

Stableford at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

After my last article about Sibell Corbett who ran Stableford Farm at the beginning of the twentieth century Val and Peter Williams who live in Stableford Farm House rang to say that they had some photographs of Sibell. I was so excited, partly because she fascinates me as a person and partly because I was interested that a young woman, clearly of some means, would choose to run a farm. And from the photos you will see that Sibell didn't just manage the farm, she worked on it, too. Thanks to Val and Peter for sharing these images.



Sibell Corbett

The Corbetts were living at Stableford Hall when they took over the tenancy of Stableford Farm from Mr Dowman in March 1906. Mr Dowman moved to Ewdness. There was a lot of correspondence with the agent about the state in which the farm had been left. Poor fences led to Dowman's bull getting in

to the Corbett's cows, good hay and muck were carted off to Ewdness leaving behind rubbish and land and buildings were in a shocking state. The complaints went on and on for months. Actually Mr Corbett went on and on and Mr Dowman tried rather lamely to defend his position which probably was indefensible.



Sibell Corbett

From the 1901 Census we know the number of occupants of Stableford Hall. There was the husband (although he was not in residence at the time of the census), his wife (Susan Corbett), five daughters, nine live-in servants and two nieces who were visiting. The gardeners, laundry maids and coachman all lived out so there would have been at least two servants per person.

Sibell must have had quite a culture shock when she took over the running of the farm but it looks from the photographs as though she was enjoying herself. She seems to be always

pictured with horses, riding or working with them so perhaps horses were her real love. I like to think that Sibell took the photograph of the horse which is being broken-in, a lovely image and a good looking horse. Does anyone know the identity of the man in the photograph below and the man offloading the sacks in the following picture? Is it the same person?



Can anyone name this man?

At the side of Stableford Farm House is a pathway up to a lane which leads to The Old House (see photograph below.) The Old House, like Stableford Farm House is a beautiful building but it is not the buildings which are the focus of our attention but the occupants. You will see that one of these occupants is very famous, even today.



Sibell and Unknown Farmworker

In 1901 the census records the occupants of The Old House as Henry Ernest Wodehouse, aged 55, Ex Official Colonial Civil Service.

Eleanor Wodehouse, aged 48, wife

Ernest Armine Wodehouse, aged 21, Scholar Oxford University

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, aged 19, Bank Assistant

Mary Parton, aged 24, Cook

Mary Mason aged 22, Housemaid

You may not, at first glance connect Pelham Grenville Wodehouse the Bank Assistant with P.G. Wodehouse the novelist, but they are one and the same. P. G. Wodehouse lived in Stableford from the age of fourteen to twenty one.

Wodehouse's father retired from the Hong Kong Civil Service (he was a judge) on health grounds and took a house in Dulwich for a few months and then moved in 1895 to the Old House at Stableford. The two boys were at boarding school but

came home in the holidays. The family moved on to live in Cheltenham in 1902 but for six years the Wodehouse family lived quite modestly in Stableford. Presumably Henry Wodehouse's former occupation ensured that they would have mixed with the upper echelons of society. P. G. Wodehouse's elder brother was very gifted academically and it was thought that his younger brother would follow him to Oxford but instead P. G., or "Plum" as he was known, went into a bank. He hated his work but thankfully managed to combine employment with writing and his first novel "The Pothunters" was published in 1902.

I don't know what the inhabitants of Stableford thought of the Wodehouse family but Wodehouse gives this tantalising glimpse of what he thought of Stableford in "Bring on the Girls."

"My happiest days as a boy were spent near Bridgnorth. The only thing I didn't like in my formative or Stableford period was the social stuff. Owners of big estates round about would keep inviting me for the weekend...

Picture to yourself a Trappist monk with large feet and a tendency to upset tables with priceless china on them, and you will have the young Wodehouse. The solution to the mystery of my mixing with the County is that my brother Armine was very popular. He played the piano like a Gershwin and could converse pleasantly on any subject."

An enduring love of the Shropshire countryside was one of the legacies of Wodehouse's time at Stableford. Local place names appear throughout the novels. Badger becomes Badgwick, Rutton could be Ryton or Roughton and Chesterton and Worfield are mentioned using their actual names. Eckleton is clearly Ackleton and Worfield is sometimes called Worbury. But the holy grail that everyone seeks is the identity of

Blandings Castle. Patshull, Weston, Dudmaston, Chillington and Apley have all been suggested and other country houses even farther afield.

One can assume that at least some of the local people had their fictional counterparts although if they gave rise to characters such as these it may be best not to look too far for their “real” origins.

- *“A melancholy-looking man, he had the appearance of someone who had searched for the leak in life's gas pipe with a lighted candle.”*
- *“She looked as if she had been poured into her clothes and forgotten to say when.”*
- *“Some minds are like soup in a poor restaurant, better unstirred.”*
- *“He had just enough intelligence to open his mouth when he wanted to eat, but certainly no more.”*

Sibell Corbet and P.G. Wodehouse were the same age, for six years lived in the same small village and moved in the same social circle. That is the reality. Whether Sibell was immortalised in any of the books I don't know. I only hope that if she is there, the author treated her kindly.

If you would like to write a piece about Worfield's history yourself or if you have any photographs, memories or anything else you would like to share contact me, Jane Smith on 01902 759997 or email janekirkland@hotmail.co.uk
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