

## An interview with Bob Farren

### Introduction

In this featured article, we interview Bob Farren who was born in the village in 1926 and who has been based here all of his life. He has a fascinating view of how things have changed over the years both on a personal level and from a general perspective.

A map of the village with locations named in the text is included at the end of this feature.



### When did your family move to Cowfold and what are your earliest recollections?

The first member of my family, my paternal grandfather, moved to Cowfold around 1888; that was James Farren and when he first came to the village he worked as a journeyman blacksmith at the forge that was sited where the Lychgate is now and eventually set up on his own around 1892.



My grandfather married Olive King in 1891, who was at that time at Eastlands Farm, run by one of my great grandfathers, Stephen King. He moved out of the farm and up to Barns Green around that time after he objected to one of his best fields being taken over by the sewage works, leaving grandfather and grandmother in Cowfold. My father was born in December 1894 (he was an only child) in, I think, one of the Elm Grove cottages in Station Road. After a while, around about the turn of the century, they moved down into Sussex House.

In around 1902, George Knight, the baker, moved down with his family and were in the bakery in Bolney Road. Father was very friendly with two of the sons and that is when my father first met my mother. In about 1908, the Knight family moved to Worthing, opposite Broadwater Church, because the premises at Bolney Road were too small (the two daughters slept out in a rented bedroom). By that time, my father had acquired a motorbike to go down to Worthing to see the boys and, of course, my mother as well.

The First World War came along and my father joined the army in 1916 and went into the Army Service Corps as an engine fitter. They were posted overseas to Gallipoli/the Dardanelles but disembarked at Thessaloniki and he spent the rest of the war working with the Serbian Army. He was demobbed in 1919 and came back to the village to work with his father and gradually they developed a motor business. In the end of the shop at Sussex House, semi-permanently sealed up now, there is a pair of double doors next to the Lychgate and inside there was an inspection pit for cars. He married my mother in 1922.

In about 1926/27, my father and grandfather were able to acquire White Lined House on the east side of the A281 and put in some petrol pumps on the roadside and a workshop on spare ground at the back. My parents always lived in Sussex House and my grandparents moved over to White Lined House. I was born in 1926 and grew up in Sussex House. I have one sister who is a year and ten months older than I am.

I vaguely remember the Lychgate being built and have a vague recollection of what is now Margaret Cottages being rebuilt from the old parish workhouse (alms houses) using old style wooden scaffolding tied together with rope.

## **What was life like in the village when you were a youngster?**

### **St Peter's School**

I went to the local school, St Peter's, which was on the same site as the current school and took children from 5 up to 14. The headmaster was the renowned Reginald H P Quick who was a strict disciplinarian. I would say there were around about one hundred students with some of them brought in from Shermanbury. They travelled to school in a closed-top lorry with forms down either side. I can remember as a Scout being taken in that lorry down to Chichester to a big St George's Day parade. I would have gone to school in 1931 and was there until I was 12 and then I went on to Collyers in Horsham.

### **Other activities**

I was very friendly with a farmer's son down at Crateman's Farm and used to spend quite a lot of spare time down there. We enjoyed messing about in the stream and then we progressed to air guns and eventually progressed to shotguns. I was using a 12 bore at 14; the first thing I shot, I was walking along with my friend along the stream and there was a rustle in the reeds at the side of the stream and up came a duck and my friend said 'shoot it'. That was the first thing I shot with my 12 bore. Harvest time was always using the old reaper binder going round the fields in ever decreasing circles until there was only a bit left in the middle when the wildlife would rush out. I remember I shot a fox on one of those occasions. I didn't get terribly involved in the motor business but started playing about with wireless when I was about 12 or 13 and eventually made myself a one-valve wireless. My father was also always interested in wireless as he had a mechanical mind. I didn't ever go on holiday with Mother and Father but we used to go down to Worthing to my grandparents for a seaside holiday in the summer.

### **Church**

We all went to church and I was confirmed in December 1939. The vicar then was Reverend Sandberg. I wasn't at the first service that he ran but I remember one of his sermons at Mattins where he commented on how he had been told that "Sussex will be Sussex and Sussex wunt be druv" (taken from a poem written by W Victor Cook in 1914). There was a certain amount of pressure for me to become a choirboy but I resisted and wouldn't be "druv"!

### **Transport links**

I attended Collyers School in Horsham and travelled there by bus. Of course, they were all double-deckers then. In the post war years, the number was changed several times but it has been No.17 for some long time now. In those days the return fare Cowfold to Horsham was one shilling and four pence (almost 7p in today's currency).

The trains ran up until Dr Beeching axed the line in 1965. When my mother took my sister and me down to Worthing we would nearly always go to West Grinstead and change at Shoreham. We didn't go up to London very often - they were real foreign parts. Mind you, Henfield was foreign parts then too!

My Father had to contend with dusty roads when he was travelling by car and motorcycle as a young man but gradually they started using tarmac. I remember the lanes were not black tarmac but were light shingle with tar. It was always stuck down but they are all tarmacked now.

### The Village

Cowfold was much smaller then. The newest houses in the village were the eight pre-war council houses along Station Road. There were just two new bungalows built along the Bolney Road. There were many more workers on the farms and they would all come in to do their shopping. People would only go to Horsham as a special outing. So, there were plenty of shops in the village.

There were two general stores: William Sprinks since 1887 (where the Co-op is now) and Peacocks, which was adjoining what was the Coach House pub, in the house called Jersey Cottage. They both sold everything and anything: groceries, hardware, some clothing, haberdashery, patent medicines, fruit and veg, wines, spirits and beer and even furniture. As well as the general stores, there were two bakers in the village. There were also two butchers: Sendells on the east side of the A281 and Goatchers on the west side. Along Station Road (in what is now the gent's hairdressers,) there was also the Post Office, which sold a lot of china and, because the owner, Mr Humphrey, was originally a boot maker, they sold boots and shoes too. When I was a boy I remember there was a manual telephone exchange operated by one of his daughters in a small room off to the left. The telephone number for Sussex House was 44 and I think Fowlers was something like 14. Then, in 1938, possibly the end of 1937, they installed the automatic exchange which was one of the first village exchanges to be put in. From then, our number was 244.

Ours was the only petrol station in the village until the 30's, when Fowlers built Bridge Garage. When it first started, they sold Regent petrol whereas we had a selection, always two grades of Shell, National Benzole and Power Petroleum (which was the cheaper petrol); another one was Cleveland Discol. We had a charging plant at the garage and people would come in once a week to change their (2V) accumulators at sixpence a time. The shop at Sussex House was selling wireless batteries and torch batteries, etc, and, after 1935, electric light bulbs.



Until a few years after the Second World War, the Hare & Hounds was just a beer house. It was a small room and had beer barrels in the cellar; the beer was drawn straight from the barrel. There was a long extension at the front where they used to have a dartboard. The first time I had any beer there, I was about 15. I had been down helping with the haymaking and everybody retired to the Hare & Hounds. In those days, the local copper knew exactly what to turn a blind eye to. He lived in the Police House in Henfield Road, which was built about 1938. There was another pub in Cowfold

Parish when the boundary was a bit further north up Crabtree Hill called the Jolly Farmer; this was also just a beer house.

### **How about your time in the Royal Air Force?**

I was a member of the Air Training Corps (ATC) at Collyers and signed on for the RAF in January 1944. I applied for, and got, six months deferment so finally joined up in July 1944 and, after lots of square-bashing and training on radio and radar equipment, I was posted to the Far East for approximately two years and spent time on operational bases in Java, Hong Kong and Rangoon. My trade in the RAF was officially "Leading Aircraftman Air Radar Mechanic" (later upgraded to "Fitter") and, when I left in 1948, my pay was £2. 8s a week (which included a "hard living allowance").

### **What happened after the War?**

When I came back in 1948, I decided not to stay in the RAF but, as I knew all the ins and outs of the circuitry, I thought I would have a go at television and that was the start of a small radio and television business from Sussex House. I gradually developed it into television rentals for a good 25 years; this was a profitable business as the big worry always was the tube.

The garage business was still going and it was about the early 70's when my father wanted to give up and, by that time, the television and electrical appliance business was getting very cutthroat. My father wanted to finish so I eventually took over the garage and gave up the TV business but kept the shop going for some time. I sold off the TV rentals business and eventually moved all the electrical stuff, etc. from the shop over to the garage.

### **Can you tell us a little about your family?**

I first met my wife on the bus going to school in Horsham. It was very strange; for a short time after Margaret left school, she worked for Marjory Baker, the photographer in Henfield, who had a showcase on the wall of the shop of Sussex House and, every two weeks, Margaret used to cycle up from Henfield to change the photographs and that is when my mother first met my wife. After I got home, there were two or three of us in the village that used to go around various dances; there was always one in the Assembly Rooms at Henfield. I went in there looking round, we used to say, surveying the talent. I saw this fair haired girl sitting on the opposite side of the room and thought "I know her". I decided to go and ask her for a dance and we got on quite well. We were doing the Statue Waltz and won it and, after that, she would say to people: "I don't know how he ever won that Statue Waltz dance, because he was drunk". I wasn't drunk but I had had two or three beers.....

We were married in October 1951 and bought Wilcocks Cottage in Kent Street. It needed lots of work doing to it and Margaret said she would not move in until it had a bathroom. We were there up until 1960 when we had our present bungalow in St Peter's Close built. These plots of land were up for sale for £500 and I remember Margaret and I sitting at the table in the cottage trying to work out how much we would get for it and if we could afford to build the bungalow. We had two children: Rosemary, who was born at the cottage and Anthony, who was born in Henfield. I have just two grandsons.

We decided to give up the garage business and closed the forecourt at the end of May 1988. Bridge Garage was still going at that time but subsequently also gave up selling petrol because there was a noticeable reduction in traffic on the A281 after the A23 and A24 improvements.

## Who were the families and characters who made a big impression on the village and you over the years?

I suppose going back a long time, the Godman family was quite a big influence. The Godmans built the Village Hall and owned the land that is now the Playing Field. It was just the cricket field originally and the next field over was used as a football field but also at times there were cattle out in that field. After the Second World War, the Parish Council agreed to have the two fields rolled into one and it was donated to the village. They did quite a lot for the village one way and another.

The Godmans, with the Colvins, owned probably an arc of land from the centre of the village east and west on the A272 to the north. Thornden House was demolished I suppose in the 1950's. When they started building the Thornden properties, we had a look at the plans and decided that we didn't like them. The Godmans also owned the ground south of the A272 that is now Oakfield Road and Acorn Avenue. When I was on the Parish Council, their Agent put in an application for the development of the land south of Oakfield Road and it was turned down in view of the Gatwick Crawley Sub-regional Survey, whatever that meant. The Parish Council had a neutral view on that but a couple of years later the question came up of the falling number of pupils at the school. Tony Butler was the Chairman at the time and he said basically what we want is more babies in the village. I can remember George Ralph, who was the sort of father figure of the Council, saying "no good looking at me Mr Chairman!". The Parish Council went back to the Agent, Henry Smith, and said if you want to submit that application again we will push it; hence, the development of Acorn Avenue. The land on the west side of the village, south of the A272, belonged to Church Farm; it all comes under the Hawkins now.

Fowlers were always prominent in village affairs. They employed many of the local men, those that weren't employed on farms. Stephen Fowler was a wheelwright and he started the business in 1853 and they had their centenary in 1953. There is a photo of their centenary celebration dinner in the Village Hall. As times changed, the way these building firms operated changed and they were directly employing less and less.

I can remember two elderly men who used to regularly visit the Red Lion pub (latterly the Coach House). There was old Mr Tom Anscombe, the shepherd, and occasionally he would wear his smock. There was a yarn about a Sunday School lesson when the teacher was talking about the good shepherd and asked who the good shepherd was; a boy at the back said old Tom Anscombe. The other elderly man was Mr John Roberts and every day he used to come up to the pub at midday. He was very deaf and would often come over to the shop and ask my Mother to make a telephone call for him.

## Final words

My father lasted until he was 96 and I aim to catch up with him. He was a lucky man. He didn't have a day in hospital from the time he left the army at the end of the First World War until the last week of his life. He was brought up on fat bacon and suet pudding!

## Map

See below for a map of the village centre with the location of the buildings cited in the interview.

