



# Life on Atkinson's Warren

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE DESCENDANTS OF A GAMEKEEPER





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# An Introduction to Atkinson's Warren

Atkinson's Warren sits on a coversands heathland site. The UK has about 20 per cent of the world's total area of lowland heath. Today, this heathland is a precious resource, a special type of habitat with unique flowers and birds. We now have only about 20 per cent of the heathland we had 200 years ago but work to keep, restore and re-create heathland in the region.

**Atkinson's Warren**  
Local Nature Reserve

**Wildlife and you**  
Today, Atkinson's Warren is one of the few remaining lowland heath sites in the UK. It is a special place with a unique mix of habitats and wildlife. The heathland is a precious resource, a special type of habitat with unique flowers and birds. We now have only about 20 per cent of the heathland we had 200 years ago but work to keep, restore and re-create heathland in the region.

**Early industry**  
The heathland at Atkinson's Warren was once a busy place. It was used for a variety of purposes, including as a source of peat and as a place for the local community to gather. The heathland is a precious resource, a special type of habitat with unique flowers and birds. We now have only about 20 per cent of the heathland we had 200 years ago but work to keep, restore and re-create heathland in the region.

**Geology**  
The heathland at Atkinson's Warren is a special place. It is a mix of different geological features, including coversands and peat. The heathland is a precious resource, a special type of habitat with unique flowers and birds. We now have only about 20 per cent of the heathland we had 200 years ago but work to keep, restore and re-create heathland in the region.

**History**  
The heathland at Atkinson's Warren has a long history. It has been used for a variety of purposes, including as a source of peat and as a place for the local community to gather. The heathland is a precious resource, a special type of habitat with unique flowers and birds. We now have only about 20 per cent of the heathland we had 200 years ago but work to keep, restore and re-create heathland in the region.

**Look out for these...**

**What is a geopline?**

**Enjoy your visit and leave only footprints!**

In North Lincolnshire, heathland is concentrated around Scunthorpe on land known as the “coversands” (an area of wind-blown sand deposits). Most of these areas around the town have been lost to development and what remains is largely fragmented and found on the edge of the town, often within areas of acid grassland.

Atkinson's Warren is now managed as a local nature reserve with around 36 hectares of acidic grassland and mixed woodland.



It's one of several warrens in Northern Lincolnshire. During the 1900s, Atkinson's Warren was managed for game. Sir Berkeley Sheffield hired Walter Atkinson to manage the warren and prevent poaching on the site. This is a story about life on the warren as described by the descendants of Walter. The Atkinson family lived on the warren in a cottage called South Lodge. Today all that is left of the Lodge is foundations and some of the front wall surrounded by fruit trees. You can still see the fossils embedded in parts of the remains that John Hocknell refers to in his writings.



## Warrens

But first a little history about rabbit warrens in England. There is no Old English word for rabbit. This is because they are not native to Britain. Rabbit bones have been found during the excavation of Roman sites in southern and eastern England and it is known that the Romans valued them for their fur and meat.



They seemed to have died out after the Romans left the country and then were reintroduced by the Normans in the late 11th or early 12th Century.

The rabbit is not very well adapted to the English climate and are easy prey for native predators such as the fox, stoat, and birds of prey. Rabbits (or 'coney' as mature rabbits were known) were, therefore, kept in special areas known as warrens that were either fenced or walled to prevent them from escaping. The meat became a delicacy and their fur was used to trim clothing. By the 13th Century, one rabbit was worth more than a working man's daily wage.

Landowners hired 'warreners' to look after the rabbits and in turn they guarded the warren fiercely, fed the rabbits, bore holes for burrows and warded off predators and poachers. Warrens were a sure way of making money in the Middle Ages from poor, sandy or heath land that was otherwise classed as 'wasteland'.

By the 18th Century, the rabbit had escaped into the countryside and became seen as a food for the poor. Areas that had once been looked after as profitable warrens often became estates for managing game and these were looked after by Gamekeepers.



## The Gamekeeper

The work of a gamekeeper was the object of his life. He had to be well trained and highly skilled, have intimate knowledge of wildlife and how to preserve game, and all the while be a fine shot and sportsman! A gamekeepers' work carried heavy responsibility; he was important to the estate owner, to the hunt, to the farm bailiff and it was up to him to ensure a shoot brought in good returns. Aside from the preserving of game, he was required to prevent poaching, breed and break dogs alongside breaking in young gentlemen to gun work.

For all the hard work and despite being a first-class gamekeeper he might be paid no more than a pound a week, which was similar to the salary of a ploughman. He might make additional income from other activities, but generally, he was dependent to a great extent on charity. The lucky gamekeeper may have lived rent free in a comfortable cottage where coal was supplied to him without cost, wood gathered from the estate, and milk from the farm. Or he might have had a cow and even pigs of his own. He would generally be presented with a new suit of clothes every year. Then there's extra income to be made from dog-breeding and exhibiting as well as vermin and rabbit money.

He may have kept fowl at his employer's expense, taking a proportion of the eggs and chickens for his own table. He could help himself to pigeons, rabbits and rooks and quite often a kind master would offer him a brace of hare or pheasant after a shooting party.

Keepers sometimes were given enforced holidays in February either because the keeper left of his own free will, or had been dismissed; "Left owing to shoot being given up". Married keepers were not so light-hearted and rarely left their berths of their own accord unless to better themselves which is why the best permanent berths went to married men. If a bachelor gamekeeper found a suitable wife before having a permanent berth he would advertise for a place, making the statement; "Married when suited."

And so it was that Atkinson's Warren became managed for game throughout the 1900's and here is how the family lived through the eyes of Walter's descendants.

*Doug Atkinson* ►  
*(son of Walter)*





## **Diana Kelsey's Story of Life on Atkinson's Warren**

"I am the 2nd youngest grand-daughter of Walter and May Atkinson who moved to 'South Lodge', Crosby Warren, Crosby in the early 1900's and remained there until the death of Walter in 1957 at the age of 86. Grandma then left South Lodge and lived in the Crosby area until her death. South Lodge then remained empty and all the belongings were either divided between the sons and daughters or sold in an auction at the Farm (as we knew it) and I can vaguely remember this taking place.



*Diana with cousin Pauline (Eva's daughter) c 1950's*



*Bob with Diana in Norfolk c 2000*



*Bob plucking a pheasant at her sons house in Norfolk c 1990*

Walter was born in 1871 in Nottinghamshire and had 6 Brothers and 2 Sisters. After leaving school Walter worked as an apprentice Gamekeeper, on an Estate in Empingham, Rutland. He applied for a job as an apprentice (according to Gordon Atkinson) Gamekeeper and travelled from Nottinghamshire for an interview for this position. He travelled by Train to Gunness where he had a bite to eat at the Ironstone Wharf Pub. The Landlord then offered to take him by Pony and Trap up to Wood House, Burton where he had a brief interview with James Coulthurst, the head keeper on Normanby Estate and being suitably impressed gave him the job plus one guinea to return to Elston to collect the rest of his belongings.



*Walter with Gertrude May at the front of the cottage c1940s*



*Walter on cart*



*Walter on horse and cart*



*Harvesting with family and neighbours (Ernest Fearaby, Tom Hill, William Thomson & Tom Henton)*

Gertrude May came from Cambridgeshire and both Walter and May (her preferred name) started work for James Coulhurst about the same time. That's how they met and started courting. James Coulhurst was the Head Gamekeeper on the Sheffield Estate, Normanby Hall.



*Sheffield Estate Staff Photo (Walter is 5th from the left in the front row)*

They were married in 1897 and spent their first few years living in one of the Estate cottages in Normanby village where their first two sons were born; John Henry, (known as Harry), and Arthur Douglas, (known as Doug). Walter was then promoted and they moved to South Lodge, an old Hunting Lodge on Crosby Warren and Walter was given the position as Gamekeeper for this area, as described in a Deputation issued by Sir Berkeley George Digby Sheffield in 1902.



*Walter on his wedding day*



*Gertrude May on her wedding day*





*The front view of South Lodge*

South Lodge was an old Hunting Lodge situated on Crosby Warren which stretched between Ferry Road Hill and Flixborough Village and at that time it was a very isolated spot, and surrounded by woodland and heath-land. The Lodge itself was built in 1815 from slate and ironstone and was owned, along with the whole area that the Lodge stood on, by the Sheffield family (owners of Normanby Hall). It was regularly used as a venue for hosting shooting parties when there would be a party of around 14 guns, and after a morning shoot they would lunch at South Lodge.



*View of South Lodge from the back*



*William Thomson (Eva's husband loved the freedom of life at South Lodge)*



*Eva's husband William on the Warren*

Harry was the first-born and apparently was a good weight for a first born – my Mum said that he weighed in at 14lb but I think that was a slight exaggeration. However, he grew into a strapping lad and was a great help to his Dad with the smallholding they then had and there was always plenty to do with growing corn and potatoes as well as the vegetable garden and orchard.



*Walter with others after a shoot*



*Doug, Walter, Jack Dent and Harry Atkinson c 1920s*



*Diana with Chummy the black labrador under the big oak tree near the cottage*

Doug, second child, also helped out with the chores alongside Harry, but Mum remembers that both lads had to be encouraged to get out of bed in a morning. However, that didn't stop them getting on with the work – Doug was also a big lad and he also joined up during WWI but not immediately. He joined one of the Surrey Regiments known as the 'Mutton Slashers' and did his training and went overseas but didn't actually see any action as the War was over by that stage. It was Doug that used to take the corn down to Keadby to be milled and mum and siblings would sometimes go with him for a ride on the cart and to keep him company. Mum can remember buying some cream biscuits from a little shop on the way and would break them open and lick all the cream out of the middle of them.

Harry volunteered to join the forces during the First World War and he was actually under age when he signed up, but as he was very tall and broad for his age, no questions were asked. He went into the Coldstream Guards and did his training at Windsor and eventually went over to France and fought in the trenches.

He returned home in 1919 unscathed but no doubt mentally scarred but he never spoke of his time over there. My Mum recalls that one day when they (the girls) were on their way to School, they met Harry coming home on leave and were so excited that they turned round and came back home with him. I think they were forgiven for missing a day at school.



*First World War - Harry and Doug (Sons of Walter)*

Harry was out of work after the War and did a bit of casual work but then trained to be a Welder and managed to obtain a job at Lysaghts Steel Works where he stayed for the rest of his life. He met and married his wife Frances Ward and eventually lived at Rose Cottage at the Flixborough end of the Warren and the garden backed onto the Slag Bank at Lysaghts.

One day, during the First World War, Mum went out the back door and saw what she thought was a great big Elephant coming towards the house from over the hill. It scared her so much that she ran back indoors, terrified, to find Grandma and it turned out that what she had seen was a Zeppelin (Air Ship) – I think it must have been the one that dropped bombs on Scunthorpe and killed some people in 1916.

During the War, loads of people would go down to the Warren to escape the bombing and they would take their pigs and chickens in prams and you could barely move for people. Next day there would be hats and caps all over the place which they had left behind.

Grandad was an Air Raid Warden, and as written by 'Bobs', one night when he and a friend were out doing their duty, they were arrested by the Police and accused of being Spies.



*Bob with Eva on the Warren c1930*



*Margaret Atkinson (bridesmaid to Evelyn Atkinson on her wedding day) taken at the Warren'*

Eva was the eldest girl born in 1905. My mum, Phyllis, was the middle girl born in 1907. She was very tall and thin with a narrow waist and long thin legs and her Mum used to say that she took after her Dad's Mother, Phoebe Atkinson, more so than the other two girls. She also loved fashion and liked to be smartly dressed and, even in later life, she would love to follow the latest fashion although she would often say that she wished she was a bit fatter.

Mum was the one that Grandma would take with her to town to help with the shopping because she was the better one at walking and sometimes Grandma would make more than one trip to Scunthorpe in the same day. Most of the shopping was done on Frodingham Road – groceries were from Mr. Hunt's shop in Berkeley Street and I believe he made deliveries to the Farm.



*Eva stood in front of South Lodge on one of her visits*



*Phyl with Eva and dolls pram at Hornsby Holt c 1915*

Phylis met my Dad when she was 17. He was a conductor on the bus which she sometimes caught to go into town and I think they fell for each other quite quickly. Her Mum went on the bus with Phyl one day to 'check him out' and thought he was quite nice and gave her approval. He then started coming home with Mum and would help on the farm, play tennis and would help out with any of the jobs that needed doing and eventually he obtained a gun and was able to go and get a rabbit or pigeon. They married when they were 20 in 1928 and lived in lodgings for a short time before moving into Old Crosby then finally settling at Thealby, where my husband and I now live.

There was no electricity or running water to the premises and consequently no

bathroom or toilet, which meant that the water was taken from a spring across the farmyard to a tap at the back door and a pump on the other back wall. The toilet, which was an 'earth closet', was about 50 yards from the house across the path and beside the pigsty and consisted of a wooden bench with a hole in it and torn up newspapers as toilet paper. It was quite a frightening experience for the youngsters in the family, especially after dark, as there were plenty of rats about and it was wise to take a stick with you, as well as an elder brother or sister for moral support. The container which collected the 'waste' would have to be emptied on a regular basis by one of the sons or son in laws and buried in a pit. Not a very nice job but one that had to be done by someone.



*Pauline (Eva's daughter)*

The inside of the house consisted of a pantry where you had to go down two or three stone steps and there was a stone gantry all the way round it for keeping fresh food cool during the summer and hooks from the ceiling for hanging the hams and sausage on after killing a pig. This was situated off the back entrance into the house on the way to the kitchen area, which was only a sink with a window above it looking out into the orchard. There was also a boiler to heat the water and shelves around the walls for storage along with more ceiling hooks for hanging hams and sausage after killing a pig.



*Walter at his shed in the yard with kittens*



*Eva at the farm gate on the Warren c1915*

The main living room was in the centre of the house and there was a door leading off this room on to the veranda, where Grandma had the deck chairs for sitting out on a nice day or of an evening as the sun was setting. We loved this door as it contained a glass panel in the top half made up of different coloured glass and when the sun shone all the colours would show up in the room – blues, reds and greens. Very pretty. The 'best' room, for special occasions, and where all the best furniture was kept along with numerous

cases containing stuffed birds, led off from this. None of the rooms were very large and the upstairs was a duplicate of downstairs with a middle bedroom overlooking the back of the house and the other two were at each end of the house with windows overlooking the front. The stairs were off the living room and I understand that when my Mum and siblings were young, the three girls slept in one bed in the left facing bedroom, their parents in the middle room, and the two boys shared a bed in the right facing room.

There were no ceilings in the bedrooms and you looked directly up into the roof which meant it was extremely cold, especially in the winter, and for extra warmth they would use whatever they could put on the bed for extra warmth, including their thick winter coats. They would also use the oven shelves or bricks heated in the oven, wrapped in old blankets for added warmth. The floors upstairs were also concrete with just a peg rug for warmth when you first stepped out of bed and they were home-made using a bit of sacking and any old pieces of clothing or material which were cut into pieces and made up into rugs by Grandma and the girls as a pastime during the long dark evenings.



*Phyl Atkinson holding Ann*



*Gertrude with Phyl c 1930s*

They were made in various sizes and used throughout the whole House. No hoovers in those days so the rugs would be taken outside and given a good beating over the clothes line to get the dust and dirt out. The floors would be regularly swept and mopped before putting the rugs back down. The cooking and baking was all done on the black leaded stove / fireplace situated in the living room and that would be the only means of warmth for the whole house.

As I mentioned earlier, South Lodge was totally isolated in the early 1900's – none of the surrounding Housing estates were built and the nearest place to the Lodge would have been Crosby Cemetery going towards Scunthorpe or a few properties on Ferry Road West or other isolated Farmsteads on Scotter Road.

The main route to civilisation would be at the end of the track to Crosby Hill but the route that was mainly used was over the hill at the back of the Lodge and along a dug-out trod with wild honeysuckle, dog rose and many other wild flowers growing in the banking. This would take you across heathland full of wild flowers and butterflies with gorse bushes and lots of bird-life, especially the Skylark, bringing you to a small wood, which is still there, at the corner of Ferry Road and Foxhills Road opposite the Cocked Hat Pub.



*Gertrude May with Walters sister Kate*



*Eva holding her niece Ann with cousin Madge from Sheffield at back of South Lodge.*

Sometimes Mum would bring friends home with her during the Summer months, unbeknown to Grandma, so there was an extra one at the table but it didn't seem to bother Grandma and she was a great cook making fantastic meals like beautiful stews, rabbit pie, jugged hare, pigeon pie and sometimes roast pheasant, all served with fresh potatoes and vegetables from the garden. She made lovely Yorkshire puddings, cakes and homemade bread which Mum said was out of this world.



*Walter with Margaret as a baby c1930*



*Walter at the Warren Hayfield Stood*

Mum's favourite pudding was a Yorkshire pudding filled with fresh fruit, usually freshly picked blackberries. Of course they had to help Grandma with the cooking and baking when they weren't at School and wash the dishes etc. along with general housework. In fact on some days when there was a big wash to do or a lot of baking, one of the girls would be allowed off school to help out – you can imagine what it must have been like as there was no such thing as washing machines or even a decent oven and hob top.



*Walter with Bob and Eva on the horse, Bill Leaning is stood watching (he lived on Crosby Hill in Wooden House)*

Wash days were very busy for all the girls and water was carried into the kitchen and boiled up and we all had our jobs to do. The washing line was by the silver birches just beyond the oak tree where Chummy the large black Labrador was chained up – he was a good guard dog and would soon let you know if anyone was about but also

very friendly to those that knew him. If there wasn't enough room for all the washing on the line, then smaller items were draped over the bushes to dry in the sun if it was out. On wet days everything had to be put on a wooden ceiling aired above the fire range and then on a clothes horse in the front room.

There were two Shire Horses called Turpin and Violet and Violet had a foal; then there was another light legged horse called Jack for pulling the trap. There were also 3 cows, two of which were called Friday and Tiny and they supplied the milk which was turned into butter by one or other of the girls and sold on to neighbours or a local shop. We were not allowed to wash our hands at the sink in the kitchen so there was a bowl left on the orchard wall near the back door along with a tablet of Sunlight soap and a piece of hessian sacking to dry our hands on. We had to remember to remove the soap afterwards as the cows would come and try to eat it, and as they were chewing it up, more and more soap suds would be coming out of their mouths and we would be in trouble from Mum for not putting the soap out of their way.



*Phyl with Margaret c 1930*



*Foal with Phyl and her husband late 1930s*

One day one of us accidentally left a darning needle and wool on the wall and one of the cows tried to eat it. A friend had to come and put a poultice on the cow's cheek until he eventually managed to remove the needle from the side of the mouth.

They also had pigs and the piggery was down the track opposite the gate to the cow field and it ran alongside Hornsby Holt and was situated on the right – there was a little wood there known as Pig Pen Wood.

There was also a sty in the main yard which contained 2 or 3 pigs and you had to pass this on the way to the toilet. A pig was killed at least once a year, usually for Christmas and a local butcher would come down to the farm to do the killing and butchering into joints and Granddad would do the salting down and Mum and sisters would help Grandma to make the sausage and brawn and any other 'meals' you could get from a pig as everything was used but the 'squeak'.

So there was no shortage of good food and there were a couple of dozen free range chickens which supplied enough eggs for the family and some to sell on to neighbours etc. and I think the occasional chicken was killed for a meal, especially if it was getting old and past laying. There would be numerous clutches of baby chicks coming along to fill their place.



*Grandma Atkinson with Peggy*

Wood was used from the surrounding woodland – fallen branches or even trees were dragged back to the yard and sawn up into logs using a cross cut saw over a wooden horse, which needed two people. I can even remember dragging some branches from Hornsby Holt with my Dad and helping him to saw them into logs – that would have been in the early 1950's. Hornsby Holt was a lovely wood as it was always full of Bluebells which we loved to go and pick, but, of course, it is now full of houses so remains a happy memory of how things

used to be and I think myself very lucky to have been a member of the Atkinson family and being able to enjoy such simple pleasures.

There were also the dogs as Granddad had at least 4 Labradors and probably more, as they were needed for his job as a Gamekeeper to flush out and retrieve the pheasants on shooting days. There were also a couple of Jack Russell's for ratting and quite a few cats about the place to keep the mice down but they were all pets to us youngsters and I can't remember ever getting bitten or scratched.

For relaxation and entertainment, they had a gramophone and also a piano and Mum's sister in law, Frances, would come and play it and they would all gather round and sing songs like 'The Little Grey Home in the West'. Sometimes they would go into Scunthorpe at a weekend to look round the Fairground near St. John's Church and once they won a Tea Service on one of the Stalls. It wasn't very nice coming home at night though as it was very dark going across the fields bordered by dark hedgerows and they sometimes became very scared and would run as fast as they could and were so relieved to reach home safely.

Another time when they got off the bus at the edge of the warren track, it was so foggy that they didn't know where they were and got lost. They kept shouting for their Mum but eventually finished up down near the River Trent. I guess they did manage to find the right direction in the end but it was a very frightening experience – no mobile phones then!



*Phyl with niece Peggy from Sheffield and Fan the dog in the late 1930s*

During the summer when the evenings were light, they would play tennis in the cow field. They had to fetch the cows in first before marking the court out and putting the nets up and then go in for tea. Grandma would get cross at Mum and try to stop her playing tennis as she was terribly thin and Grandma was concerned, but Mum said that if she was fit enough to work then she was fit enough to play tennis. She just loved playing and took it very serious. One of her partners was Doug and Harry's Boss at Lysaghts and Mum also played in a tournament at Roxby once with another friend and they won a bicycle lamp and a box of chocolates.

She really loved tennis and became a very good player – in later days when she was married with a family, she would still go and play at Sheffield Park along with the family.



*A family gathering on the veranda at South Lodge*

Clothing and household linens were usually bought at Healds on Frodingham Road and they, too, were very generous and would allow Grandma to take a selection of items to choose from. There was also a little Antique/Second hand/Bric a Brac shop which Grandma used to love looking in and sometimes treat herself to a piece of china or jewellery. Then there was the Co-op on the corner of Frodingham Road and Sheffield Street where other general shopping was done including paraffin for the lamps etc. One day Grandma went off on her own as Mum was asleep on the settee whilst Bobs and Eva were out playing somewhere. So Grandma decided to lock her in the house but some friends called from the Farm where they obtained their milk and woke her up and encouraged her to climb out through the window, which she did, and caught her knickers on the window catch and ripped them. She was quite embarrassed as well as worried what her Mum would say when she got back.

Christmas was a lovely occasion as children although they didn't get a lot of presents and usually they would get a 'shared' present like a doll's pram with dolls or a scooter and later still, a bike to share between them until, eventually they had a bike each.

They would sit and make paper chains for the Christmas Tree which their Dad would fetch from the fir wood and they would then decorate it. Their presents were hidden away in the front room, which was usually locked, and they would try peeping through the keyhole to try and see what they had got. Of course, they got other small gifts from other members of the family and friends and one year Frances (brother Harry's future wife) bought Mum a box of paints which she loved as she did like to draw and was quite good at it.



*Tom with daughter Ann*



The remaining relatives of Walter and May, cousins, 2nd cousins and 3rd cousins now make a point of attending a Christmas meal together at Normanby Hall – a lovely Family Gathering which I hope will continue long after I am gone.

*Walter at Cleethorpes – the only day he had out when Eva took him*

**Evelyn Hocknells' Diary** *Daughter of Walter Atkinson*



*Eva in the woodshed 'posing' with Bobs' shotgun*



*Eva with Bob shooting*



*Phyl (on the left) with two friends*

"My father was Gamekeeper on Sir Berkely Sheffield Estate for sixty two years, so it was called 'Atkinson Warren'. He came as a young man of 23 years, and lived at Flixborough. Later, he met my mother, who was a maid for Mr and Mrs Coulthurst. They married and lived at Normanby, where my brothers were born. He later moved to 'South Lodge' my two sisters and I were born there, and it was there I spent my early life until I was forty five. Childhood days were happy ones, plenty to do during school holidays. There was a lady called Morris, we called her 'granny', who lived in Crosby, she came regularly and helped mother on washdays and confinements. We had a long walk to school (Crosby) and had pack up lunches and hot meals on returning at night. Evenings we had to fetch milk from Mrs Ferribys Farm also sticks and coal to get ready for morning.



◀ *Back Row Left to Right:*  
*Eva Atkinson (Walter and Gertrude May's Daughter)*  
*Gertrude's brother Charley*  
*Charley's Wife (name unknown)*  
*Doug Atkinson (Walter and Gertrude May's son)*

◀ *Front Row Left to Right:*  
*Jack (Charley's son)*  
*Phil Atkinson (Walter and Gertrude May's daughter)*  
*Cecelia (Charley's daughter)*



*Gertrude May with Dandy in front of South Lodge*



◀ *Back Row Left to Right: Walter Atkinson, Gertrude May Atkinson, Gertrude is holding Margaret... is Harry and Francis daughter. Harry Atkinson (Walter and Gertrude May's son), Harry's wife Frances, unknown family friend!*

◀ *Front Row Left to Right: Bob Atkinson (Walter and Gertrude May's daughter), Phyl Atkinson (Walter and Gertrude May's daughter), Ernest Ward, Ernest Ward's Mother (name not known)*

Father used to rear pheasants ready for the shooting season. It was interesting looking after them, having to boil eggs and potatoes and put them through a sieve as they were smaller than chicks when born. I used to exercise the dogs daily, we always had four, and all gun dogs.

Our nearest neighbours were a Mr and Mrs Leaning, who still have a poultry farm on Crosby Hill. Sunday morning I used to fetch the papers for our neighbour and ourselves.

Springtime was wonderful when fog hung over the Trent Valley, as the sun came over the hill and I would wonder at its beauty, as I fetched the cows for milking, and the birds would be busy with their morning song. The milk was strained and then poured into shallow bowls overnight, in the morning we skimmed the cream from the top of the bowls.

Every week, butter had to be made from the cream; this was made and weighed into pounds for selling. There was no fridge to keep food fresh in a summer, but the pantry was cool, you had to go down three steps which were stone and stone gantries around the outside, making it suitable for milk or meat during the summer. The calves were fed with the skimmed milk, we had to teach them to suck the milk from a bucket, by putting two fingers in the calves mouth, and then into the milk; fascinating but cruel to be deprived of mother love.



*Walter and Gertrude May feeding the calves*

During the First War, our house and out-buildings were always full of people who came from Scunthorpe during air-raids, thinking it was safer there, it was often early morning when the all clear siren would boom out and they would return to their homes. There was the summer evening when the police took my father and a Mr Hinton, to the police station in a black van as suspected spies, when all they were doing was looking for trespassers, through their binoculars. During the coal strike when the woods were open to the public, continuous streams of people with barrows and prams, looking for anything that would burn, coal dust that was washed down the drains from the works was collected, pressed into shapes and dried in the sun. We used it, along with wood and found it very good.

It was a big day when they had the pheasant shoots. The 'Sheffield's' would bring a party of fourteen guns, and after a morning shoot they would lunch at 'South Lodge' cottage. The food was brought in hot containers, along with two footmen,

for serving the meal. After they had wined and dined, we were invited to go and enjoy what was left, it was lovely being served by footmen. The smell of cigars and the taste of wine and cooked birds were great. It was a big day for my father as the number of birds etc. that were shot reflected on how good the rearing season had been.

We had our own tennis court, not very good, but we had lots of fun and really enjoyed playing with our friends, during the summer. We had several birds that father shot, preserved and set in cages. There was a 'Honey buzzard' with a six foot wingspan, a white stoat, white pheasants; some of these were given to the Scunthorpe Museum. I remember going into our front room one morning early, I had a candle to see my way. On the wall facing the door was a giant glass cage containing two stuffed owls, but on the top of this cage was sat a real black owl, it had come down the chimney during the night. It flew round and round the room and out the window, leaving soot marks around the room, the warmth from the chimney had attracted it.



*Pigs in the yard*

I left school at fourteen and then it was a very active life, helping with all the outside work. Cultivating the land, I could work a pair of horses when needed. It was interesting helping father to catch vermin, rats, rabbits, moles, stoats and foxes. I used to skin them and nail them on boards to dry. Selling them was my pocket money. Not so easy when I skinned my first fox, apart from the smell, it was hard work. I was pleased with the result after being cured, and made into a fur collar.

Mother was a wonderful cook, a pig was cured for Christmas, there were pork pies, sausages and brawn to be made, the rest of the pig was salted and cured on the floor in the pantry, after three weeks it was taken out, the salt brushed off, then the joints were hung from the kitchen ceiling on large hooks. We lived a simple life; our main meals consisted of milk, butter, rabbits, chicken and bacon.

It was a very interesting life and I soon learned how to do most jobs on a farm. Having my own twenty bore gun, my early morning trips for young rabbits became very profitable as I have had three with one shot many times, and my mother's rabbit pie was delicious.



*Walter with Dandy sat in the front garden*



*Bill Atkinson (Walters brother) with Doug and wife Effie harvesting 1920s*



*Walter haymaking c1930s*

Also at harvest times when the corn was cut, and we used to stand around when there was only a few square yards left to cut, the rabbits would wait thinking they could escape, but no, death came sharp and fast as they tried to scamper one after another into the wood. After this was the 'Stooking', it was an attractive sight, the corn sheaves lined up like rows of soldiers.

Today it's all done with the combined harvester, quicker and cheaper, but never as interesting as a pair of horses pulling the machine that cuts the wheat so gently shuffling it up the table to be tied in neat bundles to be forked out automatically every few minutes into classical rows."

## Memories from John Hocknell *Evelyn's son:*

"My mother, Evelyn Hocknell (always known as "Bob") was born at South Lodge in 1909, the youngest daughter of gamekeeper Walter Atkinson. She had two brothers, Harry and Doug, and two sisters Eva & Phyllis.



*Bob sledging on the warren late 1990s*



*Phyl and Eva and Bob c 1915*



*Playing cards with Walter (Ann, Gertrude May, Phyl, Walter, Steve, Alf and Diana) early 1950s, taken at South Lodge*

I was born in May 1939 and my earliest memories are of going to bed by candlelight, of Grandma Atkinson cooking and baking on a range over an open fire, of closing the heavy wooden shutters over the main windows at night, of lighting the "Tilley" lamps and hearing the vaporised gas hiss as the mantle ignited.

The house was built of ironstone which contained many fossils and I remember, as a child, chipping away at the house walls in an effort to extricate a particularly desired specimen!

The Second World War started soon after I was born and so I grew up in a period of rationing with food, clothing coupons and

strict restrictions on what we could buy in the shops. I remember Hornsby Holt, (the wood immediately below the house), being full of Canadian troops camping whilst they were in transit and later, of searching the wood when they left, for souvenirs. We found a helmet, despatch riders' goggles and even a bayonet!

One of the advantages of Grandad's employment was that our home, plus a few acres of land, went with the job, and we kept two shire horses, three cows, several pigs and about twenty chickens.

I remember Grandad Atkinson, who was always out of the house early, returning for his lunch about 10.30 a.m. and having a bottle of beer (always Forest Brown!!). He'd sit in the corner and insert a poker into the open fire...when the end was red hot he would stick it in his glass of beer and watch the steam rise, then drink the beer accompanied by a slab of cheese.

(Breakfast at the farm was between 7 and 8 a.m. lunch was at 10.30 ish, dinner was at 12 noon and tea was at 4 p.m. I don't remember any suppers!!)

A tennis court was created in one of the meadows and friends from town were invited to the Farm to enjoy a game. With our own eggs, milk and butter, the vegetables that we grew ourselves and with fruit that we grew from our own orchard, we fared better than most. Additionally we had meat from the pig which we slaughtered each year, and game (rabbits, pigeons and the occasional pheasant).

Lysaght's steelworks weren't very far away and I remember the whole sky turning red at night as the molten waste from the blast furnaces was tipped from special trains onto the slag heaps that surrounded the works. (Hence Scunthorpe's motto which translates from the Latin to read "The skies reflect our labours").



*Lysaght's slagbank at the back of Rose Cottage where Harry lived*



*Gertrude May with her brother George, wife and daughter Marjorie, Bob at the back, Phyl with Ann on her knee c 1930*

You didn't need a watch when working on the farm, you always knew the time by the steelworks hooters .....the 11 o'clock hooter, the 2 p.m. hooter etc., denoting shift changes at the nearby steel plant. I remember hearing the alternating wail of the air raid sirens warning us of anticipated attacks by enemy bombers intent on attacking the steelworks in the town, and of lying in bed at night listening to aircraft flying overhead and huddling under the covers until the sound receded and I was sure that they were not going to drop any bombs on South Lodge!! At this time the news (which we listened to on a battery powered wireless) was full of stories about the London Blitz.

On one occasion a British aircraft returning from a mission over Germany, crashed at night in nearby woodland between South Lodge and Lysaght's steelworks. The whole family crowded into my bedroom to watch the flames towering over the treetops.



*Phyl, Tom with Ann in pram, front of South Lodge c 1934*

Several of the crew were killed and my Father, because of his reserved occupation on the steelworks was registered as a "Firewatcher and Stretcher Bearer" was involved in recovering the bodies. Next day Grandad took me in a horse and cart to have a look at the wreckage. By that time soldiers were guarding the site of the crash. After VE Day I remember aircraft flying over the Farm and showering us with tinfoil strips in celebration. I believe it was a ploy used to confuse enemy radar during the war.

My mother was nicknamed "Bob" because her mother and father would have preferred another son to help on the farm. Nevertheless she worked like a man. She ploughed the fields with two horses and plough; she helped her father with his game keeping duties and was an excellent shot with her double barrelled twenty-bore shotgun. She milked the three cows, by hand of course, and helped churn the butter once a week. All the domestic tasks had to be done by hand with hot water boiled on the range or from a big wood fired boiler in one of the out buildings. Ironing was accomplished by using a heavy flat iron heated in the oven and fitted onto a brass shoe.

Other memories include having the day off school to help at the slaughtering of one of the pigs. My duties entailed carrying joints of the butchered carcass from the stables, where it had been hanging all day, to the pantry in the house where Grandad would be on his knees salting the pork so that it would keep. The salted hams were

later suspended from hooks in the ceiling; meanwhile Grandma was producing yards and yards of sausages. A busy time.

'My younger brother David and I lived at South Lodge with our parents and Grandma and Grandad Atkinson until 1950 when tragically David died of complications following a tonsillectomy operation in Scunthorpe Hospital. Mum and Dad were deeply affected by his death and felt that South Lodge now held so many sad memories that they decided to make a new home in Portman Road, just over the hilltop and within easy reach of the Farm.

My mother visited South Lodge every day to help with the routine jobs.

At 11 years old I had just started having shooting lessons from Grandad, using Mum's 20 bore shotgun. I spent every available hour, after school and at weekends, on the warren learning about gamekeeping. I was told that if I ever became as good a shot as my Mother, then I would be pretty good!!



*John Hocknell*



*David Hocknell*

In June 1953 I remember Dad climbing the old oak tree next to South Lodge ( it seemed a lot bigger at that time!) and securing a Union Flag to the uppermost branches in celebration of the Queen's Coronation. Grandma and Grandad were true Royalists.

I remember pig's trotters and collared head turning up on the dinner table afterwards. I was given a thoroughly washed pig's bladder for use inside a brand-new and never used leather lace-up football. During the war rubber bladders were unobtainable.

I remember saving all the silver threepenny bits (called Joeys) throughout the year so that they could be dropped into the Christmas pudding mix and anyone who found a coin in their portion on Christmas Day were assured of good luck in the coming year (unless of course they happened to break a tooth in the process!!)

I remember washing at the tap outside the back door before going to school and having to break the ice before I did so. I remember going with Grandad into the woods on a winter's evening to listen and note where the pheasants went up to roost. Every time one flew up into the bare branches it made a distinctive call which was followed by the clatter of wings.



*Walter at his pheasant coops*

When we roughly knew where they were we walked through the trees until we could see the birds silhouetted against the night – sky, then we tapped on the tree trunks to alarm the birds until they flew down. Otherwise they would have made an easy target for poachers. While waiting we kept warm by making a small fire of fir cones and Grandad told me tales of his youth. How he started work at 9 years old for sixpence a week (two and a half pence in today's money). Shepherding cows and crow scaring (acting like a mobile scarecrow to keep the birds off the growing crops).

I remember the bitter winter of 1947 which started on January 22nd with frost and snow until March 15th. I was going to Henderson Avenue School when the bad weather started and caught bronchitis so had a fortnight at home. When I returned the same thing happened and the doctor said not to go to school until the snow went..... so I had quite a long holiday that winter.

Getting to school for me, or work for Dad was no easy task as South Lodge was

completely cut off to vehicles. On foot you could just about make it to the main road. That winter we were forced to be self- sufficient. Living on ham hanging from the kitchen ceiling and rabbits and pigeons shot by my Mother and Grandfather, and they had very little meat on them. We ran out of coal and had to fell the trees in the hedge across the meadow to cut up for firewood.....meanwhile the rabbits were chewing the bark off the trees where

they protruded from the snow. Months afterwards visitors to the farm couldn't understand what these strange rings were around the trees between three and four feet above the ground. We used to time each other at skinning a rabbit, I think it used to take me seven or eight minutes, being easily beaten by my Mother every time! We used to skin the whole rabbit, head as well, and then my Grandmother cooked the carcass in its entirety. When it appeared on the dinner table my brother David and I used to fight for the delicacies. I favoured the brains, cracking the skull open and scooping them out with a teaspoon, whereas David loved the tongue. The kidneys and liver were also firm favourites. All the rabbit skins were saved, and together with any skins of stoats, weasels or moles that had been killed by Grandad as part of his game keeping duties were sent off to the furrier to raise a little extra cash.

On special occasions we sometimes killed a chicken or a "Stag", (Grandma's term for a cockerel), for the table. When it appeared for carving a great fuss was made of whoever was given the "Wishbone", a horseshoe shaped bone found in front of the breast. The recipient was expected to cut the meat off it and then, curling a little finger round one of the "arms" of the wishbone, offer it to someone else at the table that was expected to do likewise. They then each pulled/twisted the bone until it snapped.....whoever was left holding the largest piece was allowed a secret wish.

On another occasion I remember riding home from the harvest field with my cousin Ann, on top of a horse drawn cart loaded

with wheat sheaves, when, looking over the bracken and nettles growing alongside the farm track we spotted the most wild mushrooms we had ever seen. Further investigation revealed them growing on a long forgotten manure heap from a nearby piggery. Although many of them were past their best we nevertheless had mushrooms included in our menus for several days.

I remember Grandad sitting in his armchair in the morning using a buttonhook to secure his gaiters, with about 20 small buttons on each leg to secure, it was no easy task. At the dinner table, he had his personal horn handled knife and fork. He'd had them for as long as I can remember and would refuse to eat until they were in place. The knife was as keen as a razor and had been sharpened so often that the blade was worn away until it was merely an inch long!

Grandad's Gamekeeper's Gibbet that he created on a fence at the farm where he hung all the vermin he shot or trapped. The carcasses of stoats, weasels, magpies, carrion crows & jays extended for yards along the fence for all, especially his employer to see, and was meant to prove what an efficient 'keeper he was. This was general 'keepering' practice as late as the mid 1950's & often included the bodies of hawks & owls before they were on the protected list."

My Grandfather went into hospital in 1957 for treatment for a double rupture that it was suspected he'd suffered from for some time. The operation was successful and Grandad was even asking for a bottle of his favourite "Forest Brown" when he suffered a relapse and sadly died at 86 years old.

He was buried in Flixborough Cemetery, with a plume of cock pheasant tail feathers in his coffin. As the service in the churchyard concluded in the late afternoon, pheasants in the nearby woodland could be heard calling as they flew up to roost. A fitting tribute to Walter Atkinson, Gamekeeper, a man who had devoted 62 years of his life to the local countryside'.

"Old Akkie" as he was known and feared by generations of school children who dared to trespass on his preserve, is remembered by the Warren named after him on the outskirts of Scunthorpe. I slept in the back bedroom, the one with the dormer window, and I can remember looking out of it in the morning, seeing rabbits on the grassy bank above the old sandpit, dashing downstairs for my gun. Creeping outside and up the bank for the chance of a quick shot.

After we'd left the farm and Grandma was unwell, I would ride down from Portman Road last thing in the evening to spend the night there in case she was taken ill and someone was needed to call the doctor as there was no telephone.... I always used my old bedroom. Grandma and Grandad had the double bedroom nearest the orchard and mum and dad had the one nearest the oak tree.

Talking about the house...on the oblique photo of the cottage taken from the front, a painted window can be seen on the left of the veranda. We always understood this to be a 'Peel's Picture' dating from the days of the Window Tax, when artificial windows were created (they were tax free) to create the impression that the occupants were slightly wealthier than they were.

## **Memories from Michael Youngman** *(Fostered by Evelyn)*

"I arrived in Portman Road in 1950 on a trial basis and lived there permanently from February 15th 1951. I start with the 10-minute trek from Portman Road to the warren, usually with some of the half-dozen friends in the street. Getting there was complicated when they established the Lysaght's sports ground on the field we went through. That meant a detour down Ferry Road or more often through the woods near South Lodge, watching out for Harry Greaves the gamekeeper.

The sandy warren itself was memorable for the numerous rabbit holes and the bracken which was often over our heads in summer. In winter, of course it was the local sledging centre. Routes down were tricky being either bumpy on the grass, or slow through the sand.

Other memories are more to do with various features along bottom path towards Rose Cottage. Three memories do stand out. First was my regular trek with a wheelbarrow to fetch leaf mould from the wood across "bottom path". Then there was the pond just inside the gate from Ferry Road which was choc-a-bloc with frogs, frogspawn and newts. We carried our collections home in jam-jars with handles made from string. Finally, there was the fire that burnt down virtually all of the birch trees across the path from the warren. The amazing thing was how quickly they grew back to produce an even denser wood."

## Memories from Richard Beverley Atkinson

*(Great Grandson of Walter)*



*Richard on his way to his Grandads (Harry Atkinson) at Rose Cottage mid 1950's*

"I always considered the Warren began as you turned off Ferry Road and onto the dirt track. The Sheffield's' may have disagreed with me because in the eighteenth century there was a gate at South Lodge and another at the north end where Rose Cottage stood and the area either side of what would become Ferry Road was a waste called Cliff Common where probably a gypsy's horse would have starved to death. That was the warren, it was poor land, dry land, hopeless land and it was left to its own devices and in essence hadn't changed in a thousand years. So for me, as a four year old in 1955, that's where civilisation ended and the warren began and who's a baronet to argue with a child?

Immediately on the right there was a field and in it lived a donkey or possibly two behind a peculiar fence made of black pipes like big fat scaffolding pipes. I suppose it belonged to the Leanings. They lived in a bungalow hidden amongst bushes on the crest of the hill that you approached from Crogger Hill. They kept hens that I knew, because ten years later, 1965 say, I went with my grandmother to buy some. Mr Leaning was a thin man in a grey suit and not much taller than I was then; Mrs Leaning had a piano in the front room. The bungalow was homemade, they often where in those days, they were more romantic times.

The yard was made of cinders, the chickens were Rhode Island Red types with their feather fluffed out like a dozen dirty petticoats. We bundled a dozen into sacks, stuffed them in the boot of the car and took them home to Rose Cottage at the top end of the Warren and released them into our ash filled chicken yard.

They ate heartily, produced a good amount of droppings but precious few eggs. The Leanings have been gone forty five years, the bungalow too, though there's a lilac bush where it stood that won't give up the struggle.

And so we come to the site of South Lodge. An old oak tree marks the spot. In the photographs from a hundred years ago it looks already an old tree but much larger and not yet in its decline. I think it must have been there long before the house.



Jim Hornsby (perhaps born 1832 at South Lodge) the notable rat catcher and poet who was a face around Crosby until his death in 1916 wrote a poem about the tree. He looked old enough to have planted it. The maps from 1715 and 1775 appear to show South Lodge on the western side of the road and much farther down the slope. This seems most likely, even into the twentieth century a space the shape of the eighteenth century garth remained on the map. My grandparents told me the house was built in 1815.



*Walter & Gertrude May with Richard*



*L to R: Pauline, Phyl, Eva, Gertrude May c 1950s*

It's almost two generations since South Lodge was demolished but its skeleton still lies there like that of a ship in the sand of a beach. It was no typical hovel built of a single skin of brick with an earth floor and a ditch a few yards from the back door full of stinking black water. It was built to look picturesque, to be a credit to the estate, it faced west and sat on the soft, dry slope of the hillside as perfect as a dozen brown eggs in a tea towel, more perfect in every way than Normanby Hall. Built in the shape of an E the middle bar was missing and replaced with a stone flagged veranda. Perhaps the design was bought in but whoever pointed the stem of his clay pipe at the ground and said there had a morning of genius. There was a walled orchard attached to the north side stocked with plums and apple trees. Perfection.

There are photos of me and Walter together but I have no real recollection of him, him being born in 1871 and me in 1951. I can remember great grandma. She, like him,

was small and capable and determined and she'd dress up finer than the lady of the manor with a stole that seemed to fasten with the claws of the animal.

He was a very quiet man my mother said, and most people would remember him saying keep to the path, except that the majority of people who would remember him saying that are gone too.

By the Sixties, the land around South Lodge had been sold twice over by speculators. The whitethroats in their nest were murdered but not with a gun, but with a bulldozer to clear the land to build a shop within an industrial unit that sells pictures of the English countryside painted by a machine in China.

Packs of dogs roamed the Ferry Road end of the warren. In those times dogs would be kicked out of the house at breakfast time and only return around the start of children's television. Sometimes the packs would be fifteen or twenty strong, beasts of all sorts

but mainly proper Scunthorpe dogs, long and lean and good at leaping, black of coat and with plume tails. Blackness of coat is a measure of domesticity in the dog species but these had a very nonchalant look about them.

Walter would sit up on the hillside, in the shadows beneath a favourite hawthorn with a pair of grey binoculars my Grandfather had taken from a dead German machine gun crew and keep

watch over his beat. He took keeping seriously. Once in the Twenties, he shot a bewildered guillemot thinking it would be a danger to his birds, once a buzzard. Except that it was a honey buzzard and only a danger to the Hymenoptera of the district. The birds were stuffed and years later ended up in Scunthorpe museum. All are as dead and gone now as the German machine gun crew, hound's tongue and all. Except for the binoculars. I've got them.



But before we leave the warren, let's look at a couple of strange trees at the top of what was once the garden of Rose Cottage. The first is an oak tree. At first glance it doesn't catch the eye but on close examination it reveals itself as a very old tree indeed, far older than the tree at South Lodge, certainly it would have witnessed the building of the first house in the 17th century. When I was a boy it was massive, with the same shape as the Major Oak, but in 1970 or 71 it collapsed under its own weight and yet in spite of its great age it sent out shoots that are now as thick as a man's body. Of late kids have begun lighting fires in its hollow trunk. Such a Stone Age activity, but it's the fate of all old trees. When I stand by it and look out across the Trent valley, past the sheds of the chicken factory, the huge, featureless fields, the pylons, the wind farms, past the distant A1 to the hills around Barnsley and Goldthorpe I know that if I woke up in a world where kids didn't set fire to ancient trees I wouldn't recognise it.

And so to the last tree, on the farthest point of the warren. It stands on the edge of the footpath that leads to the site of Flixborough Old Church. It looks so ancient, so reminiscent of a living Domesday Book, so gnarled and corky surely it must predate even the oak. Well, it might.



*Walter with Richard on his knee, his son Harry & Margaret*



*Gertrude May with Richard on her knee, Harry & Margaret*

When I was young I thought it was a small leaved lime but of course it's a black poplar. An unusual tree by anyone's standards. It may not have been planted; it may have grown from a stake used to mark the boundary of, well, the Warren. It must be a tough old tree, it was already ancient when the molten slag was poured within a whisker of it. It looks as healthy as a three hundred year old poplar can, though of course it's doomed. But when I stand by it and look out at what's left of the Warren, that once perfect wilderness created by man, I want to tap the tree on its trunk and tell it, forty years ago I took a cutting from you and it's grown up big and strong and true."





*Family christmas gathering at Normanby Hall*

## Photo's from our Family Album



*Yvonne 2, daughter of Doug Atkinson*



*Yvonne, daughter of Doug Atkinson*



*Margaret, daughter of Harry Atkinson and mother of Richard Beverley Atkinson*



*Gordon Atkinson, son of Doug Atkinson. Gordon farmed the land around the Warren for many years up to retirement.*



*Evelyn 'Bob' and her son, John Hocknell*



*Eva with her daughter Christine, who also painted the South Lodge pictures on the front and back covers of the booklet.*



*Bob's son Mick Youngman (far left side) with his family and members of John Hocknell's family on Bob's birthday*



*Steve, Gamekeeper of Atkinson's Warren the 1960's for the Sheffield Estate as his grandfather was. He also was Gamekeeper at Normanby Hall.*



*Bob and Phyl taken at one of their birthday gatherings. Pictured with them are descendants of Phyl's family with John Hocknell's wife Daphne.*



*Pauline Hannah with her two sons, Rod and Fergus. Pauline is holding Fergus's son Grayson*

## **My Memory of Atkinson's Warren**

*By Martin Kelsey Great Grandson of Walter Atkinson of South Lodge, Atkinson's Warren*

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, I spent a great deal of time on Atkinson's Warren, with my uncle Steve; Walter Atkinson's grandson. Steve had worked as a gamekeeper for the Sheffield family estate, from leaving school up until the early 1970's, when the estate changed the way it operated and gamekeepers weren't required anymore - at least not in the numbers beforehand, but one such keeper was kept on - the 'infamous' Harry Greaves, an older and experienced gamekeeper, 'infamous' because of his fearsome reputation which preceded him. Harry was a well-built, no-nonsense keeper and didn't mince words, although he was very personable if you knew him. There was a period of time when youths took to riding motorbikes all over the warren and caused damage. Somebody on one occasion got hold of one of those motor bikes and threw it off the Slag Heap while its delinquent owner looked on. I think Harry Greaves got the blame for that as he was well known for being a strong and strict gamekeeper, but some thirty years later, I can tell you now it was Steve! He threw that motorcycle! You couldn't meet a more friendly and gentle man but he despised people destroying the natural countryside and had a temper, especially if the delinquent became mouthy!

I have many fond memories of my times on the warren with my uncle. We would sit quietly for hours, listening and watching nature. Steve would say 'You won't see much, Martin, charging around and making a noise. The trick is to be still, watch and listen.' And sure enough, before long, we

would hear bird call, which he would then identify with ease, and other times we would catch a glimpse of a stoat or even a fox, close-up.

The wildlife didn't always turn up though and on such occasions, Steve would regale me with stories of his adventures from his 'keeping' days. One such account stuck in my mind of how, when he was just a boy of fifteen (about the age I was then, myself), as an initiation test of nerves, stealth and sense of direction, he was given the task of tracking down the other keepers, in the dead of night, without a torch, deep into the darkest recesses of the fir wood. He had to approach them without detection or he'd fail the test. The aim was to train him in stalking and apprehending poachers. Steve passed the test and found the keepers, who cheered and patted his back, congratulating him on his success. This training would prove very valuable in the years to come and especially on one occasion when the tables were turned and Steve and Harry found themselves becoming the hunted when a particularly dangerous and ruthless gang of poachers fired their shotguns at them, one dark, cold night. They had to hide in a ditch as the poachers walked right passed them, uttering curses and revealing their plans to shoot the keepers if they saw them! Of course, Steve and Harry were themselves armed with twelve bore shotguns but they had sense to stay low so as not to cause an all out shootout that night, which would have undoubtedly ended in injury or death.

Steve's employment as a gamekeeper had ended but his passion for nature and wildlife conservation innate in him from childhood, never wavered and so Harry kindly allowed him to visit the warren, whenever he liked, to birdwatch and study insects. at the Flixborough end.

When Steve's gamekeeper days came to an end, he locked away his shotgun but retained his license, just in case (he always hoped) the situation changed and he might return to the gamekeeper profession. He admitted that he didn't miss having to shoot animals (vermin) though as it heavily conflicted with his love and respect of all living creatures but then something happened in 1973, which caused him a dichotomy and forced him to begin using his gun once more.

Some forty-three years later, the exact details are somewhat sketchy but I do know that Steve acquired an African Barn Owl in the early 1970's. This bird had been imported illegally by a student at a university somewhere, then confiscated and decided by the law that as an exotic species must not be released into the wild here in the British Isles. There were no means of transporting it back to Africa at the time; not without incurring huge expense and specialist skills, so word was put out in search of an experienced bird keeper or zoo, who would take it on. Unfortunately, no such help arrived and it was only by chance that Steve read about this dilemma in a newspaper and he decided to put himself forward as a potential owl foster parent.



*Steve with the African Barn Owl 'Ollie'*

I remember Steve excitedly telling me he had a surprise to show me and I must get round to his house immediately. I also remember being stood outside the huge aviary he had built and at first, I couldn't see what he was pointing to over in the corner amongst a load of tree branches. 'There look, Martin! Can't you see him?' Steve said. I looked again and there he was, quite camouflaged, Steve's African Barn Owl, 'Ollie'. Ollie's head rocked from side to side as he fixed his beady eyes on me. 'Why's he doing that, Steve?' I asked. 'He's weighing you up because he doesn't recognise you.' Steve replied. Of course, these days special licenses must be required for keeping exotic birds of prey in captivity and questions would be asked about the ethics involved but Ollie escaped on a couple of occasions when Steve was cleaning the aviary out but he returned of his own volition, so it could be deduced perhaps that he enjoyed his life of being waited on, hand and foot.

In more recent years, live food such as rats and mice can be purchased by those who keep snakes and reptiles but forty years ago, there was no other option but to source these foodstuffs by one's own means and thus there arose Steve's aforementioned dichotomy; shooting rabbits. Ideally, Steve didn't like to be carrying his gun and shooting things anymore as it was at odds with him being very strongly into preserving wildlife - not shooting it, but he had a responsibility – a

Barn Owl dependent on him to feed it.

So every Saturday, with Harry's permission, Steve and I would get dropped off at the Rose Cottage end of the Warren, near the road that enters Flixborough. It was a cold and arduous task in winter but summer was like an idyllic countryside walk.

'Rose Cottage' was little more than an enclosed orchard garden but by then, the house was gone, and all that remained was undergrowth covered rubble, enclosed by bushes, high trees and shrubs. Even in its sorry state, it was still a picturesque little spot though.

I remember there was a line strung between a couple of trees with certain vermin (rats, crows, magpies etc) hanging from it, called 'The Vermin Line.' It was an old practice and would be frowned upon now but its purpose was to show the landowner that the gamekeeper was doing his job. I think this was Harry's work. Macabre as it was, it was a thing all gamekeepers did; probably even Steve when he was full time keeper and Walter Atkinson did too. But it didn't detract too much from that now abandoned Rose Cottage garden: it was like walking into an enclosed piece of perfect countryside; a scene from a Constable painting or suchlike. Harry Atkinson once lived at Rose Cottage but when he became too old to live there, nobody else moved in and like South Lodge, it became derelict and was pulled down.

Returning to the macabre though, I am reminded of two more of Steve's tales of the warren. At the Flixborough end, there used to be an ancient church and cemetery, which if you know where to look, just a few stones now exist but they are mostly toppled and covered by the undergrowth. During the early 1980's, I recall Steve telling me how he'd been down



*Flowers left on South Lodge remains. These are left every December by the John Hocknell family in memory of their Mum 'Bob' where her Ashes are laid.*

to the area and was shocked to discover skeletons hanging out of their exposed coffins! He remarked that it was like a scene from a Hammer Horror film! At first he thought it might have been a deliberate act of vandalism, and he was right to have had initial suspicions that the grave yard incident might have been caused by morbid vandals. The same year he had discovered an eight foot tall wooden cross, hammered into the ground on another part of the warren. From the left arm of the cross there hung a dead crow and on the right arm, a dead black cat! Was it part of a black magic ritual or had it been set up for a photo shoot? The answer will probably always remain a mystery but Steve pulled the gruesome find to the ground and buried both creatures. As for the grim cemetery find, closer inspection revealed that there had been a small landslide and it had caused the damage. Steve spent the afternoon returning the skeletons to their respective graves and covered them up.



The picture above shows Flixborough old Church and cemetery but also, on the left, Rose Cottage can be seen.

Steve was on a gamekeeper patrol down past the cottage many years before, in the 60's I believe, when a meteorite landed a few feet from him on the track. It was very, very hot and glowed like a red lamp. Steve was a very accomplished astronomer, having done astronomical surveys for Patrick Moore and he could name all constellations and numerous visible stars and planets in the night sky, so he knew what he was seeing. He marvelled at the possibility of it being close to hitting him, he was on his own and nobody around to claim his find for their own, so he left it to cool until he came back from checking the pheasants. On his return it was still very hot but he wrapped it in thick leather from his bag and chanced carrying it home like that without it burning through the bag. For some years, following the loss of my beloved uncle, the meteorite has been in my possession and it resides on my shelf. It fits into the palm of the hand and is surprisingly heavy for its size. It is a very tactile object and most people who handle it note how interesting it is to examine and wonder at its origin and it's incredible journey across vast expanses of space.

Today, Rose Cottage garden is so overgrown it is unrecognisable as a garden or even the site of Harry Atkinson's home, but it was quite special in the times I visited there in late 1970's. My outings there weren't always so pleasurable though! As a schoolboy attending Foxhill's school, which was in relative close proximity to the warren, Rose Cottage was part of the cross country route we had to endure during bitter cold, harsh winters. That was an adventure through Atkinson's Warren I despised!

On this particular day though, Steve's aim was to shoot two rabbits, which would feed Ollie for a week. Sometimes Harry would get one for him if he was struggling to find one or two to shoot. I remember the Myxomatosis outbreak in the 1970's caused much anguish and concern to Steve and both he and Harry were out hours one week, trying to get a rabbit without 'Mixy'. I went with my grandad, Tom Hill, to try and get one during a week day while Steve was at work. I was very young but I remember it well. I remember my grandad getting very worried about the potential of no rabbit being available for Ollie that week. Eventually, we'd spot one but Ollie had to be on rations some weeks. Fortunately, by the time I was frequenting the Warren regularly on those Saturdays, there was a good supply of rabbits as they had recovered their numbers well.

Steve always tried to get the rabbits as soon as he got there, so he could leave them in the now derelict Rose Cottage's garden, to be retrieved as we left to go home. He would sit in the door of a shed which remained in the now overgrown garden, and he would gut the rabbits and put them in the hut, safe for later collection.

Invariably, we'd start out by walking up the fields towards the railway line after being dropped off. Rabbits gathered there and the route we took gave us an advantage of being able to look down from a bridge which straddled the line. Steve always kept me about 5 foot behind him when the gun was readied for action, and taught me to walk silently. As mentioned earlier, Steve could sneak up on a poacher in a wood without making a sound in the dead of the night. We often did get the rabbits from the bridge looking down on the railway, which resulted in Steve galloping down to retrieve them while I waited at the top.

If we had bagged the rabbits from off the bridge, we would sit in the old church yard above Rose Cottage, with our backs against the then stillstanding gravestones. We were silent so the birds didn't know we were there and after a few minutes of sitting, many times, an owl would come down and land on the nearby gravestones. That graveyard was an idyllic spot to sit on a hot Saturday afternoon.

The wildlife we saw there was so often numerous and varied. If we had not got the rabbits at the bridge, we would go off the beaten track a bit up near the church yard. I remember following Steve through what seemed like impenetrable bramble briars to emerge at another spot probably only known to him. But often, if no rabbits had been obtained, we would walk down to the wood opposite Rose Cottage and walk very very quietly through the trees to the other side of the wood, which opened up on a very sandy area which was invariably alive with rabbits. It was easy to get a couple as long as we had been extremely quiet while walking through that wood. If no rabbits, we would have to continue at that point towards Scunthorpe through the sandy areas along that area. But we were mostly successful and we would double back to Rose Cottage garden to gut and stash the rabbits in the hut doorway, and the Barn Owl would not go hungry in the next week. Sometimes we would go down and walk the track slowly and quietly and get the rabbits. But Steve's real aim was to get them quickly so we had the rest of the afternoon to do some serious birdwatching.



*Steve getting rabbits to feed the Owl*



Steve produced a map with a key of abbreviations, of birds, some very unusual, such as the rare Hoopoe that he had seen on the warren when he was a gamekeeper during the 60's. This map has only recently been found by my mother.

Steve liked little more than sitting quietly birdwatching. He was more about conservation than most of his fellow gamekeepers. After sitting talking and birdwatching in the Rose Cottage garden for an half hour or so, we would head off deeper in to the warren and into the woods, which were dark and dense in those days, to such an extent that I am certain that I would have been quite lost if I had not been following Steve. Eventually, we would stop and lean against a tree in silence, waiting and watching. Wildlife and birds would eventually come and surround us and we would just rest and simply observe nature. Steve and I did this every week, until his untimely death in 1996. We used the 'quiet and still' method of wildlife watching all over - wherever we went; not just the warren. Steve knew the warren like the back of his hand, even in the dark. He patrolled many woods and warrens of the area and knew the Normanby Park grounds in the same way.

We would often walk through those woods on the warren and it came out near a stream at the back, which is now gone (I believe the road cuts through the Warren at this spot now). We would then continue down through the trees and back across the then clear path. All the time birdwatching, stopping, listening and looking. I remember we used to, on occasions, end up on the Slag Bank (thought to be an area historically used as a dumping ground by the local steel works but I can't be certain). I have a clear memory of Steve, with his ever-present binoculars up to his eyes, suddenly whispering 'Blimey Mart! That's a flock of Golden Plover!' He was always looking and always aware of what birds were there, he taught me the calls of many birds which I still know to this day; I haven't forgotten them. But Steve knew every bird by its call, like he knew just about every star in the sky for Patrick Moore!

We never ventured too close to Scunthorpe on those Saturdays. It's not a good idea to walk too close to inhabited areas carrying a shot gun! But also because Steve hated the built-up area encroaching on the beautiful warren his grandfather lived on. We were more likely to see interesting things closer to the Rose Cottage end by that time in the warren's history. At the time, I didn't realise the warren would get built on and destroyed or that a huge chicken farm would be built on that sandy area where we hunted rabbits. Later, only a few years later in fact, the area we frequented was built on and a road put in through the centre of the wood. I saw it before the huge changes and am grateful for that. South Lodge was still largely standing back then, but not for much longer as despite much protest by conservationists; Steve included, it, and much of the warren was bulldozed by the local council to make way for huge department stores and housing and all that remains are my memories of those walks back towards Rose Cottage, through sandy warrens and shrubbery; all the time watching for wildlife and birds and stopping occasionally for a sit and listen. Occasionally Harry Greaves would appear on his scooter, and stop for a chat, and occasionally we would see Gordon Atkinson, Steve's cousin, who worked on a farm that encroached on the Warren. But usually we saw very few people and I think that's why nature fared so well there. The entire area was an outstanding piece of natural beauty and would have been an amazing nature reserve from Scunthorpe to Flixborough, if it had not been built on. Such is the cost of industry and increasing populations I suppose, but I will always have my memories of 'Ackie's Warren', the sights and sounds of nature, Steve's stories and those days spent hunting for Ollie's weekly food supply.

**Martin Kelsey**

*Great Grandson of Walter Atkinson*

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"MY FATHER WAS GAMEKEEPER ON THE SIR BERKELEY SHEFFIELD ESTATE FOR SIXTY TWO YEARS, AND SO IT BECAME 'ATKINSON'S WARREN'. TODAY KNOWN AS 'AKKIES'."

EXTRACT FROM THE DIARY OF EVELYN HOCKNELL

