

Welford-on-Avon · High Street, opposite the Bell

Virginia Cottage

A thatched cottage and the family who lived in it for five generations, from a pedlar's shop in the 1860s to the sale of 1984.

Drawn from the Welford and Weston Local History Society archive (folder references in grey), checked against census and listing records.



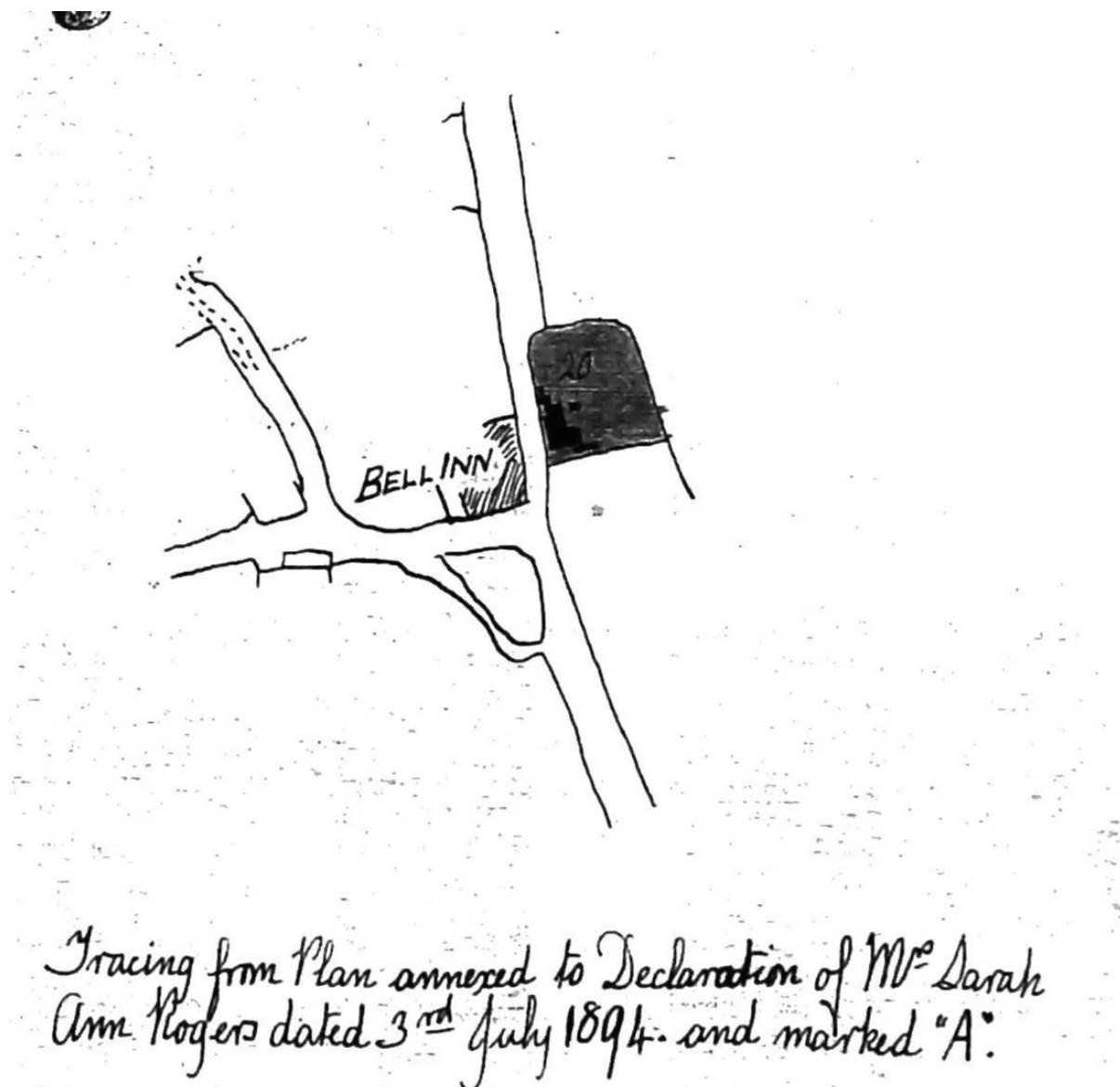
John and Millicent Wilson at the gate of Virginia Cottage. The back is inscribed "? 1860", later corrected in pencil to "1880/90", which better fits John's grey beard and the photographic process. 41/02

The cottage opposite the Bell

Virginia Cottage stands on the east side of Welford's High Street, at its narrowest point, facing the Bell Inn. In 1908 a doctor's bill reached the family addressed simply to "Op[posite] The Bell Inn" 45/31, and a plan drawn for a sworn declaration in 1894 shows the cottage as plot No. 20, a heavily shaded block across the road from the inn's hatched corner 45/26. The family spoke of the two ends of the property as the "Maypole end" and the "Binton end" 33/44.

The building is a seventeenth-century timber-framed cottage of one storey and an attic, on a plinth of local blue lias rubble, under a steep thatch. When it was first listed, on 2 August 1972, the description noted red brick nogging between the timbers and a modern bay window 13/02, 30/07. The district council's 1992 Conservation Area Study, still describing the pre-restoration listing, gave it the same short entry: Grade II, serial 17A/49, "C17, timber frame, red brick nogging, thatch, lias plinth, one storey plus attic" 15/08. Inside, the estate agents of 1983 found a flagstone floor, exposed ceiling and wall timbers, and an inglenook "with evidence of an old bread oven" 33/38.

Until 1931 Welford lay in Gloucestershire, which is why every deed before then places Virginia Cottage "in the County of Gloucester".



"Tracing from Plan annexed to Declaration of Mrs Sarah Ann Rogers dated 3rd July 1894 and marked 'A'." The shaded plot opposite the Bell Inn is No. 20, Virginia Cottage. 45/26

Landlords and early tenants 1845 – 1903

The earliest written proof of ownership is the will of William Jackson the elder, a Welford farmer, made on 8 August 1845. He left his Welford farms and houses to trustees, with a life interest to his widow Ann, then to his daughter Ann Cook "for her sole use independently of her present or any future husband", and finally to his granddaughter Ann Hollis Cooke. Jackson died in 1847, his widow in 1856 and Mrs Cook in 1891. On 27 July 1895 the last trustees conveyed the estate to Miss Cooke, by then living at Henley-in-Arden. In their schedule the cottage appears as No. 20, "Cottage and Garden", tenant John Wilson, 1 rood 16 perches 45/24, 44/18.

To prove the title, an elderly neighbour, Sarah Ann Rogers, swore a declaration in July 1894. Her family had rented the cottage next door since Lady Day 1847, and her father had walked the rent once a year to Mrs Cooke at Oldberrow. Of No. 20 she said it "has for some time in the past been in the occupation of John Wilson and about 30 years ago occupied by a man named Tenson" 45/25. The family later read the name as Tinson. The census supports that: Charles Tinson, an agricultural labourer, is in Welford in 1841, and in 1861 Charles Tinson (53), his wife Elizabeth and son George are listed alongside a James Tinson 48/01, 48/04.

John Wilson, "Happy John" 1838 – 1903

John Wilson was christened at Halesowen in the Black Country on 1 July 1838, the son of William Wilson and Martha 44/12. His parents had married at Welford in January 1834, Martha signing with her mark as Martha Geydon 44/33. After his mother died in Halesowen, the small boy was sent back to her family in Welford, and he travelled by water. In the family's telling he came by canal and river, "the Avon being then navigable to commercial traffic", and landed at the lock gates at Cress Hill 44/10, 44/22.

The 1841 census finds him aged three in the household of William and Mary "Goodal". That is almost certainly the Welford grandfather recorded elsewhere as William Geadon or Gaden, who had married his second wife Mary Lively in 1817 48/01, 44/36–37. His grandparents did not live long. By 1851 John, aged 13 and working as a ploughboy, was lodging near the Bell Inn with Thomas Morris, a farm labourer and Chelsea Pensioner. His descendants believed this was the household "at or near Virginia Cottage" that took him in 44/09, 44/38.

On 18 December 1860 he married Millicent Ghilson at Stretton-on-Fosse, and four months later the census shows the newly married couple in Welford, John an agricultural labourer of 22 48/04. From then until his death he lived at Virginia Cottage, always as a tenant of the Cookes.

He started as a pedlar, with a basket on his head and a rag bag on his back, then bought a donkey called Billy, then a pony and cart. A broadsheet poem by "E. H." of Welford tells the story: "Some people called him 'happy John', / Some called him 'happy Jack'; / Whiche'er it was 'twas all the same, / He smiled an answer back" 33/47. John and Millicent opened a shop in the cottage selling candles, lamps, wicks, writing slates and slate pencils, fuel oil and

kindling. He became a carrier, with carts, wagons and horses taking village produce to Stratford market and bringing back what the village needed. On Fridays the carts were scrubbed, planks were laid across them for seats, and he took the village women into Stratford to shop 33/43, 44/22. The census tracks the rise: licensed hawker in 1881, hawker and employer in 1891, and in Kelly's Directory of 1897 "Wilson John, oil dealer & carrier" 48/06, 48/07, 48/13-22. On Sundays he taught at the Wesleyan Sunday School.

POEM about JOHN WILSON of Welford-on-Avon (1838 - 1903)

"HAPPY JOHN."

By E. H., Welford-on-Avon.

THERE was a man, whose sunny face
Was very often seen
Along the roads or through the lanes
On village street or green.

His basket, poised upon his head,
Containing wondrous store
Of needles, cotton, tape and pins,
And many a marvel more.

His bag athwart his back he took,
To carry home the rags,
Which oft were waiting for his call,
In cottage box or bags.

Some people called him "happy John,"
Some called him "happy Jack;"
Whichever it was 'twas all the same,
He smiled an answer back.

By and by his trade increased,
The people liked his face;
They liked his goods, they liked his talk,
He bought and sold apace.

To carry all upon his back
For to try was vain;
And soon a donkey was the prize,
And "Billy" was his name.

And when his master drove him out,
To help him on his way,
If met by friends he needs must stop,
To pass the time of day.

A pet with all he soon became,
And would advantage take;
And often walked into the house
His odd requests to make.

Would ask for sugar, bread or cake,
Ask until he got it too;
And if chance would help himself,
Ere he would turn to go.

But in a while poor "Billy's" strength
'Twas found was not enough
To do the work he had to do,
Although his limbs were tough.

So for a time he stayed at home,
And took his ease and grazed;
And thought it still his right to be
Petted, stroked and praised.

Then lest poor "Billy" should perchance
With cruel treatment meet;
His master had him shot and buried
Beneath the greensward sweet.

A pony next became the prize,
With shaggy coat and mane;
Which did his work with right goodwill
And soon gained equal fame.

So off they jog right merrily,
The master and his steed;
And often on their busy rounds
They do a kindly deed.

And if you greatly wish to know
How John his evenings spends,
It is in busy work at home,
Or singing with his friends.

His wife a busy cheerful body,
His daughter blithe and gay,
Do much to help him in his work,
And love to join the lay.

And as each day of rest comes round,
They join with Christian friends,
Who raise their hearts in prayer and praise
To Him Who blessing sends.

And now, dear friends, my tale is done,
I wish you all good night;
And may each day through all your toil
Be happy, calm, and bright.

A cheerful, sunny-faced male teacher carrying a monstrous teapot, is specially told off to wait upon them."
See "Our Sunday School Treat," by the same Author.

"Happy John", a printed poem about John Wilson by E. H. of Welford-on-Avon. It follows him from pedlar to carrier and was written in his lifetime. 33/47, 44/11

Behind the cottage he built a coach house at the Maypole end and, at the Binton end, "a very handsome stable for the horses with a manger, drainage in the floor and, overhead, a large, light loft", where the shop stock was kept. There was a pig-sty opposite 33/44. He put

his savings into market-garden land and cottages. He lost £420 when the Liberator Building Society crashed in 1892, but in 1897 he still bought seven cottages and pieces of land from Robert Gibbs for £710 44/13-14.

John and Millicent had three daughters. Lucy and Harriett died in infancy, and only Sarah Rosetta survived. Millicent died on 2 June 1894, aged 56. On 28 February 1903 John was thrown from his trap on the way home from Stratford market and died in Stratford Hospital, aged 65. His memorial card says "The result of an Accident" 44/17, 44/23, 44/38. His gravestone behind Welford church carries a carved likeness of his face. He left land and cottages around the Maypole and the Bell to his three grandchildren, and about £2,790 in effects 44/15. Virginia Cottage was not his to leave.

Sarah Rosetta Matthews buys the cottage 1894 - 1932

Sarah Rosetta Wilson married Thomas James Matthews at Welford on Christmas Day 1886. He was the blacksmith at Upper Quinton, and their three children, Wilson John, James Arthur and Rose Amy, were born there. When Millicent died in 1894 the family came back to Virginia Cottage to look after her father 33/46. Thomas died in May 1908, aged 45.

As a widow, Sarah Rosetta took in children boarded out by the Poor Law guardians. On 8 March 1910 she signed an undertaking with the King's Norton Union to care for seven-year-old Florence Briscoe, for 4s 6d a week until the child was twelve. The form was witnessed at Welford Rectory 10/35. Florence and her sister Matilda grew up at the cottage.

That autumn she bought the house. Her adviser was Alfred "Alf" Deavs of Saltley, Birmingham, a solicitor's clerk whose letters fill a whole folder 45/03-16. Miss Cooke accepted her offer of £300, and Sarah paid a £15 deposit on 3 November 1910. The conveyance, dated 20 December 1910, describes a plot with "a frontage to the main road of 44 yards 2 feet", 1,749 square yards in all, with the cottage and outbuildings "now known as Virginia Cottage" 45/21-22. The next day she sold part of the land to Alf's father for £60, and he built a house called Polruan on it. She put in £140 of her own money and borrowed £100 on mortgage at 4 per cent. Alf later took over the mortgage himself, and it was paid off on 24 June 1922 45/01, 45/23.

"I think if I were you I should insure for £150, because in the event of a fire the whole show would be burnt down."

Alf Deavs to Mrs Matthews, 22 December 1910 45/14

Her own running account shows what came next: new chimneys in February 1911, Cresswell the Salford Priors thatcher paid £8 for rethatching, a W.C. in May, firebricks for the stove, timber for a path, and in 1912 a new gate, steps and wall 45/43. On census night in April 1911 the four-roomed cottage held four people: Sarah Rosetta, 48, "private means"; her son James Arthur, 21, farm labourer; and two girls aged 13 and 5, almost certainly the Briscoe sisters 43/105, 48/11.



A child at a garden gate, from the Virginia Cottage bundle. Nothing on the print names the place, but its position among the purchase papers and the thatched roofline make it very probably the cottage, perhaps with Polruan behind. 45/19

Jim 1889 – 1917

James Arthur "Jim" Matthews inherited land from his grandfather and worked it as a market gardener. In February 1916 he ordered the season's peas, beans, sprouts and onion seed from Toogood & Sons of Southampton, to be sent by rail to Milcote station 14/03. He was engaged to Olive Hancox, a teacher at the village school. In 1917 he went to France with the 1/6th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, and he wrote home almost fifty times, every letter addressed to "Mrs S. R. Matthews, Virginia Cottage" and signed "Your loving son, Jim". Many of them deal with rents, tithes and the mortgage. He died of wounds in Belgium on 9 August 1917, aged 28. The official death notice and Alf's letter of condolence came to the same address 43/02–84, 43/83–84.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission still records his mother "of Virginia Cottage, Welford-on-Avon" as his next of kin. He is buried at Dozinghem Military Cemetery. His story is told more fully in the project's essay on Welford in the First World War.

Rose Amy Booth c.1920 – 1983

Rose Amy Matthews married Ernest Booth and moved to Eastwood in Nottinghamshire, where the family remembered living near D. H. Lawrence's house. Their daughter Vera Isobel was born there, and a son, George Ernest Shakespeare, who died aged two. When Sarah Rosetta became disabled by arthritis, Rose brought the family home to nurse her. Her second daughter, Millicent May, was born at Virginia Cottage in February 1922 33/46. That same month Rose, "of Virginia Cottage... wife of Ernest Booth", let the Lime Ground on Headland Road to Archie Wright for £17 10s a year 11/43.

The bills and letters addressed to Mrs R. A. Booth chart the arrival of the modern world. In 1928 she paid Lord Sackville's steward to extinguish the old manorial rents on the property. In 1929 the tithe was redeemed, and she let the Post Office put a telegraph-pole strut in the garden next door for a shilling a year. Mains electricity reached the village in 1930 and Virginia Cottage in June 1934, with a wayleave signed for the power company 33/04–05, 33/07–41, 45/51. Sarah Rosetta died on 16 December 1932 and left the cottage to Rose. The assent of 1934 describes "all that freehold thatched cottage called Virginia Cottage garden and premises situate near The Bell Inn" 45/47. In 1936 Rose paid rates on the cottage at a rateable value of £6, and on five other cottages she owned 14/05. In 1942 the county made "Mrs R. Booth, of Virginia Cottage" a First Aid Point under the Civil Defence scheme 01/30.

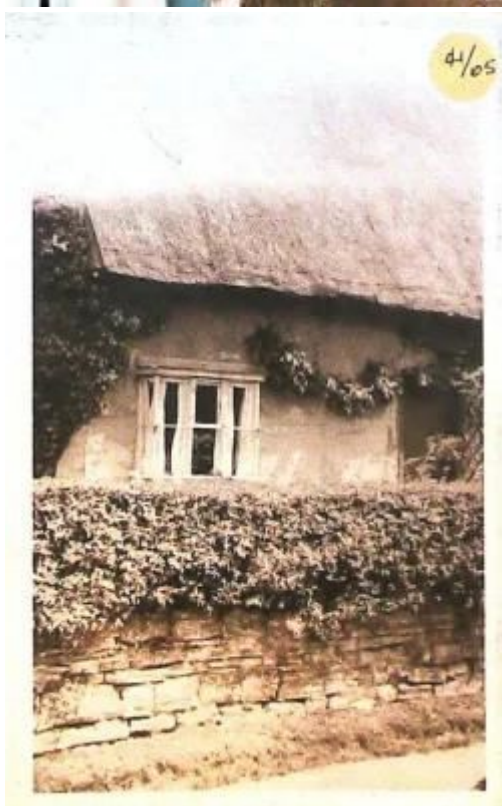
Millicent May remembered a childhood home with "neither electricity, gas, water nor sewerage". There were paraffin lamps, "a tiny Kelly lamp for going to bed", a hot brick wrapped in flannel instead of a hot-water bottle, and a big iron stove, blacklead weekly, that "ruled the living room". Water was pumped from a well in the garden or drawn from

the rain-water butt. The children had a swing in the coach house and found "many treasures of the past" in the forbidden loft. They listened to Children's Hour on their grandmother's horn radio 44/22, 33/44. Mains water and sewerage arrived only in the late 1950s 45/51.



"Interior of Virginia Cottage, Mrs Rose Booth." A copper pan hangs on the whitewashed wall beside the fireplace. 41/01

Rose lived at Virginia Cottage until her death on 7 January 1983, as her mother had before her. The house passed to Millicent May, now Mrs Buggins.



Virginia Cottage in the Booth years: whitewashed walls, a blue door and a creeper over the gable; and a front window under the thatch above the roadside wall. 41/03, 41/05

Sale and restoration 1983 – 1990

In 1983–84 Sheldon Bosley offered the cottage for sale at around £35,000, freehold with vacant possession. The particulars described "a genuine, detached, half-timbered, rendered and thatched Cottage" with two bedrooms, a large garden backing onto Willow Bank and "a derelict timber stable building". The agents added that it "has been in the Vendor's family for something like five generations and, at one time, a part of it was a 'local shop' selling writing slates, lamp wicks, lamp oil" 33/38. In October 1984 the Society's committee heard that the cottage, although listed, had been served with a closure notice 37/01–04. The

house was sold in 1984, and the family's connection with it ended after about 120 years. By 1985 the coach house, stable and pig-sty had all been demolished 33/44.

The new owners stripped the render back to the timber frame and added a brick wing with a tiled roof. In April 1988, with the builders' rubble still in the garden, the cottage was back on the market at £175,000, with four bedrooms and two bathrooms 33/39. When the listing was revised, the entry became "House. C17 with extensive 1990 restoration... 1990 brick wing with tile roof", and the interior was "noted as having flag floor, exposed beams and timber-framed cross walls" 47/60.



Before and after. Left: the plain rendered cottage in the 1983–84 sale particulars. Right: the

rear during restoration in 1988, with the timber frame exposed and painted black and white and the new brick wing on the right. 33/38, 33/39

The family's memory of the house passed to the Society. In March 1998 Mrs M. Buggins (née Booth) gave the AGM talk "Virginia Cottage and its Inhabitants", beginning by explaining that the cottage was of particular interest to her "since she was born there" 27/01-09, 38/01-03. The papers she kept, from Alf's letters to the rate demands, are now the core of Folders 33, 43, 44 and 45. The Society's 2012 talk "Readings from the archives" was dedicated to her as Mrs Susan Buggins, the donor, who had died that April 44/38.

Who lived at Virginia Cottage

Years	Household	Basis
to 1891	Owned by the Jackson and Cooke families, rent paid to Oldberrow	1845 will; abstract of title
c.1860s	A man named Tinson (or Tenson)	1894 declaration; 1841 and 1861 census
1860 – 1903	John and Millicent Wilson, pedlar then carrier, and the shop	Family history; 1861–1891 census
1894 – 1932	Sarah Rosetta Matthews; Thomas (d. 1908); Wilson John, Jim and Rose; Florence and Matilda Briscoe. Owner from 1910	1910 conveyance; 1911 census
c.1920 – 1983	Rose Amy and Ernest Booth, with Vera and Millicent May. Owner from 1932	1934 assent; rate demands
1983 – 1984	Millicent May Buggins (owner); sold 1984	Sale particulars; 1985 family history

Notes on the sources

- **John Wilson's grandfather.** The 1985 family history first named him William Wilson, then Henry Hopkins, the Chapel Street shoemaker. The Society's research in 2012 settled on William Geadon or Gaden, which fits the 1834 marriage of William Wilson to Martha Geydon 44/18, 44/33–38.
- **Birthplace.** The 1861 census gives Staffordshire (possibly Bilston), while the 1891 census and the baptism record give Halesowen. Both are in the Black Country.
- **Alf's surname** is written Deavs, Deans and Dears in different papers. He signed most letters simply "Alf".
- **The donor.** The Society's 2010 and 2012 papers call her Mrs Susan Buggins, great-granddaughter of John Wilson. The 1998 talk was given by Mrs M. Buggins née

Booth. Both descriptions fit Millicent May, but the archive does not say whether "Susan" was a second name or a family name.

- **Restoration date.** The listing says 1990, but the 1988 sale particulars already describe the cottage as restored, with its new wing.
- **Jim's age.** The CWGC record gives 28, matching his birth on 2 May 1889. The South Warwickshire Family History Society gives 27.

Online records checked: Historic England list entry 1382861, Virginia Cottage, High Street, Welford-on-Avon, via [British Listed Buildings](#) (first listed 2 August 1972, amended 19 June 2000) · [CWGC, Private James Arthur Matthews](#) · [South Warwickshire FHS, Pte J. A. Matthews](#). Census returns for 1841–1911 were read from the Society's copies in Folder 48 and the 1911 household schedule in 43/104–105.