

Churt in Late 19th to Early 20th Centuries

The following account was written by my father in 1967 and is mainly about the village of Churt from the late nineteenth century to the start of the Second World War. There is a copy in Farnham Library or Museum, and extracts were printed in the Farnham Herald and FMN Volumes Nos. 2, to 7 after my father's death. The following is the full account [square brackets contain information I have added]. I have also added section titles.

A short preface was written by Philip Brooks (who lived next door to my father and was the author of Churt: A Medieval Landscape) as follows:

This family first appears by name in the Pipe Rolls, These are the records of the Bishop of Winchester's Manors. The Tything of Churt is part of the Manor of Farnham. The Rolls start in 1210 and extend over some 500 years.

The family is first described as 'atte Cruce'. Later forms are Cruche, Crouch and finally Croucher.

By 1294 William ate Cruce holds a messuage and virgate of land [see <http://www.croucherconsult.co.uk/genealogy/Croucher.htm> for explanations of these terms and details of the entries]. During the next 50 years Agatha atte Crouch and Henry atte Croucher pay dues for land. There appears to be a break after the Black Death in 1349 until 1450 when John Crouch is in default for land called 'Hollands'. This may have been the family land as it is mentioned indirectly one hundred years earlier. [Hollands is the low ground north of Ridgeway Farm bisected by the track Maryners Lane which leaves the road to Elstead in a dip – the name has the same origin as the country – low land.]

In 1489 a William Croucher asks for the privilege of being buried at Waverley Abbey before the altar of St. Katherine.

In the surviving Frensham Parish Register the name appears regularly from 1657.

There is no doubt that this family has lived in and around The Tything of Churt for at least 800 years.

P.D.B. 1975

January, 1967

I have never made any serious New Year Resolution until now. This year, however, I will jot down some of the events of bygone years as they occur to me. Many have certainly gone beyond recall.

The way of life, socially, at work. Leisure and, in fact, all things during the past 100 years have changed completely but so gradually that one became accustomed to the change without realising it had happened. Many things that my father told me seemed almost incredible. I, therefore, understand Edward's manner when I tell him what must seem to him to be strange.

My father was born on December 19th, 1860. Edward's date of birth was October 30th 1946 so two generations span 86 years and a period of the greatest advancement in science and mechanics.

Grand Parents

My paternal grandfather was born in or around 1835 at either a cottage where 'Old Kiln' now stands or on the site of 'Old Pottery' on the Thursley Road beyond Pitch Place. [I believe the former to be correct – he was christened at Frensham Church on 11 January 1835 – a long walk from Pitch Place where Thursley Church was much nearer. In the 1841 census the family was living in Lower Churt which was to the west of Green Cross Lane, Hale House Lane and Tilford Road. Pitch Place was to the east in Upper Churt.] His father was a potter and a small-holder but no doubt his biggest income came from trade with smugglers. My grandfather was still taking part in this illicit trade at the time of my father's birth and later.

In later life my G. Grandfather lived at Squirrels where they had a small shop. [This refers to Charles and Charlotte Croucher – he died on 22 December 1843 aged 52 so would still be working as a potter. I assume Charlotte moved to Squirrels after his death. She was still there as a grocer in the 1881 census. Squirrels was a tented property over 200 years old belonging to Hale House or possibly Greencross. It was divided into two tenements before 1749. Only half the original building survives (Philip Brooks - Churt: A Medieval Landscape Page 42)].

The premises were searched by Revenue Officers on several occasions. The 'breaking down' of brandy involved continuous stirring of the liquor in earthenware pots, It took several hours of work and made inebriated those who inhaled too much of the fumes, On one occasion Revenue Officers arrived on the scene soon after my G. Grandparents had returned from the coast. He had evidently been followed but was then turning his pony loose in the paddock, and remained out of view. The teenage daughters took the kegs to the parlour and sat on them covering them with their crinolines. The officer found nothing. The smuggling men travelled in large parties for strength. A small party would have been robbed and left naked at any point between Midhurst and home, lonely roads and tracks having necessarily to be used for the purpose. [The crinoline story is not unique to the Crouchers! I suspect that the smuggling was based at Old Kiln. I received an email containing the following "one thing i questioned her about was the reference you made to charles croucher, the potter, smuggling. she said yes that was right, she remembers playing in the builders yard as a child and finding chain harnesses used for dogs to pull barrels of brandy on carts up from the coast. the old kiln is only a short way away, she also believes that a lot of the earthenware and pots (flower pots, chimney pots, rhubarb pots, kitchen crocks) around redhearn came from the kiln].

Barford Lower Mill

My father was born at the Lower Mill at Barford [the mill is on the Headley side of the stream, but James was christened at Frensham on 13 of January 1861 and was born in Chert (sic), but he was living in Barford, Headley aged 3 months in the 1861 census] the mill then being out of use as it was so many times in its history. Family squabbles and the stealing of title deeds was the cause of this. The house was then not only reputed to be haunted, but my G.M. heard strange noises so often during G.P.s absence. This may have been the reputation taking effect.

In the late 70's or early'80s the mill was equipped with new machinery and Harry Cooper was Manager. [The family had moved to Pond Cottage next to Frensham Pond before the 1871 census.] A fire took place soon afterwards and he was said to have run to Farnham, East Street to call the Fire Brigade in 35 minutes. He was a very tall man, but elderly when I was a boy. His wife was small.

I do not remember the mill in use [my father was born in 1900]. The sheds between the mill and the bridge however, were full of rags, mostly in sacks. As boys we went into them despite warnings. Years later the roofs caved in. By then the rags had sunk into a solid mass. That was during the time that Mr. and Mrs. Verstage lived there. An elderly couple, pleasant, but reputed to be misers.

In 1911 an evangelist how had arrived in the village, converted a cart shed which stood between the rag sheds and the place where the stream emerges, into a chapel. The shed had only 8 uprights on which the roof rested and was open on all sides. A disused cart which had stood there for years, and on which I, or we, played for many hours was removed. The shed was weather boarded and lined with match boarding, the M.B. also being placed under the rafters, a floor was put down and the whole place was cosy inside, warmed by oil heaters.

For several years I and my sisters and brothers attended Sunday School there, and my mother with one or other of the children, Sunday evening service which was conducted by local preachers. It fell into disuse after the war when two large families which had supported it emigrated to Canada and others moved away.

Barford Middle Mill

The mill, often called Middle Mill, as earlier there had been three, was in use when my memory begins. Sam Larby was the miller and my father bought pigs' food there, mostly barley meal for fattening. I often accompanied him on such occasions and, of course, that was our only way of reaching the village and school [my father was born in a cottage now demolished very close to Upper Mill, the track to which passes the Middle Mill]. Later Mill House was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Pride, Dorsetshire people who emigrated to Canada as so many families did when their daughters married Canadian soldiers.

Mrs. P. was one of the local women who contracted to do soldiers' washing during the war, It was poorly paid and more poorly washed. A soldier's bundle consisted of one of each shirt, pants, towel, pair of socks and a household would take a G.S. wagonful each week. As non of the cottages had a hot water supply beyond what could be heated in a pot over the fire, one can understand the result. All the water had to be carried from the stream in pails.

Children's Games

The Bargate quarry was in use on and off up to the outbreak of war, and it was a school boys' paradise. School boys during the two hour dinner break in the summer roamed many miles playing soldiers, fox and hounds and games that have been long forgotten. Every girl had her wooden hoop and every boy his iron one. It was common for up to 30 boys with hoops to go charging up a road and leave the hoops to run downhill when the speed became too great to follow. The hill from the Church Green was a favourite.

At that time a cart would give notice of its approach with its iron tyres on gravel. The carriage tyres being of solid rubber, the clip clop of the horses hoofs and the tinkle of its bells warned us. But it was only the carriage which we were afraid to upset. Mr. Dockeral, who was coachman for Mr. Pritchard of Llanover would avoid the school vicinity at the times when the 'kids were out'. He, also, would never attempt to drive past the steam roller.

Churt School

I commenced school in June 1905. Many children commenced at a younger age, even at three years. The Head Master was Mr. Hurley or Early but he died a few months later, but I scarcely believe I had worried him to death [Frederic Hurley master of Churt School died on 11 October 1905 aged 50].

The School was comprised of two rooms, the small one for infants, the other for six standards with three teachers. The infants' room was like a small gallery, each row of seats being a little higher than the one in front of it and from the rear seat it was possible to look out of the high window behind. There were at least 40 children in that small room. The school at Beacon Hill opened later that year and the numbers dropped very much. Until then no school existed between Churt and Shottermill and Grayshott. The big room must have been packed to capacity.

As infants we had strips of leather and boot laces to learn how to lace our own shoes. Cards with holes on dotted lines through which we passed wool to make the shape of one of a number of animals. Children in class 1 were given pieces of cloth on which to sew buttons. It was there I learned how to thread a needle quickly and years later won thread needle races for different girls. We used slates for writing and "Wipe your slates clean", meant spit on them and rub it off. We were told not to use our handkerchief for this purpose, but to bring a piece of rag. Most of the children, however, had only a rag for a handkerchief.

I forget the name of our teacher but she was very nice.

I was about six years old when, with two other boys, I chased cows in the field beyond Morton House entrance. How the cows ran and the more they ran, the more eager we became. Someone told teacher and we were hauled before the class. A girl of our age (Lena Ransley – the daughter of the chauffeur to Col. Findley of Barford House) jumped to her feet and said "Willy Croucher wasn't there teacher". I was told to go back to my place. I did. Who was I to say that she was fibbing. I wonder where she is now. That was more than 60 years ago. Her people left Churt soon afterwards when Col. Findley's command at Longmoor terminated. As a digression, I will mention that Gen. Findley was the first General Officer to be killed in 1914 in action.

To be continued.

