

The Brimleys of Road Farm

One of the striking aspects of nineteenth century village life in the Bedfordshire village of Willington was the way tenancies for farms passed from father to son. The result was that a small number of families dominated village life during the period from 1774 to 1902, when the village was part of the Duke of Bedford's estates. One of these families was the Brimley family at the High Road Farm, sometimes called simply Road Farm and later in the twentieth century, Grange Farm. Joseph Brimley held the farm in the early years of the Bedford period until in 1818, his son, William acquired the lease. Following his retirement to live in Bedford, his son, Joseph took on the lease in 1859 and remained as tenant until 1879. These three generations of the Brimley family played a significant part in village life as employers and leading members of the community. The farm itself appears to have been a mixed farm with wheat, barley, peas and cattle.

The first Joseph Brimley married Jane Gutteridge and their son, William was baptised in Willington in June 1786. The Russell account books for Willington list tenants in the early years of Russell control rather than naming farms. That Joseph was a significant tenant is shown, for example, in the 1798 assessment for land tax, where he was the tenant assessed for the largest sum. He was also regularly appointed as an overseer of the poor for the village. After 1800, the account books start to name individual farms. Joseph begins to be listed as the tenant of the High Road Farm and the account books show an increase in rent in a new lease agreed in 1809. The increase probably reflects the work undertaken for the Russells in improving the Willington farms and pushing forward with enclosure. This work appears to have included the provision of new farm houses for the High Road Farm (below) and for nearby Hill Farm. Joseph was clearly a man of standing and the poll books indicate he had the vote.



Figure 1: High Road Farmhouse, later Grange Farm

Joseph appears to have died in 1813 or 1814. For the next few years, his executors are named in the account books as holding the lease for the High Road Farm. However, in the 1818 account book, "executors of Joseph Brimley" is crossed out and his son, William Brimley's name is inserted. The farm he then acquired consisted of just over 383 acres. By then, William was a married man; his wife was Peggy Farr.

He and Peggy lived in the village until they moved to Bedford, when his eldest

son, Joseph took over the tenancy.

Census returns indicate that William and Peggy were typically supported by two domestic servants and show that, in 1851, William employed 24 outdoor labourers. He was, therefore, a significant employer. That he also took the lead in maintaining stability in the village is shown, when in 1831, with John Purser of Manor Farm, he took the lead in getting villagers to use the allotments provided

for them by the Duke of Bedford. These were seen as a means of encouraging good habits in agricultural labourers, giving them a stake in their village and developing a self-reliant approach.

During their time in Willington, William and Peggy had a large family of five boys and seven girls.

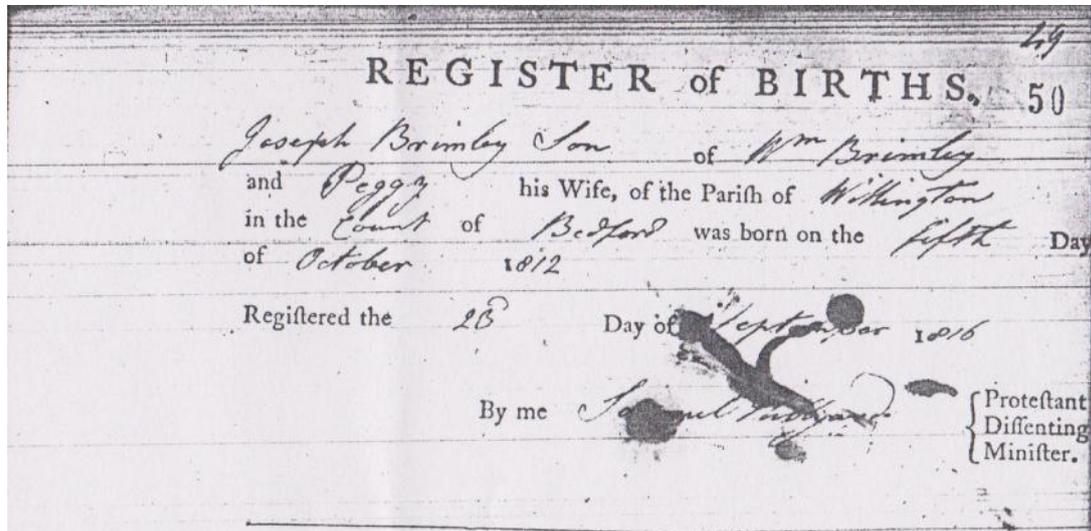


Figure 2: Registration record for Joseph's birth at the Old Meeting House, Bedford

They registered their children's births at the Congregational Old Meeting House in Mill Street in Bedford. William continued as a dissenter and in 1851, he made a return for the ecclesiastical census from Willington, reporting that 60 people had attended the Independents' evening service in the village and naming himself as "lay preacher." He indicated that this was an average attendance and said that there were no regular preachers but that services were conducted by laymen or preachers. Interestingly this census also reveals that a neighbouring farmer, Thomas Twitchell at Croots' Farm held a Methodist service. Two of the leading tenant farmers were, therefore, attending to the spiritual welfare of the village as well as providing employment.

William retired to Bedford and lived in the parish of St Peter's. He died in November 1867 and his estate was valued at just under £6000. The probate records name him as "William Gutteridge Brimley, formerly of Willington in the County of Bedford Farmer but late of the Town and County of Bedford Gentleman deceased."

Before then, in 1859, the High Road Farm was in the hands of his son, Joseph Brimley, who was born in October 1812. Joseph is named as the tenant in the census returns for 1861 and 1871, employing 16 men and 8 boys in 1861.

Joseph stayed at the farm until 1879. The accounts for the following year indicate that a new tenant, George Church, had taken on the lease. In December of the following year, Joseph emigrated to the United States. He, his wife, Harriet and five of their six children, Anna, Sophia, William, Herbert and Clement, were saloon passengers on the steamer, Canada sailing from London to New York. The ship had one funnel and three masts rigged for sail. She had an iron hull and a speed of 10 knots. There was accommodation for 100 first or saloon class passengers and 750 steerage passengers. The ship sailed the London to New York route, taken by the Brimleys, between 1874 and 1893. The Brimleys

		Sex		Origin		Destination		Cabin	
Mrs M. E. Dudley	33	f	Lady	England	U. S. America				
Mrs J. S. Macken	40	ad.	Lady	U. S. America					
Mrs "	30	"	Child	"					
Mrs "	18	"	Child	"					
Mrs J. Collins	20	"	Child	"					
Mrs H. Drummond	28	ad.	Went	England					
Mrs Joseph Brimley	68	"	"	"					
Mrs "	56	f	Lady	"					
Mrs Anna	30	"	"	"					
Mrs Sophia H.	28	"	"	"					
Mrs Geo. J.	26	ad.	Went	"					
Mrs Herbert H.	20	"	"	"					
Mrs Clement S.	18	"	"	"					

Figure 3: The passenger list entries for the Brimleys

were described on the December 1880 passenger list (above) as “ladies” and “gents.” Joseph was then 68 and his wife was 56. Their children ranged in age from 30 to 18.

What made them take such a step at that age? The agricultural depression was beginning to have an impact, making emigration appear an attractive route to a better life. The Bedford estate accounts for 1879 show that Joseph received a remittance of £328 on his rent of £606 and was in arrears to the tune of £151/12/- in that year. This type of problem was shared across the Bedford estates and more widely. The depression had hit hard and worse was expected. Local newspapers were advertising sailings to North America and other destinations. First class fares were between £10 and £20, a fraction of what Joseph paid in rent. The Brimley family had heard of opportunities in North Carolina through a chance meeting with an agent of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, Immigration and Statistics. Their financial situation in 1879 must have seemed like a final signal that it was time to take the plunge. The Brimleys duly arrived in Raleigh in North Carolina looking to start a new life away from the problems of the agricultural depression. The reality on arrival, however, did not live up to the blandishments portrayed. Harriet and Joseph’s son, Herbert, later to be curator of the state’s natural history museum, wrote about his first impressions:

“My first impression of Raleigh was that it was without question the damndest place I had ever seen. Expecting to jump directly into the celebrated Sunny South, irrespective of the time of year – December 31st – I found a town with unpaved streets, ruts hub-deep, frozen solid and covered with snow, and the temperature down mighty close to zero¹.”

The Brimleys pulled up the carpets in their hotel room and used them for blankets to keep from freezing that first night in North Carolina. The new life had not started well but the family’s fortunes eventually improved: after various unsuccessful ventures, Herbert and Clement became famous for their work as curator and collector for the natural history museum, work still commemorated by Raleigh’s Brimley Society. For the Brimleys, the decision to move to the United States appears to have been timely and ultimately to have benefitted the family.

¹ From A North Carolina Naturalist: H.H. Brimley: Selections from His Writings. Accessed at http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=qfhcQGfjN3YC&lpg=PR11&ots=GzdkYx_0Ur&dq=Brimley%20Raleigh%20North%20Carolina&pg=PA14#v=onepage&q&f=false on 12/11/12.