

## **The Henry Flatt Story.**

*Henry Flatt's story following WW1 shows him searching for new business opportunities, a man clearly determined to prosper. It's told here as it was told to me, not in any convenient order! His fertile business mind seems to have leapt from one idea to another. Apologies to anyone who gets confused as to the passage of time!*

Henry Flatt was a villager of considerable influence, both before WW1 and after, in fact right up to his death in 1977. His story begins in 1880 when his parents were living in the civil parish of St. Cuthbert, Thetford. By 1901, aged 20, he was working as a groom to a private family.

### **Henry's beginnings in the village.**

It is thought that Henry came here about 1904, having already married his wife, Flora. On arrival he probably got to know people quickly through his job as an insurance agent for what became the 'Prudential', a considerable step up from being a groom. Having sickness insurance meant that medical treatment could be obtained in the event of illness or accident. Life and property insurance were becoming desirable for those who could afford them and being able to afford 'insurance' became status symbol.

It was common for moderately well-off people to have servants. Children leaving home to enter domestic service meant greater security for a family because there were fewer mouths to feed. Labouring work on the land provided employment for most villagers and it was common for girls to work unpaid in the family home. Some men found specialist agricultural work associated with horses or a particular trade but it was often necessary to rely on a variety of part time work on the land and stone sifting on the warren, unless, that is, they were fortunate enough to obtain permanent farm or other full-time work. The arrival of the vast Chivers fruit farm at Sedge Fen, and the later planting of poplar trees by Bryant and May for match sticks, were very important sources of work for the village.

In 1911 Henry was living at 9 Plough Lane, now Mill Road, with his wife, Flora, and children, George Edward (5yrs) and Fred (1yr). Their daughter, Elsie Maud, was born in 1912. Henry was recorded as an Insurance Agent in the census of that year. The family probably remained in Plough lane until the early 1920's.

### **1914. Henry's War.**

The outbreak of WW1 drove a 'coach and horses' through family life for very many people. At its outbreak Henry was around 35 years old, a mature family man who was becoming successful. In the June of 1916 enlistment became compulsory for all males between the ages of 18-41 including married men with children. Military records show that he went into the Royal Flying Corps and in 1917 he was later transferred to the RAF as a Driver-Air mechanic, 59898, 3<sup>rd</sup> class. Flora was 45, with two boys aged 12 and 8 and a daughter aged 6.

As a transport driver he saw a great deal of the war and although he was not personally involved in front-line battles he witnessed at first hand their appalling results and recorded what he saw.

Here is an edited selection from Henry's account of what he witnessed in the 3rd Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele, which began on 31 July 1917 and continued to 10 November 1917.

*"Ypres.*

*".....The air was stuffy with sodden clothing and humanity-unwashed. The Calvary of Ypres. Honey-combed putrid matter for honey. Swept by machine gun and rifle fire then shelled. Terrifyingly we wonder if anything can possibly survive, then stormed by Phosgene, its pear and apple stench or perfume dulls the senses, men almost forgetting its horrors and delay. Then maddened by the poison they would hurry to their 'posts of battle civilisation', the aid post or canteen, there they would stagger as the blood diffused the phosgene poison through the system and with a cigarette they stink down. Retching-dying, gassed. The Calvary of Ypres."*

He ends this harrowing account, "May the God of Peace keep me from a like experience."

II

Unshaven & haggard, yet they  
smiled as well posed over our  
maps. \* the air was stuffy with  
laddy clothing & humanity unwashed.  
The Calvary of Ypres Honeycombed  
but putrid water for rough  
swept by machine gun & rifle fire  
then shells, terrifically until  
we wonder if anything can possibly  
survive, then stomped by Phosgene /  
its pear & pineapple stench  
or perfume dulls the senses, men  
almost forgetting its horrors, & delay  
then maddened by the poison  
they would hurry to their posts  
of battle evaporation, the aid  
post or canteen. There they would  
slapper as the blood diffused  
the Phosgene poison through the  
system & with a cigarette they  
sink down, twitching - dying!  
Gassed. The Calvary of Ypres \*  
On I go through the darkness. Shapes  
& forms appear & disappear, tree

Henry's written account.

Like many who had fought in the war Henry developed a great antipathy to warfare. At some time, possibly in the early 1930's, he was asked to give a speech concerning some of his experiences of war. According to his own words he was reluctant to do this.

hardly a night goes by with a raid  
and frequently the same vicinity is  
visited 2 or 3 times in one night

We had just moved into a camp  
behind Ypres. In fact there were  
several camps round about where the  
troops come to rest. usually there is  
a few farms about. And the people  
do a good business in supplying coffee  
eggs & chips to the troops. Some of our  
chaps heard of a place. a field or so  
away. where eggs chips and coffee were  
sold. So one evening 3 or 4 others and myself  
decided we would go out to supper.  
We were just enjoying the good things  
when we heard the drone of a plane  
next thing horrors bone cracking doors  
bursting open women shrieking and a  
general hubbub. Jerry had dropped me in  
the yard. We heard some more dropping

The following are two edited extracts from his notes. It is not known who the speech was delivered to or when it was given.

"In the late war the aeroplane was used for the first time, and a new horror has been added. Previous to this one could judge the direction and range (Ed. gun fire?) and the civilian population could move and be safe..... When the weather is favourable hardly a night goes by without a raid and frequently the same vicinity is visited 2 or 3 times a night".

And.

"We had just moved into a camp behind Ypres. In fact, there were general camps round about where troops came to rest, usually there is a few farms about and the people do a good business in supplying coffee, eggs and chips to the troops".

"One evening 3 or 4 others and myself decided we would go out to supper. We were just enjoying the good things when we heard the drone of a plane, next thing horrors, bone cracking, doors bursting open, women shrieking and a' funeral hot-bath'. Jerry had dropped one in the yard. We heard some dropping in our camp so hurried along as the order was, 'All men to rush to their vehicles and stand ready with fire extinguishers'. We mingled with the crowd and answered the role-call.

Both extracts are taken from original documents in the possession of Mike and Ann Chambers

Henry saw at first hand the bombing of civilians fleeing from the shelling and bombing of their village.



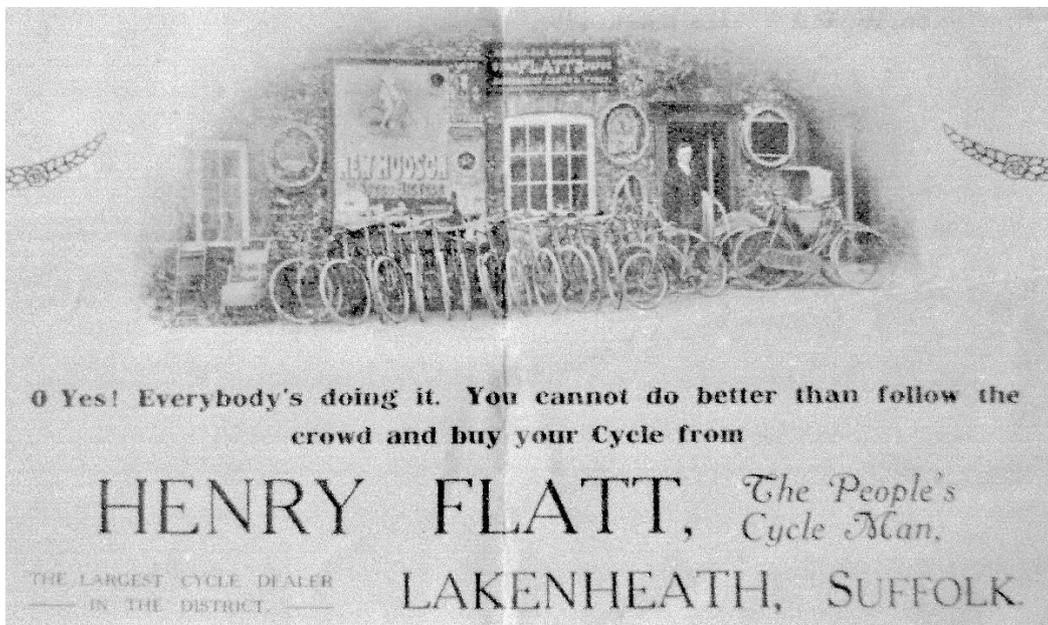
Before he was released from the RAF in 1918-19 this photo was taken.

### **Henry Flatt's Enterprises. Bikes, Chickens and Cars.**

Sometime before the war Henry had an idea. Observing labourers walking long distances to and from work each day he hit on the idea of buying some bikes and starting a rental scheme, renting them out to the farm workers at 6d. a week. After a while he offered to sell the bike at 1/- a week, but only to reliable payers. In effect he was being paid twice for each bike! He displayed the bikes for hire outside his house near the bottom of Mill Road and his front room became his shop. This was the foundation of his successful highly successful cycle retail business.



*The original shop in Mill Road, then Plough Lane. Henry is standing in the doorway.*



*The above photograph turned into an advert*

The 1911 Census had described him as an 'Insurance Agent' so he probably continued this until the bike business became secure.

As the cycle business grew larger premises became necessary, not only for his business, but also for his growing family. He was able to buy a property which included a house and land opposite the Post Office on the corner of High Street and Wings Road. This land extended as far as Back Street. Henry and family lived next to the shop in buildings which have been recently refurbished. The late-Victorian terraced houses fronting on to the High Street were built earlier and may have been included in the sale. It's likely that his knowledge of the insurance business enabled him to finance his acquisitions. So far it has not been possible to accurately date this period of Henry's life.

Food shortages during and after the war had shown that poultry farming was a rapid way of producing food to feed the country. Never one to stand still, Henry decided to extend his interests and so became a chicken farmer. This proved to be a very wise decision!

By 1924 he was advertising the sale of 'Karswood Dry Chicken Grain' and other poultry feeds from 'Flatt, Cycle Agent, High Street, Lakenheath'. A few years later he rented, or more likely, bought, land behind his premises from the recently arrived Sir Charlton Briscoe, the new owner of The Retreat. This included the land which is now Mayfields, Wingfield Road, Wingfield Avenue and Breckland Avenue and probably included the huge chalk pit off Back Street after the chalk deposits had been exhausted. This pit eventually became the ground of Lakenheath Football Club, known as 'The Pit' or 'The Nest' for obvious reasons. This business grew and eventually he was employing 6 or 7 men, farming an estimated 5000 chickens, with son Fred becoming the foreman. In addition to all this land he may well have been entitled to grazing rights on the remaining ancient medieval warren. By 1936 he had become a major chicken farmer in the district. He later acquired a second farm known as Street Farm which was roughly where Palmer Drive is now. He was prominent in village affairs but however successful the poultry farming had become, Flatt's shops continued to be a central part of village life right up to his retirement.



*Street Farm and the rearing ground..*

Whilst all this had been going on, a general store, managed by George, had been added to the cycle shop business which was managed by Fred.

*"If you want something Flatts will have it".*

Son Fred extended the cycle shop and cycle repair side of the business, which in addition to supplying paraffin for lamps and heaters also provided the village's first petrol pumps. George, who was said to be very kind, was afflicted with a bad stammer and not a healthy man, which might account for his interest and knowledge of patent medicines. The general store was so well equipped with various medicines and treatments in addition to general groceries that it was recommended by the doctor. It's said that the doctor sometimes referred patients to George as the cost of treatment could not be afforded by everyone. On occasions he was helped by sister Elsie who was also the house-keeper for the family. She later sold a decent range of toys jewellery and cards at the back of the cycle shop.

It could be said that these Flatt enterprises were not unlike a hypermarket such was the range of products sold. Henry was way ahead of the times and George could be relied on to know most of what was going on in the village. During WW2 George has been said to have written to every single Lakenheath resident who was in the forces, all, of course, by hand.

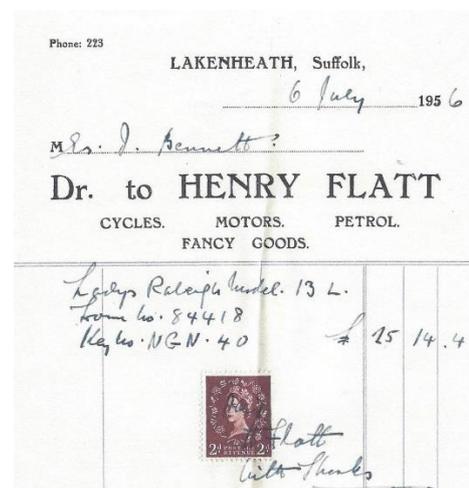
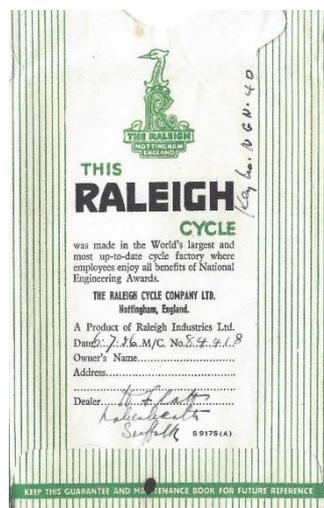
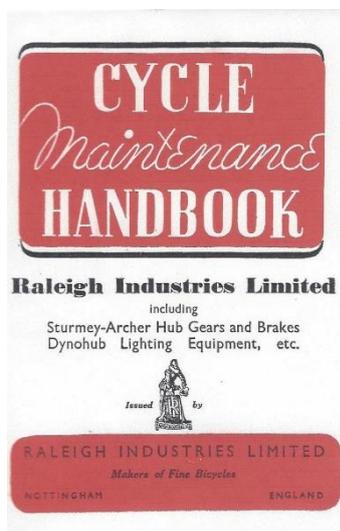
The general store became a centre for older men who were often to be found warming themselves by the shop stove deep in conversation in the evenings so the shop remained open for longer hours! Young lads often waited in Fred's workshop whilst their bikes were being repaired. Fred had been something of an athlete in his youth.

Later Henry started a Christmas Club so parents could save up to buy their children presents. Bikes and toys were very popular. He sold nearly as many cycles as the Raleigh main dealer in Ely!



Photo 1 L to R: Henry Flatt, the vicar, Elsie and George outside the cycle shop by the petrol pump.

Photo 2 L to R: George Flatt, Elsie and Father Henry inside the General Store.



Parts of the Raleigh hand book and sales invoice to Mrs. J Bennett, 1956.

It seems that Henry owned the second car in the village, following Dr Pickworth. His was certainly one of the first, and before long he had the idea of running a taxi service to Lakenheath Station. In the early 1930's Fred drove the taxi, a 1909 Cooper, one of only six made. Each year he took the owner of The Retreat, Sir Charlton Briscoe, to Scotland for the grouse shooting season, but probably not in this car!



Henry's car which became the first village taxi. This is an extremely rare 1909 Cooper Car, built by the Cooper Seam Digger Co. of Kings Lynn. Later it was owned by the late Sir John Briscoe and then his son, the late Sir James Briscoe. Sir James is shown with the car.

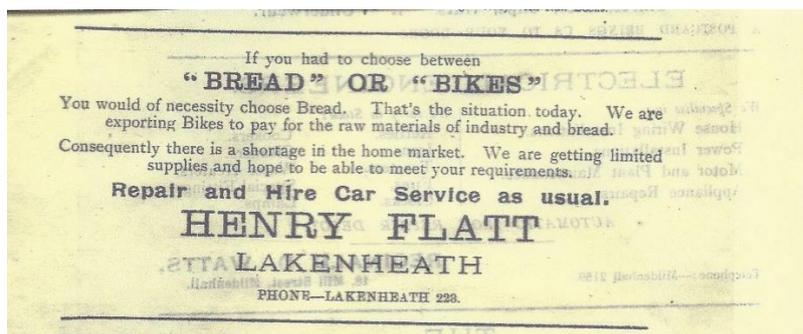
*Photo by courtesy of Diana Briscoe.*

By 1936 Henry had become an authority on poultry farming and was opposed to government proposals to nationalise the poultry industry. The 1939 Register now showed his occupation as 'Cycle and Motor Repairs'. At the beginning of WW 2 he was a special constable\*. Interestingly the 1939 Register has George as 'Shop manager, Village Store' and Fred as a 'Poultry Worker'. Mum Flora, and daughter Elsie, are shown as carrying out 'unpaid household duties'.

There were several poultry farms in the village by the outbreak of WW2 but none came anywhere near the size of the Flatts enterprise. There was very good money to be made from rearing chickens.

*\*In WW2 men who were physically fit but excused military service on the grounds of age or a particular job of importance to the war effort were encouraged to serve in other ways, filling gaps left by younger men who had been called up. One of these was that of the Special Constabulary.*

An advert placed in St. Mary's church magazine in Feb. 1948 shows the difficulties being faced after the war. Food shortages and raw materials were still a problem. Never the less Henry was reassuring his customers of his best attentions.



*An advert from St. Mary's Church magazine. 1948.*

The business benefited from one particularly loyal employee, 'SARGE' HALLS, who worked for Henry for many years. He continued to work for the new owners the Curtis Bros after they had bought the business in 1969.

Henry's wife, Flora died in 1944, aged 78, and daughter Elsie, who had been managing the house for some years due to her mother's ill-health, continued as house-keeper until her father's death, at the age of 97 in 1977. Fred married Mrs. Mallett, widow of the former Post Master, late in life, and, it's said, in some secrecy, causing friction in the family. At some point they moved to Norwich.

"Crossways", a bungalow on Wings Road, was built as a retirement home by Henry. He lived there with Elsie and George until his death in 1977. He continued to show a keen interest in the fortunes of the shop. Elsie and George lived out their lives at "Crossways". Elsie, having remained unmarried, spending almost all her entire life looking after house and home. She was a staunch member of the Methodist Church. She died in 2010, aged 98. George had died in 2002. Fred died in 2006.

With Compliments from Telephone Lakenheath 223

# HENRY FLATT

PARTNERS G.E. FLATT F. FLATT E. M. FLATT

Cycles . Motors . Mopeds . Fancy Goods

Smiths Clocks and Watches . Pedigree Prams and Toys . Tobacco and Stationery

Tyres LAKENHEATH, SUFFOLK Petrol



Beautiful England
St. John's College, Cambridge

## JANUARY

## 1968

## FEBRUARY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
☾ FQ 7th	1	2	3	4	5	6	☾ FQ 6th	○ FM 14th	☾ LQ 21st	• NM 28th	1	2	3
7	8	9	10	11	12	13	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
14	15	16	17	18	19	20	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
28	29	30	31	○ FM 15th	☾ LQ 22nd	• NM 29th	25	26	27	28	29		

*A promotional calendar from 1968, the last one issued.*



*Good Old Henry!*

*Henry's motor-bike is a Triumph Junior 225cc. first registered 31 September 1931. It is currently taxed until September 2020. As a vintage motor-bike it has not required a MOT certificate since 2008.*

*Contributors.*

*Robert Rolph, Ken Turner, Mike and Ann Chambers. Colin Brown. Lakenheath WI 1965 Scrapbook.*

*Village and the Flatt business details are from the Bury Free Press. Research by Michael Tuffs.*