

# Holme Life



Holme village, c1939-1949

## The story of Bill Ayres and changing village life

Produced by Great Fen staff and volunteers, with the help of Ramsey Rural Museum, as part of the Great Fen oral history project.

Great Fen 



LOTTERY FUNDED



Picture above: Aerial view of Holme village during World War II. Note the runways of the Glatton Air Base on the left.

Picture on front cover: 1939 to 1949 - Bus turning towards Holme from the Great North Road (A1)

Our thanks to Cambridgeshire Community Archives Network (CCAN) for providing these and other photos in this booklet. Also our thanks to 457<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group for sharing their photos.



## **A different way of getting to school**

Growing up in Holme, Bill was able to walk to the village school, but for the children living in the fen, it was a different story:

"Grandfather started going round the fens because Mrs Wells, her husband owned the village, she knew it was too far for the children to walk to school so she gave us money, and my father and his half brother used to go round the fen and collect them in this horse and van.

"And later, after the end of the First World War, when he came home, he got a lorry and he used to do it with that."



A class at Holme School, c1950, from CCAN

## **A village train service**

Bill was born and raised next to Holme train station, when transport was very different:

"You could get on the train and go to Peterborough and it would take about 13 minutes. People used to go to work on the trains.

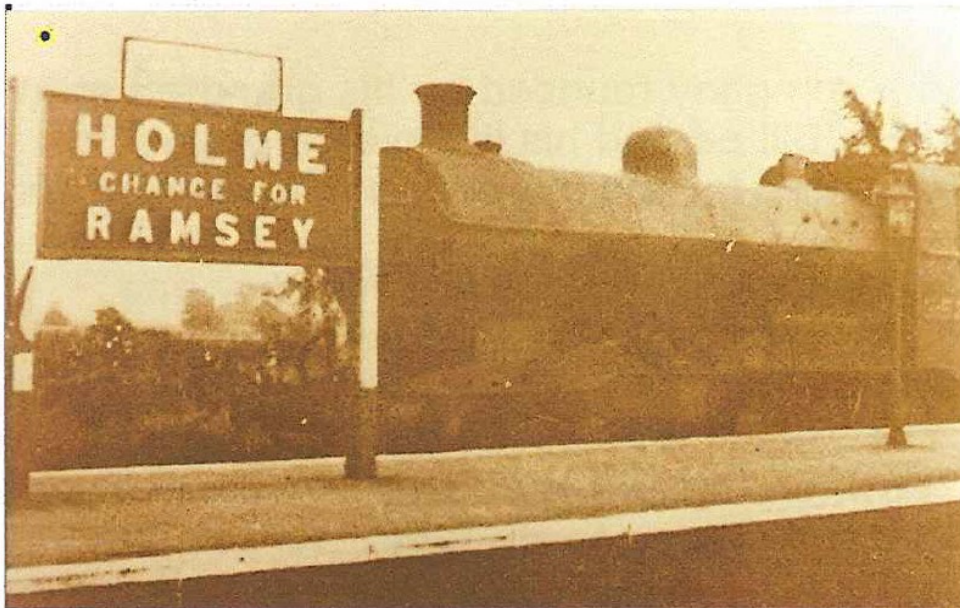


Holme Station, c1930-50, from CCAN

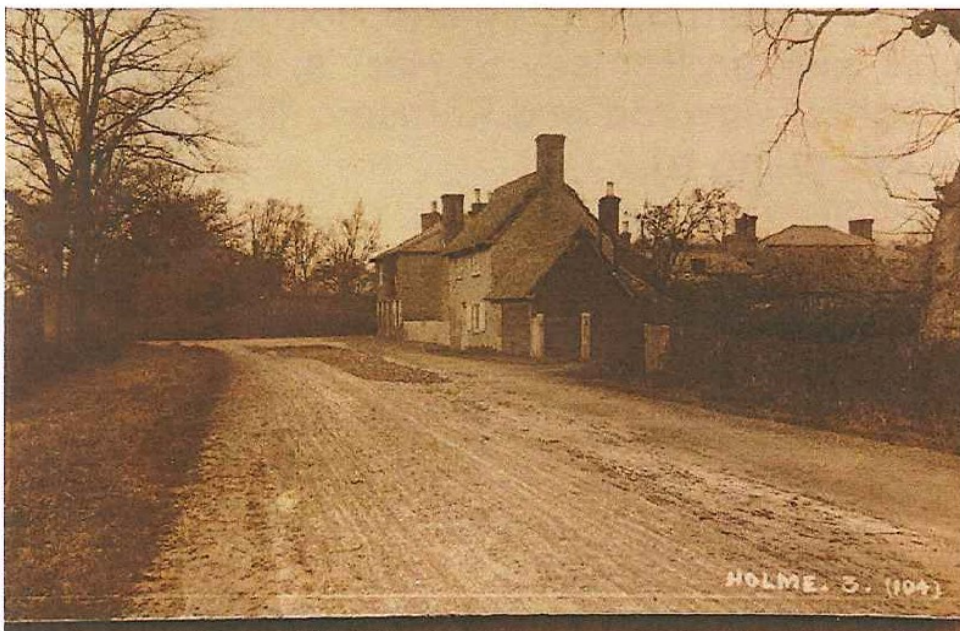
"There was the goods train which brought all the goods in – the coal and anything for the farmers and then there was that one that went to Ramsey North."



Holme Station, c1930-1950, from CCAN



Station Road, Holme, with the present village stores at the far right handside, c1930 to 1950, from CCAN



## **Life as a Coal Merchant**

In a company founded by his grandfather in 1860, Bill earned his living as a coal merchant for the majority of his working life.

The work involved loading his lorry and delivering coal to houses in the local area, as Bill explains:

**"Well we would load the lorries and go to the villages to deliver. We bagged it by hand then – we had a hopper with a pedal that filled it electrically. The bags were 100 kilograms in weight."**

"We delivered to Thrapston, Conington, Sawtry, Stilton, Yaxley and Holme Fen. Later on I took on Ramsey St Mary's, Ramsey Heights, Upwood and Ramsey. They were worth going to."



## **Working in the cycle shop**

Bill often spent his evenings and weekends working in his family-owned bicycle shop, selling new bikes and repairing old ones.

**"Well everybody had a bicycle in those days.**

"People used to bike from Sawtry to here to work on the railway and people used to bike to work on the land.

**"Between four and half past you'd see gangs of people biking home from work because the farm workers used to knock off at four o'clock."**

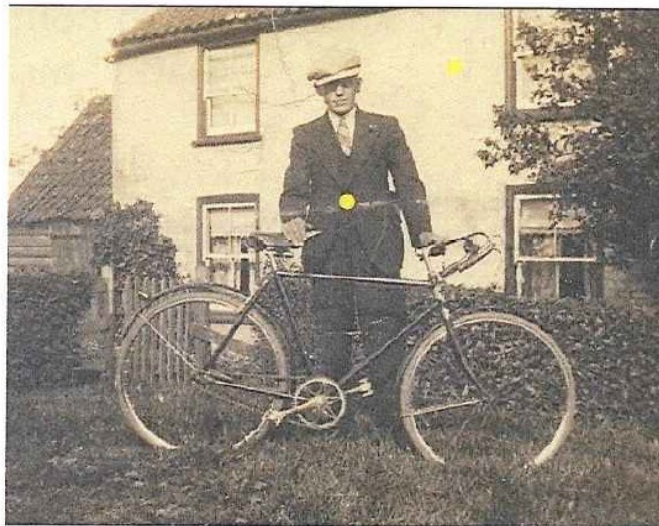


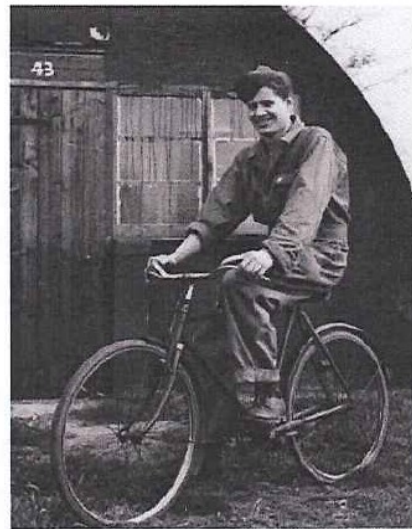
Photo from CCAN

## New customers

When the Americans joined the war, they built Glatton airfield next to Holme village, for the B-17 Flying Fortresses.

This brought Bill in close contact with the American servicemen from the base who wanted bicycles, particularly to get out to Yaxley and Peterborough.

**"We had plenty of business from the Americans," Bill said, "Many of them wanted the bikes to get to the pubs."**



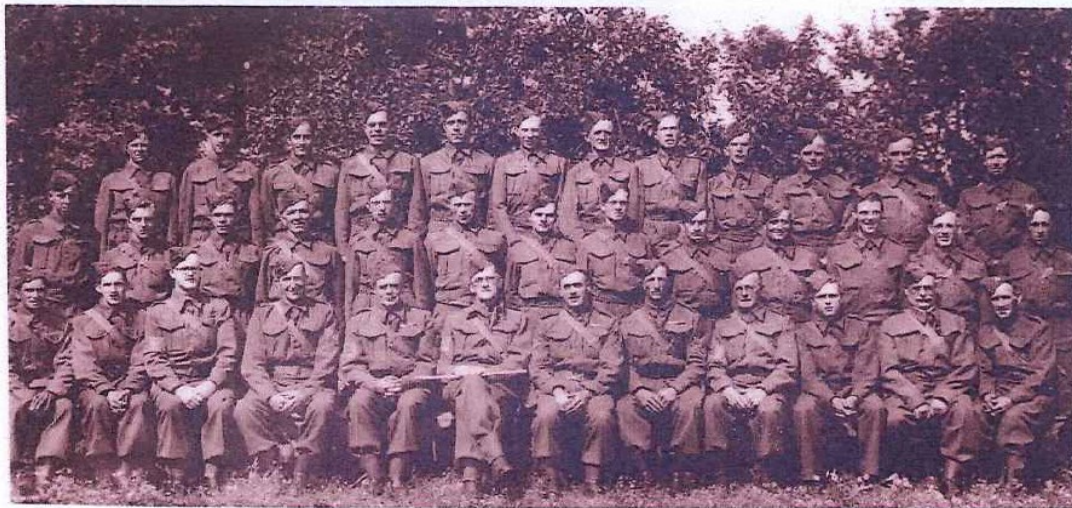
John Piekieleko of  
457th Bomb Group at  
Glatton airfield

Bill and his family could clearly see the airfield from the back window of their house and would count the American planes going out and returning home.



## Holme village in wartime

Bill said, "The men went into the Home Guard in the main. See people that worked on the land, like on the railway, people in specialised jobs didn't get called up so they were expected to join the Home Guard."



**'DADS ARMY'**

### THE HOLME VILLAGE HOME GUARD 1941

Bob Bebe	Bill Leyton	Frank Cox	Eric Allen	Horace Allen	Bill Adams	Ted Emery	David Baker	George Butler	Dan Dunkley	Harry DeAth	Frank Leyton	
George Leyton	Bob Hobbs	George Bass	Arthur Hobbs	Alf Leyton	Son Oxborough	Celwyn Manchett	Len Hughes	Kitch Cox	Walter Cousins	Jack Short	Harry Lamb	George Burrell
Charlie Cox	Alfred Cox	Graham Garner	Horace Olga	George Baker	Alfred Dixon	Bill Parsons	Alfred Whitehand	George Webb	Albert Drinkwater	Asa Clark	Olly Callip	

## **Old skills in a foreign land**

In February 1945, when he turned 18, Bill was called up to serve his National Service.

Following training at Glasgow, Northampton and Sheringham, he was stationed in Malaya, working both as a lorry driver and guarding Japanese war criminals who were waiting to go on trial.

Whilst in Malaya he was able to put his home-grown skills into practice:

**"We got a football that had a puncture so I went to one of the locals.**

**"He said he could fix the puncture, but had to fix a bike first so I said, 'you do the puncture and I'll do the wheels'. So I took the wheels to pieces and rebuilt them completely for him."**



## **Newcomers to the fens**

Following the end of the war, a wave of German and Italian prisoners of war arrived in the fens to work on the fields.

**Bill said, "The Germans were different to what we expected. They were good, genuine people."**

Many of these Prisoners of War fell in love with the area and decided to stay in the fens. They became a welcome addition to the mixture of residents that make up the fens.

## **And a final word...**

Although Bill has noticed far fewer bikes on the roads in recent years, he's still in business in bike repairs:

"Well if anybody wants anything done, I can still do it today."

**Our sincere thanks to Bill Ayres for sharing his memories.**

### **Local Memories project**

If you have a story, photos or objects that you'd like to share with us, please do get in touch:

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**www.greatfen.org.uk**

**You may also be interested in some of our other Local Memories booklets, including:**

- **Four generations on the Fen:**  
The Masons at Woodwalton Fen
- **Family Life in the Fens**  
The story of the Kemps and the Keightleys
- **Fireballs and Flying Fortresses**  
The story of 457<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group

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