MEMORIES OF STONELEIGH VILLAGE

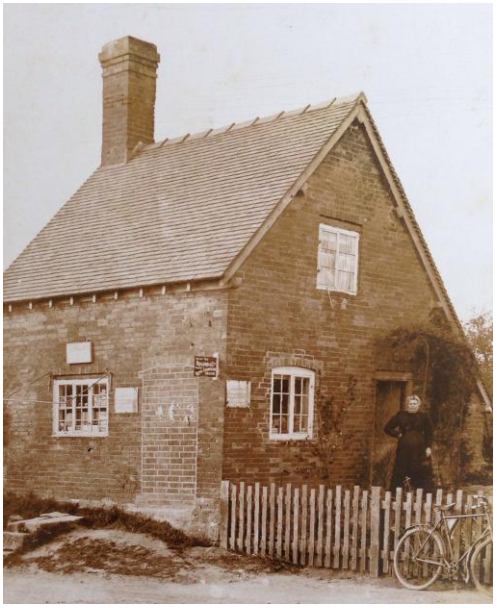
By Nora Blagburn | February 2022

My husband Will's memories of Stoneleigh began much earlier than mine as he was born and grew up on this side of Coventry and he and his friends used to cycle all around here.

He remembers stopping at Craines Stores for ice cream and they served teas in the garden.

(One day they cycled to the American Camp (now Abbey Park) for a big fair, where one of the attractions was the American soldiers chasing a little pig, the winner had the pig!)

In the war, pupils from Henry VIII School, including Will, were brought out for potato picking up at Kings Hill Farm.



The cottage was demolished to make way for Stoneleigh Close

Will remembers the cottage that had to be demolished to make way for the road where Miss Walden lived and she had a small shop in one room, selling haberdashery and confectionery.

(Before we were married, Will worked as a relief rep for Laxons Wholesale Grocers and he used to call on the village shops for orders, (taking them down on his order pad, to be delivered two days later, on a two weekly rota.) His calls included Miss Walden and Craine's Stores which were the main shops for groceries. There was also the Co-op shop along the main road, but he did not call there.

The Village Bakery used to be there before that, years ago.

No. 2 Birmingham Road, next to Skep Cottage, on the corner of Stoneleigh Close, was inhabited by Mr. Bobbie Jones and his wife; he drove the horse and wagon for Stoneleigh Abbey.

During the First World War, Will's father (James Blagburn) helped with farm work and lodged during the week with the Jones.

Will's mother Winnie told me that she visited him once and they gave her a mug of cocoa - but the mug was dirty!

Julian Birditt told me that Mr. & Mrs. Scarbrooks lived there in the early 1950s.

He and his brother used to pinch apples from their fruit trees.

His mother Joyce was born in Stoneleigh at the cottage where Martin and Kim Smith now live (that rhododendron bush is still there).

The Birditt family Bob, Joyce, Gary, and Julian lived in Stoneleigh, moved to Lillington and back to No.11 Stoneleigh Close in 1968.

Many of us remember Bob, who was on the Parish Council, and Joyce, who was actively involved in village activities, including the Mothers' Union. She sang in the Church Choir from the age of nine until it closed in the early 1990s.

Both Bob and Joyce Birditt are now buried in Stoneleigh Churchyard.

As you go out of the village on Coventry Road, at one of the two houses on left lived a large family, the Woodfields. They used to walk down through where No.13 Stoneleigh Close, is to catch the bus. The husband came to help us with some of the hard work in the garden for a while. He was knocked off his bike at the crossroads and died. We felt sorry for his widow Mary with a large family of small children.

She moved to one of the Birmingham Road maisonettes when her family grew up.

SO HOW DID WE come to live in Stoneleigh Close?

We were married in January 1955 and lived in Coventry, just off Broad Lane, Heathfield Road, close to where Will had lived in Whoberley Avenue.

A strange coincidence is that Jan Whitehouse grew up in Heathfield Road and is now living in the Old Post Office (previously Craines Stores).

We always hoped to move out to the country and one Sunday afternoon in 1959, when driving through Stoneleigh in our new little white Austin 7, we saw a road being dug out and a notice about houses to be built.

We walked up the roughly dug out road in a field to look at the site.

The day after our exciting discovery of houses to be built, we contacted Thomas Bates the builder (Kenilworth) for details.

Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey owned the field (likewise most of the village).

He was Joint Master of the Hunt with Thomas Bates and rumour has it that while drinking together, Lord Leigh was persuaded to sell the field for building houses which was most unusual.

The Palmer family lived in Hall Close, Stephen remembers getting over the hedge to play in the field, making dens, digging up potatoes from the next field, and trying to cook then over a fire there.

They were sorry when the field was built on and they lost their play space.

Our house (No. 7) was the second to be completed and occupied.

The twenty-four houses were developed over two years (some as individual designs and others built on spec).

The only newly built houses previously in the village were the Council Houses in Hall Close. Since then, there have been several in-filling builds and Walkers Orchard which was built on the site of the old Manor House Farm which we believe was farmed by Mr. Metters and then Mr. Walton when we came to Stoneleigh.

So, we could purchase the plot and have a house built. What did we want? Not sure - we liked Swiss style chalet houses (as we had visited Switzerland hitch hiking and walking between Youth Hostels)!

We drew up a possible plan to submit to the architect - he suggested changes and a split level to overcome the slope of the land - we agreed.

This idea was used later in at least two other houses in Stoneleigh Close.

We visited the site and picked the largest plot as we wanted a big garden to grow fruit and vegetables. The wire fence to mark our boundary was set back from the Coventry Road, as road widening was due, we remember buses scraping the hedges and it was also erected through a row of wonderful raspberry canes which were in the gardens of the cottages on The Bank, so our vegetable plot is very good soil, whereas the rest was mixed sub-soil which was bull- dozed down from the road.

The road was dug out and concreted, no pavements or lights for a while, sub-soil was pushed down over our plots, because of this our ground had bad drainage, we had to have a tractor and 'mole' to drain the solid soil.

READY TO MOVE - August 1960

Jonathan was four and a half years old, and David was nine months old.

What an exciting day! David sat in his big Silver Cross pram watching the removal van being loaded up, then we took him from the pram, it was put on the van to be the first thing unloaded and David was put back into it at his new home in Stoneleigh.

It seemed so spacious and light, with central heating and a beautiful wooden floor, with 'contemporary furniture' and modern fabric design curtains (Heals, Lucienne Day) with our Minty 3-piece suite in red and oatmeal colours!

We had a large turf square laid straightaway, with the top paths slabbed and clothesline posts for the washing line as washing the nappies was a priority!

The garden gradually developed and evolved as time went by.

The hawthorn and beech hedges were planted along with the orchard in the winter of 1960. My dad was helping me plant the fruit trees as it started to snow one day.

The orchard grass just grew- the first summer we had hay and Mr. Sibley came to cut it with a scythe. He was the 'roadman' in the village, keeping edges and gutters clear. He was Mandy Gibbs' grandfather.

STONELEIGH CLOSE

No. 4 was the first house to be built to design and occupied by Mr. & Mrs. Hull (a quantity surveyor and very particular about the details) had the house painted white, without planning permission but once done that was it. Betty & Ted Hind came in about 1964 and are still there, both in their 90's.

Then two bungalows were built 'on spec' - stone chimneys - No. 3 & No. 19.

No. 7 was the second purpose-built house, built for us (Will and Nora).

Next was No. 6 for Mr.& Mrs. Hancox, (he was M.D. of Humber) when they moved, Philip & Peggy Sutton (Sutton's Bakery) came and recently our new neighbours Jonathan & Emma Payne, Ethan, and Anya.

No. 8 came later; it was bare land and weeds where I used to put David out in the pram for a sleep before our garden was fenced off later in the winter.

Mr. & Mrs. Nicholls first, then Paul & Lyn Smith and now Richard, Ann & Ciara Hancox. No. 18 (opposite) was Mr. & Mrs. Taylor, then Syd & Eileen Creed, next Bob & Sheila Duckham. No. 12 was the Greens (Chemists).

No. 15 was the Gradys, now Paul & Gwen Brittain.

Out for a walk - the first summer - through the churchyard with David in the pram and 4-year-old Jonnie by my side - Does anyone remember the Dovecote on the wall of the Parsonage with the black and white Nuns Doves? a lovely feature.

MORE MEMORIES OF THE VILLAGE

THE COTTAGES

Most of the old cottages were not modernised, no flush toilets, though there was electricity and water. There was the weekly sewerage collection tanker - the 'bucket men' - the boys used to call them - and walk on the other side of the road!

Cottages all used open fires for heating, many still used the blacklead ranges for boiling the kettle and cooking.



The Bank, Stoneleigh.

Miss Edith Mills lived at the end of the row of cottages on The Bank which backed on to our garden. After her mother died, she used to come up our garden through a little gate to help me in the house and would babysit the children.

She was our 'treasure', when we went on holiday she would clean through the house and fill it with flowers for our return.

As she lived on her own, I think she took a great interest in us and loved us calling in to the tiny cottage with two bedrooms where there had been a large family of her parents and eight brothers and sisters.

The fire was always burning in the range with the kettle on the hob. The washing was done in the boiler house across the little yard with the copper and fire for boiling the clothes.

Down the garden was the pigsty, a nice little brick-built building, as in earlier years most families kept a pig and chickens of course.

Miss Mills (as the children called her) was part of the Chattaway family.

Her grandmother lived in the thatched house across the river and took in washing and ironing, in the days when there were the starched aprons and frills to be ironed with flat irons, and narrow gopher irons for the frills.

She loved to tell us tales of village life, when many in the village worked on Lord Leigh's estate, her father was a forester, there were gardeners, dairymaids and farmers.

As a girl, Edith used to love leading the carthorse with the load of hay for Mr. Metters who farmed down in the village.

Lord Leigh used to ride round on his big grey horse, ride up the cottage path and rap on the door with his whip for his tenants to speak to him.

There were many keen gardeners in the village, of course 'grow your own' was the normal thing then.

We remember particularly Mr. Fred Morgan and Mr. Lovell, their cottages next to Miss Mills backed on to our garden, but they had allotments as well and Mr. Harry Edmunds (Shirley's father) who all grew show chrysanthemums, huge blooms protected with paper bags to be perfect for the shows. I used to go to Mr. Edmunds to buy vegetables when we did not have enough of our own.

There was the Village Show in those days with keen competition to exhibit prizewinning fruit, vegetables and flowers, held in the Club.

In those days, the River Sowe was more polluted with no fish, and some days great blobs of foam would blow and float over from Finham sewer works and the Weir.

Mr. Parish had the GARAGE with old-fashioned pumps, on the bend before the bridge. He would stand in the road to wave you out.

Mr. Compton's garage came later on the site of the Old Bakery in 1968. (it became a derelict eyesore, eventually with planning permission for a house to be built).



The former village shop and Post Office on The Green with Chestnut Cottage next door.

The Craine Family had a village store and post office (opposite the chestnut tree) and lived next door at Chestnut Cottage. We rarely saw the old lady though she was still in charge of things.

We had our weekly grocery order delivered; it was convenient as I did not drive. The hygiene was questionable, the cat used to sit on the food counter!

The Craine family, Nancy, Jock, Elsie and Janet, ran a catering business from the sheds at the back, where cooking was done and the equipment was stored, with vans for large events, parties, and weddings.

The village ladies worked as helpers and waitresses.

When Will ran Thompsons of Coventry, we borrowed the china and glasses to serve refreshments to customers at the Christmas show in his wholesale warehouse selling stationery, cards, toys, and Christmas goods.

When Craines had a small fire in the Post Office section, they were no longer allowed to run the Post Office. In 1977 a small room in the school was used for a while and then it moved to Wyn and Harry Herdman's house. (Wyn died early October 2011, Harry lived into his 90's).

Wyn made delicious cakes selling them to fund raise for the Helen Ley Home and she was also a reliable source of local news.

There was no village shop after Craines shop but a baker from Cubbington delivered bread regularly, a milkman, the Ruck Family Butchers from Bubbenhall and the fish man called weekly and the Mobile Library (recently a welcome reintroduction).

A Baby Clinic was held in the Old Village Hall - I took David to be weighed and checked there.

Then the new Village Hall was built and donated to Stoneleigh Village with the Playing Field by Lord Leigh.

MEMORIES OF THE VILLAGE SCHOOL

Children started school during the term in which they were five years old. Jonathan went after the Easter break, being five in February 1961. There was no settling in period or parent induction visit!

I went to put his name down then took Jonnie along on the agreed date, was met in the corridor by Mrs. Antrobus, he was taken firmly by the hand and led off. I was left to go out and make my way home, with a few tears for my very shy, nervous little boy.

She was a teacher at the old school, no nonsense, but got results.

She commented before Jonathan moved to the second class that he would do well and go to university! (and so, he did!)

It was a nice little school; both our boys were happy there most of the time.

(David told me recently that the lads at school called Stoneleigh Close - Snobs Close! But I always found everyone in the village very friendly.)

There were three classes, infants' downstairs, two classes upstairs in a divided room.

Mr. Grant was Head Teacher, living in School House next to the Parsonage. After his retirement Mr. Black became Head.

Mrs. Clarke replaced Mrs. Antrobus when David started school.

The children went to church on Saints Days etc., sitting in the pews, not seeing over the top and giggling together.

Sports days were held up in the field; both our boys were good runners so collected quite a few certificates for the races.

Once there was a concert in the Village Hall, Jonnie played a short piece on the piano. There were Christmas concerts in the school attended by Lord and Lady Leigh who gave out the presents.

Lord Leigh was Chair of the School Governors and later I became a governor, taking an interest in the school.

I helped dress the children up for Nativity Concerts, all very makeshift outfits. Once we performed The Pied Piper of Hamelin and made rats from grey socks pulled along with string! and Alice in Wonderland.

Mrs. Parkes (wife of Rev. Parkes) gave me a whole lot of clothes that she and her daughters no longer used, to help with costumes but most of them were far too good for that - beautiful evening and party dresses, many hand sewn, lovely materials.

I suggested to Mr. Black that the children might enjoy helping me with the school front garden. We grew plants with amusing names like elephants' ears, lady in the bath, snow in summer with annual flowers and bulbs.

So, children came out two at a time on a Friday afternoon to help.

Recently pupils Nigel Roberts, Mick Malone and Philip Neale told me they remembered that and how they enjoyed it, probably because of getting off lessons!

THE WARWICKSHIRE HUNT

The Warwickshire Hunt used to meet outside the Village Club.

The school would come out to watch it gather and then move off with the hounds. They used to gallop across the Deer Park and Stoneleigh Grange Farm; we could see them from our garden.

We used to have picnics after school up on Motslow Hill or in Stoneleigh Deer Park.

The school closed when there were only about twenty pupils, then children began to be bussed to Kenilworth.

Both our boys passed the eleven plus exam. Jonathan went to Warwick School, Will took him up to Gibbet Hill to catch a bus to Warwick, then one to Myton Road, returning via Leamington, often the bus was late and I would worry, no mobile phones in those days! First, we asked the Fardon boys to befriend Jonathan on the journey as he was not used to buses, but as they were older, they did not bother much, not appreciating what a huge ordeal it was for a nervous young lad, what a change from a small village school!

David went to Kenilworth Grammar School in Leyes Lane.

There was school bus to take the children there.

I remember people coming to dig for old bottles etc. across the river by the old ford until the deep holes became dangerous and it was banned.

One year, flying home on American Airlines, watching a tourist film of England, we were amazed to see Stoneleigh and the Stoneleigh Stitchers shown at work! In the Church there are the pew cushions with such beautiful designs.

STONELEIGH FLOWER CLUB

The club was very active with a committee meeting monthly in the village hall with demonstrations, a sales table, and competitions. Betty Hind and I used to attend quite often.

Once there was a Flower Festival at Stoneleigh Abbey Undercroft in which Betty and I took part, (arranging a display with arum lilies, wood and a dressmaker's model wearing a Victorian outfit).

We also took part in various flower festivals at the church.

PARENT AND TODDLER GROUP - 1982 - 1987

Between 1982 and 1987, Maggie Muldowney, Lynne Fletcher and I organised and ran a Parent and Toddler Group held in the Youth Club Hut (also used by the football team, so we needed to clean up after them).

I already had experience of running a large group in Kenilworth, was able to obtain a grant from the Pre-school Playgroups Association for some equipment, some toys we brought from home, some bought from sales. We did lots of fundraising including a successful cheese and wine lunch.

We won a prize from Fisher Price Toys for a doll's tea party; the press took photos.

There were Maggie's children, Stephen and Kelly, Lynne's son James, our daughter-in-law Caroline with Ceara and Darren (they lived in Coventry then, Will used to bring them over in his lunch break and I took them back.)

Several mums came from Kenilworth and Leamington as they liked the small group and the village location and one or two more from Stoneleigh.

We closed when the village ran out of pre-school children.

ROYAL SHOW - We remember the Show coming to The National Agricultural Centre before it was a permanent site and being VERY muddy underfoot.

We saw the Queen and Duke arrive in the carriage and horses and drive around the ground to the Royal Pavilion. The Coaching Marathon drove through the village; we rushed down to watch the coaches go through. My brother John, as a pedigree pig breeder, won top prizes for his pigs and met several members of the Royal family.

We remember the FIRST AIRPORT INQUIRY held in the old Baginton Village Hall almost 50 years ago.

Mrs. Hill, who lived at the red brick house down Vicarage Road, organised a coach to take some of us to the inquiry for an afternoon session. David was about 3 years at the time; we have a press photo of a group of us about to board the coach.

The Dove Tapestry in the church was made as a memorial to Mrs. Hill.

The more recent proposal to extend Coventry Airport was campaigned against by the action group CEACA with several active members from Stoneleigh Close. The history of this, resulting in a victory for the campaigners, is fully recorded on a DVD made by Will Blagburn.

Memories of waiting for the bus at the bus shelter on the Coventry Road, it was often late or did not come, a nuisance when the boys and I had a dental appointment.

I learnt to drive in my fifties and had a blue Mini, oh joy! It enabled me to do so much more, train to work in Preschools, tutor in Early Years and NVQ Assessment.

There have been many happy, social events up in Stoneleigh Close.

During the 'Open Gardens Events' teas were served at No. 14 then the home of Jean and Den Fardoe (now Maggie and Tony Samouelle).

We at No. 7 had an open garden the first year with two hundred visitors.

Many a party has been held at different homes, always with neighbours contributing generously with an abundance of food and drinks!

Barbecues at No. 23 and New Year's Eve Parties, one year after supper we performed a Victorian Melodrama, written, produced, and acted by residents, complete with a starving Heroine, The Hero, and the Villainous Squire!

The MILLENNIUM was celebrated in great style at No 7, finishing with the Conga up the Close (and in and out No 8, much to their surprise.)

There was the QUEEN'S GOLDEN JUBILEE lunch in our front garden, a picnic lunch in the back garden to celebrate the victory over the expansion of the airport, coffee morning to meet the new neighbours, a street party get together, a lovely village wedding of Nicola Baker (Steve and Val's daughter) from the Close and the latest in May 2011 - a celebration of the wedding of Prince William and Catherine (with look-alike guests!) held up the road, courtesy of Maggie and Tony at No. 14.

In recent years, there have been several changes, sadly losing some older neighbours but bringing in new residents with young children, which is a delight.

We hope the friendliness and good neighbourliness in the Close will continue to make this a happy place for all who live there.

Later Will and I had more time to enjoy and help with village events, perhaps because we had retired from some of our other work.

We felt privileged to live here and share good times together, like the Planting of a Community Orchard and the Queens Diamond Jubilee Celebration and Club events.



Photograph by Will Blagburn.

Will became known as the Village Photographer as this was such a keen hobby of his with his photos often on the cover of Stoneleigh & Ashow News. The picture on the left was chosen by me for the October 2019 cover of the Stoneleigh & Ashow News to commemorate what would have been Will's 90th birthday was.

As a tribute to him, the Stoneleigh History Society published a Calendar of his photographs for the year 2019 and all profits from the sales went to Myton Hospices. We are grateful for the excellent care Will had at Myton Warwick.

The Village Club has created pictures to hang in the Club from some of Will's photos of Stoneleigh which will be a lovely reminder of his talents.

Since Will died in July 2017, I am fortunate to be able to stay to enjoy life in Stoneleigh and hope the various proposed developments will not spoil the beauty and tranquility of the village and its surroundings.

These Recollections are over about 60 years or so of our life in Stoneleigh, but it is such a small proportion of the rich history of the many hundreds of years that Stoneleigh has seen.



Will and Nora celebrating Will's 85th birthday, October 2014.
Photograph by Robin Bussell, published in the Stoneleigh & Ashow News, November 2014.