

LOOKING BACK

BR defends its electric trains

>> FROM THE NEWS, 1987
Commuters are suffering from a culture shock, say British Rail chiefs who have set out to defend their newly-electrified service between Cambridge and London. Since trial runs began in January, complaints have poured in. The electric trains have disappointed many passengers who are used to a spacious inter-city style service. They say the new carriages are cramped with little luggage space, small seats and no tables. Yet BR is faced with a surge in passengers and can only cope in this way, even if it means making the quality of the ride slightly less comfortable.

Ironmongers in new hands

>> FROM THE NEWS, 1962
Messrs Macintosh & Sons of Market Hill, Cambridge, one of the oldest ironmongery firms in the country, has been sold to an unknown purchaser. The firm's earliest records date back to 1688 when the business was sold to the Finch family, who kept it going for 200 years before it was taken over by William Macintosh, who'd been in business in Sidney Street. A major redevelopment scheme is proposed for the site after their retail premises close in September. The wholesale, agricultural and workshop departments will continue to trade in Mill Road.

Triumph for car company

>> FROM THE NEWS, 1937
The Cambridge Light Car Company opened premises in Hills Road about six years ago as used car showrooms. The business rapidly grew and within two years it found it necessary to take larger garage premises in Norwich Street for car storage and repairs. They were appointed distributors for the now famous high-class Triumph cars that have come rapidly to the fore during the last four seasons.

Cycle club's bright future

>> FROM THE NEWS, 1912
Belmont Cycle and Motor Club is flourishing, with an increased membership. It will continue to support amalgamation of other clubs to promote the social side of cycling and arrange club fixture cards to fit in with amalgamated club runs for the coming season. This would foster a friendly feeling.



SUNDAY BEST: Upware Chapel in the 1930s, a focus of community life

Tough times in the black fens

Memories

By MIKE PETTY



RICHARD Housden has been researching the story of the Housden family, who have been spread throughout Cambridgeshire. He can claim ancestors back to the 16th century in Great Chesterford, Hinxton and Ickleton.

But his more immediate roots were based in the black fens around Wicken, where the Housdens were part of a close, lively community centred on the little Wesleyan Methodist Chapel at River Bank near Upware. His father and his brother and sister were all baptised in the chapel which each year opens its doors for harvest services.

Life in the fen was hard following the First World War. Drainage rates and taxes were high, yields were declining, the market for agricultural produce was depressed and poverty was no stranger to farmers. Nature began to take back land which had been drained and cultivated in the previous 100 years. Horace, Richard's grandfather, lost his farm after several years of flooding and became a labourer at The Willows, a farm on the edge of the Fordham Fen.

His father and mother met on a blind date in Burwell. They had been courting for some time, going out together on an



FIND: Richard at a cottage at Wicken Fen, where he discovered an old book that belonged to his family

old motorcycle, when late one evening, miles from home, it broke down. It was impossible to repair before morning so the night was spent under the shelter of a straw stack. The next day when they arrived home in Fordham, they were greeted with: "Where have you been all night? You'll have to marry her now!" Their protests of innocence fell on deaf ears but they were happy to oblige. They wed in Burwell Church on Christmas Day 1930.

Richard was born the following November at The Willows, where his parents lived in one of the farm cottages. They soon moved to Martin Road in Burwell, where council houses had been built for agricultural workers. Everyone in Martin Road was poor but families were

self-sufficient and helped each other. "We had large gardens which were well cultivated – it was rare to have to buy vegetables. Most families kept chickens and a few kept a pig at the bottom of the garden. Nothing was wasted," Richard recalls.

"There was no piped water until 1936; our water was pumped from a well in the street. In very dry summers when the well ran dry, we had to fetch water in buckets from another well half a mile away, and one summer, when even that well was dry, we went further to fetch water from Hythe Lane on the very edge of the fen.

"In the winter evenings, oil lamps lit our homes and when we went to bed we took a candle with us. Electricity came to our part of Burwell in the early 1940s but many did not want it; they could not afford another sixpence per week in rent to pay for it. But my mother missed the conveniences of town life and ours was one of the first houses in Martin Road to have the luxury of electricity."

In the early days, Richard's father had a job at the Ness Farm. However, this was not to last. By the time a baby sister was born in 1936, his dad was a sick man. He spent two years, first in Addenbrooke's and then at the



EYES FRONT: Soham Grammar School, c.1947/8
back: David Leonard, Barry Cook, Chris Lythell, Tony Langford, Leonard Creak, Michael Bush; row 5: Arthur Badcock, John (Michael) Watson, Fluff Robinson, MP Nicholls, PD Gipp; row 4: A Hall, Gordon Prior, Jeff Neale, Dennis Plumb, Maurice Norman; row 3: Brian Pullen, John Hill, Barry Morris, Brian Easy, Bernie Nicholas; row 2: Lionel Fleet, Richard Housden, John Neville, Derek Barker, Tony Appleyard; front: Brian Lane, Roger Palmer, ?, Norman Rains.

Papworth Settlement, before dying of tuberculosis in 1939, leaving his 25-year-old widow with three young children.

His mum worked on a milk round and took in sewing to supplement her income. Often she stitched into the early hours of the morning, making clothes for them and neighbours' children. But 18 shillings a week was not enough to pay the rent and feed the family. When war broke out later that year it made the situation easier. With the men at war, work was available in a brick factory.

But it involved eight-hour shifts, 6-2 and 2-10. Richard remembers: "We became 'home alone' children – there was no choice. I was 8 years old and in charge – at least, I thought I was in charge! There were friendly neighbours who kept a watchful eye over us."

Richard went to Soham Grammar School where he won a prize for general proficiency. This proved a problem: "I did not have shoes good enough to go on to the stage for the presentation. After I had gone to bed on the eve of the school speech day, one of the neighbours repaired my old shoes, so I could receive the prize the next day."

From there he gained a place at Selwyn College, Cambridge, where he graduated in mathematics and later he went back to Soham, as a mathematics teacher – perhaps you remember him?

Later he taught computing at the Open University and was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor at a ceremony in Ely Cathedral in 1998. This time he did have some good shoes to wear!

Now Richard, who lives in Aspley Guise, near Woburn, has published his research into the Housden family history in a 200-page book supplemented by a CD of extra material.

But there is still more to discover. If you can help, email Richard at rjwjmh@yahoo.co.uk or drop me a line and I'll put you in touch

A Journey Through Family History by Richard J W Housden is published by the Norwich Living History Group for £10 – ISBN 978-0-9563255-3-2.



TREAT: An ice cream man in Burwell – but the family had little money for such luxuries

online
Visit Mike's website at www.cambridgeshirehistory.com/ MikePetty for free advice on researching Cambridgeshire and the Fens.
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