



**THE WENHAM FAMILY HISTORY**

**WITH**

**ANECDOTES AND REMINISCENCES**

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February 1995.

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### ANECDOTES AND REMINISCENCES

The Wenham family appear to have come down from Suffolk to Sussex in the 17th. Century and my branch of the family settled around Hellingly and had brickfields along the Dicker.

One of my forebears Mary Wenham married Samuel Roods of Hankham in 1770 and their tomb lies in Westham churchyard.

~~Great Great~~  
My Grandfather, Ody Wenham, was the first auctioneer in Hailsham Market and figures in this extract from 'Our Sussex Parish' by Thomas Geering 1884.

"One well known character who used to disport himself in front of 'The Crown' the Auctioneer, is gone, and has found no successor. The mantle of Ody Wenham has fallen on no mans' shoulders, yet the owner had power and a character that carried him over many a year.

Who, among the fraternity of those days, could collect a company and command attention equal to our old friend when he appeared on the joss-block in front of the Inn on a market day? And who, now, among our young and aspiring professors-knights of the ivory hammer, can rival him as he indulged in fancy of the many qualities and uses of the various lots he offered to the public? Who can equal his finesse when drawing another bid from reluctant, stubborn competitors, especially among the ladies? How he would show them twenty uses for an article intended for one only, and by a few skilful touches, wind up his harangue by some original rhyme, ensuring the good humour of the company as his hammer fell and he called out the name of the lucky purchaser."

"Mr. Wenham, in addition to his numerous other avocations, acts as Town Crier. He also lets out Post Horses. N.B. Not wooden ones!"

My Grandfather, J.T. Wenham, was Alderman in Eastbourne, serving on the first Town Council at the incorporation of the Borough in 1883. He had a furniture business with premises in Pevensey Road and Seaside, Eastbourne and at Hailsham, also he developed the St. Anthony's Hill area and bought several Martello Towers along the Crumbles, converting one for living accommodation, the work being done by John Smith of the Star Inn, Normans Bay. Our family used to spend week-ends out there and the water in the well was absolutely pure in spite of being within a few yards of the high tidemark. Grandfather had a large family, one of whom, Walter, was a well known naturalist, lawyer and poet who used to write for the Beckett family's Eastbourne newspaper under the pseudonym 'Lex'.

My father, Sydney Wenham, used to play 'hookey' from school and spent a fair lot of his time among the Eastbourne fishermen, who, at that time, indulged in quite a lot of smuggling. This was in the 1880's. I always remember my uncle Walter, who was very studious, telling me "I attended Miss Ingledew's Dame school on Marine Parade - and your father sometimes, but very seldom, came too!"

Father fought in the Boer War in a troop of Yeomanry raised by Lord Brassey, their troopship being accompanied on the journey by Lady Brassey in her famous yacht, the 'Sunbeam'. The yacht drew alongside in Cape Town harbour and a champagne party took place, but after that, reality set in and the campaign itself suffered from the usual foul up which accompany all wars, and the troops had a pretty poor opinion of their leaders excepting for General Redvers Buller (Dickie and Simon Buller's grandfather). Father had a lot of time for him and his understanding of what the boys went through. Father also fought through the Great War and survived with just an ankle injury and virtual deafness caused by the noise of the huge siege gun batteries they were operating.

We moved from Eastbourne to Dittons Farm, Stone Cross in 1926, initially just into the farmhouse, because an uncouth unpredictable Australian millionaire whiskey magnate, whom my Uncle was acting for, wished to purchase the farm buildings and land. He very soon got tired of it and my family was able to buy the whole thing from him quite reasonably, so that is how we started farming, father dividing his time between the farm and the furniture business.

My three elder brothers preferred to go into the business, but I just loved the farm to death. It was a mixed farm with a milking herd, milked by hand, then, carthorses for all the work, no tractors in those days. I had a bad tempered shetland pony, but when I was about 9 years old Father bought me a pony from Neville Perch who had Mill Hill Farm at Hankham. He paid £8 and an armchair for him and he was so thin I was ashamed to lead him home. He turned into the best pony in all the world and got me hooked on horses for evermore. My brothers preferred motorbikes and persuaded Father to let them have a grass track for races which were great fun, except perhaps for the owners of a row of houses which backed on to the field. They must have been long suffering as they didn't complain. I can remember my brothers holding a famous international rider, Spike Rhiando, head first over the bull pen until he paid his entry fees.

Farming was in a pretty poor way in the 1930's and father jibbed at paying tythes, as did Mr. Albert Wadman, from Priesthaves the next door farm, and many others. tithe sales were held by the local Bailiff to extract money from farmers who wouldn't pay, but they were rendered farcical when neighbouring farmers bid 4 pence for a cow and 6 pence for a haystack and they wouldn't pay up anyway. On one occasion Mr.

Budd, the Bailiff was chased by irate farmers until he took refuge upstairs in the Red Lion at Hooe, and they kept him there until he promised never to conduct another tithe sale. So the years passed until the Second World War broke out and every derelict acre was pressed into service once more. My brothers joined the services, and father resumed running his furniture business in Eastbourne. The town was pretty extensively bombed but he stuck it throughout. He was very brave and I think his deafness helped as he said he didn't hear half of what was going on, and certainly he would never join us in the farm cellar during air raids. There were sporadic bombs around the farm and an incendiary burnt out one of the granaries.

I was seventeen at the time and was plunged into farming at the deep end, together with several land girls. The farm chaps were very good and forgave our foolish ways and we had to learn as we went along.

My mother was an indomitable woman who held the fort throughout. She loved life and went through it like a whirlwind, particularly in her car! Spring cleaning at the farmhouse was something to behold and left us all exhausted. She came into her own in wartime, feeding all and sundry, land girls, casual workers, P.O.W's, Canadian soldiers and, on one disastrous occasion, cooking a feast of rabbits for some Australian Air Force chaps who came on leave with one of my brothers. Not their favourite tucker!

I must mention Harry Harding who is 88 years old now and who was the farm foreman and a great support in those days. He was succeeded as foreman by his son John and I just can't think of enough superlatives to describe John's abilities and qualities. His wife Sue matches him and I count myself lucky to still have their advice and assistance after all these years. They still live in Dittons Cottages. Harry's sister, Mrs Hodd, lives next door and all take care of each other.

We had many happy years after the war. I was very fond of horses and bought several from a close neighbour, Colonel Gwynne of Wootton Manor, Polegate. He was a very influential man, one time Mayor of Eastbourne, Chairman of the Magistrates and of the Police Authority, his brother Rupert being Member for the town. Therefore, when the Colonel wanted something, people jumped to it! He bred horses and, every year, an unruly bunch of them were turned out for the summer on Mr. Wadman's land at New Bridge on Pevensey Marshes to be looked after by Kath Beeney who lived there and looked after the cattle and sheep in that area. I'm sure they were a trial to both of them, but they had to put up with it.

Every Autumn, Joe Burgess, the Colonel's Estate and Stud Manager, and a dear friend of mine, would rope me in to help drive these horses from the marsh home to Wootton. I was instructed to go in front on my horse and keep galloping until they settled down to a reasonable pace behind me, quite a hair

raising experience but nothing compared with being escorted ½ a mile down the A22 and ¾ of a mile along the A27 by half the Sussex Police force, complete with Superintendents and Chief Constable with not a vehicle allowed in sight along the road till we got to our destination. All the participants were suitably rewarded by being invited to some of the Colonel's legendary luncheon parties, where you met notabilities in the South of England, including Dr. Bodkin Adams, an enigmatic character who was later tried and acquitted of murder. He was the Colonel's physician and seemed to wield a great influence over him.

The stories about the Colonel's fads and fancies are legion. He was knighted before he died and became Sir Roland, this news greeted with mixed feelings by those who had been before him on the Bench, but I received much kindness from him and spent many enjoyable hours in his company.

Nobody could have had more pleasure than I from this bit of Sussex and of its countryside community and I could rabbit on over it for ever and still miss many names which meant so much to me. Andrew Wadman comes to mind; he was so kind after my parents died in inviting me to Priesthaves for meals and for shooting days which finished up with high tea plus a stiff slug of whiskey in the teacups. The Glessings for all their hospitality over the years, and many, many others.

I left Dittons when the Pevensey Bypass split the farm in two in 1984, and was lucky enough to find a small grazing farm below Herstmonceux, still leaving me a distant view of the fields on the Sharnfold side of Dittons which is a great comfort.

I thought the time had come to set the story down and I hope the reminiscences will be of some interest.

Betty Wenham.

February 1995.