

The Village Of Elstow

My four times great-grandfather, Joseph Prigmore, was born in 1779 in the village of Elstow, a village in Bedfordshire located about two miles south of Bedford. The village was little more than one street plus a few cottages positioned off the road. It is renowned for its connection with John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan was baptised on 28th November 1628 and he lived in Elstow for many years, in a cottage on the eastern border of the parish. After he married, he moved into a cottage on the north-west side of Elstow High Street. Sadly, the cottage was demolished in 1968. Following the birth of his first child Mary, and the death of his wife, John moved out of Elstow, to a cottage in St Cuthbert's Street, Bedford.

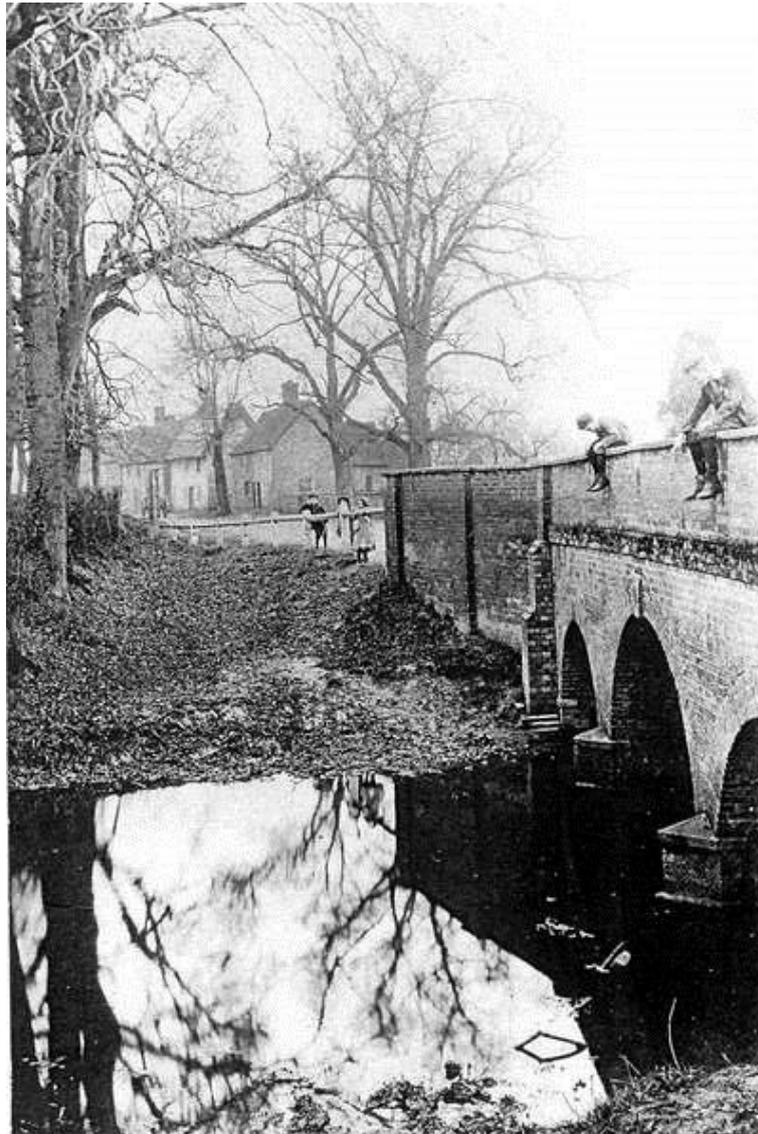


John Bunyan's cottage is the first house on the left.



The High Street looking towards Bedford, in the past and now (2019)





High Street looking north in 1905.

One of the things you would have had problems with if you had lived in Bedfordshire over 100 years ago was in understanding what people in the villages like Elstow said. Their Bedfordshire accent was very broad and a lot of words they used are no longer around today. One example is that go was pronounced “goo”. Words and sayings they used have also been forgotten. If someone were to use the word “larrup” this meant to eat greedily, “umper lodge” was to contradict or argue. A word I use and is one of the old Bedfordshire words is “whittler” which is to describe someone who was always complaining, I often say “stop whittling boy”

In most villages there was no running water and women had to go the village well or local spring to fetch water. There were obviously no bathrooms and many houses had privies in a shed at the bottom of the garden, equipped with a bucket, which was emptied once a week into a hole in the garden. This is something I remember as a child, when I stayed with my grandparents in Cranfield. There was a wooden plank

positioned above the bucket with a hole in it. Later in Cranfield, instead of emptying the contents of the bucket in the garden, the contents were taken away by the council once a week. The nickname for the collection vehicle was 'Honey Cart'. It was OK to go to the toilet at the beginning of the week, but not so good at the end of the week when it was fuller!!! There was no loo paper in those days, it was cut up newspaper, which was attached by a piece of string, or later we used a shiny waxy type of antiseptic paper called Izal.



Above - an outside privy/toilet.
My nan's privy was a lot cleaner than this one!! She would scrub the wooden seat with carbolic soap.
Top right – old newspapers.
Bottom right - Izal toilet paper.

The Post Office

Elstow post office has stood on the same site since around 1700. It was listed by English Heritage in May 1984 as Grade II - of special interest - and states that the property was built around 1700, is timber-framed with pebbledash render and a clay tiled roof with fish scales to the lower block. The main block has two storeys with a single storey block to the north, which house the post office. The door and window to the post office are 20th century.



The Post Office is on the left, in the past and now (2019).



In 1927 the property was assessed for the Rating and Valuation Act 1925 it describes it as a post office and the tenant was Walter John Southam who paid a rent of £8 12 shillings per annum. He was also, according the Kelly's Directory for 1928, a cabinet maker. The accommodation comprised of two living rooms, a scullery and two bedrooms as well as the post office. Outside stood a weather-boarded and tiled range of two barns measuring 16 feet 6 inches by 12 feet, one being used as a workshop.

The Southam family ran Elstow post office for around eighty years or more. They are first mentioned in a directory of 1862 when William Southam was the postmaster. William Southam junior, born 1831, was appointed sub-postmaster of Elstow in August 1871. His salary was £4 per annum and he was paid an additional £7 per annum for delivering the mail. On his death William was succeeded by Lily Lettitia Southam, probably his daughter born 1875. She was appointed on 26th August 1908. She resigned on 5th July 1911 having worked from 8 am to 8 pm six days a week and 8.30 am to 10 am on Sundays. She was succeeded by the Walter John Southam, born 1868. Kelly's Directory for 1936 is the last to list Walter John Southam as postmaster. The next Kelly's, the last for the county, is 1940 and in this Percy Walter Southam is listed as postmaster.

Lace Making

Lace has been made in Bedfordshire for hundreds of years. Lace-making was introduced in the 16th century by Flemish and Huguenot refugees, fleeing from religious persecution on the continent. It was also said that Catherine of Aragon, the Spanish first wife of King Henry VIII taught local people how to make lace while imprisoned at Ampthill Castle in 1551. In the 19th century it became a cottage industry. Mainly women and children made the lace at home and dealers would provide the designs and paid them by the yard.

Elstow was well known for lace-making and there was a lace school in a cottage on the High Street. Specialist lace schools were established from the 1790s onwards. The attendance charge in Elstow was 2d a week for girls. The average beginner could have been taken on at about 6-7 years of age. Work started at 6am in summer and 8am in the winter. They worked long hours, 10 to 12 hours a day.

A given quantity was set to be finished in the day and when that was done, they could leave the school. They soon began working for themselves and by about age 15, they began to work at home, in which they took great pride.

The 1833 Factories Act brought about the decline of the Lace Schools and the 1870 Education Act their eventual closure.

Bedfordshire lace was made on a lace pillow using thread, bobbins and brass pins. A “flash” or “flask” stool focused candlelight onto the work, in what were often dingy conditions inside rural cottages. A three or four-legged frame, called a pillow horse, was used to hold the lace pillow. Bending over these lace pillows caused many women and young girls to damage their spines and ruin their eyesight. Many worked for 16 hours a day.



Left – a flash or flask stool.
Above – lace pattern with pins and thread.



Fire-pots, or chad-pots, were used to keep the workers warm. They were made from earthenware, pierced with holes and filled with hot wood ash or glowing charcoal.

The women placed them near their feet, often tucking them beneath the voluminous skirts that were worn at this time. The women could not sit near fires, because the smoke would dirty the expensive lace thread.

'These pictures below are of Mrs Ann Cooper, nee Prigmore (my great, great grandmother). She is not using a pillow horse to hold the lace pillow, but an Oxford carver chair. She made Lace of exquisite beauty and won several prizes at Exhibitions of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire Lace Associations. She died in March 1909, aged 81 years. In the last years of her life, she lived in a small cottage overlooking the Moot Hall on The Green. Unfortunately, these cottages no longer exist.



A photo taken of Ann Cooper.



The photo was made into a postcard and colour added by painting.



The picture above shows Ann Cooper's cottage, second from the right. I wonder if that is her standing outside talking to another lady.



This photo was taken about 1906 and has six members of the Cooper family in it. From the left – Mrs Carol, Mrs Cirket, Miss Norris, Ruby Cooper b 1902, Jane Smith, Maggie (Margaret) Cooper b 1903, Norah Cooper b 1899, Vic Cooper b 1907, Mrs Rosina Cooper b 1871, Mrs Clarke, Mrs Berwick and Mrs White



Left to right – Margaret Cooper b. Rosina Cooper (wife of Joseph Cooper), Ruby Cooper, Norah Cooper and Mrs Cooper b. 1828 (mother of Joseph Cooper)

These women and girls are part of my family and they lived at what is now Acacia Cottage, Wilstead Road, Elstow. On 28th April 1911, the above photograph was published in The Bedfordshire Mercury newspaper, with the image of Mrs Cooper added in to complete the family.



Ruby, Norah and Margaret Cooper a little older lace making.

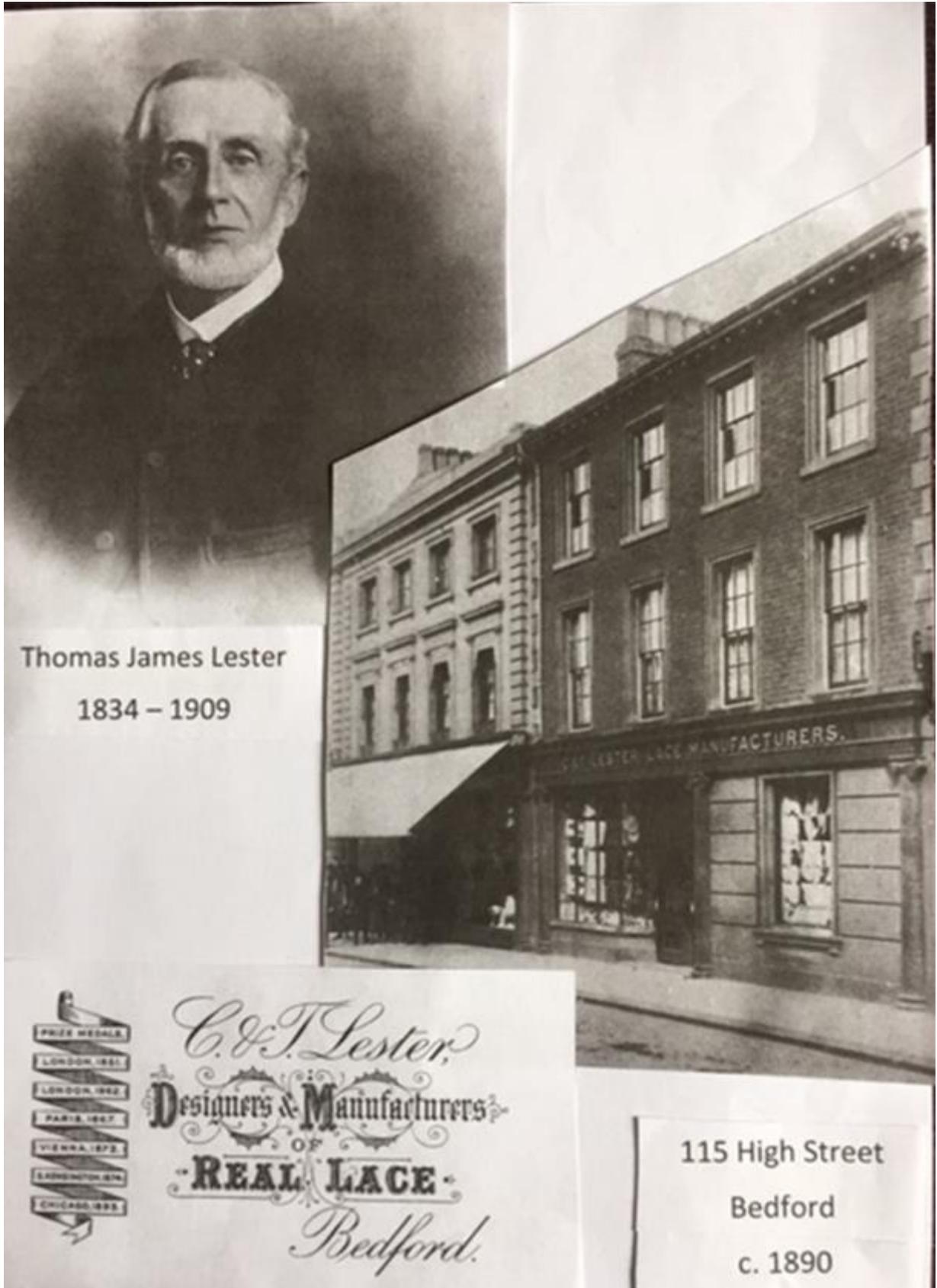
In 1815 there were 150,000 lace makers across Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. By 1891, this had fallen to 3,376.

The dealers that supplied the patterns or “pricklings” would collect the finished lace on “cut off” day, when it would be paid for by the yard. When cheap machine-made lace became available the industry declined. As hand-made sales began to decline, prices and wages fell, so lace-makers had to work longer hours, which often led to great hardship. Although a new style of Bedfordshire Maltese lace was developed to compete, by the end of the century commercial handmade lace had almost disappeared.



On the left is a pattern that came from Thomas James Lester (lace manufacturer) which is made of velum. On the right is the lace actually made from this pattern which was made by Mrs Sandra King, a present-day resident and member of the Lace Guild and Aragon Lace makers. Mrs King purchased the pattern from a descendant of Rosina Cooper along with Vic Cooper’s horse and bobbin winder. Pictures of these are below.





Thomas James Lester
1834 – 1909

LESTER LACE MANUFACTURERS.

115 High Street
Bedford
c. 1890

- PRIZE MEDALS
- LONDON 1861
- LONDON 1862
- PARIS 1867
- VIENNA 1872
- LONDON 1873
- CHICAGO 1893

C. & T. Lester,
Designers & Manufacturers
OF
REAL LACE
Bedford.

This is the dealer Rosina Cooper would have sold some of her lace to.

The Blacksmith, Inns and Public Houses

The blacksmith in Elstow would have been kept busy, as horse drawn coaches which travelled through the village would stop for a rest at the coaching inns.

Elstow used to have seven inns and public houses, but only The Red Lion, which dates from about 1790, remains. As you can see below, the building to the right of the Red Lion has been demolished, but you can still see the outbuildings belonging to the Red Lion. The names of the inns and public houses were, The Katherine Wheel Inn, The Chequer Inn, The Red Lion Public House, The Saracens Head Inn, The Sugar Loaf Inn, The Swan Public House and The Cock Inn.



The Red Lion

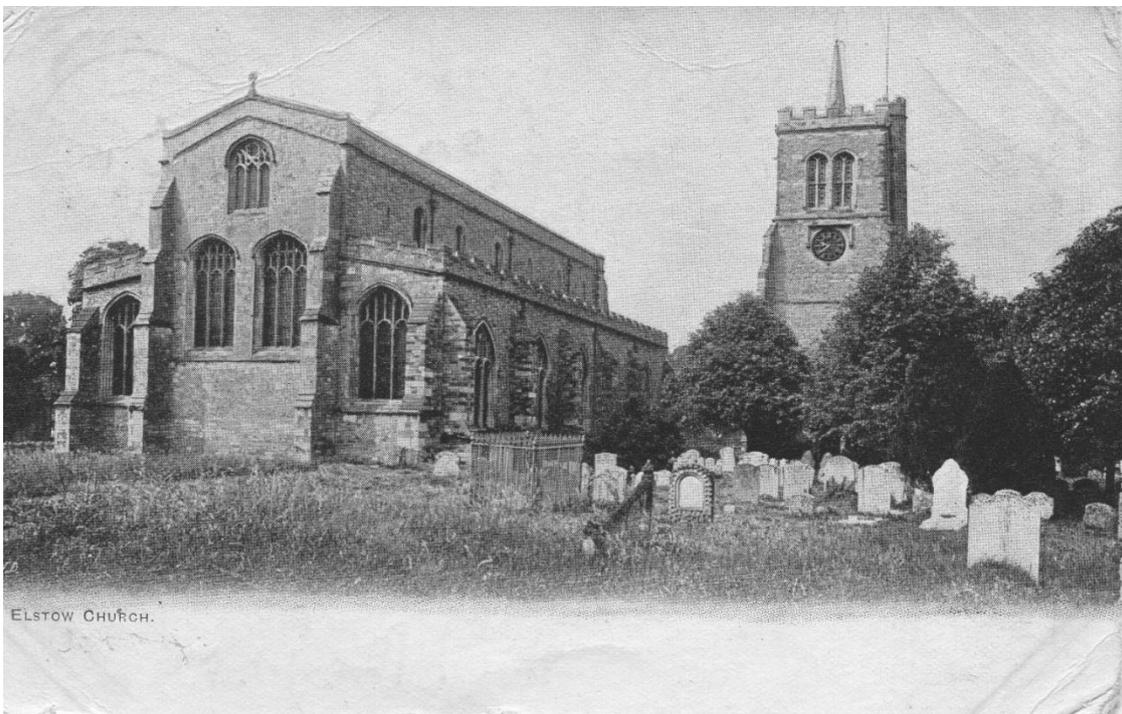


The Swan Inn

The Abbey Church

The Abbey Church of St Mary and St Helena was originally part of a Benedictine Abbey. This was founded in 1078 by Countess Judith, the niece of William the Conqueror. The Elstow nuns came from wealthy families and some came with a dowry of money and/or lands.

Elstow is an ancient parish in the Redbornstoke Hundred. It was first recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. Twenty-nine people are recorded in the Domesday book, but to get a true idea of the population one needs to multiply this figure by at least four to account for all the dependents of those 29 men, giving a total of around 120 people.

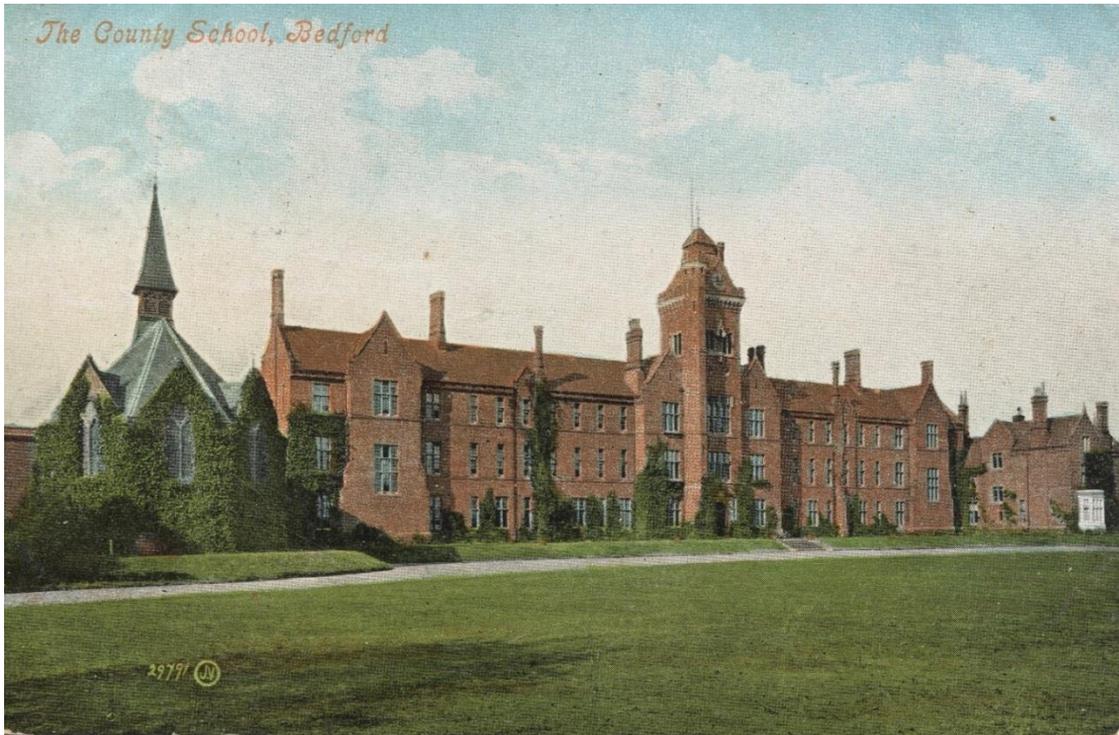


This photo was taken around 1910.

In 1580 the Abbey was partially destroyed but part of the Norman nave survived and thus the Abbey Church became the Church to serve the village of Elstow. The Church was extensively restored in 1880. There are stained glass windows in memory of John Bunyan depicting scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*. The perpendicular font, at which John Bunyan was baptized in 1638, dates from around the 13th century. The detached bell tower is of the same century.

On the church wall above the vestry door is a memorial in marble from the old Elstow County School (previously known as the Bedford County School) which was given to the Church in 1922. This commemorates the former scholars who died in the Great War. Bedford County School, which opened in 1869, was a middle class public school

and had pupils aged from nine to eighteen. The school was situated on Ampthill Road and in 1907 became known as Elstow County School, although it was actually sited in Kempston. The school closed in 1916 when it was requisitioned as a Military College. It was eventually sold to Cosmic Crayon Company in 1920. My grandfather, Lewis Henry Cooper b 1893, was working as a stoker for the Cosmic Crayon Company when my father, Robert Lewis Cooper was born in 1926. The address given as the birthplace of my father was The Bungalow, Cosmic Works, Kempston.



Bedford County School, later known as Elstow County School. Demolished in 1964.



The Robinson Rentals building replaced the County school.
The above photo of the building was taken in 2019.

The Green

Elstow Green was originally part of the Benedictine Abbey garden. Markets and fairs were held regularly on the Green, although they declined in the 19th century. Cattle fairs continued until 1900, when a local auctioneer named Mr Peacock opened a cattle market on the north bank of the river Great Ouse – opposite the site of the present day Borough Hall.



THE VILLAGE GREEN.

"Ring a ring of roses, a pocketful of posies."

The photo below shows smoke coming from the chimney of my Great, Great Grandma Cooper's cottage. I wonder if she was cooking or just trying to keep warm?





ELSTOW GREEN.

The Moot Hall



The photo of the Moot Hall was taken 2019.

The Moot Hall (the medieval term for a meeting place) is timber-framed with brick infill and a tile roof. It and dates back to the 15th century and, until the late 1800s was known as the Green House. The abbesses of Elstow held the title of lord of the manor and acted as local administrators and magistrates, so needed a courtroom, which was located in the main upper room.

From 1800, Moot Hall became the meeting place for the Elstow congregation of the Bunyan Meeting church. This congregation was usually a larger one than in the nearby Abbey church. Throughout the 19th century, Moot Hall was also used as a National and a Night school and providing schooling for children until 1873 when, anticipating the 1880 elementary Education Act, a purpose built school was constructed at the northern end of Elstow High Street. A Sunday school continued in Moot Hall until 1910, when the Bunyan congregation moved to a purpose-built chapel in the High Street. The Moot Hall was restored and refurbished in 1951 and is now a museum of 17th century life and traditions associated with the life of John Bunyan.

During the 1790s, the Whitbread family purchase most of Elstow manor from the Hillersden family. The 1800 enclosure Act allotted Elstow Green to Whitbread and,

with it, the ancient right to hold fairs and exact tolls and rents to stallholders. Whitbread subsequently purchased further properties in Elstow, until he owned most of the village. If you walk around the High Street, Wilstead Road or West End, you will notice that some properties have numbers which neither represent the present day postal numbers, nor are they in numerical order. If number 200 was in the High Street, and number 201 in West End, this would be because the West End property was the next property that was purchased and therefore given the next consecutive number.

The population in 1801 was 475 people and a hundred years later it was only 479! When new homes were built in 2001 (what is now called "Abbeyfields") the population rose to 2124.

Schooling

In 1802 James Lilburne provided a report to Samuel Whitbread (Lord of the Manor) about a number of Bedfordshire schools, including Elstow. He states that “Buckle’s Sunday School consists of between 25 and 30 boys are taught to Read and is pretty well attended. Prigmore’s Sunday School (wonder if this is one of my ancestors?) consist of between 25 and 30 girls who are taught to read and is pretty well attended. Both of above Schools are generally well attended and there being no other school in the village, are of service”. (These two schools are probably the ones held in Moot Hall during the daytime on Sundays.)

Elstow School stands at the northern end of the High Street. It is believed that the Whitbreads gave the land for the school which opened in September 1874. There was an attached head teacher’s house. On top of the school building is a small bell tower, which used to hold a bell which was rung to signal the start of the school day.

In the early years, the scholars’ attendance at the school was not always good as many children stayed away at certain times of the year, to assist with haymaking, potato picking or other seasonal employment. Many girls were kept away to do lace making in order to earn a few pence towards the support of the family.

Elstow Village School as it looked in 2019 with the village’s War Memorial in front of the building.



The children were allowed a day off from school for the Fairs, held in the village in May and November and a half day, or early finish, for the May Festival on the Green.

Below are some extracts from Elstow School's weekly diary, which include the names of my grandfather, Louis (Lewis) Cooper and his sister, Ethel Cooper.

The teacher had made a number of errors, but I have not amended any of them. Where I have been unable to decipher words I have marked with an asterisk. The classes are numbered and graded. Std V is Standard 5 and another example is 1st Class.

5th – 9th January 1899

Owing to the continued prevalence of measles the attendance is still low. Miss Hollands returned to duty on Monday. Std VI have finished the examples in mensuration and working at problems. Std V have made good progress in Arithmetic, but **Ethel Cooper** is very backward. The 1st Class have done France, Holland and Belgium, Std III Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Staffs, and Std I & II have had lessons on Cardinal Points, Direction, The Plough **. The 1st Class have made good progress in Analytics and Parsing. T James gave a lesson to Std III on ****. A new part – song "When the evening skies are darkling" has been commenced by the upper div**. Composition exercises have been given to the 1st Class on George Stephenson, the Suez Canal, and the French, and Std II have had an easy story for composition The Scripture lessons have been from I Samuel Ch I-IV and St Matt Ch VIII. The 'Recreative' Drawing Books were used on Friday afternoon in Std III-VI. The drawing of Std II was on loose papers and taken home. The P** have done good work in study and teaching. Miss Bishop has taken over Std I from E M Hollands who will now take Std II. Miss Dazeley deserves credit for her careful teaching of the Infants. Bank – 6/3.

12th – 16th February 1900

Owing to the very rough weather the attendance has been very low. On Monday Mr Prole (Vice-Chairman) distributed the prizes to the following scholars. Std VII Violet Harper Std VI Milly James, Annie Caves, Bert Hall, W Earl, H Robinson (*) Ed White and H Robinson (E). Std V Many Mason, Daisy Steele, Ada Handscomb, Charles Smith, Wm Clarke. Std IV May Looker, Edith Bushby, Amy Bartram, Ben Prole, George Blain, Cecil Pestell. Std III Amy Smith, **** Wells, Hedley Draper, E Smith, J Oxenham. Std II Annie Lilley, Rose Bushby, Bert Harper, A Bavington, ~~P Newbury~~ Horace Martin. Std I & Infants H**y Fox, Amy Fox, Gertie Goddard, Rita Mason, Elsie Bowler, Lizzie Bowler, Lily Whitehouse, ***** Birket, Horace Cooper, P Newbury, Stanley Blain, **Louis Cooper**. Miss Hollands was absent on Monday and Friday owing to the rough weather. Mr Fishwick visited the school on Friday morning, giving his attention principally to the Infants Class whose teacher he thought would get on with them nicely with a little more experience. He was also interested in the Honours List of 1st quarterly Examination. The girls took Drawing with the Boys on Wednesday afternoon and some of them did very creditable work. Savings Bank – 6/10.

Vickie Looker (Std VII) and Alice Osborne (VI) received special prizes for sewing from Mrs James.



The photograph above shows a school class at Elstow about 1900.

Top row (L to R): William Breed; unknown; unknown; Ethel Daisley, the teacher; Elsie Wells; unknown; unknown. Middle row: unknown; Lily Whitehouse; Leslie Pestell; Ernest Dickens; Winnie Horney; unknown. Bottom row: Ella Harding; Gladys Keep; Gertie James; Maude Cirket; unknown.

I wonder if one of the unknowns is a Cooper!

Children's Diseases

Families in the past were much larger than today and the death rate among the children was very high. The chief killers were scarlet fever, measles and typhus. Another disease that was high was tuberculosis, or consumption as it was then called. It didn't help that the families were under-nourished and had bad living conditions. Tuberculosis affected all classes of people because it was highly infectious.

In 1887 scarlet fever broke out in the village and three children from the infants' class died. The headmaster's daughter had died the year previously, from suspected whooping cough. Around the same time, there were outbreaks of typhoid, diphtheria and chicken pox in neighbouring villages.

Agricultural Workers

The principal crops grown around Elstow were wheat and barley. At harvest time the children were kept away from school to help in the fields, which helped to bring in much need income to the families. This is why then, and even now, the children have six to seven weeks off in the summer (although obviously they don't help with the harvest now). Many men working out in the fields would have a Bedfordshire Clanger for their dinner. They were suet puddings with a suet partition to enable one half to be filled with meat for the first course and the other half filled with jam for the sweet course.



The Bedfordshire Clanger is still made today by Gunn's bakery in Sandy, Bedfordshire.

On the farms the men worked from dawn to dusk and young boys, some as young as eight, worked part-time - leading the plough horse or taking care of the sheep in the fields. Farmers often employed casual labourers for jobs such as threshing, hoeing and scything. There were also craftsmen that did a regular round of the farms doing hedging, ditching, thatching and hay-tying.

Most cottagers kept pigs and poultry. Again, I remember my grandmother in Cranfield peeling vegetables whilst sitting on a stool just outside her back door chatting to the other ladies in the row of cottages. When she had finished, I would feed the vegetable scraps to the pigs. I was very upset one day when I went to see the pigs as they had been taken away to be slaughtered. Every part of the pig, except the squeak, was eaten, nothing went to waste.



The photo above taken around 1930s, the one below taken June 2019.



The cottages in Elstow High Street, shown on the previous page, are now called "Bunyan's Mead". The earliest – No.1 dates back to the late 13th century. Until 1974,

they were pebble-dashed but, after the Whitbread estate sold the cottages to the Bedford Borough Council for one pound, they were restored to the original black and white. At the same time, they were converted into flats and maisonettes for the elderly, with a daytime centre and resident warden's flat, and all had a built-in alarm system. Whilst work was being carried out on the cottages many features were uncovered –such as wood panelling and fireplaces. Two Coats of Arms were found over two fireplaces, one being that of William Parker, whose wife was sister of one of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators.



Looking towards Elstow from Bedford, in the past and now (2019)



The 1925 Rating and Valuation Act required that every building and piece of land in the country be assessed to determine its rateable value. Elstow was assessed in 1927 and at this time all the properties were owned by the Lord of the Manor, Samuel Howard Whitbread.



20 Bunyan's Mead -once home of Charles Cooper and family, my great grandfather.

My great grandfather, Charles Cooper born 1860, was recorded as living at what is now 20 Bunyan's Mead. He paid £3 17 shillings per half a year. The property had two living rooms, a kitchen, three bedrooms (large back) and a barn.

My great uncle Edward Cooper, born 1884, lived at 28 Bunyan's Mead. He paid £20 per annum. His accommodation comprised of two living rooms, a kitchen, three bedrooms, a brick and tiled workshop and garage, with a loft over measuring 17 feet by 35 feet. There was also a timber and tiled barn measuring 31 feet by 24 feet, an army hut measuring 15 feet by 28 feet, a small shed and a lean-to. The valuer for the Rating and Valuation Act commented on the property "outbuildings very dilapidated" also "very rough buildings" and "poor lot".

This property was listed in May 1984 as Grade II and of special interest. This means no alterations can be carried out without permission from the local council. The property bears a circular plaque saying "S.W.1796". This indicates that Samuel Whitbread, Lord of the Manor, purchased and carried out work to the cottage in that year and re-fronted the earlier building. The cottage is built in a T-shape and is constructed from colour-washed rough cast over a timber frame and has a clay tiled roof.



28 Bunyan's Mead home of our great uncle, Edward Cooper.

This house is the last detached house, before the bridge crosses the Elstow Brook. At one time this was the blacksmith's cottage and forge. He would, no doubt, have been kept busy with all the horse drawn carriages that travelled through the village. In 1925, my great uncle, Edward James Cooper, took over the blacksmith's shop and turned it into a garage. From there, he operated "Ideal Buses", which ran a service from Queen's Park, Bedford to Southend and, later, to many coastal resorts.

Another ancestor living in Elstow and recorded in 1927 for the Rating and Valuation Act is Joseph Cooper. Joseph was a brother to my great grandfather so is my great, great uncle. He was recorded as living at 202 Wilstead Road, which is a semi-detached

property, being joined to 203 Wilstead Road. His rent was £7 1 shilling per annum for a living room, a kitchen, two bedrooms and a barn. The valuer commented “sloping roof” which I would image meant it the roof needed shoring up.



Above -202 and 203 Wilstead Road
(now Acacia Cottage).
Left - Looking down towards the cottage.

These two properties became one, and as a result is now called Acacia Cottage. When it was listed in May 1989, it was classed as Grade II, of special interest. It was dated to the 17th century, with 18th and 19th century additional and alterations. It is of timber-framed construction, with colour-washed roughcast render under a clay tiled roof. The northern block is one storey and attics, whilst the southern block has two storeys. A single storey block was added to the north gable end in the 18th century and there is a two-storey block projected from the rear of the southern block.

This is the cottage depicted in the photographs of the Coopers making lace. It looks like those photographs have been taken outside the front door of what was 202 Wilstead Road. I wonder if Ann Cooper, my great grandmother was living with her son Joseph, wife Rosina and children before she moved to the small cottage on the Green?

Rosina was a widow and was living alone in 202 Wilstead Road when she died on 29th April 1940.



The above photo is of 'a gentleman of the road', photographed in the 1930s. His name was William Cunningham, but he was known as "Old Henry". He was a familiar sight in north Bedfordshire for more than twenty-five years. For years, he lived in a chicken house at Stagsden before moving to a hut in Elstow. He worked around the village, helping with threshing and gardening for various farmers. It is believed that he bathed in the brook and fed on rabbits and pigeons etc. and that he preferred strong tea to a beer. Old Henry was found in a state of collapse by the roadside in January 1957 and died in hospital soon afterwards. I wonder how many of our great uncles and aunts knew him?

Acknowledgements

A special thank you goes to Sandra King for helping me to understand a little about lace making and information about my family from Elstow. She also very kindly gave me a postcard of my Great Grandmother lacemaking, as seen on page 8.

My research came from the following sources:

Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service

Higgins Museum Bedford

Cowper and Newton Museum

Scaunchings from Beneath the Dottle Tree by Dick Dawson

Portrait of Elstow by Muriel M Hart