

# From Floods Ferry Farm to Swavesey

*By John Shepperson*

In 1839, Ann Taylor was born in Fenstanton, and attending school there until she was 12 years old. In 1851 she was working as a servant in the house of a St. Ives grocer

By 1855, Ann had moved from St. Ives, and was 'in service', at 'Floods Ferry Farm', a remote farm, on Ransom Moor, between Benwick and March, and quite near to the River Nene.

' Floods Ferry Farm ', was owned by Robert Shepperson, and working for Robert was John Shepperson, a distant relation.

Robert was a farmer and grazier. He was rather stout, and one of Ann's tasks each day was to help him to dress, and then lace up his boots. A pony & trap was brought to the front door of the farmhouse, and Robert was helped in. He was then driven around the farm to inspect his farmworkers. Arriving back at the farmhouse at lunchtime he would declare, "I've done a good morning's work".

One of Ann's tasks on the farm was to boil up linseed into gruel. This was used as a substitute for milk, for rearing calves on the farm. Before the young calves were fed the gruel, the seeds were skimmed from the top to feed to the older calves. It was a skill Ann learned, and put to good use years later, when feeding her own calves.

Ann and John Shepperson became friends. John lived in the Hamlet of Benwick, so each time he visited Ann at ' Floods Ferry Farm ', he had a 2 mile walk along footpaths, using footbridges to cross dykes in parts of the fen. John enjoyed a pint of beer, and on one moon light night after visiting a public house, he was walking home and came to one of the footbridges. Realizing he was a little unsteady, he decided it would be safer to crawl across the footbridge. Unfortunately the moon was throwing a shadow of the footbridge on the water in the dyke, and he made a mistake and crawled across the shadow,

In 1851, Robert's farm extended to 315 acres, and an early map shows the farmhouse and buildings, and the paths set out in a large garden.

A recent visit to Floods Ferry revealed that nothing has survived to indicate that buildings and a large, early 19th century house once stood on the site.

Robert was born in 1806 at Warboys, and in 1828 he married Jane Saunders of Ramsey. Robert and Jane had a family of two boys and five girls. Two daughters died before reaching two years of age, despite the fact that Robert and Jane came from affluent families and so could afford to pay for the best medical treatment available at that time.

Tragedies did not end there for Robert and Jane. In 1848 their eldest son Robert died,



[www.lilyholtroad.co.uk](http://www.lilyholtroad.co.uk)  
Genealogy  
Trace your Benwick Ancestors

aged 14yrs. The epitaph on his gravestone stated, 'Died of typhoid, after a painful affliction borne with patience'. This gives an indication of the suffering caused to those who died from that dreaded disease.

Four years later, the next member of the family to die was Edward their youngest son. Edward, aged 16yrs., was accidentally shot whilst getting out of a pony and trap, leaving Robert without a son to inherit 'Floods Ferry Farm', - the farm he had inherited from his father.

In 1856, a happier occasion occurred when Susan, eldest daughter of Robert and Jane, married Edwin Newton. This marriage produced two daughters, Ella Linda and Laura Edwina.

Robert died on the 7th of May 1866, in Whittlesey, at the home of his son-in-law, and was buried in Ramsey Cemetery. A large stone tomb covered in ivy, is today the only visible evidence of his previous existence.

On the 20th of September 1866, a widely advertised auction sale took place of Robert's farm stock. This included,

'A FLOCK OF 439 SHEEP. 46 SHORT-HORNED BEASTS, 62 SUPERIOR CART AND NAG HORSES, 8hp STEAM ENGINE, THRASHING MACHINE & STRAW ELEVATOR and a VARIETY OF EXCELLENT AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS USED FOR CARRYING ON THE BUSINESS OF A 1000 ACRES OF LAND'.

In 1881, at Whittlesey, Robert and Jane's granddaughter Laura Edwina Newton married Swavesey's village doctor, Joseph Watson Ellis. For the next 32years, Whitton House, Middle Watch, Swavesey, was the home of Joseph and Laura.

The first entry in the Swavesey Chronicle to mention Dr. Joseph Watson Ellis is in the report of an inquest on James Prior held at "The Cricketers P.H." in 1877. For at least 50yrs before that, members of the Ellis family had been attending to the medical needs of Swavesey families.

Over the years as doctors, they were privy to many of the villager's genuine needs and peculiarities, but had no time for malingerers. There is one entry in the Chronicles which demonstrated their concerns for villagers, it states,

Jan 4<sup>th</sup> 1896, 'As in former years Dr. Ellis has given a piece of beef to all widows & widowers, and those on parish relief'.

Joseph and Laura had five children, one son named Robert after his great grandfather, was in practice as the village doctor in Cottenham for most of his life.

In 1913, Laura died at the relatively young age of 52yrs, and was buried in Swavesey Churchyard. Before her death, she had inherited 'Floods Ferry Farm'.

John Shepperson and Ann Taylor were married in Benwick Church in 1856, and continued to live and work there until 1860. John was a bricklayer, and for the next twenty years he found work in various parts of the country. At one time they were living



in Hebburn, Newcastle upon Tyne.

In 1881, a mortgage foreclosure forced the sale of 'Willow House', and 3.5 acres of land. It is now No 118 Boxworth End, Swavesey,

The purchase of this property by John Shepperson brought the family to Swavesey. This provided John and Ann with their first step on the farming ladder. It gave Ann the opportunity to put into practice the skills she had learnt as a young girl 'in service' at 'Floods Ferry Farm'.

For the next forty years she devoted her energies into making their farming enterprise a success.

Ann died in 1920 at the age of 80yrs, and for the last week of her life she received,

"Professional Attendance and Medicines, £1 3s 6d," from Dr. Joseph Watson Ellis.

Ann was buried in Swavesey Churchyard, a few yards away from Laura. It seems most odd that fate should decide that two people who had connections with 'Floods Ferry Farm', should be buried in Swavesey so close to one another.

John Shepperson. April 1998.

