

## FROM COLDSTONE TO HONEYDALE - 70 YEARS AGO



Honeydale Farm February 1959

Coldstone Farm at the west end of Ascott (now Coldstone House) was an ideal place for a young boy to live, the land reached from the Charlbury - Burford Road to the Shipton - Chippy Road - total 190 acres. Grandfather became the tenant and we lived there until September 1952, grandparents, parents, younger sister and myself. The large house with long, dark passages and no electricity was quite interesting. I have been told that I was a two year old in the garden when six German bombs dropped in Ascott, the last one just outside our garden wall. A barrow load of mud landed by the back door and a chimney pot was taken off. I can't remember the event but the bomb crater made a good site for frog spawn.

Before D Day in 1944 the Army had manoeuvres and a mock battle in this area. During the dark night before Pancake Day convoys of Army tanks went along Gypsy Lane, under the now blocked up railway bridge and up through our fields to the A361 smashing through three field gateways on the way. The following day columns of tanks, armoured cars on tracks, jeeps and motor bikes came down through Ascott and along the Shipton Road. The authorities replaced the gates after the War.

Like the other farms in Ascott at that time we had a variety of livestock. There were milking cows, cart horses, calves, older cattle, pigs, hens and cockerels, geese, ducks and two dogs. There was also interesting farm equipment, carts, wagons, haymaking and harvesting machines, a tractor and cultivating machines, all available to play on and investigate. The barn was interesting with sacks of corn and cattle feed, a winnowing machine, root cutter, chaff cutter, and sack lifter, all with handles to turn, and a weighing machine. I had free access to everything including all the farm tools. The only adverse instruction I remember was when I was trying out a long handled hedge cropper and grandfather shouted, 'Don't you make gaps in the hedge Jim. We don't want the cattle getting out.' (As if I would!)

Winter often brought a small flood into the orchard; 25 cms would float a big log so I could stand on it and punt about. We had fruit trees and the Coldwell Brook stream in the orchard, old straw ricks to slide down in the rickyard plus patches of nettles and thistles to cut off with a hedge cropper or fagging hook, a type of sickle. The only fly in the ointment for me was having to go to school. The highlight of my time at Ascott School was the day I left, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1949. To add to the joyful day the oat crop was ready to harvest. A quick dash home after school and up the fields just in time to go on the first round with the binder my favourite job on the farm, and the start of a seven week holiday with all the harvest to look forward to.

I soon learned to do useful jobs on the farm. When I was nine, dad bought me a nice light axe to lop branches of willow trees. In those days before combines and pick-up balers the corn crop was harvested in sheaves and the hay was collected loose and built into ricks so there was a lot of work to do by hand. From the age of seven I could drive the tractor for loading hay and corn. I also helped move forkfuls of hay or sheaves across the rick when dad was unloading the wagon and grandfather was building the ricks. This made the job easier for both of them.

Grandfather had milked the cows by hand twice every day for as long as I could remember. Then the day suddenly came in June 1951 when he was ill with heart trouble and must not do any more milking. I milked two cows in the evenings and dad did the rest but about a week later grandfather died. I had

three uncles with farms and cows so some of the cows went to them and they helped at harvest time.

The farm was then in vacant possession and the owner decided to sell it by auction in June 1952. The bids failed to reach the reserve but it was sold privately to Leonard Hill, a builder from Bourton-on-the-Water, who was just starting his attraction Birdland. My parents were not in a position to buy a farm of that size and were looking elsewhere. The most suitable seemed to be an 80 acre farm at Clapton-on-the-Hill. Then suddenly in August Coldstone Farm was for sale again, this time in six lots and my parents bought the two lots on the hill and named it Honeydale after the biggest field.

We had to be out of Coldstone by midnight on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 1952. So on that morning my sister and I caught the Burford School bus as usual at the entrance to High Street. At that time the bus went up Chippy Hill, down to Lyneham, back up to the A361, stopped at Shipton Station, the Fiveways, Swinbrook, Widford and along Witney Street into Burford. This was perfect for us because when we came back along the A361 in the afternoon I was able to ask the driver to stop by the field corner which became our farm entrance. The only buildings on our land were two open fronted cattle sheds, a stone shepherd's hut and a small brick store shed. When we got down the road mother was there with a new caravan and a rustic garden shed which was to house the piano. They had only just been delivered. I walked down the fields to meet dad on his way up with the last load from Coldstone. I met him in Gypsy Lane with the tractor, the last wagonload of goods from Coldstone and the last two milking cows. Our move was made.

At Coldstone the house, stable, calf sheds and yard were bought by Chris Harries who converted the stable into pottery production. The kiln is still there. A couple named Price bought the barn, cowshed and cartsheds with the orchard and rickyard and converted them into a nice house. Mr Cunningham of Chestnut Close, now Wychwood Manor, bought the 40-50 acres between the Ascott to Shipton Road and the Burford to Charlbury Road. He soon ran out of money and in 1955 sold everything to Jack Dunfee who called it Malplash Turkey Farm which still exists. The two fields between our land and the railway were bought by Harry Perkins of Fern Hill Farm. Those fields are now part of College Farm. So after many centuries, Coldstone Farm was no more.

Living in the caravan was a big change. Our drinking water was from a spring 200 metres away which we carried in buckets uphill across a ploughed field but we had bottled calor gas for lighting and cooking, a big improvement after paraffin and candles. We quickly built a couple of sheds with straw bales, corrugated iron and tarpaulin.

The weather was not kind. The rain was heavy in October. Mr Hill had reserved the 60 best elm trees and sold the trunks to Groves who were large timber merchants with a saw mill and a huge timber yard with stacks of tree trunks. The area is now taken up with houses, roads and Milton Village Hall. Their big, heavy timber carriages with heavy loads churned up our wet fields into a sea of mud. In November two falls of snow put four inches of snow on the ground and stayed there for three weeks. It was cold at night. Condensation ran down inside the caravan at night, by morning the bedsheets were literally frozen to the wall. We called it arctic training.

The wind then had a go. In January 1953 a large storm in the North Sea flooded large areas of land and drowned hundreds of people in both eastern England and Holland. It rocked us hard all night and blew the tops off four hay ricks.

By April 1954 Groves who was the main employer in the area at that time, and who had built many fine houses and Milton Church, had built for us a four bedroomed house, a milking shed and dairy, a multipurpose barn and a pumped water supply. The downside was we were then back to lamps and candles. In 1956 we had a telephone put in.

On Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August 1959 a large thunderstorm came in over the forest with torrential rain. We heard a very loud bang and a stack of straw bales was on fire in the rickyard. Fire brigades from Chippy and Charlbury prevented the fire from reaching the corn ricks. We soon had a lightning conductor fitted to the house.

In 1961 a second hand diesel power generator was put up and we discarded the lamps and candles again. Christmastime 1962 brought a blizzard which put one and a half metres of solid drifts all over our farm road. It took us a full month to dig it out. The solid blocks of snow stayed there until Easter. Mains electricity came in 1970. Wendy and I were married and lived for nearly four years in a residential caravan on the farm. This had all the mod cons but was



hot in the summer. We became a team. Basically I did the feeding and milking and the various seasonal jobs, and Wendy fed the young calves and did the tractor driving, ploughing, drilling, mowing and baling etc. Then we had a bungalow built to our design. It was perfect. Wendy's father was a skilled and enthusiastic builder and was a great help in improving buildings on the farm.

Dad retired in 1974 and the farm business was in my name from February 10<sup>th</sup> 1974. We worked very hard and had many good years and a few lean ones when a drought was about, but we did OK and after nearly ten years we had a holiday most years.

All good things come to an end and all too quickly it became time to call it a day. We had an auction on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2013, the hammer fell and suddenly the farm that had been ours for so long belonged to Ian Wilkinson.

We had to move home and hoped to stay in Ascott. Blenheim Cottage looked ideal, a quick call to Joe Gomm and everything clicked into place for us. A hard race against time for Joe and his craftsmen and it was all how we wanted it just ready to move in on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2013. We also gained many close neighbours, a bonus after our isolation in the fields.

Our very good friends Ian, Celine and their family have made many interesting changes and I have a look round as often as I can. Large numbers of people have been given access to enjoy the views and other delights of Honeydale; the pleasures of which have been mine for a lifetime!

Final thoughts. I was born in the right place at exactly the right time.

Jim Pearse