

BERT MUNDY AND ALBERT MORBY



Bert Mundy, hedger and woodworker

The contentment of having a full life was very apparent when, at the invitation of June Stilgoe, Bert Mundy and Albert Morby (half brothers) and I had a chat about old times over a cup of tea in the sitting-room of The Grounds Farmhouse. You see these two characters, Bert and Albert, together with brother Gerald (who served in the Tank Corps during the last War) ,have worked all their lives at The Grounds under three generations of the Stilgoe family.

Albert is 74 years of age and his wife Lilian and son live in Adderbury. Albert travels to The Grounds Farm in an old van, formerly it was on a motorbike and before that a bicycle. Bert, a bachelor of 79 years, lives with his two sisters, Winnie and Doris and bachelor Gerald at The Old Paper Mill Cottage close-by in the Deddington Parish but with an Adderbury postal address!

Albert's father and Bert's mother died in 1910 and in 1912 Bert's father married Albert's mother. Bert's father, a cowman, moved from Hinton-in-the-Hedges to The Grounds in 1912 and in recalling this Bert recollects when attending school he worked an hour a day on the farm, mostly pumping water, and all day on Saturday for 1s. a week; he further reminded me that during the Depression after the First World War the weekly wage for a married man was reduced from 30s. to 28s. a week, working from 7am to 5pm everyday except Sunday. I noticed Bert's union badge and asked how long he had been a union man: 'years' was the simple answer. Albert said he had a badge but he didn't know where it was. Bert was a horseman in charge of a team of four horses in the early days. There were 12 horses on the farm, two teams of four horses for the heavy work such as two furrow ploughs, a team of two and two single horses. Albert chipped in here informing us that he generally worked two horses with one furrow. Grandpa, the grandfather of the present Robert Stilgoe, went every year to Peterborough Shire Horse Sales and bought two-year old colts. It was part of Bert's job to break these young horses into work, and with a natural drooping of the eyelids he commented 'you work with them for years, training them to pull and controlling them by commands, you couldn't help being fond of them, then Grandpa sold them at six years of age as sound working horses.'



Albert Morby, keen gardener

There were many things going on in these early days all around the villages: Banbury had the largest Fair, then there was the Deddington Flower Show and Puddin' and Pie – 'we got half a day off for these fairs'.

Although the two 'lads' were obviously interested in ploughing, it was the hedge-cutting, wall-building, and thatching competitions that obviously brought them alive. Here the craft and ability to create a wall, trim a hedge and thatch a stack was expressed with relish in their eyes. Bert was the hedger and woodworker, Albert the thatcher and wall-builder. They built the farm's cow cubicles.



Ploughing match at The Grounds: (l to r) Gerald Mundy, Charlie Gibbs, John Shepherd, Bob Vincent, Bert Mundy, Albert Morby and Robert Stilgoe (pic June Stilgoe)

Corn and hay in those days was cut loose with a reaper (the binder came much later and today the combine does the lot in one job). Two horses pulled the reaper which had four fixed windmill-type sails which revolved and pushed regular bundles of corn from the platform. These bundles were then tied by hand with straw bands and placed upright to dry. Stacking the corn was manual work – there were no elevators. The stack grew in height by throwing the

sheaves from the wagon to the stacker, then as the stack got higher a worker stood in a pitch hole up in the stack and received the thrown sheaf and then threw it up to the stacker. A 40ft ladder, which was also used for thatching, was used to get down. The band round the sheaves had to be tied well so they did not burst while you were throwing them up, and one can easily visualise the teamwork necessary in such an operation.

The farm had a six-year crop rotation, first year swedes, next year barley, then barley again undersown with clover, then clover followed by two years of wheat. The swedes were an important crop in Grandpa's day and were grown for the sheep which took pride of place. True there were cows and corn, but Grandpa's aim in life was the breeding and caring for the famous 'Grounds Oxford Down flock', the Grounds flock being known throughout the country at shows and auctions. Today this large-bodied yet attractive breed of sheep is out of fashion and is classified as a rare breed.

For financial reasons milking cows are now the priority at The Grounds, and the last sheep in a flock of 20 have been taken over by the retired shepherd, Harold James, 67 years of age, who together with his own sheep will continue and perpetuate the Oxford Down.

It was never quiet on the farm, then Albert nodded and told us you worked with folk not machinery – tending the sheep, helping with the cattle, ploughing, drilling, haymaking, thrashing and ditching. You always had company, at times there were over 18 workers on the farm, today there are 2 cowmen and 3 tractor drivers, one being brother Gerald, plus 'the lads' on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The 'know-how' and gift of growing things and caring for animals is emphasised all over again when you see the cottage gardens in the Paper Mill Valley. Doris, 75 years of age, is the housekeeper, Winnie 72, helps Doris and gardens. The cottage is spotless and is surrounded by areas of mown lawns intersected by areas of productive vegetable plots and flower borders.

A pattern must have been formulated for them to get on with each other over the years and then I appreciated the bachelors' 'bolt holes': Gerald had a hut close to the house where he demonstrated he had Channel 4 on the television, Bert's hut was further away, where he had a fireplace with various personal trophies and tools around, and both huts had comfortable sofas!

Bill Marshall