

The Leys School Farm and Laundry in Chesterton

Local history researchers Jim Smith and Rachel Aucott have unearthed the story of the farm and laundry that fed the boys and staff and kept the linen clean from 1887 to 1915.

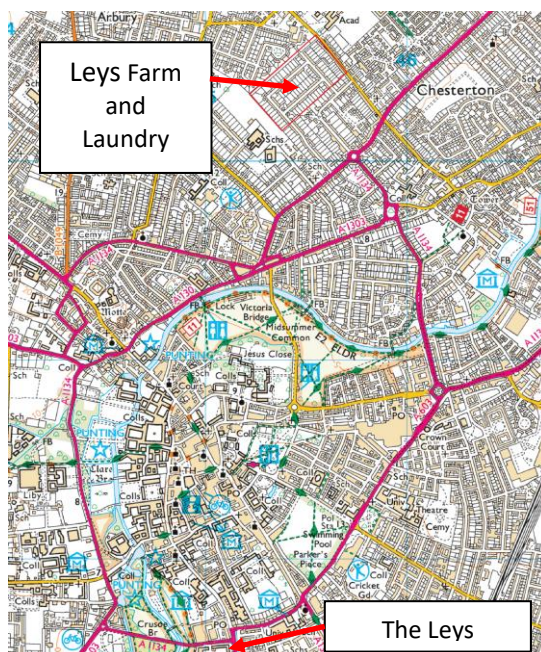
Introduction

When we began our research into the history of our Cambridge neighbourhood, the early-1930s Hurst Park Estate, our first sources were the bundles of land documents each of us had to hand for our houses in Orchard Avenue. Cambridge Estates Ltd had purchased two plots of land in 1927, one associated with the house called Hurst on Milton Road, the other described in the documents as:

ALL THAT messuage or tenement with the outbuildings, orchard and the several closes or pieces of land known as the Laundry Farm, Arbury Road, Chesterton, situated partly in the Borough of Cambridge and partly in the Parish of Impington in the County of Cambridge and comprising in the whole 24 acres, 2 roods and 3 poles or thereabouts . . .

John Harding, in *A Methodist Education: The Leys Under Moulton and Barber, 1875-1914*, 2012, page 59, tells us that:

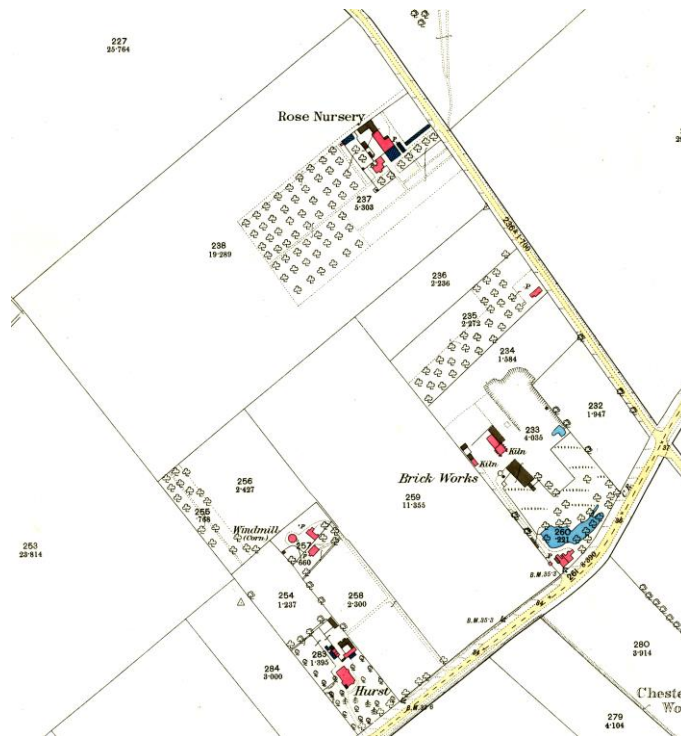
. . . at Christmas 1887, the school farm and laundry, on the site of the present West House, were closed and moved to the fields near the Arbury Camp in Chesterton, which enabled the games field to be extended to the perimeter of the site. Leys Road and Leys Avenue on the Arbury Estate [actually Hurst Park Estate] still survive as reminders of the Leys Farm there.



From 1887 to 1915 the school leased this farm from Elizabeth Swann. Those 24½ acres, supplemented for some of the period by adjacent leased or purchased plots, produced milk, fruit, and vegetables and housed the school's substantial laundry.

Before 1887

Elizabeth Swann's father, Cambridge jeweller George Roe, had bought the farm in 1852 from the Sparrow family, long-standing Chesterton farmers. Robert and Eleanor Sparrow had been allocated the land at enclosure in 1840, along with other nearby fields. The Roe/Swann family let the farm, the 1861 and 1871 censuses listing John Moore farming there. In November 1874 nurseryman John Bester moved his rose nursery onto the plot. He was still there with his family in 1881 and advertised his roses from the same address in 1886 before moving his nursery again, this time to Chesterton Road.



John Bester's rose nursery occupied the farm (plots 237 and 238 here) between 1874 and 1886/1887 (Ordnance Survey, 1885).

The School Farm Moves to Chesterton

The minutes of a school governors' meeting on 22 November 1887 note that 'Mr Bunting brought up a Report from Mr Outram proposing to take larger premises for the farm and laundry'. The meeting was adjourned for one week so that some of the governors could visit the farm and report back (minutes book 1, page 453). This they duly did and on 29 November (page 454) they agreed to rent the farm, two miles north of the school, for 21 years at £80 per annum.

The new farm soon attracted the editors of the *Leys Fortnightly* (Vol. 12, no. 224, 3 February 1888, pp 120-121). The description is worth reading in full and is appended to this article.

1889 – Fire During the Summer Holidays

Disaster struck on 19 August 1889, when the laundry was badly damaged by fire. *The Leys Fortnightly* reported the incident on 16 October. Much of the machinery was saved but the walls were destroyed: 'The rebuilding will be completed probably by the end of October', the *Fortnightly* concludes.

The local press had reported the fire in two slightly contradictory stories:

<p>CHESTERTON.</p> <p>Fire.—A farmstead and laundry at Chesterton, occupied by the Leys School, Cambridge, caught fire about mid-day on Monday, the outbreak being caused by a defective flue leading from the engine house to a barn. Fortunately plenty of water was obtainable from a pump and cistern on the premises: but, though assistance was rendered by Supt. Whitechurch and some of his subordinates, the flames were not overcome before considerable damage had been done to the building and a barn and part of the laundry machinery destroyed. The premises are in the hands of the executors of the late Mrs. Elizabeth Roe, of Market hill, and the damage is estimated at \$500. Both the buildings and the plant were insured.</p>	<p>FIRE AT CHESTERTON. — About mid-day on Monday, a farmstead and laundry at Chesterton, in the occupation of Ley's school, Cambridge, was set on fire by a number of sparks from the laundry engine. There was a plentiful supply of water at hand, procurable from a pump and cistern on the premises, and Superintendent Whitechurch, and half-a-dozen of the county police putting in an appearance at the scene, the flames were eventually mastered, not, however, before a considerable amount of damage had been done. Besides the damage to the building, part of the laundry machinery and a barn adjoining the farm were destroyed. The premises belonged to Mr. Roe, jeweller, of Cambridge. He estimates the damage to the building at £200, but the value of the property lost is not yet known.</p>
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The Cambridge Independent Press (left) and the Cambridge Daily News reported the fire in their editions of 23 August.

Farm and Laundry in 1897



The photograph of the farmhouse published in the Methodist Recorder on 8 April, 1897. The woman may be Susan Free, the farm manager's wife, or Alice Spalding, the laundress.

The *Methodist Recorder* published a supplement about the school on 8 April 1897, and reported that:

Two miles out in the country there is a farm on which sheep and pigs and poultry are raised. It is a dairy farm with fifteen milking cows. It includes a kitchen garden, an orchard, and a great laundry. There is no costly elaboration of farmyard management and appliances, but just so much as is necessary to ensure cleanliness and sweetness, and perfect wholesomeness of production. All the milk required for the Leys, and a large portion of the vegetables and fruit consumed, come from this small farm. All the washing is done with the best appliances, including a Bradford hot-air closet, in the laundry adjoining the farmhouse.

Who farmed the land and washed the sheets and shirts?

We know a little about the people who lived and worked at the farm and laundry during the school's tenure. In the 1891 census, the first during the school's occupancy, there were:

- Charles Free, 47 – Farm manager
- Susan Free, 42 – his wife
- Thomas Spalding, 54 – Farm Servant
- Alice Spalding, 44 – Laundress
- Phoebe Spalding, 21 – Laundress
- Alice Spalding, 15 – Laundress
- Eleanor Wallinger, 19 – Laundry Maid Domestic

In 1901 Charles and Susan Free were still there, as well as a niece also called Susan Free, plus the senior Spaldings, the younger Alice, and Phoebe's son, John Rich, aged 4. Phoebe had married John Rich in 1895 and died in January 1900.

The 1911 census listed the following at Leys School Farm:

- Charles Free – Farm Bailiff
- Susan Free – his wife
- Susan Free – niece: butcher's book-keeper

. . . and at Leys School Laundry:

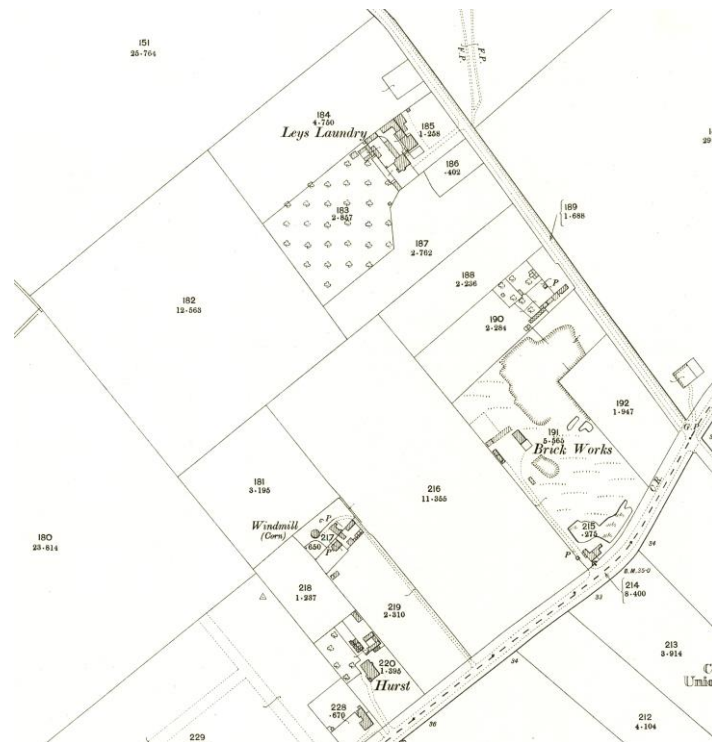
- Frederick Metcalfe – Taxidermist
- Amy Metcalfe – Laundress, Leys School
- Shirley Hugh Metcalfe, their 13-year-old son

Managing the Farm

The land rented from Elizabeth Swann comprised plots 182 to 187 on this 1901 Ordnance Survey map. 'Preston's Field', referred to in minutes on 19 March 1912, was also rented and this probably refers to plot 181, part of the land attached to Hurst, then owned by retired brewer James McCallan Preston.

The school owned plot 188 ('Perry's Field' in minutes in October 1910), having bought it for £310 from Ellen Perry and the Revd Samuel Banks on December 9, 1910. It was sold to developer William Pushee Hollis for £480 in October the following year. In 1912, Hollis laid out Leys Road on plots 188 and 190.

The minute books show that the Governors kept a careful eye on the farm and occasionally thought about leaving Chesterton for pastures new or buying the land from Mrs Swann. In



October 1896, a sub-committee given the task of considering whether the farm should continue recommended that: 'no steps should be taken at present to dispose of the farm and laundry'.

The governors seem to have been conscientious and kind employers as in September 1905 they made a grant to the laundry manageress 'in relief of expenses of her son's illness' (minutes book 2, page 106. In November 1908 (minutes book 3, page 179), they must have been content to continue with the farm as its lease was renewed at a reduced rent. In June 1910 (page 221) they were considering the purchase of Perry's Field and decided to ask Elizabeth Swann whether she would sell the farm, but she refused (page 222). However, on 24 October (pages 226 to 227), the minutes record:

The House Committee also unanimously agreed that the farm should be continued, it being in their opinion a most desirable asset of the school.

And then, on the same page, it can be seen that they had some concerns about the management of the farm:

. . . it was decided that the Bursar should see the Bailiff [Charles Free] and should suggest in a friendly way that some further opinion should be obtained as to the best methods for its successful working.

By 26 April 1911 (minutes book 3, p242) Mr J O Vinter had visited the farm and 'approved its working and maintenance in general while making two or three suggestions of detail'. The Bursar was requested to negotiate with Mrs Swann about new outbuildings. Then, on 20 July 1911 (page 248) 'the Bursar reported that he thought the question of the Bailiff's age and efficiency should be considered'. (Charles Free was 57.)

Subsequent minutes across the end of 1911 and the beginning of 1912 make it clear that the Governors were soon actively considering leaving the farm in Arbury Road, either moving to new premises or giving up farming altogether. Mr Vinter was called in again to advise. Purchasing Vicarage Farm in Trumpington was discussed in October 1911, but no clear action was taken, while the Bursar undertook negotiations for the purchase of laundry services and milk.

On March 19, 1912, however, the House and general Purposes Sub-committee (book 4, page 8) decided that its policy was to:

. . . arrange for an external milk supply and give up cowkeeping at an early date, to continue the laundry until surrender of the lease, sub-letting the farm if a satisfactory arrangement could be found, and seeking the most favourable conditions for early release from the tenancy.

On the following day, March 20, 1912, the governors agreed to the Bursar's proposals to:

- Continue cultivating the farm and the adjoining Preston's field.
- Obtain milk for the next 12 months at less than one shilling per gallon.
- Employ Charles Free at the reduced rate already in operation.
- Sell the cattle [referred to somewhat biblically in the notes as 'kine'] at the best price.
- Dismiss men with any pension or gratuity.
- Continue the laundry as at present.

Leaving Arbury Road

The arrangements agreed in March 1912 seem to have persisted for two years until the governors 'decided to enquire into farm and its advisability or otherwise' in February 1914

(book 4, page 49). Finally, on 25 March 1915, comes this stark note from the House and General Purposes Committee: 'Farm and Laundry – notice to be given to terminate in six months'. Finally, on 29 September 1915, the Governors record: 'Decided to allot profits on sale of farm and laundry to Reserve fund.'

Elizabeth Swann's new tenant was Chesterton dairyman Charles Alder, who took on the laundry as well as the farm. The name Leys Laundry was retained, even after 1926 when Alder and his wife Lucy moved it into new premises close to their home, Aldham House in Union Lane, where the business survived until the 1960s. Charles Alder carried on farming in Arbury Road until 1927. Then Cambridge Estates bought the land and laid out Highfield Avenue, Hurst Park Avenue, Orchard Avenue, and Leys Avenue, which, with the earlier Leys Road, are all that's left to remind us of Leys Farm.

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank the Leys School Archivist, Alison Lainchbury, without whose enthusiastic help there would have been a considerable gap in our history of the Hurst Park Estate.

Rachel Aucott and Jim Smith, January 2025

THE NEW FARM AND LAUNDRY AT CHESTERTON.

THE Farm has been transferred during the Christmas Vacation from the South West corner of the grounds to a more extensive and convenient spot on the road to Fly, about two miles off.

The field hitherto devoted to the cows has therefore been handed over to the G.C. and ere long, no doubt, that active body will provide us with a third (and highly valuable) cricket pitch; while the running path, so long a thorn in the side for bicyclists, can be altered so as to become available for our Summer races.

Returning to the Farm, the Governors have spared no pains to make it a really model one. Cows, calves, pigs, sheep, poultry, ducks, turkeys, and no doubt many other things are to be cultivated there for the School's benefit in addition to all sorts of fruits and vegetables in abundance.

The orchard extends over more than two acres, and should in favourable seasons supply our jams as well as all fresh fruit required. There are 22 acres besides, which will be partly devoted to grass and partly devoted to corn, so that our very bread may one day find its way to our mouths direct from our own granaries.

The Dairies have been fitted up on the most approved and modern plans; and absolutely pure water is laid on there from a rock-bored well some 60 feet under the orchard. As more cows can now be kept than will be needed for milk, a good deal (if not all) of our butter will in future be home-made.

Adjoining the Farm buildings we have the new Laundry, which is also a remarkable departure in the right direction. The little old house at Newnham has long afforded painfully small accommodation for the amount of work which has to be done for the Leys—every week between 2000 and 3000 pieces of linen, flannels, etc. have to be got up and sent home properly sorted and aired—but the new Laundry provides for almost any possible development of the School, and goes a long way towards rivaling the great Steam Laundry at Cherry-hinton.

Mrs. Seeby and her maids live in a newly-erected building next to the Farm-house, and they enter the Laundry by a covered way. The first room is about 20 ft. cube, and is used for sorting and marking the linen; this communicates with the wash-house, a still larger building with asphalt floor and hot and cold water laid on to each copper, wash-tub, and machine. From here we pass to the

Leys Fortnightly (Vol. 12, no. 224, 3 February 1888, pp 120-121)

ironing and drying room, a building over 35 feet long, and like the wash-house lofty and well ventilated.

A second door brings us back to the sorting-room, where the baskets are refilled and returned to the cart to be brought home. In front of these buildings are the drying-grounds, which are very extensive, and stand high and dry and exposed to the fresh breezes "direct from the sea."

OLD LEYSIAN UNION.

At the meeting held on Wednesday, January 4th, 1888, the following members were present:—Messrs. J. C. Isard, R. C. Beauchamp, A. Boney, H. B. Budgett, T. P. Chubb, A. H. Cooke, D. A. Hunter, O. H. Isard, A. G. McArthur, J. H. S. McArthur, A. H. Pearce, H. T. Parke, J. Southall, H. Stead, W. Q. Thomas, T. P. West, and A. B. Whitehead. Mr. J. C. Isard was elected to the chair.

The minutes of the last meeting were read and confirmed.

The Secretary reported that he had heard from Mr. H. T. Parke as to the rules of the Manchester and Liverpool branch and suggested some proposals for the amalgamation of the branches and gave notice of motions on the subject for the next meeting.

The meeting then carried out the following programme:—

SONG..... "The leather bottle" .. A. Boney
SONG..... "Conquer or die" R. C. Beauchamp

THE SCHOOL SONGS.

RECITATION..... "Judas Iscariot" D. A. Hunter
VIOLIN SOLO .. "Mazourka" (*Wienianski*) A. H. Cooke
READING .. "Ballad of the Oysterman" (*Holmes*) ... J. Southall
SONG "New Kingdom" (Violin Obligation) D. A. Hunter
SONG From "Dorothy" H. B. Budgett
READING..... "Wooden Leg" (*Mac Adeler*) J. C. Isard
SONG..... "Razors in the Air" J. H. S. McArthur
SONG..... "Here's to the Maiden" A. Boney
SONG..... "Down among the dead men" A. Boney
READING... "With an interviewer" (*Murk Twain*) .. A. Boney
At the Meeting held on Tuesday the 24th of January, 1888, the following members were present:—Messrs. A. Boney, A. H. Cooke, T. P. Chubb, W. J. Disturnal, J. O. Day, W. D. Green, E. S. Holman, J. P. McArthur, A. G. McArthur, J. H. S. McArthur, J. Southall, H. Stead, J. H. Stephenson, A. B. Whitehead.