

DISCOVERING HOLBECHE

by

The Ghost of Emma Holbeche (alias Janet Jordan)

You won't know me - I belong to Sutton's 19th century and, in fact, I died here in 1891, so I am a bit behind your times! However, because the town is developing so rapidly and its identity seems to be for ever changing, I thought it was about time to introduce some sense of permanence and I can think of no better way than to bring to your attention a book, written by my son, Richard, called 'The Holbeche Diary'.

You can find it in the Local Studies Department of the Library, nestling amongst a number of other biographies.

It isn't really a diary - more of a recollection of a young boy's childhood in the 1850's in what was then the hub of Sutton Coldfield, up at the top of the hill near the Church. It's amazing what Richard could remember because, in fact, he didn't write it until he was about 42 years old. Mind you, it has confirmed some of my suspicions about what he used to get up to!

He barely mentions me in his book. Not surprising really, as I had only just died at about the time he wrote it and I think that was a bit of a shock. He had only just retired from the Army and, when he came home to live, he probably thought I'd got a few more years left in me. Of course, his father had already died and his brothers had left home by then.

When you do find the Diary, please don't think you can read through it quickly. It is some 40 pages long and well worth savouring, but even then it should still only take you about three quarters of an hour.

So what is my son's diary about?

Shall we start first of all with my husband, Vincent, and I. He was a well-known solicitor in Sutton, practising in one of a row of properties owned by our family at the top end of Coleshill Street, just opposite Holy Trinity Church. He and my brother Henry, Henry Addenbrooke that is, were partners. The Holbeches were gentry and the family name reached back to the 13th Century. When we married, our two families, the Holbeches and the Addenbrookes, combined to make a very wealthy addition to Sutton's middle class.

Vincent was one of nine children and six of his sisters lived together in a house situated just where the present railway goods line passes under the High Street, near to the College of Further Education. They remained spinsters all their lives.

We married in June 1845, Vincent was 39 but I was only 21, and so we made an immediate start on our family - well, it was expected in those days! Plenty of children to keep up the family tradition! I eventually had seven. There was Thomas Vincent, who arrived rather quickly in 1846, then Edward in 1847, Richard in 1850, Aemilian (we called him Will for short) in 1851, Arthur and Emma the twins in 1855 and, finally, Edith Gertrude in 1860.

When Richard was born in 1850, we lived in what was then No. 3, but is now No. 1, Coleshill Street, overlooking a couple of local pubs, several shops, Holy Trinity Church, the police house and the town hall. From the back of the house, there were wonderful views, which, admittedly, took in the family stables and pigstys, but there were also beautiful croquet lawns, an orchard, trees and ponds and, in the distance, fields and meadows. All of these things made for great enjoyment for our growing children, who were always out for a bit of fun and, no doubt, in Richard's case, a touch of mischief!

In fact, we owned three properties in a row: the house that we lived in and, next to it, what was known as 'The Old Rectory' and then, beside that, a tythe barn. The house,

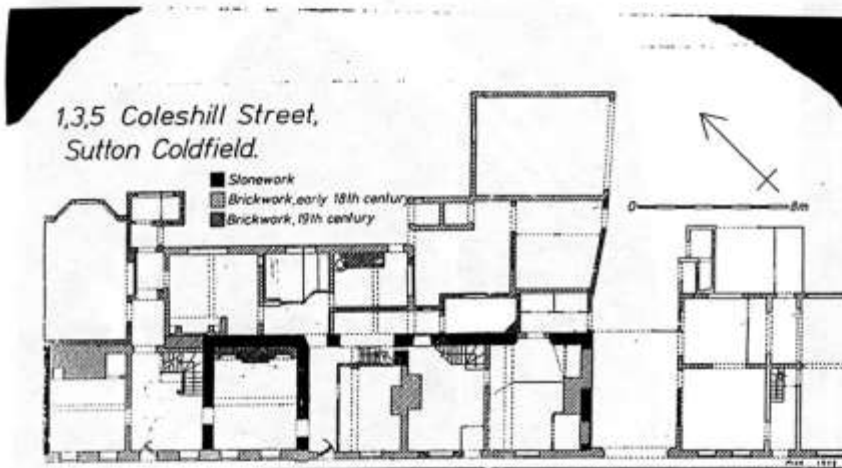


(1) Richard in his uniform of The Royal Munster Fusiliers



(2)

Nos. ① house
 ③ offices
 ⑤ tythe barn
 Coleshill Street



(3) Plan of above



(4) Back view of house and offices
 (? late 1800's)

Richard loved for its quaintness - it had been wittily described at one time as a rabbit warren, a very good simile, for the numerous rooms led into each other in a most perplexing way. There was no passage in the entire building.

'The Old Rectory' was used for my husband's office. But it was the tythe barn, and its back yard that was absolute heaven to Richard and Will, who used to play there together. When the barn loft was full of straw, they used to slide down it, from roof to floor. On other days, they would kick around the back yard, with its saddle room, dairy and pigstys, searching for things to get up to, like dipping their fingers in the cream, or getting the saddler to mend their toys and make them whips, or roast apples or pears on the stove for them to eat.

Another source of fun - the pigs - who came in for quite a bit of teasing, but having fallen in to the pigsty on one occasion the boys soon lost interest in that particular pastime!

And then, just up the road, lived the aunts. No ordinary aunts these - there were six of them - all living together in what was a 'cosy' house, full of nicknacks and pretty, interesting things, guaranteed to stimulate the children's imagination. Much loved, the aunts provided endless scope for amusement. There was Sarah, Elizabeth who was blind, Jane, Catherine, Helen the family historian, and Fanny.

As I said before, Richard could not bring himself to write about me. It was different with his father because he had died when Richard was young. Much of what he stood for and did was much admired by all his sons and Richard particularly remembers the social gatherings where he would watch his father tell some good story and pause to see the effect. He says of his father "He was generous to a degree, not only to his own sons but to every schoolboy who left the house. He was a father to be proud of."

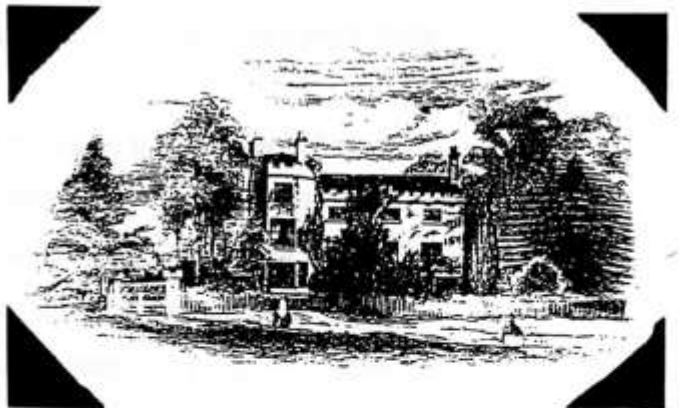
About 1855, Richard started school at Mr. Cull's Academy in High Street (and you can still see the school house - it is now owned by Charter Interiors - just before the railway

(5) Back garden -
Coleshill Street



Aunts' house - (6)
High Street

(7) Falcon Lodge -
Mr. Pepper's house
(1862)



(8)
The Rector - Rev. W.K.R. Bedford
(3rd from left, back row)

bridge over the goods line). His school chums also belonged to local well-to-do families, one of whom, Charley Perkins, had acquired the rather dubious talent of spitting out of the window, which impressed the younger boys no end!

Finding it hard to reward him for any academic achievement, Mr. Cull, nevertheless, encouraged Richard by awarding him a prize, by way of a book inscribed "For Gentlemanly Conduct in the schoolroom" - probably, distinguishing him somewhat from the likes of Charley Perkins!

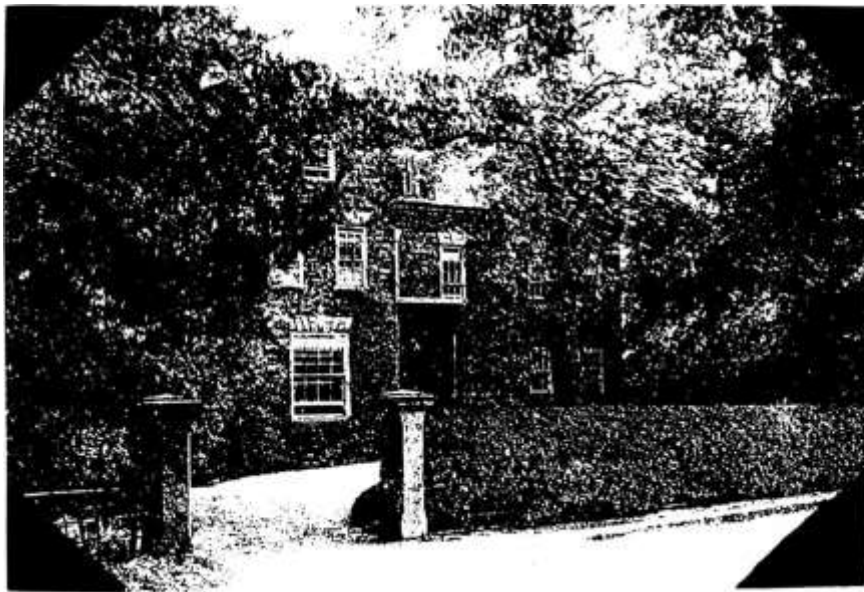
Visiting friends, for our family, was quite a major pastime and as Vincent was a man of some standing in the Town, we included the local middle class amongst them.

We used to socialise with such families as the Oughtons of Holland House, The Rector (W.K. Riland Bedford), the Websters of Penns, The Vicar of Walmley, the Hartopps of Four Oaks, Dr. Chavasse and his wife, the Kittoes of Boldmere Church, Dr. Boddington and Mr. Pepper at the Falcon Lodge.

However, in spite our rather lofty connections, Richard and Will were just as happy mixing with our more lowly neighbours up and down the surrounding streets. In fact, they thrived on it! After all, there was no end of fun to be gained from other folk!

For instance, there was Betty Perkins and her daughter, who kept a sweet shop just across the road from our house. Next door to her, Mrs. Allen also sold sweets. A lot of swearing went on between these ladies, both vying for business. Certainly, the children found their brandy snaps and treacle sticks a wonderful treat, especially having kept those items in a trouser pocket or a warm hand for some while until they were just the right consistency!

Nearby, another lady who sold sweets, among other things, was Jane Botteril. It was her window that was broken with a peashooter, aimed from a loft window on the other



(9)

Holland House
(Mrs Oughton's
home)



(10) Driffold House
(Dr Boddington's home)



(11) Rev. E. H. Kittae



(12) Top end
Coleshill

side of the road - just where we lived! She knew who had done it, but never told on them!

Many of our acquaintances met regularly for the Sunday Church service at Holy Trinity Parish Church.

Mr. Cull, Richard's headmaster, played the organ and, on one occasion, when Richard and Will were the only singers, it must have been quite an ordeal for all concerned!

However, Richard loved the church atmosphere, but he did find the services tedious. He was constantly being distracted. For example, from the family pew, up in the gallery, he used to watch George Brentnall sitting in his own individual square pew, the dog in his lap totally hidden from the rest of the congregation - no doubt, Richard was dying for the forbidden animal to make its presence known! Another time, he made his Aunt Sarah very angry because he paid more attention to a pair of new boots he was wearing than to the actual service.

The Hartopp family were always a source of amusement when they entered the church, always when the psalms were being read. They would enter by the north entrance, walk into the Chancel in single file, then down the middle of the Nave until they reached their gallery, while a servant bolted down the side aisle, opened the door to their pew and then escaped by a second door into his own pew as the party passed by with ridiculous dignity.

After the church service, the boys loved to explore the neighbourhood and Richard fondly recalls some of the people and places that he knew.

Just outside the church, he would first come upon a cluster of houses and shops halfway down Coleshill Street in the direction of Holland Pools. Here lived Miss Riland, whose wig the boys had spotted straightaway! Then there was Mr. Packwood who, although quite old, taught the boys to hop, skip and jump. And Jerry Gwynn - he was a butcher - he had a frail old pony that was equipped with kneecaps, kept in place by straps from its



(13) Holy Trinity Parish Church

(14) Coleshill Street
(beyond the church) towards
Holland Pools.



(15)
Our row of
cottages
beyond the
Tythe Barn
and opposite
the sweet
shops.

(16) Cocksparrow Hall
(note the window
shutter which was
a danger to
pedestrians in the
dark!)



collar, which my silly boys thought were there to stop the poor animal from falling down!

Going back towards the church, we owned a row of cottages just before the tythe barn. One of them contained the forge where the boys took their leaping poles to be ferruled and had their hoops made, and one of the tenants, Joseph Reeves, kept the boys spellbound with his ability to catch rabbits by stealth, patiently waiting by the hole that he knew they would exit from.

Some rather unsavoury shops stood to the north of our home. One of them was much frowned upon for keeping butter, strong cheese and sweets in close proximity to material and boots, and we never fancied anything from that particular shop!

In those days much farther up the High Street, just beyond the Aunts' house, stood two very old buildings called, 'The Old Malt House' and 'Cock Sparrow Hall' and beyond them stood the Perkins' residence, Moat House. Then there was the new Catholic Church, the Old Swan Inn, Bishop Vesey's School and, ultimately, the Toll Gate at the junction of Tamworth Road and Lichfield Road.

Turning back towards Sutton on the other side of the road, 'The Anchorage' and 'The Rookery' were both very large houses with extensive grounds situated just opposite 'Moat House'. These two have now been replaced by the Fire Station, Magistrates Court and Police Station.

Richard recalled two people, in particular, who lived in High Street and who made no small impact on his later life. There was Mr. Grundy, who lived in what is now 'The Royal Hotel' and who took some of the earliest photographs of Sutton, and then there was Miss Bracken, who lived in Vesey House and was well known for her knowledge of old Sutton and for her paintings. There remains ample evidence of their talents here in the Library.



(17) Mr Grundy's home
(now The Royal Hotel)



(18) High Street
(showing Vesey House
- the home of
Agnes Bracken)



(19) The Dam

Various butchers, blacksmiths and tailors ran their businesses along High Street and down Mill Street - until one reached the Dam, which skirted the meadow on the site of the former mill pool. At the far end of the Dam there was a well known shop, called 'Ye Ole Pie Shope' which was knocked down some years ago, and, beyond that, 'The Cup Inn' which we loved to visit when there was a bit of festivity going on.

On the other side of the road, at the foot of Mill Street, were clustered a number of dwellings, some very old, even for the 1850s. The Mill was still there, operating at Skinners Pool. Then there was the "Coach and Horses Inn" and Yew Tree Cottage, which was really ancient. There was also a rather hideous terrace of cottages.

Returning up the hill toward the Church, the Town School had recently been rebuilt; there were the Almshouses, the Goal and the Workhouse, part of which was then being used as an Infants School.

The pavements in those days were cobbled, large pebbles for the street, smaller ones for the footpaths, but the roads flooded frequently during storms, due to poor drainage. Richard thought it a blessing when South Staffordshire Water introduced a piped system many years later, although that did mean the demise of the Town Pump, which had been the meeting place for the local people to stop and exchange gossip.

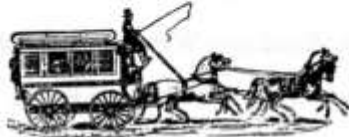
The Post Office stood near the top of Mill Street. How the boys loved to have the Sutton Coldfield post mark stamped on the backs of their hands! "Don't rub it off yet - wait 'til it's dry" the postmaster's wife would say to them.

It seems that most people in the neighbourhood had an idiosyncrasy, which no doubt helped Richard to remember who they were. Among them was 'Slopfoot Wood', who was lame in hand and foot, poor man, and Sally Salt who was always on the trot and, with no palate, one could not understand anything she said. Then there was Miss Shaw who had to drag herself about the floor with the aid of a stool, which really frightened Richard's sister, Gerty, no end!

(20) 'Ye Olde Pie
Shope' at
the end of
the Dam



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(21) Sheppard's omnibus
that took Richard
to Birmingham

(22) A reminder of
the "Black"
Country on the
way to
Kingswinford.



As Sutton was a Market Town, 'Fair Day' was quite an exciting event. Livestock hustled each another for a place, booths were open for the sale of yellow rock, ginger bread, brandy snaps and nuts. Richard says that Teeffee Caffirs were sold (whatever they were!) and there were shooting galleries, and roulette wheels which only seemed to stop at the cheapest prizes, and merry go rounds. The omnibus from Birmingham, pulled up the hill by four steaming grey horses, would bring in the customers from miles around.

Haymaking, too, was very popular, with everybody getting involved, the adults doing the work and the children having fun playing in the sweet grass and catching field mice. Plenty of beer kept the atmosphere very jovial.

In the park, public rabbiting was carried out occasionally to keep their numbers down.

A trip into Birmingham was an adventure. We actually owned a phaeton with a hood and, as Richard says, a "*dicky behind*", where he and Will used to sit. It was pulled by two of our finest horses.

Sometimes, instead, the boys caught the grander of the two Omnibuses, which was the one pulled by four horses and it cost them one shilling to get to Birmingham. The floor was covered by straw (though I can't remember why).

The other 'indifferent' Omnibus was driven by John Line who also drove a one horse 'car' in the mornings up the High Street, on which the boys would sometimes hitch an unauthorised lift by travelling on the axle. Getting off just before their Aunts' house, then running past it with very demure faces, they then got on again. I think this must have been when the boys went to Bishop Vesey's School, but in his diary Richard doesn't make that very clear.

Having described the town and its people, he then turned his attention to family matters.

He mentioned our string of horses, notably 'Black Prince', 'Peggie' and 'Fairy' and, in addition, he recalled all the many dogs that we owned.

We did do a lot of visiting, mostly to the Aunts' house, which was second home to the children. They spent many happy evenings there, singing and dancing. Minstrel songs about banjos, plantations and woolly heads seem to have been very popular then, although, no doubt, that would be regarded as racial prejudice in these days of political correctness!

Occasionally, we took a walk up towards Reddicap Heath to Hollyfield House, where my brother, Henry, lived with his wife. Card games were the order of the day and a touch of gambling went on, for pennies Richard says.

However, Kingswinford was the place to go. My parents lived there. On the way, travelling through the Black Country where the roads were black and the people were black, great blast furnaces flamed and smoked, and chains rattled over pulleys, we caught glimpses of lines of red heated iron being beaten by shiny copper-coloured men and then we would spot Dudley Castle peeping through green trees at the top of the hill. When we reached our destination, a wonderful welcome awaited.

When he wrote about all of these things in 1892, Richard was fully aware of the benefits brought about by the changes to Sutton Coldfield during his lifetime. Cleaner streets, better housing and transport, town drainage, gas lighting - these all contributed to healthy progress. But he berated the governors of the Park, who seemed to have no respect for its ancient history - some things never change!.

No longer a "*sleepy, old-fashioned town*", Richard then felt that Sutton was fast taking on the mantle of a large provincial town and, as he says - "*So the old order of things giveth place to the new.*"

Perhaps a similar sentiment would not be far from the mark in 1996!

So there you have it. "*The Holbeche Diary*". You can't fail to notice my son's genuine love for the town. Most of the places he mentions are still here. The atmosphere in the High Street is much the same and you can almost imagine him, can't you, darting in and out of the shops and houses, to see who was in and who would stop and talk to him or to join in one of his madcap games.

So, as Richard left you a legacy, I too will now finally leave you with this thought - if you love Sutton as much as he did, don't let it change for the worse. Try to ensure, as far as possible, that the town retains its own identity and doesn't get one foisted upon it!

Winter 1996

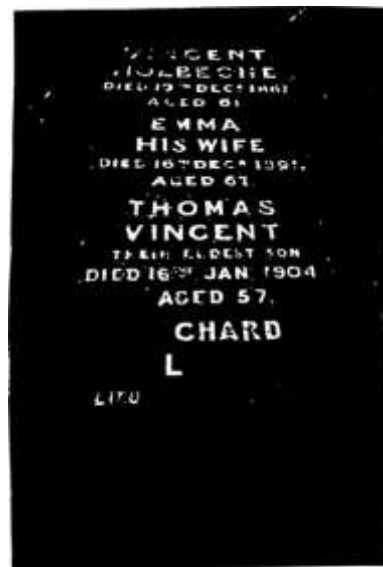
Sources for Text

Details of the Holbeche Family not apparent from the Holbeche Diary itself were discovered, in the first place, by reference to Burke's Landed Gentry, 1952, which gave all the family names and relevant dates, and then subsequent research at Birmingham Library, Archives Department, revealed copies of many of the family Wills, giving more personal information.

Sources for Illustrations

- (1) *Notes on Sutton Coldfield by Richard Holbeche, Harcourt Family Papers, MS 689 18a, Birmingham Archives.*
- (2) *Sutton Coldfield Local Studies Library (Box of Sutton Photos)*
- (3) *Plans of 1, 3,5 Coleshill Street 1986 by N.G. Evans (QSH 58.9COL)*
- (4) *Notes on Sutton Coldfield as above*
- (5) *Notes on Sutton Coldfield, as above*
- (6) *Sutton Coldfield Local Studies Library (SC 67)*
- (7) *A Look at Falcon Lodge by Marian muter. 'Proceedings, Volume 3. Spring 1994*
- (8) *Annals of the 'Free Forresters (SC24.3)*
- (9) *Old Photographs of Sutton Coldfield compiled by Marian Baxter. Published by Redwood Books.*
- (10) *Old Photographs of Sutton Coldfield as above*
- (11) *The Parish Church of St. Michael, Boldmere 1857-1957 by E.M. Joiner (SHE. 64)*

- (12) *Old Photographs of Sutton Coldfield as above*
- (13) *Sutton Coldfield Town & Chase by Midgley (SH97)*
- (14) *Drawing by Ken Williams (SC63)*
- (15) *Norman G. Evans Collection*
- (16) *Norman G. Evans Collection*
- (17) *Old Photographs of Sutton Coldfield as above*
- (18) *The Watercolours and Drawings of A.E Everitt 1824-82 by Stephen Price (BIR 759.2)*
- (19) *Norman G. Evans Collection*
- (20) *Old Photographs of Sutton Coldfield as above*
- (21) *A History of Public Road Transport in the Birmingham Area (Volume I) by Alec G. Jenson, Birmingham Lending Library.*
- (22) *The Black Country by Eric Woolley, Birmingham Lending Library*



R. I. P.