

A Life in Lavenham 1925 - 1937.

Extract from the memoirs of Ranald Clouston (Lavenham days)

For an antiquary, to be actually born in Lavenham was about the best place in England, and. I feel I was very privileged living there till I was 12. Of course the Lavenham of 1925 was not the same as it is in 2001, the changes have been vast; horses were still currently used on the land, and many came to be shod first thing in the morning in Water Street at the forge run by Mr Huffey, queues formed, and the air was filled with the noise of horses' hooves being stamped on the road with impatience.

My parents were the local doctors, mother was the first lady doctor that Lavenham had ever had, and we lived in a large Georgian fronted house facing The Swan at the junction of the three main roads, then called The Willows, so one could see what was going on in the centre of the village.

Mechanical transport was rare on the roads in the 1920s, my father had worked with a Mr Riley during World War I in the Trench Warfare Department of the War Office in London and on taking the medical practice in Lavenham wrote to him to ask whether his new car was in production. It was; and father became the proud owner of a Riley motor car, the second car in Lavenham, an earlier car being at the Firs in Church Street. Just as well as the practice extended to the surrounding villages with a surgery at Lawshall and no other doctors for some miles around. When father had the car out, and there was a call for mother to attend a patient at a distance she had to ride a motor cycle. This had a leather belt drive with copper rivets and if the clutch was operated too smartly the rivets tended to break, and mother would have to take the whole machine down to Mr Huffey's forge for repairs. Some years later when I reached the age of 16 and could get a licence for a motor cycle but not a car, I was not allowed one on the basis that they were too dangerous!

The 1920s were times of high unemployment, and. my parents did. their best to minimise the effect of this. We had a cook and a house parlourmaid, a gardener, Ambrose, who also dealt with the car and the motor cycle, and whose father came to help pull the lawn mower which was not mechanically propelled. My brother Olaf, four years younger than me and I had a nanny and there was also a dispenser in the surgery which was on the north side of the house

The water supply was highly labour intensive; for drinking water Ambrose had to go far down Water St by where the printing works is now, and where a spout discharged water into a bowl in a grotto just off the road. He carried two pails, a wooden rectangular framework and a timber yoke over his shoulders, this arrangement helped him to bring back water filled pails without them rubbing on his clothes. Unfortunately during the summer the Water St spout was known to dry up, and water had to be got from the north side of the church tower at Potlands behind Lavenham Hall, a much further distance. Other water for baths, washing etc came from the pond in our garden, through a sand filter to a well by the house, which Ambrose then had to pump by hand to a tank in the roof. Our pond was fed from a much larger pond by the Hall and discharged into a culvert which ran under the length of Water St.

Electricity did not reach Lavenham till after we had left, but there had been a gas supply from 1865 when a Gas Works had been built at the foot of Water St at the cost of £1400. One surviving gas holder bears the date 1862. The gas produced was non-poisonous, there being no carbon monoxide; the gases consisted of methane and the higher hydrocarbons. This was expensive, and made a dark deposit on the ceiling. Most of the gas lamps had a pilot jet, and I can remember on entering a darkened, room groping for the chain hanging from the lamp bracket to pull to allow the pilot to light the main burner. Just as well that the gas was non-poisonous, as on one occasion the whole bracket fell off a bedroom wall leaving the pipe open-ended with father sleeping close by.

In those days Lavenham had a railway station on the line from Bury St Edmunds to Marks Tey. A train at 0750 in the morning took us up to join the main line connecting with Liverpool Street Station and introduced me to the vast shops like Harrods which I had to visit for my school uniform. In my youth the railway lever signals went down for 'go', but I well remember my surprise to see the day when it all got changed and the lever had to point up for 'go', my first introduction to fail safe. The reason being that if the wire broke linking the signal to the signaller than the signal would go to stop.

My bedroom was over the front door on the first floor close to a gas lamp post on the

pavement outside. Christmas Eve was an important time for me as Father Christmas made his visitation and all good children had to get quickly to sleep. Not so in our house as the Salvation Army band with Ambrose playing had a long Lavenham tradition to make a recital tour of the village. Great for everyone except me as they needed to be opposite my window to use the light from the street lamp. I should have enjoyed it, but alas did not, and on one occasion I was reported to have thrown a sponge at them, and during another period of exasperation was reported to have asked Can God hear that noise?

It did not do to upset the neighbours as I found when I discovered I could get out into the gutter from the second floor windows at the front of the house behind the parapets with a grand view down Water St. I was spotted by Mrs Fisk who with her son ran the greengrocery shop opposite, she reported back to my parents that she was not happy about me being up there.

We had a wireless which lived, on a circular table in the centre of the Green Room which was at the back and looked out on to the garden and the pond. This instrument had one valve and head phone The accumulator required regular charging and had to be taken round to Mr King's who had a garage a few doors away in the High Street.

The garden should have extended to a tennis court at the back but before we came this had been put with the similar house The Firs and backed on to their garden. Not to be out done my parents took a plot of ground up Bears Lane some distance away. Years later I remember talking with a ringer Mr Maurice Symonds, who had taken a new house on the site of the tennis court and he reported on what a difficult job he had digging up the tennis court to grow food in World War II.

My first introduction to making a noise with a bell was being instructed by the then Rector's wife, Mrs Lenox Conyngham, on how to chime the third bell which had a rope which came all the way down to the ground. This must have been before 1955 when the Rev Lenox-Conyngham died.

On Sunday mother took me along to Lavenham Church at 11am for Mattins with a good choir. I did not stay for the whole service but was allowed to leave after the crede and before the sermon.

I seem to have been interested in the unusual, at the Willows there was a large open staircase and at the top was kept a china vase. On one occasion I picked this vase up, held it over the banister and allowed it to drop to the tiled ground floor in the hall. It made a spectacular row which I was not allowed to repeat I had a large old fashioned pram suspended by leather straps from springs. When I was parked in the garden for my rest I found I could get the pram to sway front to back and so much so that it went right over with me strapped in beneath. I survived, but I was not encouraged to repeat the experiment.

One of the best walks round Lavenham with nanny included a visit to the works of Mortlock & Sons by the railway station. The storage area outside the Works proper had all sorts of steam ploughing and threshing tackle. Surprisingly I was allowed to get up on to the seats provided for the operators and play with the handles and levers. This I am sure influenced me to spend 42 years professionally on steam power station plant and its design in the UK and abroad.

One of the attractions at the fetes in the locality was the street piano, or barrel organ, brought along by Rev Canon A.O.Wintle, Rector of Lawshall, where he had a factory for overhauling these instruments. He came to Lawshall in 1925 when most street pianos were Victorian and had had their day. He bought them, repinned the barrels with more modern tunes, and completely overhauled them. I well remember being instructed by him on one occasion in how to turn the handle to produce the best musical effect.

Another fete I remember was at Brettenham Hall where Sir Courtney Warner lived. On the occasion I have in mind he had brought along the band of one of the Guards Regiments all dressed in black busbies; seeing these en mass so upset me that I had to be taken away in tears.

Father was a member of the Lavenham Cricket Club which played on a sloping pitch behind the Black Lion in the High Street. His attendance was conditional on his patients not wanting him, and the score books which have survived record that Dr Clouston had to leave the pitch to see a patient. Father was unfortunately tone deaf, normally this was not apparent to anyone but he did have to be told when the National Anthem was being played and-standing to attention was expected. His hobby was collecting prehistoric flint implements of which quite a number are to be found in Suffolk. Patients

brought them along, and we used to go for picnics at Cavenham in good weather, there rabbits burrowed in the sandy ground and turned up 'finds'. On one occasion he came across a bronze shoe buckle which turned out to be Roman.

Another friend in Lavenham was Alec Hodsdon who lived on the Bury Road in an ancient half timbered house brought from Washmere Green. He was an analytical chemist and his wife Margaret was a very skilled harpsicord player of broadcasting standard. Her uncle had founded the musical instrument museum at Fenton House, Hampstead Alec established a harpsicord factory at the side of his house and had a very good name as a maker. A great problem with harpsicords is the ease by which they get out of tune, and so before any recital he would have to take along the instrument to be used and then tune it before Margaret played. His other great interest was steam cars and I was so fortunate to be invited to go with him in 1955 on the Brighton Run in his 1904 Gardner-Serpollet steam car. Years later he hosted a visit of the British Light Steam Power Society to Lavenham and the members wanted rides in his steam cars by which time he had two. So he rang up one day and asked whether I could drive the one I had gone to Brighton in for one afternoon one Saturday. Come over in the morning and I will tell you what to do! I had no experience driving a steam car at all. It was quite a worrying day as the safety valve had got stuck and if the boiler pressure rose up to the red mark at 750 pounds per square inch I was to run the engine light, not coupled to the wheels. It was fine when the car was going round the disused runway on the old Cockfield aerodrome, but as soon as one stopped to let one group of passengers off and take on another then the pressure gauge called for attention. A dog tooth clutch disengaged the engine from the drive shaft but on one occasion it was not entirely disengaged and the car shot forward even with the 1904 brakes full on. One passenger was round the front of the vehicle and had a rather narrow escape.

The Cloustons are an ancient Orkney family dating back to about 1060. My Great Grandfather, Rev Dr Charles Clouston, was born 1800, succeeded his father Rev William Clouston as Minister of Sandwick on the Orkney Mainland, William had been Minister of Stromness as well. Charles felt that the greatest need in his parish was for a doctor of medicine, so he went off to Edinburgh and qualified in 1819. He returned to Orkney and took over from his father and was Minister of Sandwick for 58 years till his death in 1884. He has a memorial stained glass window in the north aisle of the nave of Kirkwall Cathedral. He founded the Stromness Museum and had a seaweed named after him. His main interest was weather forecasting.

A son, Robert H.S.Clouston, my grandfather, after an education at St Andrews and a life interest in golf, came down to Bushey in Hertfordshire to study art and particularly mezzotint work. This was well before photography became popular, yet the large Victorian houses then being built were crying out for large reproductions of old masters to decorate their walls and to encourage the study of art. He married Kathleen Warren whose father from Nottingham was postmaster for North Britain (NB) based on Aberdeen. She was a good artist and was concerned with furniture, she wrote and illustrated a pioneering work on Chippendale, and worked with Debenham & Freebody on their furniture side. They lived in Bushey, Herts, and had three sons. Jack, my father Eric and Olaf who died young in Canada. Kathleen died in 1898 and grandfather married again. Due to a heart problem he- emigrated to New Zealand, and worked there as an artist for a year before coming over to Sydney, NSW, where he picked up food poisoning and died in 1911. I found his grave on Gore Hill in the recent past when I was on a ringing tour of Australasia.

My father's elder brother Jack ran a preparatory school. It had begun at Semer Old Rectory in Suffolk, got bigger and moved to Stratton Park by Biggleswade, Beds, and from there to Great Brickhill in Buckinghamshire. Uncle Jack knew a great many parents in the agricultural community, was a good shot, and with Harry Ruffell of Cockfield trained gun dogs. The school called Stratton Park in my day prospered and in the Autumn of 1952 I was taken there for my first term when it was at Great Brickhill. Jack was having some difficulty with the landlord who was wanting to increase the rent at a time when economic conditions were becoming more and more difficult, and Jack decided to move the school to Brickendonbury just outside Hertford for the Spring Term of 1955. So I only had one term at Great Brickhill; I remember the Armistice Day service in the open air by the War Memorial in Great Brickhill, and walking along the Grand Junction Canal which ran quite near the park. Also observing someone in a hot air balloon floating by, my first introduction to flying. My first term ended with me picking up scarlet fever and having to be brought back to Lavenham in our car on a water filled bed. At that time scarlet fever was considered to be quite serious, fortunately mine was an isolated case and no one else at the school caught it. It was never known how I had picked it up. So I got stuck in Lavenham in isolation in the nursery and my parents got a London Hospital nurse to look after me.

She was excellent and had to have an hour's walk each afternoon to keep fit and meet the Hospital rules. I gradually recovered and was allowed out in a bath chair being pushed, round Lavenham by my nurse, I did the steering. At the end of it all my toys had to be burnt which caused me a considerable degree of grief. There was some concern that my heart had been affected so I was taken up to Harley St to see a Consultant who had taught my parents at the London Hospital. I remember standing in front of an early electrical screen and the conclusion was that my heart was ok.

All being well I was allowed to go back to school but by then it had got to Brickendonbury just outside Hertford. A considerable pile with a moat round two sides and on the site of a monastic fabric. It had been much renovated by Sir Edward Pearson as his home and where he had died in 1925. Earlier he had built the first Aswan Dam on the Nile and was much involved in civil engineering work. He had given Hertford a new motorised fire engine, and once a year the fire brigade came up to the house to demonstrate the engine. This involved sending large jets of water high into the air on the front drive, quite spectacular. The moat was full of carp and fishing from the grassy banks and from row boats was encouraged.

I had two small wireless sets with crystals and cats whiskers and head phones, one in my desk in the form room and another by my bed in the dormitory above. Both needed an aerial rigged up to a local tree and an earth to the ground. The transmitter at Brookmans Park was powerful and not far away, reception was good and no batteries were needed. I was lucky to be allowed to have the wireless sets, but Jack was enlightened and could see merit in encouraging the boys to have a hobby.

Each term we had an order mark holiday; if we had misbehaved during the term then we had to stay in and work normally, if we had been good we would have an expedition somewhere. On one occasion we went round the De Havilland aircraft factory at Hatfield where one of the parents was the Manager. Early aircraft were hung from the ceiling and present day craft were being built on the floor.

Another visit was to the Denham film studios, and we saw the filming of 'South Riding'. Sir Alexander Korda was the brains behind the project to make Denham the English Hollywood.

The school had rules which applied to the holidays, and prevented us from attending places where we could pick up infectious diseases a fortnight before term began. All quite sensible but often it meant that visits to the cinema, plays, etc had to be arranged in the first fortnight of the holiday.

Even at my prep school I got involved in mechanical problems which pointed the way that I should follow. The water supply to the mansion was from a tank in a gatehouse over the stable block. When the tank was full a float operated electrical switch was supposed to shut down the pump supplying the water. Sometimes this did not happen and the tank overflowed; not really serious but a waste and it could go on all night and be undesirable. So I used to go up to the tank and check that the float operated switch did shut off the water supply when required with a little manual help if necessary. Oddly there seems to have been no problem with the low level switch as this did not require my attention.

I did learn to ride a horse but did not get round to doing any jumping, just walking, trotting and cantering. I remember running to hounds on foot but we tended to get left behind as we had to go through gates rather than over fences. We also had clay pigeon shooting but I found that the recoil from a 410 needed a degree of stamina.

I was lucky with outings as John Gayer-Anderson was also at the school and when the Colonel came over from Lavenham to take him out for an exeat he kindly took me too.

I remember seeing a glow in the sky one evening in 1956 and on enquiring what was causing it was told that it was the Crystal Palace burning down. So a fire in South London could be seen as far away as Hertford.

Our family holidays required much planning. They had to be at a time when few patients were ill, and well before the planned trip we had to go to Walton-on-the-Naze pier to look for Dr Barnes fishing. He had retired but was able to come to Lavenham to act as a locum while my parents were away. We normally went to Scotland for a holiday; my earliest recollection is of Cruden Bay just north of Aberdeen which I think we must have reached by rail. Arriving at Aberdeen Station early in the morning it was a grand sight to note that the wide fan shaped row of taxis were all Rolls Royces. We got to Cruden Bay and had a holiday in an old railway carriage which suited me fine but poor father at

6 ft tall and with a dodgy back found a railway carriage seat of c1910 a bit narrow and hard. He had acquired a large kite but I remember that the time we chose to fly it was when a 'har' was blowing with very foggy conditions and the kite was quite invisible when it was at any height above the ground. There was some fishing on the River Ythan and the excellent golf course was available at Cruden Bay itself.

Another year we were up at Laggan by Inverness on the river Spey when Uncle Jack was shooting at nearby Kingussie with friends. That must have been in 1938 as it coincided with the Munich crisis.

At weekends we managed to get away to my mother's parents in Ipswich. Her father, Frank Fisk, ran a furnishing store in the centre of Ipswich called The Suffolk House, which was facing difficult times in the late 1920s. It had been founded by my mother's Grandfather, Henry Campin Monteith, who came from Norwich and was from a Huguenot family and was a silk merchant. He attended my christening in Lavenham Church in 1925 but died soon afterwards. This compares with my other Great Grandfather, Rev Dr Charles Clouston who was born in 1800. Mother's parents lived at 4 Park Road in Ipswich where the Diocesan Bishop lives now. There is an excellent view down Christchurch Park and from my bedroom on the first floor facing the Park I could hear the twelve bells at St Mary-le-Tower being rung by probably the best 12 bell band of ringers in England at that time. This encouraged me to take an interest in the art at the appropriate moment.

Grandmother Fisk was another artist, and I well remember a large full size reproduction in oils of The Haywain by Constable in the dining room which she had made 'at the Ipswich School of Art, of a very high standard. I was very interested in playing with my Meccano including gearing, and on one occasion I ran a sharp toothed gear wheel on the polished surface on Grandmother's dining room table, which required the attendance of a French polisher to remove the dotted blemishes. Despite all this and perhaps because I was the eldest grandchild of four, all boys, Grandfather did leave me £1,000 in his will, rather more than the others received but he was my godfather.

Back in Lavenham we had a violent thunder storm and I well remember walking down Water Street with father after it was all over to see the damage. The ancient culvert under the road must have been running at full bore, the arch stones had been loosened and the water had caused the street above to be scattered with debris so it was not passable to vehicles.

On another occasion of high rainfall I was out in our Austin 7 with father and we tried to return to Lavenham via the Frogs Hall ford. This was not successful as the water got into the carburettor leaving us stuck in the middle of the stream. Father rolled up his trousers and took his shoes and stockings off and waded to the engine to clean the petrol supply. It was about tea time and fortunately a farm labourer with a horse came down the road and agreed to hitch the horse to the front of the car with the chains he had been using for ploughing, and pulled us out to dry land. So we were soon away again.

There was no central sewage farm for the village till after 1945. In my youth we had a cess pit by the side of the house near the greenhouse, and this was emptied at night and carried to Clay Hill.

Following the death of the Rev G.H.Lennox-Conyngham, the new Rector, Rev Prebendary M.F.Page was instituted in 1955. He had a family of six and the three younger girls were about the same ages as my brother Olaf and me. While the older children were away at school, we used to go for walks with the others and our two nannies. Slightly younger than me was Christobel, named after Mrs Pankhurst, but known to us as Kitty, and in 1959 we were married in Lavenham Church, and lived very happily till her untimely death from cancer in 1989. On one of our walks we were unofficially married by my brother Olaf some 25 years before the actual event.

With two sons to educate father had a problem; while we were both under 14 years old and at Uncle Jack's school the financial problem was bearable. Most of father's patients were private, on the farm labourers were on a form of insurance, called the panel, by which father was paid about 10 shillings a year for looking after them. But their wives and children were private, and the farm labourer's income at 50 shillings a week did not run to paying medical bills for wives and family. The farmers were suffering from poor income from crops grown, livestock, etc. So father's income was inadequate to pay fees for boarding schools for us when we were over 14. However he heard from a travelling salesman for drugs and similar medical products of a medical practice for sale in Tonbridge,

Kent. This town had a good school founded in 1555 by Sir Andrew Judd Kt formerly a Lord Mayor of London, for the inhabitants of the town, and if we lived there the boys could go to the school as day boys at a very reasonable rate. Father thought about this, and consulted the Gayer-Anderson twins on the Market Square. They both said that they knew all about the school, they had been there as day boys 1894-8, and thoroughly recommended it as a good school. So it was decided to move to Tonbridge on economic grounds.

I was away at school in Hertford most of the time, and we moved and the Le Goods, both doctors, took over in Lavenham. At the end of term I went down to Penbury Road in Tonbridge by the railway station instead of to Lavenham.

Tonbridge was quite different, but it did have a medieval castle at the crossing on the River Medway. Much larger and with a wider range of shops. The railway junction was important, on the longest length of straight track in Britain and good services to London and Hastings. The Schools class of steam locomotives were specially designed to traverse the tight curves between Tonbridge and Hastings, and the wetness of the Sevenoaks tunnel prevented electrification coming down to Tonbridge for some decades. We lived at the south end of the town where the practice had many patients working on the railway and in the large local printing works. Tonbridge is in a bowl in the Medway valley which got little wind in summer, and quite high temperatures. Hop gardens all around and grand views from Bidborough Ridge to the south and from Sevenoaks to the north.