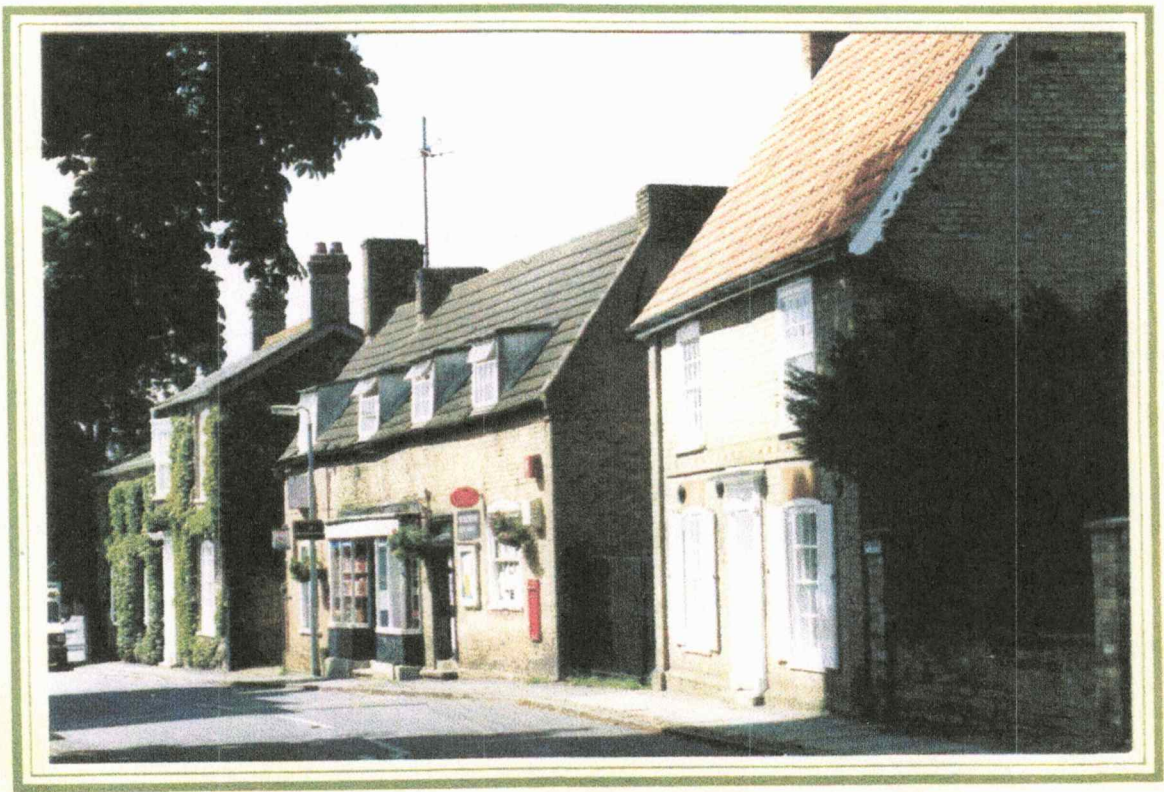


"Boys from Bluntisham"
for my friends, Peter and David Godfrey.

Bluntisham



Alec Spore
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Boys from Bluntisham.

(A sometimes dimly remembered account for my friends, Peter and David Godfrey).

In many ways, my life seemed to begin when I was three years old. I had been born the third child and second son of Alan Moore and his wife, Isobel, in Belfast in 1925. Alan had left employment with reasonable prospects to join the Royal Inniskillings in 1914 at the age of 17; within the year he had won his first campaign medal in France and I have since worn it with his other medals on Anzac days in New Zealand. After France he served at Gallipoli and Mesopotamia and left the Army in 1919 suffering with the after-effects of wounds and malaria and the gas which had left him with serious lung problems. None of that seemed to have deterred him from marrying Isobel nor of becoming the father of four children before he succumbed to ill health and died in 1928, still a very young man. Isobel had come from "a good family" in Northern Ireland, but there had been some opposition to her marrying an ex-serviceman with health problems and few prospects; it was a generation away from any form of social welfare and the beginning of the Depression, so the death of my father left her with few options and the outcome was that she sent three children to Dr. Barnardo and kept a baby whom she managed to support. He and I were destined finally to meet, when I was 75 years old and he 73, and our lives in some ways had followed astonishingly similar paths – he had performed well at school, had served in the Far East at the end of the Second World War, had studied some Law at Oxford and made a name for himself as an advocate for ex-servicemen in the Law Courts of Belfast and spent seven years as a Borough Councillor.

This was the background of which I was totally unaware behind my arrival, still three years old, in Bluntisham, a village of some three hundred residents in what was then the County of Huntingdon on the edge of the Fenlands of East Anglia. I had been sent there by Barnardos and was virtually adopted into a family called Ashton. I was "brought up" by Fanny Ashton, a lady with very pronounced views on what was right or wrong in life. I was very fond of her and grew up originally calling her "Mum" and later "Nanny". I was to remain in her care until I had almost finished my schooldays and was ready to join the wartime Army. She was the daughter of Edward Taylor Isaac Ashton, a businessman of St. Ives who had died a few years before I arrived; I clearly remember his portrait – a benign and bearded gentleman holding a walking stick with a bend in it – the walking stick survived long after his demise. There were Uncles and Aunties galore in surrounding towns and villages. We lived in a rambling old house, "The Homestead" which had

been built in the 18th. Century and, like many other houses in the area, had once held a licence to sell "Ales and spirituous liquor". One of its features was a long "settle" in a drawing room – which had been the resting place for many thirsty customers over the years. One of my later memories is of a "knitting Circle" of village ladies who lined the settle, and the rest of the drawing room to knit socks and gloves for soldiers in the early part of the War while I was busy swotting in another room. Another feature was a large round stone doorstep which had been one of the grinding stones at a mill which many years before had produced flour from locally grown wheat. Family members were frequent visitors, especially on Sundays in Spring and Summer, when people of various ages would join in a game of cricket in the paddock adjoining the house, usually after a large Sunday "Dinner" after the morning service at the local church. It seems likely that the house had been built close to a spring, since, during a very wet winter a large cellar would become flooded – presumably in the days when the house was an inn it would have held a number of barrels; my recollection is of racks of "Bramley" apples to ensure a supply of wintertime pies, hams, potatoes, and eggs in large earthenware vessels of preservative; next door was a sunken pantry which was as effective as most refrigerators for food storage in a large "safe". The garden outside the kitchen was a source of constant joy in summer – there were apples for cooking and eating, a lovely "Rivers" plum and a "Victoria", a tree of damsons and a "Golden Gage". The gable end of the house had an espaliered William pear; close by there were rows of raspberries and both black and red currants and "Uncle Jack", who lived close by, ensured a regular crop of potatoes, carrots, peas, runner beans, onions, broad beans and parsnips. At the edge of the paddock there was a large walnut tree – and I have fought many restless nights by putting myself back under that tree remembering the sort of breeze that brought down the skin-broken nuts while I sheltered under its branches with a book.

Our nearest neighbours were the Godfrey family who lived in the Manor opposite; ours were the two houses at the end of the village before the start of "The Heath" through which the road ran for more than a mile bordering only another three or four houses which included the Godfrey farm and a farm house occupied by one of the employees, Percy Chapman. My first meeting with him was shortly after my arrival when it had been arranged that we would all go in a farm cart for a country picnic. I recall being told that Percy bent to pick me up to put me into the cart and, noticing my Irish pallor, said "Where have they been keeping him – in a starch box"! We became good friends although a few years later I struck a door of galvanised iron with a piece of old harness and

made a loud bang at just the wrong moment – Percy was on a stool milking a cow who was so startled that she tipped Percy off the stool and wasted some milk.

David and I both began our schooldays at the three roomed Church of England school with about 60 pupils and I remember walking to school with him on either side of Miss Ethel Pratt (a somewhat unfortunate name) . Miss Pratt shared a house with her elderly father next door to the Blacksmith, a Mr. Sydney James Hand who had a most intriguing forge where a smouldering furnace could be brought to life with bellows whenever a horse needed to be shod or when heat was needed to fashion a part for the agricultural implements he made. Mr. Hand travelled by horse and trap – the horse, Kitty, spent the winter months stabled but for the rest of the year had access to our home paddock where she would be crazy with delight when she was first released. Mr. Hand had a continual supply of extra-strong mints which he always referred to as “Jolly Boys” – I never worked out why! If asked where he was going as he drove past in the trap, he would invariably reply “To Halifax” – another mystery!.

The tiny school was staffed by Mrs. Christmas, the headmistress, and Miss Pratt and a middle class teacher, or sometimes a pupil teacher. “Education” for most ended at age 14 and the boys often went to farming, and the girls to domestic service . There was a great deal of variety in the village families – poverty was not unknown during the depression years but the general standard of living was far better than in the cities. Village gardens and chicken runs provided a good deal of food. Picking fruit and cropping vegetables provided secondary employment for several months – although I recall one summer when there was little or no market for a large part of the plum crop. Harvest time also called for extra labour – in these days a combine harvester enters a field early in the day and well before nightfall the sifted grain is in the granary – back then, the excitement began with the binder which cut the corn about six inches above ground level, forcing lots of rabbits to flee from their hiding places; stooks would be built with the bound sheaves and would be left to dry for a week or two before they were carted away for stacking; eventually, a large steam engine would arrive, brought by a contractor to undertake the threshing; all in all, a far more leisurely and labour-intensive process than today’s.

One major separation between the people of the village was their allegiance to church or chapel. There were some unifying factors, one of which was cricket. Many keen young boys watched cricket each Saturday during the season, sitting in front of the pavilion, and taking it in

turn to put the numbered metal squares on to the score board. The village's umpire – and I only recall the one - was an immigrant from Yorkshire, Mr. Ambrose, whose accent gave him an unusual cry of "Over"! I remember stylish batting from Edward Peake, the Rector, and from Cyril Tebbut.

Another occasion for village unity was the annual excursion by train to one of the East Coast seaside resorts – Hunstanton, Skegness, Mablethorpe, or Great Yarmouth; - on the appointed Saturday the village, and neighbouring Earith, would be virtually evacuated. The train departed in turn from the two railway stations – long since disappeared – and return in the late evening with sun-burnt and sandy children, the local bowls lovers who had spent an afternoon in a pre-arranged match, and other adults who had spent some time sitting in deck-chairs, or exploring the pubs.

The farm yard at the Manor was an intriguing place; there was a granary and several implement sheds, a barn or two for pigs and other livestock. There was a large concreted area which was ideal for small boys on tricycles, and I played a great deal with Peter's younger brother David who was a year or so younger than I whilst Peter was two years my senior. For some time a favourite pastime was the construction of dug-outs which served as our gang headquarters, with Peter as leader, and places where we planned "feasts" which often included Crisps and ginger beer bought through the bar window of a pub a little way down the road to the village. David and I decided one day that we could reduce the depth of our digging and build upwards against one of the farm fences; it was an ambitious affair and took a lot of planning; it was to have an area of flat roof which would be concealed under grass and earth spread over some solid timbers and galvanised iron, and, highly likely, bits of asbestos. Once completed we were enjoying our handiwork and standing on its roof looking over the fence; there was suddenly a complete collapse below us and we emerged from the wreck to be reminded that we needed to return our building materials and clear up the mess. I do not think we built another hut, but David, who was destined to take over the running of the farm from his father and make a very competent farmer, was never happier than when he had a spade in his hand so we dug trenches and drains and generally "played on the farm". Peter and David had an elder sister, Ruth, who seemed like a big sister to me; Ruth had a large and well equipped "Wendy House" and often dragooned David and myself into being her children for the day – an extra breakfast at 9.00am was fine and we coped with lunch at 10.00am – but when called for "supper" at 10.30 David rebelled and said the game was silly – whereupon Ruth exclaimed "The trouble, David, is that you have no

imagination whatsoever.”. Ruth had a great imagination and I recall us being schooled to act a charade on a summer afternoon in the garden for the benefit of visiting grown-ups. These included Grandpa Godfrey who had suffered what was probably a stroke, and who was confined to a wheelchair; earlier I recall him teaching me at Sunday School. The site for our acting was the lawn on which we played cricket and which was also later restored as a tennis court.

Indoor activities seem to have been mainly wintertime – I recall parties in the Christmas holidays when we carried slippers through the snow . Peter had a great collection of Hornby trains and at the top of the Manor there were two attic rooms linked by a landing and we created a complex train system running via a series of stations from room to room. I remember Peter teaching me that “Edinburgh” is not pronounced as spelt!

The Village Rector was always a key figure in the life of the Village and the Parish of Bluntisham cum Earith; although so close to Cambridge, the “Living” was gifted by the University of Oxford and the first Rector in my experience was Edward Peake, a native of Giggleswick, Yorkshire, who had, I believe, played cricket at some time with W.G.Grace. He was a graduate of Oriel College and a very keen ornithologist. His predecessor had been Henry Sayers, father of Dorothy Sayers, author of “The Man born to be King,” and the series of “Whodun-its” featuring Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. I remember enjoying “The Nine Tailors”, a title taken from the bells in the Parish Church. The Parish was renamed “Fenchurch St. Peter “ in the book but the characters were given names from village families. Writing the book required some considerable knowledge of both fenland drainage and bell-ringing- interestingly, although the victim in the story dies from the effects of being trapped in the belfry during a lengthy spell of bell-ringing, the bells had only been chimed by hand for many years for fear of weakness in the tower.

In a very few years Peter’s life was to be significantly changed; very