

"The new Chairman of the Club, Phillip Neale, looks back at his Stoneleigh connections"

My name is Phillip Neale. I have the privilege to have been elected as the new chairman of Stoneleigh Village Club. I thought I would take this opportunity to introduce myself and my family origins in the village of Stoneleigh.

My family on my mother's side, the Kings, originally came from Priors Marston, having lived and worked the farms there for a hundred or more years. The village had been a possession of Coventry Priory which later came under the control of the wealthy Leigh family of Stoneleigh Abbey. My Great Grandfather, [Joe King](#), once married, stayed in Priors Marston for a couple of years, his wife, [Maria](#) giving birth to their first child Alfred, and second son [Joseph](#).

They later decided to move to Cubbington, which was then under the ownership of the Leigh estate. The farms were being sold off around the time of the 1920s. They stayed only for a short period in Cubbington, but it was during this period number three son was born, [Ernest](#).

The next move was to Stareton around 1895 to work on the village farm, when son number four, Harry, was born. My Great Grandfather was employed as a waggoner, or plough man as part of the Stoneleigh estate.

His feet must have been itching yet again, so off the family went to his final village destination, 1 Vicarage Road Stoneleigh, right next to the village club. A further three children were born in Stoneleigh: [Clara May](#), my grandfather [William John](#) and the youngest, [Hubert](#).

My Great Grandfather continued to work on the estate as a waggoner, though in his later years he went to work for the local council on the roads. I'm sure this was due to farms becoming more mechanised, so he needed a career change. While working on the estate he had a team of shire horses, I think a team of four or six, ploughing or pulling whatever was required of them alongside other teams on what was then, the biggest or nearly the biggest estate in England. This must have been a truly wonderful "sight of old England" when people had a close relationship with the land and animals. I can only imagine the control needed alongside a gentle way to persuade these beautiful animals to work all day, a skill almost lost today to the tractor.

They eventually moved to a bigger house with an expanding family to number 10 Birmingham Road, further up the village; that house then stayed in the family, continuously lived in by members of our family right up until January 2017 when my Mum, [Pam](#), and Dad, Bob Neale, moved out due to old age and infirmity.

It was a sad day and a milestone to my brother Steven and myself knowing we were the last key holders to that house and our village where we were born. When the keys were returned, we were even sadder as the person at the other end of the phone dealing with the estate rent and collection of keys showed no recognition of the time it had been in our family. As for me, I left home from Mum and Dads in my teens, it would be about 1974. I went to live at 9 The Bank Stoneleigh for two pounds a month rent; this was a time when if you were born in the village and lived in an estate house you were entitled to a house under estate rules - not bad when you're just starting out in life doing an apprenticeship and only earning a low wage of about 12 pounds a week or less. It was not too long after this that the village went to a large meeting about the school closing; as is usual the council didn't listen to our worries and concerns, and the school was closed in 1976 having been built and used as a school from the mid 1700s.

We villagers were all very sad. We all agreed it was the start of the death of Stoneleigh as we knew it, and so it came to pass as people moved out or died the vacant houses were sold off and strangers started to come in. This was a mixed blessing as some were good and wanting to embrace village life; others not so. I went to the school first as an infant and then up to the age of eleven, then you went to Kenilworth, in my case Abbey High, Leyes Lane.

In my last years at Stoneleigh, I was in "Gaffer" Grant the head teacher's class. My job in the morning while the class was standing silently and upright with hands behind their backs, was to ring the school bell every morning before prayer twelve times and to warn any late comers they were in trouble. Often, I would see kids sprinting like greyhounds trying to get in before the last chime of the bell. God help them for late arrival! It was always rung twelve times for the twelve disciples. On my last day before leaving for the summer holidays and the new secondary school, I accidentally rang it thirteen times due to pulling the bell a bit too hard on the last ring. The fear

of death swept over me, and I was ordered to ring it again, this time doing the regulation 12 times without mistakes! The fear of the cane makes you precise and concentrates the mind!

I managed the sacred twelve bells with clammy hands and a bead of sweat on my brow.

Apart from that it was only years later when I grew up that I realised what an excellent education that school had given me. After a couple of years due to an expanding family, we moved next door to my Nan, [Annie King](#). Our house was a damp, cold, but spacious property that later became the last post office in Stoneleigh having started out as an infant school that my Grandfather Bill King had attended as a child.

The compensation was that we only paid three pounds a month in rent! It is now a residential property with all mod cons such as central heating, a bath and inside toilet, truly a great update to what we were used to.

Like most houses belonging to the estate none of those now taken - for - granted facilities were available. We had a thunder-box toilet, or bucket and outhouse or privy up the garden, a tin bath outside and open fire for heating with lots of cold drafts from badly fitted single glazed windows. As for an insulated loft, we didn't even know what it was, and wooden doors that moved according to the weather; no hot water, only a cold tap and sink. Compared to today we were very healthy even as a child, living almost in a cave. By today's standards we didn't even seem to get colds although I'm sure we did.

Lord Leigh died, his son John Leigh took over the estate - this would be around the late seventies.

This was a big turning point in the village: houses that had been built and owned for centuries were put up for sale to the tenants or in my case we had to move out as we didn't have the funds to buy our house for what they wanted, or to pay the now escalating rent, basically to force us and others out so the houses could be sold off to pay death duties to the state. In those days tenants didn't have the protections they had some years later or today.

A further irony was that my first job as an electrician was rewiring the Deer Keeper's Lodge for the now new Lord John Leigh, for him to live in at huge overspend.

We moved out and bought a mid-terraced house in Kenilworth with the luxuries of hot water, central heating and all the things we didn't have in Stoneleigh.

All those things were life changing for me, but I really missed village life and never felt at ease living in what felt like a busy town in comparison to Stoneleigh. Since then, I've always stayed in contact with the village by way of friends, family and the village club.

The thing I feel most proud of is that both my grandfathers and my uncles who lived in the village were members of the club; my other grandfather, Sid Neale, was also a member. Even my Nan King cleaned the club and when Pop King retired, he helped her until his untimely death.

My membership started at eighteen. The club was a much different place then; the youngsters were very much kept in their place and had to tread carefully amongst the elder members.

I can only imagine if they were alive today what my grandfathers would say to their grandson as the new Chairman. I'd like to think they would be proud of me, but to me it's an honour and a privilege to take on this role to try and keep our old village club alive and well for years to come.

Phillip Neale
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