

West Bilney Hall 1962 - 1972 - Geoff Newton's Memories.

I began working for S.Fell and Sons in February 1962 in Kings Lynn, as a mechanic.

Their fleet of vans and cars was based in Chapel St. (now part of the car park opposite the Council Offices) I was asked by Mr. Fell if I would mind helping Mr. Stammers the gardener who lived at the "Old Lodge" to cut some branches off the oak trees alongside the road near "Bilney Hall" where the "Fell" family lived.

Mr. and Mrs. Fell and their son Peter lived at the Hall, from where they ran the business of S. Fell and Sons, selling TV, radios, cycles and toys, with shops also in Kings Lynn High St. two in Wisbech, and one each in March, Peterborough, Holbeach, Long Sutton, Sutton Bridge, Downham Market, Watton, Brandon, Swaffham and Marham; the head office being at Chapel St, Kings Lynn.

Mr. Stammers told me in conversation that a bungalow on the main road at East Winch was to be sold by auction at the Dukes Head, in Kings Lynn. Florence and I were fortunate enough to buy it!

We then moved to East Winch, from Marshland St. James, and I began to work full time at the "Hall", there being a large workshop at the rear which had been used by the Estate's carpenters in previous years.

This was March 1962; there was no "Mains" water or "Electricity" in those days. There was a brick pump house over the fields behind the "Old Lodge", housing a petrol engine and pump



which pumped the water up to a 5,000 gallon tank on top of a brick pillar, approximately 60 feet high, near where the old "Hall" used to be. The water was then fed by gravity across to the "Hall", where it went through a filter ready for use.

Every Friday Mr. Stammers and I went over to the pump house, put a gallon of petrol in the engine, started it up and left it to run out of fuel; this pumped enough water for it to last for one week.

At this time there were 2 flats at the "Hall" which were let, mainly to R.A.F personnel serving at Marham; the flats used the same supply of water!

Electricity was installed at the "Hall" and in the workshop, produced by a diesel engine running a generator. This was 110 volt D C supply, which charged 55 two volt batteries; these were large glass cells with lead plates in them, kept apart with glass rods and filled with sulphuric acid and distilled water. Periodically Mr. Stammers and I had to wash these out, then refill with acid, not a very nice job! These and the generator were kept in the buildings

on the right as you turn into the yard.

There was a Rotary Converter in the "Hall" which turned the 110 volt D C current into 240 AC current, which ran both the TV and electric iron!

In the winter we started the generator every day and ran it until the batteries showed "Fully Charged". Of course during the summer it was not necessary to run as much, maybe once per week. It was quite a good system and worked well. In the workshop there was a grinder and drills, all 110 volt D C.

At this time, as there was always work to do in the shops, warehouse, the "Hall" and Flats etc. a full time carpenter was employed, Graham Wilkinson from Grimston
In the spring work was also needed on 2 bungalows and 2 chalets that the Fell family owned, on Beach Road at Hunstanton.

There was a central heating system installed at the "Hall"; this had a boiler house that ran on coke; but as it used 5 cwt per day and needed constant attention it was deemed too expensive to "run", so fires were lit in the house every day.

Mr. Stammers and I cut branches off the oak trees alongside the road with a crosscut saw, split them with steel wedges and took the pieces, approximately 3 feet in length, back to the "Hall" in a Morris 1000 van. We sawed them into logs using a bench saw, powered by a petrol/paraffin Fordson Major tractor.

The fireplace in the main room of the "Hall" had an 18 inch grate that Mr. Fell kept well piled up with wood. The heat from it was quite something; at times he said to me "Put another log on the fire Geoffrey" and I would have to shield my face with my arm in order to get close enough to do so!

I have been told that the "Hall" was the Headquarters for the searchlights in the area during the war. It was in quite poor repair when Mr. Fell bought it.

(Webmasters note. I seem to remember that Mrs Fell once told me that the "Hall" was also used as a military hospital – possibly this was during the first World War)

There was a nice walled-in garden and greenhouse where lots of the household needs could be grown.

There was also an underground tank, at the back, which held 200 gallons of petrol; so the cars could be re-fuelled each morning.

There was always a job for Mr. Stammers and I, as you can imagine. Cutting and sawing wood for the heating, maintenance of the water supply, including putting bags of salt in the filter at intervals, as well as starting the pump, checking the batteries and the electricity supply.

The Company had 12 vans and 4 cars to maintain and also sold Raleigh Mopeds, which obviously needed repairing from time to time.

After a few years both mains water and electricity was connected, which made life much easier., Because of this however, the old methods fell into disuse. Mr. Fell was of retiring age so gradually began to sell off the shops and of course the vans.

Mr. Stammers and the carpenter retired; I stayed on, planting 1000 Christmas trees per year for 5 years, on the field that belonged to the "Hall". These were then sold in the shops at Christmas, as they matured.

(Webmasters note. For some number of years Mrs Fell gave the Village Hall a Christmas tree. This was always erected and decorated in time for various events that took place over the Christmas and New Year period.)

By the early 1970s most of the shops had been sold and the only work at the "Hall" was in the garden. I was fortunate enough to be offered a job by John Lemon at the Middleton Service Station and so finished working at the "Hall" in February 1972, after 10 very happy years at West Bilney Hall.