

Village People

By Christina Oxley

Les Friend was born on 12th March 1927 on the family farm, Wadland Barton, Ashbury. His grandfather had been the original occupant of the Wadland Barton Estate farmhouse, which was built in 1685, working on the land as tenant farmers of the Ashbury Estate. Richard Chapman Friend and his wife Ethel (Les's parents) took over the management of the farm, eventually buying the original farmhouse from the Ashbury Estate.



Original Wadland Barton Farmhouse 1685 to 1950's, Water Colour painting.

The original house (seen in a water colour painting above) had 3ft thick stone walls, with the only heating being the large oven in the kitchen. Across from the house were the stable and another cottage. At this time the farm provided work for a few staff, including a servant girl who helped their mother in the kitchen, a cowman and horseman. Les's father was a keen horseman and usually had 5 horses, he also bred horses. A very memorable horse being called Silver Tail, a hunter which was requisitioned for the War effort, never to be seen again, probably taking a bullet.

Les remembers walking to Northlew school every day from the farm with his sister Stella, on the way calling for a girl that lived above the Laundry House at Ashbury. Wearing boots with scoots on the heels, much like a horseshoe. At the age of 11, he sat and passed a test and went on to the Grammar School, Okehampton in 1935. Mr Hunter was the Head Teacher then.

Early memories also include the installation of Telegraph poles & new phone lines in the 1940's. One memorable evening there was a terrific thunder storm, lightning hit one of these poles, splitting it like match wood, the strike travelled along the lines & did the same to the next few poles destroying each as it hit.

At school the older children were recruited to work on the land in the War effort to plant potatoes, where due to his farm experience he was often in charge of this workforce and directing works. These war years were hard work, as was farming in those days required maximum output to feed the nation.

The day would start at 6am, the first jobs of the day would be to prepare and clean out the stables, get the horses ready for working the fields. Ploughing and furrowing would take a team of two horses. A team of 3 would pull the Binder to cut corn. The farm yielded 60-70 acres of corn, which was all made into sheaths, the wheat used for thatching.



The steam thrasher would then be brought in to separate the wheat, with a reed comber on top of the machine. They also grew barley and oats to make dredge corn and straw for bedding. The picture to the left shows John Jordan, who married Les's sister Stella, on the left with his father inlaw Richard Chapman Friend on the right having a short break during thrashing.

Work in the war years was hard, seven days a week with no days off. Often the old small tractor would take upto an hour to start and crank into life.

The first tractor on the farm was a Case Tractor R Model, bought approx 1940. Les remembers working on the tractor as required, while his sister would do the milking of the dairy herd. His father would often be away visiting other farms. Next to the house the milking parlour had a pump room and vacuum pumps. All this equipment would need to be sterlised monthly, which always made a long day even longer.

Following milking the 10 gallon churns were put out to be collected by the milk lorry. They always had Devon cows until Les remembers his father buyin an in-calf friesian and an in calf shorthorn. In later years the family decided to stop producing milk and concentrated in beef production.

One of the wonderful old country skills, still seen occasionally today, was hedge laying, a process of cutting the newly established tree growth in a hedge and 'laying it' to strengthen the denisty of the hedge and encourage future growth. The off-cuts were used to make 'faggots' bundles of wipsy bits of twigs, used as fire ligters. On Sunday mornings the cowman and horseman would use a cross-saw to cut the large bits of wood into useable sizes, making sure there was plenty to see through to the following Sunday.

The War Years obviously made quite an impact on Les too, he remembers one misty evening hearing a German bomber overhead, he could hear the bomb doors open and the next thing

he knew a bomb had been dropped and had landed nearby in fields, but it did not detonate. It was only the first and was followed by several other which did detonate and blew large holes in the fields close to the farmhouse. In total approx five or 6 bombs were dropped.

Another summer Les was doing the cut-in, which is when you start ploughing about 3-4 furrows wide, he was looking after the ponies, when a Hurricane plane tried to land having run out of fuel, it hit one of his furrows and summersaulted. His father saw the plane crash and rushed over from the top fields to help the pilot, who was trapped by two fingers on his right hand. Luckily for the pilot his father refused to cut his fingers off as requested, help arrived and they managed to free the pilot and save his fingers. Later the RAF's top brass came to thank Richard, and said the pilot kept crashing his planes!

Les also fondly remembers dances which were organised by Lady Fison of Northlew Manor for the local Black Army Camp soldiers, who were stationed at Winsford near Halwill Junction, there were 100's of American men. He remembers the floor of the Victory Hall would bounce to the sound of music and dancing, the servicemen and locals were all polite and respectful until the white American service men arrived, then there would often be trouble.

It was one of these dances held in the village that Les met Betty Dennis, they married on 10th April 1950 at Inwardleigh Church. 1950 was a big year for Les, as not only did he & Betty get married, but he took over the running of the farm from his father, who retired and went to live nearby at The Parks, Ashbury. This picture shows them celebrating their 70th Wedding Anniversary last year.

It was also around this time the late 1950's early 1960's that the old farmhouse was demolished and Cooks Builders of Okehampton built the present main farmhouse. Les remembers helping with the demolition and climbing a rope attached to the left chimney stack with fear, as it was the last wall standing of the old house.



Les and Betty had four children, two girls first, the eldest being Margaret, who they sadly lost in a tragic fire accident at the age of two and a half. She was laid to rest At Ashbury Church. (see previous picture)

Many years later, Phil, their youngest son took over the management of the family farm, by then some 340 acres and built on the family legacy, his older brother took on another farm nearby. Les and his wife went to live in the new bungalow, built next to the farmhouse in 1984, positioned thoughtfully to continue being in the centre of a busy family farming life.

Les has also been the 'custodian' of Ashbury Church grounds for 30 years, holding the keys to the church and looking after the grounds. In the early days he remembers mowing all the



lawns with a push along mower and then buying a sit on mower second hand for £1000, easing the task significantly I am sure. This picture was taken many years ago, but is instantly recognisable. Les also served as Chairman of the Parish Council for a number of years.

Les has seen many changes in his 94 years, farming has always been tough, but back in the 'old days' it was a different kind of tough, and he has certainly earned his retirement.

Thank you Les and family for sharing these recollections for everyone to enjoy.