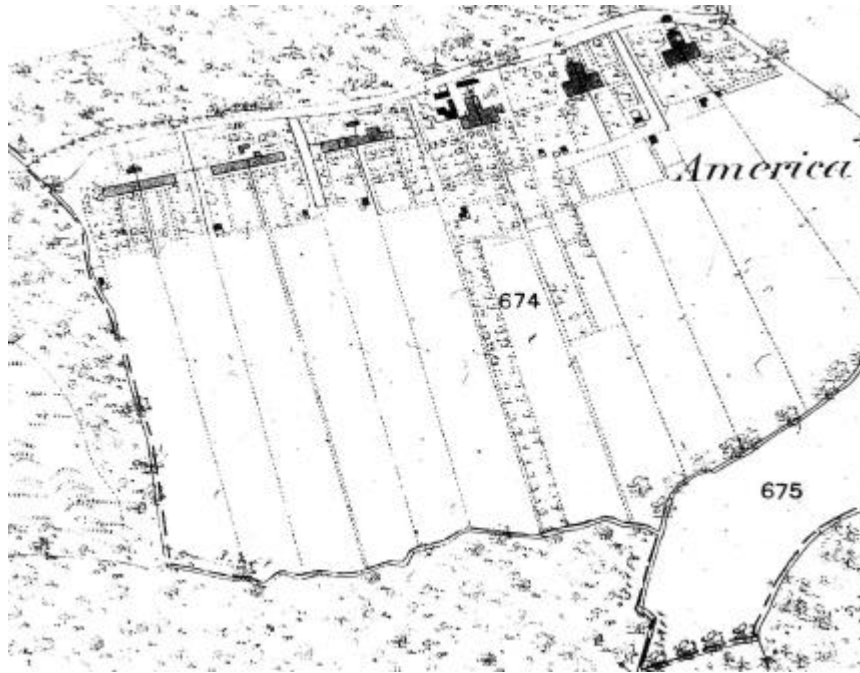


Rediscovering America Local History series No 2

America Lane: in the Footsteps of William Allen



Compiled and edited by Debby Matthews
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**AMERICA LANE: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
WILLIAM ALLEN**

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Chapter One—Mr William Allen’s dream	5
Chapter Two—Living in the cottages	15
Chapter Three—The end of an era	29
Bibliography	31

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Note: All effort has been made to ensure accuracy: however some errors may inevitably occur

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is the second in a series of local histories covering the area now known as Bentswood in Haywards Heath. The first covered Barn Cottage Lane, the development of Bentswood housing itself, Hanbury Stadium and the Pub. The third will tell the story of New England Road. This booklet covers the earliest history for this area when William Allen built his "Colony" of cottages for the poor of Lindfield to develop self-sufficiency on what is now America Lane

The booklet has developed from taped interviews carried out during 1999 with people who had known and lived in the cottages. The transcripts, together with photos and maps, helped to create a set of 10 displays which can be borrowed by schools or groups telling the story of the area. This in turn has prompted a group of local residents to meet together during 2000/2001 to gather more of their memories and stories together which has resulted in these booklets

REDISCOVERING AMERICA local history project series

1. *Barn Cottage: cows, cottages and football heroes*
2. *America Lane: in the footsteps of William Allen*
3. *The story of New England Road: 125 years of living and working*

When reading their stories it is important to remember that history told in this way is as much about impressions and feelings as it is about facts. If you remember things differently that is just as valid. All thanks go to all the participants for sharing their lives with everyone. All quotations from residents are shown in italics

CHAPTER ONE—WILLIAM ALLEN'S DREAM

"I have been thinking lately that we may make inroad upon the present demoralising system of paying agricultural labourers out of the poor rates by building cottages for them and giving them some land" William Allen diary entry 31 Dec 1823

In one sentence we find the nub of the idea behind the creation of the cottage "colony" created in the 1820s on the land of Gravely Farm in the parish of Lindfield. In this booklet there will be descriptions of the cottages and what it was like to live in them. However first it is useful to look at some of the thinking behind William Allen's statement and how his ideas fitted in with those around at the time

William Allen's life

William Allen (1770 –1843) was a profound thinker and doer. A Quaker he was closely involved with the reformers of the time such as Humphrey Davy, chemist and inventor of the miner's safety lamp, Elizabeth Fry prison visitor and reformer, Joseph Lancaster schools reformer and William Wilberforce – who brought about the end of the shameful British slave trade with the Americas. Possibly his most important act from the point of view of impact on history was to ensure that the Princess Victoria was born in England and therefore could inherit the British throne on the death of her uncle William IV in 1837. He provided the funds for her father the Duke of Kent to bring his wife, the sister of Prince Leopold of Belgium to Kensington Palace for her to be

born. The Prince Regent would not help his brother out!

He also communicated closely with non-Quaker social reformers such as Robert Owen with whom he fell out over the lack of religious instruction at his community at New Lanark. He was interested in the ideas of William Cobbett and the Rev Arthur Smith concerned with how to help the poor help themselves through agricultural self-sufficiency. Poverty was an increasing problem all over Britain at the turn of the 18th and 19th century. The powers that be were concerned that growing numbers of people wandering between parishes could cause social unrest - or even create a revolution like they had recently had over the Channel in France

The social situation in Sussex at the time

The war against Napoleon had finished for good in 1815 but it and the war with America 1812 -14 had had an impact on trade and the price of food which was high. The end of the war had caused a problem for returning soldiers looking for work on the land. Surplus labour meant that low wages could be paid. Around this time also bad seasonal weather had led to poor harvests, the year of 1816 was said to be “the year without a summer” The price of wheat for bread was kept high through the Corn Laws passed by Parliament so that land owners would not suffer from cheap imports

Acts of Parliament had been used by landowners to enclose areas of land for their own use to ensure that they could benefit from the high price of corn or to create large estates and gardens like at Petworth. The traditional rights poorer villagers had to that land, such as grazing

or wood collecting, were taken away so some chose to move away to try and improve themselves. In large parts of Britain people were moving off the land to find work in the manufacturing towns. In Sussex this was not possible as the earlier Wealden iron industry was actually in decline leading to less work. In Sussex agricultural labouring remained the main source of work for most people although as studies made at the time showed the wages did not necessarily keep a family

Improving agricultural practices

Rising populations and the state of agriculture meant that Britain went from a corn exporter to a corn importer during this time. More marginal land was therefore taken over for growing and some farms had exhausted their soils through over cropping. Some new agricultural machines were disliked and during 1831 were broken up in the night by groups calling themselves Captain Swing. This action caused many to be transported to Australia as a punishment

Some reformers like Arthur Young, William Cobbett and William Allen pointed out the need to change to more improving methods using crop rotations, soil improvers, better crops and techniques. William Allen even carried out experiments at Plough Court in using different manures and crop rotations. He describes these in detail in his pamphlet *Colonies at Home* which he produced to set out his ideas on self sufficiency from the land. “*You may depend upon it that the Labourer who is the most diligent at collecting and applying manure will have the largest crops*”

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

However to find an alternative to the expensive wheat other staples were tried. Rice had been imported from the Carolinas since 1796 to supplement people's diet. This was not greatly liked. William Cobbett however brought over Sweet Corn or maize from America which he called "Cobbett's Corn". In his book *Cottage Economy* (1821) his wife set out recipes for Polenta for people to try, based on that which the American Indians had shown them

Potatoes

A great deal of debate was had around whether potatoes, seen as a food mainly for animals, were best eaten boiled or roasted or ground into flour and made into bread. William Cobbett, in contrast to Arthur Young and William Allen, was unimpressed with potatoes as compared to the expensive wheat as a staple food for the poor "*It is a fact clearly established that after the water, the stringy substance and the earth are taken from the potato there remains one tenth of the rough raw weight of nutritious matter, or matter which is deemed equally nutritious with bread*" William Allen described how to make flour from potatoes "*by grating them in water, the flour may then be separated and dried*"

How were the poor helped

Farmers and landowners paid poor rates to keep the poor of the parish - the amount assessed according to the value of their property. There were two Overseers of the Poor who kept the Account Books, and the Vestry Minutes, in the Parish Chest. As the Overseers themselves were rate payers they were not extravagant in their payments to paupers and there was very much a feeling that a person should "deserve" the charity

In 1801 according to the Overseers accounts 30% of Lindfield people received some sort of relief. Thomas Philbeam received 6 gallons flour a month, clothes, sheets, shoes and rent. Any wages his 10 children earned was paid straight back to the Parish. In this way receiving support became a way of life

The Workhouse

During these years of increasingly rural distress led to the increasing cost to rate payers for supporting the poor. Some areas set up workhouses or "Houses of Industry" to keep the poor under one roof and provide work and relief more cheaply. These became much more of a way of life after the 1834 Poor Law reforms when parishes were grouped together under Unions to manage their affairs. Lindfield came under the Cuckfield Union and its workhouse was the local general hospital until the opening of the Princess Royal Hospital in Haywards Heath

Emigration

A scheme was set up by the 3rd Earl of Egremont and between 1832 and 1837 1,800 people were funded under the *Petworth Emigration Scheme* to emigrate from Sussex, Surrey and the Isle of Wight to Canada. One family in fact came from Horsted Keynes and they would sail from Rye. Other people looked to their local parish to help fund them to emigrate - as in 25 March 1820 when the Lindfield Vestry minutes showed

It was agreed by the majority of the inhabitants then present to assist Wm Isted of Lindfield, Labourer, with a sum of money not exceeding sixty pounds for and towards paying his frait (freight) passage or expenses of conveying his family consisting of himself, wife and six children to

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

America. By 1824 Lindfield was paying out £100 a year on poor relief, this large sum being one of the reasons that William Allen chose Lindfield for his experiment

In 1821 when William Allen first visited Sussex he noted that Lindfield was *“the poorest, most neglected village he had ever seen”*. He however did not agree with encouraging your best able and fittest people to emigrate and entitled his pamphlet *Colonies at Home*, stating *“Instead of encouraging emigration at an enormous expenses per head let that money be applied in the establishment of Colonies at Home and the increase in our national strength”*. His ideas were to build the new world spirit in the old world

What did “America” mean to people at that time?

William Allen called the area the Colony and the earliest map shows it as the *“rural colony on Gravelye estate”* in 1834. However by 1851 the census enumerator Samuel Chilcott was listing people living in the “American Colony” and maps had the 12 cottages to the western edge of the estate shown as “America” in the 1870s. William Allen himself died in 1843 and there is no doubt that his intention of using the term colony was to mirror the experiences of colonisers of the New World.

There was much travel between Britain and America, especially some of the more free thinkers who found themselves in trouble in Britain for their views. Robert Owen set up a community based on egalitarian principles in Indiana called New Harmony. Ironically this fell apart fairly quickly due to an inability of the people to get on with each other. More successfully the Shakers set up communities in New England

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

In particular as a Quaker William Allen would have been aware of the successful community set up by Quakers from Sussex - named by them Pennsylvania after William Penn. Scamps Farm where Samuel Gurney lived was renamed Penn Farm during William Allen's time and the last entry in his diary was that he went "*in a chaise to Penn's*" with JJ Gurney who walked alongside. JJ Gurney had written a pamphlet on his travels in America. Penn Crescent in current Bentswood follows this example

It was reported by his adopted daughter Christine Majolieue in her diary that visitors came from America to Gravely House including Red Indians and freed slaves (after abolition of slavery on 1 Aug 1834) and others from West Africa. A black man did visit the school in Lindfield and William Allen was reported to have a servant called Black Tom.

The fight for the abolition of slavery for William Allen was central to his life and work from the passing of the first bill in 1807 which outlawed slave ships. He met black ship's captain Paul Cuffee who had made good with his life and who encouraged support and seeds to be sent by William Allen to Sierra Leone. Many of William Allen's friends and colleagues with the *British and Foreign Schools Society* visited America and Africa. William Allen had avoided any trade in his works at Plough Court that involved slavery and on its abolition was relieved to be able to partake of sugar, having refused on principle for so many years

American and French revolutions, birth of democracy, the writings of William Paine created in some minds the idea of America as the land of liberty. An example of this in

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

Sussex was the declaration of independence in Hastings of the people who had created a living by squatting on the old rope walks, now the area around Robertson Street. An attempt to evict them in 1827 led to their raising the American flag and declaring independence for their *American Ground*. Needless to say the magistrates won and threw them off the land. However the use of the Stars and Stripes shows the symbolism of freedom attached to those American colonials who had thrown off their shackles from the Old World

On 12 July 1841 the Brighton railroad was opened to Haywards Heath and 5 days later William Allen came down on the new steam train “ *to Haywards Heath station today. Rode from thence to Gravelly which is looking very beautiful, my spirits quite cheered*” he wrote

After William Allen died in 1843 the land passed to the family of Mrs Wickam-Martin and it stayed in the family until the 1930s. She recounts “*his name was the Reverend Thomas Scutt. For a short time he was the Vicar of Lindfield and his daughter married a Johnson, Croxton Johnson and there’s a Croxton Lane, and his daughter married Andrew Lawrie, and they put “Laurie” in some of the books, but its not it’s “Lawrie”. It was inherited by my father who was Percy Shute Lawrie. So was it passed through two daughters and then my father and my mother and then me.*”

She had heard one story told about William Allen that he was coming down from London to Haywards Heath station to visit his colony and in his carriage there was a large individual, and they got into conversation and this man turned out to be an American and he was telling William

Allen about the hardships of the farmers in America at the time. And William Allen said *“You had better come and see my colony. I’ve set up a little colony of my own which is virtually like a little America. The new America was called the land of promise for some generations in its little way, as you say, as your big continent is to thousands and thousands from the old world and so this little colony is as was America in its small way to the people in the old world.”*

The Lindfield scheme of William Allen

William Allen was very clear about how he expected people living in the cottages to behave and set out rules for them to agree to. These were:

1. To observe strictly moral conduct
2. To receive nothing in alms or charity [effectively to agree not to claim poor relief]
3. To cultivate the land in the manner prescribed to him, or not to vary it without leave. To underlet no part of it, nor to damage any or remove any shrubs and to keep the land properly manured [This meant to cultivate potatoes which were little known at the time, as well as his other practical horticultural methods developed over the years of experimentation in London]
4. To send all his children to the schools so long as no catechism is taught in them, and all inference with the peculiar religious opinions of their parents is avoided: the religious instruction to be confined to the Holy Scriptures, without note or comment [This reference probably referred to the catholic religion of the Irish, against whose extremes of poverty and misery the plan set out in *Colonies at Home* was also directed]
- 5 To pay the rent at the time and in the manner to be agreed upon

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

6. Not to suffer any spirituous liquors to be sold on the premises [The people who built the pub in Bentswood on the site of the cottages and called it *The Pilgrim*, using a picture of a Pilgrim Father may have been unaware of William Allen's rule 6!]

John Smith MP agreed to purchase Gravely Farm for the experimental settlement and handed it to William Allen to manage. There has always been some debate over whether he, or William Allen, owned the land originally. The Poll Book for 1837 however showed all those landowners eligible to vote in the Cuckfield polling district including

Benjamin Allen (William's brother) with Land as ocp.,
Beadles & pt of Gravely Farm;

William Allen esq. of Stoke Newington with Copyhold
House and land, Beadles farm;

Samuel Gurney esq. of Lombard St, London with
Copyhold land, Scamps farm;

John Smith esq. Dale Park, Nr Chichester (the MP for
Buckingham) with freehold land and houses, Gravely
Farm

The *Sussex Association for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes*, formerly called the *Cottage Society*, whose membership included the Duke of Suffolk, Duke of Norfolk, Earl of Chichester [the Lord of the Manor of Lindfield], Earl of Sheffield, and Earl of Surrey undertook to monitor the scheme. Their first quarterly report in 1831 declared the experiment a success. The accounts over a year showed a surplus of £5 4s for the occupants

CHAPTER TWO – LIVING IN THE COTTAGES

The whole estate covered 100 acres in all and as well as the 18 colony cottages with one and a quarter acres each a further 7 cottages were built with 6 acres and Gravely House for William Allen to live in. This white house on the hill was different to the Gravely farmhouse which was situated near where William Allen Lane is now. The farmer continued to farm on 50 acres up until at least 1891. The other farm in the colony was Barn Cottage Farm about which more is written in the first book of this series

The first set of cottages on Gravely Lane

With a rent of 3s a week (agricultural wages were around 9s a week by comparison) these cottages were built first and occupied by 1827. They were brick built with slate roofs and “chambers above stairs”. The first recipients of parish relief listed as living in Gravely Cottages in 1831 were as follows: William Elliott, Isaac Chatfield, John Cook, Thomas Nickols, Henry Simmonds and old Richard Gaston and his daughter Elizabeth

The heads of household for the first 50 years were listed in the censuses as follows. All the following information has been taken from the work of Wyn Ford and not rechecked. The 1891 census was consulted and shortly information from the 1901 one will be available

The occupants of No 1—6 Gravely Lane

1 Gravely Lane 1841- 1871 John Gaston followed by 1881 by William Constable who was still in the house in 1891 aged 42 with his wife Elizabeth and 4 daughters Esther (13), Annie (11), Ellen (9) and Alice (5)

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

2 Gravely Lane 1841– 1861 Edward Botting followed by Ann Botting, from 1871—1891 when she lived there alone

3 Gravely Lane Charles Comber from 1841—1861, then Elizabeth Comber, his widow was there with sons Trayton and George in 1871 and Trayton listed as head of family in 1881—1891 with his elderly mother living with them and by 1891 his older sister Ellen, wife Elizabeth and son John

4 Gravely Lane 1841 David Budgen, 1851 Matthias Constable, 1861 Benjamin Brooker and brother William Brooker who's widow Harriett had married Henry Davey by 1879. They lived there until 1891 with son Henry (21) stepson George Brooker (11) and son Edward Davey (6)

Mr and Mrs White were the last people to live in No 4 in the late 1940s/50s and found them very run down by then: *"My Mother in Law found a place for us. It was one of those cottages that was condemned in 1936. It was one of William Allen's cottages and there had been a big, family lived in there - father, mother and eight children all of them in the two little bedrooms upstairs and downstairs, a little tiny little parlour. If we took the papers off the wall, there were six layers of paper on top of each other, it was to hold the bricks together, it was all alive with bugs of every kind you could think of*

I was on my hands and knees for three solid weekends with hammer and chisel to get off the lino. Six or seven layers, it was filthy between each layer. For five weeks, I spent every weekend there, cleaning it up. And then I scrubbed the floors, all the floors. And when I got to the

floor in the front room, where the lino was, it was just bricks laid on mud. Mr Hilton suggested I put roofing felt in layers on top of each other and then you could put a carpet on. Just to save the worms and the crickets and everything coming through."

She remembers that it was two up and two down and there were six cottages like that. *"I had a very nice neighbour next to me, Mr Botting and Mrs Botting."* [They had to move out around the same time as the Whites who moved in 1954 to Boston Road] *"I had a freshwater tap and a decent excellent old stone sink, so I could do all my washing in there. The luxury was the gas, because I could use my gas boiler. I could wash my washing properly, you see. I had two little gas lights, one in the kitchen and one in the front room.*

It was in Gravelly Lane where that lovely bungalow is now, by William Allen Lane - which was eventually built straight through our garden. You could grow your own vegetables and everything. It was absolutely beautiful. My husband and I worked like slaves because the place was so neglected. We had no toilet, by the way. None whatsoever. There were a couple of boards and a hole down at the bottom of the garden. We had a little elsan like they did in caravans, years ago. And my husband had to empty that twice a week and dig it in the garden. He had nowhere else to put it.

And - while my husband was at work - I collected all the bits and pieces of crockery, we had lots of rockeries and stones and bric-a-brac, and built a lovely floor, and my husband put a lovely roof over it and built a shed over there

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

Oh yes we had our chickens and our ducks. They were beautiful animals one was like a swan it was so gorgeous and graceful. Mind you we fattened up a cockerel every Christmas. It was like we lived out in the country, you see” They paid rent of 7/6 a week to 3 landlords at the time, Mr Hardin and Mr Hutchings were 2 of them. “I remember once a sweet little old lady came to me and said “Would you mind if I took a photograph of your cottage?” I said “No, please do” and she took a lovely photo. I haven’t got the photo though”

The inhabitants of the last 2 cottages in Gravely Lane were:

5 Gravely Lane William Gaston from 1841—1851. One of the original inhabitants had been old Mr Richard Gaston and daughter Elizabeth. Followed by Lucy Gaston in 1861, Henry Plummer in 1871, Ann Plummer and Walter Brooker in 1881. In 1891 Ann Plummer was head of household with three sons age 17, 14 and 6 and daughter Ada (2). They had a kitchen maid Kate Miller staying with them

6 Gravely Lane had Edward Cook one of the original inhabitants who had originally lived on Gravely Farm and remembered meeting William Allen regularly He brought up 7 or 8 children there. He lived there from 1841—1861, by 1851 only one child was still living there. From 1871—1881 Mary Cook lived there. In 1891 Mary Cook lived in No 9 The Colony and Lucy Cook at No 7 further down the Lane

In her book *Lindfield Past and Present* Helena Hall wrote many details about the house that Mrs White lived in on Gravely Lane. “ *From her actually I learned quite a lot.*

She told me that William Allen built Gravely House, and built a little tower – a bell tower. And he rang that bell every Sunday morning for about half an hour. And all the people gathered here round about America Lane. While Mr William Allen was preaching God's word, and the old dears from the cottages were boiling up teas galore and offering them around because a lot of these people came from far, far away you see. To listen to him."

The second set of six colony cottages

To get to the next set of cottages you needed to follow the lane down past Gravely House. There was a gate at each end of the lane originally as it was a private road and many people still remember the one that was at the New England Road end until the late 1930s when America Lane started to be developed

These next set of 3 double cottages looked very different from the first set on Gravely Lane. These were built of brick and slate but were only one story high and had stucco on the walls. Towards the road side were shared pig sheds and outbuildings so that the houses formed a T shape. The rent for these was 2/6 a week

According to the census returns the following heads of family lived in these cottages. The later census returns started the numbering from what is now America Lane: 7 Gravely Lane, known as 7 American Colony in 1851 and 1 The Colony in 1891 . Here lived Benjamin Brooker 1841– 1851, he , or his son, moved to 4 Gravely Lane by 1861 when Edward Upton had moved into the cottage. 1871—1891 has George Trill living there—aged 51 in 1891—with his wife and 2 daughters

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

8 Gravely Lane, known as 8 American Colony in 1851 and 2 The Colony in 1891 has James Mitchell living in the cottage 1841 until 1891 when he was aged 74 with his wife and 2 daughters. Between 1861—1881 George Upton's family is also listed

9 Gravely Lane, known as 9 American Colony in 1851 and 3 The Colony in 1891 shows James Maynard in the cottage 1841—1871 with Jesse Durrant from 1881—1891 who came from Waldron to marry Ellen a local girl. They lived there in 1891 with a daughter age 2 and son aged 4 mths, plus a 12 year old servant and another 19 year old man

10 Gravely Lane, known as 10 American Colony in 1851 and 4 The Colony in 1891. John Marchant lived there from 1841 until 1891 when he was 73, there with his wife Sarah (61) and daughter Harriett (31)

11 Gravely Lane, known as 11 American Colony in 1851 and 5 The Colony in 1891. The Maynard family lived there right through 1841—1891 with John there until 1861 when Charlotte was listed as head of house hold, sisters Harriett and Lucy lived there as joint heads 1871—1891

12 Gravely Lane, known as 12 American Colony in 1851 and 6 The Colony in 1891 has Marchant Pierce living there from 1841— 1871. From 1871 Charlotte his widow lived there until aged 69 in 1891 with her grandson Charles aged 14. (See also 18 Gravely Lane for members of the Pierce family)

Mrs Wickham Martin remembers the people who lived in

the cottages as she often visited with her mother Mrs Lawrie in the 1920s/30s. *“All of the people in the cottages worked in agriculture of some sort or another. One of them was a retired downland shepherd. He’d been a shepherd on the Downs all his life, Mr Medhurst. A dear old dear called Mrs Kent and her niece who lived next door, who was Miss Marchant, and Miss Marchant she was always called Tiddles. Tiddles I mean to me seemed about 100, from the first time I ever saw her.*

The third set of cottages

These were the thatched roofed and earth built ones, as had been described by William Allen as suitable to be built in his pamphlet *Colonies at Home*. *“The walls may be made of rammed earth or Pise as practiced on the Continent and in some part of England or of mud and straw about a foot thick as in many parts of Ireland, but in this case the external surface must be covered with cement”*

Rent was charged at 2s a week. The end of the lane came to a five bar gate which led eventually on to New England Road which began to be developed after around 1870. The heads of household here were:

13 Gravely Lane, known as 13 American Colony in 1851 and 7 The Colony in 1891. The Cook family lived here through from 1841—1891 with John in 1841, Elizabeth 1851, James 1861-71, Lucy 1881—91 when she was 39 living with daughter Lillian (13) and son Samuel (11), 2 nieces aged 11 and 13 and her brother aged 33

14 Gravely Lane, known as 14 American Colony in 1851 and 8 The Colony in 1891 had Thomas Fowler in 1841,

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

John Muzzell in 1851, George Upton then from 1871 until 1891 when he was aged 67

15 Gravely Lane, known as 15 American Colony in 1851 and 9 The Colony in 1891. A Henry Cook is listed right through from 1841 until 1891 when he was aged 66 with his wife Mary also aged 66. There could have been two generations here

16 Gravely Lane, known as 16 American Colony in 1851 and 10 The Colony in 1891 had James Harland in 1841, Elizabeth Harland 1851—1871. Leonard Mitchell 1881—1891 when he was 46, with his wife Mary, son Leonard (19), 3 daughters aged 11, 9, 11 mths

17 Gravely Lane, known as 17 American Colony in 1851 and 11 The Colony in 1891. In 1841 William Maynard was head of household (a John Maynard lived at No 11 and James at No 9 Gravely Lane at the same time). 1851 Frederick Malthouse was listed and had lived there from 1848. John Muzzell moved there from No 14 by 1861 and lived there until 1891 when he was 54

18 Gravely Lane, known as 18 American Colony in 1851 and 12 The Colony in 1891. Henry Cox was listed in 1841 and Esther Cox from 1851—71. From 1881 Charles Pierce and his family lived there having moved from Woodside Cottages in 1879. Charles Pierce and his family lived in the cottage until they were moved out for them to be sold and later demolished, around 1938

Mrs Wickham-Martin remembers *“They had wonderful gardens, practically self-supporting and they grew lots of fruit and they grew “meddlers” amongst other things. It*

used to have to go rotten before you ate it. It looked like a little pear, only it had to go dark brown and was nearly rotten before you ate it. They also grew quinces. I always remember going to see old Mrs Kent when I was a very small child and old Mrs Kent saying "the Lord has blessed me with many apples" and I said to my mother "I should have thought the Lord had cursed her with many apples" there were so many of them. They used to be absolutely weighty. Of course, they used to make pies of them and the pigs had the rest. Most of them had a pig in the sty

They sold some of their produce. Used it themselves and sold it. And a lot of them grew little bits of wheat and oats and things like that to feed their animals and to use the straw themselves. Some took in laundry and had it drying on the bushes around the gardens. It was all done by hand. If the thatched roof needed re-doing a thatcher was brought in to do that, with special thatching straw. They look all very neatly thatched. My father had, of course, to arrange that"

Mrs Wickham-Martin's father was the landlord and the rent was collected by a woman from Scott Pitcher who had an office by the station in Boltro Road "And the rents were still very low. As far as I remember the thatched cottages were only about 3/6d per week. If people were on hard times they were excused. They took an awful lot of keeping up. They weren't built to last. They were the sort of pre-fab of those days really. They were all wattle and daub"

Living in the cottages

Two sisters Audrey and Gladys (nee Kember) remember well living in the cottages during the 1920s and 30s and

Re-discovering America Local History Series No 2

were there up until they were pulled down after the war. Starting with Audrey: *"Well I was born down in the cottage in 1920, no 16 Gravely Lane. It wasn't called America Lane then. There were three pairs of these with thatched roofs and then a second set of three with tiled roofs. They were quite big and they had three bedrooms, a big large kitchen and one big large living room. One bed room had proper fire place in it so if anyone wanted to have it like a little sitting room, and just two bed rooms, they could - which eventually is what my mum had. So we had one to use as a little sitting room with a fire in it*

The pairs were all alike except they were laid out in opposite ways to each other. There was a big through room as a big bedroom with a little window on the back side [facing America Lane]. There was a smaller bedroom with a little passage joining the rooms and then the one that had a chimney, with a fireplace. Going down the lane, you only saw the backs of the cottages with hardly any windows. The front was at the other side because it faced the beautiful sunshine. The gardens went right down to the cemetery, in Western Road

All of the left hand side of Allen Road right from the top where it joins America Lane to the cemetery, it was all our garden. The road was called that because of William Allen of course. My mother used to say 'when you see a funeral, don't play there until it's over', and she used to say as soon as the funeral was passed and gone 'you can go back down and play again'. So we used to play and there was a lovely little brook down there. My mother could remember them building the cemetery. I think she might have known the first one to be buried in the cemetery

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You paid rent, as far as I can only remember. The rent lady came around from Scott Pitcher once a month to collect the rent. She used to come across the gardens, she didn't come up the lane, she used to come to the front door [which was around the back] across the gardens

I knew somebody called Blackman they lived further down, they were in one of the ones which had got tiled roofs. They were more like little bungalows and they had water laid on in their garden. They had a funny tap which you had to pull out and twist. It was the one where the well is and people who hadn't got their water laid on used to go to the well but they also used to come to our well, just inside our back gate

America Lane was a sandy lane with a bank opposite. We used to climb up the bank and slide down. There was a well for the people who lived further down. But we had a well in our own garden. We all had our separate gates. My aunt, my mother's cousin name, of Cook, lived in one further down the lane, next door but one down the lane

We had chickens and down the bottom there was a field, We had goats and a little white kid. Mr. Pierce (No 18) had ducks and he might have had geese and I know he had ducks. I used to play with his daughter

The farmer [from Barn Cottage farm] came around twice a day, because he used to milk his cows in the morning and evening you see and then he used to come around to all of us with a milk churn with all the sizes hooked on the side. I think he must have got something outside in the lane like a cart and a horse. But he used to come to the door and then he would come again in the afternoon. We

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had fresh milk always. We didn't have to worry we had a wonderful walk in pantry with a proper tiled shelf so that kept it cool

My father had a great big crock, really big one glazed inside which he used to fill up with drinking water and for cooking only. Then we had things to catch the rain water for washing and anything else because it was such an odious job getting the water from the well. It was really deep before you reach the water and it was deep after you reached the water too. Oh, then you had to wind it up, you just kept winding it till you could see the bucket. So it was better to use rain water for washing to preserve the good water you see

For bathing the thing we used to do when I was a little kid was to use a big round bath, actually I think it was to put cream in - so as to let the cream rise to the top and to skim it to make it skimmed milk. But my aunt Polly she had got more than enough, and she had more modern type of zinc bath so she let us have it and it was just right for my sister and I to have bath in you see. It was a round one but you could also get a zinc bath which you couldn't lie down in but they were long enough to sit comfortably.

Then of course you had to heat all the water. We did have ranges in the living room, an oven and a big top you could always put kettles and things on top and it was always running. We had what we used to call a copper it was there they used to boil the water in the corner of the kitchen. My father knocked that all out and he dug a trench all the way down from the gate at the bottom of the New England Road so we could have water laid on. He dug all the way down, and then down to our back door

and then he had to lay the pipe and everything and then they turned on the water so we had water so that made it nice because then the other people could cash in on that and just extend the pipe and add into it.

Because we got water and eventually he managed to get gas too (that was only just before we moved out actually) then we had a gas boiler and he got a bath. He got the outlet to go through the wall outside to collect the water for the garden. So we were able to have a proper bath. He made it where the bread oven and the copper for boiling the cloth in had been

The family in our cottage before us had a very large family and we had pebble dash all over the wall. We used to spend time picking it off but obviously we didn't do all of it as there were patches already

Inside it was so nice. Mum used to wall paper it to make it all really lovely. I was born there, my sister was born there and it was home. Both sitting rooms had mantle pieces, the one over the range in the living room was a higher mantle piece, the one in the sitting room was slightly lower and it was lovely. Sometimes I used to dream I was buying that cottage and doing it all up. I hated to see them fall down. But I don't dream about any more so I must have got over it!

They never ought to have been brought down, they were history. In those days it was only after the war and people didn't have this idea of keeping, preserving things. But they really should have been preserved them, in hindsight of course. But still it did allow much more housing for people who desperately needed it after the war. But it is a shame they couldn't have kept one or two"

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Gladys who is a little older than Audrey also remembers the cottages well: *"Half way along the passage there was a trunk of a tree embedded into the walls as a support. It had its bark removed and was coloured to match the walls. My sister and I used to take running jumps at it and swing on it on our way to bed*

The well was 80 foot deep and usually there was 40ft of water in there but in the terrible drought of 1921 it went down to 20 ft. So that meant great long haul for the bucket. Sometimes the bucket slipped off the rope and then my dad would lie on his chest and dangle grab hooks until he retrieved it. My sister and I could put our heads into the sitting room fire place, when there was no fire in it, and look straight up the chimney and see the stars and sometimes the moon.

For lighting we had double burner table lamps with a tall glass chimney and we used to sit around the table and sew or read. All the lamps had to be tended properly and mum worked really hard. We had to have candle sticks in the bedroom and we learned at a very young age to be very careful carrying them so as to avoid setting our hair alight. Bearing in mind that we also had a thatched roof which could be tinder dry in the summer

The lavatory was an earth closet with a removable bucket and a big wooden trough in it with ashes and a small shovel to cover things with. My dad disposed of it around the garden. My mum kept everything disinfected. We used to have to walk a long way to the lav. and in winter it entailed hurricane lamps, umbrellas and strong boots. Once my mother came hurtling back because our neighbour's ferrets had got loose and were chasing around in there

CHAPTER THREE – THE END OF AN ERA

In order to pay death duties after the death of her husband Mrs Lawrie found herself needing to sell the whole estate. The sale document shows not only the America cottages but other fields, houses and cottages which formed part of the estate attached to the original Gravely Farm. As Mrs Wickham Martin remembers *“My mother was by herself then and couldn't be doing with it. I was very sad to have it sold and I implored them not to sell it, but my mother said “we just can't afford it, we've got to do it to pay the death duties”. That was the reason for that. I never saw them pulled down or anything like that*

When the cottages were sold they were bought by Mr WC Hilton the local builder who built the houses in Allen Road, running down to the stream. Gladys moved into the first house built, No1 Allen Road, where she could overlook the cottages' sad demise. The side wall of her house has some of the bricks from the brick floor in the cottage embedded in it. These bricks were painted with tar and can be seen still as the black ones interspersed along the side of the house.

As the war had started not long after the first houses in Allen Road were built in 1937 the cottages had been left to go to rack and ruin. From her vantage point Gladys could also look over and see the apple tree that had been in her garden as she grew up. *“When these cottages had to come down, I just hated watching it. Watching them fall down because the builders who bought the land kept his goats and his chickens in our houses”* Audrey recalls.

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Just inside the fence had been the well that Audrey and Gladys remember. *“The bus stop is there now, after they first built those houses down Allen Road, they kept finding there was sinking in the pavement and so they just kept filling it up. Then after a couple of years, they would have another big dip coming so that they’d fill that up. It took several years before it was full and not dipping any more. That was where the well was. My father used to say that it was a big stream and which went underneath, underground for someway”*

The area where the thatched cottages were is now Boston Court and the slated ones are now America Lane shops and the pub. The Pilgrim, opened in 1951, was named after William Allen with a picture of a Pilgrim father on the pub sign. William Allen himself used to dress in sombre Quaker clothes with a large brimmed hat. Built between Boston Road and Quakers Lane the pub was designed by HG Turner and remained a tribute to this local benefactor until the pub was renamed the Golden Eagle

The mini roundabout where New England Road, Bentswood Road and America Lane joins is where the 5 bar gate was. People had to ask Mr Pierce at the end cottage for the key to open it although it was possible to get around the side on foot. For more about the development of New England Road look out for the next booklet in this series

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Web sites

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