

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 be 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

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of Boormans team. He told me Boormans 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 Boormans 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 Olivers. 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 Olivers. 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 Olivers 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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