Three notable Victorian families in Great Bowden

by Paul Bennett, Great Bowden Historical Society

The Victorian age saw the emergence of a large, prosperous and influential middle class of men and women with big ideas, a strong social conscience and the drive and ability to change their world. It was also a time when both the civic landscape of Britain's towns and many of its villages were transformed by the erection of public buildings such as schools, libraries, town halls and village halls. New churches were built following Pugin's Victorian Gothic style and medieval churches were "modernised", Non-conformist chapels appeared everywhere: Baptist, Primitive Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist and Congregational.

Great Bowden in its own small way mirrored this Victorian scene. There were three families of importance in the village, the Chaters, the Hays and the Stokes. The Chaters were "chapel" and the Hay family was heavily involved with the parish church. The Stokes were originally farmers but had one very talented son who became an extremely rich and successful businessman. The Stokes did not seem to have had significant links with either church or chapel.

The Chater family

The Chaters were a dynasty of gentlemen farmers or graziers which lasted for over a 100 years in the village.

A Jonathan Chater, living in Dingley, became a member of Market Harborough Congregational Church in 1797 and a deacon in 1802. Leicestershire was one of the most active Nonconformist areas in the country in the 18th and early 19th century.

His son John was born in Dingley in 1799 and is recorded in the census in 1841 as a grazier in Great Bowden. Ten years later John Chater had 680 acres and employed 20 labourers, making him the largest landowner in the village at that time. He also had a Corn Merchants business employing a further 10 labourers. Significantly he was Chairman of the Sick Club in the village. One of their meetings was reported in the Leicester newspaper in April 1853 when 130 people sat for dinner at the Shoulder of Mutton. The 1871 census shows him still living with his family on Main Street. However he died the following year and the sale of his stock was held at his premises on the 4th October 1872. (128 beasts, 486 sheep, 8horses and farming implements) Although no house number is given, one can be sure that the address corresponds with the places we know today as "Upper House", "The Round House" and "Granary Close".

Upper House

It appears that the wealth of the family began with John. He and his wife Ann (nee Woolston) had six children, five boys and one girl. Four of the boys grew up to become graziers in their own right with substantial holdings of land in Great Bowden, Market Harborough and nearby villages. One son, Matthew, moved to Hallaton, where by 1881 he was farming 313 acres and employing 2 men and 2 boys. The youngest son George appears in the census of 1881, living on Coventry Road in Market Harborough, and was a grazier with 292 acres and employing 5 men.

However, the eldest son John Woolston Chater, continued to live and work in the village all his life. His life style reflected his status as a gentleman farmer and a major employer in the village, like his father before him. As well as owning extensive amounts of land

in Great Bowden, he is recorded as a grazier in Desborough and Middleton in Northamptonshire. The 1891 and 1901 censuses show him living with his wife and children in the Chater family home, now known as 32 Main Street (The "Upper House" estate).

The Chater Family Grave

In 1906 three years after his death, this large estate, which included the main house with its lodges, the granary ,land and cottages adjoining John Henry Stokes's Top Yard Farm, was sold to William Ernest Stokes for £11,000. (see below: John Henry Stokes' son, who was probably representing his father.)

Just like his grandfather, Jonathan Tayler Chater , John Chater's second eldest son, was a prominent member of the Congregational Churches in both Great Bowden and Market Harborough and took an active part in the fund raising for a new chapel in Great Bowden. (The two chapels were always closely linked.) The Market Harborough Advertiser of November 10th, 1885 records the "Laying of a Memorial Stone at Great Bowden" on November 5th, for the new chapel. The proceedings began in the old chapel in Sutton Road where a hymn was sung. After this there was a procession to the site of the new building on Main Street, where the Rev J. Hamill gave a short address introducing J. T. Chater, as "one who was a household word in Great Bowden", to lay the memorial stone. Jonathan Chater was presented with a mahogany mallet and inscribed silver ivory-handled trowel for the purpose. The new chapel, designed by Mr Talbot Brown of Wellingborough, was completed the following year, 1886, and accommodated 250 people.

Jonathon Tayler is recorded in the 1871 census as a farmer's son and living in Upper Green, Great Bowden. In the 1881 and subsequent censuses he is living in Market Harborough working as a grazier like his brothers. John Woolston had five children, four boys and one girl. His brother Jonathan Tayler had just one daughter.

The Congregational Chapel
Great Bowden

William Harrington Hay c. 1924

In the 1930's Alec, who was one of John Woolston's five children, was still living in the village, at the Old Hall on Upper Green, having continued in the family business as a grazier.

William Harrington Hay

Born in 1849 and educated at Eton and Cambridge, he came to live at Great Bowden Hall in 1881 and stayed until his death in 1925. He had inherited the house from his father who had converted the old Brittania Inn into a fine house with a walled garden and extensive out buildings. William and his wife had eleven children of whom only seven survived to adulthood.

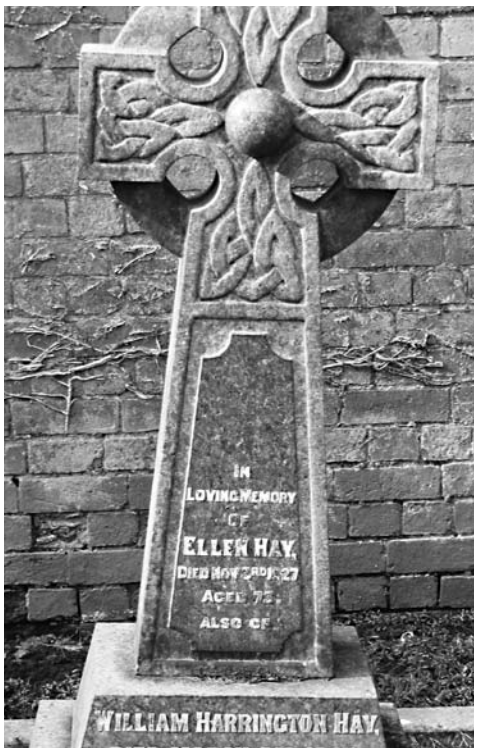
The "HAY" sisters of Bowden Hall, Great Bowden, Leicestershire.
C1895
Left to right:
Katherine Ellen 15yrs; Margaret 9yrs; Emma Nora Florence 10yrs; Dorothy Harrington 5yrs; Phyllis Hay 3yrs; Governess ?; Nona Constance, ? months; Nanny ?; Gladys 14yrs.
Identities conjectured & calculated from birth year by Michael C.Brown, LE16 7HD 77,UK.

Great Bowden Hall home to William Harrington Hay
1881 - 1925

These were all daughters of whom only one married, the rest remained as spinsters living on in the house until their deaths in the 1960's. The house was large and rambling and still with no electricity in 1970.The family always had numerous pets, mostly dogs and birds.

Mr Hay was a talented cricketer who had played with W.G. Grace against the Australians and so it was to be expected that he became Vice-President and Chairman of the new Great Bowden Cricket Club at their inaugural meeting in 1882! Cricket was his love but he was involved in all sports, particularly shooting and hunting, managing even to play a little golf. He also became involved in all aspects of village life: holding responsible positions as a J.P., School Manager, Church Warden and a Sunday school teacher. William Harrington Hay even found time to join the village amateur operatic and drama societies. He and his family were popular in the village and often were to be seen visiting the sick and needy. On one occasion they brought bowls of soup to the Elliott family on Leicester Lane when the children had scarlet fever.

Also in 1882 the "Leicester Journal" reported the summer treat organised by William. The outing was for "scholars of Sunday and Day Schools" of the village, accompanied by the Rev William Fryer from the Parish Church, teachers and friends. The paper says that as many as 230 people were entertained with an afternoon picnic tea at Great Bowden Hall. The majority walked the half a mile or so to the house, but "upwards of 70 lesser children" were conveyed in wagons provided by John W. Chater of Upper House. This annual summer treat continued into the early 1900's.



The grave of William Harrington Hay and his wife Ellen

John Henry Stokes

Stokes (1850-1920) was undoubtedly the most influential man in the village in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

John Henry moved to the village with his mother and siblings around 1875. His father William had been a prosperous farmer in North Luffenham who died tragically in 1863 leaving his mother Ann with five children, the youngest being only 2. John had benefited from a private education and had also hunted with the local Fitzwilliam and Cottesmore Hunts. Following the father's death, the farm appears to have declined over the next 12 years and eventually Anne and four of the children, including John Henry, made the move to Great Bowden buying an old farmhouse in Nether Green. However, once in Great Bowden their fortunes seem to have changed again, and in 1881, only six years after their arrival, John Henry is recorded in the census as having 400 acres and employing eight men and two boys. Nether House was considerably enlarged and became the centre of his empire with large and impressive stables and out buildings. This was also at a time when agriculture in England had entered a period of virtual collapse being unable to compete with cheap imports from America.

John Henry Stokes outside Nether House

Nether House in c. 1910

Initially he was listed in the trade directories as a grazier and a horse dealer. But such were his natural abilities for choosing horses it was not long before he became probably the most successful breeder of hunters in England. The breeding and selling of hunters became the more important part of his large business. His records show that he was supplying fine horses to a clientele which included the future Edward V11, the Emperor of Austria and the Kings of Spain and Italy, as well as most of the hunting aristocracy of England and continental Europe. At the same time he was also supplying large numbers of lesser quality horses to the army, for the Boer War and later the 1st World War.

John Henry Stokes was a regular prize winner in the show ring. Two of his horses subsequently became Grand National winners, the most famous being "Music Hall" trained in East Langton. He appears to have been equally successful as a grazier with a large acreage around Great Bowden and in the Welland valley, well known for its rich pastureland. He was a notable prize winner with cattle and sheep in agricultural shows, even recovering from an epidemic of foot and mouth to continue producing prize winning champion sheep and cattle.

There is no doubt that his business was greatly assisted by two factors: the easy access to the railway, Market Harborough station being only a short distance from Great Bowden, and being situated in the most famous hunting area in England.

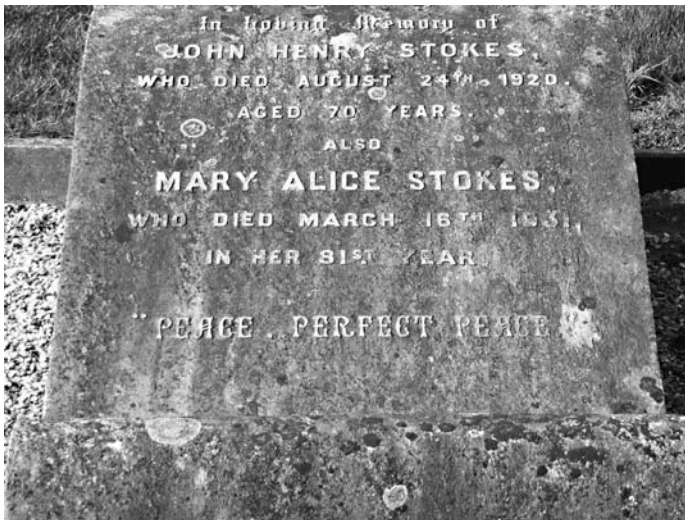
Stokes kept several large account books or ledgers detailing all his income from prizes and sales.(There is one entry recording the sale of a hunter for 50 guineas to the then Prince of Wales, including a charge of 1 guinea for transport to the future King's hunting box, Craven Lodge, at Melton Mowbray) There was also a scrap book which was continued by his son Ernest. These are now all available to be seen in the Leicestershire Record Office in Wigston.

It was his idea to build the village hall and he set up a building fund with donations from his rich clients. (Some critical people said that his main reason was to keep his employees out of the public houses of which there were six in the village at that time!) He became treasurer of the fund raising committee and arranged the purchase of the land from the "Rectory Farm Estate" of Christ Church, Oxford. A letter from their London solicitors dated 29th July 1902, acknowledging his first letter, states "We know you by name very well and will look after the matter for you".(Mr William Harrington Hay was also on the fund raising committee. One wonders where they held the Committee meetings, certainly not in a local inn!)

Stokes altered the whole appearance of the village by acquiring various large houses and changing them to hunting boxes. He also demolished many old cottages, building new hunting "boxes" in their place. The best place to see these changes is to walk the length of Sutton Road, certainly the finest road in the village. Nether Green Lodge, Welham Bush Farm, Green Lodge and Bishop's House form an attractive eclectic mixture of styles. (Bishop's House only acquired this name after the Bishop of Peterborough lived there during the 1st World War.) Green Lodge was built in 1906 on the site of the old Congregational Chapel.

Amazingly there has been nothing to commemorate him in the village other than the family graves in the cemetery.(However there has been a recent development of the Nether Green area in 2012 and2013 to convert part of his old stables. This is to be called Stokes Yard.)

Fittingly the Stokes family are buried in two graves immediately adjacent to the large Chater memorial. Together they form an impressive group of gravestones, easily found to the right as you enter Great Bowden cemetery on Dingley Road. The Hay family are also all buried in the cemetery and are grouped together at the bottom of the cemetery near the wall.



The grave of John Henry Stokes and his wife Mary

Memorials are usually associated with church and chapel. There is no evidence of John Henry Stokes being closely associated with either the parish church or the Congregational chapel in Main Street. His true and lasting memorial is the legacy of limes and chestnuts he planted all over the village and his many buildings around the village, especially the hunting lodges on Sutton Road. He had only one child, a son William Ernest. (Always known as Ernest)

William Harrington Hay, a churchwarden for 32 years, has two memorials in the church: a window in the east wall of the chancel and the tower screen.

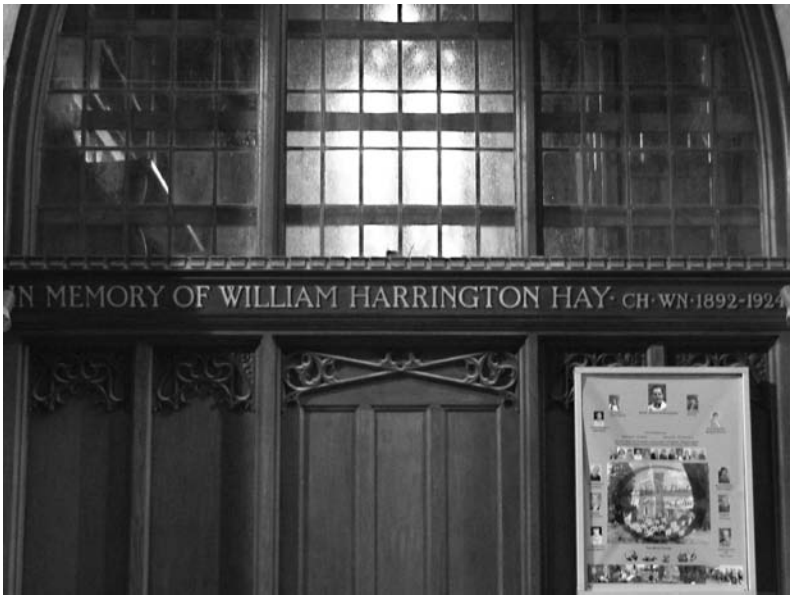
The Chaters are recorded by Chater Close off Manor Road, which lies on the land Alec Chater owned for many years when living in the Old Hall. There is also of course the memorial stone in the wall of the Congregational Chapel recording Jonathon T. Chater .

So we have the three families: the Chater family, notable Congregationalists and successful farmers; William Harrington Hay and his family, he living the life of a gentleman, a prominent member of the local Great Bowden Church and a pillar of society; and finally John Henry Stokes, originally also from a farming family, whose subsequent wealth was a result of his formidable business acumen and his phenomenal success as a breeder of horses, cattle and sheep.

They were all of similar ages; William Harrington Hay was born in 1849 and was only a year older than John Henry Stokes. John Woolston Chater was born in 1833, Johnathan Tayler Chater in 1836.

Between them these families appear to have virtually controlled the life of the village. There is no doubt from the evidence, that Stokes very quickly acquired more land and became the major owner of land and property , but the Chater family retained a sizeable

acreage. Mr Hay, with a private income, was living the life of a country squire; hunting, shooting, a JP and active in the parish church. His influence was more on the social life of Great Bowden. His occupation is always listed as a "Gentleman" in the census records and it must have been increasingly difficult to maintain his rich lifestyle looking after such a large family, none of whom actually worked. The photograph taken in 1924, shows a tired and rather sad old man, standing in front of his front door at Great Bowden Hall.



Hay Tower Screen Memorial in St Peter and St Paul's Church

Within a few years of each other they were all dead. John Woolston Chater died in 1903, Johnathan Taylor Chater, his brother in 1919. John Henry Stokes followed in 1920, from complications of his diabetes and William Harrington Hay died five years later in 1925. (Mary Alice Stokes, John's widow lived on to the age of 80 dying in 1931. William Hay's wife Ellen had died aged 73 in 1927.)

For the Stokes and the Hay families things were never the same, as their wealth started to disappear.

The only married daughter of the Hay family had one son, born in 1917. Unfortunately, when he married he had no children and so the name disappears. With very little income for its maintenance, Great Bowden Hall deteriorated, and was still without electricity in 1970 when it was sold. (It has now very successfully been converted into luxury apartments)

The Chaters, no doubt because there were so many male heirs, all of whom would have been working, continued to prosper in the area and were still farming after the 2nd World War.

John Henry's only son Ernest married in 1915. He married "well", Molly, a relative by marriage of the Duke of Beaufort.(No surprise there! The Duke of Beaufort was one of John Henry's principal clients.) However his wife was a great socialite in the 1920's and 30's and between them they appear to have very quickly spent much of the family fortune. By this time Ernest and Molly were living at Green Lodge on Sutton Road. Nether House, the original family home, and its adjoining stables had been sold to the Fernie Hunt, when it moved to the village from Medbourne in 1924. Eventually most of the Stokes land and a significant number of properties were also sold. The Nether House stable yard, near the house, even became a brush works in the 1950's and was a mushroom composting area by 1970. They currently lie derelict awaiting development as housing.(Note development of the other stables mentioned above) There is, however, still a family trust in the Stokes name, which owns various small pieces of land around the village. In the census of 1954, Ernest Stokes, was still living in Green Lodge on Sutton Road and his by now estranged wife at 14, Langton Road, where kennels had been built for her to breed greyhounds. They had two children, a son and a daughter who both moved out of the area.

So ends a history of three families who, in their different ways, had a significant effect on the village of Great Bowden in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The story shows the ups and downs that can occur from one generation to another. It is said that the fortunes of a family can rise, fall and disappear in the space of four generations, and this seems to have been the case here. However we have seen how between them these three families helped to change Great Bowden, leaving behind the village we recognise now. A walk around the village, looking at the houses they owned and built, shows the legacy they have left.

Thanks to Michael Brown for photographs and information on the Hay family.