

Be Happy, Be Good, Donald Welford's Family History



*Ashley House Yard,
Donald Welford in the pram*

Donald was a well-respected local businessman, farmer, Parish Councillor and proud head of his Clifton family. In 2000 he published under the title, *Be Happy, Be Good*, a history of the Welford family businesses. He died in 2002 and his widow, Jean, has given me permission to reproduce some of Donald's historical snippets, some well-researched, some passed on by word of mouth. The title of his family's history was taken from advice given to children by Donald's great-grandfather William (1838–98), a devout non-conformist and great advocate of leading a good life. 'Be happy, be good' became his great-grandson's quotation too. But let Donald himself speak to us in his well-remembered way:

'My father told me that the War Office (during WWI), which was responsible for buying hay for the armed forces, once sent a very substantial cheque to the Welfords at Clifton for hay that they had not supplied. Naturally, John Henry (Donald's grandfather) wrote back explaining the error and returned the cheque. Back came another letter, along with the cheque, advising him to look at his accounts again, because the War Office was quite certain that this hay had been supplied by the Welfords. John Henry checked again and again, and was more sure than ever that he had not made a mistake. He returned the cheque yet again with a letter saying that he had checked and had found that they really did not have any record of hay supplied according to the War Office's statement of account.

'Back came the cheque once again, with a stiff reply saying that the War Office knew its business best, and would the Welfords please stop writing unnecessary and uncalled-for letters, and kindly present their cheque to the bank in order that the War Office's accounts could be squared. It was a very difficult situation: not only was John Henry a strict Methodist, he was also a magistrate sitting at the Deddington courthouse, and was therefore doubly conscious of his moral responsibilities. There was nothing for it, however, but to cash the cheque in deference to the powers-that-be!

Edward and Mary Welford

Edward and Mary lived in Marsh Gibbon, near Bicester where one of their sons, William (Donald's great-great grandfather) married Susanna Wills in 1822. He then made the probably difficult decision to leave the village of his ancestors and with his young wife settled in Clifton where they began their family. Their six children were all baptised in Deddington parish church, amongst them another William born in 1838. An energetic man, he was destined to break away from his father's shoe-making tradition because, in the fast-moving economic changes of 19th-century England, he could see possibilities opening in the world of coal trading.

The Great Western Railway line from Oxford to Banbury was opened on 2 September 1845, making it possible in young William's day to make available coal from the mines in Warwickshire to people in the Cherwell Valley. William began his one-man business by arranging supplies of coal to be delivered to the wharf or station at Aynho. He must have saved up to buy a horse and cart, coal sacks, shovels and a machine to weigh out the coal and sell it by any amount from half a hundredweight up to ten tons or more. William's small

business prospered. As the years passed, the canal company built a wharf between Clifton and Aynho with a small house and stables in which William probably kept his horse. As the market for coal increased, he bought more horses. The barges transporting merchandise on the canal were all pulled by horses and they had to be fed. (Donald could remember seeing barge horses being taken to Aynho stables as late as the 1930s.) William realised that if he could purchase hay at a reasonable price from local farmers and store it in the barn beside the wharf he could sell it at a comfortable profit to the owners of barge horses. No sooner thought of than done! By 1865 William Welford's coal and forage business was considered important enough to be mentioned in Kelly's Directory, published annually, containing the names of all the people who had a business or a farm in the area. William, just 27 years of age, seems to have made his mark and was on his way to prosperity.

No doubt his wife Anne Shirley (from Clifton) with whom he raised a family of four provided the very settled home required for his restless business exploits. Religion too gave him the calm strong belief he needed to launch his many entrepreneurial ventures. William did not feel comfortable with the way the established church was being run. He became a devout non-conformist and put a great deal of time and effort into building the Wesleyan Methodist chapel in Clifton. His diaries show that he would often leave Aynho station in the early evening, go to Central Hall, Westminster for a Methodist meeting and return the same night to Clifton. No small undertaking, but typical of the man whose enthusiasm in anything he touched was total.

William Welford (1838–98)



Donald's great grandfather William, now diversified even further. He purchased small properties in Clifton and built his own house 'Roseville' in 1875 where he was to spend the rest of his life. He also bought next-door 'Ashley House' with stables and a blacksmith's forge, giving him his own horse-shoeing facility. William and his wife Anne Shirley had four children, of whom John Henry, Donald's

grandfather was the eldest.

While enlarging the coal side of his business William suddenly realised that he rather liked the idea of producing hay for marketing. To this end he acquired grassland meadows from which he was entitled to take one crop of hay a year, allowing him gradually to extend his forage client base beyond the barge men of the Cherwell Valley to nearby towns such as Banbury, Brackley, far into the Cotswolds, to Oxford and even to the larger markets of London and Birmingham where, in the mid-19th century, the economy was still entirely dependent on horses.

Working with William in his expanding forage business were a number of highly-skilled local men known as hay-tiers who would arrive with their hay presses wherever there was a rick to be turned into bales of hay for easy transport on horse wagons, or for long distance orders, in railway wagons. These men also had hay knives, gruesome weapons to be treated with the utmost care, but in their hands useful in making neat trusses (bales), each truss weighing 56lbs. The farmer would then supply a horse to fetch the hay press which was made on two wheels so designed that a pair of shafts could be attached and the whole contraption pulled by a horse.

William now began to travel extensively. He met farmers who traded with him and, to convince them of the quality of his hay, he took with him a really

good sample, pressed in just the way that the hay-tiers did their bales, but to a size that would fit into his Gladstone bag. (In Donald's possession was the miniature hay press William used and showing it to many people over the years nobody ever recognised what it was used for.)

The End of the 19th Century

We are now moving towards the end of the 19th century. Welford's coal and forage business is in full swing, the coal trade expanding from barge transport to rail, needing Welford depots not only in Banbury and Brackley, but also at the LNER line station at Finmere.



All over England canal transport was giving way to railways as the preferred means of transporting goods. This expansion meant that the great collieries of Wales and Yorkshire now had access to a coal merchant in faraway Clifton.

In 1884 William's wife Ann died. This was a shattering blow to the whole family at Roseville, Clifton, rendering William for a time quite unable to take much interest in business matters and

leaving his son, John Henry, to carry on.

John Henry married Nellie Whetton, whose family was closely associated with the Methodist church in Chapel Square, Deddington. John and Nellie started their married life in Ashley House next door to Roseville where William after some years brought his second wife Isabella. 'It may have been Isabella who was behind one of the most revolutionary changes in William's home', writes Donald in his memoir.

'Around the turn of the century Roseville became the first house in Clifton to be equipped with water sanitation. A flush toilet was still regarded with some suspicion: certainly it was not placed indoors but in a small shed in the garden, with a septic tank at the bottom of the garden.

There was no piped water in Clifton; water was collected from a well, such as the one in Roseville's garden, or in buckets from the local spring known as Clifton Mill fountain. Keeping the cistern filled was a problem, however water from an enormous water tank which collected rain water from the roof of the house could be used as a supplement. 'In a period of prolonged drought', Donald writes, 'things became rather more difficult!'



Roseville, Clifton

By 1898 the thriving Welford & Sons business comprised William and two of his sons, William the younger and John Henry, who by then had a young son of his own, William John (Donald's father). In that year father and grandfather William, this tremendously energetic businessman and loving family man, died of a heart attack at the early age of 60.

William John and Donald Welford

Donald writes: 'On 17th April 1967, William John died suddenly. He had for many years left the poultry farm and the general farm for me to look after and had been very busy in his work helping the National Farmer's Union

and latterly the Egg Marketing Board to improve welfare and profitability of the industry as a whole. I shall never forget attending the investiture at Buckingham Palace when he received his CBE. The poultry and farming press paid many tributes to his work and life.'

But what he had achieved over the years had certainly not fallen effortlessly into his lap. We read: 'When William John, promising pupil at a Methodist school in Trowbridge, finished his schooling in the early 20th century, he wanted to enter the Methodist ministry, but his father, John Henry, was adamant that he should enter the family's well-established, successful coal and hay business. Although deeply disappointed he obeyed his elders. It was his mother Nellie who recognised his frustration and suggested that he develop an interest outside the business – something to live for and enjoy! He was to find pleasure in gardening but Nellie, realising that her son was looking for a challenge, encouraged him to set up a small flock of breeding poultry. He used the cottage to breed the chicks and, once grown, they were settled in an orchard owned by the family.

Just as his grandfather had seen new opportunities in the coal and forage business, William John began to see in his hobby the possibility of a successful business venture. What was sure though was that expansion required big money and he knew that he had to convince his father and his uncle, William the Younger who jointly held the purse strings of Welford & Sons, that his proposal for a poultry farm made sense. Not surprisingly, before they would agree to advance any money, his father wanted to know what the new venture would cost, how big it would be, how much money it would earn and how many people it would employ! They also wanted to know how William John, who had suffered from ill health most of his life and was still recovering from an horrific motor-cycle accident, would cope with taking charge of such a venture.

These were tough questions but, given the enthusiasm and will to overcome problems coupled with some business drive probably inherited from his ancestors, he did succeed. His poultry farm expanded in leaps and bounds and would in due course carry again the name of Welford & Sons. Already waiting in the wings was his son Donald who from boyhood loved to lend a hand on the poultry farm and learn the trade, not only from his father, but also from many a loyal Welford worker taken into employment by his father when his uncle's coal and hay business was wound down.

Ruth Johnson, 2009–10, with grateful thanks to Jean Welford