

RALPH WHITLOCK (1914-1995) - REMEMBERED

The following is taken from www.parliament.uk the official record of Parliament in the UK. It relates to the serious flooding issues that have plagued Britain and continue to do so:

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I should like to take a short trip down memory lane. A remarkable author called Ralph Whitlock was born in the village of Pitton and many years later died in the neighbouring village of Winterslow. In 1988, he wrote a book about life in the villages on the edge of Salisbury plain. I shall quote one passage, which states:

"More than twenty years have now elapsed since the springs last broke in Pitton. The water-table in the chalk has evidently been sinking steadily. New residents tend to be sceptical about the tales of floods, and it is difficult to believe them.

The senior citizens who remember them well regard wet summers and wetter autumns with hopeful anticipation: "I hope I live long enough to see the springs down just once more!" they say. It would, they feel, be a just nemesis falling on those who ignored their advice and built new houses on sites which were once flooded regularly.

But the years pass and the springs stay well below the surface. It is unlikely that they will be seen again."

He was wrong. We need to remember that in the 1960s this country's climate was unusually dry. In that period, many planning authorities and river boards allowed houses and industrial estates to be built on flood plains. That is at the root of many of the current problems.

One of the saddest examples can be found in the village of Pitton. Ralph Whitlock told me that one could tell when it was going to flood there by checking the black stone 4 ft from the top of the well at Box cottage. When the water reached that black stone, the village would flood three days later. Box cottage has gone now. The land has been built over. The well is no more. The village floods, heavily and regularly.

Flooding is a tremendous problem, but some really quite simple solutions have hardly been touched on today. Tom Ridout, clerk of Allington parish council, wrote to me on 10 January. The matter could not have been put better. Mr. Ridout said that changing weather patterns and increased river flows were crucial factors, and added:

"If this calamity is not to recur annually serious forethought and expensive measures must be taken to quickly improve maintenance of the river—dredging, clearing of weed, clearing of banks, raising bunds, raising bridges where they have a dam effect, etc. This will require a national initiative.

At the local level, the parish council are constantly chiding their masters over matters of basic maintenance. Ditch clearing, weed cutting, drain emptying, etc. Though these factors may not have an influence on the full measure of these floods there can be no doubt that regular basic maintenance has a part to play. The local authority are ever ready to issue glossy brochures and send out wordy consultation

documents and letters but slow to send men regularly, with tools, to do what needs to be done. Particularly this is so in the countryside where so often the inhabitants are at the very end of the queue for resources."

I therefore commend Wiltshire county council for reintroducing the ancient concept of lengthsmen who are attached to a village so many weeks a year and go round doing just that. It is no good weeping over the fact that our farmers no longer have a surplus of labour who used to spend the growing months ditching. They no longer ditch because there are no longer people to ditch.

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Ralph Whitlock is part of our WHITLOCK51 family and was the author of more than 100 books, mainly on rural issues. I came to know Ralph from an article I read in the "Field" magazine in 1967. I wrote to him enquiring about his Whitlock family and started a correspondence that continued for nearly thirty years until his death in 1995. I credit Ralph with getting me started on the quest that resulted in the Whitlock Family Association and more than forty five years of research into the Whit(e)lock families and their descendants.

Ralph was very proud of his heritage and the fact his part of the Whitlock family had lived in the same village for over 400 years. Ralph believed in the collection and recording of knowledge and the passing on that knowledge to each successive generation. He used his skills as a writer to contribute a vast repository of knowledge. He wrote a weekly article for the local newspaper for over fifty-five years and used this as a base to write many of his books. He not only knew how daily life worked in his village and country surrounding it, he researched the history and understood why village life worked the way it did. I remember him writing to me about one of the Whitlock holdings in Pitton that linked two sets of fields at opposite ends of the village. Throughout the seasons, the owner could be observed driving his horses and sheep through the village from one field to the other. They had been farmed as one unit as long as he could remember. His research revealed that the two properties had become linked in the 1600's and had remained so for 400 years.

The item from the Parliament records would please Ralph and also sadden him. In so many cases the wealth of knowledge built up over centuries is all there but not consulted or worse consulted and then ignored as the countryside evolves to accommodate the growing population. Unfortunately we likely all can think of examples of this occurring all over the world and still occurring!! Ralph's contribution was huge and it lives on and it is nice to see from time to time that it is recognized. Our thanks to Malcolm Whitlock for sending this item in.

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