

LAVENDON
PAST and PRESENT

The Inside Story

By Claude Horwood

June, 1983

I have found it convenient to write this history in the first person. I hope the 'me' and 'my' will not be too intrusive.

It is difficult to know the starting point. Only two County Councillors have lived in Lavendon. They are the Rev. George Pochim Soames, elected in 1889, and myself, elected in 1958. I think it is appropriate to begin with details about Mr. Soames. Mr. Freestone, remembered by the older people as a really great schoolmaster, is another figure to whom we must play tribute.

I am humbly and deeply grateful and proud that for many years, the people of this village came to consult me about their difficulties and problems. It was they who elected me to the County Council, and the Borough Council. Although other villages come into the Wards, it was the whole-hearted support from Lavendon which resulted in electoral success. I shall try to repay that by service to the village in any way possible.

This brief booklet is not about sticks and stones. It is about flesh and blood. It is about the ordinary people whom we meet every day.

In 1875, the Rev. George Pochin Soames became Rector of Lavendon. Within a very short space of time, the Rector, with his chestnut cob and trap, became known over a very wide area. When County Councils were formed in 1889, Mr. Soames became the representative for the Olney and Lavendon Ward. He also became the first Chairman of the Parish Council. It speaks something of the esteem in which he was held that he was the County Councillor for thirty years but was never opposed again after the first election. The success in 1889 was the occasion of great excitement. The Rector's wife did not quite share the husband's "hail fellow well met" attitude. She was Mrs. Frances May Soames. It is thought that she looked a little askance when, after one general election (Mr. Soames having been at the Count) several of the ladies of the village hugged and kissed him on his arrival with the news.

Throughout the Midlands, Mr. Soames became known on Liberal and temperance platforms. He was a tremendous worker in the cause of Mr. (Later Sir) Harry Verney. One resident recalled an occasion when the Rector curbed a rowdy election meeting by simply walking to the edge of the platform, holding up his hand, and saying "Quiet".

In those days, villages had their crier, who used to announce with his bell and voice such things as political meetings, the travelling pot-mender, and other events. The crier at Lavendon was Mr. William Hives, who, for some reason, was always spoken of as Warwick Hives.

The Conservatives worried greatly about Lavendon, and not without reason. It must have been the most Radical village for miles around. Mr. Soames always went to Conservative meetings, refusing to sit down, and walking around the room with his hands behind him. At one meeting, Conservative candidate Beaumont said with some asperity, "I wish the Reverend gentleman would keep his flock quiet!" On this occasion, the Rector's efforts to restore order failed, and the audience started shouting "Quack! Quack!" in mockery of his "Quiet! Quiet!" This was a very rare instance of the Rector's failure to secure results.

On another occasion, the Conservative meeting was rudely interrupted by Joseph Huckle, of Olney, who was a road sweeper in summer, and a chimney sweep in winter. Mr. Beaumont was just reaching the climax of his speech when Mr. Huckle's head suddenly appeared round the edge of the door. He shouted, "Man, ye are a liar, and the truth is not in thee." The audience found the interruption more entertaining than the speech.

Mr. Soames' forty-two years as Rector were marred by several sad events. A baby was dead at birth. A son, Francis Oswald, age 27, was drowned in an accident, and is buried in the churchyard. Another son became a solicitor, went to the Australian bush, and was never heard of again. In 1914, Mrs. Soames died, and Miss Mildred became the lady of the Rectory, and remained so until Mr. Soames' death at the age of 80, in 1918. During the Boer War, Cpl. Harry Holmes, (who later became RSM. Holmes) wrote home, just after the Battle of Belmont, and says in his letter, "Thank Miss Soames for the socks she made, which fit me beautifully, and Mrs. Soames for the gift of handkerchiefs."

Mr. Soames sometimes paid for a joint of meat to be sent to a poor family, but he was unfortunate with his investments. This was the hey-day of several infamous swindlers, including the South Sea Bubble, and it is thought that Mr. Soames lost all his savings.

Mr. Soames always took an interest in the babies he baptized. It gave him a great thrill when a bouncing boy, Benny Holmes, was born on his own birthday. The last wedding conducted by Mr. Soames was that of Mr. and Mrs. Jamieson on Boxing Day 1917.

Mrs. Soames is best remembered as the strict choir mistress, and she had a splendid ear for music. The Rector too was a wonderful musician, and sometimes he attended choir practice. Sometimes he would say to his wife, "Fanny dear. That was wrong." The stern reply would be, "It was not, George!" Finally, the Rector would gain his point.

Night school was one of the Rector's innovations. During the winter months, he gave lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic to boys and girls who had left school, charging a penny a week. The pennies were spent at the end of the winter on a party at the Rectory. The fare was liberal, so the pennies must have been supplemented from the Rector's pocket.

In 1917, a young soldier home on leave from Fance in the First World War remarked to his mother, "I shall not see Mr. Soames again." This proved to be true, and on March 29th, 1918, Mr. Soames died at the age of 80, and was buried in the churchyard. He was "one of the old school", a fearless fighter on the Liberal platform, and at temperance meetings. During his term as Vice-Chairman of the County Education Committee, no fewer than seven Secondary Schools were opened in the County.

Here, there follows a mystery. The grave has an unoccupied space. This was intended for Miss Mildred. She went away to the Oxford area, and although she must have been dead for a considerable time, Lavendon residents do not know when or where. At one time, Miss Soames held the advowson. No one will quarrel with the inscription on Mr. Soames tomb, "Good and Faithful servant."

A contemporary of Mr. Soames was Mr. Freestone, the schoolmaster. In these enlightened times, in the first five minutes of acquaintanceship, every one wants to use first names, and everybody is Tom, Dick or Harry. It is not merely coincidental that no one can remember the Christian names of Mr. Freestone. People who knew him say, "We always thought of him as Mr. Freestone." There can be little doubt that Mr. Soames and Mr. Freestone have exercised more influence upon Lavendon than any other two people,

In Saxon times, Lawndon (as it was then called) was an important village, with a powerful Castle, an Abbey, and ten Manors.

The Abbey was a monastery of the Praemonstratensian Order. The Grange now stands on the site of the Abbey. Only a few carved stones in the garden walls show where the Monastery was. The fishponds are there, and the Parish Council has enabled a protection order to be placed on them. The porch is modern, and was built in 1911. According to some notes left by the Rev. G. P. Soames, it was built by a clever craftsman named Wooding. Mr. Wooding found the jambs and sidestones in the moat, and the headstone came from the fireplace of a cottage at Turvey.

In mediaeval times, a small hamlet named Adersey existed between the Grange, and the Northampton Road.

There has been a Mill from very early times. For many years, the Perry family were the millers.

Until the end of the Second World War, the moat around the Castle was almost complete. Mr. Phillip G. Dunn, filled in the moat in the front of the house, and planted an orchard. King Henry VIII gave the Castle as a gift to one of his wives. ??

Snelson Manor, is a fine old riverside house. Uphoe Manor is another fine old upstanding house dating back to very early times. Parts of it date back at least to the 16th century.

The Church may date back to 950 a.d. Considerable repairs were carried out during the incumbancy of the Rev. H. S. Davis (1918-1928).

One mystery is why the village suffered so substantially during the Great Plague of London. In the year 1665, sixty-six burials are recorded.

The Union Chapel on the Square has a long history. For very many years Mr. H. Parris was closely associated with it. There was an important service on Thursday, July 14th, 1914 when the present organ was dedicated. The Rev. E. G. Gange, a former President of the Baptist Union of England and Wales, was the preacher.

There was a very interesting ceremony on August 21st, 1938 when Miss Dorothy Osborn (later Mrs. H. E. Kitchener), Mr. Harry Kitchener, and Mr. Leslie Seamarks were baptized in the river. The service was conducted by the Rev. Mr. Morris, of Letchworth. Two hundred persons were present.

Several Rectors have left their mark in various ways. The Rev. George Fermer Leggett was a member of the Newport Pagnell Rural District Council. He was a generous man. He was reprimanded by the Bishop because of his careless and improvident approach to money matters. Mr. Eric Lay, a long serving Churchwarden, was able to inform the Bishop that

Mr. Leggett's difficulties only arose because of his gifts to village people.

1940's The cemetery was opened, and the Church portion consecrated in 1895. The Rev. Roy Rendell obtained the lych gate from Kent. Mr. Rendell also published a history of the village.

Mr. R. F. Britnell, while he was headmaster, re-introduced the village feast, which was traditionally held on October 11th.

Another Rural District Councillor, Col. Smith, of Home Farm, was able to get piped water. Amazingly, sanitation had to wait. When I was elected to the County and Rural District Councils in 1958 and 1959, nearly all residents were using the earth closet or bucket up the garden.

A native of Lavendon who reached high office was Sir Harry Johnson, who worked his way to the top on the railways, and became Chairman of British Rail. It was a welcome change to have a Chairman who could couple-up a wagon.

The now famous Nell Dunn spent all her childhood in Lavendon. I have heard yarns about millionaires who do not carry money with them. When I was secretary at the Castle, Mr. Phillip Dunn, Chairman of the *News of the World* and director of many other large companies, found on one occasion he had no money with him, and asked me to lend him some. I gave him all I had with me, which was half-a-crown!

At the time of writing, the Rev. Peter Chianchi is Priest-in-Charge, Miss Avis Peache is school-mistress. There is a magistrate living in the village: Mrs. June Woodford.

The members of the Parish Council are: Mr. A. Cony (Chairman), Mr. Nigel Alexander, Mr. Peter Hanson, Mr. Claude Horwood, Mr. Graham Mabbutt, Mr. Charles Paine and Mr. John Woodhouse.

The recent acquisition of the old school by the Parish Council was the subject of a lively Parish Meeting. As an independent valuer gave £25,000 as his figure, it seems that the Parish Council were right to buy it for £8,000.

The present Clerk to the Parish Council, Mr. E. Bates, is also secretary of the British Legion, and secretary of the Milton Keynes Association of Parish Councils. Every time any problem crops up, the answer seems to be, "Go and see Eric Bates!"

Lavendon Life is a splendid little monthly magazine. Mrs. Hilary Lucas is the editor. Mrs. Helen Cook is undertaking the printing and distribution.

My father's cousin, Mr. Ernest Horwood, bought Home Farm shortly before the Second World War. Mr. Horwood organised the first gymkhana, and started the movement for a village hall.

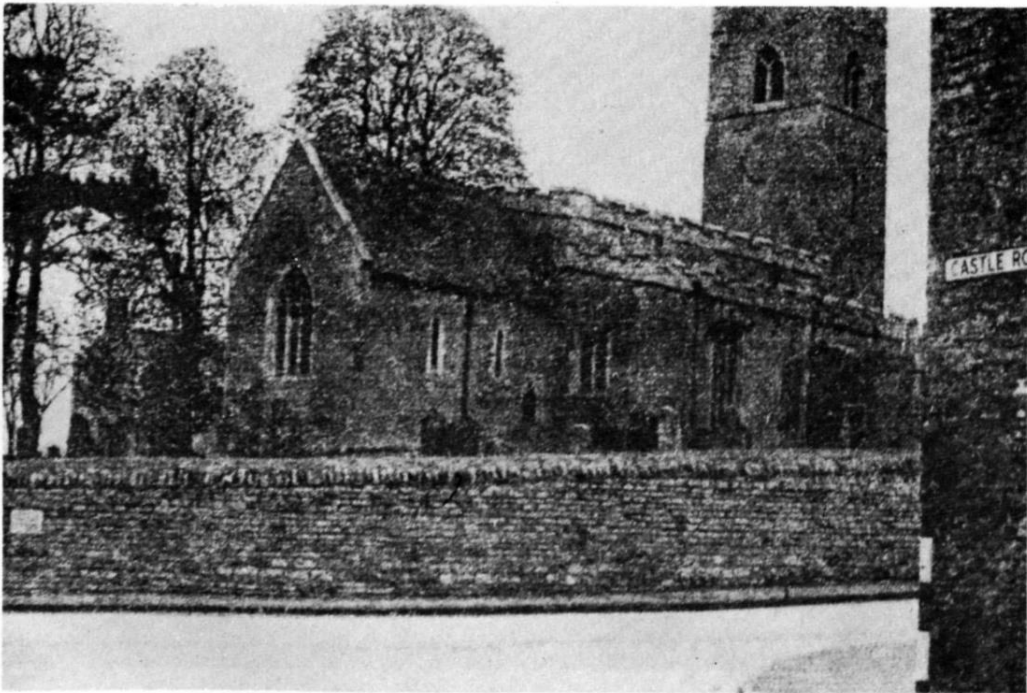
One "native" who became known as a great Rugby player, reaching International standard, and being the first player to be given a Bedford cap, was Mr. Samuel Dix Kitchener.

The village has a curious link with the turf through the Bletsoe family, who lived in Olney Road. The Bletsoes have been known throughout the County of Northampton in connection with racing. In 1901, Mr. Bernard Bletsoe had a horse, named Gruden, in the Grand National. On the day of the race, there was a blinding snowstorm. Almost everyone, trainers,



Olney Road approaching village centre.

dates of Pictures ?



Castle Road approaching church.



Northampton Road approach.



Bedford Road approaching village centre.

owners, jockeys, and spectators took it for granted that the race would be cancelled. However, after some delay, the stewards ruled that the race would take place. Bernard Bletsoe had the inspiration of a life-time. He sent to the refreshment rooms for a quantity of butter, and packed it tightly into Gruden's hoofs. The jockey, Arthur Nightingall did not have a high opinion of Gruden, but immediately the race was started, he was confident of success. Other horses were slithering about with balls of snow in their hooves. Gruden was sure-footed. So confident was Nightingall about the success of Mr. Bletsoe's manoeuvre that he allowed the horse to quietly trot beside Covert Hack, ridden by Archie Anthony, and engaged in conversation with Anthony. Surely this must have been the only race ever in which two jockeys had a quiet chat! Half a mile from the finish, Nightingall said, "Well, I must be going now so ta ta," and merely shot off, and disappeared into the blizzard. All the other horses were tremendously slowed down, and Gruden won by over four lengths. The second was Drumcree. Gruden was priced at 9-1. The four horse shoes were given to four branches of the family. The Lavendon one was stolen from outside Mr. Bletsoe's house in Olney Road.

On March 25th, 1958, *Sporting Life* had a full page article, written by Mr. Frank Woods, about this most extraordinary race. The article had bold banner headlines, "Snow Storm Could Not Stop Gruden. Bletsoe's Butter Brain Wave Kept Him Sure-footed."

A Spectator at the race has described how Bletsoe ran out to hug the huge horse; and how the horse's breath made a "Hole" in the snow.

At the time of this incident, Mildred Bletsoe was nineteen, and she used Gruden for her private riding. Fifty-seven years later, she said that Gruden had "the sweetest disposition of any horse she had known".

'Gruden' is the old spelling of 'Grendon'.

A well-known and popular figure at the turn of the century was Regimental Sergeant Major Harry Holmes, who was awarded the Military Cross during the Boer War. Mr. Holmes joined the 2nd Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment in 1896, and served for twenty-six years. He saw combat in the South African War, and in the First World War. A native of Lavendon, he moved to Yelvertoft at a fairly early age.

Mr. F. W. Hooton, well known as a Baptist lay preacher, did a great deal towards getting Lavendon's new school. Mr. Hooton was a member of the Divisional Executive for Education, a Governor of the Radcliffe School, and a Manager of Lavendon School. He was a member of the British Rail Convalescent Homes Committee. He died suddenly while on a visit to the Home at Dawlish, in 1977.

The present Chairman of the Parish Council is Mr. A. J. Cony. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. F. Cony were both members of the Parish Council at the same time. Mr. Cony Senior died in 1961. Mrs. Molly Cony is a tireless and energetic worker for village causes. One of her jobs is as bookings secretary for the village hall, which is no sinecure.

For many years, the village has fought for a by-pass. A number of years ago, Mr. William Biggs told me that he could remember when only two

vehicles, the carrier's cart, and the miller's wagon, passed through the village each week! What a different story now! The traffic census taken by Major John Wetheral, and his by-pass committee, shows that there are now 9,000 vehicles per day!

A recent letter from the Parish Council to the County Council representative produced the reply that Lavendon would not get its by-pass until after the year 2000. The Parish Council, and the By-pass Committee refused to accept that, and as a result of pressure from the Parish Council, the By-pass Committee, and the M.P., Mr. William Benyon, Surveys are now being taken, and it seems likely that the by-pass will come by 1986.

The discussion at the Annual Parish Meeting about the by-pass was a little noisy! It is obvious that wherever the by-pass goes, there will be objections from some-one.

One thing which has caused me some heart-searching is the extent to which I should record the disputes which took place between the Parish Council and myself as County and Rural District Councillor. In 1958, I was elected as County Councillor for the Olney Ward, which includes Lavendon. A year later, I was appointed Vice-chairman of the County Planning Committee. This brought me into close and happy association with that great architect, and far-sighted planner, Mr. F. B. Pooley. Village plans had not been "invented". Buckinghamshire was the pioneer county. At my request, Mr. Pooley arranged to come to Lavendon, do a village plan, and thus make Lavendon the first village in the country to have such a thing. This is referred to in the Parish Minutes for November 14th, 1960, and January 9th, 1961. I had expected the Parish Council to share my enthusiasm. It was a bitter blow that the majority of the Parish Council were strongly against proposals for a village plan. They also refused my request for a meeting with Mr. Pooley. There were Parish Councillors such as Mr. Cony and Lady Mary Hartwell who realised that such discussions could be very valuable, and agreed with me that the future of the village should be planned by discussion, not imposed from above. The people concerned were unyielding, and in April 1965, I made arrangements for Mr. Pooley to address a meeting in the village hall. I paid for the hall, and the printing and advertising.

At its meeting on April 12th, the Parish Council passed a resolution "deploring" the forthcoming visit of Mr. Pooley, and instructed the Clerk to write to him expressing their concern. The names of the Proposer and Seconder for that Resolution are, of course, recorded in the Minutes. The day before the meeting was due to be held, Mr. Pooley rang me, and read over the 'phone the strongly worded letter which he had received from the Clerk, Mr. J. H. Green, J.P. In view of the Parish Council's fierce objection, Mr. Pooley felt he could not come. The village lost a wonderful opportunity.

The relationships continued in the same way, and I suggested to some members of the public that they should exercise their right to attend meetings. At the meeting in September, 1966, Miss Loraine France, Mrs. Betty Carter, and Mrs. Rutherford were present. When we reached the most important item on the agenda, the Chairman ruled that it should be "taken in Committee", and ordered the members of the public to leave,



Sir Harry Johnson, Chairman of British Rail,
with Mr. F. W. Hooton and Mr. R. C. Horwood
at the Church Fete in 1971.

which they did. It is a sad state of affairs when a Parish Council needs to have secret sessions!

In January, 1967, the Parish Council instructed their Clerk to write to me complaining of my "improper use of Minutes!" This "improper use" was that I had obtained certified copies of the Minutes, and made them public in the village.

In the period from 1961 to 1967, the village could have taken a full part in the planning for its future, and it is sad that the door was slammed in that way.

There were people who had no aspirations to public office, but who were a beneficial influence at that time, such as Mr. Arthur France, Mrs. Betty Carter, Mr. Ray Ingram, and others.

Lavendon residents are looked after from the cradle to the grave. There is an efficient Baby Sitting Circle, and an active Old Peoples' Committee. The latter was formed before the First World War. Naturally, it ceased to exist during the War, but was reformed in 1918. The present Chairman is Mr. Ben Holmes. The British Legion and the Womens' Institute are very active. Mr. Reg. Panter was secretary of the Legion for many years, and there is a seat dedicated to him in the Garden of Remembrance at the cemetery.

Several master craftsmen such as Mr. Francis Lay, and Mr. Joseph Lay have left their mark upon the village. The former butcher, Mr. Edgar Lay, is a colourful figure, and a visit to his shop always resulted in a good joint, and a resumé of the week's affairs. A village policeman, Mr. Percy Wheeler, retired in Lavendon, brought up his family here and is now the oldest inhabitant.

The village is now in the Borough of Milton Keynes. Of course, it is not in the designated area of the City. I was the first Councillor of the Milton Keynes Council. I won the seat, despite opposition from Mr. Michael Farrer. The present Borough Councillor is a Mr. G. I. Ritchie, and the County Councillor is a Mr. A. W. Eley.

It is a pleasant thing that the old families remain. The Panters, Lays, Kitcheners and Ingrams are still with us. Some members of these families are not recognised as such because obviously, girls have changed their name on marriage. The village would be poorer without such people as Mrs. Julie Patrick, and Mrs. Barbara Adams. Many such couples have chosen to remain in the village, rather than move into towns.

The sale of council houses has been a topic for political controversy. It is worth while to point out that a number of tenants who have bought their houses, have made substantial alterations which have improved the appearance of council estates.

One thing which must be mentioned is the tragic death of County Alderman Stanley Weetman Lord, J.P. Mr. Lord was the Managing Director of Messrs. J. W. & E. Sowman. In 1946, Mr. Lord was elected to the County Council and a few years later was elected an Alderman. In 1962, Mr. Lord became Chairman of the County Council, being one of the few people from North Bucks. to attain high office in the County. I shall

not quickly forget the Saturday morning when a reporter from a Northampton paper rang me and told me that Mr. Lord's body had been found in Bardsley Spinney. It was quite clear from a note left by Mr. Lord that he had committed suicide. Later, many people realised that this terrible action had been planned a long time in advance. At the last County Council meeting which Mr. Lord attended Rear-Admiral Peter Skelton, C.B. whispered to me, "Doesn't Mr. Lord look ill" I glanced up, and saw a fearsome haunted dreadful expression on Mr. Lord's face. We were sitting in the front row, and Mr. Lord looked at us, obviously having overheard what we said, and his face became composed and smiling, with the expression which was so well known in North Bucks. After his death, I realised that Mr. Lord knew that he was presiding over the County Council for the last time.

There are two further matters which must be commented upon. Firstly, the proposals for the Third London Airport, which began in 1969. One proposal put forward by the Committee appointed by the Government was for an airport at Cublington, in Central Bucks., and the alternative was Thurleigh, Beds. The Thurleigh one would have affected Lavendon very badly. The members of the County Council shouted loud and long against the Cublington proposal, and it was withdrawn. However, the members of the County Council refused to make any protest against Thurleigh. Only Mrs. H. E. G. Durbridge and myself took part in the campaign against the Thurleigh proposals.

One other matter upon which comment must be made in the establishment of the Milton Keynes New City. The South-East study was published when Sir Keith Joseph and Mr. F. V. Corfield were at the Ministry of Housing. This document provided for a City of 250,000 people in North Bucks. In 1967, the New City Development Committee was set up. By this time, the complexion of the Government had changed. It was Mr. Anthony Greenwood who was in office as Minister of Housing when the New Town Development Corporation was established. It was Mr. Greenwood who instructed that the City should be called Milton Keynes.

The proximity of the City does, of course, affect the surrounding district. It does not appear that the early Government pledge that the City would be an alternative to excessive development of the villages, has been kept.

Life goes on. Lavendon is a fine democratic village. We warmly welcome the many people who are coming into the village for the first time. Perhaps the facts about the historic past will help us to build for the future.

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