

Conversation with Mr Mike and Mrs Anne Chambers on Monday, 14 August 2017.

Mr and Mrs Chambers and Arthur Curtis used to run Curtis Brothers & Co (cycle shop and filling station) in the village until March 2004. The original cycle shop was first opened in Plough Lane by Mr Henry Flatt.

Mr Flatt came to the village in the early 1900's as an insurance rep and he lived in Plough Lane. He obviously made a good living, but could see all the farm lads going through the fens to go to work and some used to travel a long way and he decided he would buy a few bikes and rent them out, so he used to rent them out so they could get to work quicker and he started in Plough Lane. Eventually, the ones that were good payers he said to them, why not buy the bike by paying the same rent, and then the bike would be theirs (early hirer purchase). That was how he got started.

Henry Flatt is standing in the doorway of this picture.



Mr Flatt needed bigger premises and plus he wanted to expand, so he bought the land occupied by No. 29 High Street from the present Pilipino Restaurant to the junction of Wings Road and up to the present location of the football ground, which at that time (?1908) was a chalk pit. In addition to converting No. 29 to a cycle shop he used all the remaining land for chickens, probably as many as 1,000, which in those days was an unbelievable number and confirmed the position as a far-seeing person.

The doctor bought the first car in the village, Mr Flatt bought the second car. As the station is a distance from the village he saw an opening and run a taxi service. His eldest son (Fred) used to do the driving and took people to and from the station. Fred also drove Sir Charlton Briscoe to Scotland and back again, staying with him. They used to stay at various pubs along the way.

Mr Henry Flatt also installed the first petrol pumps in the village. Fred at the pumps in the picture overleaf. Before that they used to sell petrol in two-gallon cans. A deposit was paid on the cans which was returned when the can was returned.



He built the three cottages on the High Street and rented those out. When Mr and Mrs Flatt retired they built the bungalow "Crossways" on the corner of Wings Road and Back Street, when Mr and Mrs Chambers moved to the village in 1968.

Mr and Mrs Chambers home in Anchor Lane was originally a pub and is over 400 years old. There was a big bench and where the customers used to sit. A previous owner was Mr Harding and he used to tell them that the workmen used to come home from work and sit on the bench and drink.

Apparently when Mr Harding was a small boy and lived there the front wall of the house fell out and that's why it's not chalk anymore. Mr Harding, before going to school he had to put the bricks in buckets of water to soak them before they could be re-laid. He was insistent that that was what happened and Mr and Mrs Chambers saw no reason to disbelieve him.

Before the drainage channel was built the fen, land used to flood quite heavily, their land joined the river that took you to Ely, you could go from the bottom on their land to Ely by boat and further on from Ely you could get out to sea and go to Holland so basically you could go from their back door to Holland by boat.

In 1946 there was a severe flood and it was decided then that a drainage channel would be built, which Mr Chambers thinks was built in the middle 50's and that helped drain the fens, which are now well drained. Lakenheath is just above sea level but there is a property down the Fens, which used to be known as the Chicory Farm which is below sea level, it is also an area where the counties meet and you can stand with one foot in Suffolk, the other foot in Norfolk and put your arm into Cambridgeshire.

Mr and Mrs Chambers used to have a pond, and when the channel was being cleaned the man cleaning it used to call her to give her fresh water oysters to help keep the pond clean. Mrs Chambers said there were literally hundreds of these oysters. There is also a well on their property, but is covered over.

The village used to be almost self-sufficient, the only thing the village didn't have during the time Mr and Mrs Chambers and lived here is a wet fish shop. Every other trade had a retail outlet, so there was no need to go out of the village at all. There were 13 pubs, but when Mr and Mrs Chambers came there was 6 or 7, 3 butcher shops, the Post Office used to sell underwear and bits and pieces, knitting wools. Where the library is now was a draper's shop, where you could get curtaining and the Co-op was opposite which are now houses. Opposite The Tap where the estate agents is, was an electrical shop. The owner was another far-seeing person, a Mr Rolph, who was into all the modern gadgets that came out and he always had them in stock. His shop had the first electric light. Lots of people went to see the electric light switched on.

The Flatt family were very well thought of in the village. They were very heavily involved with the Methodist Chapel, which used to be at the end of Anchor Lane, at the back of what is now the opticians. John Westley also preached in the Chapel. The Chapel was rebuilt after the war in its current position.

Where the Co-op is now was a dairy, there used to be two – Cooks Dairy (next to the library – the big house) Graham and Joyce are still alive. Mrs Wortley had a dairy in the High Street, next to the Post Office. The dairy was at the back of the house. Both dairies did well, and made daily deliveries.

Bennetts were responsible for a lot of the development of Lakenheath, the original buildings were what is now Woodlands. Then they saw a niche in the market for retired people and did a lot of canvassing and advertising in the London area to encourage retired people to come and live in Lakenheath. They used to send the girls down from the office when they put exhibitions on. When Mr and Mrs Chambers were in the shop they could tell within days those that were going to stay and those that were not.

Mr Bill Smith formed a company for irrigation which is still going called RST Irrigation, and employs quite a lot of people. There was a period of very successful carrot growing.

During the War, a lot of girls came down from up North as Land Army and they lived in a hostel, opposite Quay Side Court, quite a lot stayed and got married. Marjorie Palmer and Mrs Hewsby are still living in the village.

This is a picture of the dining / cook house /domestic area used by the Girls Land Army



Anchor Lane was all little cottage, and one bedroom might be over someone's else's – a bit higgley/piccledy. The area opposite the Post Office was the poorest, no sewerage. The sewerage used to come up in Anchor Lane and went to cess pits. There used to be a gate leading to Honeycart Lane were the carts used to go after emptying the cess pits. There used to be a series of walkways and small cottages. At the top of the Anchor Lane where the hairdressers are, the Henneys came and turned it into a restaurant and there was a barn at the back. At one time, it was a travel agents. There was a fire and the whole barn went up. Found it strange when they first moved in the early 70's, one person had a tub outside and an old wooden mangle and lighting a cooper to heat the water.

Where the present opticians is situated on the High Street used to live Stanley Watts and his friend, Charlotte. They were reputedly England's longest engaged couple, it is believed that a local newspaper carried an article complete with a photograph, but unfortunately Mrs Chambers does not have a copy. When Charlotte was given anything to wear she categorised it as best, second best, third best, etc. The result of this was that the best clothing was saved for her 100th birthday, but although she lived into her late 90's she never made the 100.

Opposite the present bank was a very successful nursery and garden shop run by Cyril and Betty Matthews but this closed over 10 years ago, when Tesco were looking to develop the site.

The only new properties in Lakenheath when Mr and Mrs Chambers arrived were those in Woodlands. There were some council houses. The chip shop used to be an outfitters of sorts – David Raven. Mr and Mrs Hunter sold nearly everything and had a lovely cooked meat counter, the old co-op which used to be opposite the newsagents and library. Alex had the butcher's shop which is now the newsagents. Joe and Jenny opened a greengrocers (and everything else). Mrs Neilson who sold knickknacks. Wellingtons, pots and pans. The electric shop also did repairs. Mr and Mrs Chambers also sold paraffin, they couldn't keep up with sales sometimes. The funeral parlour was an ironmongery shop which also sold paraffin. In the winter, you could be up and down pumping paraffin and they also did a delivery service. The toy shop is now the restaurant next to the bank. Mr Flatt's son George, was a bit of a hypochondriac, but was very good with patent medicines so if you saw him he would give you a remedy which wasn't serious enough for the doctor.

The school – when they first came here the headmaster didn't live in the school, but the caretaker did and so there was somebody on site all the time. When their children were little Mrs Chambers was on the PTA and they fund raised to build a swimming pool. The PTA spent a lot of time, effort and money, providing the school with an outside swimming pool. It was thought that eventually it could be covered. It was eventually filled in to provide car parking for the teachers. At one time, there was a headmaster called Wally Hebdon, who came from Yorkshire, who was very musical, very much into brass bands. He revived what was an ailing Lakenheath Band and for several years it was very successful. A lot of youngsters progressed to the band, because of this one man. Eventually he passed on and the thing dwindled.

Lakenheath also had a very good sporting side, the footballers were successful and Lakenheath was one of the first places to have an indoor bowls area, which is now the cricket pavilion. That unfortunately had a fire but it was rebuilt in its current location. The area was originally a chalk pit, a tremendous amount of chalk was taken out from there, pre-war, taken by boat to Ely. The boat used to come up to a property opposite the church called Keyside Court, it should have been Quay side.

Dumpling Bridge Lane was so called it was built to cross a river (which is no longer there), it was dumpling shape and that's how the lane got its name, you can just about see the remains of the bridge if you go down the footpath. It joined the High Street to the public footpath, the footpath went down to the Fen to a pub called the High Bridge.

Mr George Flatt, Henry's son, kept in touch with all the boys that went to war not only during but after the war as well.



H. FLATT.
CYCLE AND
MOTOR CYCLE AGENT
LAKENHEATH, SUFFOLK.
LARGEST STOCK OF CYCLE & ACCESSORIES
IN THE DISTRICT.
PRAMS. PUSH CARTS.
Gramaphones. Records.
ELECTRO-PLATED AND FANCY GOODS
TABLE AND OTHER CUTLERY.
Clocks and Watches Stocked.