

WITLEY
Worcestershire
Reminiscences 1910-1945.



The Rector and Mrs. Wilson
at their front door.

1.
Reminiscences
of

C. J. Wilson, Son of Canon A. A. Wilson F.S.A.
Rector of Witley, Worcestershire 1910 - 1945.
Should, if possible, be read with R. O. Walker's "Witley, Worcestershire".

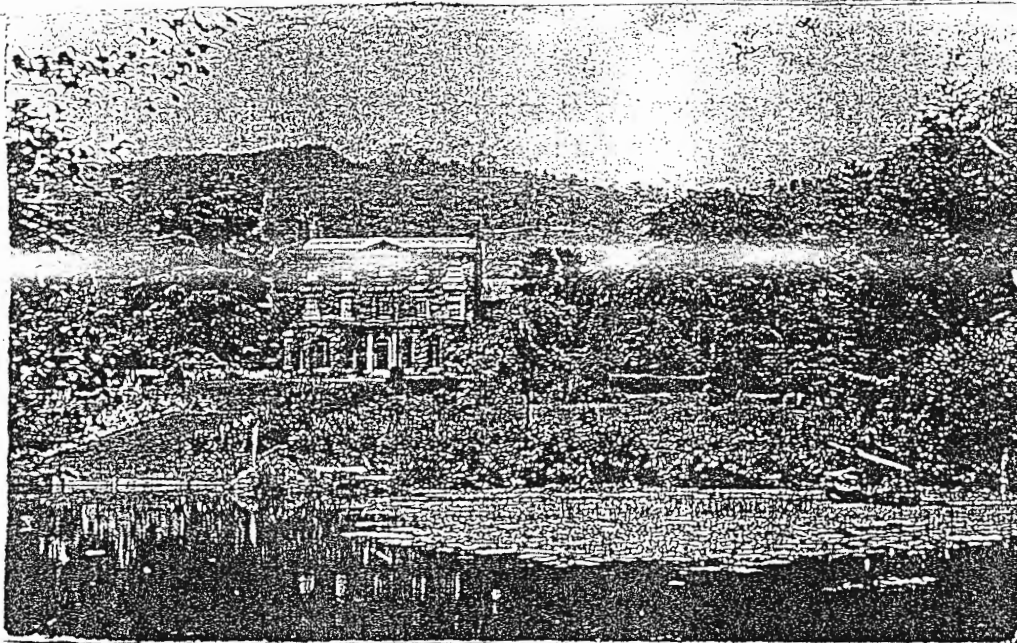
I was 5 when we moved from Hints, Staffordshire to Witley Rectory. The district was not unknown to us, as my mother's family, the Gibbonses, were midlanders and closely connected with these parts; my grandfather, the Rev. Benjamin Gibbons, was curate at St. Mary's, Kidderminster in 1851, the year of his marriage; was then vicar of Stourport (then known as Lower Milton), and retired to Waresley House, Hartlebury; my mother, the 14th of his 15 children was born at Stourport Vicarage in 1871. Her sister Connie, lived at Hillhampton Farm, on her marriage to Beville Stanier in 1895, when William Carnegie was Rector of Witley. Carnegie had been a travelling companion abroad of Lord Dudley (the 2nd earl) before his marriage. It was through my aunt Connie Stanier's friendship with Carnegie, since their Witley days that we went to Witley. She was staying with the Carnegies in 1909, in Dean's Yard Westminster he being Vicar of St. Margaret's & Sub-Dean of Westminster. He said to Connie: - "Lord Dudley has asked me to find a new Rector for Witley, do you know of anyone?" Connie said "What about my brother-in-law, Rowland Wilson?" And so,

we went there in 1910, and my father stayed till 1945. His predecessor was Horace Munro, a Newfoundlander, whom the Dudleys had persuaded to come to Witley in 1905, from Dublin, where Lord Dudley had been Lord Lieutenant. Munro found Witley tame, after the gaieties of Dublin. He told me, years later, when he had graduated to Vicar of Wimbledon & Sub-Dean of Westminster, that on his arrival in Witley, the Abberley Clock Tower bells had played "The Irish Emigrant". But he didn't regret his 5 years at Witley, as they qualified him for a Dean's Chapter living. He made a striking improvement to the Witley Rectory garden, by planting yew hedges on the lower side of the lawn, turning them at right angles & continuing them down to the pool, with broad flower borders in front of them.

The rectors of Witley had always been men of special abilities; before Carnegie, was Canon Melville, whose son-in-law, Col. Gaskell, made ^{another} a striking contribution to the garden at the rectory by extensive planting of rhododendrons round the pools & probably the various fine fir trees - deodar, cedar & ^{stone pine} firs, with monster cones (size of pine apples), & acacia, these last three in the lowest pasture on the south-east, of the rectory glebe.

Then we come to Thomas Pearson, to whom there are several references in R.O. Walker's well-researched "Witley, Worcestershire; Record of a Parish" 1985. He married a Gibbons, of my mother's family, & my grandfather

after p. 2.
WITLEY RECTORY, WORCESTER 1913.

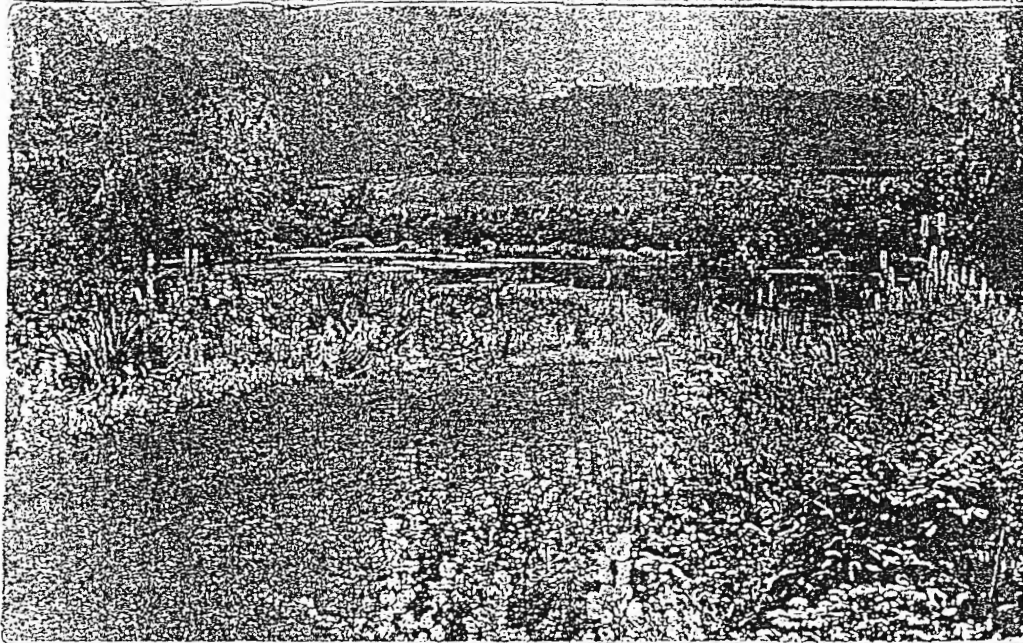


Abberley Hill

900 ft.

in back ground.

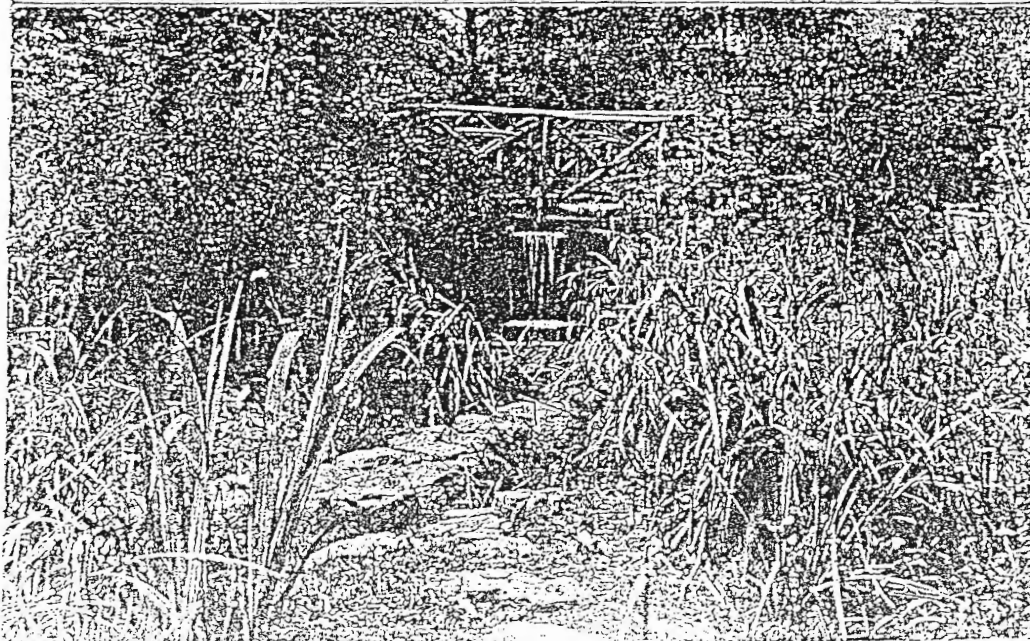
R.A. Wilson, Rector, in the
clearing weed from pond



Flower borders,

created by Munro

Rector 1905-10.



Water Garden

largely created

by Mrs. R.A. Wilson

& family.

Stepping stones

from Walsgrove

Quarry.

had stayed at Witley as a boy, and was very pleased when my father was appointed rector, as he regarded it as a prestigious appointment. He gave us a portrait of Pearson by I think Linnell, ^{my father's} was hung in the church vestry in ~~his~~ retirement he thought it would be in safer hands in Worcester & they were glad to have it, in the Shirehall, as Pearson had been Chairman of Quarter Sessions. It was officially accepted for the county, by my brother-in-law, Sir Chad Woodward, then Chairman of Worcester-shire County Council. Some years later, Lady Woodward, my sister, tried to find it, but it had been moved & she failed to trace it. Pearson, his wife, née Gibbons & her unmarried sister are buried on the left of the main entrance to Witley Church; the sisters finally lived at The Elms, Abberley; later on, The Elms was "aggrandised" by Sir Richard Brooke, who built on two substantial wings. My mother became friendly with Lady Brooke, a lively personality. The Brookes were racehorse owners, & had paddocks at The Elms for their horses. They had moved from Lancashire, where their property had become urbanised.

When we came to Witley, it was still feudal, but owing to the prolonged absences of the squire, Lord Dudley, in Ireland, & then Australia, then Le Touquet, where he lived with his mistress, the actress, Gertie Millar, the rector was, so to speak, the managing director of the parish. The squire being the President. Munro told me

that in his day he once remarked to Isaac Es-
of one of the Wall House cottages in the Martley
on his unusual absence from church & Isaac said
"Oh! You want take away my cottage, will you?"

The Dudleys gave a great ball at the Court
on, I think, their return from Australia in 1914.
& I still remember my mother's dress, which
was sheath-like, - the days of "hobble" skirts -
& covered in purple sequins. Lady Dudley was
an energetic hostess & gave regular childrens'
parties & sometimes just had a few to tea;
these would generally be Mollie & Bill McSeagh
from Hillhampton House, Betty & Wyndham (Blogs)
Baldwin from Astley Hall, Mary & Bob Lea from Dunley
Hall. The youngest of the three Ward girls, Patsy
was exactly my age, and when I was, perhaps, 10,
I asked my mother if a parson's son could marry
an Earl's daughter. My most memorable recollect.
of Lady D. is her dramatic entry into church,
dressed from head to foot in creamy-white,
with ropes of pearls round her neck. She
was kindly, but rather alarming. On one occasion
at the Court, we were playing hide & seek, &
some of us were on the roof, which was out
of bounds; Lady D. saw us, & Patsy said:-
"Look out, she'll rise," so we kept out of
her way. When my elder brother, Raynold,
became a naval cadet in 1915, she asked to
soon to congratulate him, & generously

gave him a wrist watch. I still have an attractively bound, though now rather delapidated, "Second Jungle Book", given me by Morvyth (Dickie Ward, for my birthday in 1912; she was the Ward sister above Patsy, & so a teenager in 1912. She was very out-going & attractive, & was master of the Village Scout Troop; they were known as "Lady Morvyth's Own" & bore her badge on their shoulders. There is a picture of them in R.O. Walker's book on Willey, with her in the centre, & Mr. Wall, the village schoolmaster on the right; he may well have been more than just a figure-head!

These early years, of ours, 1911-14 were, I think, the time when the Court family's presence most affected the village. Lady Dudley was in charge, & saw to it that her children took part in village festivities, such as the annual Christmas Entertainment, organised by my mother. This consisted of songs, recitations, tableaux, dances, sketches etc. We had been brought up on sketches from Alice in Wonderland, etc., progressing to "The Unlucky Family" by Mrs. Henry de la Pasture, & so on. Many people were trained to sing in public, and amateur dramatics were in a normal activity in large Victorian families; my mother's attendance at these early grounding encouraged

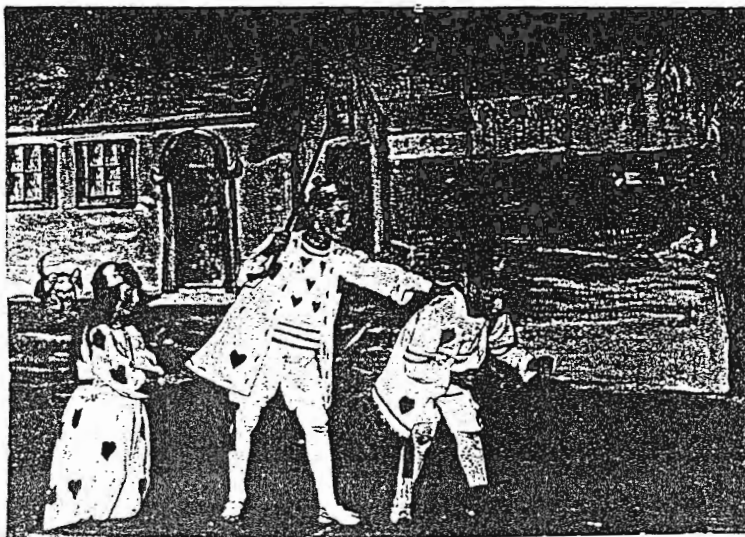
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Tableaux at the annual Christmas Entertainment
staged in Gr. Witley School, 1911.



The
Three Fishermen's
Families

Lady Honor Ward, Lady Morvyle (Dickie) Ward
Mollie McGeagh (of Hill Hampton)
Beryl Hebblethwaite (friend of McGeagh's)
(C.T.) Kit Wilson Grace Wilson



King, Queen
& Knave
of Hearts.

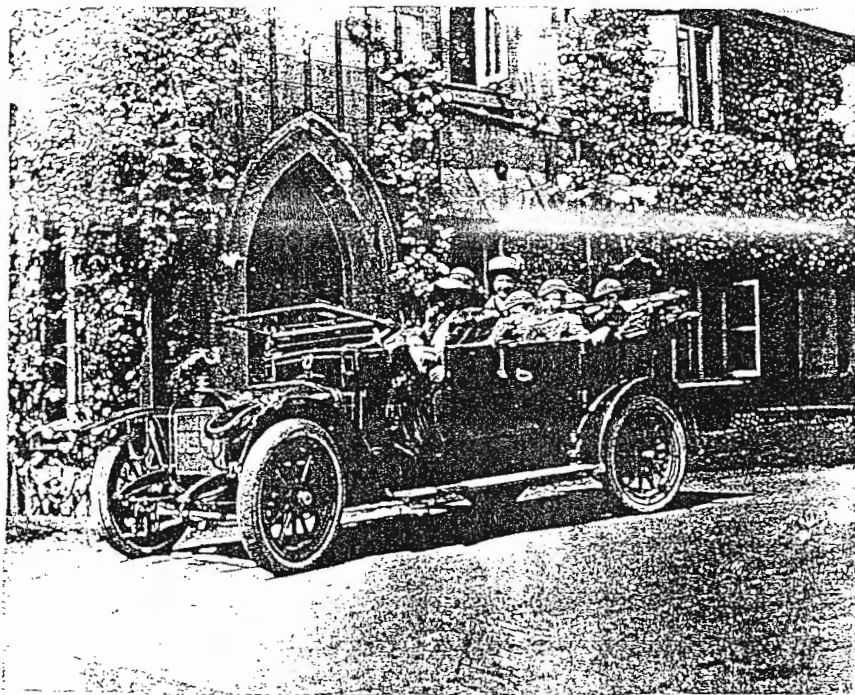
Mollie McGeagh Raynold Kit (C.T.) Wilson Wilson.

Particularly by her brother Ted, who wanted to go on the stage; his father, the Rev^d Benjamin, considered that there were only two possible professions the church & the law; Ted became a reluctant barrister, volunteered for service in the Inns of Court Volunteers, caught Typhoid & died on a troopship on the way to South Africa, much to the distress of his brothers & sisters, where he had been a bright spark.

To return to my mother; she was energetic & vivacious, & a great asset to my father as rector. When Lady Dudley had an urge to act the Lady Bountiful, she would naturally consult my mother, on who were deserving cases for gifts of blankets or whatever. My mother suffered some deterioration in health about 1915, but by judicious resting managed to continue doing what she wanted, including her voluntary Sunday school almost until she died in 1945. Through this activity she got to know & appreciate many of the village children & on their leaving school at 14, was able to place them in good domestic service, much sought after in those days.

As I have already remarked, Lord Dudley was seldom in residence at the Court. I never saw him in church, & in fact, can only recall seeing him once; this was the occasion in 1911

after p. 6.

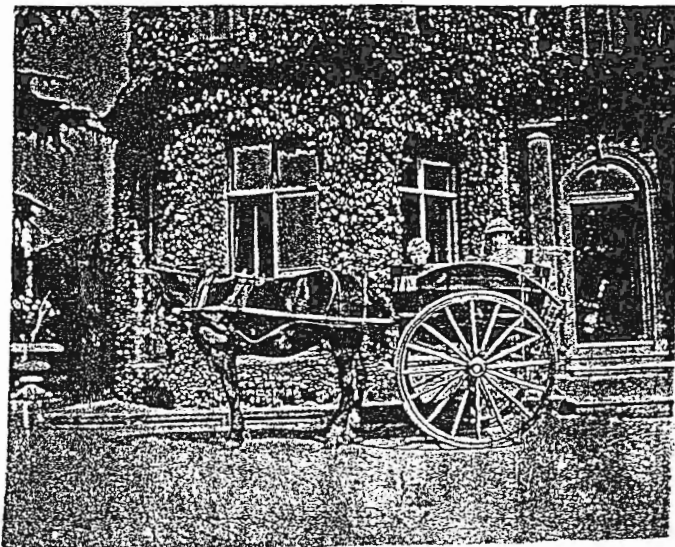


1914.

Cothill House
Abingdon,
my prep school.

Austin car of Raymond Tomkinson, jr. H.M.
Mrs Tomkinson
Miss Hames (Matron)

Raymond Tomkinson's father was the founder of
the family carpet firm in Kidderminster.



1915.

My mother is always
outside the front door
of the Rectory, in
the "governess" cart;
drawn by "Gypsy".
She was an ex-hunter
from the Hink Hall stable
but broken-winded.

She used occasionally take fright on the road &
break into a furious gallop, which was very
alarming.

of the cricket group, with my father as captain
shown in Mr. Walcott's book on Witley. He was
a competent cricketer, & played for Eton v.
Harrow, but was recorded as "absent" for the
2nd innings!

Lady Dudley was a keen churchwoman
She presented the silver sanctuary lamps
in the church, as a thank offering for the
return of her husband and his brothers from
the South African war. Later on, she
presented the ~~recess~~ mosaics, lilies &
the cross, ^{on a gold ground,} as being more appropriate to the
church than tables of the ten commandments.
It must have been about this time that she
designed & planted the "Garden of Remembrance"
as a family burial ground, adjoining the cemetery
at the Great Witley Chapel. This was a
magical spot; it had ornamental iron gates
which were kept locked; but there was a weak
spot in the yew hedge which you could get through.
There was only one grave to start with; the Hon.
Gerald Ward, killed, I think in the South African War.
The next grave was Lady Dudley's own, in 1920.
She had a private refuge on the west coast of
Ireland, & suddenly we heard that she had been
bathing & drowned; she had a troubled life &
there were of course rumours that it might
well have been suicide. It was in the papers, that
she had to go to law to obtain payment of her agreed

personal allowance of, I think, £9000 a year.

The Dudley's eldest son, Lord Ednam, had a good business head & was said to have put his father on an allowance. When the Witley estate was sold (1920), the Ednams restored Himley Hall, Staffordshire to be their main residence; Himley had been in the hands of caretakers since the Wards bought Witley, some 80 years before. Some fine mahogany doors, which had been removed from Himley & brought to Witley but never installed there, were now returned to their original settings at Himley. The Duke & Duchess of Kent were lent Himley for their honeymoon.

The sale of Witley, where they had been brought up, was a sad occasion for the Ward family; however, they still had Himley, and an opulent London house in Carlton Gardens, now the Ladies Annexe to the Athenaeum Club. Dudley House in Park Lane, their original town house was sold to Lord Dudley's younger brother, Sir John Ward, who had married an American millionaire's Miss Whitelaw-Reid, daughter of the American ambassador. When Lord Ednam was married in 1919 to the daughter of the Duke of Sutherland, the wedding reception was at Dudley House; my parents were invited. The house is still there but occupied by officers.

The new owner of Witley Court was Sir Herbert Smith Bart. a self-made Kidderminster carpet man.

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-facturer. He was proud of his humble origins, & when referring to the parish church, which was joined to the Court, he said "They wouldn't let me buy the best room in the house."

The estate sale, naturally, caused an upheaval; instead of one owner there were now dozens; but fortunately quite a number of tenant farmers & cottagers managed to buy, so that the character of the village did not substantially change. The chief influx was retired shopkeepers from the Birmingham district; however the Martley Rural District Council stepped in here and built a number of council houses at reasonable rents, for the displaced locals.

The new situation posed two main problems for my father, first, Sir Herbert Smith, & second his own stipend. Sir Herbert's attitude with his grand new property was "Keep out", instead of freely available rights of way, enjoyed for centuries. The parish church had been built by the Court family (Lord Zouley) & since then largely maintained by them, and their successors, the Dudleys; so it was very important to maintain some flow of funds from this quarter, if possible. My parents had considerable success in their handling of Sir Herbert; he said to my mother, "I like you, I'm fond of you". He put electric light into the church - he was, in fact, putting it

into the Court so it was not a major operation. He was a keen musician; in his early days he had played a violin in Kidderminster pubs. He had kept up his musical contacts & suggested to my father that Robert Radford should give a concert in Witley Church, which he did & raised a good sum towards the church maintenance.

Reverting to my father's second problem - his stipend. In the Dudley era, till 1920, he had been paid tithes from the estate office. The collection of tithes became a major problem, which he handed over to Queen Anne's Bounty. This was the Trust set up by Queen Anne, of whatever Ecclesiastical property, confiscated by Henry VIII, ^{was} still remaining in royal hands. My father arranged for the patronage of the church livings of Witley & Holt to be transferred by Lord Dudley to the Bishop of Worcester; also for the transfer of the Church of England schools at Great & Little Witley, the old school or Parish Room & 2 cottages, (built by Queen Adelaide, when living at Witley Court) to Parish Trustees. The Little Witley chapel had at one time come under Holt and the Rector's wife, Mrs. Sale, had done a considerable amount of ^{stone} carving during its restoration. She once fainted during a service & when she came to, she said "I thought I was in heaven till I saw James Best"; he was the tenant of Holt Castle.

Mr Sale had a considerable number of David Cox's paintings, which he left to Birmingham City Art Gallery.

Hillhampton House, which ^{was} halfway between the villages of Great and Little Witley was always well-lived-in; when we came to Witley, there was a family called McGeagh there, consisting of a widowed mother & 2 children, Mollie & Bill, of our age, also a governess, Miss Hempton whom we shared, before going to boarding school. We used to be driven over in a pony cart, by my mother or our gardener. The McGeaghs had one of the 3 cars that were then in the village, the others being Lord Dudley's & the doctor (Dykes). A horse bus, Owens of Abberley, went into Worcester daily, coming out in the afternoon; on Thursdays it went to Market Day in Kidderminster. In the mid-19th cent., Hillhampton had been occupied by my mother's great-uncle, Benjamin Gibbons, who had built a picture gallery on, & we used it as a school room; it was demolished by the new owners, after the sale, Dr. & Mrs Goodwin, from near Kidderminster; she was a Palethorpe, of the then famous sausage-making firm. The Goodwins were good parishioners.

A great event which had taken place in the Dudleys' time in 1913 was a monster fête at the Court. It was so well advertised by my father's curate, Mr. Hall, that thousands swarmed in from the great conurbation of Birmingham. Mrs McGeagh of Hillhampton was in charge of the catering & at a committee meeting,

Mr. Hall, ventured to suggest that the scale of her preparations was inadequate; Mrs M. was formidable & rose importantly to say, "I propose that Mr. Hall takes over the catering." She was duly smoothed down, but, in the event, the food ran out, and panic supplies had to be brought in. The famous German pilot, Gustav Hamel, was billed to make a demonstration flight, but, disappointingly made only a brief appearance in the far distance; planes were rare sights in those days. When war broke out it was suspected that Hamel had been on a reconnaissance flight.

Before proceeding with the Smith era, I think that some of the village characters that we used to visit on afternoon walks with my mother are worthy of mention. There was Harriet Toimer, a dwarf, about 4 ft, who kept house for Howard Limbrick; she was observed at a parish tea party, happily munching buns with their paper covers; the Limbricks had some nice things in their house & my father bought an interesting picture from them, which was painted on metal & included a clock in a tower & a mill-wheel, which had had works & which he got replaced; my nephew Mervyn Wilson still has the picture, at his rectory in Northamptonshire. Another quaint woman was Mrs. Morris; we disliked visiting her because of the smell; bedrooms were few & far between then, like cars; she used to walk through our garden, as the nearest way to fetch her milk from Mr. Goode the village dairy.

one day Grace & I heard curious moaning noises & traced them to our upper pool; Mrs Morris was discovered sitting in the shallow water at the side of the pool, having pushed her way through bushes at the side of the path; we hauled her out & she was duly despatched to the Martley District Home (euphemism for Workhouse); when they bathed her, they had finally to remove 7 vests. A quite different milieu were the farms; Hill House Farm was lived in by the old Proudman's, whose son Garner had Redmarley Farm; Hill House had a very interesting relic of its "manor" days, some massive brick gate piers, abandoned in a field on the west side. Hill House was bought by Herbert Banks, the Kidderminster auctioneer & estate agent & I believe he made a lot of improvements, which may have incorporated the old gate piers in the garden. His son, Tony, went on there, I think, & in due course became High Sheriff. A farm in Little Witley was Well House, the Whites; Mr. White hunted with the Worcestershire hounds; Mrs. White used to give us painting books or chocolates; I seem to remember she was blind, but very unaffected by it. Their daughter Louise married David Off; he was the postmaster's son and clever, becoming a don at New College, Oxford. My father kept up with them & periodically visited them in N. Oxford; he had married them in Little Witley Chapel; I dined in New College, with David, in 1911, when I was on an Army Staff course.

Our chief farmer friends were the Tottenhams of Walsgrove; They were Toby & Cecile, & the 3 children Charles, George & Dora; the boys were just younger than my younger brother Alwyn, & Dora was younger still. Alwyn & the boys were Bees hunters, & had a pack of hounds, known as the Rareity Hounds, with which they hunted rabbits & rats. Walsgrove still had hop yards & all the village used to help with the picking. This was revolutionised some years later by invention of a hop-picking machine by Freddie McConnel, then living in Martley. Small hop yards were already dying out, & the Walsgrove one was the last in Witley. We were all very sorry when the Tottenhams left Walsgrove; They could always be relied on to play up in parish affairs; Toby was in the choir & on the parish council; my mother said, "I hope Toby will be at the meeting, then we shall get a laugh." I was very pleased to re-discover Dora, through our mutual friends in Hambledon, & through her to enjoy Cecile's company again & Charles's on several occasions in England & Canada, & to meet his wife, Elspeth, whose relatives, the Stones, I'd known way back in the City. Charles inherited the title Marquess of Ely.

Harking back to the Smith era - Sir Herbert was a heavy drinker; my father called on him one morning & he was already imbibing & invited my father to join him; he refused politely, but then thought that if he joined in, Sir Herbert would not drink so much,

So changed his mind, whereupon Sir Herbert ordered another bottle! He had a son & daughter, aged about 20-25, the son was Herbert, known as Tim, & the daughter Dora, known as Do. Tim, in due course got married to "Squeak" Norton, sister of Mrs. John Brinton of Redmarley Farm, & lived in the Kidderminster area. Do led a rather lonely life at the Court; she often called on my mother & played with Alwyn, aged 10, whom she called "Angel Boy." She took Grace & me & Alwyn to the Birmingham pantomime, in the Family Rolls; we picked up Sir Herbert in Kidderminster, who was hopelessly drunk, so we had a fairly unpleasant drive. Having dropped us at the Theatre, Do took her father back to Kidderminster & then came back to join us; after the show I was dropped at the station with my trunk, as I was on my way back to Rugby. Do & Tim both had quite good voices, and took part in our annual Christmas Entertainment in the Village School in 1922; I have the programme in my old photo etc. album; she sang "Autumn" & "A little winding road", also "The early morning" & "O mistress mine." He sang "The deathless army", "Oh lovely night" & "Chiselling." It all seems an incredible long time ago, & quite another world.

Do made a runaway marriage to a young auctioneer called Ingman, and her father cut her off, which was very sad for both of them. My father kept in touch with her for some time but she drifted out

of our lives.

I left school in 1923 & in 1924 went to work in the Bank of England in London, where I was given an introduction by the Wallace family, neighbours in Worcestershire, who had a merchant bank Wallace Brothers, in the City. From then on, I was only at home for an occasional week end, until 1928/9 when I worked at the Birmingham branch of the Bank of England & was at Witley quite often. On one of these visits, my father & I were invited to a shoot at the Court; one of Sir Herbert's friends peppered me on the legs, fortunately from such a distance that the pellets didn't penetrate & just dropped from my stockings. Do was at home still & put on a very recherche spread of refreshments for us, after the shoot.

Then in 1937 came the disastrous fire at the Court; there were several stories about it - one, that the house was so enormous that the fire was not noticed for 3 days; two, that the staff had no feeling of loyalty, & just let it burn; three, that it was to get the insurance. The ^{fire} was the finish of the Smith era & the remaining slice of the Witley estate, which surrounded the church, and the problem of its maintenance grew. The approaches, the old private drives to the Court, became worse & worse & riddled with potholes. My mother was the first person to raise money from outside the parish, by getting an article into Country Life.

This raised about £1000, paid for an urgent repair to the roof; the war was looming by this time, which didn't help a cause such as church repairs. My father carried on as rector till 1945, when he was 76. This was longer than he would have wished, because of the war. Our good friend, Mrs. Louis Biggs, of Rectory Cottage, (of whom later), said there was never a proper rector after my father; the nearest approach to one being the splendid Brian Moore, founder & highly successful manager of the Witley Garage, who stood in as a lay reader. Louis Biggs was born Louis Hook, at Strutton's Heath in an unexpected terrace of several cottages, known as "Snuffy Row"; this was at the Astley end of Witley, the east & open end, the west end being enclosed by the 900 ft. high Woodbury & Abberley Hills; springs in our garden supplied a string of ornamental pools, 2 in our garden, then Redmarley Farm, Redmarley Mill, Hill House, on through Strutton's Heath to Sharpley Pools & Glasshampton where our 17th cent. mansion had been burnt down & the outbuildings taken over by a group of Anglican Franciscan monks. My mother spotted Louis as a likely girl, and she was a good spot; it was the way she spread the bread & butter at a parish tea. She came to us on leaving school at 14, and remained on & off, a potent personality in our family circle. She ~~left us on promotion to~~ bathed me when I was 6, & I remarked to her, "Knows! it was naughty." "Bloody

Motor, Louie" & was duly ticked off. She left us on promotion to one of the noble Coventry families on the other side of Worcester, where she met & married Bert Biggs, a groom at the Coventry station at Croome Court. At the end of the war in 1918 Louie & her husband came to live with her mother at Strutton's Heath; Bert was just out of the army, so without a job & he asked my father if he could come & work for him; apart from a big garden we had 2 cows, pigs & poultry & fruit orchards of several acres. My father said he couldn't really afford 2 gardeners, but Bert could come temporarily; he stayed for 26 years till my father retired in 1945. He & Louie moved into Rectory Cottage, which my father bought for them at the estate sale in 1920. From then on they remained loyally available in my parents' day-to-day life & when the second war came, & domestic help disappeared, except for the occasional Irish girls, Louie took over at the Rectory & did the cooking. In addition to her domestic skills she was a good dressmaker & helped my sister Grace make her party dresses. She had 2 children Pam & Johnnie; Pam received an injury in the road outside their house, which set her back temporarily; later on she took over Rectory Cottage; my mother reported from her Sunday school "Johnnie is bright." He progressed on to Hartlebury Grammar School & at 18 was given a job at Birmingham's Conduit Works.

their representative in America & a partner, a great success story which Louie lived to enjoy. She said, "Now that John's a partner in Brintons Mrs. Brinton kisses me." They were close neighbours, & Louie used to help her in the house, on occasions. The last time I saw Louie, I was staying with Grace at Arley & we had Sunday lunch at Rectory Cottage; this was a slap-up do - roast beef & Yorkshire etc, all done to a turn; we had so much enjoyed each others' company, that, after lunch, we danced round the table.

Returning to the main theme of Witley Church and the problem of its maintenance. Through the disappearance of a squire & then of the parson, through amalgamation with neighbouring parishes, the church gradually sank. But a miracle happened in the person of Mr. W.A.M. Edwards. He had bought a plot of land near the Worcester Lodge & built a house for his retirement, from being a director of I.C.I. He was recruited to the Parochial Church Council Restoration Committee as Treasurer; he enlisted the big names - Historic Churches Preservation Trust & Pilgrim Trust & Department of the Environment. So owing to his intelligent & efficient efforts, Witley Church is now the sparkling, baroque 'monument' to its founders, the Foleys, & an inspiration to all who have the good fortune to enter it & worship there. My most memorable family occasion

These were my brother Alwyn's christening in March 1910, and my sister Grace's wedding, to Chad Woodward in April 1934. This happy event cemented & ensured the continuance, of our family ties in Worcestershire much to our benefit, over the years. Chad was squire of the Arley Castle estate on the river Severn, above Bewdley, & 10 miles from Witley. His & Grace's 3 daughters have kept on their old family home, Arley Cottage, formerly the dower house, as a shared country house & I have just, Nov. 1995, spent a week-end there.