

Coal: The Langfords and the Webbs

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“The Somerset Coalfield covered about twenty villages. Timsbury was at the centre of the Coalfield and at different times 11 pits were in operation. The earliest reference to coal mining in Timsbury can be found in John Sambourne’s will dated 1572. An account dated 1610 stated ‘it is said the works at Timsbury are near worn out...’. This early activity would have been where the coal seams were close to the surface or shallow ‘bell pits’ where men would have descended by ladder. Despite the pessimistic assessment of the state of the Timsbury pits, coal mining flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries”.

“The early pits were probably initiated by small partnerships which typically consisted of a coal miner and two local tradesmen, who would provide limited finance for a mining undertaking, hoping to make a profit between them. However by the second half of the 18th century as new and more sophisticated machines and equipment were introduced, the capital required by coalworks became even greater. The cost was beyond the local miner and local tradesmen, so mining partnerships were formed between larger numbers of people with money, such as the local gentry and wealthy financiers from further afield. To spread their risk the new mining partners would normally have small shares in several coalworks rather than a large share in one. Some grew rich and became very influential.

The names of the landowners who became very wealthy are very familiar – Sambourne Palmer, William and John Crang, John Parish, Robert Langford. All lived in Timsbury and most built large grand houses that reflected their wealth: Crangs – Pitfour House, Robert Langford – Vale House, John Parish – Parish’s House.”



Vale House

“Both Upper and Lower Conygre Pits closed in 1916 thus ending a long tradition of coal mining directly in the village.”



“Robert Langford was part of that small group of land owners who became involved in coal mining. In 1784 he owned and occupied Dunford Farm in the Cam Valley below Timsbury. Robert Langford was involved in the development of Mearns Pit. Vale House was built in 1802. Soon after Robert died and Vale house was occupied by, first, his son Joseph (1772-1842) and then his grandson Joseph (1814-1873).”

The above from the Timsbury Community Website <https://www.timsbury.org.uk/>

In the early decades of the 19th century, coal from the Somerset coalfields is likely to have reached Steventon mostly by canal: *“The Somerset Coal Canal (SCC - originally known as the Somersetshire Coal Canal) was a narrow canal in*

England, built around 1800. Its route began in basins at Paulton and **Timsbury**, ran to nearby Camerton, over two aqueducts at Dunkerton, through a tunnel at Combe Hay, then via Midford and Monkton Combe to Limpley Stoke where it joined the Kennet and Avon Canal. This link gave the Somerset coalfield (which at its peak contained 80 collieries) access east toward London.” **Wikipedia**

“Coal from pits all around this area was brought by tramway to **Timsbury Basin** and loaded onto narrow boats which transported it to the Kennet & Avon Canal at Dundas, a 10-mile journey. The K&A Canal gave access to markets in Bath and further eastward across Wiltshire and as far as Reading.” <http://coalcanal.org/>

Coal brought along the Kennet & Avon to Newbury Wharf could be offloaded and then brought up the turnpike to Steventon, Abingdon, and Oxford. The Wilts & Berks canal opened in 1810 and ran through the north west of Steventon parish, linking from the K&A in Wiltshire to the Thames at Abingdon, bringing coal from the Somerset coal fields to the towns of Wiltshire and Berkshire and enabling the transport of other goods.

“The (SCC) canal now became one of the most successful in the country and, by the 1820s was carrying over 100,000 tons of coal per year. This prosperity was soon to be halted by the coming of the railways..... Railway competition was also hitting the Kennet and Avon Canal on which the S.C.C. depended for its markets.” <http://coalcanal.org/>
A video about the canal can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifW1N2wfDQ8> .

The opening of the Great Western Railway, to Steventon in 1840 and through to Somerset by 1841, brought change and coal started to arrive by train. See separate pieces about The Coming of the Railway, North Star, and FireFly. A video of a replica of the first train into Steventon is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urAwB6i1qzU> .

‘Our’ Robert Langford was born in Timsbury in 1823, the son of John (described at the time as a coalminer, but by 1841 as Parish Clerk) and Elizabeth (Betty): at that time Robert was described as a labourer. On Christmas Day 1845, after Banns being read on the three previous Sundays, Robert - described initially as a collier but this crossed out and changed to bookkeeper, given as living at the time in Cholsey - married Mary Bigwood, said to be living in Timsbury, daughter of Richard (a labourer) & Eleanor Bigwood, from Semington in Wiltshire: incidentally, Semington has a dock and two locks on the K & A Canal. Mary was 12-15 years older than Robert.

By the 1851 census Robert & Mary had arrived in Steventon, when he was described as a coal salesman with a depot in Steventon station yard: they lived on The Green and had a lodger – George Sutton – who was a journeyman cordwainer (shoemaker). In 1861 Robert was listed as a coal merchant living, apparently, at the ‘Station GWR’ with the main contract to supply coal to Steventon railway station, employing his 19-year-old nephew Charles as a salesman. Charles was one of the sons of James Langford, a clerk and accountant in the coal business, and his wife Frances; Charles’ younger brother was Robert Smith Langford, born in 1845.

By 1871 Charles was not living with them, and indeed disappears from the record, but they had added a servant Sarah (Prior?). Meanwhile Robert Smith Langford (RSL) married Annie in Timsbury in 1870, and in the 1871 census they are living in Norbiton, Kingston, with RSL described as a coal agent.

From the 1870s Robert Langford arranged the building of Timsbury Villa and Timsbury Terrace (8 houses) all 1877, on the High Street; Prospect Place, (2 semis, 1882) and Somerset Terrace (4 houses, 1883) both on the Little Green.



Timsbury Villa – Left, undated postcard, note balcony above door case.

Right: now Timsbury House, with the Cassandra Lodge extension furthest from the camera) Author photo 2022



Timsbury Terrace 2024, author photograph: 18 RL 77 is picked out in darker bricks in the centre of the terrace



Prospect Place 2022, author photo



Somerset Terrace 2024, author photo

In the 1881 census Robert is listed as retired, living with Mary in Timsbury Villa, with a servant – Leah Ellaway: Mary died on 27th October 1886, and Robert died on 27th March 1887 (according to the gravestone – parish burial records say 3rd March) - they are buried in St Michael's churchyard.



Thanks to recent research by Drayton historian Clare Kirk, it has emerged that in Q1 of 1887, a few weeks before his death, Robert remarried – this time to Esther Bradfield, a 51-year-old farmer from Drayton. She had inherited the farm from her father – William Hobbs Bradfield – in 1861. How they came to meet and marry is unknown, but Clare Kirk continues: “Tragically, just a few weeks after the wedding, Robert died ‘rather suddenly’ after becoming breathless. An inquest was held on his body in Steventon’s Wesleyan school room, and evidence was heard that he’d had diabetes for many years, and had suffered with a bad cold for 13 weeks. In fact, he had ‘never enjoyed the best of health’. Given Robert’s known medical problems, the coroner ruled it a death by natural causes. ‘His death however was altogether unexpected, and much sympathy is felt for Mrs Langford, who has been forced into widowhood after but a few weeks of married life.’” There is no notice of the marriage in existing St Michael’s records, but there are only two weddings recorded for the whole of 1887, one only for 1886 and two only for 1888...

Esther continued to live in Timsbury Villa, and in 1901 is recorded as living there with a 15-year-old servant – Ellen Beck (or Beeth). Clare Kirk again: “she died in 1905 aged 70, leaving effects valued at £2647 (£281k today). Her will instructed the sale at auction of several properties, brewery shares and furnishings. However, there were no heirs to her estate and in (November) 1907, a national newspaper ad sought her Bradfield kin”. Her burial is recorded in St Michael's records as September 16th 1905, but unfortunately there’s no record of the plot number and many of the stones are difficult to read: it is hoped that further research in the graveyard may eventually discover the grave.

By 1881 Robert Smith Langford (RSL) has arrived in the village with Annie and children Robert West 7, Edith Annie 6, Ernest 5, Edgar 3, Florence 1. Robert Smith L, described as coal & corn merchant and farmer of 100 acres, has taken over the business and the family are living in a farmhouse, near (on the census document) to the Kings Arms pub on the Little Green. Florence (1879-83) and two later children, Charles Harold (1881-83) and Percy Vernon (1882-86) died in infancy and their grave is also in St Michael's, Steventon. There is also the grave of one 'Martha', 1809-83, and her husband James Langford, 1811-93. James was the father of RSL: his wife Frances, mother of RSL, had died in 1873 and James married Keziah Gould in 1874. In 1881 James and what reads as Kerzia were living in Timsbury Terrace. Keziah is a Hebrew name, and it's possible that she took or was given the name Martha prior to burial.

According to Jackie Smith, archivist for Abingdon, RSL rented the Fox Barn on Highway Lane to store corn, hay and straw. He had the tenancy of Rookery Farm, "a 100-acre farm at Steventon belonging to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The coal business was sold off to a merchant from Faringdon. While his eldest son, Robert West Langford (RWL), was apprenticed to Charles Midwinter & Son of Newbury, corn and seed merchants, his place on the farm was taken by his younger brother, Ernest".

In the 1891 Census RSL is listed as farmer & corn merchant, living with Annie and children Edith Annie, Ernest, Edgar, John Harold 7, Charles Henry 5 at the fancifully renamed 'The Priory' on the Causeway. Jackie Smith states that Langfords bought back the coal business that they'd previously sold in 1895, and (also?) acquired the coal part of the long-established Abingdon coal business of ES & J Copeland.



Left: Rookery Farmhouse



Right 'The Priory'

Author photos 2024



A Langford coal wagon made by the Gloucester Railway Carriage & Wagon Company Limited and photographed in November 1901. Dimensions given are 14'5" x 6'11" x 4'0". Painted bright red with white lettering shaded black. The wagon is marked as being 6-4-0 tare (unloaded) and to carry a load of 10 tons

<https://www.culhamticketoffice.co.uk/images/powagons.html>

Limited edition Dapol model OO gauge B000 Langford 7-plank open wagon, image from <https://www.hattons.co.uk>



"With his offspring, he formed R S Langford and Sons Ltd., took the business to Abingdon, acquiring a local firm and in due course building a new headquarters at 30-32 Stert Street. The sons grew up to live in large houses in the Victorian garden suburb of Albert Park, and played a part in the local community, particularly Robert West Langford, who was organist in the Congregational Church and a governor of Christ's Hospital. The firm was still in business in the 1970s, but as a garden supplier." https://www.abingdon.gov.uk/abingdon_people/langfords

Robert West stood for the borough council, was mayor of Abingdon 1919-21, and was also a JP. Langfords had taken over AJ Kinchin & Co, corn merchants and millers, around 1906 and took over their tenancy of the Abbey Mill. They continued to operate the Abbey Mill to mill flour and for storage into the 1960s.



The HQ on Stert Street, designed by local architect Timothy West, now Oxfam,
Author photograph.



Langfords at Abbey Mill, c 1925
Francis Frith Collection
<https://www.francisfrith.com/>

Langford Advertisement from Nancy Hood's
'The Vale of White Horse in Camera'

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Robert Smith Langford of Steventon, farmer, coal merchant and corn dealer, age 59, died 12/12/1904 leaving £7481 to Annie Langford, widow (**National Probate Calendar**). Robert West took over the coal business, with Ernest briefly responsible for the farming side before the farm tenancy was relinquished in 1906.

on **Steventon Green**, Four substantial Modern **COTTAGES** with Gardens, known as "Somerset Terrace," let to Messrs. Webb, Ridge, Langford, and Rutter, at rents producing £31 4s per annum, also Two Semi-detached **DWELLING HOUSES** and Gardens, known as "Prospect Place," let to Messrs. James and Newton at rents producing £20 16s per annum, and in **Steventon Street**, "Timsbury Terrace," a block of 8 **COTTAGES** with Shop, and good Gardens, let to Messrs. Prior, Lyford, Tarry, &c., at rents amounting to £60 9s per annum. The Properties at **Steventon** are Copyhold.

Freeholds of the 'Langford terraces' in Steventon were offered for sale in March 1906, ad from **The Farringdon Advertiser & Vale of White Horse Gazette**: as can be seen a Langford was living in Somerset Terrace at the time. RSL and Annie's sons Edgar and Ernest were the two Langfords on the electoral register for Steventon in 1907: Edgar as having ownership of land – listed as Crab Tree Piece in 1906 – while Ernest also 'jointly owned a tenement' in the 1907 register - but not in 1908.

In the 1911 census Annie, Edith Annie, John Harold and Charles Henry (the latter two described as corn and coal merchants respectively) were still in The Priory; Charles Henry continued to live as a lodger at The Priory – in a first floor bedroom - at least until 1915; soon after Annie and Charles Henry had moved to Park Crescent in Abingdon and by 1930 Edith Annie had joined them.

The Webb Family

The subsequent history of coal supply in Steventon needs further research. However, in the second half of the twentieth century it was in the hands of the Webb family. George Richard Webb (1914-83), known as Dick, was still living with his parents – George Richard and Catherine Maud – in Drayton at the time of the 1935 Electoral Register, but had married Cicely (sometimes shown as Cecily) Curtis in quarter 2 of 1939 and by the 1939 Register was already trading as a coal merchant, haulage, and delivery business: Dick and Cicely are living at 79 Hanney Road, Steventon, a two bedroomed bungalow, with 2 lodgers.

While according to Kelly's Directory of 1939 the Langfords were still listed as a coal dealer at Steventon station (as well as Abingdon, Challow and Faringdon) according to Ann Webb's memories, shared by Richard Bosley, "Dick had purchased the coal business from Charlie Harris, who ran the King's Arms public house – where Dick was a frequent visitor. Mr. Harris also had a charabanc which Dick – who had a PSV driving license – had driven from time to time. Given the choice of which business to buy Dick chose the coal, saying it had a safer future. The bus was sold to Tappins." This was clearly the genesis of G R Webb & Sons, which continued in business until the early 2000s.

The first four sons – Bernard, John R, Michael C and Brian P – were born in the early 1940s. Two daughters, Margaret and Susan followed. In 1949, Graham was born a little early and both Cicely and the baby were unwell: Graham was left disabled. While Cicely was advised not to have any more children, Thomas and Laura were born in the first half of the '50s. Coal deliveries were initially made using a horse and cart, with the horse kept in a paddock along the Hanney Road: when the boys were old enough they would go and fetch the horse. Eventually the horse got too old and the business moved onto a series of lorries.

"Dick developed a peptic ulcer and, as he was a self-employed man, no work meant no money. This meant that the boys had to do their bit – not only with the coal but the pigs as well." *Ann Webb (wife of Bernard)*

The family appear on the electoral registers at Hanney Road until 1954, although Ann Webb recalls that the family moved to 12 Pugsden Lane in 1953: "This gave them all more space and there was a large garden as well. The bungalow had been built for two spinsters and was built of breeze blocks. They had a pigsty and when the pig had gone this became a chicken run. When the last chicken had left this world, the area was left to its own devices except for a small area let for bonfires. The boys were all taught to dig with a spade and dig they did. They dug the whole garden by hand, working their way across the garden in ranks until it was all done. Then it was planted with potatoes, winter greens, runner beans, pumpkins and anything else they were given on the coal round..... The bungalow was very large and was built with breeze blocks. It was neither warm nor comfortable. Its only grace was it was large. There were five bedrooms, a large living room, a large hall, a very small kitchen and a bathroom that contained a toilet, a bath and a very cantankerous gas guiser, which filled the bath or a large enamel bowl placed on a board across the bath. The living room had a 'courtier' stove. The other rooms were heated by electric fires, and grandad's old greatcoat was extra heat on his bed. This was a final resting place for these coats when not needed any more."



USAAF aerial photograph 9/2/44 showing number 12, bottom left, with Bridge House (no. 2) and sheds top by the road, with the old Vulcan works – with part glass roof - and the three pre-war bungalows in between

This description of the bungalow is a little confusing. The reference to the “two spinsters” suggests Julia and Jessie Puzey: according to earlier research Julia lived in four of the properties associated with Bridge House (2 Pugsden Lane) until her death in 1935: in 1920 she was in ‘The Hut’, before moving to ‘Orchard Nook’, then ‘Graywalls’, and finally to ‘Byways’ (where her sister Jessie joined her for the last year of her life). ‘Byways’ was brick built and small, as was the adjoining ‘The Hut’; ‘Graywalls’ was made of concrete faced breeze blocks, but when put up for sale in 1935 had only two bedrooms: perhaps this was extended between 1935 and 1953 and renamed 12 Pugsden (6, 8 & 10 Pugsden were built around 1938).

“Back at home the Webb’s life revolved around coal – deliveries and some collections. They had some coal tipped beside the house for their own use. This was made possible because the lorries were quite a bit smaller then. There were fewer choices of fuel then. At the entry to Pugsden Lane were large pens for large coal, small coal (nuts), coke or anthracite. The coke and anthracite were used for back boilers and small stoves. The coke was collected from Oxford Gasworks, until it closed. Then it was brought in by road until natural gas came in, and all the gas works closed. Newer fuels came in and ‘coalite’ took its place. The winter of 1962/63 was very good for trade, with snow 18 inches deep and freezing rain. As the railway became less reliable for deliveries more stock came in by road although the Webb’s still had an occasional truck come to Abingdon Station.” *Ann Webb*

British Railways withdrew passenger services from Steventon and all other intermediate stations between Didcot and Swindon in December 1964. The station was demolished soon after closure.

After 25 years at number 12, the family moved to number 2. This had been the home of Louisa M Hunt, school secretary or similar at Abingdon’s Larkmead School, from at least 1945:

Bridge House, number 2: the old Vulcan iron works used to be in the foreground



“The bungalow in Pugsden lane was sold in 1978 and the family moved to Bridge House, also in Pugsden Lane, after the previous occupant, Miss Evans, moved to a flat in Ock Street, Abingdon. Sadly, mother died shortly before they moved there – she was so looking forward to living there. By then the three girls had married and Bernard and Tom were also wed. This meant it was only Dick and the four unmarried boys that moved in. To them it was luxury – central heating, shower and bathroom upstairs and down, five bedrooms upstairs and three rooms down. Dick only lived there for five years before he died suddenly and left the four boys in the house where they are today, living much as they always have.” *Ann Webb*



The Webb sons continued running the coal business for some 20 odd years after Dick's death, as well as helping out on various local farms, and four of the last lorries remain decaying in the sheds next to number 2 to this day.

