

MY LIFE STORY

by

CHARLES WRIGHT

of ~~HADDEN HALL, HADDENHAM.~~

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Hadden Hall
is at bottom
of Stearn Mill



As one looks back on the years that have passed, time seems to have gone very quickly indeed. I am now over 70 years of age. As far as I can remember, as a little chap I started school life at Wilburton where I was born. My father was a wheelwright and carpenter, working with his brother in the village. They were not natives of the village, but migrated from Gamlingay and settled at Wilburton, Isle of Ely, Cambs. They did a lot of building at Wilburton, including work at St. Peter's Hall and the Rectory house, the home of the Pell family.

My father had very poor health, and of course that kept him poor, so I had to start work very early in life. I finished my school life at nine years of age, but by that time had risen to the top of the school. The schools at that time were divided into classes: last class, third class, second class and first class. The top row of the first class was the highest you could get in the school; now I think they have standards. We had to take slates home with us for sums, etc., and pay twopence a week each Monday.

I started work at nine years of age. My first place was with a farmer named Uffenhill, driving the horses for the plough. The horsekeeper was named Powers, "Brownie" they called him for nick-name. I was his favourite, so we got on alright together and I stayed two years. My next place was at a yeoman farmer's. I didn't stay long there, as he was not very free with his pay. I asked him for a rise in wages when I was getting 4/6 a week. I wanted 5/-, and he said he would not give it to me, so I went to see another farmer about a job. He said he would give me 5/- a week and told me to start on Monday. I went right away and left the other job. I stayed with this farmer till I was 14 years of age. I was yardman there and fed the bulls, calves, cows and pigs, and got in fact to become quite an agriculturalist. After that time I had to decide what sort of work I was going to do. Whether a wheelwright, or any other occupation, and as I had no liking for wheelwright work I went to work for another yeoman farmer as garden boy and continued in his employ till I was 19 years of age. He gave me a good foundation as he was a born gardener. He had a beautiful place, and was then living the life of a country gentleman, and he taught me a lot. Of course the pay was not much. I was getting 9/- a week at 19 years of age. I thought to myself that I should have to wake up a bit, as I was getting on, so I talked it over with a cousin of mine. He had a nice place called Poplar Lodge, and offered me 11/- a week to work for him, and help with his glass-houses, as he grew tomatoes, cucumbers, etc. I did not like this kind of work, as it was not so nice as being in a gentleman's place.

I made up my mind to advertise for a place. But advertising for a place meant leaving home, but I was a singer in the village choir, and the parson had spent a lot of money in training the choir. I was an alto singer. I advertised and secured two answers. One from a nurseryman

and the other from a German gentleman who kept a large establishment; coachman, servants and carriage, etc. The place was at Blackheath, near London. He was a man rather hard to please, and I had rather a trying job. I had to help the coachman, the gardener and the servants, and assist all round. It was a nice place, with a lovely garden and a fine display of camellias. My health was not very good there, so I only stayed a year. In August I came back home to Wilburton.

In October I advertised again, and got a job in March as gardener for a doctor whose name was O'Connor. I did very well with him. He made me his assistant for mixing medicines, so I used to be called "The Doctor" by some people who knew me. But alas, he and I fell out. I said something he did not like. I think he said I told him he was not a gentleman. Anyhow I offended him, and if you have offended you are not easily forgiven, which is the Irish temperament, so I left him after two years in his employ.

My next place was at a small village in Hunts. A young man had been left £8,000 by his uncle, so like a good many more he wanted to make a show. He employed a groom and had smart turnouts. But I only had three months in his employ. It was told me afterwards he lost all his money, did a moonlight flit, and went as a footman. I did not stand idle long—about a week.

I then went with a coachbuilder of the well known name of Windover. I was there some time as groom, gardener, etc. The house was at East Barnet. Rather a nice place, had a clock on the house. It had been a hotel in the old coaching days. He stayed in this house some time, and then took a house in New Barnet, but was only there for a year. He used to tell me that when he had full management of the Company he was going to put a groom under me, but alas! carriages went down and motor cars came up, so it did not come to pass. After he had been in this house at New Barnet he told me he had to go to India to see after a branch of the business they had at Bombay. I had an offer to go in the Sale rooms or do what I liked till he came back, as he would want me on his return. My parents had great trouble at home at that time, so I came back again to Wilburton to see what I could do to help.

I started farming, but farming was then at its worst. Wheat was 10/- a coomb, little pigs eight weeks old, 2/6 each. But I had a try. I paid £2 rent for the land, and 14/- an acre for outgoings such as tithe, drainage, etc., so it was not much of an outlook. I hired the land for two years. The first year was a bit difficult; the land was not what it ought to have been or as the landlord said it was. Still, I got through the first year, and paid my rent; the second year I did better, got more yield to the acre, as I had worked hard at the land the previous summer.

When my two years were nearly up I told the owner I would give him £1 10s. an acre, but he said "No, £2 or leave it." I said it was not much good me going on with it at that rent, so I left it just before the second harvest. My father managed it for me till the time of my leaving

it was up. I went back again with Mr. Windover, senior. He had taken a house at Oakleigh Park, while my old master had returned from India, and went to Huntingdon. He wrote to me asking me to go to Huntingdon with him again, but I did not do so. When Mr. Windover gave up his house at Oakleigh Park I left him and went to live at Champion Hill, near Dulwich, a very beautiful place at the foot of the garden, and the Crystal Palace could be seen about six miles away. The lady was very eccentric; she kept three servants and a man in the house, but she would not let him plant a flower in the garden, nor yet a vegetable. All he had to do was to keep on raking and burying leaves and rubbish. She was good natured. She gave the Salvation Army £50 while I was there. I rather liked that part of London, as I went out every evening, sometimes to Dulwich Park, other times as far as the Old Kent Road, but I could not put up with the monotony of keeping on burying leaves, so I left and again went with the Windovers, this time at Crouch End, which was quite a different sort of life. I had a season ticket to London. My job there was in the show-rooms in Long Acre, where I had to show off the carriages to intending purchasers, go to sales and buy, so I got to know a lot about London. Some of the places were great mansions where I have seen camelias growing like trees, under glass, of course. Then I had to go shopping one day a week. The great meat market in the morning, then to the great stores afterwards, finishing up with "Seven Dials" for fish. Well, I did this job for a time. I did not care much for Crouch End, I liked Highgate better. Waterloo Park was very nice, with Nell Gwynn's house at the entrance. That part of Highgate is noted for its Roman Catholic Churches. It is a very fashionable parade about there, especially on a Sunday morning—one sees all the latest fashions. I stayed there some time. I went from there at ten in the morning, returning at five from Broad Street Station. I went from this job to Golders Green with the Trevelyan family, the most aristocratic family I had lived with. Mr. Trevelyan was a Barrister, and went to the law courts every morning. I used to drive him to West Hampstead Station and meet him in the evening. He was very fond of cricket, and spent a lot of his time at Lords cricket ground. There were three sons. One a major, one a captain, the other lived at home when he could agree with his mother. I cannot say I am very fond of aristocrats. I was coachman. I had a little bedroom just large enough for the bed and could just squeeze in to get in the bed. I had to look after the coke fire in the hall, and watch that no burglars came. I was a kind of watch-dog. We were fed on the hardest beef that could be bought. If one had false teeth, it would smash them all to bits. Golders Green at that time was a small hamlet between Hampstead and Hendon. The house of the Trevelyans was a miniature estate and was painted outside. There was a large lawn and conservatory and some nice trees. Three servant maids, a gardener, cowman and coachman were kept. The Trevelyans were a branch of an old Northumberland family, and I was told the estate there was 20,000 acres. It was alright being there as Hampstead and Hendon were nearby. When I was there some time ago the old Golders Green had passed away, together with the house and grounds.

I left London and came back again to Wilburton. My father's health had been worse, consequently he got behind with his rent and the lord of the manor at that time threatened to distrain if it was not paid. So I paid it and told him he should not bother about rent any more, as I would build him a cottage. I had bought a small allotment previously, so I started to work. I helped the builders as bricklayer's labourer and dug the well for water myself. I moved the few odds and ends of furniture into the house, and after I had installed my parents there, the people wanted to know what I was going to do for a living, or whether I had made a fortune. I said "Yes, but would not take long to spend it." Well, the builder said, "I am building a fairly large house here at Haddenham" Would I care to take the situation. I told him I did not mind, as I thought I had had enough of London for a time. Consequently I came to live at Haddenham. My first job there was to live in the house and thoroughly air all the rooms, and make the gardens. That was in November—the house was just finished. That winter was one of the hardest we had for years. The frost made gardening impossible, so I had a very quiet time airing rooms. The owner did not come there to live till the following May, and I lived there alone for six months, till he came. When he came and settled down, I lived in the house, looked after the house and cow, and acted as gardener, etc. I had a good lot to do, as there was nothing much on the place, being new, so I made the lawns, and kept planting trees and shrubs each year.

After I had lived in the house for three years, I married a young woman living at Haddenham, so I had to look out for a cottage. Her father had promised her a cottage sometime, and when he consented to our marriage the tenant was given notice, and we went there to live. I had 15/- a week and continued my employment. After a year or so we had a son. But after he was born my wife began to lose the use of her legs, which was the beginning of her illness from which she never recovered. It was a disease called Diseminated Sclerosis, which means Creeping Paralysis. This was an anxious time. I had to wheel her about in a bath chair. This went on for about ten years, she gradually got worse, and no hope of a cure. I tried everything—hospitals and several doctors. I kept on with my employment for 15 years, and during that time my father died and my mother came to live with me, which was a help until she had a stroke, and then I had two invalids to see after and nurse at that time. I had to look after things as best I could, doing my own cooking and washing. Then my mother died. My employer had bought a motor, and had been made Sheriff, so he told me he wanted a man who understood motors, which I did not, so I left his employ and had to shift for myself as best I could. I went to work for an old farmer for about 1/6 a day. I could not leave my wife all that time, as I had to fix up the fire guard, etc., and did not want to go home and find her burnt to death. I kept on persevering and getting work such as digging front gardens and jobbing about the village, but alas! my wife grew worse and took to her bed. I looked after her for three months, night and day until she died, and I and my boy were

left alone. I had sold all the furniture, and let part of the house, the tenant's wife agreeing to cook us some food, which she failed to do. Then I tried her with my bit of washing, and in that she failed, and preferred looking after others, neglecting us, which brought down the Inspector of Cruelty to Children. I had to get rid of these tenants, and get someone to look after us properly. The Inspector could not find much fault, as I had looked after things myself pretty well. I managed to get a man and his wife to live in the house and look after us. They were better than the first tenants, only they had a lot of children. This went on for about three or four years.

I got tired of this kind of life and married again, this time to a young woman from Feltham, Middlesex. She was born and brought up in the village of Feltham. She is a good wife and looks after us well, so we had more comfort than ever before. Through the years of the war I was feeding and looking after pigs, as the sons of the farmer were called to the war. I had to feed 200 pigs night and morning, and was glad when the war was over to relieve me of my job. My next job was at Hinton Hall, as milkman; this also was in the latter end of the war. I stayed there for a time, but left and went again to Ivy Lodge as gardener with Mr. Ireland who rented the place. I was with him for seven years till he went away. After he left I stayed on with Dr. Howe and his successor, Dr. Fairweather where I am to-day. He was a Scotchman; so I have worked for a German, an Irishman and a Scotchman and I started work for a Dutchman. I have been called a man of many parts—I am a fruitgrower, besides being landlord of more than 20 tenant's land and houses of course. These are a care and trouble in these times with high rates, taxes and repairs. What changes there have been in 70 years. Nearly all the old faces I used to know as a boy have passed away. Still, through all my varied experiences I think this is a beautiful world, and if one uses it aright men might be happy. It is a good deal their own fault not to be. I have always been fond of reading. I think I may say I have read loads of book. As a young man I was fond of Jackson Wray's books, as I got older of Joseph and Silas Hocking for preference.

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When I lost my first wife, I used to ride up to London on a bicycle and had a trailer attached for the boy. I used to get a job of work in different parts of London. I stayed about a month or six weeks, then came back again. So I got to know a good bit of London, living there, and visiting it from time to time. I used to be fond of going to the Royal Aquarium to see Blondin wheel a barrow with a man in it on the rope at the top of the building. Also the Agricultural Hall, the show and the military tournaments. I cannot say I am glad the motor car has come to stay, for I feel it is not so good for agriculture as it was in the old days, when most rich people and others kept their stables full of horses. I have been for days riding round Enfield to buy hay for horses in my charge. Now none is wanted.

Vic.

Another of my hobbies was fishing. As a boy, instead of mixing with

other boys, I went fishing alone. I have spent day after day in Wilburton fen, fishing in the drains. I was never successful in the river. I think fishing is a good sport if you get plenty of bites. Only, to be a good fisherman, you have to be patient, and keep yourself out of sight of the fish.

My hobby in middle life was pig rearing, in which I was very successful, as here again, patience is needed to be successful, as pigs are very sensitive. They know who is kind to them and who is not. When I was a young man I made a fair amount of money rearing pigs. Young pigs, in my estimation, are one of God's beautiful things. Some people think pigs dirty, but there is not an animal that appreciates being clean more than they. I am now too old to take on pig rearing, as a lot of work is required in the business—sitting up sometimes all night long, and watching them to save the young ones.

I have always been fond of birds and animals. From the first I can remember, I used to make cages for young birds, hanging them on a tree for the old ones to bring them along till they could peck. It would not do for them to be left too long, if they did, you might go some morning and find the old bird had given them something that did not agree with them. They would be dead.

I brought up a young jackdaw once. He was so tame, he used to hop on my shoulder when I was at dinner, and say, "Jacky wants a bit." A young man wanted to buy him from me, so I sold him, but Jacky did not take to him, so he hit poor Jacky on the head. I did not think him much of a gentleman for doing that. It is a wonder I had not cracked his head for him. Now I go in for dogs. My first dog was a Pom. A pretty, saucy fellow, with a long tail, but, poor chap, a motor wheel caught him, and ran over him. It is astonishing how fond one gets of dogs. The next one was a collie. It was a rough collie, a lovely pedigree dog. I used to take him to shows. He won second at Cambridge, but I had bad luck again and he caught distemper and died. I had had him four years. After a time I bought a young collie from Ipswich. I had her till she got to be a nice dog, and taught her all sorts of games. She could dance like a lady on her hind legs to music, but one day she got out on to the road, and a motor caught her, and she was killed. She was a very valuable dog. I have another one now, growing into a nice dog, and I hope she will not have the same luck as the others.

Once I went in for rearing a lot of fowls, all sorts, and hundreds of them. That is another very interesting hobby or business to anyone willing to do it—another game of patience. But there is nothing got in this world without work and patience. I thought I was on the road to prosperity with a lot of fowls, but I had a garden and they would scratch up all the things I had planted, so I wired in the garden from the fowls, and shut them up so they could not get out. Then to spite me they ate up all the eggs they laid, so I sold them off.

My next venture was rearing geese. They were as bad to me as the fowl, as they ate the bark off the fruit trees. Then I had some guinea fowl,

but they used to sit in the fruit trees and make such a noise in the evening, that I sold them. I have kept ponies, too. I only had one donkey. My wife likes donkeys, but I cannot say I do. A good donkey is a very useful animal. They know who treats them well. Cats, too, are very affectionate, even more than dogs. I have a cat now who waits for me. When he knows I am coming, he walks quietly in and takes his place. I lived at Golders Green as I have mentioned before, where they had 20. Mr. Trevelyan had his own cat, and had its own place at table. When he went on circuit, which he did at certain times of the year for a month, this cat used to wait out on the road on the look-out for him. I have no liking for politics or public life. But for choice, I think I am a Conservative. But I don't mind which Party rules as long as it does the best for all concerned.

I have been a Special Constable twice. Once I was asked if I would like to be a J.P., but that came at a time when I had great trouble at home. My first wife lay dying, so I had not much heart for anything.

I have always been fond of music. I started by buying a concertina. I saved my money a penny a time. I managed to save 4/., and walked to Ely, and a funny thing, there was only one concertina on the market, and it was put up for auction at 4/.. I bought it and walked home. I was living at Wilburton then, about 7 miles, 14 miles there and back for a concertina! Still, I had no choice, as I had not a penny in the world after I had paid for it.

Another hobby of mine is pictures. I think they are very interesting. I have bought pictures from all places and have a collection of oil paintings, etc.

Trees and shrubs are a fascinating hobby. There is something grand in a well grown tree or shrub. I have a good collection at Hadden Hall, my present home. I like the fruitful and the ornamental. I get a lot of pleasure watching them grow and bearing fruit. An apple tree in bloom is a glorious sight. I am fond of flowers, every one in its season. Of course one has to have a love for these things, otherwise they are not a success. If a man takes an interest in them he is independent of other things. I have lived in towns, but I agree with what I once read. "Man made the town, but God made the country." Regarding religion—I was brought up in the Established Church, as a boy living at Wilburton. Sunday mornings we had to go to School, repeat the Collect, Epistles and the Gospel by heart, which takes a lot of practice. After that the scholars marched to the Church in pairs. When I grew older, I was trained for the choir and had to attend all the special singing services at Ely Cathedral. When I lived near London, I took part on special occasions at Exeter Hall, London—I think it is a very good start in life to have this training. We had a very good schoolmaster, and if a boy had anything good in him, he was bound to bring it out.

As to philanthropy—I am not mean, but I think charity begins at home. Then, if there is anything to spare after that, well, one can practice

benevolence. I have been to meetings in my younger days, when money was wanted, and I have watched men trying to outdo each other, and I used to wonder when I knew the money was wanted at home. What honour is there in getting a name for benevolence, when those you should love the most have to suffer for it? That is my idea.

If any young people read what I have written here, when I shall have crossed the Bar, I say "Give to Jesus your earliest days. They only are blessed who walk in His ways. In life and in death, He will be your friend. For those whom He loves, He will love to the end."

I am writing this when over 70 years of age. I have had many troubles. I have watched by the beds of those near and dear to me; I have been saved from many accidents, and feel the Lord is the best friend one can have.

Looking back on my life I can recall several strange happenings. When I lived at East Barnet, Hertfordshire, I had made up the greenhouse fire, for it was freezing. I had not been away five minutes, before I returned for something I had left behind, and found the whole roof had fallen in. Had I been there then, I should certainly have been killed by the weight of the roof.

The other strange happening was when I lived at Champion Hill, near Dulwich. I had a room to myself in the old house. I, and the servants had retired for the night. There were three servant maids kept to look after one old lady. I had made myself secure in my room, as I thought, and put a heavy chair against the door as I generally did when living near London, so if a burglar or anyone tried to get in, the chair would fall and wake me. I had been living at Blackheath, and hearing so much talk about Peace the burglar, I took caution. I was just going to sleep, when all at once I felt something or someone put their arms around me and try to drag me out of bed. I always have shut my eyes soon after going to bed, and I was very much frightened. I dare not open my eyes to look. Had I done so I might have seen something. Still, it was a strange experience, which I only had once in my life of 70 years. I think about it now at times. I was a young man then of about 25 years of age.

Another strange experience befel me years afterwards in the harvest field. I was in the cart loading corn, and all at once the horse bolted, and went up the field like the wind, with me still in the cart. I thought if I stayed in the cart the horse would run me into the river, and I should be drowned. So I kept working my way to the front of the cart and got on the copes. All carts have copes on them in corn-carting time. I threw myself off on to the ground with the horse at full gallop, and the most curious part of it was, when I did that, the horse turned round the opposite way and galloped back to where it started. It gave me a shaking up. This was close to the place where Hereward the Wake defended the Isle of Ely against the Normans many years before in Aldreth Fen. I wonder what will become of this England of ours in the future.

I look back and think of other days. Workers get more pay to-day

than when I was a boy, but they do not seem to be much better off. There was not so much discontent then as now. The great German War seems to have thrown everything out of gear. True, we have the wireless, which is very nice, and science has made great strides, inventing machines to do without labour, but I cannot see that is much gain to the country, when unemployed have to be kept living an idle life.

I started work when I was nine years of age, and I am now over 70 and still employed. I have always had more work to do than I wanted. My forefathers, from what I can learn about them, were the same. They were rich at one time, but not idle rich. My great-grandfather employed 50 men as wheelwrights, millwrights, etc. These are the sort of men who have made England. Men who have put their shoulder to the wheel: and there will have to be such men as these to keep England from going under. It will not be the lovers of pleasure that will do it. Rome had a great history, but it fell through love of pleasure, and so will any nation that gives itself up to pleasure, and ceases to work for its best welfare. There is an old saying "God helps those who help themselves." God is sure to do His part, as He never fails in His promises. If man fails to do his part, whose fault is it?

What a wonderful thing memory is. As you look back on past years, and think of all that has happened, and of the people you have known. In my own native village of Wilburton there are not many living now whom I knew as a boy. They have all gone. There used to be a lot of Wrights then. Now there are none. The places remain about the same, but the people disappear. New generations grow up, and when you go back you are like a stranger to most of them. "The old order changeth, giving place to the new."

I have heard people say they did not believe there is a God or any hereafter, but from my experience of life, I believe what the Bible teaches is all true. As the old proverb says "Experience teaches." If anyone would be good for anything, they must have experience. I have had 70 years experience, and I can look back and say that "God is good, and His tender mercies are over all His works." Man is akin to the beasts by his body, and if he is not to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature.

March 10th. I have been to the lawyer at Ely, and made another Will, as I am sorry and disappointed in my son; he is mentally unstable. I cannot leave my property absolutely to him, as I would have liked, so I have left him a life interest, and when he dies, it will go to the hospital and churches locally. It is a disappointment to me, as I intended to found a family when I started buying property, but I do not see how it can be helped. It is no use worrying over these things. If the property is cut up and divided, I do not suppose I shall be here to see it, and it may do some good eventually. So I must "Keep right on to the end of the road," as Harry Lauder sings. Life has many ups and downs, and ins and outs, and it seems to pass very quickly. So it is up to us to do our best "while it is called day, for the night cometh when no man can work."

I must not complain. "I have been young, and now am old, yet saw I never the righteous forsaken, nor His seed begging their bread."

My mother was a good woman. She became converted in middle life, and it was due to her influence that I respect better things. She and I were both baptised together in Haddenham Baptist Church, and although she is dead, her influence still lives on, especially in Wilburton Chapel, where she and her mother before her were members for 30 or 40 years each. These old Baptist churches have done a grand work in the past, and have helped to stir up the Established Church in a great measure, especially in villages.

I remember the time when Spurgeon came about here to preach. What a commotion! People flocked to hear him. I heard him preach at Waterbeach, and I thought what a hold he had over the people listening to him. He was a very humorous man, and I think it was a great help to his popularity. He did a good work in his day, and he has gone to his reward.

We all have a mission of some sort to fulfill. We cannot all be great preachers, but we are all expected to do our bit in some way or another, and if we can each of us hear the Master's "Well done" at the last, it will more than recompense us for the difficulties of the way. That is what I think about it. Perhaps I may be old-fashioned, but this does not distress me at all. I do not want any greater honour than that myself. My employer at Barnet was a coachbuilder, so of course, I drove the best turnout in the place. I wore smart livery, drove high stepping horses, and paraded Regent's Park, Hyde Park and Regent Street. On Sundays I had a rest, so I used to attend the church at East Barnet in the morning, and go to the Bible Class at the Baptist Chapel in the afternoon, and service there in the evening. By doing so I became acquainted with some very nice, respectable people, beyond my station in life. Then I used to be asked to their houses, and had some very good times. At that time Mr. James Fowler was Superintendent of the Sunday School and was associated in business with Ward, Lock and Bowden. He was a very quiet, nice gentleman, and I should think, a real Christian.

Then there was Mr. Thomas Pavitt, who led the Christian Endeavour Society. His son George was a great friend of mine, and a man of whom I was very fond. Then there was the Beale family. Richard Beale was a nice young man, but what became of them after I left, I do not know.

When I lived at the top of Denmark Hill, I used to go to the Baptist Chapel in Coldharbour Lane, on a road leading to Brixton. I became acquainted with some good people there, especially with a young man employed as a clerk in Somerset House. He was a nice chap, and we became like brothers, but as I had to move about a good deal, I had to leave these old friends behind. That seems to be the lot of some. Some travel on, whilst others stay in the same place.

I am now turned 70 years of age. I could write a lot, but I will now close with the verse of a well-known hymn—

"Hide me, oh, my Saviour hide,
Till the storm of life is past,
Safe into the Haven guide.