

DERSINGHAM 2000 HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW 14

Date interview conducted: 12th November 1998
Name: Sidney John Mitchell (usually known as John)

When did you first come to Dersingham?

I was born in Dersingham in 1916.

Where do you live now?

Four Winds, Fern Hill

Do other members of your family live in Dersingham?

No, I am the last remaining member of the Mitchell family.

What are your earliest memories of the village?

Your memories go back a long way. I am going to refer to some pictures; the corner shop - Linford's.

I remember that quite clearly; it was Rowley Linford's shop. His father who was a painter and decorator built the shop with the living accommodation above. Roland married a local girl, Maisie Terrington, daughter of the Butcher's that operated where Mr. Lincoln the Undertaker now is. The picture was taken before the War Memorial was installed. Lynn Road looks a bit vacant. I can see in the distance a building that would have been Emma Middleton's shop. Mr. Wheeler the Headmaster lived next door to Linford's. The shop was occupied by two sisters Emma was one, I forget the other. They drove a donkey and cart in the village and sold paraffin for the heating and lamps. I believe their father was in business before them and when I came back here to live the shop was occupied by the Thaxter's and was used as an off-licence and has only recently been demolished.

The picture of the Dun Cow

The Dun Cow I remember quite clearly. The landlord was Mr. Magness. I remember him as he had a growth on the back of his neck that used to stick over his collar. One of the men in the pony and carts could have been my father who used to call there for a pint. I also remember there was a duck pond on the side which led up to the farm that was occupied by the Balding Family. George Balding. There were three Balding farmers in the village. Fred lived opposite The White Horse, Jim lived in the row opposite what is now the Post Office and George near The Dun Cow. I can't remember it being demolished. The daughter of Mr. Magness became the Landlady after it was rebuilt. When I was

in the village the Dun Cow was as it is in the picture. When I came back after the war the new one was there.

The picture in the Church Magazine.

That is a picture of the Station workers; LNER. The poster showing Great Eastern Railway is dated 1914. It can be clearly seen. The group consists of Mr. Chilvers who was the then Station Master and lived at the bottom of Fern Hill. He lived until he was 100. It shows him wearing his form of frocked coat and peaked hat. Also on his right my uncle George, the guard on the railway. You can see he is the guard by his uniform. At the back is my uncle Arch who was a porter and he is wearing a sleeved waistcoat. They were proud of their station. All stations competed with their garden and particularly Wootton. Wolferton was nearly always the winner. I remember also the introduction of the bus as we know it now. That was in the 1920's. It was quite an event. Buses were the only means of transport. I remember the children usually travelled by train to school in Lynn; one in particular, Joycie Lee, I have a picture of her running to catch the train down Station Road.

My memory takes me back to immediately after the First World War, the return of my father from the war. I was five or six years old. My father had been a member of the Sandringham Company and had served with them in Gallipoli but fortunately he was wounded on landing and he got home. There were many that did not come back and there is still speculation as to what happened to them. (*Photograph of Mr. Mitchell's father is shown*). He was wounded and became a military policeman. Father was employed on the Sandringham Estate. Most of the village relied on employment from the estate.

I can recall German prisoners of war. They could be identified because they had patches sewn on what was left of their uniform. They were employed by the local shepherd Mr. Lincoln, who lived in Chapel Road and tended all the stock on what was then the marshes between the railway line and The Wash. The marshes were owned by the local farmers and they would graze their stock, cattle, sheep and horses on these marshes. Mr Lincoln was designated the Marsh Shepherd and tended the flock on a contractual basis for the various farmers. I remember him going off to the marshes in the morning in his horse and cart with German prisoners marching behind. I don't know where they were billeted. There were five or six.

I started school at five. It was known as St. Nicholas Church School I think. Mr. Wheeler was the Headmaster. Before him it was Mr. Firth. He had retired when I started. I also remember Mr Alexandra was the Assistant Head Master, Miss Catlyn.

We were segregated, infants and then we'd move up into Standards; Standard 1, Standard 2 and the top was Standard 7. You left school when you were 14. You sat for a scholarship at 11 and if you passed the exam you went on, that's if your parents could afford it, to King Edward V11 Grammar School in Lynn. The parents had to contribute towards the rail fares, and also the uniform. I passed I was given the choice. If I went to the Grammar School my mother would not have had a new costume. So I wasn't too keen and carried on until I was 14. When I left school I worked for Sandringham Estate. I went to the Game Department. Usually you went to the gardens or the woods. Some went to Queen Alexandra's Carving School. They became good joiners. Where the stud is now it used to be behind there.

I went as House Boy to the Head Keeper. All Heads of Departments had an establishment which was paid for by the King. Depending on the status of the Head of Department so his household was numbered. The Head Keeper had a groom, a gardener, a maid, a washer woman, and a house boy. The Estate Agent, Beck, lived in The Laycocks which is still the official residence of the Manager. He had a larger staff. He had two maids, a gardener, a groom, and a house boy. The Head Gardener had one maid. The Stud Groom, Mr Walker, he had a very old house boy and one maid. There was a definite pecking order.

You were lucky to have employment. The standard working week was 52 or 54 hours. You worked 6 days a week and you had a half day on Saturday and finished at 1 o'clock. If you had a bike you would peddle like mad to get home to play football or cricket for Dersingham. That was life.

I remember Queen Maude who had her residence at Appleton House. She was one of Queen Victoria's daughters. When Queen Victoria bought Sandringham for her son and heir Edward V11 I think it was decided that she should be given Appleton so that she could come whenever she wanted from Norway. She used to walk from Appleton House to Sandringham House on most days to use the Post Office. It had its own Post Office in those days letters were not delivered; that was the function of the House Boy to collect the mail from Sandringham Post Office once or twice a day and also to take the mail for posting.

It was the visit of the Royal Family that was waited all year and Sandringham became a very busy place. They would bring the horses with them. The highlight of the Christmas visit was the distribution of beef on Christmas Eve that took place every year and was held in what later became the garages. The beef was home produced and butchered and then you would assemble in a queue in alphabetical order. That was the Christmas dinner. Depending on your length of service and position in the pecking order you were allocated the beef. You took a nice clean towel or tea cloth and when your name was called you

would plough through the clean straw on the floor and put your cloth down and the beef was banged in. You would acknowledge the Royal Family as they sat and you'd be on your way with your dinner.

I was born in Chapel Road in the row opposite the old Methodist Chapel. I was born in the middle one. My grandmother and grandfather lived at the end. Chapel road was always fairly well housed. The only development is on the same side as the Chapel which was a meadow then that belonged to Mr. Pratt.

I left home in 1933 and went into Royal Service. I was a footman in the Royal Household until the outbreak of war. Off I went to war. By the time I returned, about 1950, my mother and father had died I went my way. I earned my living in business. When I retired 1985 my aunt was still alive in Chapel Road. My late wife and I decided to come back and set up home. No 27 Fern Hill was on the market at the time and my wife liked it. I've been here now 14 or 15 years. If I didn't live here I don't think I'd stay much longer. I don't like what I see happening to Dersingham.

What are the biggest changes you have seen in the village?

I was surprised at the changes when I came back. The over development that had taken place. Dersingham was never a pretty village but it always was a lively village.

What would you say was the village centre when you were little?

That is difficult to say. We had no village green. We had no centre, the church had a great influence in those days. It was church school. The Women's Institute was very active. Chapel was very lively, particularly The Primitive Methodists. For me living opposite it was three times on a Sunday. The Chambers were the leading lights in the church. They lived in what was The Temperance Hotel; it is now the Westdene Hotel. The Chambers lived there. They were builders. They built the Chapel. Mr. Alan Cross is married to a Chambers. The Wesleyan Chapel in Post Office Road. Both were well supported. We were more God fearing than we are today. As a child you had no choice. I did a stint in the choir. The vicar was the Rev. Oliver who had had a very rough war and become shell shocked and so he was an excitable character and if we annoyed him he got very excited. He took religious lessons at the school Scripture lessons for about half hour in the mornings. The organist was Mr. Rye; he was the son of the miller who operated the Mill at West Newton.

There were all sorts of functions in the evening. Dances would be held. Ballroom dancing. There was an enterprising individual Petty Officer Warren who introduced gymnastics in the Institute. I don't know where the money came from for the equipment, fencing, boxing, punch balls and parallel bars.

We had a high time twice a week. We were taught boxing and fencing.

I remember the first cinema in the village; it was at The Forester's Hall. They were silent films the accompaniment was by piano. I think the admission was about a penny. I believe the operators came from Hunstanton and their name was Wells; two brothers. It was always full.

The local carrier, most villages had a carrier, Dersingham had two. One was a member of my family, George Mitchell, the other was Teddy Wyr. They journeyed between Dersingham and King's Lynn and on the way through Sandringham, going west, they would call and pick up your instructions. If you wanted to send a pair of boots to be made or repaired, or a pound of sausages they would do this for a charge of about twopence or threepence.

One of the first cars to appear in the village was one owned by Mr. Parker the grocer. I had the job of cleaning the car on a Saturday for a shilling; it was a Morris Cowley with a dickey seat at the back. It had to be washed and polished. It had a brass radiator, brass handles, all had to be polished. I was a baker's boy at Fitts the Bakers in Chapel Road. There were 3 bakers. Fitts in Chapel Road, Jarvis where the Chinese Takeaway is now, and Playford's in Manor Road. Three Butchers, Bird which is now Scoles, Lines and before Lines, Tansley who built Ben Douran, opposite the Coach and Horses, and Terrington where Lincolns is. Pubs in abundance, six or seven. The Alexandra stood next to the station; that was kept by the Bird family. One became the local coal merchant that is now Dungers; that was never very busy. The Coach and Horses, The Feathers, The Albert Victor, The Dun Cow. People had their special pubs. The White Horse was the most popular pub for the workers; The Feathers was the gentleman's pub.