

Introduction

This is the story of approximately one hundred years in the life of the Slater family of Crowland, based upon a collection of photographs that has been assembled and preserved by the present John Slater. It is a remarkable collection, not only from the family history point of view but also for the glimpse it gives of life in Crowland over a time that has probably seen more changes to village life than ever before. Crowland is an ancient place (the Abbey was founded in AD 716) and has had encounters with many well-known figures of Church and State during its long history. Their lives and doings are well known and well documented. But this is different. It is a record of ordinary people going about their daily business and just getting on with their lives.

There has been a Slater family in Crowland for very many years. Matthew Slater (b. 1813) and Martha Desborough from Borough Fen were married at Crowland Abbey in 1838. On their marriage certificate Matthew's father is named as "John Slater, labourer". It is not known whether he was living at Crowland at the time, but it seems more than likely that he was a local man. Matthew appears again in 1844 when, according to the Vestry Minutes he was appointed to be a member of the first Crowland Fire Brigade. He died in November 1885 at the age of 72. Martha lived to see the 20th century and died in August 1905 aged 91. They left a son, John Desborough Slater (b. 1841) who married Sara Ann Reynolds of Wainfleet. She was working in service with the Riddington family at Brewery House. Before that she had worked at her brother's hotel in Brighton, but that is

part of another (and quite romantic) story. They had 12 children, of whom the 10th, Charles Alfred (b. 1890) was the father of the present John who has collected this family archive.

John's pictures begin in the 1890's. In 1891 the population of Crowland was 2,800 (in 1991 it was 3292) and it seems to have been a busy, prosperous little town with a wide variety of shops and tradespeople, a Fire Station, a Bank, a Gas Works and a

"Free Parochial Library" of some 200 volumes. Public transport was good too. There was a daily "omnibus" to and from Peterborough, also carriers daily to Peterborough and several times a week to Spalding. For travel further afield there were railway stations at Postland, Eye and Thorney.

This, then, was Crowland in the 1890's. Now John Slater's pictures and memories take up the story. "An everyday story of country folk", perhaps? We shall see!



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An early start (1898 -1918)



This is one of the early Slater family pictures. It was taken about 1898 and shows their water-carrier's cart by the side of Crowland Lake. A water-carrier's cart might seem to be rather unnecessary in the Fens. However, White's Directory of Lincolnshire, published some thirty years earlier in 1856, had noted that, "...the drainage of the Fen lands round the town [of Crowland] has been so complete that many of the inhabitants have to be supplied by itinerant water carriers."

John Slater's grandfather, also John (b.1841) and father Charles (b.1890) sold water around the village at $\frac{1}{2}$ d a bucket or 3 buckets for 1d. (The prices are difficult to convert; $\frac{1}{2}$ d has no decimal equivalent and anything under 3d equates approximately to the present 1p.) The cart pictured here was owned by Grandfather John Slater. Seated on Toby the donkey is Lilian Slater, John's aunt, who was born in 1894 and was therefore about 4 years old. Mary Ann Slater (b.1882), another of John's aunts, stands by the barrel. Mary Ann married Robert Henfrey, sometime landlord of the *Durham Ox* in Nene Terrace and later of the *Carpenter's Arms* in South Street. Lilian married Walter Cary, who became a smallholder after the First World War. John and Charles also acted as local carrier to and from Spalding market and brought coal from Peakirk at 3s. 0d (15p) for a 10-stone bag (approximately 65 kilos). In later years, coal was transported by barges down the river and unloaded in Burton's Yard, near the *King's Head*.

The building on the far right of the picture is the *Boat Inn*, demolished many years ago.

Here are two more pictures of Toby the Donkey in the early 1900s, older now, but still pulling the water cart. In the first picture he is seen in South Street, Crowland with John's cousin Doris (Uncle Matthew Slater's daughter, b.1910) sitting on the barrel. In the second, he is at the Crowland Bank end of Gravel Causeway.

Toby died about 1920 and a family funeral was held for him at North Bank Cottage. As the second curfew tolled from the Abbey at 8pm, Toby was buried at the bottom of the garden.



In spite of "the drainage of the fen lands being so complete" that the water carrier was still necessary, it did not prevent regular flooding of Gravel Causeway at this spot.



Floods at Fen Bridge in the early 1900s (Photo courtesy of Judy Bunten)

Well within living memory Crowland was regularly cut off.

Winter flooding of Crowland Wash isolated some communities from the village and boats were used to ferry people to and from Fen Bridge for a 4d (2p) return fare. As recently as October 1989, at her 100th birthday party, centenarian Mrs Maud Sharpe, who with her husband John Sharpe kept the *Bridge Hotel* "over the Wash" on Crowland Common from 1913 to 1953, recalled how, when the floods were out, the only way that the family could get to market or the children to school was by boat. Amongst her vast store of memories she

recalled how the pub sold beer at 1d a pint in 1913, and how she would go out after tea to skate on the Wash. "Often I'd still be out there skating by moonlight."

Like Mrs Sharpe, Crowland people can usually make the best of a bad job. The cheery folk in this Fen Bridge flood (below) are obviously trying to tell everyone that it was really a pleasure trip. The boat looks rather full and one hopes they all got across safely.

In the picture, taken in the early 1930's, Johnny Brown of North Street, Crowland, is seen at the oars of one of his two boats. John Slater's uncle, Bill Beeken, in the bow, also



owned two boats. Several crossings were made each day, beginning at 6.30am and ending at 4.00pm, with special reductions in the fare for tradespeople, schoolchildren and the postman. One of the boats had formerly been a ship's lifeboat.

Flooding of the wash-lands, with all the problems it caused, was not, however, always confined to the wintertime. A well-remembered occasion when summer did not quite live up to its name was August 1912, when severe storms caused much damage to the harvest. The *Peterborough Advertiser* described the last days of the month as "this black week of rain and ruin." One day it poured with rain from 5.30am until 7pm, and at Peterborough the River Nene rose 18ins (½ metre) in 12 hours. The following day it was 8ft (nearly 2½ metres) above normal. Many properties in the Bridge Street and Albert Place area were flooded to the depth of several feet, as was the hamlet of Garton End. In the Deeping area many roads and hundreds of acres were flooded; the corn stood in water with no possibility of the harvest being gathered in. Never before in living memory had so many acres been covered with water.



After the storms at Crowland. The farm worker in the picture is stooking sheaves in an attempt to minimise losses.



But, come hell or high water, as the saying goes (high water and Boatman Brown in Crowland's case) children had to go to school. Stepping back a few years from the disastrous harvest of 1912, we see here Postland Road School in 1907. John Slater's future mother-in-law, née Dora Pepper (b.1895) is first on the left in the front row. She grew up to be a well-known and much loved lady in Crowland, noted for her great kindness and generosity to all.

Postland Road School was built in 1856 at a cost of about £1,600, of which £500 was given by the Marquess of Exeter, £100 by the Duke of Bedford and the remainder by "other subscribers". At the time of building, it was described as "a handsome building in the Early English style, with a spire 72 feet high and a fine oriel window, being intended to be used also as a chapel of ease." It was originally a National School for both boys and girls, but in 1877 South View School was erected off South View Road. This was a "Board School" for boys and infants; apparently the girls remained at Postland Road. In 1900 the average attendance was 132 pupils and Miss Louisa Frances Stanwell was the mistress; by 1913 attendance was 134 and the mistress was Miss Lucy Morris. South View School later became a mixed school for both boys and girls. A well-remembered teacher was Miss Daisy Cooke. She taught girls Standards 6 and 7 - and was still there in the early 1940's.

School children certainly had their problems in times of flood, but they were not the only ones. The postman, too, sometimes had his work cut out to deliver the mail, as Mr Percy Hall of Millfield Gardens, Crowland told the *Peterborough Evening Telegraph* in December 1990:

"My grandfather, Mark Middleton, who lived in West Street, Crowland was a Royal Mail

contractor.

He would start work at 5pm, collecting mail from Crowland post office before going on to Thorney and Whittlesey, eventually delivering to the general post office in Peterborough. He also took the mail for the midnight Peterborough to London train. After a few hours sleep he would leave at 6am on the return journey, dropping the mail at Whittlesey and Thorney.

The journey was made more difficult when Whittlesey Wash was flooded. Often he travelled through the floods and when warned of danger, he replied: 'I must get



through with the mail'. When conditions were too bad, he made a detour via Eye-Peterborough-Stanground for the Whittlesey mail."

The mail driver in the picture above is George Taylor, relief driver at that time.

The journey must have been horrendous when one remembers that often it must have been done in the dark, by the light of candle lamps on the cart.

In time, Slaters too became connected with Post Office transport. John Slater's Uncle Ernest is pictured above right with Post Office staff at Peterborough c. 1919. He delivered mail to Crowland before buying



his own lorry in the early 20's. His sons, Bill and Tony, continued in the haulage business. We shall meet them again later.

Comparison of this mail van with the horse-drawn one shows how much transport had changed in the fifty or so years between the two. Mechanisation had begun to appear

on the farms too, but most of the work there was still done by men and horses as it always had been. The chief local crops were wheat, barley, oats and potatoes. Both men and women worked on the land, and one of the traditional "women's jobs" was potato picking.

Here below we see a gang of potato pickers from the 1880's, led by John Slater's grandmother Jane Pawley (standing seventh from the left). She once brought her gang out on strike for 6d (2½p) a week more, and won, a rare event in those days. (A farm labourer's wages were about ten shillings (50p) a week, or less.) Note the assortment of lunch baskets, and the hats, which were intended to be functional rather than fashionable. Fenland sun shines both sides of the hedges and fenland winds are lazy. (Think about it!)





of these engines were designed to prevent emission of sparks and so minimise the risk of fires being started in the straw.

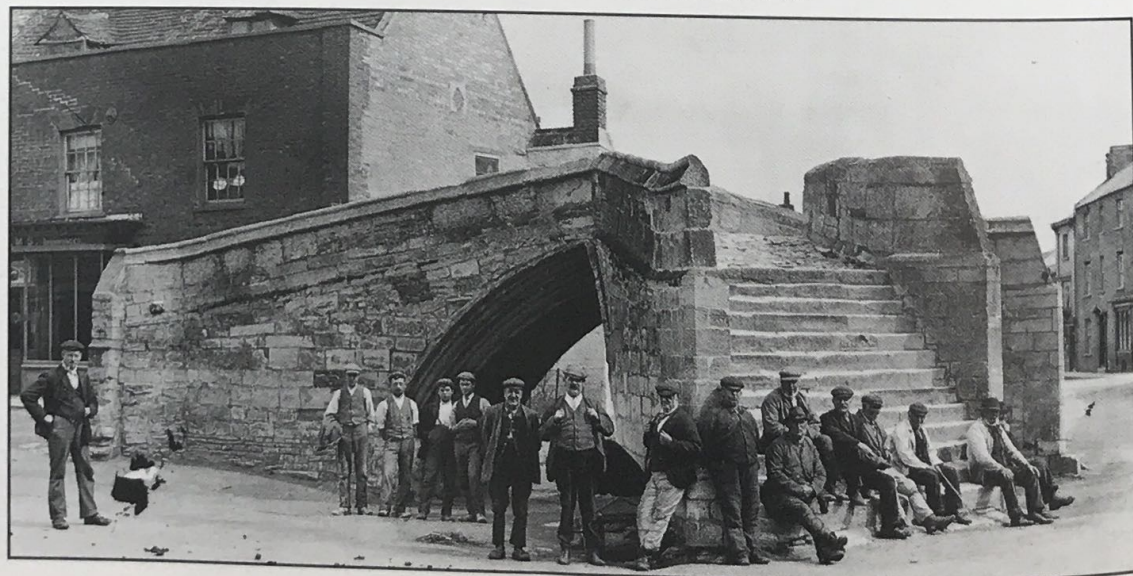
Grandfather David and Grandmother Jane Pawley both died on the same day - 4 December 1943. As their gravestone in the Abbey churchyard records "in death they were not divided".

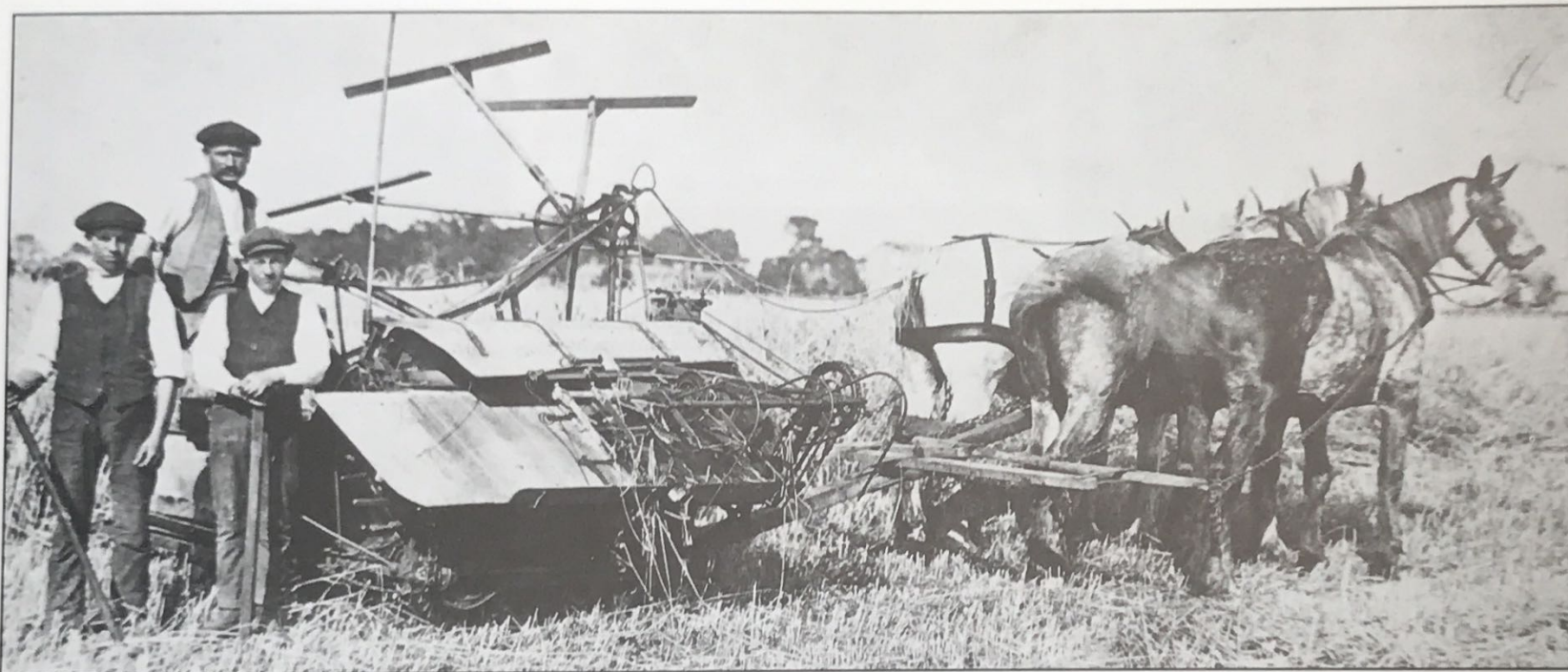
The century turned and within a few years the First World War was to bring many changes but, for the time being, life jogged along in much the same way as it had for years.

Below, lunch break by the Bridge for some Crowland workmen some time before 1914. Grandfather David Pawley is the portly man standing by the corner of the Bridge, eighth from the right. The Bridge - known as the "Triangular Bridge" or Trinity Bridge" - originally spanned three rivers, the Nene, the Welland and the Catt. The present stone structure is thought to have been built between 1360 and 1390, and replaced an earlier wooden one which is mentioned in a charter of AD 943.

However, machinery was beginning to appear on the farm more and more. Steam engines had already replaced most of the drainage windmills along the dykes, and by about 1850 they had begun to replace horses on the land. The straw elevator was invented by James Hayes of Overend, Elton, near Peterborough, and had its first trial at Morborne in 1853. Long before his death at Warmington in 1890 it was in general use.

Both engine and elevator can be seen in the photograph above. This stackyard scene at threshing time was taken about 1893 in Simon's Yard (at the back of the North Street Fire Station). John's grandfather, whose spirited wife Jane had led the potato pickers' successful strike, stands hands on hips in front of the Foster portable steam engine, typical of the kind he used for thirty-seven years. The tall chimney stacks





Ancient and modern working together on Crowland Common, again some time before 1914. Arthur Sharpe, Benny Copland and Ernie Sharpe with an up-to-date Massey-Harris binder and a team of good old-fashioned Percheron horses.

Crowland Brass Band (right) around the turn of the century, with Bandmaster George Hall (who died in 1906) seated in the centre of the middle row.

Forthcoming events, official notices and general announcements were publicised by the Town Crier. For about 100 years, from 1850 until the custom was discontinued in the 1950s, the Crowland office was held by the Strickland family. The practice was to cry 12 times for each announcement but, for some special occasions, he would cry 20 times. One cry was always made from the Bridge.





This is a photo of Mr Marshall Strickland (Senior) who took over the position of Town Crier from his father in 1890. He held the office for about 50 years and was succeeded by his son George who was the last Crier.

As well as Town Criers, the Strickland family were - and still are - a well-known firm of local builders. They were also all fine skaters with many wins to their credit, and here (right) they are on one such occasion.

The Strickland family, left to right, Marshall, George, Cuddy, Marshall senior, Arthur and Robert. Cuddy, in the wellingtons, is holding a pair of the long-bladed skates known as "Fen Runners". These were

standard until about 1895, after which "Norwegian Runners" began to appear and gradually took over from the old style. On the bank in the background is one of Slater's Ford lorries which was used to take skaters to races.

This picture was taken in 1929, with Mr Marshall Strickland (senior) holding the Crowland Skating Association Cup, which he won twice, on 4 January 1889 and 17 December 1890. Arthur is holding the Kingston Rose Bowl, which he won in the Under-19 event in the same year (1929).

But we are wandering away and have run (or skated) too far ahead in our story. Back to the early 1900's, and another look at bygone Crowland.

Above right is a photograph of a very old established business, Harker and Graves, printers and stationers, of North Street, Crowland. "Graves" was the maiden name of



Ted Wortley's mother. She followed her father in the business, collecting newspapers by bicycle from Eye and Postland railway stations before delivering them, still by bicycle, as far afield as Whaplode Drove and all the Fen roads. Ted Wortley was one of Slater's lorry drivers and worked for the firm from the early 1930's to 1946. Next to the shop is the *White Hart* inn.



South Street, Crowland (far right), in the early years of the century. The old Post Office (from where Mr Percy Hall's grandfather Mark Middleton, set out on his arduous journey every day) is on the left hand side with the little girl outside. On the far left is Bill Gray's blacksmith shop.

On the opposite side, the *Three Tuns* on the corner of Reform Street was kept by Frederick John Cary from about 1908 until his death in 1912. Next to the *Three Tuns* was the gasworks. The streets were lit by gas and John's father Charles Slater was the town's lamplighter for many years. The white building at the far end is the *Carpenter's Arms*, some time kept by Robert and Mary Ann (née Slater) Henfrey.



Above, the Slater family in carnival mood, some time before 1914. Taken at North Bank Cottage, we see father Charles Slater holding the pony's head, Uncle Desborough's eldest son Bill ("Big Bill", b. 1902) seated on the pony, and Aunt Lilian and Aunt Mary Ann (who we saw earlier at the lake side with the water-carrier's cart) sitting on the decorated cart. Standing in front is Granddad John Slater (b. 1841) - nicknamed "Yardy" - Grandmother Sara (née Reynolds) next to him, wearing the white apron that she always wore in the afternoons, then Uncle Desborough's wife Florence and their little niece, also Florence, in front.

Some of the old Fen ways still survived. Bottom photograph is a typical winter scene on Cowbit Wash in the early part of the century. Taken about 1910, the photo shows a wild-fowler with his day's catch. Apart from several ducks, he appears to have bagged a



pair of swans as well. His long-barrelled punt-gun has been mounted on a sledge to enable it to be pushed over the ice, and he also appears to be carrying a shoulder gun.

Winter on Cowbit Wash, however, was not only good for wildfowlers. Some of the great Fenland championship skating races were held there in the past. In the photograph (left) is John Slater's father Charles





after winning the Professional Championship of Lincolnshire on 5 February 1912 at Cowbit. His time for the 1½ mile, 3 turn barrel course was 4 mins. 50 secs. He is seen wearing the winner's sash which was presented by the Lincolnshire Skating Association.

Since the Second World War, major drainage works on the Welland, particularly the cutting of the Coronation Channel, prevent water staying on the Wash for more than a few days. Skating matches are no longer held there and it is doubtful whether the famous 'Flying Straight Mile' will ever take place again, certainly never again at

Cowbit. The last time was in 1940.

The next picture is, in contrast, a summer one. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, a hot one.

Here we see Bert Sharpe, Ethelbert Smith, Benny Copland, Arthur Sharpe, Ernie Sharpe, James ("Gittam") Sharpe, and Mr Hall, with Jack Slater (a distant relation, from Thorney Road, to John) standing by his own engine. They are using an elevator, powered by steam engine, to turn an overheated stack. Weather can cause a damp stack - usually hay or oat straw - to become very hot in the centre. The result is a serious fire risk by spontaneous combustion

if not attended to in time. A 7-foot long metal 'needle', with a hook on the end, was thrust into the centre of the suspicious stack and left overnight. If the end was black when the 'needle' was pulled out in the morning, the stack was overheating and had to be turned over at once. The photograph is believed to have been taken about 1914 near Beeken's Yard, off what is now Clutton's Close.

Bert Sharpe was the eldest of the family; his brother Ernie went to war but sadly did not return. He was killed in France in March 1918. Ethelbert Smith did his war service in a Scottish regiment.