

Tales from ...Nassington House 1600 - 2023.

In retrospect, so many of the things that fascinate me about our village began life as a half remembered conversation with a family member. Stories of eel filled ponds and subterranean tunnels from my brother Fran for example. The wartime antics of the LDV on Sunday afternoons that so amused my Uncle Harold. Tales of the 'top end' and 'bottom end' gangs from my brother Toni. The musical outpourings of the *Sunshine Jazz Band* that my mother told me about amongst very many other things.

But more of all that later.

Of course, we never ask the right questions when we have the chance do we? Nassington House is a case in point. Now, it's interested me for years for two main reasons. Firstly, my mother mentioned having gone there as a child, and how odd it seemed to her that the floors were made of flagstones. I didn't have the sense to ask her why she visited, or who with, or even when but, just like last time and the tales from Nassington Station, by asking the right people and looking in the right places over the past few months, the jigsaw pieces are fitting together nicely. I might even have solved a village mystery.

And the other reason?

Well, have you ever spotted anyone in the front garden, doing a bit of weeding perhaps? Mowing the lawn? Relaxing with a good book in the dappled sunlight below that glorious old tree?

No, neither have I.

'With her head tucked underneath her arm....'

Way back in the when Nassington was, according to '*An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Northamptonshire*' quite an important place all things considered. King Cnut might have dropped by for a short break in 1016 for starters, using a hall used before him by Saxon rulers. A kind of Viking *AirBnB* you might say. By the Norman Conquest in 1066 it had been a royal possession for a long time then already. William himself may well have hunted close by in Rockingham Forest and his own son, Henry I, gave some of these royal holdings to Lincoln Cathedral (perhaps his aim was to store up some moral gold in heaven given the slightly dodgy manner by which he had ascended to the throne). These lands in Nassington would eventually be the site of Prebendal Farm and the Manor House which went on to act as the ecclesiastical and secular centres for village administration. There was wealth aplenty after all, and much to keep an eye on. The area has a fine pedigree too. Fotheringhay Castle with links to Richard III and Mary Queen of Scots just a hop skip and a jump away. Peterborough Cathedral not far off either where Mary Queen of Scots would eventually be buried for a short while at least, as too was, and still is for that matter, Catherine of Aragon. She lived for a time at Old Sulehay Lodge no less, formerly used as a hunting lodge by her

adoring hubbie when he could still be described as such. Then there's Apethorpe Palace, visited on occasion by Charles I and James I, the eventual home of the Earls of Westmoreland. Southwick Hall and its many secrets...

Wow.

But situations can change, and the world was a crueller place back then.

Political ups and downs were so often 'settled' on the executioner's block and certainly this was true for the ill fated Mary Queen of Scots. She was to meet her grisly end on just such a block on February 8th 1587 just a couple of miles up the road. Some say she haunts the former castle staircase still, in its new home at the Talbot Hotel in Oundle, the very one she used to descend to her untimely death. It, along with some of the castle's windows, was installed there in 1638 after the castle itself was ordered demolished by her son, the aforementioned James I. It is claimed that marks on the balustrade bear the imprint of her ring as she gripped it while walking down to meet her fate on that cold and dreary morning. Elizabeth had the place vacated soon after the execution, wishing no one to live there any longer, and one of James's very first acts as King was to ensure that, at '*Foderingey*' '*nae twa stanes o' ilka hoose shuld rest ane aboun anither*'. Hmm. Call me an old cynic if you will but perhaps the alleged fixtures and fittings from Fotheringhay Castle are rather like those 'authentic' pieces of the Berlin Wall purchased by thousands upon thousands of tourists since 1989. If they were all put back together again then the wall would be big enough to encircle Germany in its entirety. Similarly, Fotheringhay Castle might look more like the Winchester Mystery House, enormous, with staircases leading nowhere and rooms built within rooms. Who can say for sure, but it's a good yarn all the same.

To her credit, her cousin Elizabeth I, who had signed her death warrant after all, never quite reconciled herself to her pivotal role in the whole sorry saga. Yes, Mary had indeed been involved in plots to dethrone her and, yes, the Catholic church at the time would have been delighted to see Mary succeed in a blaze of Catholic glory but to resolve the issue with the swing of an axe man's blade? Makes you veritably shudder. They were, after all, related, through Henry VII. Two of his children were Henry VIII, Elizabeth's father, and Margaret Tudor, Mary's grandmother. It was Mary Tudor's son, James V of Scotland, who sired Mary Stuart, hence first cousins once removed. Just about on the Christmas card list then. And she had a legitimate claim to the throne so, hey, Elizabeth had cause for concern. Their relationship was fractious from the get go too, as the Catholic Mary refused to ratify the 1560 Treaty of Edinburgh which would have declared Elizabeth the uncontested monarch of England. She didn't want to see her own claim to the throne dead in the water when such things mattered so much more than is evidently the case today with a divorced and Catholic raised British Queen currently sporting a shiny new crown. So, swords were metaphorically drawn. Bizarrely, and some might say extremely foolishly, despite upsetting her Protestant kin, Mary fled south when she herself was deposed in 1567. Rather than the expected, but unlikely, open-armed welcome she found herself under house arrest. For nineteen long years no less, her very last days

spent in Fotheringhay Castle, and a focal point during that time for all those muttering, plotting Catholics lurking in the wings. They never met, or so the history books tell us, despite various film versions of their tale that conveniently place them together in a field somewhere. Oh, the joys of poetic license.

But perhaps the films have it right though, albeit not the meeting place. On a recent trip to Southwick Hall I was reliably informed by Fabio Perselli, the current custodian, that the two ladies might actually have met there, neutral ground so to speak, and quite handy for London and certainly Fotheringhay. And that is not all that Southwick Hall has to contribute to the tale of the tragic Mary. Elizabeth, once the dirty deed was done, would go on to claim that she had somehow been tricked by her cunning advisors and had not actually signed the death warrant at all.

George Lynne, then head of the Southwick Hall household, not only attended her actual execution but was charged with safeguarding the original copy of that infamous document lest it fall into the wrong hands and lead to all kinds of Popish shenanigans. It would have been shown to Mary on the evening before her execution and, presumably, left in his safekeeping thereafter. And so he took it away with him and hid it somewhere safe so as not to lose it. We've all done that haven't we now, maybe not with a death warrant, but something important or precious we want to keep safe. Instructions for the new dishwasher perhaps. Only trouble is you can't find the damned thing when you need it again. Oh alack and alas! Fabio tells me they always assumed the lost death warrant was somewhere up in the Chapel area but it hasn't actually been found as yet. Maybe though, just maybe, they're looking in the wrong place. A recent visit by *Haunted Heritage* made 'contact' with Mary once their seance table stopped wobbling its way across the crypt floor. Yes, you read that right, Mary herself took a break from pacing up and down the stairs at The Talbot to drop by and tell them that they'd been looking in the wrong place all along. The warrant, she said, was indeed there but in the 'solar', not the Chapel. Blimey. I do hope someone takes a look, and soon. What a coup that would be for the other side.

Anyway, something needed to be done I suppose as far as Elizabeth was concerned but execution? Really? Afraid so. Simply put, that's how they dealt with things in days of yore, a once and for all solution with no going back. No former PMs lurking in the undergrowth, mumbling in Latin, biding their time until their own dirty deeds brought them tumbling back to reality. Politics was a cut throat old business back then, literally, before the joys of universal suffrage. It may be a system we have cause to doubt when votes don't go as expected, but better than the block, even if members of the family can be trying, very trying, at times. To give her some credit though Elizabeth took nineteen years to be 'tricked' into signing the infamous warrant and was forever troubled about the whole messy business, striving to distance herself from everything to do with it. And here's the point, she distanced herself from this whole area to a greater or lesser extent, including our very own village. Much of the Crown's land locally was subsequently sold off or given away including, most probably, the land where Nassington House would be built. It was customary to pay those who had 'fought' for you in battle (the Lord of

the Manor that is) a Knight's Fee. This often took the form of a piece of land or a house. Similarly, some land was given for direct sale and, whether by one means or the other, two 'gentlemen' namely Thomas Eastchurche and Alexander Kinge both came into property in our village in September 1598. Now, sadly, Thomas Kinge didn't live very much longer after this purchase so didn't get to enjoy the many and varied delights that the area has to offer. As sole owner at this juncture, Alexander Eastchurche saw fit to sell the whole lot on, for the grand sum of £450, to Sir Anthony Mildmay in 1616. In turn the land was left to his only daughter Mary who would go on to wed Francis Fane, 1st Earl of Westmoreland. Though based in Apethorpe Palace they and their heirs subsequently owned much of our village for many centuries thereafter and collected rent, amongst other things, as a consequence. Well, until 1892 to be exact, when their holdings were sold, thereby ending their role as the village's landlords. Nassington House, rather surprisingly, gets a pretty lukewarm mention in the sales document. It is registered thus:

Lot 55

A VERY VALUABLE ACCOMMODATION BUILDING.

Occupying an exceedingly favourable position in the Village of Nassington, on the north side of the main road, a little to the west of the 'Black Horse' inn.

A STONE BUILT AND STONE SLATED DWELLING HOUSE.

Fronting the roadway, and containing, on the Ground Floor, Parlour, Living Room, Pantry and Wash House with Work Room and Coal House adjoining; on the FIRST FLOOR 2 good Bed Rooms; and on the UPPER FLOOR 2 Attics.

At the rear is a well built stone and tiled

SET OF BUILDINGS

Consisting of Open Cart Shed, a Loose Box, Chaff House and Piggery.

So, there you have it, except for the Close named after them that is.

Now here I must point out that much of what comes next is reasonably intelligent conjecture. So far I have been unable to put my hands on an actual document with an actual date and an actual name that states categorically who had Nassington House built and when. Indeed, when first built it may well have been called something altogether different. Patricia Ryan, a former owner, mentioned to me recently that there are clear signs of a fire in the attic so maybe documents perished as a result. Suffice to say what I know so far makes reasonable sense I hope so, read on if you will.

Nassington House itself dates back to at least the 1600s and, although added to and improved over the intervening four centuries it still has many of its original features albeit either inside or at the back of the property but there nonetheless. The 1987 Inspection Report refers to it as a '*substantial detached private dwelling house... being of mixed age but originating we consider from the 1500's-1600's*'. From the front there are new windows from the eighteenth century, a nineteenth century wooden porch (albeit replaced at least twice so a little like Triggers broom...) and, oddly, railings in the wall still in situ, one of the few houses in the village not to have 'donated' them during WWII. To aid the war effort, people and businesses were encouraged to give up any iron railings or gates etc, to be melted down to build vehicles and other useful things in the war against Fascism but what really became of all the collected items is, in itself, something of a mystery. Why does Nassington House still boast its railings then you may ask? Well, I do have a theory though, of course I do, so see what you make of it. Matthew 'Matthey' Mould, an eventual owner of the property, died on July 20th 1939. The executors of his Will, Frank Ernest Barnett and the Reverend Charles William Limb, went on to sell the house, as per his instructions, to Major and Mrs White. But not until June 1941. Now why he had nothing better to do in the midst of war than move house is an interesting point in itself. In 1941, with an invasion regarded as a matter of when rather than if, perhaps he was urged to move into the area to help with some sort of resistance, who can say? Presumably though, the house stood empty for two years with no one to offer the railings up for the war effort. Or, perhaps, as a Major, he had sufficient clout to hang on, so to speak, to his railings rather than see them removed only to languish in a pile of others that would never be used?

Take a closer look when you next stroll by. Grade II listed of course. Collyweston Slate roof these days, what else? Whether Eastchurche or Kinge had it built or actually resided there we may never know. Who knows what might show up? Someone had it built after all, it's just a matter of putting your finger on the right piece of paper if it still exists. Maybe the whole lot are secreted in a hidey hole in Southwick Hall along with that illusive Death Warrant, or shoved up a chimney somewhere?

But Patricia Ryan had other documents she had kept about Nassington House since she and her husband bought it. Yes indeed, and rather intriguing ones at that. Now, before we all get ahead of ourselves, none of them specifically mention Nassington House by name but why would she have been given them when the house was purchased unless they are relevant to its history? The oldest one, and I nearly fainted when I spotted it, is dated 1690. Once you get your head around the unusual spelling and swirly handwriting, it appears to be the 'minutes' of meetings, held from May onwards throughout that year, to settle various financial matters in the village. What interested me in particular was the information concerning who would be leading said meeting – '*Chosen Churchwardens for the year 1690, John Peake and Isaac Elkings*'. Digging around in various old documents kept by Colin Dolby (bless the man for his good sense in doing so) I suspect that John Peake

went on to marry one Mary Males. The Males family will figure significantly in our tale so remember the name, I'll get back to it in due course.

It's certainly an intriguing place in terms of appearance too, with some oddities to say the least. Why, for example, does it stand so far away from the street unlike all the other buildings along Church Street? Then there are the interior wall paintings, up in the bedrooms, faded to just blue now after four hundred years but still visible. Intricate stencilled designs that must once have been highly coloured, far more extensive and truly lovely, the wallpaper of their day I suppose. It was usual for artisans of one kind or another to travel the country, offering their services to those who could afford them, to brighten their homes or make things run more smoothly. One of the beams in an upstairs bedroom was allegedly taken from a ship in the dim and distant past, who knows which ship or why, and something of another mystery given that we were on the edge of Rockingham Forest territory at the time, so why bother with a ship's beam? It's a thing of beauty nonetheless. Access to the upstairs rooms is via an uneven corridor, lumpy and bumpy but little wonder given that it was created using reeds and a lime mix many years ago. As I go along I'm becoming an amateur 'expert' on a myriad of things and here is a case in point so hold your hats, I'll give you the low down on this particular building material shortly. Intriguingly a couple of the back window ledges boast what can only be described as graffiti. The window itself looks down on a Tudor style privet maze, lovingly and painstakingly researched and subsequently created by another previous owner, Jane Martin. Perhaps the stonemason responsible for the window decided to while away a few minutes scratching his initials into the stone or, more likely, it was to remind the owners of his work for some elusive reason, payment perchance. He might even have been an ancestor of mine for the Blacks have a very, very long history of working as stonemasons in Nassington and hereabouts so it's certainly within the realms of possibility.

And yes, there sure are flagstone floors downstairs.

As mentioned, the property came into the hands of the Earls of Westmoreland who became the Lords of the Manor in Nassington. While they chose to reside in Apethorpe Palace, Nassington House was rented out eventually to tenant farmers who worked the field behind the house where Tyler's Pond now is.

Tyler's Pond? What's Tyler's Pond I hear you cry (or some of you at least)? I've recently discovered that mentioning Tyler's Pond is a fail safe way of knowing if someone grew up in the village. Had you done, you'd know all about that pond not to mention the cart and horse that met their squelchy end in the bottomless depths. I'll come back to that later too, have no fear.

So, a series of tenant farmers working the field behind the house and paying rent dutifully each month to the Earls of Westmoreland. By 1832 a Mr John Linney was the rent collector for the village, noting down a £493 sum collected from a Mr Males (there's that name again) for the two hundred and twenty nine acres he was responsible for including Nassington House and the Brickfield.

So here we are back with the Males family as promised. A John Males is associated with us further back still, being recorded extensively on the 1778 Enclosures Map. Indeed, the Tax Redemption records of 1798 show a John Males as the second largest landowner in the village after the Earl of Westmoreland. If you take a look around Nassington Church, which I have had cause to do quite a bit in recent months, you'll spot a memorial to him and his sisters above the wooden door that leads to the kitchen area. Clearly the lands he worked accrued a fair bit of profit as such an engraved memorial would have cost his executors a pretty penny in the 1800s. Sister Mary died in 1819 aged 71 (not the one married to John Peake but rather her niece I suspect) and Sarah in 1830 aged 89. John himself died in 1833, aged 71, so he was born in 1762. Whether he and his sisters lived together in Nassington House in a kind of genteel, gentleman farmer Jane Austenesque manner, all sipping tea together from china cups before a roaring fire while toasting their crumpets I cannot say for absolute sure, but I hope so. To be truthful it's quite pleasing to bring renewed interest to this 'forgotten' family tucked away peacefully in a corner of our church, stop and take a look at it sometime. Further investigation of the Poll Book and Electoral Register takes us back further still however. My calculations suggest, after all, that our John Males (No. 1) would have only been 16 in 1778. His mother was Anne Males (née White) and, in her Will, dated 1791, she mentions four children, Mary, Sarah, John and Stephen, all said to reside in Nassington. Many gravestones were removed from Nassington churchyard in the 1970s, there's a plan I've made for the church and given to Reverend Tailby if you'd like to see exactly who and where, but fortunately no fewer than two John Males still have theirs undisturbed. Trust me, you've seen them. The big box tombs in the corner up by the church, brother Stephen's too. John Males No 2 died in 1789, the inscription still legible, John Males No. 3 in 1753 aged 93 no less, his gravestone also pretty readable, both alongside Stephen Males who died in 1809. If you do the calculations it seems highly likely that successive generations of the family, each naming the surviving eldest son John I would guess, resided in the village and, most probably, in Nassington House, from the early 1700s to the 1830s. A bit more digging has unearthed just that little bit more. It would seem that John No 3. born in 1660 was baptised as John Mailes in our church on March 16th 1661. His father was Christopher Mailes and his mother Mary. His sister Elizabeth was baptised on 23rd October 1664. Perhaps all three or even four generations resided in Nassington House, along with assorted siblings and family members. A variety of documents were also kept, including the Wills and Indenture documents currently in the custody of Colin, one of which holds the key to why Patricia Ryan has something mentioning John Peake. Hope you're keeping up, its convoluted I know, but suffice to say lots of Peakes and Males and all their paperwork and memorials make me feel pretty sure that generations of them lived in Nassington House from the late 1600s to the mid 1800s. Hopefully the supply of crumpets was plentiful. Given the size and longevity of their memorials they could certainly afford them.

Linney's log book was found in the 1970s in 35 Church Street to where our tale will return us later. It was 'secreted' there by Samuel William Fenn and Samuel Ireson in 1862, for posterity presumably. That turned out rather well then. You just never

know who lived in your house long before you did, leaving dusty reminders in some out of the way place, stuffed up a disused chimney perhaps, or some other nook or cranny. Or somewhere in Southwick Hall. Always worth having a quick rummage about in the flues, you never know.

Back to the Census information though. In 1841 John and Mary Coles are mentioned as the residents of Nassington House and in both 1851 and 1861 John and Elizabeth Wilson. In 1871 new residents, in the form of Luke and Alice Dixon, had taken residence.

Our tale livens up considerably, however, with the arrival of Alfred Blott Whitney. He nearly put Nassington well and truly on the map. Nearly but not quite. Mr Whitney decided to try his hand at the brickmaking business and where else would he begin but in what was to become the Brick Field.

An entire horse and cart disappeared...

Another easy assumption was that Tyler's Pond was actually spelt Tiler's Pond. After all, the original purpose of the original three excavations there was to get at the clay needed to make bricks and, I supposed, tiles. I'm learning not to jump to conclusions as they're often false and the true answer is invariably far more interesting. Census details from 1881 show a lot of potters as well as brick makers living in the village at this point as rural brickfields, of which there were many, produced various items. Drain pipes for example, sewage pipes and tiles, skills associated with a potter and not a brick maker. Five potters lived in Nassington at the time, including a lady, all but one, William Forster, having come from far afield. This suggests to me at least a healthy business, healthy enough to attract workers from outside the village at a time when many didn't stray too far. As for the brick makers, two of the four were Nassington men.

Tyler was, therefore, a person, and not the would be 'Brick King' either. He was not the one to create the bricks that built so many village houses and walls, sheds and outhouses, many still standing today off Runnel Lane – the 'bottom shop', Mould's the Butchers, Martin Longfoot's house, Nassington Station even? But he will figure in our tale. Be patient.

So, Alfred Blott Whitney decided to try his hand. He was born in Folksworth and, aged 39 in 1881, according to the census of that year. Now, he overlaps John Males by a mere two years. Another poser then. Did Blott Whitney move into Nassington House after John Males died in 1883 or had he moved out prior to Blott Whitney's arrival for some reason? By 1881 Blott Whitney was employing four men to work his seventy two acres in the village in various ways. It could be that his arrival and choice of residence coincided with or was prompted by the construction of the railway in the 1870s. Perhaps the contractor given the job of building the infrastructure was looking for a local source of bricks and Alfred stepped in to help with all those bridges, tunnels and station buildings in need of construction. Such areas were often developed by a river as a handy water supply was useful for the

brick making process and the Runnel flows right past where the kilns used to be. Three pits were dug in the field to extract the necessary clay, two having filled with water over time, due to neglect, thanks to an underground spring. Similarly, along the Ruisbrick Lane in a field also owned by Blott Whitney are some lime kilns. These kilns were worked by a Mr Murkin King, a labourer who would eventually work also on the railway. All that remains today to prove the existence of these kilns are memories, old map references and the gate that led into the field from Ruisbrick Lane. You can find it yourself, in the part of the lane that dips, on the right hand side. Once the lime had been extracted and dried it could have been used for mortar for said bricks, or to spread on the fields as a fertiliser in those areas not built on limestone, or to use in the creation of lime fly ash flooring mentioned already upstairs in Nassington House and possibly in the roof of the Black Horse. Ruisbrick Lane itself would have afforded a handy way of both accessing all the fields alongside as well as transporting the lime to wherever it was needed. By now I know you're dying to hear more about it so here we go then.

Lime fly ash is quite the thing, though, should you discover that your house has it. Unfortunately, Jane Martin found herself in the midst of a chaotic situation concerning just this very matter, having unwittingly stumbled across some when trying to unblock windows filled in to avoid the Window Tax in an upstairs bedroom in the 1990s. By so doing an old fireplace was uncovered which proved to be highly unstable and in danger of falling forward and crashing through the floor, potentially bringing the front of the house down with it. In December. Not good. During the course of saving the front of the house some of the lime fly ash floor was inadvertently removed and all hell broke loose. Lawyers. Enforcement and Conservation Officers. Stern directives about replacing what had been accidentally removed to precisely the standard and in the same way that it had been created in the first place centuries before. You can't tamper with it you see, it's protected, unless it has been ruined by the passage of time. No matter how lumpy and bumpy your floor gets or your roof sags, you're meant to leave it alone.

Blimey.

Fortunately, one of the two experts at the time able to undertake the challenge was prepared to save the day. It's a very, very tricky and precise business and not just something your average builder can deal with while knocking up an extension out the back. Oh dear me no. There's an extremely swift chemical reaction you see, once the reeds and the lime and water are in place. Once you add the ash on the top you need to move fast, very fast. The flooring gets extremely hot and, within seconds, sets rock hard, so you have to get your metaphorical skates on. No mucking about. So the damage was made good and so too the floor in the adjacent bedroom with the graffitied window sill. That was allowed though. Death watch beetle. One dropped on the bed one night so Jane knew they were lurking in the crevices, nasty little blighters, and, as it turned out, they had munched and mashed up the floor over decades into small blocks so it, and they, simply had to go. The upside of the tale is, of course, that, not only was the front of the house saved, but,

in the process of 'making good' the work after, those marvellous old wall stencils were uncovered. A silver lining for an otherwise difficult situation for all involved.

Back to the brick making though and our friend Blott Whitney. Maps from the time show the brick kilns clearly marked in the now Eastfield but, alas, there is no sign of them now. I know, I looked, along with Tracey Gilder and her granddaughter Evie, a couple of months ago. Tracey and I knew of the tales associated with what was to become Tyler's Pond so, full of trepidation and armed with my trusty strimmer we braved the hillocks and rabbit holes, fully expecting to find our way to the actual ponds impeded by brambles and weeds, like latter day heroines of a Grimm fairy tale. Goodness knew what we'd find, an overgrown mess we assumed. I'd even had a dream about the place, peering through the undergrowth to see a black panther enjoying a drink from the waters....

Wrong again. Getting to the pond itself was no problem whatsoever much to our amazement. It was as if someone had conveniently nipped round with a Flymo in anticipation of our visit. It looked just as it had when we were children – calm waters, bulrushes galore, trimmed grass but all slightly eerie. We could only assume that the very many fallow or muntjac deer living in the field were responsible for the tidy grass but, unsurprisingly, we didn't see a one. Nor a black panther for that matter. A bit disappointing really. Nor did we find Len's missing fishing rod.

So, Blott Whitney had the area dug out and the bricks etc made, quite a fair few I imagine if so many houses were built of them. Sadly, however, our fame on the international stage was not to be. We were not destined to be home to the world's largest Brick Museum selling tea towels and mugs emblazoned with...

<p style="text-align: center;">WELCOME TO NASSINGTON, BRICK CAPITAL OF THE WORLD!</p>
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No shop with a selection of miniature sewerage pipes and toilets dangling from key rings. No trick rubber bricks on sale to be thrown at your unsuspecting friends and family during the Christmas festivities. The quality of the clay in the Peterborough and Eye areas proved too much to compete with and that was that. Fletton brick, as it's known to the initiated, is not that frost resistant so was used mainly for interior walls.

Despite being, ostensibly, a religious man who held prayer meetings at Nassington House, Blott Whitney was not adverse, allegedly, to having a string of 'lady friends' nor to hot footing it to the USA it seems when his business failed to take off, leaving his debts behind him. Some attempt was made, at least, to cover his costs though. The **Peterborough Express** on Wednesday 5th October 1887 detailed the instructions given to a Mr W. Mann to auction the brickyard plant and stock on Wednesday September 21st 1887 as the owner was 'going abroad'. The property consisted of '*75,000 drain pipes, 100 sewerage pipes, 7,600 tiles and 1,700 bricks of various sorts*'. There were also railway coal and lime wagons, two clay wagons, a 400 gallon iron tank and a number of barrows, tramway and iron wheeling planks

too, suggesting again a connection with the railway station. Eager bidders would have gathered at the auction in Marholm for the 1pm start, maybe enjoying a swift half at the '**Green Man**' before proceedings began. Here's where it gets intriguing though, at least for those of us who know the tale of Tyler's Pond. The final 'lot' for sale was not only a cart but also 'Whitefoot', a five year old bay mare...

Now the Census for 1891 shows John and Martha Starsmore as the next residents of Nassington House so perhaps they also purchased many of the items on sale? Maybe. Then, in 1901, Walter and Laura Askew took up residency. What became of Whitefoot though? The life expectancy of a horse is around thirty years if they are properly looked after, so, at best, dear old Whitefoot could have survived until around 1912. So not our infamous horse then, or was she?

And so we come to Mr Tyler, he of the Pond. He appears to have been living in Nassington House in 1911 and probably for some time beforehand. By 1921 there are three owners of Nassington House listed in the Census, not just Mr Tyler but also, surprisingly, Alfred Blott Whitney too and Matthew Mould. I suspect that, given that it is a sizeable property, various families could have lived there at the same time. All of the previous owners are noted as farmers so dear old Whitefoot might have helped them all in her time. Could Whitefoot be the very horse said to have perished, along with her cart? And what became of Mr Blott Whitney's transatlantic adventure? Did he go at all? Did he sell all of those sewerage pipes for nothing? Or did he go and come back, tired of all the sunshine and sarsaparilla? His name appears on a couple of Conveyance documents too when, in the early 1900s, the land adjacent to Nassington House, including the driveway, was being sold off to Ruby Kelham. His name appears alongside David Brassey (later Major Lord Brassey of Apethorpe OBE JP DL), both of whom were anxious to keep the mineral rights to the land in question.

As mentioned, all village children, until quite recently, and for decades before, have been told about the horse and cart that got swallowed up by the mud and waters and sucked down into the murky depths never to be seen again. The pond is bottomless we were all told. So don't go there was the strongly implied warning. It still gives me the collywobbles now. The young June Stokes and Jean Wilson both remember being told the exact same thing in the 1940s as little girls just as Tracey and I were in the 1970s. Children, perhaps fortunately, don't know the pond exists I suspect as it is not visible from the field so maybe I shouldn't be mentioning it at all. As a former teacher you'd think I'd know better but there you go. Bramble bushes obscure the view of the waters and bulrushes beyond. Not too many summers ago I had cause to contact one of the owners of the field, Susan Perrett, as my annual battle with the brambles creeping over into my garden seemed doomed to failure yet again. She was more than happy to send men to chop back said bramble and there has been no issue with it since but, during the course of the conversation, she did mention that the field was kept 'as it is' for the benefit of the wildlife who, it must be said, clearly enjoy a high old time. They've gone for years left to their own devices it seems, undisturbed, except for a small group of gallant explorers armed only with pink wellies and a strimmer in the past few months. The owners of the field received

an EU grant, I was informed, to make it worth their while to leave the field alone. As a child I remember it populated with cattle that would pop their heads over the fence if you happened to be in the garden. Big, brown-eyed, beautiful animals who loved you to stroke their noses or tickle their ears. On occasion they might get into the gardens and feast on your flowers, local men like Bill Fitzjohn and Raymond Sewter called in to shoo them out into the field again but that has not been necessary, sadly, for many a long year. They did the same in the garden of Nassington House Patricia told me, through the gate that leads into the field. Doubtless the grant has been kissed goodbye too but still the weeds and grasses block the way to the pond. I'm half tempted to ask Ben Jolly if he wouldn't mind creating a pathway up to it when he next cuts the grass in the field, an extra footpath, but that might be irresponsible.

It could have been all quite different though I discovered quite recently. While going through paperwork that had long been languishing in a dusty box on a top shelf of the village hall store room I came across a missive sent by the Planning and Transportation Department of Northamptonshire Council, dated 1991, asking the then owners if they might consider leasing the pond and the area around it with a view to preserving the area as a *'nature reserve by and for the village'*. Sue Paice, the then Pocket Parks Officer, describes Tyler's (or the Brickyard Pond as it is alternatively known) Pond as *'a site of considerable significance to wildlife conservation'*. The hope was that Tyler's Pond could be properly managed. Why this never came to pass is something of a mystery and an opportunity missed. Who is footing the bill for the field at all now is anyone's guess too.

I was always rather concerned during school summer holidays when I saw boys heading off to the pond, fishing rods and buckets in hand and would say to my mother that one of them would come to some harm in the infamous muddy depths one of these days'. No-one would hear their screams I protested but, as far as I know, thankfully, no one ever came a cropper. The odd missing rod and boot perhaps, but nothing untoward. My brothers Toni and Fran, members of the 'top end gang' launched, as boys are wont to do, various 'missiles' in the form of their metal toys into the pond, flinging them, along with suitable military sound effects only boys can make, along a plank, cheering no doubt as they flew and eventually sank never to be seen again by enemy bombers or the gang from the 'bottom end'. I wonder what does lie in the waters beneath? Lots of rusty toys no doubt but not a horse and cart I'm pretty sure. And so is Justin Mould. He works in the Fisheries Department of the Environment Agency so he would know you'd think. The water is quite shallow actually he assures me, so it's all a mere 'cautionary tale' told to local kiddies to keep them away from the water. I'm not sure if I'm pleased by that or disappointed, it's a good story after all and certainly effective as all of us who know of it treat Tyler's Pond with great respect. An underground spring, of which there are plenty in Nassington, must have filled up what had once been two of the clay pits to form the ponds. They are silted up too but the water is beautifully clear. Someone, at some point, must have added a few tench or perhaps they were dropped in by birds for this is what those summertime fishermen were after. There are newts as well, frogs, the occasional eel. Justin fished there as a little lad, Peter

Quincey too along with his daughter Lesley and Len Chambers until, of course, he lost his rod. Many others for many years. Tench can tolerate water in a fairly poor condition I'm told. They are benthic fish, meaning that they have modified fins that enable them to crawl along the bottom of sea beds or lake bottoms. They like still waters with a clay or muddy substrate and abundant vegetation so Tyler's Pond would suit them down to the ground if you'll forgive the pun. As they feed they give themselves away by producing sheets of fine bubbles. It could be that the odd eel made its way there when the waters were high, on its annual migration to the Sargasso Sea to spawn. Another bizarre tale but true, every single eel throughout the world swims and slithers its way there, from stream to lake to river to sea, during night time hours, to spawn once a year after which they die. You'd think you'd see them but you don't.

Weird.

The loss of his horse (whether Whitefoot or another) and cart, or maybe, and more likely, the inconvenience of it getting stuck in the mud, didn't seem to stop Mr Tyler, another religious man known not to swear, from working the field when he moved into Nassington House along with his daughter. Apart from that he also produced Stilton cheese and with some success it must be added. It was widely distributed in the area by all accounts, even to the USA and Australia, nice and ripe by the time it arrived I shouldn't wonder. His daughter Katie had the job of washing out the cheese cloths daily ready for the following day's production. Nice. Nassington House has, conveniently for Katie and the other members of the household, a separate wash house in the garden. Just think of it? More items for the potential souvenir shop – Nassington Cheese Cloth, Stilton flavoured ice cream and bags of lime to do with as you saw fit.

If only.

After the infamous Mr Tyler came Henry Starsmore in the 1920s to work the field along with his relative Wim Ireson and, after them, George Crowson. He's mentioned as residing in Nassington House in Kelly's Directory. I reckon that the house had various occupants all under the one roof at any given time, it's big enough after all. By this time Nassington House was actually owned by the aforementioned Matthew Mould and his wife Fanny who, in their turn, moved from the 'bottom shop' into it but let out the land for farming. They seem to have enjoyed living there and certainly stayed put as there is a lovely old photo of the Golden Wedding celebration for Mr and Mrs Mould, taken outside featuring some of the Kelham family too. It would seem that they remained close friends and business partners for many years. In the interim Mrs Mould seems to have had a job sorting out the day to day running of the place. The British Newspaper Archive makes mention of no less than four adverts placed by the lady of the house for staff during the 1930s. By all accounts Fanny Mould at least was a fervent Methodist. Various legal documents are witnessed by the then Methodist minister, Reverend Charles Limb, so the admiration was seemingly mutual. He is featured in the photograph too, the gentleman with the dog collar. So, a closely knit group, living and working in

the village and residing, some or all of them, in Nassington House. All rather charming really. But it all end in tragedy sadly. A newspaper account of Fanny's death states that she died in 1938 as a result of a wasp sting, aged eighty six. It would seem that she was minding her own business one day, sitting in her lounge, when a wasp came in and stung her in the jugular vein. Sadly Matthew only survived her by one year.

As mentioned, then came Major and Mrs White, he of the iron railings, followed during the war years by proud Scot John Graham, his wife Kathleen and their three children Mary, Greta and Gordon. In an odd quirk of fate the current owner, Julia Peach, found herself sitting next to Antonia Cook, a former classmate, at a school reunion recently, only to discover that Antonia's mother was the same Mary. Small world. She remembers visiting her grandparents in Nassington House as a little girl and was happy to share with me family recollections of a home they all clearly loved. Her mother got ready for her marriage there before travelling to the ceremony at Yaxley Church in 1953. Decked out in the requisite finery she made her way downstairs to join her parents only to find her mum being plied with whiskey, what else, by her father, after taking a tumble down the stairs. Wedding nerves perhaps or the infamous lime fly ash floor? Gordon, the only son, has a memorial in the church too, this time a sad one though, remembering his death in 1947 in Palestine. Although WWII ended in 1945 he formed part of the peace keeping force in the Middle East. Lieutenant Gordon 'Lofty' Graham met his untimely death at the age of just 22 on May 15th 1947. As reported in the *Boston Guardian* on May 28th, while serving with the 147 Airborne Park Squadron of the Royal Engineers, he was killed whilst attempting to dismantle a mine planted on a railway line near Qiryat Motskin, Haifa. He and his second in command had sent all of their men back to a safe distance but sadly they did not survive when the mine exploded. He was awarded a military funeral and a few years ago one of the Graham family went out to visit his grave. She took a stone with her, upon which his sister Mary had written a message so that, from that point on, he would always have a little piece of home with him in that far away resting place. Members of the Graham family have continued to attend the annual Remembrance Service in Nassington Church over the years. His sister Mary had applied for the Elizabeth Cross for him which was granted posthumously and would wear it when she attended the service in our church. Sadly she is no longer with us but, last year, her son and Gordon's nephew attended in her stead. In the early days a former comrade from his regiment sent flowers for the service through our Post Office too. Gordon Graham is buried in the Khayat Beach Park Cemetery in Israel. Though at rest far away, he is clearly not forgotten. Maybe stop by his memorial in the church too when you visit that of John Males.

Other people remember going to Nassington House for other reasons, and here my mother comes back into the picture.

'I promise that I will do my best'

In 1909 a group of girls appeared at a Boy Scout Rally and declared that they wanted to join in the fun. Wanting a share of the pie is not a new thing, no indeed.

Lord Baden-Powell, who had started the Boy Scout movement, decided that the time had come to start one for girls also and the rest, as they say, is history. A year later the Girl Guide Association was officially started under the leadership of his wife Agnes and by 1912 there were groups in Ireland, Portugal, Norway and Nassington. Yes, Nassington. And where did the village girls go for their weekly meetings? You guessed it. Nassington House. Hence the comment about the flagstones.

Mind you, not everyone seemed so impressed with flooring of this nature. Pretty cold underfoot, not to mention that you struggle to open the doors over it, even in 2023. Jo Cooper told me that she was one of these guides in the 1960s and her abiding memory is the white shag pile carpet on the floor downstairs. To keep it pristine the girls were expected to change their outdoor shoes for little slippers. Very luxurious. Nassington House at this point was inhabited by the Altmans, an American couple used no doubt to all mod cons which explains, perhaps, the flamboyant flooring. He worked for Massey Ferguson in the USA so was perhaps here working with Baker Perkins in some fashion. As he was often 'out of town', his wife ran the girl guide troupe to involve herself in village life. They had no children of their own so perhaps it was a way to fill the time for Mrs Altman. I suspect Mrs A. liked to have the odd glass of vermouth too to 'take the edge off' if a former guide remembers all the empty bottles correctly. And guides are known for their truthfulness after all. When sober though there were many things to teach to make village girls into the upright citizens they were to become. Jo remembered learning to tie knots while sitting in the garden under the tree for one.

The tree.

Now that is something vivid from my childhood too, the owl that lived in the tree. Every afternoon when coming out of school to walk home, you could stand under the tree that even then hung over from the front garden of Nassington House and sure enough the owl would be looking down at you. June Stokes remembers doing the same, so either it was the oldest known owl in avian history or a family of them, each successive generation blinking wisely down on successive generations of school children weaving their way home. The tree itself has something of a tale to tell. It's actually listed on the Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Inventory as a veteran Turkey Oak (*quercus cerris*), with a girth of 4.15m. These trees were introduced into the UK in the 1700s so was perhaps planted at around the same time as the house itself was being built. It's mainly valued for its ornamental worth and it must have graced the garden of Nassington House after all for a good many years. It's a curious tree really as it sheds its leaves in spring rather than the autumn. That's why it was easy to spot those owls maybe. It's also proven to be something of a headache for the various owners of Nassington House what with those leaves all over the pavement you see, pretty slithery when wet, and the trunk and the roots pushing at the walls and causing damage. I can sympathise of course but it's lovely that tree, part of the village landscape.

The Altman's didn't stay too long apparently. Going through some of the paperwork with the current owner, Julia Peach, it is hard to overlook an impression of the

Altmans as financially stretched. I was told that the running costs of the house, even when shared with family members, proved rather too much for them and so they moved on, after having tried adding a staircase at the other end of the house and dividing the property into two to increase income. Other ways and means were tried by Mr Altman prior to this to raise funds to pay off money owed. Shares were sold. Furnishings too, including that not-so-white-now-thanks-to-the-vermouth stains- carpet. Eventually they called it quits and moved on but the Girl Guide group survived. Janet Sardeson remembers the requisite paraphernalia in the house when she used to babysit for the new residents from 1963, Flight Lieutenant Jeremy and Mrs Mudford. They had two daughters, Victoria and Charlotte and, on those occasions when there was a 'do' at RAF Wittering, Janet would spend the night in what, to her, was something of an eerie house. If one of the children woke in the night she would need to make her way down long, creaky, uneven corridors to settle the child, unaccountably placed in its crib in the bathrooms at the far end of the building.

Curious.

By the time the Ryans moved in in 1987 the place was in need of a serious overhaul. Back to the Inspection Report; *'there is a substantial amount of maintenance and improvement works to be undertaken to bring the buildings and accommodation up to a modern standard'*. The Mudfords didn't sell but rather rented out the property to Michael Evans and his family for a short while in the late 1960s and thereafter, sold it to a Lorraine Morris. On a recent visit to Nassington House Ivan Quetglas, Julia's husband, drew my attention to an oddity in the flooring of the main room downstairs. The flagstones are of a different colour, some clearly far older than the others. It seems, on further investigation, that Mrs Morris Snr moved in with Lorraine and her hubbie and was confined exclusively to this downstairs area due to poor health and mobility issues it must be assumed. She was attended also by a nurse. It would seem that the area she frequented had the flagstones taken up (naughty...) and not until the Ryans took over was something suitable laid in their place.

The Ryans had renovated a property before and had been looking for something suitable and one day, in Grantham, spotted Nassington House up for sale once again. It had only been advertised in this one estate agency for whatever reason but, nonetheless, the property was on the market. By the time the Ryans took over the reins some TLC was certainly needed and so they set to.

The Ryans logged their improvements with a series of photographs and, oh boy, did they set to with a will. One thing they did do was to add new flagstones to the dirt floor area, explaining the different colours noted by Ivan. From little more than a broken down and beaten up mess emerged a beautifully and lovingly restored home. Every room needed work. Although habitable it was truly grotty and they, for their part, dealt with the house itself. Then came the Martins, who were able to focus their attention on stage two of the transformation, namely the gardens. At one point Mr Lock had used their garden area as a crew yard so it was in real need of a

little beautifying. Now, thanks to much hard work and planning the garden is lovely again. They too thankfully kept a record of the work undertaken, how they cleared the outside area, filling skip after skip as the Ryans had done before them. The grounds have been set out in an historically sympathetic style and hints of its past glory have been left in situ. My particular favourite is the privet hedge maze. There is a stone wall at the back especially favoured by adders who enjoy basking in the sun. When it gets too hot they make their way to the ponds for a quick dip amongst the lily pads. If it's on show again for the next Open Gardens event in the summer of 2024 take a look for yourself. It's lovely. And it has its very own laundry in the garden.

Rub a dub dub.

Mention is made in a memoir written by Lucy Lock of the laundry at Nassington House, a separate washhouse with a copper for hot water and always there seemed to be piles of laundry. Valerie Rusdale recalls that her mother did the laundry there on a Monday. Monday was traditionally wash day for many families, getting everything clean after the high jinks of the weekend and ready for the week ahead. That is how bubble and squeak came about. Back in the day, when the fires needed to be lit to heat the water good and early, that water having been carried from a local well or spring, and the laundry had to be scrubbed or pummelled into submission by hand, first the whites, then the coloureds and then the darks, before dragging each out, soaked and heavy, but clean, with some wooden tongs, to be rinsed at least twice, then wrung out by hand, put through the mangle if you had one, then hung out to dry, perhaps on an overhead drier that you needed to hoist up, well, it was long and tiring, rather like that sentence. Who'd want to cook dinner after all that? And all the hot water had been used up doing the washing anyway. No siree. Chop up the leftovers from Sunday lunch and fry it up. Hey presto, bubble and squeak.

And, of course, you had to get a wiggle on to get all of the laundry done and dusted for the rest of the week. By the weekend you needed your 'Sunday best' ready for wear so there was no time for dilly dallying. Almost exclusively this work was done by women employed for this very purpose as it could take a whole week to get everything washed, dry, ironed and back in place ready for the day of rest when you could strut your stuff in a freshly laundered outfit. During the winter months, when outside work was less frequent, there was less to wash thank goodness but still doing the washing was a dominant feature of running a household. Perhaps that's why so much of our everyday expressions are peppered with 'laundry speak' – 'doing your dirty laundry in public' for example. Tenterhooks were those tongs used to drag out wet sheets to wring out and dry in the open. A buck would be used to put items in to soak, a smaller one called a bucket. Spring cleaning too was born of the laundry ritual. Once the weather started to pick up then off came all the bed sheets, towels, tablecloths, napkins and who knew what else, to be washed, at last, and dried out in the fresh spring air. Particularly swanky homes might even boast stables, complete with all the added work. Under such circumstances a larger washing facility was needed, often placed by the stable to keep all the unpleasant

odours from both horse and laundry processes together in one place. To avoid 'liaisons' when the maids were out from under the watchful eye of the house steward or butler, corridors or special tunnels were sometimes added so that the girls might not be 'led astray' by the grooms. As if they'd have the energy for any of that lark, but there you go. In a bigger house four maids could be kept busy for six whole days, starching collars, washing dirty nappies, aprons, the list is endless, and only Sunday off, sitting in church, back aching, exhausted, looking at all the lovely clean clothing that would end up back in the copper.

The laundry building at Nassington House is about the area of a really good sized shed. You can still see the chimney needed for releasing all the steam generated by the boiling water, the ovens below the tubs which would have heated it, the open fire to help with the drying process. Plans are afoot to convert it into an outdoor dining space, for summer barbecues perhaps in those unusual years when we see the sun for more than a week. During a recent visit to Southwick Hall I got quite overexcited at the café they have there. It's called the *Old Laundry* so, well, obvious really. Around the sides of what was their version of what still exists at Nassington House, stand disused mangles, dolly tubs, laundry equipment and paraphernalia. They have the same heating stoves and spaces, very much the same idea and much the same size. Worth a visit if you find Southwick Hall open one sunny afternoon. Pop in to the Old Laundry Café if it's open, browse the books in the conservatory or ask Fabio about the illusive death warrant if you get the chance. Plenty to keep you busy.

Ceilings in such laundry rooms were high, with slats to let out the steam, and floors were of stone, with standing boards so the maids could keep their feet dry. Rainwater was always preferred so there would often be water butts outside for its collection. Most big houses didn't have the luxury of running water until the 1860s. Imagine. Piped hot and cold water! It must have seemed like Christmas had come early. No getting up at the crack of dawn to light the fires to heat it all in readiness for a day of nigh hard labour. To make for a thorough job the sinks for scrubbing would be under windows to allow for as much light as possible, God forbid you failed to spot that gravy stain from Sunday lunch. And so they toiled on, week in, week out, but it was work, warm in the winter at least though backbreaking.

Now, as many of you know, Nassington had its own laundry so why, you may ask, was it necessary to have one attached to Nassington House too?

To be blunt, as with so many things in this country in particular, laundry was divided along class lines to some extent. Many large houses it seems would have had laundry areas of their own, filled as they once were not only with family but servants too. To have sufficient space to deal with laundry on a weekly basis would have been a huge asset, especially if income allowed you to employ someone to do the laundry, mending and ironing for you. And it provided employment, after all, so everyone benefitted. In the age before polyester, acrylic and synthetic fabrics of every hue, fabrics were in need of ironing or hand washing, plant based rather than man-made. Clothing needed to be hard wearing for jobs that demanded physical

labour, on the land, in pub cellars, in the abattoir, on the railway as a plate layer, the list goes on. No biological wash powder either, just good old fashioned elbow grease.

As for the average family, laundry was simply done at home. Rachelle Mould showed me the outhouse used by the Mould family for laundry before the advent of the electric washing machine. What has become an outside toilet was once the washroom, complete with chimney to let out the steam from the copper below. The water was fetched from the little spring on the pavement nearby in big containers now used for flowers. As a child I remember water running there, one of the many Willowbrook springs that pepper the village, but it has long since been redirected. Within, in all that steam, the lady of the house would put the dirty clothing in her dolly tub and set to with a dolly stool or posser. No need for a workout at the gym three times a week. No need to 'get your steps in'. House work was just that. Work. And this was simply the start of the process. A blue bag was put in the white wash to make it especially bright. It would begin as a tub of hot water full of lovely soapy bubbles and end as a sort of pale grey soup with no suds worth mentioning. For stubborn stains in those days of real work had to be removed somehow. You could use soda crystals or bright pink carbolic soap of course. Even up to the last decade my mother would swear by soda crystals, still available in a supermarket near you, to soak her 'delicates' in, a disinfectant she swore by even though it made you itch like the blazes. Most homes had a washboard of course, so you could really attack whatever stain was clinging on for dear life despite the boiling water and the smelly soap used to clean floors too. These are something of a rare item these days as so many enjoyed a new life in the 1950s as instruments in skiffle bands. Ah, Lonnie Donegan. *'The Cumberland Gap'*. *'My Old Man's a Dustman'*. They don't write 'em like that now mores the pity. And nor can you find many washboards going cheap either, thrown out as they were when their music days were done.

Then came the rinsing and the squeezing, and the mangle, being careful not to trap your fingers. Finally the drying. Goodness knows how laundry was dealt with in the winter with no tumble driers or radiators for that matter to make the whole thing simple for you still had laundry to do in December no matter how careful you were with the gravy. People used a clothes horse for smaller items, hanging things over and standing it by the fire to steam away merrily, or a rack to hoist above the head if room allowed. Somehow they managed it. Every week. The same process. From the smallest items, undies and handkerchiefs, to bed sheets and thick cotton and linen work clothes. People even took in other people's laundry to eke out the family income. Some still do, happy to do other people's ironing, quite a relaxing enterprise once you get into it if truth be told, a cuppa and a good film on the box while you fight your way through a pile of crumpled items, Cary Grant maybe or Jimmy Stewart, turning the crumpled laundry into a pile of tidy, folded things ready for wear.

Ironing of course was another thing altogether. Later in the week, when everything was just dry enough, the irons were put on the fire to heat up. No electric irons then,

let alone steam ones. Even the handles got burning hot and had to be held with thick cloth. And, depending on the fabric being ironed, the iron itself was heavier. Rachelle has a few of these, the very biggest one perhaps a purchase from Nassington Laundry when it closed down. All of the items within were auctioned off and she had this iron from Richard so, who knows. We could hardly lift it. Those women, our grandmothers and great grandmothers, must have had muscles like navvies. Fabulous women. No mod cons. No little washing capsule to fling with gay abandon into a front loading machine, a press of a button and an hour later all done and dusted. Labour saving devices. So many of them in our modern kitchens, one machine to do all the work that once a small room was needed for and an army of women.

Labour saving. Really? You'd think we'd all be sitting around sipping cocktails all day long considering how to solve the world's ills, accompanied by the whirr of all our gadgets. But we don't do we? No. We do other things in the time that has been 'freed up' for us.

Teachers. Gardeners. Hairdressers. Cleaners. Nurses. Doctors.

Again, the list goes on.

Nassington laundry, a 'high class establishment'.

So what became of Nassington laundry? A newspaper report from October 1986 relates the '*demolition*' of '*a red brick building at the side of a village green surrounded by stone buildings*', referring to what had once been the laundry as an *eyesore villagers were glad to see removed*'. The laundry had been out of use for some years prior to this but is referred to as a building that had '*graced the village green since the last century*'. Contradiction to one side, what was its story and why was it needed if big houses did their own laundry and villagers too by all accounts?

Kelly's Directory in 1920 mentions a Miss Emily Watson as our laundress. It was she, along with a Miss Emma Ball, who opened up the first steam laundry in the village, the Rose Cottage Laundry, powered by steam that is, rather than creating it. The business began above Spademan's Barn that is now 35 Church Street, then to the rear of the same building and eventually, thanks to a brisk trade I suspect, to the building opposite inhabited until that point by Betty Albone. This was to be its final location until its eventual closure. Initially, the only machinery was a machine big enough for eight bed sheets, everything else dealt with by hand, the whites and boilable items in coppers, heated by coal. The aforementioned newspaper report about the closure of the laundry also mentions a Miss Watson as the last owner but I suspect there were others in between unless, like the owl, she was blessed with extraordinary longevity. Len Chambers and Bill Shepperson have clear memories of the couple who ran the laundry in their youth, this time a Mr and Mrs Watson. The business had been left to Robert Watson by his aunt, Miss Watson No1. Mr Watson had served in the Navy during World War II on submarines and spent time in hospital for shrapnel wounds but, in his absence, the laundry continued to run with

his wife and his sister at the helm, along with a bevy of local ladies who performed the multitude of tasks. Sisters Gwen, Lottie and Freda Woodward. Addy Black and her sister in law Elsie Black, my grandmother. Ethel and Annie Sardeson, Doris Barr, Miriam Knight, Mona Hull. Many others over the years. Eva and Gladys Brown, Violet Harrison. Apart from local ladies, 'friends and relatives' from London would also lend a hand. Mr and Mrs Watson, in their turn, had two children, Pamela and Peter. Miss Watson No.2, their aunt, was the one to see it through to its final days. The reputation of the establishment preceded it though, described as it was in '*Northamptonshire Within Living Memory*' by the Federation of Women's Institutes as a '*high class*' establishment, no less. Put that in your pipe.

My mother and Uncle Harold would reminisce often about village anecdotes and people when he and my Aunt Eileen would visit on a Thursday afternoon from Rushden. He never really left Nassington in his heart, and would come as often as possible, to spend time with his friend Jack Woodward and go for walks. One thing that always made me smile if I happened to be home when they called, were the ingenious nicknames given to people. We don't seem to do that any longer, not even in schools mores the pity. Perhaps I had one myself as a teacher but if so I'm unaware of it. Dread to think what it might have been. Mum and Uncle Harold would talk of Throbbin' Hudson, Bimbom Baker, the Local Defence Volunteers during WWII, the LDV known affectionately as 'Look, Duck and Vanish' by the locals who watched them drill on a Sunday afternoon with their wooden rifles. Then Len Chambers mentioned 'Soapy'. 'Soapy' Watson who ran the laundry. Who else?

Initially Albert Baker was in charge of the horse and trap for laundry deliveries, making his way to Peterborough via Sutton and Castor on a Wednesday, to collect the grubby and return the freshly laundered items and Oundle was on a Thursday. It was a slow process, however, and often he would not finish his work and get home before 9pm, the increasing volume of traffic from the war years onwards not making his job any easier. Once demobbed, Mr Watson purchased an old Albion ambulance to collect and make deliveries himself. As was not uncommon in those days, he had no driving license so Raymond Sewter who, at 16, had just passed his test, would often accompany him on his rounds. Len Chambers, Colin Dolby, Bill Shepperson and a fair few others would tag along too as boys, sitting on the hampers in the open backed vehicle, clinging on for dear life when it went round a bend. Bill recalls that they were often given the task of running off to pick up some unfortunate pheasant to cook for Sunday lunch that had been 'accidentally' hit on the way back home on a Saturday. By all accounts Mr Watson, with his strong Cockney accent, did a great deal for the local boys in one way or another. He ran the 'Nassington Dazzlers' football team for the younger ones and both they and the older boys who he also managed would be taken to matches in the trusty Albion, his son Peter included. By all accounts he was a fair player too, trying out for Coventry City at one point. One evening per week they would also all make their way to a youth club in Stamford for a bit of boxing and would even go over to Apethorpe Palace, at that point in the late 1940s, early 1950s a remand home for boys. Let's hope they all kept their dukes up.

The main source of business for the laundry were larger establishments, such as army barracks, hospitals and the like, or large houses that did not boast a laundry of their own, such as Elton Hall. Keeping track of what had been sent to the laundry in a full hamper usually fell to the housekeeper. She would keep an inventory of the linens and clothing which would duly be put into a calico bag and subsequently into the hamper, one with added castors if you were lucky. Some big houses added laundry chutes, the grubby linen then sorted and noted into the laundry book and cross checked when items arrived back, clean and starched, folded and wrapped. Below is a seventeenth century laundry list from Haddon Hall. Quite apart from clothing, the cleaning items needed to run a house were also sent off to be dealt with. It makes for interesting reading. All the different fabrics needing different treatment. Cotton, wool, damask, silk. Different kinds of cloths for purposes we wouldn't even consider today. I ask myself how on earth they managed but, I suppose, like anything else, if it's all you've known it seems just fine. How might people of the future view wearing clothes that actually need washing?

LAUNDRY LIST FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR AND TWO SERVANTS 1880
A FORTNIGHT'S WASH

2 pairs wool stockings	7 silk, 20 white handkerchiefs
20 neckcloths and collars	4 frilled collars
8 night caps	2 muslins
5 cambric gowns	2 flannel waistcoats
6 flannel petticoats	2 pairs woollen stockings
30 shifts	26 pairs cotton stockings
8 pinafores	2 coats
2 cotton night caps	2 pairs trousers
4 pairs drawers	4 fine table cloths
12 table napkins	2 tray cloths
4 breakfast cloths	2 pairs fine sheets
4 fine pillow cases	20 towels
6 kitchen table cloths	6 glass, 8 kitchen cloths
6 dusters	4 kitchen hand towels
4 knife cloths	3 coarse pillow cases
3 pairs common sheets	

Of course, some items sent on a regular basis, are not mentioned at all. My grandmother, in her time, worked at the laundry. We take so very much for granted in these modern days, not just the ease of laundry in general but the kind of stains that the powders and elbow grease are expected to remove. I am often aghast at some of the adverts we have thrust upon us in 2023. The one that amazes me currently is about super absorbent panty liners. A young woman sitting on the toilet while pouring water from a vase of flowers onto such a pad to prove her point. Nothing so easy in my grandmother's day. With no such things as sanitary towels of any kind, but merely cloth dressings, ladies working in the laundry had the task of removing any number of persistent stains by hand, with the help of soda crystals and the like, that were sent in their direction every month. Each of the ladies

sending such items had their own little square linen bag with their name on so that, understandably, they had returned to them, now clean, the exact items they had sent that month when soiled. A necessary evil and one we no longer have to worry about, at least in the affluent West, but something so vivid in my gran's memory, and that of Mona Hull, that they both felt the need to mention it to their daughters, Jean Palenski and Angela Gibson, many years later.

Apart from all the usual rubbing and dubbing other tasks were performed. Elaine Quincey told me that one of her sisters of the three that worked in the laundry was in charge of the goffering iron and had her own annex in which to use it. Maids, waitresses and nurses often sported caps or aprons with frilly edges, all of which, when ironed, needed to look crisp and smart. And that's where a goffering iron came in, a narrow contraption designed to smooth ruffles and frills to perfection. While the steamy business of the laundry was going on in other parts of the building, she and the other ladies tasked with ironing everything into submission could go about their business undisturbed. Others of them were armed with darning needles and 'darning mushrooms' to mend any offending holes. There was a time when people had to mend rather than replace, to fix rather than fling and this seems to be coming back thank goodness. I often ponder, as I walk around clothing stores crammed full of t-shirts, trousers, dresses and all the rest, that it'll eventually all end up in landfill somewhere. And not just this one store, but every single one the world over. Mind boggling, not to say worrying. In our environmentally conscious world the making do and mending mentality is being hailed as a new way to go. Buy second hand. Repair your clothes. Recycle. Upcycle. Our ancestors would have been aghast at our wastefulness.

In some ways, though, laundry work must have been quite pleasant. Mondays and Thursdays were wash days and Tuesdays and Thursdays reserved for mending and ironing at Nassington Laundry at least. You enjoyed a good income by the standards of the day, friendly company, lots of chat and laughter no doubt between all the lifting and swirling and rubbing and squeezing. Grace Mould married Bert Conquest and went to work in the laundry. She named one of her sons, unaccountably, Norman. She had positive memories of it all, especially in the winter when it was so snug and warm inside but not so much in the summer, a mix of sweltering heat and steamy dampness. All a bit too fetid then. She recalled the ironing benches round the edge of the room with coal burning stoves positioned down the centre. The various flat irons would be lined up to heat along the top, ready to be chosen and replaced once they cooled down too much. In a nutshell laundry went in at one end, stinky and dirty, and came out the other washed, pressed and clean ready to be sent home again in the hamper in which it had arrived. There was a separate wash room with two coppers and special basins for silk and fine work. One for drying too, with wooden horses standing around for smaller items and the sheets hung overhead. One room had a big laundry calendar machine for the pressing of sheets. Last of all was a packing room where the men would wait ready to take the clean laundry off to get dirty again over the coming week. Regular work for sure, always plenty to sort out. The day was from 8am to 8pm and the pay 24 shillings a week. Pretty good in those days but Mrs Watson

was, at least as far as Grace remembered anyway, unreliable with her payments. Pretty galling at the end of the working week, scrubbing at laundry till your knuckles were red and then having to wait for your pay. She was remembered though as a friendly employer, who liked to dress well and wear make-up, a nice lady by all accounts whose husband would mechanise the business to make it more efficient and cost effective but, sadly to no avail. The laundry business had begun on the crest of the automobile wave to some extent. Census reports show a decline in the job of laundry maid and the rise of the business laundry as it became easier to deliver and collect the items you wanted dealt with. Commercial laundries had invested in machines, as did ours, and it became more efficient to farm the labours elsewhere. And so it carried on, as is the way, for quite a while, but the development of affordable washing machines and synthetic, easy care fabrics saw a subsequent decline here too. Despite his efforts the business had to close, selling off the equipment in the process to Richard Mould and others, and so the building stood empty until 1986. Planning permission had been sought in the January of the same year, for three homes to be created from the one building and that is where we find ourselves today. Jo Booth was to move into one, something of a village institution until her untimely death in 2017 and now Mr Stuart Booth (no relation) lives in one and Lynda Norman in the other. There are no clues left of the former life of the buildings. I know because I asked. Without doubt they are a great step up from the timeworn shadow of their former selves, but our laundry's history affords a glimpse into the domestic and social developments enjoyed and tolerated by our forebears and family members.

Airing your dirty laundry...

In the dim and distant past, of course, we know that the usual method for getting your clothing clean was to head for the nearest river or stream and spend a few hours letting the water wash away the grime after you had bashed the living daylight out of your smalls. There were no detergents at all, the water alone the only way of getting out the sweat and the grime, along with the elbow grease. Clothes were washed as little as possible as a result but sweat rots fabric away so there must have been something of a dilemma for early man when deciding whether to send his woman off to the stream for a day of pummelling. Stink like blazes and risk holes in your underarms or let her spend all day getting the stench out. Hmm. I wonder what he decided to do?

Early cleaning aids developed, of course. A good way of removing dirt and grease is to use lye. Gather up the fine white ash (that again) from your fire, furnace or bread oven, sieve it through muslin into your wash water and there you have it. Or pigeon and chicken dung. Smashing. Large houses like Prebendal Farm had dovecotes after all so there must have been a ready supply. Nassington House has one too, a small one in what would have been a barn, but kept as a feature now in one of the bedrooms. Handy to put your bits and bobs in. Urine even was used as a wash aid. Outside privies often had a separate hole to sit over to collect your pee in. All, apparently, very effective. Not that I've tried. Thought I'd give that particular experiment a miss. Anyway, after wringing it all out by hand, assuming that your

arthritis hadn't developed too far already by then, you'd spread everything out over a bush or stone to dry.

Simples.

Then came a more developed form of 'agitation' than using stones or wooden paddles to beat and rub the filth into submission. Eventually tubs with uneven edges were developed to aid the washerwomen in their labours. A great deal of effort was still needed, but at least the tub itself helped you along the way. A washboard was eventually developed, sometimes metal, sometimes glass, again to 'agitate' the dirt from the material. You had your trusty posser or dolly peg too to swirl and mash to your heart's content. A good way of taking out your aggression I suppose. I'm sure these ladies felt it, after all, working away getting all the grass stains and goodness knows what out of their hubbie's work clothes. Fortunately, though, to relieve all the angst, women worked together. Washing was often a communal event, wash houses springing up in towns where women could gather to set about their day long chore and complain about the old man, at least with the prospect of a bit of chat to alleviate the tedium. They would gossip too of course, exchanging snippets of news, some good, some less so, some nasty, some nice, airing that proverbial dirty laundry in public. Wash houses were not only sociable but more comfortable, with waist-high basins and shelter from the elements available to all regardless of income. Indeed, the need to keep infectious diseases to a minimum through hygiene encouraged local authorities to develop such places before entire populations were wiped out with outbreaks of scarlet fever or typhoid.

The Industrial Revolution in England sped things along mightily. The mangle came along in the nineteenth century. Not good for your buttons or your fingers but a damn sight better for your wrists, reducing as it did the need to wring things out. Next came mechanized washing machines complete with hand cranks for you to turn clear of the water. By the twentieth century there was an electrically powered agitator within the wash tub with a hand mangle attached, then a twin tub which would both wash on one side and spin the rinsed clothes on the other. One of the first factories to produce washing machines of this kind was the Hoover factory in Merthyr Tydfil which opened in October 1948. They began with 350 workers but the demand and affordability of such a labour saving device meant that 5,000 were on the payroll by the 1970s. Sadly, though, the business acumen of the owners by the 1990s proved to be the factories downfall. They had a surplus of machines so decided to offer two free flights to Europe or the USA for every £100 spent on white goods. 200,000 customers took advantage of the offer and Hoover lost, as a consequence, £20 million.

Oh dear.

The twin tub is where my memories of doing the weekly wash begin. I quite enjoyed doing the laundry in this way to be truthful, in my case on a Saturday morning when the mood took me. There was something very satisfying about watching all those white soap suds swirling your clothes about, draining the water out into the sink via

a plastic tube, the whizz of the tumble dryer and the final part of the ritual, hanging everything out on the line to dry. To this day I don't think anything beats the smell of laundry dried outside on the line, you can keep your jasmine and ylang ylang scented fabric softeners, nothing beats the smell of fresh air. Anyway, even the twin tub had its day. A friend of mine took quite some while to part with his, it was only when the juddering across his kitchen floor, spewing water and froth as it went, grew too much for him that he decided to get a front loader. My mother was reluctant when I offered to buy her one in the 1990s, mistrustful as she was that it would do as good a job as her trusty Electrolux. But persuade her I did and now all it takes is a multi-coloured laundry tablet and a preset cycle and everything is done. No fetching water from the well in a bucket. No heating it all on a copper. No bashing, swirling, wringing out and rinsing.

Thank goodness for that.

As with everything these days though it seems that even this we're getting wrong. We've just grown too lazy, and perhaps too complacent. Washing machines are one of the worst offenders when it comes to energy use in the average UK home. For the sake of the environment we should be washing on a cold setting we're told, to reduce our carbon footprint by 10%. Nor should we do laundry so often we're told. Wear things for a bit longer before washing them for goodness sake. Tumble dryers are a leading source of microplastic pollution in the air we're told and air drying reduces climate impact by 67%. And the most effective laundry method of all? Hand washing.

So it's off back down to the river with the laundry, no artificial cleaners or washing aids, just something environmentally friendly, renewable and natural.

Urine maybe?

Ah well, here we are again, back to square one. Just like the railway. If only we'd kept things as they were we'd all be living in a cleaner, healthier world. The women would all be exhausted, with arthritis in their fingers and it'd be bubble and squeak for dinner every Monday night but at least we'd have clean air and normal weather. For despite it all, doing the laundry and the ironing ranks as the least popular of household tasks.

Progress eh?

Lily-white and clean, oh!
With little frills between, oh!
Smooth and hot – red rusty spot
Never here be seen, Oh!

Mrs Tiggy Winkle, 1905, Beatrix Potter

Notes

Please note that there are numerous websites available that give further information about some of the matters below but I have given details of the ones I found of most use in my research into this topic. The libraries in Peterborough, Stamford and Oundle also have local history sections that have been of great use.

I have also given references for further information and documentation available in the Nassington History Archive Files (**NHAF ref:**) that are kept in Nassington Village Hall in Church Street.

- Southwick Hall boasts a good collection of local history books in their crypt area. Among them are *Northamptonshire. Within Living Memory: Northamptonshire Federation of Women's Institutes* which mentions Nassington Old Laundry.
- *The Brickmaker's Tale – Peter Minter*. This is certainly available in Stamford Library and, although no mention is made of Nassington bricks specifically, it gives an insight into the way of life of brick makers and the process through the centuries.
- *The Sunshine Jazz Band* comprised of John and Sheila Rowles (the latter on the accordion) and Bill Black on piano. As related by my mother, they would often play at the old school up the Woodnewton Road which became the first village hall and, as the Rowles family also ran the Black Horse at the time, doubtless there too. With the advent of WWII and the arrival of American, Canadian, Czech and Polish forces in the area, the local 'hop' took on quite a different flavour however. At this point servicemen were invited to attend dances in the current school hall, the area prepared after class on a Friday evening, furniture removed and the dance floor prepared, everything being returned to normal by the following Monday morning. Record players were now the norm along with army bands.
- William the Conqueror was succeeded by his son William Rufus. Sadly, he came to a sticky end in a hunting 'accident' in the New Forest, his body unceremoniously dumped on the back of a cart and taken back to London while his brother Henry, hotfooted it back at top speed to claim the throne to become Henry I.
- During a scene in the pub in the comedy series 'Only Fools and Horses', the character Trigger, a road sweeper for the council, tells Del Boy and Boycie that, after many years in the job, he is still using the exact same broom. Amazed, Rodney makes a comment in praise of the broom's longevity only to be told that, yes, it's the same one he's had from the start despite various new handles and broom heads during its long working life.
- To access census data you need to go through a site such as *The National Archives*, *MyHeritage* or *Ancestry* or a local library. Bear in mind that they do not allow access to census information for the preceding 100 years so the first year available to the general public is 1921. If you go to the National Archives in Kew you are able to view forms from 1841-1911 free of charge on microfilm (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

- The 1881 census notes that the potters living in Nassington at the time were Joseph Foster from Thetford, Thomas Foster from Sicknell near Derby, Edward Holland from Cambridge and Alexandra Turner from Chesterfield. The brick makers were listed as William Reedham and the brickfield owner himself, Alfred Blott Whitney and William Plant and James Ward from Great Bowden and Stanground respectively.
- Many of the archives relating to Nassington, most notably the Westmoreland Archive, is at Northamptonshire Records Office. Their website is westnorthants.gov.uk. Their archivist, Sarah Bridges (archivistNCC@westnorthants.gov.uk) is very helpful and will point you in the right direction but you need to identify what you want to see and ask for it to be made available to you ahead of your visit.
- Information re Nassington Old Laundry is in **NHAF ref – RED FOLDER A: *Businesses and Facilities Past and Present***. Laundry 1.2.10.
- Kelly's Directory began in 1897 with the intention of listing all businesses and tradespeople in a given area. It also listed some addresses and was a kind of Victorian Yellow Pages. Some local libraries have the odd copy, including the Guildhall Library in London.
- A solar was a room in many English and French medieval manor houses and castles, mostly in an upper storey, designed as a private area for the family or 'master' of the house.
- The Window Tax was first introduced in 1696 and revoked later in 1851. It was introduced to increase revenue for the government. The more windows a building had, the more you were expected to pay. As a result people bricked up windows they deemed to be unimportant and there is plenty of evidence visible in old houses of such decisions.
- The British Army in Palestine found itself, post WWII, stuck in the middle of a growing conflict between Arabs and Jews. Various broken promises to both sides led to armed conflict, terrorism and bloodshed. Tension escalated and, in 1947, the number of British troops in the region rose to about 100,000, most of them National Servicemen. Sadly they were often targets for attack and kidnap in retaliation for perceived injustices perpetrated on local populations. Eventually, the decision on how to progress was given to the United Nations and the establishment of separate Arab and Jewish states was recommended. Subsequently British troops withdrew on 15th May 1948. By this point, however, the conflict had cost 750 British military and police lives.
- *The Parish and Manor of Nassington-cum-Yarwell* by C. J. Gordon (1890) is also full of interesting information. There is a copy in Peterborough Library and also in the Village Hall in the relevantly labelled box.
- Copies of all documents and photos relating to Nassington House can be found in **NHAF ref – RED FOLDER : *Domestic Dwellings. Snapshots through the ages 1985-2006***. Nassington House 1.1. 94.
- The copy of the Sales Particulars of the Westmorland Estate is in the Village Hall History Archive. If you would like to have a look at it, as it covers many of the houses and properties in the village, please let me know.
- Prior to the Inclosure Act of 1773, much land in England was categorized as 'common' or 'waste', meaning that, although under the control of the Lord of

the Manor, it could be used as pasture land. 'Waste' land was often quite poor, or inconveniently located, but would still be worked by peasants. With the new act, however, landowners gained legal control of these areas too. Although they were able to modernise the farming process with a variety of innovations, rents were also raised and some were displaced. Many, with no other source of income, headed for the towns and the newly opened factories, thereby speeding up the Industrial Revolution. Below is part of a poem written in the eighteenth century, showing the disquiet engendered in many by this new act:

*They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
Yet let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose*

*The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who take things that are yours and mine*

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