railway continued in use until the 1990s. More recently both limeworks have been used for landfill.

### **School**

Bokesbourne's village school was at The School House in School Lane from at least 1840 until it closed in 1972. There may have been a school before that somewhere else in the village for there were certainly schoolchildren in the church choir in 1822. In 1841 there was also a school run by Frederick Ward in the original farmhouse at Chalkpit Farm and later in the Old Palace. In 1901, the Headmistress at the village school was Miss Trees and there were 27 children at the school all taught in one room. This didn't last for long because around 1903 a new classroom was added for the infants and a covered walkway added to link the two buildings. Miss Trees, a keen cyclist, was assisted by Miss Prett and Miss Whale.

By the late 1920s Miss Allen was the head and she continued in the post until the school was disbanded for the duration of the Second World War. In 1945 Miss Gandy took on the leadership of the re-opened school and impressed the children with her 'New Look' fashions. The last Headmistress was Mrs Sandall who arrived in the 1950s. She also ran the Bokesbourne Cubs and Brownies and for a while the Sunday School.



Bokesbourne Seniors 1934 (Raymond Newport)

### **Milling**

Bokesbourne's windmill stood next to Mill Cottage on the top of the Downs. It was one of the oldest 'smock' mills in the country and was relatively new in September 1806 when advertised for sale or hire by the millwright, John Elvey. In 1840 the Tithe Map shows it in shared ownership between George Gipps and others (of Howletts), Robert Gardner (of the Old Palace); William Gardner (of Sondes House); the Reverend William Eden (Vicar of Bokesbourne) and George Austen. The miller at the time was Stephen Barton. A subsequent owner was William Bax who sold the mill to Edward

Jarvis. Jarvis was there from at least 1878 to 1891. He is noted as being 'a nice, straightforward man with a long beard and 14 children'. Jarvis may still have been the owner when the mill was struck by lightning on June, 28, 1892. Ownership later passed to George Sheaff and then to its last owner Ernest 'Buff' Baker of Parsonage Farm. The mill was still working in 1906 when it was fitted with a set of four new sweeps and a new fan. However, by 1933 it was a wreck compared with its former self. It was surrounded by rough grass belonging to Mr Tyler who ran a chicken farm on the adjacent property, Chota. On Tuesday, 29 August, 1933 the grass caught fire at 10.30am and despite desperate attempts to beat out the blaze a breeze fanned the fire towards the mill. It burned like a blazing beacon for ten minutes and then collapsed. By midday all that was left was a heap of burning wreckage.

### **Baking**

The bakery in Bekesbourne was at the white timber-clad property in Old Palace Road now known as 4, Riverside Cottages (built circa 1853). The bakehouse was behind the cottage in a brick building which still exists with the brick chimney and fireplace in working order. The bread was sold over a hinged counter on the side of the cottage which is now painted black and screwed up to form part of the wall of a lean-to extension. After the war bread was delivered by van from the bakery at Bridge where the baker's name was Mr Baker.

### **The Doctor and the Midwife**

It seems that Bekesbourne people have always looked to Littlebourne, Bridge and Canterbury for the services of a doctor, as they do today. However, the village had links with Kent's famous Flying Doctor, Dr E.D. Whitehead-Reid who kept his aeroplane at Bekesbourne Aerodrome. A popular figure in East Kent, he was killed sadly in an aeroplane crash in October 10, 1930.

There were two sanatoria in Bekesbourne: one for tuberculosis sufferers on the Aerodrome where Strusma (previously Montarzah) now stands; and Bridge Isolation Hospital now reincarnated as Highfield Care Home. This had a ward for patients with diphtheria and another for those with scarlet fever and there was a tin and wood shed in the grounds for patients suffering from smallpox. This shed later became the bungalow adjacent to the hospital. The midwife, Nurse Blomberg was a familiar and much-loved figure looking after the sick in their homes and helping with home-births. Before her was Nurse Gilbert who the local residents remember travelling around the village on her bicycle.

### **Charcoal Burning**

In the days when charcoal was used to fuel the oast houses, the charcoal burner was a familiar visitor to the hop farms. During the winter coppiced poles and timber trimmings would arrive at the farm and be sorted into piles. When the charcoal burner himself arrived he would build his 'pit' around a central pole surrounded first by lighting material and then by poles. The wooden pile was covered with a layer of green litter and sand. It took up to four days to turn the wood into charcoal. During this time the pit was watched over day and night, if flames burst through a blowhole it would be plugged at once and extra sand was added to maintain the casing. In 1915, the charcoal burner in Bekesbourne was John Francis. The Francis family was one of the first to move into the buildings left on the Aerodrome after the First World War.



John Francis and son stacking the 'pit' ready for charcoal making (Alan Clayson)

### **The Hedgerow Harvest**

At this time of year the fields and woodlands around Bekesbourne are a rich source of wild food. Our display includes: rosehips, elderberries, hawberries, sloes, damsons, medlars, cobnuts, walnuts, sweet chestnuts, blackberries, watercress and mushrooms all gleaned from the countryside within the last few days. During the WWII the Ministry of Food actively encouraged this hedgerow harvest and the use of rosehip syrup as an important source of Vitamin C - babies of the war and post war era grew up on it. The hip juice had to be carefully strained to make sure all the sharp hairs were removed.

### **Choir**

There was a 'singing gallery' at the tower end of the church before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was replaced in 1822 by a larger gallery providing four rows of seating for school children and two rows, with backs, for 'other persons'. The gallery was swept away in the church restoration which took place in the 1880's and the surviving stalls were used to create the present choir space in the chancel. In the 1920's the Choirmaster was Mr Claude Noble, the railway porter. In 1978 there was still a thriving church choir lead by Stanley Grey, the organist. Grace Allan of Ardpriory (now Palmstead House) took over for a time, but the choir ceased to be active during the 1980s.

### **Boys Brigade**

The Boys Brigade movement grew out of experiments by William Smith, a Glaswegian who in the 1880s started to experiment with the idea of uniformed youth groups as a means of evangelism. 'By associating Christianity with all that is most noble and manly in a boy's sight', he wrote, 'we would go a long way to disabuse his mind of the idea that there is anything effeminate or weak about it'. Meetings were often twice a week and would typically involve band practice, drill, first aid and gymnastics. At weekends the Brigades would march around the local roads playing marching tunes. In the summer the Brigades would go away to camp. Bekesbourne's Boys Brigade had a hut on the triangle of land at the top of Chalkpit Hill. The hut was burned down in mysterious circumstances during WWII. It is possible that the Boys Brigade became a branch of the Buff Cadets, but so far we have been unable to verify this.



Marching down School Lane (Raymond Newport)

### **Pedlars**

Villages which were too small to support permanent traders relied instead on pedlars and hawkers to supply the few material possessions that they needed – these included all manner of essential household goods and other less important but nevertheless desirable items such as ornaments, trinkets and finery. Under the Pedlars Act of 1870, pedlars had to hold a certificate which was valid for one year outside the town or city where they lived. If a pedlar remained on one spot for any length of time, so effectively inviting customers to come to him, he could be deemed to be street trading without the necessary authority and hence liable to prosecution.

### **Blacksmith**

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century almost every village has its forge where one or more smiths worked hard and regularly on plough shares, harrow tines, ironwork for wagon and the shoeing of horses. Shoeing smiths made up new shoes for farm horses by welding old ones together and they would give a penny for an old shoe found and carried in. John Fagg was a blacksmith in Bekesbourne who made ironwork for the church in the

early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 1803 rates list shows him as an outdweller for a house and forge situated somewhere in the parish. According to the church records for 1816/17 he was paid 18 shillings for ironwork and one pound five shillings for iron gates for the church in 1818/20. Later there was a forge in the grounds of the Bifrons Estate. Charles Dungey, who lived at Court Cottages in Old Palace Road (now The Court House), was the blacksmith at the turn of the century. He would have been considered one of the artisan elite: he was on the parish council and also a churchwarden at St Peter's.

### **Horse-drawn transport**

George Matcham ... We do not know if there was ever a wheelwright in Bekesbourne, but there would have been one locally and he would have worked closely with the blacksmith. Four-wheeled wagons and two-wheeled carts were the principal means of transport on the farm. A waistband enabled the front wheels to turn. Large farm wagons brought the harvests in from the fields. They were also used for carrying heavy root crops and manure and were often pulled by several horses. Market wagons were lighter with narrower wheels and better suspension. Like the governess carts and other carriages used by the gentry, they could be used only where the roads were in fairly good condition.

### **Dairy Farming**

Dairy farming in Bekesbourne was part of the mixed farming carried out on many of the small farms. In the 1920s and 1930s Ernest Baker kept Guernsey cows at Parsonage Farm and the remnants of the milking parlour were still there until 2006. Until 1945 milk from Miss Hordern's Jersey herd at Cobham Court Farm was delivered each day to the school for the benefit of the local school children. Pupils remember ice-cold milk in tall jugs being stood before the fire to warm before drinking. Miss Hordern's cattle were kept in the meadow in front of the church and one local lady remembers stepping in a cowpat as she walked up the church path to her wedding. Milk from the Clayson's smallholding on Bekesbourne Hill was also sold locally from a dipping churn taken from door to door to fill the householders' jugs.

### **Flying Club**

When the Aerodrome was derequisitioned after the First World War the remaining hangar and airfield was bought by Mr H C Ramsay who lived at Howletts. Mr Ramsay founded the Kent Flying Club which was based at the Aerodrome and learned to fly himself in 1932 at the age of 70. An associated company, Kent Air Services, an aircraft sales and service agent, operated from the airfield with Avro 504Ks for joy-riding. And in 1932 Sir Alan Cobham's Flying Circus visited with a National Aviation Day display. There were also aerial advertising displays - one set of banners read 'SHARPS EATON TOFFEES' - and a plane which would write 'PERSIL' or 'OXO' in smoke in the sky.



*Bekesbourne Aerodrome.*

The Flying Club helped to train pilots before WWII and closed for civil purposes at the outbreak of war in September 1939. The name on the roof was ordered to be painted out and the Kent Flying Club ejected. When in 1945 the wartime aerodrome was derequisitioned for the second time Mr Ramsay wrote 'place knocked about, roof very bad state; four aeroplanes mere junk.' The aerodrome was never used for flying again and the hangar was demolished in the 1990s to make way for the houses at De Havillands.

### **Flower Shows and Fêtes**

The Flower Shows at Bekesbourne were held in a large white marquee on the Recreation Ground throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. The last remembered date for the marquee is 1963 when the funds raised went to the Freedom from Hunger campaign but there were shows after that in the new village hall.

Mr Wallis who farmed on Bekesbourne Hill and lived at Oakleigh in Oakleigh Lane (formerly Mud Lane) was the main organiser of the flower shows. He was a key person in Bekesbourne at the time, a member of the Parish Council and a village elder who worked closely with Wilfred Mowll (of Mulberry Cottage) – the two of them were prime movers in raising funds to build the new Village Hall in the early 1960s and the flower shows and associated fetes were part of the fundraising. Albert Patterson who worked on the Wallis farm also played a key role in the flower shows. Wilfred's son, Will, later Vicar at Boughton-under-Blean was a teenager at the time. His skiffle group, the Alpines, helped with the entertainment at many fundraising events including the year that Bekesbourne entered a float in Canterbury Carnival. One year the marquee was used for a village barn dance.



Bekesbourne Fete circa 1960 (David and Doris Friend)

Each year the men, ladies and children of the village would compete to grow the best vegetables and flowers or to cook the best jam tarts or fruit cake. All jam tart exhibits had to be accompanied by an empty McDougall's flour bag. There were large silver cups to be won and competition was fierce. The classes were strictly amateur and those who worked in market gardens as a profession were not allowed to enter. The village fête was run on the same day. Stalls included the traditional Aunt Sally and bowling for a pig.

Fêtes have continued in Bekesbourne Recreation Ground on special occasions: most recently for the Millennium and the Golden Jubilee.

**Thank you to the villagers, past and present, who have contributed to these memories of Bekesbourne and supplied the photographs for the village archives**

**Don't forget to visit the tea tent, the plant stall and the tombola**

**Researched and Collated by: Jill Thomas  
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