

The Smith family and the founding of the Ewelme Watercress Beds

The hamlet of South Weston in Oxfordshire, lies at the foot of the Chiltern Hills, about three miles North of Watlington. In 1841, it was the home of a 30 year old agricultural labourer called Eden Smith and his wife and the first five of their eventual family of eleven children. Six years later, according to a local directory of the time, he had become a beer retailer, although this seems to have been a side-line, as he is still recorded as a farm labourer in the 1851 census.

However, the beer trade obviously did well, and, by 1861, Eden Smith's main occupation was as a licensed victualler. He died in 1867, to be succeeded by his wife. Some time within the next fourteen years their fifth son (and ninth child), George, took over. By 1891, George's public house was known as 'The Salisbury Arms' and George himself is recorded as a 'watercress grower and publican'.

Whether from the sale of beer or from watercress growing (or both), George was to become a man of some substance. He was then into the second of his three marriages. His first wife, Anna (or Hannah) Maria, after bearing him four children, had died in 1878, and he had re-married a year later. Mary Ann, George Smith's second wife, bore him a further eight children, before she also died in 1893. By 1900, he had again re-married. His third wife, Annie, by whom he had a further four children, survived him.

About six miles from South Weston, on the other side of Watlington, is the village of Ewelme. It is a village with extensive historical connections. Its medieval palace, (now largely destroyed) was originally the home of William de la Pole, Earl and later Duke of Suffolk, whose wife, Alice, was the granddaughter of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer. Henry VIII stayed there, and the future Elizabeth I also lived there for a time under virtual house arrest during the reign of her sister, Mary. The Church as it now stands and its adjoining group of almshouses largely derive from the generosity of the Duchess of Suffolk. She rebuilt the Church, and was responsible for building what is now one of the oldest school buildings still in use for its original purpose.

The village also has an attractive stream, which runs down the main street, before turning away to run past the backs of houses to the site of the former mill.

On 20th November 1886, the 'Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette' contained this item:

'WATLINGTON

SALE OF PROPERTY – Mr Richard Spyer, who has recently resumed the business of an auctioneer, established by his father in Watlington some years since, conducted a successful sale on Wednesday of a small freehold property at Ewelme, consisting of two cottages, with about half an acre of good garden ground, abutting on the celebrated Ewelme trout stream. The property, which produced a rental of £10 per annum, was sold to Mr George Smith for £180.'

This is the only record to have come to light of George Smith acquiring land in Ewelme, but it was probably about this time that he also acquired the site of the Ewelme watercress beds.

The watercress beds in Ewelme stretch for about three quarters of a mile. They run from the point where the Ewelme stream is separated from the village street by houses to the bridge where the Benson road crosses it. Beyond the bridge, the beds continue through the old mill pond and the site of the former mill to end a little way below.

George Smith's son, Wally, was interviewed in 1977, and said that his father and uncle had dug out the beds in about 1870, a date which has been widely accepted as the date of the founding of them. However, Adelaide Smith, his sister-in-law and predecessor as owner of the beds, is recorded in 1950 as saying that the beds were opened 'about 60 years ago', which would have made the founding date about 1890.

The latter date seems more likely. The mill was operating on the lower part of the site until 1886. The two Ordnance Survey sheets covering the site, dated respectively 1877 and 1881, show no trace of watercress beds. And when George Smith bought the cottages mentioned above, they are described as 'abutting on the celebrated Ewelme trout stream' again without any reference to watercress beds.

On Friday 5th February 1886, the 'Wallingford Times' reported:-

EWELME MILL BURNT DOWN. - On Sunday morning, Ewelme Mill, the property of Mr J. Slade, was almost entirely destroyed by fire. Mr Slade and his men had been working in the mill till twelve o'clock of Saturday, and shortly after they left, and Mr Slade had got home, his attention was called by his sister to the fact that smoke was issuing from the roof of the mill. On proceeding there, he found the whole premises in flames. An alarm was given, and several persons soon arrived on the spot. In a very short time,

the Benson fire engine also arrived, but nothing could be done to extinguish the flames. The mill was burning all day on Sunday, and a portion of the following day. It is conjectured that the bearings had got too hot, and had set fire to the woodwork, and the whole building being very old, it easily caught fire. A considerable quantity of corn and flour was in the mill, and the damage sustained amounts to several pounds. Mr Slade, however, was heavily insured in the 'Law' office.'

It seems quite likely that, after the mill went, its site and the land occupied with it (which could well have included the whole of the eventual watercress beds site) were put on the market, and that George Smith then bought them. Whenever it happened, the digging out of the beds was a colossal undertaking. The work had to be done by hand, creating a series of 39 levels, each about 25 yards long, with steps down between them.

At the end of each bed was a wooden partition, made of elm, with slots cut in it at exactly the right place, and to exactly the right depth to ensure an even flow of water throughout the system.

Where the site allowed, the beds were in pairs, side by side, separated by a low dam of chalk, so that it was possible to drain one side whilst keeping water in the other. And to facilitate this, there was also a channel along one side of the beds, from which the beds could be fed with water, or into which they could be drained, according to the state of the crop, and the operation which was required at any time.

In all, the beds occupied some six and a half acres.

Although George Smith appears to have provided the inspiration for the opening of the Ewelme beds, and probably the capital, it was his younger brother, Robert, who seems to have been responsible for the day to day running of them. Successive local directories, of 1891, 1895 and 1899, refer to 'Smith, Robert, watercress grower' in relation to Ewelme, rather than to George. George had other interests, including the 'Salisbury Arms', and watercress beds in South Weston, Bourne End, and probably elsewhere. In 1902, he also acquired a substantial farm, Church Farm in Lewknor, employing thirteen or fourteen men, where he again grew watercress, as well as carrying on more general farming.

He was, however, nominated as a parish councillor in Ewelme in 1896.

By the turn of the century, the Ewelme watercress beds were well established. Their produce, mostly at that time packed in 56lb hampers, was taken by wagon or cart to Watlington station about four to five miles away,

and then by train to the Midlands and Manchester. Ewelme cress acquired a very high reputation in the national markets and was much sought after.



Adelaide Smith with Percy Strickland – 1950.

The Ewelme Watercress Beds in the twentieth century

George Smith retired from the 'Salisbury Arms' between 1905 and 1910. He would then have been in his late fifties or early sixties. He died in 1918.

In his Will, he left his land and business interests upon trust for his wife and fourteen surviving children. The Will provided that his third son Sidney should have the right to buy from the trustees the farming business at Church Farm, Lewknor, and that his fourth son, Edward, should have the right to buy the watercress business at Ewelme. Others of his sons were to be offered the businesses if those named did not want to take them on, but for some reason, the two eldest sons, George and Henry were specifically excluded from this.

Edward did take over the watercress business, being joined for a short time in the late 1920s by his younger brother, Bert. However, this arrangement did not work out well, and Edward eventually bought Bert out, unfortunately leaving himself short of capital in the process.

At this time, Edward was married, with a young son, Gerald. Gerald remembers the trips over to Watlington with his father, to take consignments of cress to the station. These were usually sent on Thursday and Friday evenings to be sold in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Manchester markets at the week end. At this time, the cress was sent packed in 28lb wicker baskets, which still bore the identification plate 'GSSW' (for George Smith, South Weston).

By now the horse and cart previously used to take the cress to the station had been replaced by an Austin car drawing a specially designed ten foot trailer. However, in other respects, the business would have carried on year by year in exactly the same way as it had been from the start.

The baskets of cress joined with supplies coming from other growers destined for Covent Garden. The Ewelme cress destined for the Midlands formed the greatest proportion of the cress traffic, which in itself formed the main goods business of the railway on these evenings.

Gerald remembers that whilst the consignment was being weighed and labelled and loaded on to the train, he was allowed to buy one item (usually a Fry's chocolate bar) from the vending machine on the station.

It seems to have been about this time that the legend grew up of the Ewelme watercress babies. It was said that a childless couple anxious to start a family

had only to come to Ewelme in the spring to gaze on the watercress when it was green and their wishes would be granted. (And if they were not anxious for children, they had to be very careful not to come at this time!). The story is told in the village of a wife who came to live in the village and became pregnant. Her sister-in-law came for a visit, and she too immediately became pregnant; and then her mother came for a visit and also found shortly that she was expecting a late child. The legend was still current well after the War and was featured in the National press.

Edward Smith died in 1939, when his son was only 10. As Gerald says, he had no interest in the beds at this time, but his mother, Adelaide, took them over and continued to run them until the 1950s. The War years must have been very difficult for a widow with a young son to support, trying to run a business in the face of the many restrictions of the time. The younger workers would have been called up, and transport facilities would have been limited.

Adelaide battled through, but certainly after the War ran into some financial difficulties. She was helped out by her brother-in-law, Walter or Wally (George Smith's penultimate son), and Walter eventually took over the beds himself in 1957. Gerald had at first become a motor mechanic, but was eventually attracted by the open air life of the watercress beds, and came to work with his mother. He continued to work for Walter. In 1951, possibly as a local contribution to the Festival of Britain, a 'Pageant of Ewelme' was put on at Ewelme Manor, celebrating the history of the village. One scene in the Pageant was the 'Mime of the Water-cress Men and Women', an indication of the importance of the watercress beds in the life of the community. It included a song, 'The Watercress Queen', which the watercress men are said to have sung whilst they were working:-

The Watercress Queen

While strolling out one evening
Down by the running stream,
Where water lilies were growing,
It was a lovely scene.

The sight I saw was better,
A damsel like a Queen;
She was gathering watercresses
Down by the old mill stream.

Her hair hung down in tresses
As gently flowed the stream,
She was gathering watercresses
Was that fair Watercress Queen.

I asked her if she was lonely,
She answered with a smile,
"Oh! no Sir! I am not lonely,
For this is my daily toil.

I have to be up so early,
To gather my cresses Green."
She told me her name was Martha*,
Better known as the Watercress Queen.'

**The name would be changed at the choice of the singer.*

Harry Winfield, a notable character in the beds at this time, remembered singing this song. He was aged over 81 in 1951, but was still working in the beds after more than 60 years, having been George Smith's foreman almost from the start.

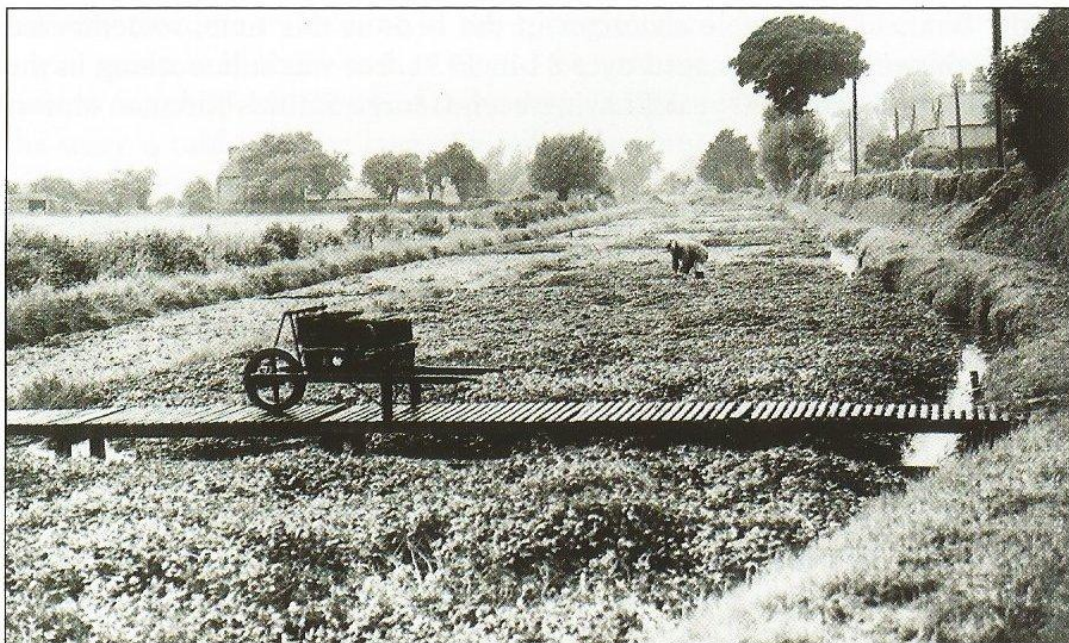
In 1965, Walter Smith retired, and advertised the beds for sale. They were bought by two businessmen from Thame, a Mr James Chavasse and a Mr Ken Austin. For the first time in their history, the beds were no longer owned by a member of the Smith family, although Gerald Smith continued to work for the new owners for a time.

However, they had new ideas about the working of the site, with which Gerald did not feel comfortable. After a short time, therefore, he left to get a job in a dairy, but returning occasionally to help out in times of pressure.

For another 23 years, the new owners worked the beds, but they were proving less and less viable. They closed rather suddenly in 1988, bringing to an end around 100 years of watercress production in Ewelme.



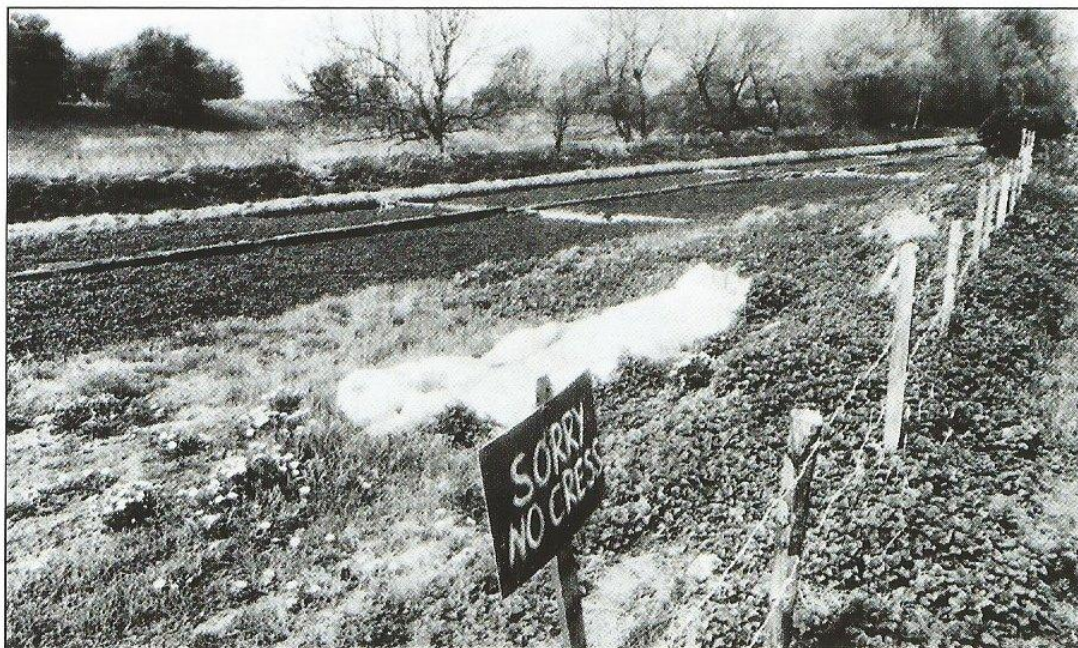
For sale December 1995.



Looking towards the Ford from the Nellie Bridge – 1950.

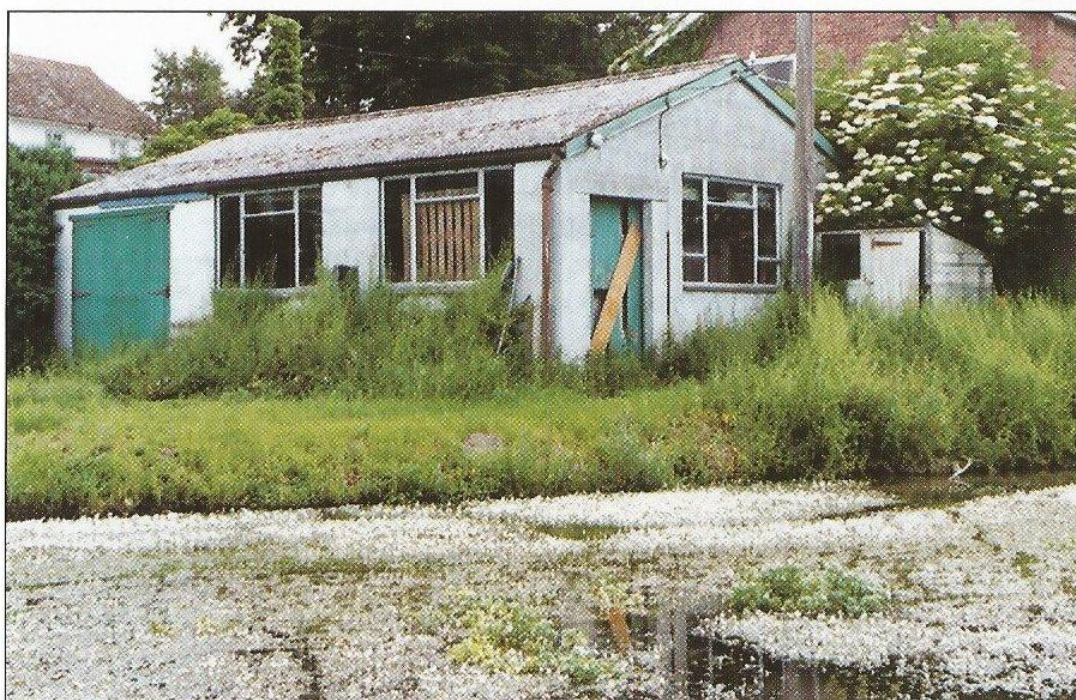


Edward Smith and Harry Winfield tying cress into bundles – 193?



NEWSQUEST

The Beds close down in 1988.



Before the now derelict packing shed was built in the 1950s all work was done outside – 1996.

The beds since closure and the future

That might have been the end for the Ewelme Watercress Beds. Once they were no longer cultivated, the site was very quickly colonised by weeds, particularly Great Willowherb. This grows to over 6 feet tall in the summer. In the winter, its hard, woody stems die and fall, and these were soon choking the waterway and beginning to fill in the beds. In addition, the structure of wooden dams had received little maintenance for some years, and these rapidly began to rot and disintegrate.

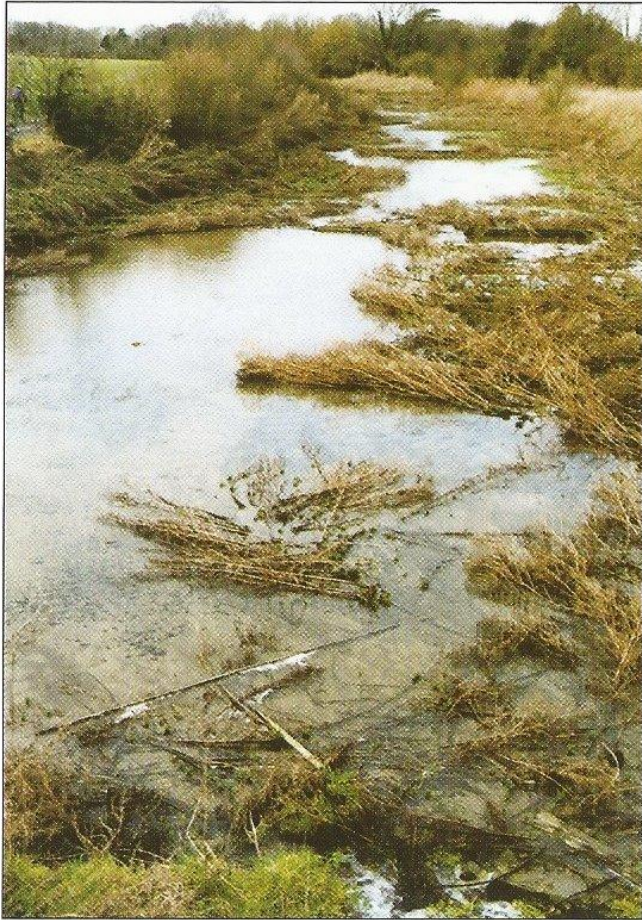
For three years the beds deteriorated and dried up, the river reverting to a narrow channel, swinging from side to side of the former site. The beds became an eyesore rather than the attractive feature of the village scene which they had been for so long. The habitat which they had previously provided for much wildlife, especially the endangered water vole, was disappearing.

Many people in the village regretted what was happening, not least of them Gerald Smith, still living beside the beds in Watercress Cottages, the property bought by his grandfather so many years ago.

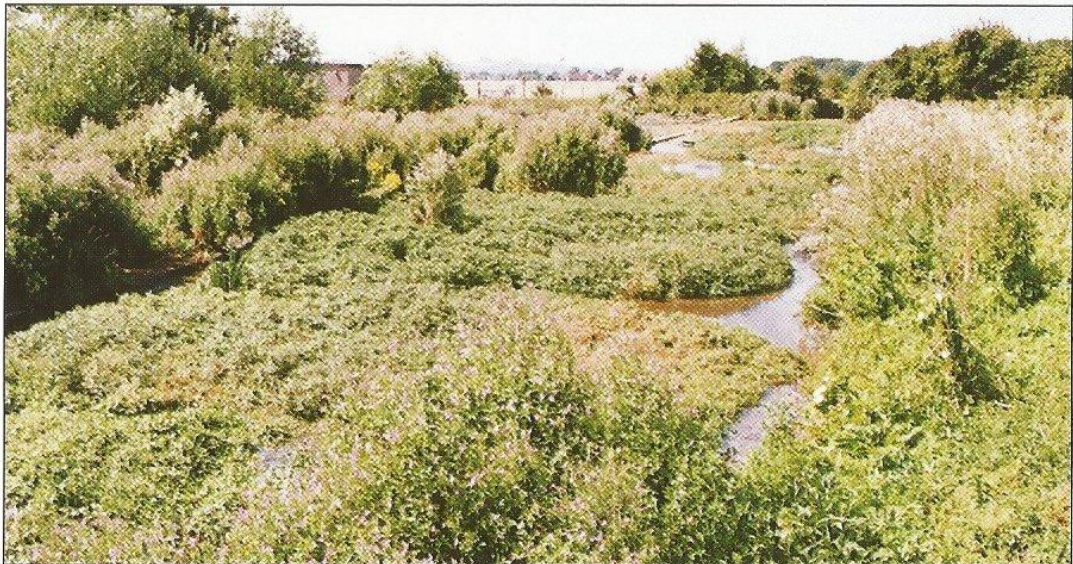
One man in particular decided that something needed to be done. In 1975, Des Dix had bought a house, then newly built, by the side of the Ewelme beds. One of the things which had attracted him to this house had been the prospect of the beds which came with it. When cultivation stopped, and the beds were obviously deteriorating, he approached the owners for permission to work on the site, and then in 1991 set to work with his son to clear the weeds and restore the site to good condition.

It soon became apparent that he and his son could not do this on their own. He appealed for volunteers from the village to help him, and many from the village rallied round. But it needed more resources than even the village could offer, and he therefore also approached the Chiltern Society Conservation Volunteers, who agreed to organise work parties in the summer of 1992.

One more thing soon became clear - that until the structure of dams had been completely rebuilt, it would be impossible to retain water at the correct level in the beds. In 1994, Des sold his business, and, having time on his hands, undertook this project. He had to rebuild twenty of the most important of the low wooden dams, originally created by George Smith and his brother, now using oak, elm being no longer available. Each dam had to be cut and shaped in situ, so that it fitted exactly the shape of the bed, and



Each year Great Willowherb takes over more of the open water – Spring 1995.



Below the bridge, weeds are growing on banks of silt while the stream cuts a narrow winding channel.



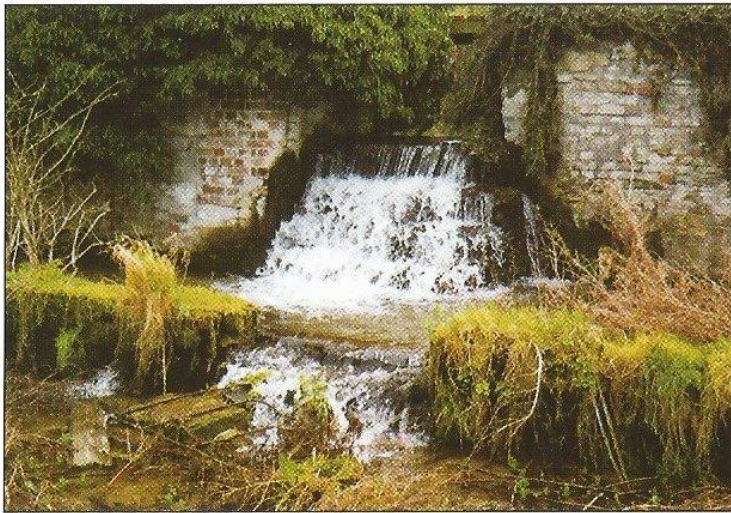
The first workday. Digging grass out from the beds – May 1992.



The first workday. Clearing out 2m tall Willowherb – May 1995.



*Patching up a broken dam –
Spring 1993.*



*Although the mill weir is
structurally sound, the poor
state of the lower weir is
obvious – 1996.*



As the silt builds up Willow carr develops – 1996.

Des had to re-learn painstakingly the techniques of his predecessors in ensuring the even flow of water through the site. It took him a year and a half to restore the part of the site above the bridge, the part which was most visible from the village street.

One positive benefit of the closure of the beds for commercial production was an increase in the use of the site by ducks and moorhen, who had previously been controlled by the commercial operators. Des did some work on the area of the beds below the bridge (the site of the former millpond and mill), to restore the waterfalls which existed there, but otherwise decided largely to leave this area alone as a wildlife haven.

Whilst the dams were being repaired, volunteers from the village and the Chiltern Society continued to clear the weeds which had invaded and dig the levels back to their former depth. This work continued until 1997, apart for a short period following the death of one of the site owners, Mr Chavasse, in 1993.

With the death of Mr Chavasse, there was a fear that his share in the beds might pass into fresh hands, which could lead not just to a halt in the conservation work, but even to a complete change of land use and the destruction of the valuable archaeology of the site. Difficulties experienced in contacting the solicitors for the Chavasse estate led the Chiltern Society to seek the help of the Environmental Law Foundation. They, with the help of South Oxfordshire District Council, put the Society in touch with the now sole owner, Mr Ken Austin. The beds were put on the market for sale in 1995.

People in the village interested in the future of the beds set up an informal support group, the Friends of Ewelme Watercress Beds. In February 1999, the adoption of a formal constitution resulted in a large increase in membership, which now stands at 163, the largest voluntary society in the village. The group is affiliated to the Chiltern Society, and the Friends and the Society are together exploring the possibility of acquiring the beds from the surviving owner.

They have been advised that it would not be possible to resume commercial production of watercress, because the beds could not be made to comply with modern standards of water quality and food safety without disproportionate expense. However, the site is of historical interest, as the production of watercress was an important rural industry in the Chilterns, and the beds at Ewelme, besides being the largest and most important in the area, with a national reputation, were also one of the last to operate commercially. As a result of the work already undertaken, much of their



The day of the skip – 1995.



Some of the early "Friends" – 1995.

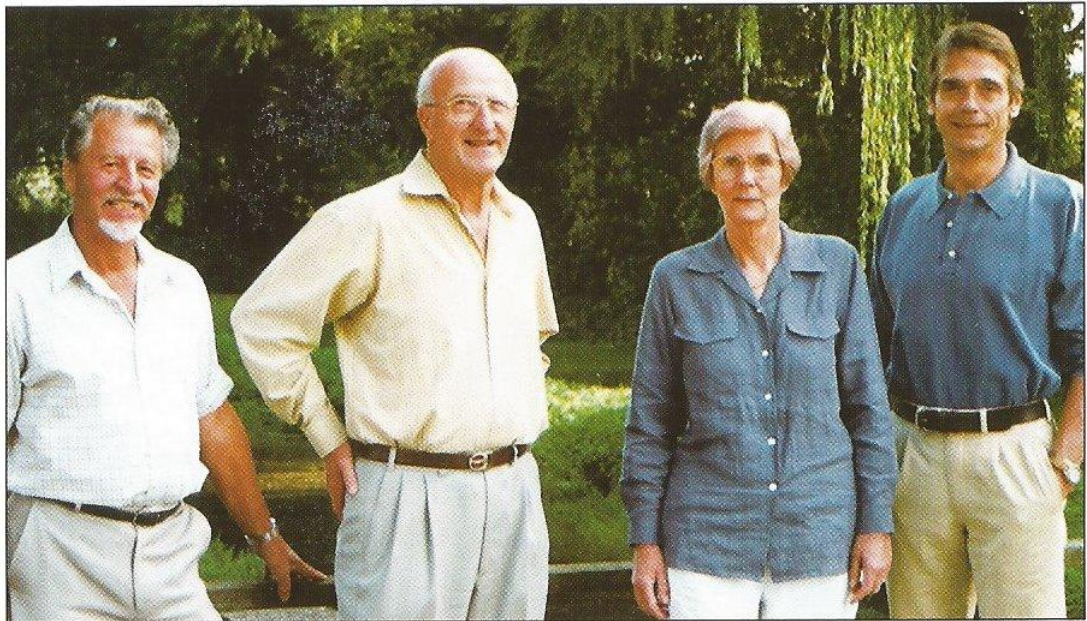
basic structure remains intact, which gives them particular significance.

The beds and the adjoining land also have a substantial wildlife and landscape value, and a conservation management plan has been produced by Derek Highfield of the University of Reading.

The purposes of acquiring the site have therefore been identified as

- (a) to preserve the industrial archaeology of the site
- (b) to conserve and where possible extend the range of wildlife habitats
- (c) to improve the landscape quality
- (d) to provide public access where appropriate
- (e) to offer educational and interpretational facilities and
- (f) to provide facilities for observing wildlife

In September 1999, the Chiltern Society with the support of the Friends launched a fund raising campaign with Jeremy Irons as patron to purchase the beds. This is under way as this book goes to press.



Launch of the fund raising campaign. Desmond Dix, Chairman of the "Friends"; Michael Rush, Chairman of The Chiltern Society; Beryl Hunt and Jeremy Irons.

Bibliography and sources

Help in compiling this history has come from a number of people, notably Gerald Smith and Des Dix and others of the Friends of Ewelme Watercress Beds, Christine Brown and others of the Ewelme Millenium Group, Dr Barbara Perriton and Mrs Juliet Nissen of Ewelme, Beryl and Hugh Hunt and Dr Barry Scott of the Chiltern Society, Mr John Jesty of the National Farmers Union Watercress Growers Association and the staffs of the Centre for Local Studies in Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire Archives, the Museum of English Rural Life, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Library, the Family Records Centre and the Probate Service, Principal Registry Family Division.

Written information has come from the following documents:-

Official Records

Census returns for England and Wales for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891

Parish registers of the parishes of Ewelme, Lewknor and South Weston

Registers of electors for Ewelme, Lewknor and South Weston for the years 1895, 1900, 1905, 1910, 1915, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935 and 1938

Probate Registry Calendars for 1880, 1918 and 1940

Ewelme Parish Council minute books

Published Works

(a) Books

John Gerarde:- 'Herball' (1597)

Nicholas Culpeper:- 'The English Physician, or Herball' (1653)

Henry Mayhew:- 'London Labour and the London Poor' (1851)

M.Prister-Crutwell:- 'Ewelme, its History and its People' (1976 edition)

'New Larousse Gastronomique' (English edition 1977)

Leslie Gordon:- 'A Country Herball' (1980)

'The Oxford Book of Food Plants' (1985 edition)

Paul Karau and Chris Turner:- 'Country Branch Line' (Vol. 2 1999)

'Ewelme History Trail'

(b) Trade Directories

Post Office Directories of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire (1847, 1854 and 1869)

Slater's Directory of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire (1850)

Harrod's Directory of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire (1876)

Kelly's Directories of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire (1883, 1887, 1891, 1895, 1899 and 1907)

(c) Newspapers and magazines

'Wallingford Times' (5th February 1886)

'Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette' (20th November 1886)
 'Journal of Royal Agricultural Society of England' (vol. VIII T.S. No. 32 Dec. 1897)
 'The Countryman' (Autumn 1944)
 'Farmer and Stockbreeder' (4th July 1950)
 'Thames Valley Countryside' (Winter 1965)
 'Agriculture' (vol. 79, No. 1 January 1972)
 'Country Life' (17th October 1974)
 'Farmers Weekly' (27th June 1980)
 'Oxford Mail' (May 5th 1989)
 Various unidentified newspaper cuttings

(d) Miscellaneous

Ordnance Survey Sheet XLIX 8 (1877)
 Ordnance Survey Sheet XLIX 4 (1881)
 Ordnance Survey Sheet XLIX 4 (1912)
 'Watercress Growing' (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Bulletin No. 136
 Third edition 1967)

Unpublished Documents

'Ewelme' (manuscript by Henry Taunt believed c. 1895)
 Will of George Smith (10th November 1917, with two codicils dated respectively
 20th March 1918 and 9th April 1918. Proved on 24th September 1918)
 Script of 'Pageant of Ewelme' (undated but performed on 27th and 28th July 1951)
 Notes of a field investigation into Watercress Beds, Ewelme, 17th/18th January 1977
 (source unknown)
 Will of James Chavasse (17th November 1992. Proved 17th January 1994)
 'Watercress' (handout from N.F.U. Watercress Association c. 1997)
 Chiltern Society 'Ewelme Watercress Beds. Introduction and Description of Project'
 (undated)

Produced by the Friends of Ewelme Watercress Beds supported by

