

Dennis Flatman



Dennis Flatman, aged 87



Young Dennis Flatman on his Wedding Day in 1957.

Courtesy of Dennis and Jasmine Flatman.

Rum ole Boys

A few weeks ago, one of my earlier Blog subjects and helpful correspondent contacted me to suggest a possible subject for this Blog. Morag told me,

“... one of the practice managers at the vets, Wendy Scrivener, says you ought to talk to her 87 year old dad, still living in the house he was born in, on Old Kirton Road...”

Fascinated by the notion of one person living in one house all his life, I was impelled to contact Wendy to check out the possibility of meeting her father, Dennis Flatman, and through her intervention this was achieved. Of course, I am aware many people stay in one house all of their lives, mainly because they have inherited it as it has been passed down different generations. But this

house is a little different as it's a former Council House which Dennis has occupied from birth and after so many years, he must be almost unique in our area. I phoned Mr. Flatman who said he had never been a Mister in his life and I subsequently put the telephone down having arranged to meet Dennis, which is how he likes to be known. He proved to be a vigorous conversationalist, full of memories of the village and its people. With no small degree of pleasure, I present to you the following short snippet of Dennis's life and recollections and demonstrating many of the changes experienced during the Twentieth Century.

It was under the fallow skies of late November afternoon when I finally made my way to Dennis's house. I was welcomed with a firm handshake and ushered into a room overlooking the Old Kirton Road. Dennis's long-standing friend, Maurice Byam, was already in situ. He was there to verify facts and remember details which might otherwise be forgotten; an adjudicator, if you like.

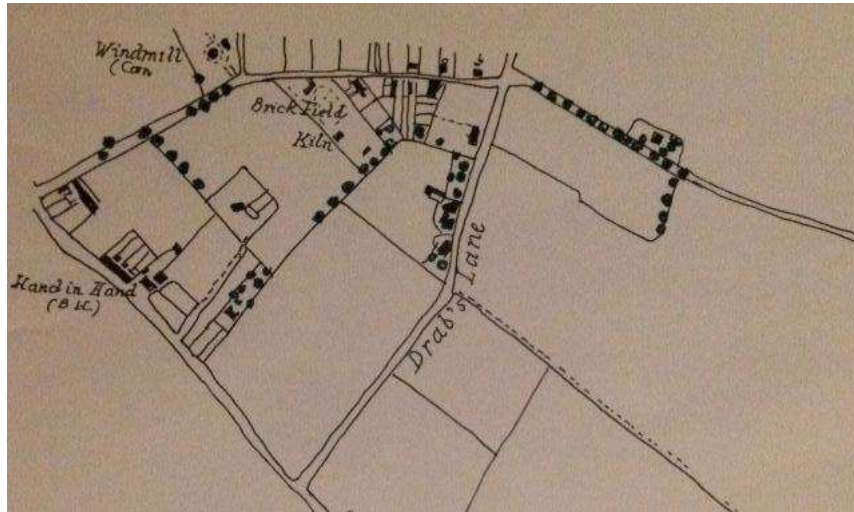
"We're Rum ole boys..."

Dennis told me, giving me fair warning of any upcoming peculiarities. And with this in mind you may wish to note any incorrect information recorded here is entirely down to my inability to keep up with the verbal ping-pong played out between the pair of them. I wasn't so much a Referee but more of a snagging net, which halted the flow of their shared memories. Somewhat later in the interview, I discovered Maurice had lived in 3A Gatehouse, Grimston Lane and his brother-in-law, Kenny Studd had been my next-door-neighbour way back in the 1960s. (Somewhere I have a photo of his Cabbage patch.) But for the time being we all sat down looking outward onto the world, allowing the view to invoke their memories.

Dennis was born in 1931 and yes, this is the house in which he continues to live. But as Dennis made an early mention of his mother, I think it is important I should first include her in this small document, not least because without her, there would be no story. She, Mrs. E. Flatman, was also born in Trimley but her house no longer exists. It was located near the Post Office end of the village. If you went down Gun Lane in the early part of the twentieth century you would have come across three stretches of houses called Cabbage Patch Square, so called because they formed an open ended square. They were roughly opposite where the final right hand-side bungalow now sits. At the front on the High Road was a large pond and behind the square on the field side stood a few trees. The "Square" as the 1911 Census called it, has now been demolished and built over but for Dennis the memory more than lives on. I think it may be only very long standing residents who now remember the buildings it but Dennis's recall has now fixed it in time.

To return to my host, Dennis. When he was born there was no Old Kirton Road or even a Kirton Road passing his house; the house stood on Drabbs Lane, a long established and older name for the road. The name was recorded in the 18th century, possibly earlier, although I have yet to confirm it. If you look at Isaac Johnson's 1784 map you can clearly see the outline of the lane leading directly from Trimley High Road to Kirton Green. Along the lane in very close proximity to where Dennis now lives, tracks lead off to the right in an area then known as Little Street Farm and now known as St. Martin's

Green, although the 1970s development doesn't cover all of the area. Little Street Farm also embraced the old Chicken Farm and this description may help you place the extent of the view young Dennis may have seen from his back garden as he grew up.



*Trace copy of the 1881 6" to the mile, Ordnance Survey map of Trimley St. Martin
Jasmine Cottage was roughly opposite the "a" of Lane*

He was surrounded by green fields, farm land and a tiny number of houses. Dennis and Maurice can well remember nearly all the people who lived in them. One house immediately opposite his own, Jasmine Cottage, was then occupied by a Mrs. Girling ...

"Everyone was Mr. or Mrs in those days. We didn't know their first name."

Dennis said as an aside. But Jasmine Cottage was demolished to make way for the homes in Red House Close and is now long gone. Dennis recalled someone finding the former house sign in a shed they inherited. They wondered just what they had unearthed; clearly it was not particularly apparent. They both recalled Mr. Pretty's Garage, which is now the Garage like house you can see on the High Road from the end of Grimston Lane.

"It sold bicycles." Dennis declared.

"What about petrol?" was my reply,

"No. Didn't sell petrol."

They both shook their heads emphatically at such a new-fangled idea. Perhaps it was talking about bikes which made their next connexion with earlier times because the Rubber Company, formerly situated just before the Post Office jumped into Dennis's mind. I was suitably astonished to discover such an industrial activity in the village.

Dennis's own house was built in 1920 – 21 by Woodbridge Rural District Council. He knows this because when a neighbouring house was completed, someone placed a letter, perhaps a Deed of Sale in the building during the topping off process. Decades later it was found by the occupant and the document showed the cost of the original building to be £400; an unbelievable bargain and a highly successful investment on the part of the District Council. If only all builders were so considerate in their provision of useful historical detail. He described the original building to me.

“There was no electrical light and no toilet. Just a bumby at the end of the garden. You know what a Bumby is? (I certainly do! And septic tanks, especially when they go wrong.) There was one water pump between four houses, all connected by a long, public access walkway across the back gardens. Baths were a semi-shared experience; the eldest had first dibs followed by the remainder of the household in descending order of age. The water was grey by the time bath time was over.”

From the luxury obsessed twenty first century, some might view these conditions with shock. But the comforts of the newly constructed Council house were manifold and were of unsurpassed craft and sturdiness. In many ways they have never been bettered. The rooms are of a very good size, the bedrooms airy, the gardens of a size and proportion available to few social housing clients today. Overall they gave the successive tenants enviable homes. Occupants grew their own vegetables using inherited gardening skills, vital to the maintenance of sustaining a large family. After I left Dennis, I did some swift research into Council Housing. Dennis's house is one of the very first Council built homes in the area and came into being as a direct result of the 1919 Addison Act. If you look at the date, you immediately note its close proximity to the end of the First World War and you may recall David Lloyd-George's desire to build a land, “Fit for Heroes”. Addison was the then Minister for Medicine and introduced the initial Bill. The government recognised housing was in short supply and in many instances, very dire condition. Housing became a recognised national priority and responsibility. Other Housing Acts followed throughout the Twenties but it was the first one which led directly to Dennis's front door. His house has more than stood the test of time for nearly one hundred years, receiving all the necessary modifications to create a comfortable and desirable modern home.

Dennis talked about his early life. His school was in St. Martin's and he pointed out that for nearly half of his school days, the country was at War.

“We would walk to school and when it snowed the whole road might be blocked. That's when we would walk across the fields because it was quicker. In the summer there were lizards on the right hand side of the road; if you picked them up by the tail, it would pop off! We had to do a lot of gardening because it was War Time. The boys dug allotments at the back of the school and we had to pick Rosehips (they were a strong source of Vitamin C) and Acorns for the pigs.

Mr. Herring was the Head Teacher and when he taught us, he would stand in front of the fire to warm himself. We couldn't feel the heat at all! I left school at 14 and started work on the land. I worked at Little Street Farm first and then Great Street Farm but I didn't stay on the land...I later went to work for

the East Suffolk and Norfolk Rivers Board. They covered all the Suffolk rivers and went right up to North Norfolk. I learnt how to operate a dragline using a crane and bucket from a boat and patrolled the area from Felixstowe Ferry to Kirton Creek ...it didn't do to be careless cos I once took out a huge chunk of the river wall."

Maurice, who used to bike part way to school, added he could remember snow up to the top of the hedges.

When I asked Dennis about the '53 Floods he said,

"Yes. I was working for the Rivers Board during the 1953 Floods. I remember walking along the river wall when the water was lapping at the top...that's how it was...we didn't think anything of it in those days. My wife was living in Old Felixstowe during the Flood and had to be evacuated... some of her relatives lost their lives..."

After I finished with the River Board, I worked for the Yeast Factory at the Docks as a Fitter's mate. Then on to Briscoe's as a Lorry Driver, then the Marina at Levington as a Digger Driver...later Ransomes in the machinery section as well as working for the Gas Board as a different sort of fitter. I finally finished up working for the Blue Cross in Walton and was there for 18 years before I finally retired in 1996."

Approximately ten years after he left, the Walton Blue Cross Surgery moved to new premises near the Ski Slope on Bourne Hill. At the time it was stated about four to five hundred cats and dogs used the centre a year. How many people must have met Dennis when their small animals were sick and suffering? I have a hunch he was a calming presence amidst their distress and was as thoughtful to the humans as he was to the animals.

But I need to go back a little to when Dennis was a young man and his thoughts, *"...lightly turned to love"*. He was justifiably proud when he told me he will have been married 62 years early next year.

"I've known her (Jasmine) since she was fourteen. I'm a bit older than her... when we met, she had long golden hair." He musingly added, *"She's a good cook."*



Beautiful Jasmine on her Wedding Day in 1957

Courtesy of Dennis and Jasmine Flatman.

He showed me a wedding photograph of them both standing outside the church; I believe they make an exceedingly handsome couple. Of course, children followed, the family grew and then the younger Flatmans began to leave home. Now it is just he and his wife who occupy the house which has sheltered three generations of his family. His retirement years have not been idle, of course. He joined the Bowls Club in 1996 and has many trophies to prove his dedication and ability to the sport. I was to view these later when Jasmine returned home.

But before Jasmine's arrival, Dennis and Maurice chased down the years remembering yet more Trimley people. They talked of Line's Fish and Chip Shop where Dennis had worked as a youngster cutting chips. It stood in what is now known as Mill Close. Somehow, there is nothing quite as desirable as the memory of good food when the cook has long since gone.

"Ooh, they were good Fish and Chips. They were 4 1/2d. People used to queue back to the High Road on a Saturday night. His (Line's) wife was thrifty though. After she scooped the chips up, she would give them a shake and make sure none were hanging over the side!"

I supposed the queue reached the old Corner Shop and of course both Dennis and Maurice remembered this little Village emporium. Mr. Carter or Tom, although he was never called as such to his face, would stand four square behind the counter when he wasn't organising the delivery or arrangement of the groceries. He was the accessible face of the shop. His wife, Mrs. Carter whose first name slipped both Maurice and Dennis's minds, was of a sober and straight faced disposition. My two informers continued to mentally walk the streets of St. Martin's. Mr. Fenton had a Cobbler's Shop and did all the army books. *"I used to knock cobbles into the shoes."* Dennis announced. Having arrived here as a small boy from Trimley St. Mary, Mr. Fenton ended up living in the row of houses next to the Bicycle Garage. A Mrs. Youngs had another small shop...where was it?

My time with these two dashing blades drew to a close with the arrival of Jasmin Flatman. Her liveliness preceded her into the room. She whisked out trophies, carefully removing some from the safety of their cabinets and allowed me to photograph samples of the gleaming crystal glass examples of sporting success. I turned to offer my thanks and goodbyes and to take a final photograph of the contemporary Dennis. His daughter Wendy was quite right. I did need to speak to her dear old Dad. I can report I haven't repeated some of the reminiscences...well, I couldn't tell you about the time when a woman on a bike came along shouting out, "I need...". No. I couldn't. But I can conclude by saying that Dennis is the very essence of a good old Suffolk Boy. Good humoured and courteous, with a clear eye for recognising nonsense, a respect for the natural world around us and possessing a voice which harks back to Suffolk's Anglo-Saxon origins. He and his generation carry the village's recent folk memories. Good health to you both, Dennis and Jasmin. And while I'm about it, let's not forget Maurice.

And thanks for the rum company.



*Just a few of the trophies garnered by the Flatmans over the years.
Courtesy of Dennis and Maurice Flatman.*

If you have any comments or would like to be part of this Trimley St. Martin project, please contact me at:
trimleystmartinrecorder@gmail.com

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References:

Council Housing: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/towncountry/towns/overview/councilhousing/>