

King George's Field, Princes Risborough

From Farmland to Recreation Ground

1820 – 2020



Sandy Macfarlane

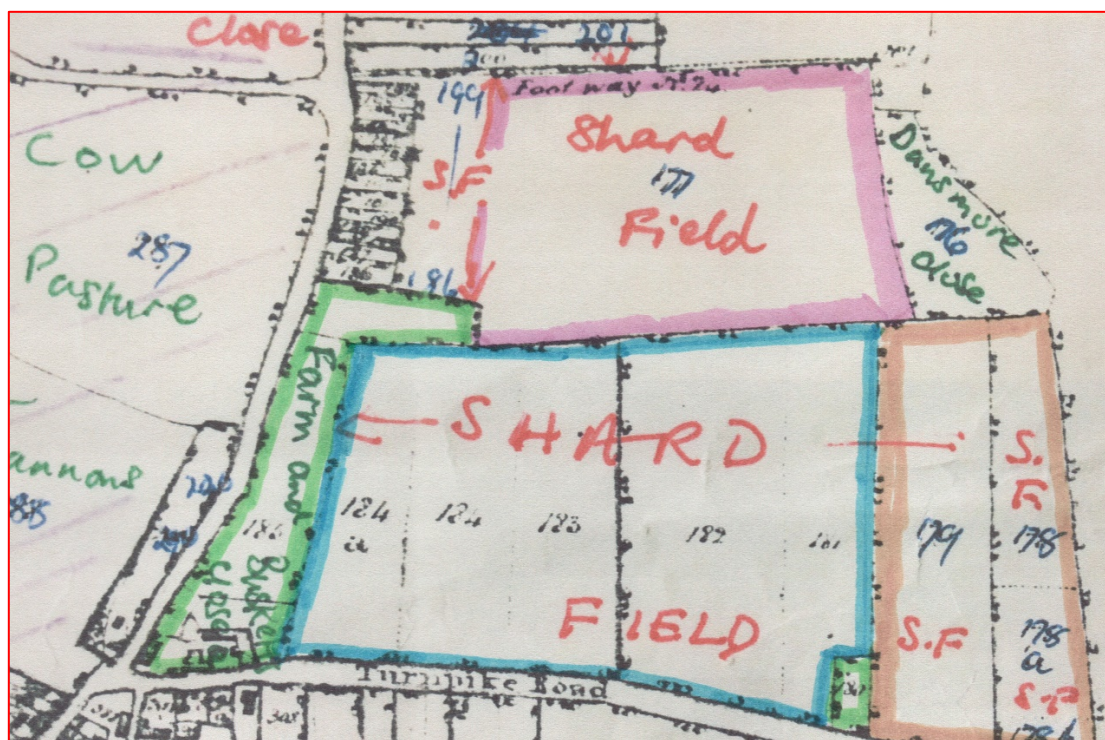
The King George V Recreation Ground

Part 1: 1820 -1914

Prior to 1820, when the Risborough Inclosure Act of Geo. IV was enacted, the land that would eventually become the King George V Recreation Ground was part of a large open field, known as Shard or Shade Field, bordered on the south-east by the Turnpike Road to Aylesbury, on the north-east by the parish boundary with Monks Risborough, on the north-west by open fields and on the south-west by a farmhouse and small closes of land adjoining the Longwick Road.

All this land and property had been part of the freehold and copyhold estate of Edward SMITH, a Lace Merchant, who was sufficiently wealthy to be described as Gentleman in parish records, owning land and houses in both Princes and Monks Risborough. He died in 1807, and bequeathed his estate to his two sons, John and Edward, his two surviving daughters, Mary and Sarah NASH, and to the children of his third daughter Elizabeth, William, Sarah and Elizabeth MONTAGUE. Of these it is his grand-daughter Elizabeth Montague, who features most in the succeeding story.

In 1823, on completion of the process of Inclosure, Shard Field, shown below, was awarded to John, Edward and Mary, 11 acres outlined in pink to Edward, 10 acres outlined in orange to John and 13 acres outlined in blue to Mary. The farmhouse, which with its attached closes and a small, detached plot to the east had originally been claimed by Mary and amounted to 4 acres outlined in green, was awarded to their niece, the afore-mentioned Elizabeth MONTAGUE.



Detail from the Inclosure Award Map, held in the Bucks Record Office, ref. BRO IR/87

Elizabeth MONTAGUE was born in Camberwell in 1794 and lived there until 1822 when she married Henry FARRAR, a Barrister, and moved into London's West End where their four daughters, Henrietta, Julia, Emmeline and Rose were born.

It is perhaps a reflection of the constrained status of women at the time that on her marriage she was persuaded, "with the approbation of her husband", to hand over her Risborough property to her husband's brother to hold in trust to use any income for her and any children of the marriage. In the same vein was the fact that although she would have seemed the obvious beneficiary of the combined estates of her uncles John and Edward and her aunt Mary they were bequeathed initially to her husband, Henry Farrar, only passing to her and her children on his death in 1846.

The Farrars were certainly in Risborough by 1841, and the 1851 Census shows Elizabeth, land proprietor, living with her daughters Henrietta, Julia, Rose and Emmeline in what had probably been her grandfather, Edward Smith's house, "The Yews", 38 High Street. By 1861 Henrietta, then Mrs. Cuthbert WILKINS and Rose, then Mrs. Edward PREST, moved away.

Elizabeth died in 1876, Julia in 1892 and Emmeline in 1907 after which the family's Risborough holdings began to be split up, but the high status of both the Smith and Farrar families of this story is apparent from the Grade II listed tomb that lies behind rails in the corner between the tower and south aisle of St. Mary's churchyard.



Time has taken its toll on memorial inscriptions in the churchyard, but in 1996, for the benefit of future generations, all that were still legible at the time were transcribed by the late Rex Kidd and the Farrar and Smith inscriptions, now almost completely lost, are reproduced below as he patiently typed them out, each / indicating a new line.

Sacred to the Memory of / Henry FARRAR Esq / of Princes Risborough / and late of Lincoln's Inn / Barrister at Law / He died 8th October 1846 / aged 48 years / much beloved and sincerely lamented / Also of / His affectionate wife Elizabeth / who died 19th February 1876 / aged 84 years / And they shall see His face / and His name shall be in their foreheads / Also of Julia / the second daughter of the above / Henry and Elizabeth Farrar / born 15th January 1823 / Died 20th March 1892 / Also of Emmeline / the fourth daughter of the above / Henry and Elizabeth FARRAR / born 4th March 1830 / Died 13th May 1907

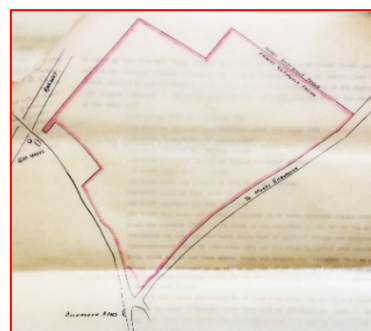
Sacred to the Memory of / Edward SMITH and Elizabeth his wife / also of / Sarah COCK sister of the said Elizabeth / SMITH all of whom are interred / in the North East side of this Churchyard / Within this vault are deposited the / remains of John SMITH son of Edward / and Elizabeth SMITH who died 28th July 1827 / Aged 62 years / Also of Edward SMITH son of Edward / and Elizabeth SMITH who died at Windsor in the County of Berks the / 3rd of February 1831 aged 56 years / Also of Mary SMITH daughter of / Edward and Elizabeth SMITH who / died the 20th November 1833 aged 71 years

Part 2: 1914 – 1938

In 1862 the Great Western Railway opened its branch line from Risborough to Aylesbury, running across the north-west edge of Shard Field and defining what was to remain the north-western boundary of Princes Risborough until the 21st C. The early 20th C confirmed a drift away from agriculture as the prime occupation in Princes Risborough, and heralded a new era of building expansion, starting in 1904 with the sale of the Culverton Mill Estate.

In 1914 Shard Field, estimated at about 38 acres was conveyed by Stanley Faber PREST and the Rev. Montague Cuthbert WILKINS, grandsons of Elizabeth Farrar, to Henry James RUTLAND, landlord of the *Buckingham Arms*, who in 1917 sold it on to local haulier Herbert HICKMAN for £1,850.

Herbert Hickman died in 1926 and on 27th May 1927 his widow Julia HICKMAN and local businessman Rupert EAST, as executors of his Will, sold the land to Joseph Ernest TURNER of The Chilterns, Aylesbury Road, and his neighbour John Humphrey WITNEY, of Longfield. The purchase price was £3,000 of which two thirds came from Ernest Turner and a third from John Witney.



Joseph Ernest Turner was a philanthropist with several business interests, notably in the manufacture of furniture and electrical instruments, with a factory for the latter in High Wycombe. It was said by some that his interest in the land was to preserve the outlook from his house, but the truth is revealed when, on 21st April 1927, a month prior to the completion of the above purchase, he wrote to the Parish Council as follows:

“For some time I have been trying to find a piece of suitable land in the neighbourhood of Princes Risborough for a playground for the children and it is only recently that I have been able to find what i consider to be a suitable position. I have the pleasure of offering to the Parish of Princes Risborough about 12 acres of suitable land as a free gift. The land in question is situated at the back of the Aylesbury Road, stretching from Longwick Road to Monks Risborough.

The land is to be used as a Children’s Recreation Ground and Park and if at any time the Town wishes to do away with the land [it] is to revert back to me or to my executors or heirs, as the case may be, but as long as it is used for the purpose for which it is given, the Land will be the Town’s own property.

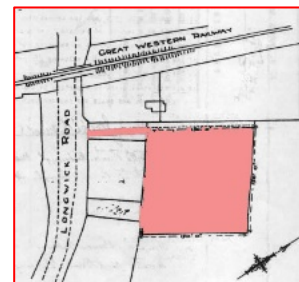
I am prepared to fence and plant the Land and fund a certain amount of money towards the development, which must be carried out to my plan, the balance of the expense to be paid by the Council. The upkeep to be entirely borne by the Parish, but I suggest that a grant might be made for part maintenance by the National Playing Fields Association.

If my offer meets with the wishes of the Parish I am delighted to be doing my little bit for the good of the Town and for the future of our children, who need some place to where they can go and have their recreation instead of having to play, at the present time, in the streets.”

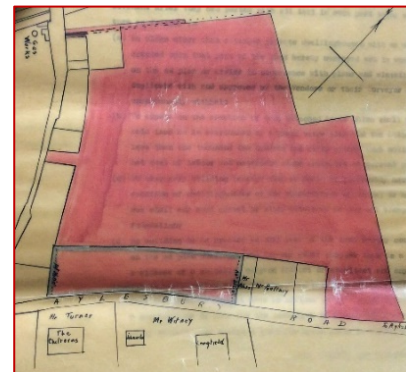
Ernest Turner's offer coincided with an appeal on behalf of the Playing Fields Association, founded in 1925, by the then Duke of York, later King George VI, who noted that some four million children were without a safe place to play. On 15th June, the Council voted to accept the offer, having formed a Committee to gather more information prior to a Parish Meeting,

On 18th June Ernest Turner wrote again, urging that the Parish Meeting be called, and the Playing Fields Association be invited to attend. Unexpectedly, given that the town's Ratepayers Association had initially urged the Council to accept the offer, the meeting was stormy. There was fierce opposition from residents of the Upper Hamlets, who objected to the prospect of contributing to the cost of a Playing Field in the town that would be of no benefit to them, and a Poll of all the Parish was demanded.

By 30th July, Ernest TURNER had lost patience and withdrew his offer in view of "organised opposition from the Hills and the apparent apathy of Princes Risborough ratepayers". The Council responded to the withdrawal with deep regret and the hope that some amicable agreement might yet be reached. Despite his disappointment, Ernest Turner continued in his efforts to support the youth of the town and in December 1927 he gave the recently formed Boy Scout and Girl Guide Troops a $\frac{3}{4}$ acre plot of land in the north-western corner of the field, with a fully equipped hut designed and built by local builder, Arthur NOBLE.



It was to be a further eight years before the hoped-for rapprochement was achieved, by which time the land had been on the brink of being irretrievably lost. Two houses had already been built by 1928, *Trelyn* for Arthur Bloss and *Ardenlea* for Charles Poultney, and in 1932 Ernest Turner and John Witney sold the remainder of Shard Field to the above-mentioned Alfred NOBLE, who plainly intended to develop it for housing. Fortunately for the future King George's Field, Turner and Witney had stipulated that the area facing their houses, outlined in grey on the adjoining plan, should be reserved for houses of a minimum value of £1,250 and only for occupation by a Solicitor, Surgeon, Physician, Dentist or Architect, which probably delayed any further construction.



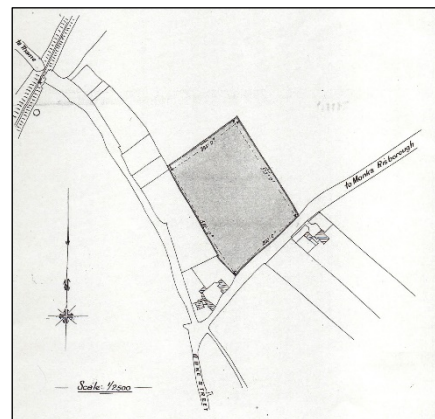
In 1933 Alfred Noble was declared bankrupt and the land was forfeited to the Midland Bank, which in 1934 sold it to another local builder, George Lacey, who promptly conveyed it to his children, Ernest, Arthur Gomm and Emma Elizabeth, in trust for sale. This coincided with a new national impetus towards the provision of recreation grounds and in 1935 the Parish Council was urgently seeking a suitable location. Two sites came under consideration. The first was 5 – 6 acres behind the *Buckingham Arms* and adjoining the Rural District Housing Estate of Cannon Place, but this was not pursued. The second option was more promising; Ernest Turner, despite his earlier frustration, had never lost his aspirations and now resolved to try and buy back some of what he and Witney had sold, for the Parish Council Minutes of 10th October 1935 record that "A parishioner had offered £1,000 if the land fronting the Aylesbury Road could be purchased."

This site had a frontage of c. 540ft to the Aylesbury road and extended back to the aforementioned Scout Hut, approximately 14 acres. An ambitious plan had been prepared to show the site could accommodate a Cricket Ground, Children's Recreation Ground, two football grounds, six tennis courts, and a bowling green.

A Deputation comprising Cllrs. James Pearce, C. T. Rowley and Clement East, with Robert Bailey, the Clerk, met Ernest Lacey on 18th October 1935 and on the 24th reported that he was not willing to sell the frontage of 600ft, but was prepared to sell 300 – 400ft of frontage to a depth of 240ft, between 1 – 2 acres, at 45 shillings per foot. More worrying, perhaps, was that he would sell an estimated area of 7 – 9 acres at the back of the proposed layout for a road at £80 an acre with about 6 acres more to the right of the latter at the same price, if required.

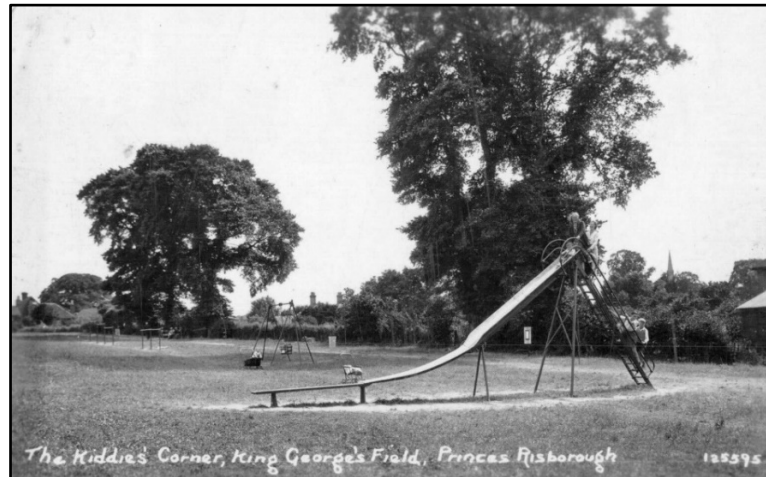
The road in question would have been part of a controversial plan to create a town by-pass running from Culverton Pitches to Mill Lane, Monks Risborough, via Picts Lane, a proposal that resonates again in 2020. The Parish Council and populace were adamantly opposed to the scheme and because it would have crossed the playing field site Ernest Turner himself vehemently objected to it, even indicating that his offer would be conditional on its rejection.

In the end all went well; by early 1936 the planned bypass had been abandoned, and although a much more modest purchase was achieved than that initially proposed, on 31st July 1936 Ernest Turner paid £1,140 for an area of some five acres and presented it to the Council, with the proviso that it was intended for "the children and old people of the town, and not for organised sports clubs". The Cricket Club, in particular, had been pressing for its own field, but he felt it and the Football Clubs could make their own arrangements .



The Last Days of Farm Life in Shard Field, 1937

The playing field was formally opened on Saturday 19th June 1937, by Lord Derby, President of the Playing Fields Association. The event was fully reported by the Bucks Herald and Bucks Free Press, from which one can learn that Ernest Turner had not only provided the land, but had also fitted it out with swings, a slide, parallel and horizontal bars, a six-seater see-saw, sandpit and paddling pool, towards which the Committee of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) and the National Playing Fields Association had contributed £30.



A Postcard View of the Play Area from 1937

In addition to the play equipment Ernest Turner provided some 400 trees and shrubs to set off the grounds and engaged George (later Sir George) Langley Taylor, FRIBA and President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, to design a large timber and thatch pavilion, seen in the Bucks Herald photograph below with Lord Derby on the steps. It comprised a large central room, two dressing rooms, kitchen, and storeroom, with a separate shed for a mower.



Note that this pavilion should not be confused with the building behind St. Teresa's church, originally a separatist Baptist Chapel, that became a centre for local functions known variously as The Pavilion, The Chalfont Hall, the Mission Hall and is now called the Walsingham Hall.

One last issue remained to be resolved; it had been noted at an early stage that a second access point from the Longwick Road would benefit the children of the recently built council houses of Cannon Place, but most of the field side of Longwick Road was already built up and no-one wanted a footpath through their property. The problem was only settled when on 21st April 1938 the Laceys granted a lease for a path 4ft wide and 150 ft long.

On 26th May 1938, the future of field was finally secured by a Resolution of the Parish Council, as follows -

It is hereby declared by the PARISH COUNCIL of the PARISH of PRINCES RISBOROUGH that the Recreation Ground acquired by them on the Thirty first day of July, One thousand nine hundred and thirty six ... in respect of which Heraldic Panels have been provided by King George's Field Foundation shall be preserved in perpetuity as a Memorial to His Late Majesty King George V under the provisions of the King George's Fields Foundation and shall henceforth be known as King George's Field.

Heraldic Panels? Therein lay a mystery. It was a condition of the permission to use the title King George's Field that there should be a formal entrance, and in some instances so-called "Jubilee Gates" in wrought iron were provided by the King George V Jubilee Fund, though not at Princes Risborough where the entrance was a paved semi-circle with timber gates.

Unfortunately, the panels did not arrive in time for the opening ceremony, and when they did there is no evidence that they were set in position. If they were, they would seem to have been removed, perhaps when the original wooden gates were replaced by the present very handsome wrought iron gates whose posts are decorated with a simple 'KGV'. Whichever, they were subsequently stored out of sight and almost out of mind, to await their recent rediscovery in the keeping of the Town Council. Perhaps now, better late than never, their time may have come.



Sadly, King George's Field did not, in its early years, get the respect it deserved, in part, no doubt, because of the exigencies of the Second World War. It did manage to avoid having trenches dug across it by the Air Raid Protection Wardens (ARP), having been designated for the purpose in 1940 should the need arise, but In 1943 the Parish Clerk reported that the pavilion had been repeatedly damaged and would be kept locked. In 1946 Ernest Turner's son complained to the Council of his mother's distress at the deplorable condition of both the building and ground, to which the Councillors replied that there was no lack of interest on their part, but a lack of co-operation on the part of the public.

In 1951 the Bucks Free Press reported that the pavilion was in a state of dereliction, allegedly by vandalism, but more probably by deliberate criminal activity as much of the boarding had been removed. The building was demolished, the remnants sold for £170, and a concrete shelter replaced it, standing in stark isolation mid-field.

Although a degree of vandalism continued to be a nuisance, better times lay ahead, spurred on in the 1960s by the arrival of young families on the new Wellington Farm Housing Estate. Generous financial and physical support was provided by the Princes Risborough Round Table, working closely with the Council, and in 1968 the ugly concrete shelter was demolished and replaced by one of better design and location, albeit still of pre-fabricated concrete panels, provided by the local branch of construction company John Laing,

That new shelter disappeared in its turn, as also in the 1970s did many of the original trees provided by Ernest Turner, victims of the fungal infection accidentally imported from Asia and perhaps unfairly known as Dutch Elm disease, having been first identified in the Netherlands.

Since then things have gone well for King George's Field. It is now two hundred years since Shard Field was enclosed, and nearly one hundred years since the land was first acquired by Ernest Turner in furtherance of his desire to provide a better life for the children of Princes Risborough. With careful landscape management and the provision of a wide range of equipment to entertain children from toddler to teenager, the field is in 2020 truly the embodiment of Ernest Turner's dream.



Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Princes Risborough Town Council for access to Deeds and other documents, and for unfailing support in this and other projects.

To Chris Kingham, Chairman of the Princes Risborough Area Heritage Society, for many years of friendship and shared research, and particularly here for information about the Farrar family and the Scout and Guide Hut.

To the late Rex Kidd, Vice-President of the Heritage Society, for his meticulous transcriptions and recording of records pertaining to the local history, without which.

The pictures and plans are, except where otherwise indicated, from my own collection of Deeds, Postcards and Photographs.

Sandy Macfarlane, 20th November 2020



Children's Play Ground 2020



Skateboard Area 2020



King George's Field 2020: Courtesy of Google Earth