

## ALLENBY'S BOYHOOD DAYS AT WEST BILNEY

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### General Wavell and Joys of Country Life

**WEST NORFOLK** readers will be particularly interested to find in General Sir Archibald Wavell's biography of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby, that Allenby spent several of his boyhood years at West Bilney.

It was there, between 1863 and 1878, that the young family of Allenby's rode, swam, shot, skated, fished, birds-nested.



General Wavell says that the purchase of this 2,000 acre estate at West Bilney, with some good rough shooting, was not a successful purchase from the business point of view, for the land in Lincolnshire, which sold to pay for the Norfolk property, steadily increased in value, while the Bilney estates steadily declined in the market, and when sold at Mr. Allenby's death fetched only half the price originally paid. But it suited his taste admirably during his lifetime.

The author continues: "There was good shooting with which to entertain his friends; the surroundings of wood and field, hedge and lane, stream and pond, were those he had known and loved since childhood; and here he could pass on to his children that deep feeling for the English countryside that he inherited through so

many generations. He was one of those rarely fortunate people, rarer now than ever, who know exactly what they like and are in such circumstances that they can do exactly what they like to do'.

### **Ideal Home for Children**

The family usually spent the summer at Felixstowe, and moved to the Norfolk property for the autumn and winter. It stood in a park, with woods and a rookery close by, through which ran a small trout stream (a tributary of the river Nar), dammed in one place to provide a swimming pool. The woods were full of birds, and during the seasons of spring and autumn migrations many more visitors to these islands could be found in them or on the coast nearby.

Life in the country really was country life in those days, and the children grew up with little knowledge of towns or factories or crowds or of the stir of business, but with much simpler lore of the peaceful countryside and the countryfolk and of the ways of birds and beasts. They rode and drove as a matter of course as soon as they were old enough, or even earlier. Perambulators were almost unknown at that time: panniers on a donkey, or a red pad-saddle with an iron ring round it to prevent falls, served in their place, so the children were on donkey-back or pony-back before they were a year old. Their games and pastimes were of their own devising.

In the holidays there was the pleasant home life and country pursuits of West Bilney and Felixstowe: in the summer sailing, fishing, swimming and riding; in the winter shooting, riding, skating. Country life was not the restless week-end business it has now become in so many places.

### **Allenby's Love of Birds**

At West Bilney the two elder boys with their father tramped the fields with guns, or sometimes went for long walks through the woods with an axe to cut off dead branches or to blaze trees for cutting. There were horses and ponies, and all the family rode, though hunting lay under the ban of the tender-hearted grandmother. When it froze there was plenty of opportunity to skate. Both his father and mother were keen observers of bird-life, and from them Allenby drew the great interest in and love of birds that was to remain with him all his life. From his mother, a keen botanist with well stocked garden, Allenby learned the names and care of flowers and plants. A brother of the vicar of Ashbocking, Professor Edward Cowell (Lecturer in Sanskrit at Cambridge), who frequently visited at Bilney and Felixstowe, added to his knowledge of botany and taught him to recognise and classify ferns and plants. Another visitor at Bilney was Maria Charlesworth, (sister-in-law of Professor Cowell), a Victorian authoress of simple tales of a devotional nature.

In February, 1878, while Edmund Allenby was still at Halleybury, his father died. The West Bilney property was sold soon afterwards, and the family henceforward lived entirely at Felixstowe.

Above taken from the Lynn News – July 8<sup>th</sup>. 1941