

*Transcription by Janet Jordan
(Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group)*

'THREE SCORE YEARS AGO'

by

Helen Holbeche

(written in 1885)

Helen Holbeche was one of seven sisters: Sarah, Jane, Elizabeth, Catherine, Frances, Helen and Mary. In their later years, apart from Mary, they all lived together at 58 High Street, Sutton Coldfield.

In 1998, I discovered a small notebook containing Helen's recollections amongst other Holbeche family memorabilia kept by Mrs Helen Springall (her great great niece) at Keele University Campus. She gave me a typed copy of these recollections and I have therefore made the following transcription from that document, reproducing the text with all its grammatical errors!

*Copies of other Holbeche Family Papers are in Sutton Coldfield Library,
Ref: BCOL Q.942.496082HOL.*

*Janet Jordan
April 2017*



Old Photograph showing the Exterior of 58 High Street on 29th May, 1848
(Taken from Sarah Holbeche Diary, Sutton Coldfield Library Ref: BCOLQ942.496081HOL)

'THREE SCORE YEARS AGO'

by

Helen Holbeche

(written in 1885)

As I was born in 1821, my recollections go back over 61 years for though some might feel inclined to dispute it I distinctly remember my third birthday, and the incident is so extremely silly and unremarkable (by which I remember it) that that fact may excuse the unbelief.

I am not going to write a history of myself - but of things I recollect, and as three score years embrace a period in which old things and new have wonderfully succeeded each other (as perhaps in no 60 years will they ever do again) it may be of interest to those of my own age to recall them, and to younger ones to hear of things entirely passed away.

It will be difficult to keep self out of the narrative and though my object is to recall things - I, me, and mine, must intrude sometimes.

Personally, I think my life has been an eventful one, but in these stirring times of travel and adventure, doubtless others have been much more so, at all events better worth chronicling.

As one of a family of 15 children, it has naturally not been a colourless or uneventful life, especially as I was youngest but one of the number, therefore the events of others, were absorbed into my own.

The absurd remembrance of my third birthday was the astounding fact that as my two year old sister and myself were being taken to our dame school (Mrs

Birch, her real name) where with our one year older brother we were daily taken - to be "out of the way" I slipped my foot off the causeway going up our little town was not hurt, nothing came of it, but I suppose the kind of importance attached to being a little heroine of "three years old" made a deep impression on the soft untramped brain.

I rather dwell on this as it has been an interest to me in later days to collect the experience of others as to their earliest recollection and amongst them my nephew (*Richard Holbeche, presumably*) tells me, that his third birthday is as vivid as my own from an equally ridiculous circumstance namely sliding down the bannisters on that day!!!

The characters of three score years ago will never be reproduced in this age of friction, when individuality seems dying out - fancy now meeting with any man who has never ridden in coach, carriage, wagon or cart!!! I well remember a man named Kesterton telling me he had never done so. And this said Mrs Birch she was a character, her little house with stuccoed walls, green shutters and posts and chains before it lay back nestling between two larger ones, the laundry on one side and a bakehouse on the other, we went down two steps into the neat little kitchen, with dark polished dresser, shelves and china, and two lovely portraits of I believe the Miss Cunnings, one of which was afterwards stolen, and the thief never discovered, and the two larger portraits (on either side of the 8 day clock) whose eyes followed us every where and our amusement used to be to try and get away from them. To this day the scent of that house and garden is as distinct as 60 years ago, the delicious combination of wall flowers, walnut leaves and bake house. And before going on to describe Mrs Birch I will tell of a sort of Wilkie Collins episode in this cottage, of a much later date. A most respectable couple named Yates occupied the laundry house and a very queer couple had succeeded Mrs Birch - the woman especially was most queer and was always attacking poor Mrs Yates as to what went on and was said in her house, and when she could

rail at nothing else, said "I'll teach you to say "um um" when they say I drink". The Yates's thought she must come out and listen at their door, when any one went in, but years after, when these people left, we thought we should like to go and see our old school house again and on going into the dark pantry at the back of Mrs Yates kitchen we saw a little light not larger than a shilling in the wall and found that the soft stone had been bored through till there was only the paper of Mrs Y's wall between, so putting our mouth to this hole in a deep sepulchral voice we said (in answer to something she was telling her daughter she had done) "did you?" down went her iron with a great scream - but the mystery of the overheard conversations was solved.

Our dear old dame did not take any children but ourselves, how neat and old fashioned she was, her white apron meeting behind, snowy handkerchiefs and funny words and ways, we were very fond of her goodness and uprightness itself. But when we did anything she did not like, she would say "old rabbit you" and if naughty, would place us on a stool facing the window, with a dunce's cap made of brown paper on our heads, and how anxiously we used to watch for old Barnaby her husband (who was Butler and Factotum at the Councillor's just above) for he always said when he saw us there, "now my little dear you have looked at the coaches long enough," and down we were brought. I never recollect leaving that cottage in the afternoon that our dear old dame did not say "Away with the lads, and the goose to the fire" and truly we thought that the goose did go to it. One childish recollection of these days must be here inserted, the Councillor's daughter was at that age when the appearance of "silver threads amongst the brown" was not welcomed and sometimes she would come for Mrs Birch to return with her and take them out. On one occasion she promised if we would be good children during her absence, she would send us a basket of hiccory nuts back by Mrs B. The opportunity for mischief was however too strong for us, and despite the promised nuts, we at once looked out for something to do - an oatmeal box hung on one side of the fire place and a salt box to match on the other, and at

once our mouths were filled with oatmeal and a regular canonade of puffing it over each other began, and then with the hearth brush sweeping each other and the floor - soon tired of this, we tried which of us could walk backwards against the fire without scorching. Robert who began it, of course passed close without harm. I followed, and as anyone might conclude, though holding my merino frock tight round me did not escape without a large brown mark being left on it - so the hearth brush was again called into requisition and terrible was our dismay to find it swept so effectually that where it had been was a large round hole instead and at the critical moment the well known "Old rabbit you" and the basket of nuts came in, but not for us, as you may suppose.

Our house (*1 Coleshill Street*) was a long red brick one - as someone said "covering half the town" - for town it was - being corporate with a charter from King John and a Park belonging to the inhabitants by this grant of 2400 acres, but it was little larger than a village, with field walks in every direction and 60 years ago only very few inhabitants and but one or two families residing in it. I can only remember the Doctor, the school master and a proud old lady with 4 prim daughters who seemed to us very old and not very loveable, and the mother especially the reverse. I cannot tell exactly what the wrong thing was we had done but believe it was leaving foot prints on the border and my brother heard her say "they deserve punishment send them to bed." And for weeks after instead of singing the chants and hymns in church we used to sing "they deserve punishment they deserve punishment they deserve punishment send them to bed" to our great delight and also great alarm as these said ladies occupied the seat behind our long one in the gallery.

The length of our house was increased by the offices, and joining on to the carriage gates several cottages. In those days people were always called Barbers who are now called hairdressers, and the present blacksmith was then a tinker. In the first of these cottages lived the Barber, an old man very

tall, thin and meagre, living alone, to whom we were taken periodically by our old Nurse to have our hair cut, hear his queer stories, have our heads rubbed with brandy (to keep out the cold) and be rewarded with gay striped peppermint sticks. In the next our laundress, and I never think of her and her daughter now without the greatest compunction. As we grew up, we were seven daughters all going out and wearing walking dresses and at any hour they were sent in to be got up on the shortest notice, and the poor thing never complained. Our table cloths went in every day to be mangled. At the back of these cottages and behind our pig sties was a hut or hovel, inhabited by a tinker (old Norris) also living alone, a never to be forgotten character "black as a tinker" scarcely did his blackness justice - perhaps our doctor's description, when he went to see him on his death bed was nearer the mark, he said "he looks like the Devil in a snow drift" our mother had sent him in some clean sheets.

This man had constituted himself the business messenger of the office (our Father being a lawyer). Three score years ago there was very little postal accomodation, and none for money transmission. So when important parcels had to be sent ten, fifteen or twenty miles, someone used to go and rap at the pig sty wall, and presently the gaunt black figure of Norris appeared and away he went on his swinging trot, through rain, hail, snow or shine, never heeding and never stopping for though a hard drinking man, he was never known to take bit, or drop, but what he carried with him till his work was done, but when he got home, and his pay, he spent it!!! No one ever entered his house till his illness, and then what a sight! The lower floor had his tools, anvil and iron and also his coffin! in which he kept his bread and cheese. Up a ladder was his sleeping room in a loft, the bed a heap of straw but this man was faithful according to his lights and never betrayed his trust. We always called his hovel Norris Castle.

At the present when our letters are delivered 3 or 4 times a day - I go back in my mind to three score years ago, our Post Office and Postman!! The former kept a very large old woman named Dreyney with her dog Venture, which she always called Ventor and whom she had taught to go up stairs and bring down her bonnet and long boa, in which she went out winter or summer. One of our greatest pleasures was to go with our nurse to drink tea with her, and hear her never ending tales which I remember to this day, especially one about a short tongued servant, every sentence ending up with "what tan be tome to te master now? tinked I not a little bit pleased too you may tink". and the Postman!!! a dear little russet faced fellow, who combined with his very light work as letter carrier, the heavier one of household carrier, between our little town and Birmingham seven miles off. Every morning he used to walk into the kitchen for orders, and to look up at the larder shelves to see how many loaves we should want, as we had our bread from Birmingham. And the incongruous things that little man had to do! to match a ribbon, buy a frock, or cap, and all done so punctually and in good taste.

Servants three score years ago were a race worth remembering, they were Sallys and Bettys and Mollys then. We had a succession of Sally cooks who married off to be succeeded by other Sallys. But we had but one Nanny, who became a member of the household on the appearance of the first baby - nursed all fifteen - and some of the second generation, and died in our midst, leaving all her savings amounting to a few hundred pounds amongst her children whom she had nursed. And one of the charms of our young lives was the number of the attached domestics living around us, to whom as to our dear old nanny we always looked with the warmest regard and affection. One dear old body, Mrs Wardle, is quite worth mentioning. She used to brew for us, and this good quiet old body trudged best part of two miles in her scarlet cloak with lanthorn and little boy, between 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning so as to begin her work in time. The little lad (Hosea whom she called Hosy) sitting on the salt box by the fire, till it was light enough for him to return, and not

till the brewing was done, and cleared up towards 8 o'clock at night did she leave, and wages 3 score years ago were 1/- (*5p*) a day. I do not understand political economy, but this I know - that cottagers in those days seemed better off than they do now. The houses better stored with bacon and the family better dressed.

How amusing it would be if just for one day, the dirty town as it now is (spread out in all directions, large shops and villas, 3 railways crossing it, and other alterations) could be changed back to what it was 3 score years ago and the people re-produced. I mind me of our tailor. A little wizzen sallow man all smiles and curtseys with an immense ruddy faced wife, who wore a turban, frill, and pinafore, this latter was the style in those days, for our wool stapler called Jersey Comber used to wear knee breeches, blue worsted stockings and a pinafore and being a very large man it was a curious costume.

The first time I ever heard the word "Railway" was at our tailors from his pinafore spouse. We went to the shop about some work, and she said her husband was gone to Manchester to buy goods - and "do you know he has been in the Railway?!", and we exclaimed "whats that!". A year or two after this we went to see the first sod turned in Birmingham of the LNWR.

Amongst the things which are gone past as well as the people are (what will be recalled by those of my own age and scarcely believed in by the young) the watchmen, who were our only guards, and to assure us that they were guarding us, called out all the hours of the dark night. They were chosen from the super-annuated of the parish as a retiring pension!! We had only one at Sutton Coldfield and I think I can see him now, his poor old lean and lank figure, muffled up in drab great coat, shawl about his neck, lanthorn and rattle (what wonderful things those rattles were, all large houses had them instead of alarm bells, we had two hanging by the bedroom windows) armed with these he used to perambulate the parish at night, and private premises if

required. On very cold and inclement nights, a cup of ale and toast was put out on our garden steps for him. Compare now our police force and these decrepid old watchmen.

And few things bridge over the current of change in 3 score years more remarkably than the simple lucifer matches and night lights. Of the latter the beautiful gas globe with a clock in it, and kettle above (as used by some doctors and others) and the only night light of 60 years ago a Rushlight!! And the hundred and one different kinds of matches with their luminous boxes and the old tinder box! Sally and Betty's only way of getting a light and such a process! some rag to be burnt for tinder - a flint and steel to strike a spark, and a flat match with brimstone at both ends to take fire (if it would). Well do I remember the first box of Lucifer matches. We were having a picnic in the Park and a mysterious box was put to go with the things which we were enjoined by one of our sisters not to touch - and of course the first thing we did was to peep at them. And the rushlights!!! No recollection of my childhood is (*more*) fraught with the misery that the rushlight reproduced. the horrid crime of Burking or body snatching as it was called, was in full force, and scarcely a day but we heard of some poor victim being suddenly attacked, a pitch plaister put on the mouth, and the body carried away in a bag, to be sold for dissection. The life of a dear old little woman (Mrs Farmer in the Alms houses) was attempted but happily failed, but it filled our minds with terror. And just at this time my Father having to spend a few nights out, we were to take turn, as a treat, to sleep with my mother - oh horror!! the large room, four post bed with dark hangings and above all the Rushlight! It was too much horror for any child, and I can feel the agony of it now. They were like these tallow candles, very thin, more than a foot long, with a rush instead of wick and stood in a kind of tin barrel, pierced with holes about the size of a shilling (*10p*), these holes throwing large eyes all over the walls, ceiling and bed, which it seemed impossible to escape.

My father went occasionally to London taking our mother with him. And what a going it was! The Coach from York to London went through the town between 3 and 4am, someone was stationed on the hill to watch for it and the guard always blew his horn. Everybody was up, and on one or more occasions we were allowed to get up to see the start of which I remember most the brown bread toast and butter in our little parlour (as we used to call it) and the desolate dreary feeling when they were gone and the excitement over. But then the coming back!! The wonders to relate about the Thames tunnel, the theatre, etc and the beautiful peepshows of both brought as presents and which we have to this day, and some artificial bunches of red and white currants bought in the Burlington Arcade, which place even now, has an untold fascination for me - a sort of glamour of the past. I cannot forget the first time I went to London (I suppose I was between 20 and 30 years of age) I was there only one day and I think rather disgusted the friends who lionized me by begging to be taken first to the Polytechnic and the Burlington Arcade. These were the two places of which we had heard such wonderful stories in childhood.

They must have been weary journies then 24 hours, instead of the present 4. I do not remember from what place the coach called the "Red Rover" came or went, but it passed through S.C. in the morning after breakfast and people used to go see it on its perilous journey down the then dreadfully steep hill out of the Town. A dam has since been constructed which lessened the declivity one half. One morning when they were watching, a cry arose "Good God its over". It was quite true, it swayed and swayed and eventually toppled over. I have an indistinct recollection of a gentleman being hurt and being ministered to at our house, and that some years after my Father's partner Mr W. met at a foreign table d'hote, a gentleman who was recounting this episode of the coaching days.

Our style of progression on long journeys was rather unique. Our carriage was a large hooded double bodied one and one horse. But my Father being County Magistrate had frequently to go to Warwick to the assizes, also to overlook his Worcestershire property. On these occasions, he drove the one horse and the groom rode the other tandem fashion.

Post chaises were the usual mode of transit, but so expensive very few could avail themselves. I think the excise duty was 7/6 (*37½p*) everytime one left the Three Tunns Yard. No wonder people staid at home. They were small yellow carriages - only one seat - pair of horses and post boy. Our post boy was a character, a bandy legged old man with yellow jacket, top boots, and the most pronounced bottle nose I ever saw. I well remember driving with my Father and a sister to Hinckley in Leicestershire and the misery of sitting bodkin all that distance with next to nothing to sit on. And once again to Stafford to the Assizes for my father to speak for a friend, who had appropriated wood that did not belong to him, he came off victorious which I must doubt his deserving to do.

Before leaving the coaching days, I think I will recount a little experience of y own about 40 years ago. I was invited to be bridesmaid to a young friend in Montgomeryshire. My father objected, because the coach staid the night at Shrewsbury at the Red Lion Hotel, and sundry very evil reports had been heard of this place. It was found that I could stay at Hay Gate a few stages from Shrewsbury a well known road side horse changing Hotel, and pick up the morning mail when it stopped to change, then breakfast only in Shrewsbury, and go on by the appointed coach.

I started from Birmingham as outside passenger (I could not ride inside) was put under the protection of a very respectable old gentleman known to some friends of ours, and he kindly ordered my rooms.

It was a large rambling old place, but I had a comfortable little parlour for my tea, and then to bed, first paying my bill as I had to mount the coach soon after 5 in the morning. The chambermaid promised to call me. It was March - quite dark at that hour. No lucifer matches, and no chambermaid called me, but I awoke all right. The wind blowing gales, and as dark as pitch. I thought I heard the coach coming - what was I to do? How to get to it? Ran to my door, went out, all darkness, could see no other door, rang my bell again and again, had I seen a door I dare not have rapped, not knowing whose it might be, threw up my window - to my delight heard a man whistling and bucket handles clanging - shouted but the wind blew so, it was long before he heard, but at length to my joy the whistling ceased and the buckets seemed to stand still, so at the top of my voice again I shouted "I want to get out to go by the coach", Eh! What? I repeated my ditty and heard "find your way down to the kitchen, there is a lad there", giving my bell another tug - away I started, groped to the bannister and following it, landed myself in the Hall from which I could see at the end of a long passage, a light, very dim, but still light which came from a wood fire, on a large open hearth in a great wierd like kitchen with bacon and hams enough on the ceiling to feed all Shropshire and a little lad lying in front of the logs, I soon woke the urchin and we stirred up the fire and warmed ourselves and he put the mail bag ready, it was sometime before the Coach arrived and just before going to it down came the chambermaid full of sleep and apologies. It was a cold black morning and the coachman padded me into my place with clean straw. Drove into the Red Lion Yard about half past seven, went into the Hotel asked to have some breakfast from the sourest looking woman I ever saw, who answered "Did you come in by the coach?" Yes - "then we have orders to keep you!!" between fright and astonishment I said "Pray who gave you those orders?" "A gentleman" - in my unfledged indignation I turned on my heel saying "there is no gentleman who has that authority," and left the Inn and the breakfast - went to the Booking Office across the yard to take my place and go elsewhere for refreshment. "Please book me outside for Newtown". Did you come in from Hay Gate?

"Yes", then you are not to go on. I stood dumb, wondering had I committed some crime or was suspected of theft? and was to be arrested? and while standing there he fumbled out a letter.

It was from the bride-groom elect, to say he was in Shrewsbury, could not leave until next day, had arranged that I should travel with him as there was an 18 mile drive at the end to Llanidloes, and he would call upon me at 12 o'clock at the Red Lion, so I had no option, and like an abashed puppy dog I had to return and ask for the breakfast from the sour faced woman.

The gentleman came, he could suggest nothing better than my remaining there, though I told him all my fears, at which he laughed, so two tiny rooms were taken, the bedroom leading out of the sitting room and both with French windows on to a low balcony. I spent the day looking at the town, getting dinner at a pastry cook's, and returned to the hotel for tea. Having no writing paper asked for some and ink to write home. Whilst thus occupied - rap tap man's head introduced "Shall I take your place in the morning Mail?" "No thank you, it is taken". Half an hour elapsed rap tap - another man's head "Will you want calling in the morning?" "no thank you I can wake myself". A little later rap tap another man - the waiter - "Shall you want any breakfast?" "No thank you and please send up the bill by the chambermaid in an hour's time", but I had not done with them. Rap tap and another man, the book keeper with the bill - by this time I had worked myself into a fever of fright - having discovered that there were no other fastenings than latches on the windows, and any one might swing themselves up by the balcony. I was not going to get out my money before the book keeper so requested him to send up the chambermaid - at which he was very sulky and insolent. That bill!!!! 3£ 10s !!! 6d paper one sheet, 6d envelope 3d ink - boots, waiter, chambermaid - no one was forgotten. There was no going to bed for me that night, having barricaded windows and doors with all the furniture I could, there I sat,

shivering and shaking all night close to the bell, listening for every sound, and never was so thankful for the morning dawn.

On my journey home we arranged that I had better go to the Falcon to sleep, so on alighting from the coach and booking my place for the next morning, the book keeper said "Do you sleep here?" when I answered "No" then said he there will be 7/6 to pay for luggage, in vain I told him that I did not pay for luggage coming, and I was taking less back. In vain I appealed to a gentleman who had travelled with us and whom I knew. A well known lawyer Mr Unett, he only shrugged his shoulders and said "I suppose it can't be helped". So I paid the 7/6 and to the Falcon I went and came home by the morning coach - these were the experiences of The Good Old Days!!!

An outcome of the visit and wedding was a sojourn I made some few years afterwards with this married couple in the very heart of the Island of Anglesey at a lone Rectory 7 miles from everything and everybody. Not a word of English spoken. And one week I was there not a human being came through the gate save the butcher who brought the newspapers and letters of the week. The silence of this place was most remarkable. I sat one day on the lawn for 2 hours, and the only sound I heard was the ticking of the clock in the Hall, an old gander at a very distant farm, and a poor lone crow, lost I should think on its way from Holyhead, but that reminds me of an incident I think I will relate in conjunction with that place. I always call it "my disastrous day at Holyhead".

My good friends were going to have a Christening party, and unfortunately the nurse broke the spring of her 3rd set of ivory ornaments and being young, declared she would not appear without them, so to the dentist they must go. And there was only one chance, on Market Day when a Welch inside car passed the gate. Nurse could not possibly be spared a whole day, so I volunteered to go.

The vicar took me to the gate, car came up, laden with old women, baskets, butter, and bottles. The vicar held long parley with the driver of which I could not understand a word, and he and his passengers looked at me astonished, and all seemed by gesture to be most concerned for my well being. The driver constantly turning round with anxious looks and much gesticulation. My host was a very facetious man, and he had told these poor innocents that I was the Princess of Wales, so they must take care of me. Away we jogged and jolted till within a mile of Holyhead when bump! thump! and down we came, baskets, butter, bottles, old women and all, into the road. The near wheel had carried itself off towards Holyhead. And after we had gathered ourselves together we had to follow it on foot. Mr. P. had written down for me the street and Inn where I was to go in the evening for the return journey.

The necessary dental repairs only took ten minutes, so by the Dentist's advice took some buns and went off to explore the South Stack lighthouse. A lovely morning and a lovely walk, enlivened by picking up at intervals small packets of grocery - about 7 of them, and thinking I would give them to some poor woman, offered them to the first I met, whose delight was unbounded, turning up her flag basket to show the hole in the bottom from which they had escaped, and so she retraced her steps.

By the time I arrived at the South Stack, the wind was blowing a squall. Those were the days of crinoline, and on passing over the suspension bridge I found that unless I wish to be taken up like a balloon, I must dispense with mine! What a great thing it was! As proved by the fact that on retiring behind a rock and divesting myself of it, my skirts hung on the ground round my feet most dangerously - but on I went - saw the lighthouse, interviewed the puffins, and was advised by the Lighterman to get back to Holyhead as fast as I could for "there was dirty weather ahead". Returned to my rock and essayed to replace

my balloon, the wind making it almost impossible. Away went my pocket handkerchief (alas my best) round went my umbrella and two ribs broken and I could only get the balloon under my upper skirt, the under one remaining in folds round my heels. Down came the rain in sheets - slip, slop, splash I went on getting wetter and wetter, miserable wretched and exhausted - looked for some shelter to stand or sit in for a few minutes to recruit at length joy!!! A shed open on all four sides, but anyhow, a roof and a little patch of dry ground just in the centre, but this was occupied by a pig and her piglets, in vain I asked her to let me share it - a most unhospitable grunt was her only answer - a gentle poke produced an angry reply - but I was desperate and as determined to have the dry spot as Mrs P was determined I should not. So lowering my open umbrella in her face I gradually backed her into the offing, and her language was not pleasant. The rain continuing to come down like a water spout, I concluded my best way was to go in to the Inn get dried and something warm, before starting back. With all my discomfort I could not help looking back to see if Piggy took possession again, I saw she did. I went wading on and on - boots full of water - skirts soaked and I will not say that I did not weep by the way, I was so miserable. Arrived at the Inn at last, but was long before I could make my wants understood and in despair kept repeating "Sarsnag, Sarsnag" when some one was fished up who understood sarsnag. But to my dismay said the place was full - no room, fire or food could I have, neither could they tell me where to do. Out I turned again, and in desperation boldly went into a small drapery shop, saying to the young woman, please take me upstairs and bring some hot water, and a pair of stockings from the shop and some flannel. I was wet to the skin. To my delight she understood me, darted off - I after her - told her all my wants and away she went. I thought I was landed!!! But up came the mother looking thunders (and I didn't wonder) and, said she "You can't have hot water for your feet, and you can't be attended to, I can't have you here". I looked at her as pitifully as I could and said - surely you would not turn me out to drive back in this plight only look at me!!! and she did - and was mollified. Away she went and

returned with her daughter, brought stockings, dry boots, dress, shawl and hot brandy and water!!! In pulling off my boots the soles came from the bodies, they were the first and last pegged boots I ever had. My good Mrs Abel in my eyes changed from a demon into a ministering angel, swathed me in my flannel, clothed me in her boots, dress and shawl and carrying off my dripping articles in the foot bath left me to enjoy the fire and further on the tea, which her daughter had prepared. How I loved that woman, gave her a kiss and half a sovereign besides the worth of the things purchased, going off in her clothes, and she keeping mine, till they were to be exchanged the following Saturday.

Two years later, on my way from Ireland, I stopped for one night at Holyhead on purpose to visit my good friends, slept at their house and was welcomed, as the Welch only I think can welcome you.

After this digression back I must go to the "Old House at home".

Pianos were few and far between in those days, in fact none but rich aristocracy possessed them, and a family of fifteen to clothe, feed, and educate was sufficient reason for our being without one. (My Father had not then come into his property).

A very old and generous friend of our parents sent us one for the School Room (this same kind friend who lived at Moor Hall, laid down our Hall with gray and white stones instead of the old red quarries). The piano was an old one, but no 160 guinea instrument carried into a house now, would cause as much excitement as that did. It had a cover made on purpose, and nothing was allowed to be put on it.

Our two oldest sisters took lessons from the organist a queer looking old woman, and well do I remember how we two little ones, caught up the tune of their duett "the Village Festival" and sat down (or stood, I should imagine) and

played it by ear. This old instrument went in part payment years after for a new Cottage Broadwood for the Drawing Room, the extra money for which was partly raised by telling everything and everybody in the house, and the little book containing these tolls (now in existence) is very amusing, it was in 1837, and the piano is still a good one, and is much prized, as likewise the remains of a drawing room carpet worked by our Mother nearly four score years ago.

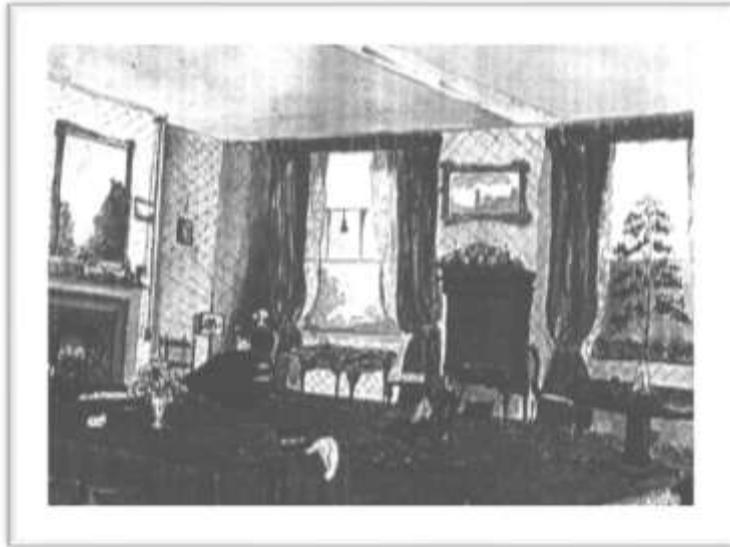
I very distinctly remember the coronation of William 4th and the terrible storm the day George 4th died. Tables were laid all down the Town. Arches were made of the testers off our beds covered with hops. And the Ball in the Town Hall - on which occasion (I think it was) that our eldest brother being in his Yeomanry uniform was said to be (by Mary Whitworth) the Belle of the Room!!

At the Elections the polling Booths were opposite our house, by the old Town Hall, the Conservative colours were orange and green (Wilmott and Dugdale) and dishes of fruit were sent over to the clerks, decorated with marigolds and green leaves. Our two oldest sisters receiving silk handkerchiefs of these colours from the successful candidate Sir W. Wilmott. His son sleeping at our house, we got our windows broken in consequence. Next house to us lived a hot radical doctor, who hung out his blue flat and though our garden had been stuck all over with the yellow and green ones and made in the house to decorate the Town, Mr W. and my brother would not tolerate our neighbour hoisting his colours, and creeping out of the attic windows at night along the parapet, with the help of a fishing rod hauled it down, the irate Dr finding it gone next morning, offered a reward and was furious! So the culprits thought it best to go in confess, and apologise.

Ours was an old fashioned garden, a flight of steps down into it. The top part was square with 4 broad gravel walks forming a square 18 times round these

made a mile. And my father had a little table put up [with a] numbered and moveable hand, for the use of our Mother in later years, when she and our Father used to walk their allotted distance. It was a mixture of flowers and kitchen garden, scarcely a rare flower that could not be found in it. A summer arbour in one corner with oak tree over it and a sundial. From the square it went down like a long Y with a loop at the bottom, the tail was a strip of kitchen garden on the left hand, and low hedge on the right, dividing it from the field, and under the hedge all the way down a glorious belt of crocusses. The bow was a sweet little bit with a mulberry tree, quince tree and fuschia bed. A seat, a rock, two springs with plank across to a little gate, under two weeping willows, which led into the field - and now - where this garden was, stands a station and a steam horse puffs along, where our horses and cows used to browse in the field.

The mulberry tree has taken a walk up to the house - the sundial and pedometer disappeared. Norris Castle has been turned into a tenement, the old Town Hall gone. All the field walks disappeared - and not now I think above one or two old faces that were known in the place - three score years ago.



Sketch showing Interior of 58 High Street in the 1800s.

*(Taken from a copy of 'The Holbeche 'Diary' in the Holbeche Family Papers, Sutton Coldfield
Library Ref: BCOL Q.942.496082HOL)*