Nick Ridley Remembers

My name...Nick Ridley

Born...1936, in Limes Rd., Folkestone...which was my g-father's house, where my mother was staying over the confinement. I grew up on our farm...Whitehall Farm, half-way between Elham and Barham, at the top of Whitehorse Lane which was opposite the Palm Tree inn. The farm was called Wingmore Poultry Farm in the 20s and 30s, because that is what it was...and in its prime it was one of the biggest in Kent...in numbers of birds. The main part of the house had been a semi pair of farm workers' cottages, each one one-up and one-down and very small. These were built in 1729-1730. At some period they had been knocked into one, with a kitchen added to one end. My dad's father had had a veranda added to the front of the house and an extension, one-up and one-down , added at the end opposite the kitchen when dad got married in 1926. The front of the house looked across Elham Valley to the downs above the Palm Tree, and from our fields we could just see Red Oak house. (On 1819 Ordnance Survey this is called Red Hook). From the back we looked up to Breach Downs and our own wood, Thomas Acre. It was, and is, a beautiful area, and I have always felt lucky to have grown up there.

My father was born in 1903 and grew up in Folkestone and because of delicate health, when he had left school he was advised to get out into the country for the fresh air. His father bought the farm for him in 1925/6 and he farmed it for 64years and kept in robust good health.

My mother was born in 1907 and grew up in Dunstable, Bedfordshire, the youngest of 4. Her father died around about 1917 (nothing to do with the war), and without the breadwinner the family fell on harder times. Donald was the oldest of the four by a long way, and took over the support of the family. They bought a smallholding just outside Denton (on the Folkestone/Canterbury road), and Donald ran that with chickens etc. I think my parents must have met at local barn dances...when "barn dances" were just that. I have a vague idea that a barn at Lodge Lees was used for these socials but I can't be sure.

My paternal grandfather was born in Reading in 1865, one of 7 brothers, sons of William Walford Ridley , who had settled in Reading and ran a timber business beside the Kennet and Avon canal from sometime in the 1850s I think. My grandfather, after an adventurous early life - 5 years apprenticeship sailing before the mast on 3-masters to South Africa and India, time in the Canadian pine forests logging and in the Amazon rain forests,= became partner in the timber importing business of Tolputt and Ridley in Folkestone. I never knew my maternal g-parents.

My earliest schooling happened at "Mrs. Hubble's"...a kindergarten on the back road in Elham, just opposite the hunt kennels. I can remember playing "tanks" around the back garden at break times. We shuffled along the crazy-paved paths making engine noises and holding an arm out straight in the manner of a tank gun, swinging it backwards and forwards and banging away when we spotted a German. I also remember going down the back path that ran from the road down past the side of Mrs. Hubble's and on to the main road, then along the main road to a bakery opposite the service station (run by Arthur Wootton in those days I believe) where we bought warm rolls for a penny and ate them leaning against the wall of the Abbot's Fireside. Later in the war both my sister and I went to a ghastly school in Canterbury, down the Old Dover Road. To get there we had to take the number 17 bus from the Palm Tree, and I suppose we got out at St Lawrence Rd., and walked past the cricket ground which the school was near. I have unhappy memories of that place but they have nothing to do with the Elham Valley. Going to school in Elham and then Canterbury when I was 5 to 8 years old gave me a great affection for the number 17 buses, and for what might have been a generation the time table stayed the same: buses from Folkestone to Canterbury stopped at the Palm Tree ("by request") at 15 minutes to each hour, those the other way came by at 10 minutes to the hour; they were scheduled to pass each other on the road above South Barham. Once when sister and I got off the bus from Elham (1942/3?) to cross the road to go up Whitehorse Lane we had to climb over the tow bars of 25 pounder field guns and their Quad tractors parked nose to tail all along the road. Part of yet another exercise , and taken as normal as the whole area was a training area, getting ready for the re-invasion of Europe, and all little boys knew about 25 pounder guns..they were as iconic for the army as the Spitfire was for the air force.

And this would seem a good place to recount "***my memories of the war"***, and although I was not even 3 when it started and nearly 8 when it ended, I can still recall some seemingly mundane incidents with greater clarity than I can last week's!

I suppose my earliest memory of the war, fittingly, is of the Battle of Britain. My father is driving our 1935 Austin 10 up to Bladbean and I am on the back seat going along for the ride. We had just gone over Wingmore railway bridge and turned left for the longer way round rather than go up Bladbean Steep when a series of dirty black puffs appeared in the sky way over Elham or beyond. My father stopped in the next gateway, we watched as more puffs of smoke appeared, silently and for no apparent reason as whatever the AA guns were firing at was so far away as to be invisible to us. Rather than go on, we turned for home. I was disappointed because I liked going for rides with dad. A very minor incident, but for some reason has stuck. I could still go to the exact spot where we turned... where the road turns right to go up the gentler hill to Bladbean.

Another, clearer memory of the Battle of Britain. We are all in our dugout just behind the house. There is a dog fight somewhere miles above us, unheard and unseen except for the vapour trails weaving and swooping, showing where the fight is but not what is happening. I am not allowed to go outside and watch the trails...and then we hear the warbling whistle of the empty 303 bullet cases falling end over end through the summer air and tinkling on the tiled roof of the house. Most of them fell softly into fields and woods , and even into the 60's and 70's they would be turned up by the plough and each bent and corroded case bearing testimony to its place in history; stamped round the base the legend W D 1940, and between the letters the arrow head sign of the British War Department, a sign connected to British arms since the 14th. or 15th. centuries.

Other memories crowd in now, as though I have opened flood gates by reliving these first memories.

My sister and I are in our 'big field' (called 'stonyclose') when we hear the unmistakable burbling of a doodlebug .We hurry for home, but see the V1 heading our way. We run to the nearest hedge and cower down. This must have been late '44 or early '45 because the elder and hazel hedge we hid behind was devoid of leaves. And as we sheltered there the doodlebug's engine stopped. The silence more profound because of the instant fear...where would it hit? The nose dipped and it started its glide. We waited a lifetime cowering behind our leafless hedge, until we heard the dull explosion from some way off, then silence again. In its glide it had cleared our valley and landed somewhere in the next. Why do I remember this incident from a long war? Because I can remember thinking, even at my tender age, what was the good of hiding behind a bare thin hedge as protection against nearly a ton of high explosive!

A far more frightening incident, and one which left me, and I think dad, shaking, occurred much earlier in the war, possibly '42 or '43. It must have been before the doodlebug incident because it involved a German fighter penetrating our air defences at tree top height in broad daylight. We were in our yard near the house, not far from the wooden garage where the Austin lived. Dad heard or sensed aircraft engines looked up, shouted, and as he threw me and himself behind the doors of the garage I glanced up and saw two German fighters,- probably Me 109's - at tree-top height racing straight for us, noses tilted down following the slope of the valley side, props, wings and guns pointing straight at us. One touch of the button and I am sure we would both have been dead. A fraction of a second and they had gone, their noise fading fast. That was perhaps my worst instant-shock of the whole war.

As East Kent was an army training area in the preparations for the invasion of Europe (not that we knew anything about that) we had much contact with the military, and to keep their training as realistic as possible they had freedom to go where they wanted, camp or bivouac wherever they needed to, and knock down or damage anything that was in the way of their movements. We had our fair share of military incidents, some of which I can recall.

It is I suppose 1943. I am standing in a field not far from the house. Two Sherman tanks come smashing through Thomas Acre wood at the top of the hill and trundle across our field towards me. A head pops out of the turret of the lead tank. "Which way to the pub?" shouts an American voice. I point to the gate and In my squeaky little voice give him directions to The Palm Tree "Through the gate and left down the lane to the main road," And off they went, churning up the soft grass with their tracks but using the gate instead of going the direct route which would have been straight through our barn. Compensation could be claimed for any damage done to property by the military on their exercises - payable *after the war!* But going to the pub in a tank!

Thirteen gaps appeared in the hedges of our 3-acre field above Breach Downs. A squadron of Churchill tanks had gone that way. I don't think my father claimed for them; there was no crop to spoil, no livestock let out and hedges grow back in time.

More potentially serious was the time when a company of Canadians took over the outbuildings in our yard one evening for their night's bivouac. The buildings were tar-soaked weatherboard, full of feed and equipment to do with the poultry farm. In one of them they lit a fire on which to cook their evening rations. A three ton (Bedford?) truck was parked against the end wall of the house. My father protested about the fire, but in the morning he became really angry with the soldiers... the truck was their ammunition truck and just the other side of the brick wall I and my sister slept. The sitting room had been converted to our bedroom for the slight increase in safety. The Canadians left, but more because of their orders I think than because of dad's anger.

One incident did end in tragedy. A number of bren gun carriers came up our lane onto Breach Downs. Just at the top of the lane is a part of the downs that is very steep. One bren carrier tried to go straight up, tipped over backwards and killed at least one of the crew of three.

Few of my memories can be dated accurately for obvious reasons, but one can be: 1st. June 1942. From my bed in the converted sitting room I could see through the doorway and window to across the valley. This night something woke me up, and above the horizon I could see a huge red/orange glow. Canterbury burning 8 miles away! One of Hitler's so-called Baedeker raids

As all of East Kent was an army training area the roads and lanes were churned up by the constant passage of tracked and heavy tanks, guns, lorries, bren gun carriers et al. ,until they were nearly impassable. My father had to use his Austin 10 for his work, and in his diary he wrote that one day he had four punctures, all of which had to be mended by the roadside. Tyres of course were strictly rationed, and the flints and pot holes soon wore them down to the canvas, so little wonder that punctures were almost literally a daily hazard. But being a tank training area had one advantage...after the war all the lanes in East Kent were resurfaced, even where they hadn't been surfaced in the first place, and lanes which don't, and never had, much use, will still probably have that surface . Whitehorse Lane was one such , at least within my knowledge. It might have been done since.

The single track railway which ran along the bottom of the valley, crossing and recrossing the Nailbourne stream, joined Folkestone to Canterbury and all the villages along the Elham Valley. Dad used the line on a regular basis in the 20's and 30's to visit his father in Folkestone, and he also used it to send crates of eggs from his poultry farm to customers around Kent and Sussex. He would wave the train down at what was Wingmore Halt and they would be at their destination by the next day, probably after several changes. But this service stopped in 1940 when the War Department took over the line to use it for rail-mounted artillery. For this they had to strengthen the bed of the rails and doubled the sleepers, and "Bosch-buster" arrived. Because of its size we assumed it was a cross-channel gun, but later we learnt that it was an anti-invasion weapon that could throw its one and a quarter ton shell 30000 yards into the middle of the Channel against any invasion force. Happily invasion wasn't attempted, but the gunners had to practice. When practice rounds were to be fired Wellington Boot, the Elham policeman, had to cycle along the valley warning people to open their windows so that the concussion from firing the gun wouldn't shatter the windows. Having completed his round Bosch buster was fired and Wellington Boot's windows were blown in, he had forgotten to open them. My father said that Wellington had a brother called Jack, but that might have been a joke!

The very real threat of invasion in '40 and '41 must have made a deep impression on my 4 year old mind, because I can still recall planning, even at that age, how I would stop the invasion onto our land. I would take my father's .22 rifle (used for keeping rabbits down), and shoot any Germans coming over the hill onto our fields from Dover way , and I would do it from the back bedroom, the windows of which looked straight up the hill to a gap in the hedge...through which any invaders would have to come! They never did so my plan never had to be tried. But my parents' worries must have seeped deep into my thoughts.

One memory which is more personal than war-torn happened to me in '41 or '42...I know I was very young. I was very ill at home, and Dr. Mitcheson from Lyminge said I had scarlet fever. At that time, with no antibiotics etc., scarlet fever could be fatal, and you had to go into isolation hospital to avoid passing it on. I very vaguely remember being in Kent and Canterbury hospital for a day, or just a night, then being transferred to an isolation hospital somewhere in the countryside around Canterbury...where, I have no idea, except in the back of my mind out Fordwich way rings a bell. It was an all ages ward and I was about the youngest there, out of the 30 odd patients. There were Morrison shelters down the middle of the ward , minimal nursing and truly awful food, Nobody seemed to be pleasant, the nurses didn't seem to care, and not having been away from my parents before I suppose in modern parlance I was traumatised. Of course, mum and dad were not allowed to visit, but they wrote to me and sent small games, but there were few games to buy in '41/'42 and little money for them. Letters sent out were baked in an oven to prevent our diseases escaping into the population, and generally this period must rate as one of the unhappiest of my entire life. It lasted for at least 4 weeks, and when mum and dad came to collect me I was so eak - from malnutrition I suppose- that my mother had to carry me to the car. I couldn't walk properly for a week or more.

As a corollary to my experience: years ago, when teaching primary children, one child had been away for 3 days. When he came back the note said he had been off with scarlet fever. I thought "you're lucky!"

More memories. It is morning. A badly damaged Lancaster bomber returning from a night raid is circling and getting lower in the air, over Wingmore and Worlds Wonder. As it circles the crew bale out, and we count the 'chutes..one..two..three..four..five ..six...and after the sixth it dips out of control into the woods beyond Bladbean. We think the pilot must have been circling to give the crew time to get out, and hadn't had time to get out himself. Because a Lancaster's crew was 7. Every little boy knew that. But six lived to fight another day. Not so the crew of a Flying Fortress that belly-landed on the flat land near the A2 road between Barham and Wootton. The only survivor was the pilot who had managed to bring his shot-up 'plane back to crash land on the first bit of flat ground. But all the rest of the crew were dead, all 10, not from the landing but from ack ack fire and fighters.

Late in the war we are in the house, a drone of aircraft engines getting louder takes us outside. The whole sky from horizon to horizon is covered with gliders and their tugs, all low, slow, in formation and heading south. This wouldn't have been the D-day paratroop drops, they wouldn't have come over us. Was it Arnhem? Quite possibly, because it was a huge armada, hundreds and hundreds of them. But of course then we wouldn't have known.

And now it is early 1945. We are all asleep. Suddenly we are awake...violent explosions not far above our heads, crashes and bangs of assorted artillery. What on earth! Then aircraft engines very close, and then a violent explosion on the hills opposite us above the Palm Tree Inn. A plane has been shot down and has exploded on crashing. Next day dad and I walk up to the crash site to see what it was all about, (and I to collect souvenirs...I got a thick piece of perspex and a dial from an instrument). The site was guarded of course, but rumours soon got around that there were 4 dead in the plane, but only 3 parachutes..the idea going round was that the plane was making a desperate attempt to get into Britain with a high ranking German, with offers of surrender etc. At the time the rumours just melted away, but it remains a mystery why a lone German plane should try to make a virtually suicidal entry over Britain when Britain held 100% air supremacy and the war was nearing its end. I have searched many books and websites but have found nothing about it. But it did happen and perhaps someone else can throw some light on this incident.

(Note: David Brocklehurst, the chairman of the Kent Battle of Britain Museum gave us this update: Dornier Do 217M, Werke No.3028 of 3rd Staffel of Kampfgeschwader 2 which was shot down by 3.7inch Ack Ack fire from gun site D4 and crashed in Covert Wood, Barham, Kent at 12.30am 23rd August 1944. Feldwebel L. Jooss, Feldwebel H. Grzybowski, Obergefrieter A Körner and Unteroffizier E. Schlüter were killed. The aircraft was totally destroyed. Covert Wood isn't very far from the Palm Tree Inn and on the opposite side of the road. The plane was shot down by Ack Ack, during the night and four casualties, as Nick correctly recalls. The other suggestions I would think are rumours and embellishments of the story over the years.)

Then the war was over. We hung out a big flag in the front garden, and I tied a small one on a wire frame to a convenient piece of guttering just outside my bedroom window. We went to a service of thanksgiving in Canterbury Cathedral, which had escaped serious damage despite the total destruction of areas nearby.

Months or maybe a year later a cousin returned from the Far East where he had been serving in the RAF in Burma. He came to visit us at the farm, and my memory is of his emaciated condition.

Quite apart from the remembered incidents which are few and far between considering the war went on for 6 years, the general impact of the war was all pervading, but I suppose we got used to it and "carried on". As my own earliest memories are of war years I have no previous memories of family life with which to compare life during the war, but it was all around us in everyday life. The first big impact on our life, although I can't remember it, was evacuation...not the mass evacuation from cities but our own arrangements. Soon after the war started my father thought it safest to send his family, mother, me and my sister, inland away from East Kent which was bound to see a lot of activity. He had family friends in Clifton Hampden, beside the Thames in Oxfordshire, and that is where we went, to live in a caravan beside the river. (The friends lived in Bridge House, which was the original toll house for the Victorian bridge at Clifton Hampden). I have no recollection of the time we spent there, but according to letters and diaries of the time we suffered more disruption and sleepless nights deep in the heart of England than my father did back on the farm. So after a month or so we returned to the farm and stayed there for the duration. The noise and disruption, according to mother, was caused by the bombing of Cowley (where aircraft parts and engines were made) and the aircraft at RAF Benson, a couple of miles away. There doesn't seem to have been any bombing of Cowley at this time so it must have been just aircraft noise that did for mum's patience.

Rationing was of course the aspect of the war that was a daily reminder of the difficult circumstances, but living on a farm lessened the impact of this privation , but I still have a "rationing" disposition towards food and have endless confrontations in the family about waste. It is very true that what you grow up with in very early years stays with you forever. Our weekly groceries came from the store in Barham, which at the time was called Perry's I think, and Mr. Hearn would arrive with the order which dad would have phoned in. The items would be taken out of his large wicker basket and placed on the kitchen table, then the ritual of coupon cutting would take place. Mr. Hearn kept a small pair of scissors in the top pocket of his fawn shopkeepers coat, attached to the lapel with a string. Each type of rationed food had its own colour and code system and with years of practice Mr. Hearn would snip off the tiny pieces of paper from each relevant page with nonchalant ease and hand back the ration book to mum, who then replaced them in the kitchen drawer until needed again. Compared to the bags of a present day shopping for a family of four the pile on the kitchen table would be pathetic or starvation diet. But I suppose we managed...everybody did. And as I grew up with the system I never knew anything different...until some years after the war when rationing was eased, and then discontinued. The only rationing that I can really remember impinging on me personally was sweet rationing, which continued long after the war. I seem to remember the ration was about 4 ounces a week (approx. 120 g. in new money.) But often sweets were rationed by lack of pocket money as well.

Some well-remembered characters from my earliest life, in no particular order, and with few dates:

Phil Hedley. Lived at the Palm Tree, taken in as an orphan from the East End of London by Bessie Watts, landlady of the Palm Tree. Worked as a general labourer around the local farms; grew and cured his own tobacco which he smoked continuously in an evil pipe; helped in the pub, and when Bessie died I think he might have taken over as licensee; he sometimes helped out as casual labour on our farm; a quiet man who like many of the older generation of that time " kept the noiseless tenor of their way."When he knew he had terminal cancer he ended his own life so as to save his housekeeper Molly from the trouble of looking after him in distressful times.

Molly Higgins. Lived at the Palm Tree, taken in as a London orphan; worked as a barmaid in the pub and when Bessie died more or less ran it, with Phil. In their old age Molly kept house for Phil at an Old People's home in Out Elmstead.

Tom Newing. Of Little Breach ; farm labourer, hedger; always wore a white collarless shirt with sleeves rolled half way up his forearms.

Mr. Marchant. Owned Breach Farm during the war; he was a small, precise, carefully dressed man, with a small military moustache, and had a very good boxer dog called Caesar. He was a very good farmer (according to dad); he died from loss of blood when he cut his arm or wrist while cutting logs with a circular saw.

Charlie Webb. Lived in the wooden bungalow (ex-Navy billet) across the lane from our house, our nearest neighbour; he had been severely injured in WW1 and lived on his pension; he walked with difficulty, with a stick; he had a mongrel dog called Toby who would run away down the lane when the door was open, and then Charlie would stand out in the lane...by our back gate...shouting for Toby to come back, using language unfit for my tender ears! When Toby returned, which he did, he would try to scoot past his master while Charlie would try to catch him a whack with his stick as the dog rushed by. Charlie's injuries included a severely damaged jaw, and he had a complete set of dentures, upper and lower, spring mounted. Dad told a story that when he went in to see Charlie one day the teeth were on the mantelpiece. When the door was slammed, being a wooden hut everything vibrated..including the teeth which lay on the mantel chattering to themselves until the vibrations stopped. Charlie's hut had been a Royal Navy billet for 30-odd sailors at Portsmouth, and after WW1, so I heard, Charlie bought it (presumably as surplus to requirements in the run-down after the war) and had it brought to the Whitehorse Lane plot which included a paddock and woodland of several acres. The building is still there, according to my sister and Googleearth. Charlie was pretty bad-tempered, but he had a kinder side. One day I was playing out by our back door when Charlie called from the lane...through the hedge he passed me an orange! This must have been just before the war because I can't remember seeing another for years. Like bananas and all other exotic fruits they were low on the priority list of imported foods which kept us alive during the war.

Alec Webb. Butcher from Lyminge, delivered to customers; announced his arrival by kicking open the back door and shouting " rations" and dumping his wicker basket on the big kitchen table. The basket would contain a selection of cuts from which mum would select what she could afford in coupons and/or cash; but Alec seemed to be generous, and even at the height of the war I cannot remember a great shortage of meat; perhaps this is just my memory ,or maybe , having grown up with the shortage, it never occurred to me to think of it as such; Having been paid from mum's purse and snipped the coupons he would re-cover his basket with the white cloth that did duty as protection against flies and dirt, bang his way out of the kitchen with a bellowed farewell, bang the outside gate, and go across to Charlie Webb's. Alec was the archetypal butcher, large in voice and frame, with a large round face, red and always jovial, a forceful person with a personality to match. As a local butcher he did the local slaughtering, and on occasion he came to our farm when dad wanted a pig slaughtered for our own use. This was allowed in those days, and I can't remember whether it was in the war or just after, but I can remember very vividly helping dad to salt down the two sides of a butchered pig. This was done on a wooden bench (used as a work bench usually) on which the side of pork was laid; the salt was crushed rock salt in a bag in a wooden barrel from which you took handfuls and rubbed and pressed and ground it into the meat until all the meat was coated and the salt had penetrated into the flesh , then the side was turned over and you did the same again. The damp from the meat helped to dissolve the salt so that your hands were as salted as the pork; and any cuts or grazes became agony-- but also were protected against infection and bacteria as we hoped the side of pork was. But its not a cure that would find many favours now. The sides of pork were then wrapped in muslin cloth and hung from rafters in the garage or barn. The rashers and joints off our pig would have been recognised by sailors in Nelson's navy, and needed days of soaking before being cooked.

Mrs. Banks: helped around the house and with the poultry, eggs etc. during the war because dad was away every day working for the KWAEC. She was a very pleasant person, hard-working and completely reliable, but to my very young eyes seemed worn and I suppose prematurely grey from a hard life. Her daughter married Bill Newing from Little Breach

(brother of Tom) and they lived in the house (now completely redeveloped I think) a few hundred yards along the valley road from the Palm Tree, towards Elham, on the left. I heard years later that Bill had been killed on the road while walking home from the Palm Tree.

Tom Goatman: ran a little shop half way up Cullings Hill (?), I can't remember what his main business was (radioes? bikes? general?) but we went there weekly to get our "accumulator" battery recharged. As there was no mains electricity along the valley (until '47 or '48) we used this to run the Cossor radio. The glass jar had to sit on a cork mat behind the radio in case the sulphuric acid spilt.

There are of course other people that I came into contact with, often in connection with the farm and my father's war-time work with the Kent War Agriculture Committee, but my fleeting impressions would not add anything to the local history...as the above sketches may not either!

Where I grew up:

Whitehall Farm was a small one, nowadays it would be a smallholding, In the 20s and 30s we had upwards of 4000 free range hens based in several large wooden chicken houses. The eggs had to be collected by hand, individually "candled", weighed and boxed, and then were collected by a firm called Stonegate I think. We also supplied hotels in Folkestone with eggs and oven ready chickens. Most of this processing work fell to my mother. To produce a bird ready for the oven she had to kill the bird, pluck it by hand while it was still warm (easier to pluck), take out the giblets and gizzard and put them in a separate bag, singe off the bits of feather not removed in the plucking, then fold the legs in and truss it ready for the oven. Towards the end of the 30's the egg trade died because of cheaper imports from France. These eggs were sold as "Calais day old". They might have only taken a day to get from Calais, but three weeks from Poland and eastern Europe where they were laid. But they were cheaper!

After the war we went in for pigs and mixed farming- vegetables, potatoes, barley or wheat etc.

Before combined harvesters the harvesting and threshing of corn was a long and labour intensive industry. I can remember from at very early age working in the fields stooking the sheaves as they were flipped out of the binder. You would walk along, collect a sheaf in each hand, lean them stalks downwards against each other and press the top ends together to form a sort of tent shape, you would then collect another pair of sheaves and place them tight against the first pair..then another pair and another. I think usually a stook was made with 6 or 8 sheaves. The purpose of putting the sheaves into stooks was to allow air to get into the sheaves to dry the grain and straw. This was before the days of grain driers. These stooks would be arranged in regular lines across the field to await carting and stacking when the corn was considered dry enough. Damp corn would moulder and ferment in the stack and on occasion set the whole stack alight. When the stacks were ready they would be thatched to await threshing in the winter. Threshing was done usually by a threshing gang who would go from farm to farm with their threshing machine and engine. I can remember, it must have been late in the war, a gang coming to thresh our stacks. They had a steam engine rather than a tractor, and setting up the whole gear took much of a day. The threshing machine was drawn up against the stack, the steam engine was then worked into position so that the long drive belt ran from the engine's huge fly wheel to the drive wheel on the threshing machine without running off but tight enough not to slip. Old railway sleepers were then pressed under the wheels of everything so that the shaking of the steam engine did not disturb the alignment. After which the threshing could begin. The thatch was removed from part of the stack, one man on the stack would pitch each sheaf to the man on the top of the machine, who cut the string of the sheaf and scattered the corn into the mouth of the machine rather than cast the whole bundle in a lump, which might jam the threshing drum. One or two men would be on the sacks, taking them off as they filled, tying the mouths and putting new sacks on the chutes. When things were going well and a crop was heavy "sacking off" was a hard job. One man would be on the straw at the back of the thesher, one on the steam engine, and others filling in as needed. Being small I was given the job of "tailings"..a job nobody else wanted anyway!... I think there were four chutes, three for grain and one for all the small rubbish or tailings that didn't get passed out by the "walkers" which took the straw out of the back of the thresher. Tailings consisted of dust. havels, husks, short lengths of the beard off the barley and so on. My job was to watch the tailings sack fill , take it off, replace it with a new sack, tie the full one up and dump it to one side. The nasty bit of the job was that , standing by the tailings chute you were covered with it.

Early combines didn't have a collecting tank for the grain but used a similar bagging off system. And again if the crop was heavy it was a race to get full bags off, tied up and replaced before those still filling overflowed. The tied bags were pushed down the slide at the back or side of the combine, and when there were three or four you pulled a lever which allowed the bags to fall onto the ground. They were then collected by tractor and trailer.

The change in the job of "harvesting" within my lifetime epitomises the vast changes in all aspects of agriculture. What was done by dozens of workers over weeks bindering, stooking, carting, stacking, thatching, threshing is all done by one or two men in a day or two. The world could not be fed under the old system...but then there weren't 6 billion (and rising) to feed! But that sentiment is not part of the Elham Valley story.

Nick Ridley