

TWO HOUSES IN PENNS LANE, SUTTON COLDFIELD

Two interesting buildings in PENNS LANE, dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, have recently been demolished. The earlier of these stood at the Walmley end of the Lane, a few yards from the railway bridge. It was known as PENNS COTTAGES, and later numbered 293-297. It was demolished in 1984.

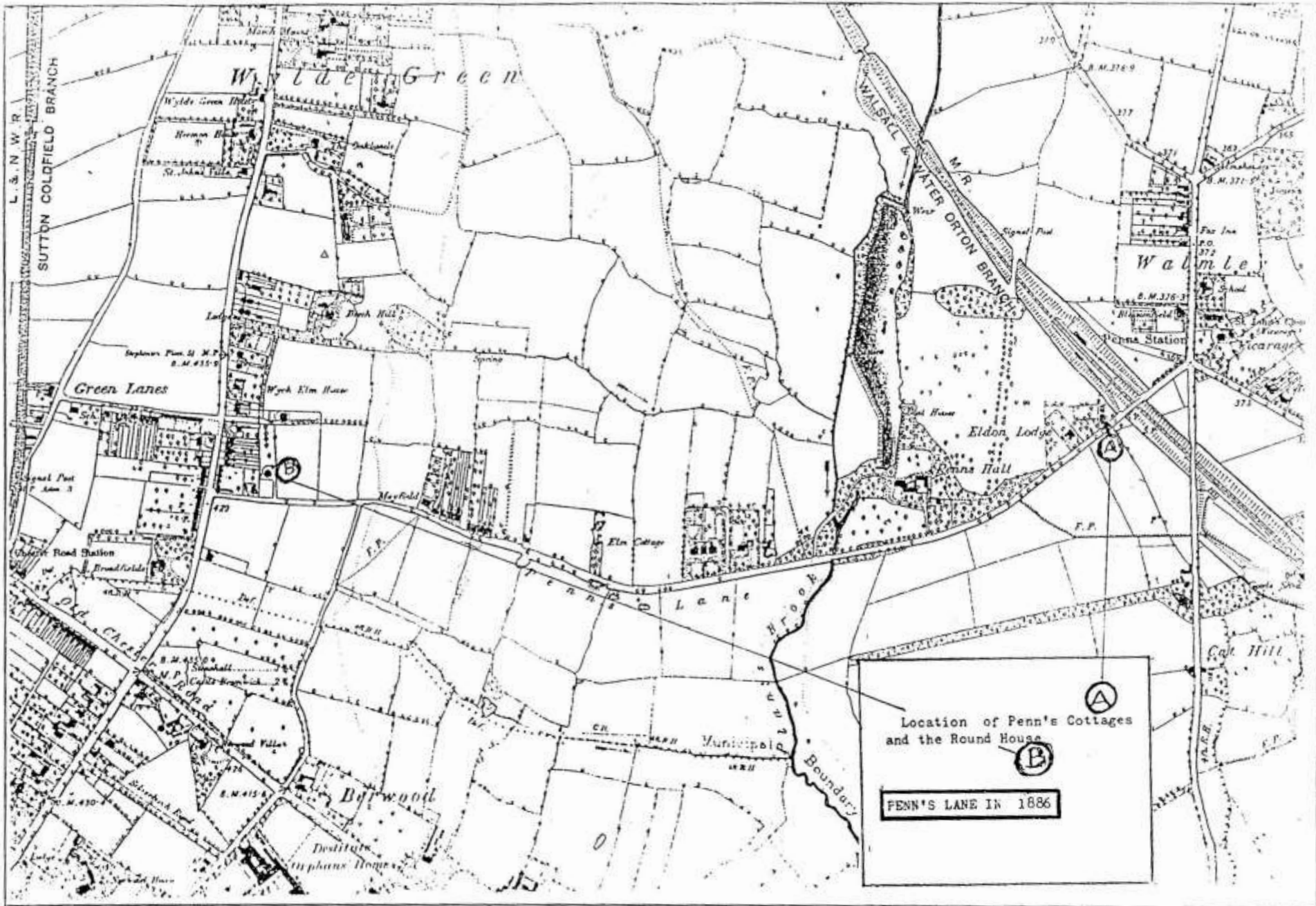
The other stood at the Wylde Green end, some fifty yards from Birmingham Road, on the site of the present filling station. It was referred to as the ROUND HOUSE, or ROUND COTTAGES, and was later numbered 23-29 Penns Lane (also, in the Electoral Rolls of the 1920's, confusingly called 'Penns Cottages'). It was demolished about 1970.

PENNS COTTAGES (1812)

Penns Cottages stood end-on to Penns Lane, as shown in the sketch-plan overleaf. The house (Fig. 1, overleaf) overlooking a flower-garden and mature oaks, was attractive, with its weathered brick walls, partly covered with ivy and creepers, its tall and imposing chimney-stacks, low pitched slate roof, and general feeling of mellowness, when viewed from the front, or East side. In the middle of this, above the 'front door', was the most eye-catching and evocative item of all - an oval Date Stone with the inscription, 'I.W. 1812' an irresistible challenge to the enquiring mind ... Who was I.W? The answer is: 'J.W.', for the stone-mason was using the Roman form, and so I. W. stood for Joseph Webster.

Joseph Webster 'the Third' followed his father, Joseph Webster II, at the Penns Mill iron and wire-works. His father had died in 1788, when J.W.III was five years old, and it was not until 1800 that he was removed from school, aged 17, 'to learn the trade'. This move was highly successful, for by 1812 he had seen the business expand so much that he needed housing for his increasing workforce, and decided to build it on his land near Walmley. Hence the '1812' house (and also a similar one, some thirty yards further North, demolished when the railway was made).

The Census returns of 1851 throw some interesting light on the inhabitants. Between Walmley Parsonage and Penn's Farm (next below Penn's Hall) there are 22 dwellings, in 15 of which the head of the household is described as a Wiredrawer, or is in some other way employed in the industry. Scrutiny of the



record shows that '3, 4, 5 and 6 Penns' (numbers allocated by the census taker) do indeed represent our '1812' house, or 'Penns Cottages'.

In 1851 it was occupied by four families, three named Martin, and the fourth Knowles. Prominent among them was Joseph Martin; born at Hints in 1794, he is described as a 'Clerk in a Wire Manu factory'. (His name also has the distinction of appearing in the local Register of Electors). With his family, he occupied that part of the house numbered 'Three'. His wife, Ann, came from Fazeley, and their three children, Thomas (23), Ann (21), and James (19), were all born in Sutton. Ann is described as a 'Postmistress', which seems a surprisingly responsible post for a young woman in 1851; however, there is corroboration in a handbill of 1857 concerning certain plots of land to be sold at auction, with a plan on which the house is marked, and labelled 'Penns Post Office'.

The Martin family was by this time comfortably settled in the '1812' house, or at any rate, in three quarters of it. They seem to have arrived there some time before 1826, from Minworth, where, the older children were born, whereas the birthplace of Joseph, junior, is recorded as 'Sutton Coldfield', i.e. Penns Cottages, in the year 1826. This is confirmed in the Register of Admissions to the Town School, which opened its doors on 23rd January, 1826. On that day William Martin, son of Jos'h Martin, Accountant, of Penns, was among the first intake, and the first of a succession of little Martins, for the next thirteen years, to trudge or trot daily from Penns Cottages to Church Hill and back.

Record of the Martin Family at the Town School, 1826-1839

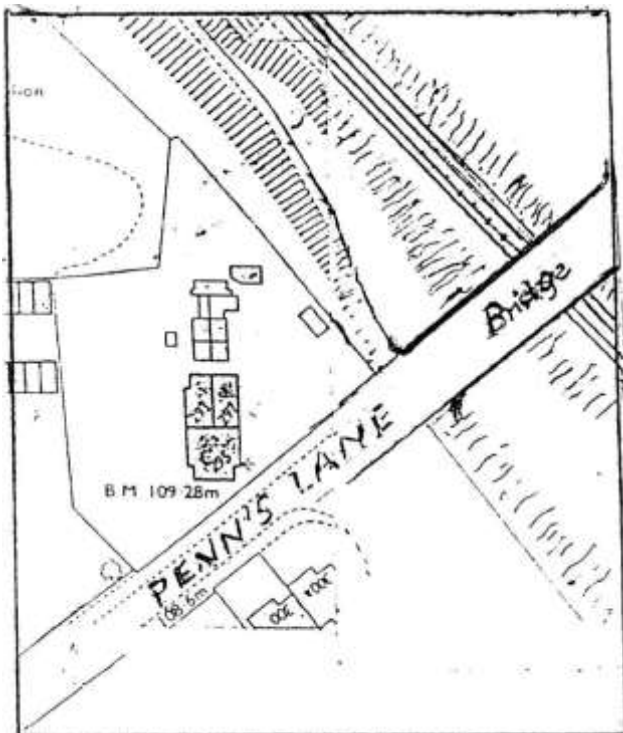
| | Admitted | Left | Time at School | Ages |
|---------|-----------|-----------|----------------|------|
| William | 23 Jan 26 | 13 Sep 30 | 4yrs 7mo | 8-13 |
| Charles | 5 Jan 29 | 16 Feb 34 | 5yrs | 6-11 |
| Joseph | 7 Apr 34 | 30 Nov 35 | 1yr 8mo | 9-11 |
| Thomas | 1 June 35 | 21 Nov 39 | 14yrs 6mo | 8-12 |

(Charles is recorded as having had 235½ 'days of sickness', and Thomas, 70½).

Thomas had a younger brother, James, but there is no mention of him in the Register, so that the main source of information is now the CENSUS.

In 1851, the Martin Family, since its first arrival round about 1825, had begun to 'colonise', until it now occupied three of the four dwellings.

'No. 1 Penns' as we have already seen, was home to Joseph and Ann, now elderly, and their three grown-up children; Thomas the wire-drawer, Ann the



Penns Cottages as seen by the Ordnance Survey (Revision of 1973)

The house had long been reduced from four to three dwellings, now numbered 291,295, and 297.

21 year old 'Postmistress', and James the Engraver.

At '4 Penns' are William Martin, former pupil of the Town School from 1826 to 1830, now married to a girl from Polesworth, and their two young children. Next door, at '5 Penns', is his brother Joseph, also a former Town School boy. He too is a Wiredrawer; his wife Maria was a Minworth girl, and they also have two small children. At No. 6 we find the Martin 'monopoly' broken by the presence of the Knowles family: William, 48, a wiredrawer, and his 58 year old wife, Elizabeth.

This cosy, neighbourly pattern came to a sudden end in 1859. Penn's Mill closed down; the works and no doubt most of its 100 employees were transferred to Hay Mills in Birmingham. The next Census returns (1861) tell a different story. Under a new system of numbering, Penns Cottages appears as Nos. 33, 34, 35, and 36 'Penns' with Heads of household as follows:

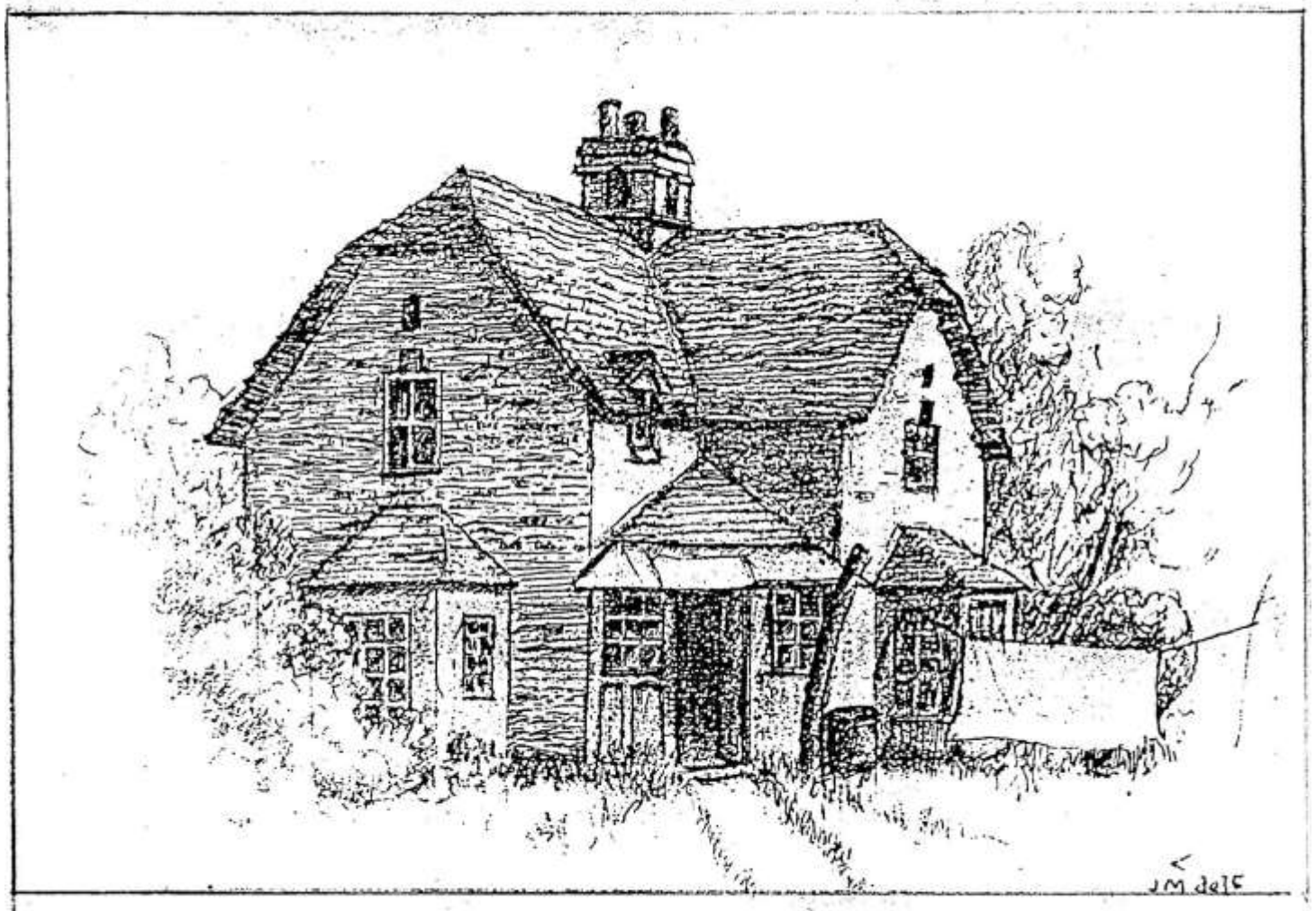
| | | |
|-----------------|----|--------------------|
| William Clemson | 67 | retired Wiredrawer |
| Samuel Davis | 60 | Smith |
| John Alsopp | 34 | Groom |
| Joseph Bailey | 26 | Police Constable |

(As late as 1984, local folk memory was of the village policeman living in the house, with the Warwickshire Constabulary sign over the door, and of the Post Office that was there a hundred and thirty years before.)

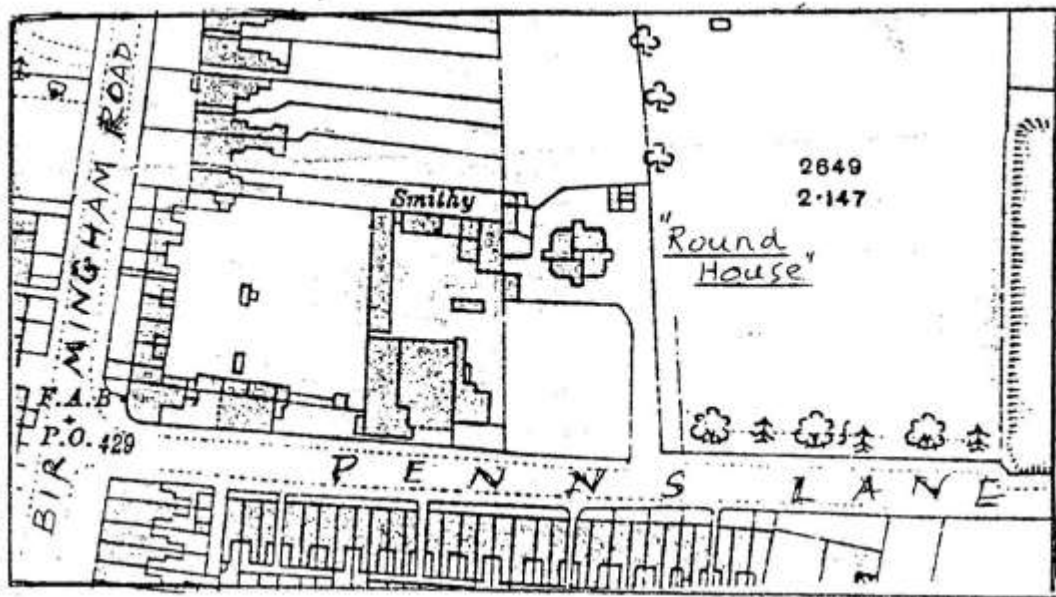
Changes took place gradually during those long years, with a fairly constant coming and going of tenants, none of them staying very long. It was some time before the house was numbered (291-297 Penns Lane), and later Nos. 291 and 293 were combined and eventually the Electoral Register for 1968 names only two families living in the house. They were the Wassells at 297, and the Woodward at 295, both of whom are still (in 1991) remembered locally; Mr. A. L. Woodward was well known for the dairy business which he ran for many years.

But all this came to an end when someone decided that it was necessary to widen Penns Lane and, in doing so, to clip a small corner off the old house. The residents, with deep regret, moved out, the developer moved in, and so a century and a half of history was wiped out.

Not completely, however: someone had the good sense to rescue the date stone, and it is now, most appropriately, in the keeping of Walmley Parish Church, which owes its existence largely to the benefactions of that very 'I.W.' - Joseph Webster III of Penns Mill.



The ROUND HOUSE about 1970



The Round House as seen in ground—plan by the Ordnance Survey, 1914

THE ROUND HOUSE

It is not clear when the 'Round House' was built, but it must have been between 1840 and 1849.

An Act of Parliament of 1840 enables the trustees of the estates (at Erdington, etc.) of WALTER STANLEY, esq., deceased, to grant building leases. The next documentary evidence is in the Sutton Rates Book for 1849, which names the occupants of the house (not precisely located) as:-

Grimley; Britten; Twist; Joseph Atkins junior.

The Valuation of 1856 shows that Stanley's Charity is leasing the property to Charles Machin (possibly a builder) who sub-lets.

Despite the 1851 Census, which names the occupants as living 'near Penns Lane', and the 1855 Rates Book which speaks of 'small tenements' in Green Lanes, there is little doubt that all the preceding information relates to the building that stood at the western, or Wylde Green, end of Penns Lane, some 50 or 60 yards from the Birmingham Road.

There was no attempt at numbering until the 1930's, when the Electoral Register lists, under 'Penns Lane, Round Cottages', Numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4.

In 1951 the whole of Penns Lane had acquired numbers, and the Round Cottages were now simply Nos. 23, 25, 27 and 29 Penns Lane, and so they remained until they were knocked down. Nothing remained except a few memories, and speculation on matters of mild interest: why the 'Round' Cottages and who lived there?

The name has something to do with the trustees of Stanley's Charity, who may have wanted their building to be of the nature of almshouses, which accounts for some of its features: it offers limited accommodation for four families under one roof, yet independent of each other; each part has its own front door, and even the chimney stack is clearly divided into four. The outward appearance of each of the four parts is identical; indeed the guiding principle of the architects seems to have been Absolute Equality. (See Figures overleaf).

As to who lived there, we have already heard of Grimley, Britten, Twist, and Atkins, and further information is available in Electoral Registers, Rates Books, Census Returns, and the like. The Census returns are of particular interest: in 1851, for instance, we find Matthew Grimley, an 'Ag Lab' or Agricultural Labourer, living in one quarter of the house with his wife and seven children, aged from 12 years to 2 months, in what must have been very cramped conditions.

Grimley's neighbour, William Hiley, was a gardener, and he too had a large young family. Joseph Adkins, mentioned in the Rates Book of 1849, is still there, with his wife and two young children, but Twist, the fourth original householder, has now left, replaced by George Britton a carpenter from Birmingham, his wife, and five children: four of these, aged 9, 7, 4, and 3, are described as 'scholars'.

Ten years later, at the 1861 Census, the Adkins family, as well as the Hileys, have left, to be replaced by Samuel Davis and James Linforth, both in their twenties, with small, young families. By 1871 however, both have left; the tendency is for younger folk to be on the move, while the older ones are more likely to stay. This is certainly the case with the Grimleys and the Brittans (sic).

In 1861 there are still eight Grimleys at 'No.19 Sutton Road'. Matthew is now 50; John (20) is a sawyer; Jane (16) a servant. The other two daughters Ellen and Mary (22 and 17 respectively) do not appear (being no doubt married or 'in service'), while Job is already, at the age of 14, an 'Ag Lab'. Ten years later in 1871, he is no longer at home, though Matthew, now 60 and still a labourer is still at home with his wife, a son and a daughter, and now a grandson James M. Grimley.

Ten years on, in 1881, the picture changes; Matthew is 70, his occupation no longer stated, though his wife Elizabeth, aged 67, is still working as a laundress. The other four occupants are Fred Hammond, a 31 year old groom from Lincolnshire, his wife Sarah (nee Grimley), their infant daughter, and another grand-daughter, aged 15. Thus the Grimley dynasty has now been settled in its quarter of a house for nearly 40 years. The Burgess Roll of 1886 shows that Matthew, who would have been 75, is now replaced by Job and Sarah. As the 1891 census returns are not available, it is not possible to say whether Sarah is Job's wife, or his unmarried sister, who in 1886 would be 35 years old, while Job would be 39.

His name, though not that of Sarah, appears in the Burgess Rolls and Registers of Electors throughout the early 1900's, until we reach 1918, when 'Job and Ann Grimley' are registered as voters. In 1931, Ann has vanished from the list, and in 1940 Job is replaced by Joseph and Hannah; thus if we are still dealing with the same family, as seems likely, then the Hannah Grimley who lived at No. 27 Penns Lane in 1951 is a direct link with the Rate Book of 1849 and Matthew Grimley, Agricultural Labourer. After 102 years the family must have got fond of the old place, in spite of everything.

Another family of similar life-pattern were the Bamptons. Robert Bampton appears in the Rate Book, 1869. He was an 'Ag. Lab', aged 34; his wife's occupation is not stated, but she would be fully occupied in looking after the house and seven children. Forty years on, in the Burgess Roll of 1910, Robert was still there, aged 75, and other members of the family appear over the years; for instance, John and Harriet in 1940: John Bampton could well be the sixth child of Robert, born in 1876, and so a man of 64 by this time. The last mention of the family is in 1965: Robert was still there probably the son of John and Harriet, and named after his grandfather, that young man who brought his family to the Round House 96 years before. Thus the Bamptons and the Grimleys were neighbours - and very close

neighbours for 82 years. They must have got on pretty well, though the Enumerator is silent on the matter.

Even the Census returns, up to 1881, give answers to very few of the questions that form in the mind. Yet here and there a factual entry will stir the imagination, such as that on the Bearcroft family: Charles, Mary, and their children. They were true country folk: Charles hailed from the parish of 'Moore' (Upper and Lower Moor are hamlets between Evesham and Pershore) and Mary, from Grafton Flyford, some four miles to the North - a pleasant walk it must have been, by fields and lanes in the 1840's.

However, the call of the big city prevailed and by 1862 the young couple found themselves in Northfield, with a baby son. Seven years later, Charles and Mary, with three children, had moved on, not only to Sutton, but to the Round House, and there they stayed seventeen years. The prosperity they sought seems to have eluded them: in 1871 Charles had described himself as a 'Groom and Gardener', but by 1881 he omits the 'Groom'; the eldest daughter, at 17, is a 'Dressmaker', William aged 19 is an 'Engine Cleaner. (locomotive)', and the eighth member-of the household is yet another migrant: John O'Connor the 30 -year- old 'Boarder', an Ag. Lab. from 'Ross Common' in the remote West of Ireland. After the Burgess Roll of 1886, they all vanish from the records. Charles Bearcroft was 50 years old; he might have done better to stay in Worcestershire.

As to the Round House itself, it has not yet, after some 18 years, quite faded from memory, and people can still tell you of the sweep who could not be sure of which flue he had cleaned unless he went outside to see which chimneypot his brush was emerging from. It is pleasant, too, to hear of the way the old house struck back at its destroyers: the bull-dozer was about its lethal work when a passer-by warned the driver about a deep well in the garden. He ignored the warning ("I aint seen no well"). But when that passer-by returned an hour later, he could hardly repress a smile on seeing the rear end of a bull-dozer sticking out of the garden. Only a brief respite, but of course, as we all know, 'You can't stop progress'.