

JOHN MARLBOROUGH PRYOR OF WESTON PARK

By Harold Bonnett

John M Pryor, the very popular squire of the small village of Weston near Baldock, in Hertfordshire, died aged 72 on the 30th January. Suffering from a chest complaint, he had been admitted to the Lister Hospital in Stevenage a few days previous to his death there.

He had been the kindest of men to many deserving causes; but we of the Steam Plough Club remember him especially for our Steam Ploughs at Work display of 16th, 17th and 18th July 1971 on his land in the adjoining hamlet of Clothall. He and his farming partner Mr McArthur found the coal and carted the water and, in return, we shared the profit of around £300 between the club and Weston church. Many members will recall the two-set cultivating and ploughing done there during ideally hot and dry weather on those steep hillsides where the Chiltern Hills begin to run down to East Anglia. Our Ploughing by Steam film was given a good start there. The old estate is steeped in Steam Age history, for John's grandfather had a Cooper Digger and his father a set of single cylinder Fowler Plough engines.

The funeral took place on Friday afternoon, 3rd February, at Weston church. On my walk from Baldock station that rather windy, wild and wintry afternoon, I passed the great open fields of the Pryor estate where pools of rainwater made patches of light among the rows of young rape plants. A variety of twisting and flashing tinfoil bird scarers protected the crop from the predations of wood pigeons.

As I glanced across that hill top scene, a flock of these birds flung themselves carelessly over one field, as if rejoicing in the fact that John had laid aside his gun for ever.

At the entrance to the village I fell in with a gentleman who turned out to be Andrew Boorman, a representative for Messrs A T Oliver & Sons, agricultural engineers and salesmen of Wandon End near Luton, former steam ploughing, threshing and rolling contractors. Andrew's forebears had also cast slide valves for Goodes, the tandem compound people of Elmdon, and later supplied 'hearts' or tine points for John Patten's steam cultivating work at Little Hadham.

The bells in the church rang out a muffled peal over a group of people standing outside the porch, for although there was still half an hour to go before service time, it was standing room only inside. There were uniformed schoolboys, ruddy faced farmers, paler faced executives, village housewives and farm chaps all mixed up together. John's four gamekeepers, smartly dressed in green tweed Norfolk jackets and knickerbockers to match, added an air of yesterday's England to the scene inside. And did that motley congregation sing We plough the fields and scatter "with great strength and feeling! It was a fitting farewell to grand old English gentleman.

In the churchyard I was told by a stranger that Johnny Pryor, as a commando officer in the Special Boats Division, took part in the unsuccessful attempt to capture Field Marshal Rommel during the North African campaign of World War 2. Landing secretly from a submarine, the raiding party took prisoner Rommel's HQ staff, but the Field Marshall happened to be elsewhere at that moment. John ordered the men of his detachment to fall back to the sea and the submarine, whilst he himself covered the withdrawal from the rear. In the event the Germans reacted quickly and, opening fire, shot John in his backside and took him prisoner. It seems that whilst that John was always reticent about his own part in the show, he was quick to maintain that he was not shot in the behind whilst running away.

In memory of how we ripped up his land in 1971 I threw down on his coffin a clod of earth. A single cream rose had also been thrown down. This rose reminded me how, a couple of weeks before our steam work display John had taken Brian Hailey of Great Wymondley and for a final, look at the field. A splendid splash of pink wild roses hung from a hedgerow. "When we see those," said John in the fashion of a true countryman,

"we know that it is six weeks to harvest." And so has passed from us one who, during the formative and struggling years of the SPC was one of its greatest benefactors.

SOME NOTES ON THE JOHN PRYOR ARTICLE IN SPC MARCH 1984, No. 65.

I was very pleased to see the above article on the SPC website. My family have lived in Hertfordshire for many generations and myself in Baldock for the last 43 years. I did not join the club until half way through 1988 so I had not seen the article before.

I have written the following notes which I hope might be of interest to add to Harrold's article.

The site where the SPC demonstration took place in July 1971 looks much the same as it did then, only the small electricity pylons, which are briefly glimpsed in the club's 'Ploughing by Steam' video, have been changed.

Mention is made of the various machines previously owned by John Pryor's family. Further information can be found in one of Harrold Bonnet's books, 'Saga of the Steam Plough' pages 92/93. A letter is reproduced in the book, from a Mr Cadwell of Weston, Hertfordshire. He had been a driver of Pryors steam digging engines and later had worked with their ploughing engines. There have been two steam diggers on the estate according to Mr Cadwell. The first arrived in 1890 and the second digger came in about 1912. The second was collected from Hitchin railway station. For those interested in finding out more about steam digging engines there is a book, probably the only book exclusively about digging engines, called 'Digging by Steam' by Colin Tyler.

Does the club have any records which would identify the Fowler single cylinder ploughing engines which were owned by Pryors.

John Pryor wrote a short series of articles called 'Down on the farm' in the 'Hertfordshire Countryside' magazine one of which mentions their Gyrotiller. I believe this series ran over the period November 1980 to July 1981 and think the article mentioning the Gyrotiller was written in 1981, but I failed to record the exact date.

He wrote, that in partnership with Mr. Dan Sheppard, they once ran a contracting business using a Fowler Gyrotiller. The intension was to run the business within a radius of twenty miles of Weston. The gyrotiller was based at Town Farm, Weston, Hertfordshire. He states that he borrowed half of the money (£3000) as a deposit to buy the gyrotiller. This was from Dan and Hilda Sheppard. Hilda was his aunt. Apparently Fowlers sent one of their own men down to be their foreman; his name was George Osbourne an ex-navy man. I suspect this was just until the partners had become familiar with the operation of the machine. According to the Fowler records reproduced in Norman Southgate's book 'The Fowler Gyrotiller' this machine was number 20034 delivered on the 15th September 1933 together with a 3 man living van fitted with fuel tanks. The van was numbered 15459 and delivered on the 11th September 1933. I have been told the gyrotiller was delivered to the original Stevenage station, now long since demolished.

There is a photograph of this gyrotiller on the Ashwell Museum website.

Apart from normal agricultural work, their gyrotiller was also used to clear about 1 square mile of bushes at the site of the 'secret' airfield at Tempsford, Bedfordshire during World War 2. A similar job was also carried out by this machine at Great Gransden, in what was at that time, Huntingdonshire. Many of these large gyrotillers were used for land reclamation during this period.

The Pryor's gyrotiller was the only one, as far as I know, to have been based in Hertfordshire.

The only other machine that I have found to have been based near Hertfordshire was one owned by Drage and Kent of Chrishall, Essex about 6 miles from Royston, Hertfordshire. This was machine number 20218 delivered on the 17th August 1934.

Mr. Andrew Boorman is mentioned in the SPC article. His company was based at Cromer, Hertfordshire. Over the years they had run a foundry and several agricultural franchises including International Harvester, Massey Harris and Ransomes. They were also agents for John Deere, Oliver and Caterpillar.

Andrew Boorman wrote about their business in the July and August 2009 'Old Tractor' magazine.

I used to correspond with a former member of Boorman's staff about local past agricultural matters. He was the late Mr Wallace (Billy) Green formerly of Walkern, Hertfordshire. At that time he was the last surviving member of Boorman's team. He told me Boorman's had also made parts for the Pryor's gyrotiller and had cast firebars for Fowler ploughing engines. I have found cast road drain grills in parts of rural Hertfordshire bearing Boorman's name.

Messrs A. T. Oliver are still trading as agricultural engineers at the same site in Wandon End, Hertfordshire as well as several other places over the country.

According to their website they were founded as a family business in 1823.

My maternal grandfather Bertie Parker of Walkern, Hertfordshire had worked for Oliver's and later with T.T. Boughton working a threshing machine. The threshing machine had been powered by an Allchin engine and later on with an Allis Chalmers Model 'U' tractor. The Allchin new in 1908 was a three shaft, 7nhp, compound colonial type engine. The engine number was 1427 and its registration number NK 3184. His foreman was 'Happy' Jack Izzard of Aston, Hertfordshire who had driven ploughing engines for Oliver's. He drove 'TOGO' a Fowler class B4 ploughing engine number 10254, reg. no. NK962. This engine was paired with 'NELSON', engine number 10255, reg. no. NK963 which was driven by Ernie Hagger.

Apparently one of these ploughing engines was exhibited at the Oxford Royal Show in June 1908 on stand 219.

Both engines were new to Oliver's. I have been told that they were broken up in 1935/36 in a scrap yard near Codicote, Hertfordshire. It is believed that 'Togo' was only partially dismantled and the boiler, firebox and wheels were sold to a nursery in nearby Rabley Heath, Hertfordshire where it was used for sterilising soil.

A photograph of both of these engines, on the road with implements, is shown in the SPC's publication 'Steam Plough Times Extra' on the centre pages. It was supplied by the late club member Bill Colebrook.

As an aside I helped Bill on two occasions to do some riveting on his 1917 Fowler engine number 13880 which he was restoring in the open at Six Tunnels Farm, Gaddesden Row, nr. Hemel Hempstead. This was in 1986 or 87 I think. The engine was running again in time for the Steam Owners and Drivers Club rally at Punch Bowl Meadows, Redbourn, Hertfordshire on the 7/8th July 1990.

In early 1943 Oliver's had sold their threshing business interests in this area to T. T. Boughton, Bell Lane, Amersham, Buckinghamshire.

John Boughton's book 'Steam in the Veins' mentions that in taking over other contractors around this time it allowed them to work over an area of a thousand square miles from their base stretching to beyond Baldock.

Brian Albon, Baldock, Herts.

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