

NATURE BOY

IN THE FLOWER FIELDS

Memories of a vanished tradition



Joe Firmin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joe Firmin (80), a member of an Essex farming family, was educated at Colchester Royal Grammar School and was a trainee journalist on the Essex County Telegraph, Colchester before joining the Army in July, 1944 and taking part as an infantryman in the Rhine crossing operation, March 1945 and the advance into Germany. Later he was an Army public relations officer before resuming his journalistic career in Colchester, Ipswich and London.

He is a founder and President of the Colchester Natural History Society and chairman both of Essex Moth Group and Essex Lepidoptera Panel. He is a special life member of the British Entomological Society and co-author with

Dr Ted Benton of "The Butterflies of Colchester and North East Essex" and senior author of "The Butterflies and Larger Moths of Essex" published by Essex Wildlife Trust.

Joe is currently engaged in leading a project on the Marks Hall Estate, Coggeshall to reintroduce a number of woodland butterfly species which vanished in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the Essex Biodiversity Action Plan.

Nature Boy in the Flower Fields

Memories of a
vanished tradition

*To Ted
who shares
my passion
for the natural
world —
from
Joe*



Joe Firmin

AN IDYLIC BEGINNING

My lifetime's interest in nature began in the years before the Second World War when my father was manager of a 52 acre flower and vegetable seed production farm and varieties trial ground at Lexden on the western fringe of Colchester, Essex. In summer the vivid acres of flowers grown for seed danced with the wings of butterflies and at harvest time hundreds of goldfinches, greenfinches and linnets arrived to feed on the seed heads before my father put protective netting over the stooked sheaves and stacked the crops before autumn and winter threshing.



A purple hairstreak butterfly (underside). Still found on the oaks at Bunting's Meadow Local Nature Reserve, Lexden

wood anemones. Two large horse ponds were fringed with oaks which, in high summer, were the home of purple hairstreak butterflies. I searched in May for their curious dumpy brown caterpillars feeding on the fresh green leaves. They bore an uncanny resemblance to the oak's brown leaf bud sheaths.

In those days stately elm trees, which hadn't yet succumbed to disease, hosted a colony of the pretty little white-letter hairstreak butterfly. The female butterflies laid their eggs in July on topmost elm twigs and after overwintering these hatched in spring and the tiny larvae fed on the trees' blossoms and later on the unfurling leaves.

THE MAGIC OF REAL HORSE POWER

My memories of boyhood days on the Bunting seed farm and trial grounds are filled with the magic of real horse power. Our two Suffolk Punch work horses, Peggy and Major, performed every possible task on the 52 acres, ploughing, harrowing and carting, and I was allowed by my father and our horseman Wally Carter occasionally to try my hand with the Ransome plough which I counted a great privilege.



A pause for a photograph while horse harrowing in 1938. Joe Firmin (12) in action again with the Kodak "Box Brownie". Left Leslie Gammer; right Joe Firmin senior

One of the things which fascinated me most while in the field with horsemen was the close understanding between man and animal. Orders were given in a strange language which I endeavoured to write down and analyse. When Wally Carter wanted his team to turn left he would call "cuppy whee" or just plain "whee-whee". In a sixteenth century song the waggoner is described as "with nailed shoes and whipstaff in his hand who, with a hay and ree, the beasts command". "Hey" corresponds with "heit" and tells the horse to bear hither and to the left. Other versions of the command to move left I wrote down as cub-baa, cub-hay and coopy-hay. I believe the word coop or coopy is a corruption of "come up". There is (or rather was) a musical cattle call "coop, co-op" and "cusha cusha" which is possibly a corruption of the French couchez. The ree of

the medieval waggoner meant right as in "riddle-me-ree". But to turn a horse to the right, farm horsemen in North Essex and Suffolk used to call woosh, wish and whoash from the French gauche (left) yet, curiously, used with the reverse meaning. Essex horsemen, however, had another command for the right which I wrote down as whoar-gee or whoar-dee. The ordinary calls weh, who or whoa for stopping a horse and gee, gee-ho and gee-up for starting up are traceable to Norman French.

Some farm horsemen possessed recipes handed down from father to son for herbal ointments and liniments. Some of these concoctions had more than a whiff of black magic about them especially those which used the powdered bones of frogs ground up into an ointment of boiled herbs and aromatic oils and carried in the pocket. When applied this magic potion was said to have the power of stopping or moving horses at will and also of calming the most fractious of animals. My old friend Wally Carter had his own special recipe for a horse calming oil. He placed some red brandling worms dug up from a mature dung heap into a mixture of vegetable oils and the jar placed in the hot heart of the manure pile. After a while everything blended into a thick oil which could then be rubbed on horse noses. Certainly this strange "down to earth" application seemed to work.



Joe Firmin, aged 8, on the back of Peggy, one of the two Suffolk Punch horses on the Bunting's farm in the 1930s and early 1940s. Holding onto Peggy is farm horseman Wally Carter.

THE OLD ORCHARD

My favourite secluded hunting ground was an old orchard with more than 30 varieties of apples with such charmingly evocative names as Beauty of Bath, Blenheim Orange, Peasgood Nonsuch and D'arcy Spice Pippin. Under the spread of branches, which, in May, were wreathed in scented pink and white blossoms, there was a froth of cow parsley blooms, dappled green and white umbels, around which flew orange tip and green-veined white butterflies.

In damp corners were the dainty violet blooms of cuckoo flower, or lady's smock, where I watched female orange tips, lacking the bright orange forewing tips of the males, laying their upright creamy white eggs which later, appropriately, turned orange. Jaunty male chaffinches sang among the fragrant boughs and I knew where to find their beautifully woven nest cups of mosses, lichens and grasses. More music to my young ears came from the sweet cadences of willow warblers, the fluty vocal challenges of male blackcaps and the virtuoso and surprisingly far carrying loud trills of male wrens.

In late summer and autumn the large apple crop provided food for birds. The fallen fruit, oozing fermented juice, were bright with the jostling wings of red admiral and comma butterflies and abuzz with wasps, hornets and flies. In the dark days of winter came flocks of fieldfares and redwings from the great conifer and birch forests of Scandinavia to feed on the tumbled apples.

Then, in 1941, the fate of my special sanctuary was sealed by the Essex War Agricultural Executive Committee which decreed that the grand old trees planted in the days of Queen Victoria must be grubbed out to make way for vital cereal and vegetable crops.

The "Dig for Victory" campaign was in full swing in those stressful war years. Every productive acre was important. The ghost of the old orchard still haunts my memory. I have never forgotten the anguish and drama when heavy diggers and steam driven tackle dragged out my beloved old friends the apple trees and piled tangle of branches and roots into a vast funeral pyre. Within months no trace of the orchard was left, just a sea of wheat and barley stems stretched where the lichen-encrusted apple trees once proudly stood.



Orange tip butterflies brought springtime beauty to the damp corners of the old orchard. Here a male is feeding on the nectar of a cuckoo flower (lady's smock), the same plant on which the female orange tips lay their eggs.

Photo: Ian Rose



Above: Peggy and Major pulling the self binder cutting an oat crop grown as horse feed on the Bunting seed farm in the 1930s

Below: Sergeant Joe Firmin senior, 8th Essex Home Guard, a World War One veteran, looks at his tomato seed crop at Bunting's before evening duty in 1943. Inset: Joe Firmin, 17, with great coat and steel helmet ready for a Home Guard parade the same year, pictured outside the family cottage at Bunting's seed farm, Lexden on a snowy winter day.





Left: Flower fields boy and Mum in the Bunting flower trials 1933. Joe (7) with Mabel.

Right: As well as growing seed crops and carrying out new variety flower and seed trials, Bunting's farm kept Large White pigs in one of their old black boarded buildings. Joe Firmin senior, farm manager, with sow and a lively litter of piglets in the late 1930s.



Left: Young Joe with dog and ball



Left: Joe Firmin senior stands among the last flower variety trials at the Buntingseed farm in 1966. This portrait has been used on the information board at the entrance to the Bunting's Meadow Local Nature Reserve.

Right: Joe Firmin senior, using an historic hand-operated seed dresser in the 1960s

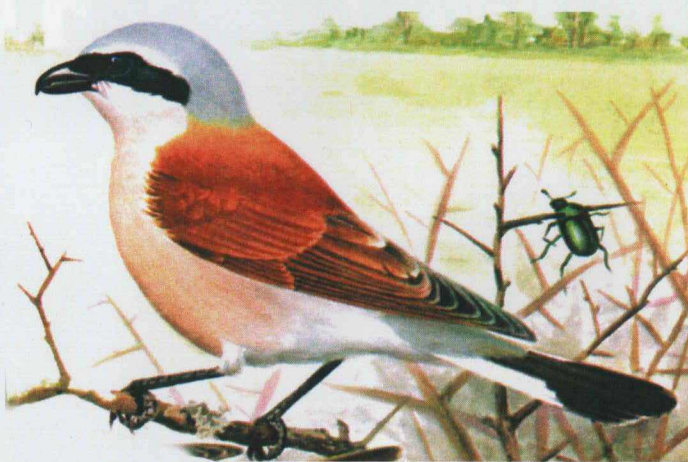


Left: Joe Firmin's daughters Carolyn (left) 6 and Susan 10 with scarecrow friend among the Bunting's vegetable seed trials in 1965. In the background is the Victorian greenhouse demolished in the 1980s

REMEMBERING BUTCHER BIRDS

Red-backed shrikes were, in my boyhood, still widespread and reasonably common summer residents, returning to breed from African winter quarters in late April and May. A pair could usually be found on the farm nesting in an old hawthorn bush or a bramble thicket. My father would tell me at teatime after my return from school; "The butcher birds are back down by the lower spinney".

Butcher bird is the local name for the red-backed shrike which comes from the habit of catching small rodents, beetles, bees and young birds and impaling some of them on thorns or barbed wire spikes to make a larder. The bill of the shrike has a hook at the tip like that



Male red-backed shrike. A pair always nested on the Bunting seed farm before the second world war.

of a small hawk. It was always exciting for me to watch the male shrike hunting for beetles and other insects from his vantage point at the top of a bush or on a post. He would hover for a moment then swoop down to pick up his prey either to eat it or place it in his larder. In May sunshine his chestnut back shone brightly contrasting smartly with his grey head and black eye mask. His breast had a faint pinkish flush. His mate was more subdued in colour but equally beautiful, her breast barred with soft brown crescents.

One reason for the decline of the red-backed shrike in the post-war period has been extensive habitat destruction. The bushy areas of scrub, heathland and commons once favoured by shrikes have been cleared or reclaimed and with cover have gone the invertebrates, small rodents and small birds which were their prey. The species has been lost as a British breeding bird and now the best chance of seeing a red-backed shrike in Essex is at migration times when passage birds from the Continent drift to our coasts.

MEMORIES OF MAWKINS

My memories of boyhood springtimes are filled with a scatter of scarecrows – or mawkins as they were called in the northern part of my native Essex. My father used to set up his battle headquarters against the pea-eating rooks, pigeons and larks in a black weatherboarded barn.

In March my mother would be told once more to hunt through the wardrobe and attic for old clothes. Wally, the farm's horseman, who could put his hand to any seasonal job, was asked to part with a couple of his hats and caps.

Every now and then he would sacrifice a soil-stained army surplus greatcoat which had kept out the wind and rain during many weeks spent behind his pair of Suffolk Punches.

"Now then, boy," my father would say to me. "Make yourself useful this morning and help us with a scarecrow or two. If we don't get a move on them blasted old rooks will have all my trial rows of peas."

So the mawkin makers would assemble in the barn, with father as commander-in-chief. He rapped out his orders with military precision.



1. The body is a straw filled sack



2. A linen seed bag makes the face

"Right, Wal," he said. "Fill up these sacks with straw... Pass me that bundle of binder twine... Cut these poles into 5ft lengths..."

And to me: "Paint the face on this one, boy. Give it a right old scarey look – white face, black eyes and red mouth. Those old rooks are a cunning lot. You've got to make the face look good."

Father would manipulate the mawkins into realistic shapes and postures. By the time he had finished directing his team there were half a dozen "old men", hoes and sticks in hands, ready to guard the rows of peas and beans. Some were "armed" with sticks shaped like shotguns and placed in firing positions.

The other scarecrow makers, who slapped a couple of plastic sacks and an old jacket on a crosspiece of poles, made my father snort. He was equally scathing about fluorescent-painted, cut out shapes of men with guns, and the scarer cannons.

Father's mawkins had a rakish realism. They were far more dandified than the traditional Wurzel Gumidge type of scarecrow. Their battered trilbies were set at a jaunty angle and kerchiefs fluttered from their throats. Often they would sport well-tailored but frayed jackets and trousers. Sometimes there would be an inquest over the supper table about these clothes.



3. On with the shirt



4. The arms are stuffed with straw

"Mother," my father would say in that tone of voice that presaged something investigatory, "Who said you could turn out my brown sports coat? Blast it – that's fit for another four or five years yet. They'll think we're made of money putting clothes like that on scarecrows."

My mother, busy at the kitchen stove, pretended she hadn't heard. But if pressed a second time she would hit back: "It's about time you put some of your things on these blessed old scarers. Heaven knows I've given up enough of my clothes over the years."

And she was right – for several of the "old men" on closer scrutiny were seen to be females of the mawkin species. They had scuttle-shaped hats of the kind all the rage in the early thirties; skirts which had passed out of fashion a decade previously; or a wasp waisted tailored suit which filled my mother with nostalgia.

"Just look at that dear," she would sigh to me. "Once I could wear things like that. Ah well..."

The crucial time in the spring battle against the birds came when the peas were beginning to shoot. If father could keep the rooks off for a couple of weeks it was long enough for the plants to get established.



5. How's that for size sir?



6. A scarf keeps out the wind

The mawkins were effective – but only up to a point.

An all-out war would be waged against the birds. The mawkin parade would be backed up with metal cut-outs of cats' heads complete with glaring glass marble eyes, gyrating bundles of rags; red-painted milk bottles on inverted sticks and periodic blasts from a 12-bore shotgun.

A few rooks were shot and their bodies hung up to twirl in the wind as an awful warning to the marauding flocks. Father would pluck out wing feathers and stick them in the ground in circular patterns around the canes on which the rooks' bodies were hung. This was thought to deter the wily birds. Certainly it seemed to work for the next few days.

Another weapon in our rook-scaring armament was a football rattle which my father picked up in a village jumble sale. When I was on school holiday I would be pressed into scarer service. "Keep those damned old birds on the move," said father, handing me the rattle.

With a grimace I saw my well-planned days of birds-nesting and fishing vanishing before my eyes as I tramped down to the pea trials.

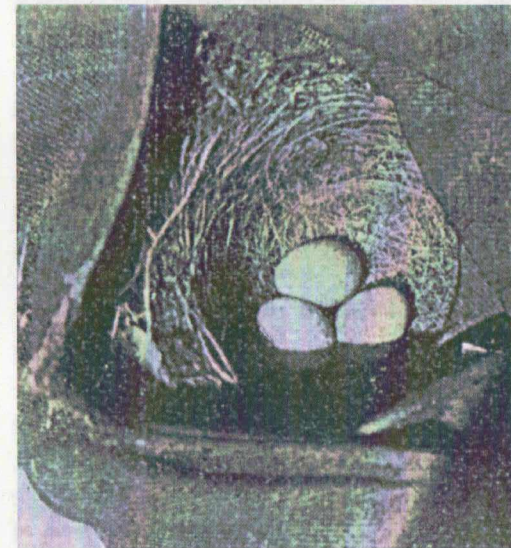


7. Final touch - the hoe



8. Will you fool the rooks?

POCKETFUL OF NEST



A pair of Suffolk Punch horses, Peggy the mare and Major the gelding, provided the motive power on the farm for the ploughing, harrowing, seed drilling, carting and pulling the self-binder with its cutting sails.

Our horseman, Wally Carter, was a keen observer of all wildlife on the farm and he figured in an amusing incident involving nesting robins. One day when Wally went to collect cigarettes and matches from the pocket of his overcoat hung up in the open cart lodge he was rewarded with a handful of moss, dry grasses and leaves. Muttering about being

The nest built in Wally's pocket that remained until the young fledged

the victim of a joke, Wally removed the offending "rubbish" and put it on the ground.

Wally's workmates strongly denied playing a prank and then one of them spotted some robins. One, probably the agitated male, loudly scolded from a nearby post. No doubt now about the origin of the material in the pocket. Wally needed his overcoat to go home and, like many countrymen, he was superstitious about robins as there was a saying that if you harmed one, its nest, eggs or young, something unpleasant would befall you.

Wally's solution to the problem was to bring one of his old jackets from the stables and put it on the peg where he had hung his overcoat. Into the pocket he stuffed the original nest material. In minutes the robins were continuing nest building. Three eggs were laid and there was a happy ending as young birds were reared and safely flew.

THE GREAT BLACK BARN

On the farm a big black-boarded barn, vaulted with rough-hewn oak and elm beams, was home to a pair of barn owls, which hunted on silent creamy wings at dusk and sometimes in daylight. The dusty cobwebbed barn, later to become another victim of wartime change and replacement by a brick-built grain and seed store, was my happy hunting ground for all sorts of creatures. Mice scurried in its secret corners, if they escaped the owls, and small birds foraged on the seed-littered floor when the great doors were open. In winter peacock and small tortoiseshell butterflies and several moth species found snug and safe niches in which to sleep away the long months in hibernation.

Before the war the barn was where flower and vegetable seed crops were threshed by my father and his team of workers using the age-old method of flailing. After some tuition from father I was allowed to try my hand at this traditional harvest activity, which has now vanished with the end of the local seed-growing industry. On a raw winter's day it was wonderful for a small boy to snuggle down on the sweet-smelling straw or on heaps of clean seed sacks listening to the thump of the flails and watch the seed heads leap and fall at each round of blows. The flailers kept a steady rhythm for hours on end. The effect was almost hypnotic on watcher and flailer alike and the spell was broken only if one of the circle faltered and lost the beat or the leader signalled a break for a smoke or for a swig of cold tea from a bottle, a favourite workday drink for pre-war farm workers. A floor was prepared for the flailing consisting of a three-inch covering of straw over which was laid a cloth sheet with the crop to be threshed



Three species of owls nested on the Bunting seed farm and trial grounds: barn, tawny and little. These young tawnies were from a nest in one of the old barns.

on top. A flailing team could number up to six but most favoured number was four. The leader of the team known as the striker started the threshing followed by the others in rotation. This achieved the required rhythm similar to the musical beat of 4/4 time.

THE STICK AND A HALF

The flail was locally called the stick and a half. The handle was usually made of ash or hazel and was 5ft or 5ft 6in long. The beater of the flail called the swingle, ideally half the length of the handle, was attached to the handle by a leather thong joined to the shouldered loop or cap of willow at the head of the handle. My father and also my farmer-grandfather John made their own flails as well as the swivel caps fashioned from willow or green ash. The swingle wood was usually ash, holly, blackthorn or apple.



Joe Firmin (left) and his father Joe Firmin senior threshing a crop of onion seed at the Bunting's seed farm and trial grounds in the 1960s when the flail was still in use

Old hands like my father used to like their swingles fairly knotty and it could be 10 years before they were replaced. The Essex seed growers preferred to flail flower and vegetable crops and to carefully hand dress the seed to avoid any varietal mixes which could prove a costly embarrassment and damaging to merchant reputation.

THE FLOWERY FIELDS

The Second World War brought the growing of flowers for seed to a halt for the duration but it was resumed at Colchester, Marks Tey, Kelvedon and Coggeshall into the 1960s when cheaper imports, and the uncertainties of the weather at growing harvesting times, finally brought this traditional industry to an end. But in its heyday in the 1930s I happily wandered among the rows of flower trials and at the edge of the acres of nodding blooms and filled my notebooks with exciting new records. Here it was, in the summer of 1939, as war clouds gathered, I saw my first clouded yellow butterfly – a male with bright orange-yellow wings edged with chocolate brown, flying swiftly among the African marigolds.



Flower seed crops and variety trials at Bunting's Farm. Happy hunting ground for the young Joe Firmin in pre-war years



Schoolboy Joe saw his first convolvulus hawk moth hovering in front of nicotiana (tobacco) plants at Buntings flower trials before the second world war. The moth has a four inch wingspan and is a migrant from southern Europe

flowers. At dusk in August I'd walk among the highly perfumed rows of nicotiana (tobacco) plants in the hope of seeing a convolvulus hawk moth.

One exciting night I saw two shadowy shapes hovering in front of the tobacco plants. My little pocket torch beam picked out my very first convolvulus hawks with their amazingly long tongues stretched into the flower tubes. The moths, more visitors from the south with their four-inch wingspans, looked as big as bats. I hurried home under the starry sky to the welcoming lights of our cottage to tell father of my special sightings among his flowers and to record the event in my field notebook.

SOME MASTERLY HELP

I used to tell my geography master at grammar school about my wildlife encounters on the farm. Mr Saunders nicknamed by we boys "Speedy" mainly, I think, because of his somewhat rapid and breathless lecturing style was in his young days a collector of butterflies and moths. He encouraged my interest in natural history and he used to regale me with stories of days in the New Forest just after the First World War when there could be clouds of silver-washed and

As well as the plentiful red admirals, small tortoiseshells and commas, painted lady butterflies arrived in some years from southern Europe or North Africa while here and there hovered and darted hummingbird hawk moths, also immigrants from southern climes, their long probosces (tongues) extended into the nectar-rich

high-brown fritillary butterflies and white admirals and, sometimes, the greatest prize of all, the purple emperor.

One day, as we walked across the school quadrangle at break time, Speedy told me of a special expedition to the Denny Enclosure in the New Forest to find and catch a purple emperor. He had been told by one of the Forest's verderers of an old pear tree on the edge of a clearing which had a crack in its bark oozing resinous sap irresistible to butterflies, wasps and hornets. It lured a male purple emperor from his lofty perch at the top of a tall oak to join in the feast. "Did you catch it, sir?" I asked. "Oh yes", replied Speedy with his infectious chuckle. "A side sweep with my trusty old kite net and His Majesty was in the bag."

The trouble with Speedy was his reputation for telling some very tall humorous stories but I wanted to believe him. The more so as he loaned me his precious identification guides to moths and butterflies written by Richard South in Warne's famous "Wayside and Woodland" series. Armed with the books' colour plates I was able to identify many of the myriad of moths and several butterflies I found on the farm and in the neighbourhood woods and fields.

QUEST FOR THE EMPEROR TREE

There was a sequel to the Speedy Saunders' purple emperor yarn. When I had a family holiday in the New Forest in the early 1960s I decided to check the veracity of Speedy's old "emperor" pear tree in the Denny Enclosure. After quite a search I came across a clearing and, much to my surprise, there was an old gnarled pear tree, this time with more than one resinous patch where two red admirals and a comma were enjoying the heady "sweets". But, alas, no sign of a purple emperor! Speedy has long since gone to the happy hunting grounds of departed bug hunters but I imagined I could still hear his chuckle and maybe an admonition for ever doubting his purple emperor story.

A VISIT FROM THE LUFTWAFFE

Stack making is now almost a lost art but in the heyday of the Essex seed industry, long before the era of the combine harvester, neatly fashioned stacks with their crowns of thatch or spread off-white sheets were a familiar sight in north east Essex.

My father and grandfather were master stack makers and at harvest time at Buntings I was allowed to help place the sheaves of flower and vegetable seed crops on the lower base sections of these important structures. There was a lingering fragrance in the autumn air as my father and his helpers finished the stacking and secured protective tarpaulins.

It was these topping sheets which figured in an episode of the war on a moonlit night in early winter 1940. There had been a big Nazi bomber raid on Midland towns and the sky was criss-crossed with searchlight beams and the bursts of anti-aircraft shells as the Dorniers and Heinkels droned their way westwards on their deadly missions.

Just before midnight one of the bombers heading for the North Sea coast and its home base in Germany descended above Buntings with a whine of engines. Startled as we peered from the entrance of the garden air raid shelter my father had built in our cottage garden we saw vivid flashes of tracer bullets as one of the gunners on the bomber opened fire on the line of seed stacks the sheets of which showed starkly white in the moonlight. There was a rattle rather like someone



Schoolboy Joe Firmin (right) and friend pose for their portraits in front of two flower seed stacks at Buntings before the Second World War. In early winter 1940 some of these stacks were targeted by a German bomber probably mistaking their white sheet tops as a tented military installation.

running a stick along a corrugated metal fence and then the plane climbed high to resume its homeward flight still pursued by the probing searchlights. We could only assume that the bomber crew thought the line of stacks was a tented military encampment or just a target on which to expend machine gun ammunition.

Inspection in the cold light of dawn showed that the air gunner was fairly accurate. There were bullet holes on four or five of the stack sheets and, as an enthusiastic souvenir hunter, I found some metal clips obviously fallen from the tail gunner's machine gun lying amongst the stubble. These joined my schoolboy "museum" of wartime souvenirs which included pieces of metal from crashed bombers and lumps of bomb shrapnel.

There was another wartime incident on the night of February 23, 1944 when German bombers dropped a large number of incendiaries which caused much fire damage to buildings and factories at St Botolph's Corner, Colchester. There was also a scatter of the fire bombs in the vicinity of Buntings. My father and I rushed to smother one which landed on a grass field on the eastern boundary of the farm and its incandescent blue-white sputtering glare lit up the whole area. Like everyone with premises we had buckets and stirrup pumps and a ready supply of sand bags. As we piled the sand bags on to the still blazing bomb I remember my father saying "Hope this isn't an explosive incendiary". Some of these deadly devices were included in the canisters of fire bombs dropped by the Nazi bombers. I "rescued" the bomb's fin from the charred pile the next day and it joined my "mini-museum".

HOME GUARD DAYS

After my years at Colchester Royal Grammar School in 1942 I joined the staff of the Essex County Telegraph newspaper as a trainee reporter. I witnessed (and reported via the official Cambridge censor) the air raids on Colchester and surrounding villages. My father Joe was a sergeant in the 8th Essex Home Guard, proudly wearing his First World War medal ribbons. He was wounded in action in France in 1918. I joined his platoon as a junior Home Guard at sixteen and a half. As well as acquiring a big Canadian Ross rifle, which I had to messily prise from its protective grease in the packing case, I was taught to fire with practice missiles two fearsomely primitive looking weapons called a Spigot Mortar and a Blacker Bombard. We were glad we were never called upon to fire these in earnest.



However my on-the-ranges experience with rifle and semi-automatic weapons stood me in good stead when I joined the Army in 1944 destined to take part as an infantryman in the Rhine crossing operation and the advance into Germany.

Joe Firmin (16) with his father Sergeant Joe Firmin as they prepare for parade in 1942.

SERGEANT TOM'S "VICTORY"

Occasionally the Home Guard took part in training manoeuvres with soldiers from the Colchester Garrison. I remember one such exercise in 1943 when we Home Guards took up defensive positions on the western edge of the Hilly Fields (now a local nature reserve) and the Army "invaders" were expected to approach from the east when they would have to negotiate the undulations of the Hillies.

One of the Home Guard defenders was Sergeant Tom Marshall, a Lexden builder and a First World War veteran. Tom had used one of his tallest ladders to haul an old car seat to the top of a very tall beech tree overlooking the sweep of the Hilly Fields. He had built a platform for his lofty vantage point and also acquired a pair of old Barr and Stroud binoculars. Alongside the beech tree was one of the concrete pillboxes built in 1940 as part of the anti invasion defences where other Home Guards were ready with their rifles primed with blank ammunition and thunder flashes to repel the invaders. What the "enemy" didn't know was that the wily Tom Marshall on the day before the big exercise had booby-trapped the Hilly Fields with criss-crossed trip-wires attached to tin cans as "mines". The

Regulars were soon in a desperate trouble blundering among the clattering cans. The Army Major who was adjudicating as umpire adjudged the invaders had effectively been wiped out even before they could get within range of the line of Home Guard defenders to fire their blanks and hurl their own thunderflashes. Sergeant Tom celebrated victory with us in the Lexden Sun Inn. Remarkably his old car seat could still be seen at the top of the beech tree into the 1960s when it fell at last and passers-by had no idea of the story behind its tangle of metal and frayed leather.

EPITAPH FOR FAMOUS OLD VARIETIES

One of the most important and fascinating aspects of life at Buntings was the annual ritual of checking the vigour of old and renowned varieties of flowers and vegetables and the quality or otherwise of new varieties. My father's boss, Ellis W Bunting, would arrive in summer with his wife and spaniel dogs in their big Rover car. My father, wearing his obligatory Panama hat if the sun shone, walked up and down the rows of trials with the all-important book containing the nominal check list. Decisions taken on this day would affect the continuance of some varieties if performance had deteriorated or the promotion of other varieties to



One of the annual checks on flower and vegetable varieties in May, 1937. On left is Joe Firmin senior, manager, with managing director of G.A. Bunting and Co, Ellis W. Bunting. They had to judge performance of more than 1000 varieties.

the highly-recommended category. Bunting's was a wholesale merchant firm as well as a major producer of pedigree seeds.

I still have my father's trials book for 1952 which contains more than one thousand trials of flowers and vegetables and the comments of himself and his boss. Some of the variety names are both strange and colourful and lots have disappeared from today's catalogues. What happened to Bunting's Irish Giant Drumhead Savoy or the Lexden Beauty summer Coronarium chrysanthemum, a variety developed by my father as plant breeder? I've tried hard to discover if this golden yellow variety survived the end of Bunting trading in 1967 but to no avail.

My precious copy of Bunting's 1952 seeds catalogue is a window into a lost world of old favourites though, of course, contemporary seed firms have saved some

timeless sturdy varieties, albeit with changed names, and are constantly developing new ones to grace our gardens and allotments.



BUNTING'S EXHIBITION.

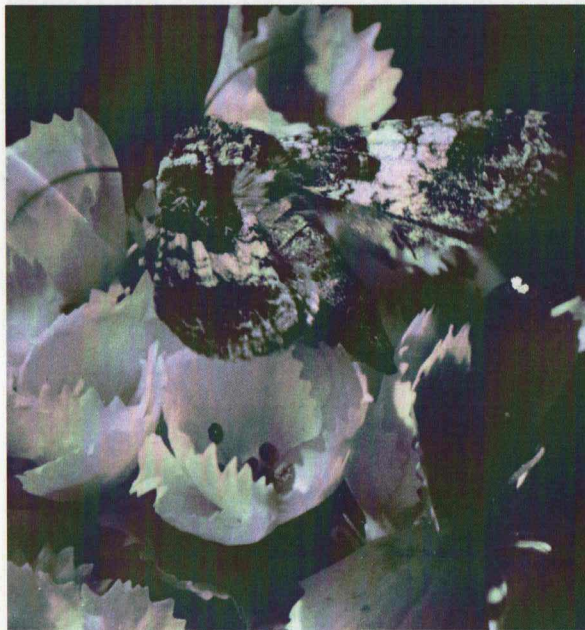
A magnificent Onion, semi-globular in shape. Under good cultivation the bulbs grow to an immense size, are solid, heavy, and splendid keepers. Colour, Golden straw. English Grown. Strongly recommended.

Per cwt., 3800/- ; Per lb., 36/-

Before my father and I set off for Home Guard duties in summer 1942 I took his photograph in one of the Bunting glasshouses as he inspected a seed crop of Bunting's No.1 tomato which was awarded the much coveted Merit accolade by the Wisley varieties research centre. The photograph appears on page 11.

Growing onions for seed was a major part of the annual programme at Bunting's. This picture and details appeared in the 1952 seed catalogue.

SEVENTY YEARS ON



The varied coronet moth

wanted me to look at. When he opened a storebox there were several specimens of the varied coronet moth which, until 1954, had been found in Britain only on the Kent coast. The moths had been reared after a female had been seen laying eggs in the flowers of sweet william in the Ipswich Road, Colchester garden.

Knowing that my father was growing acres of sweet william that year for seed at Buntings I wondered if entomological history was about to be made in my flower fields with, perhaps, a colony to add to the Ipswich Road record. On June 23rd I went to the sweet william patch at dusk and caught a male varied coronet. On the following night, several more were seen buzzing among the sweet william flowers and I caught two females which laid eggs in some potted sweet william flower plants placing their pointed ovipositors (egg tubes) inside the blooms and laying tiny pearly-white eggs. I reared a dozen resulting larvae to the pupa stage and the moths emerged in June 1955 and were released back into Bunting's. When my father threshed the sweet william seed crop in autumn 1954 he discovered scores of pupae of the varied coronet. I was approached

When peace was restored in 1945 seed growing and variety trials resumed at the Bunting's farm until my father and his employer, Ellis William Bunting, retired in 1967. Until then the flower fields brought their splashes of colour and they were to provide one more claim to fame, and a notable record, for the "nature-mad boy" now founder and leader of Colchester's own Natural History Society. In 1954 I went to see the collection of a Colchester amateur entomologist who specialized in beetles but also had some moths he

by L Hugh Newman the butterfly farmer of Kent and a well-known natural history broadcaster who wanted to acquire some of the moths as a new British breeding species so I was able to oblige. Subsequently the use of mercury vapour moth lamps in the Colchester area revealed that the varied coronet was well established in the area and since then the species has colonized most of southern and eastern England.

After the Bunting farm ceased production in 1967 the top part was sold for housing development but fortunately the lower 25 acres were bought by Colchester Borough Council and are now a local nature reserve. This adjoins Cymbeline Way (Colchester Bypass) and the Hilly Fields, also a local nature reserve. There is a butterfly trail through the Bunting's Meadow reserve and many of the species I used to see in the old days are still found there. Purple hairstreaks are still on the oaks and, in July, I can still find Essex skipper butterflies on the same bank where I discovered a colony in 1938.



This specimen of the red-necked footman moth came to a mercury vapour lamp operated by Essex moth group members on the night of June 17, 2000 at Bunting's Meadow Local Nature Reserve. At that time it was only the second record for Essex.

Photo: Ian Rose

I am sure my father Joe, whose portrait in colour among his beloved flowers graces the information board at the entrance to Bunting's Meadow, would be delighted that some of his precious acres have been saved for future generations to enjoy and that Colchester Borough Council have honoured me, the nature mad boy of the pre-war flower fields, with a commemorative oak tree.



Small elephant hawk moth *Deilephela porcellus* which came to a mercury vapour lamp operated by Joe Firmin and Ian Rose at Bunting's Meadow Local Nature Reserve on night of June 16, 2006. This is an uncommon Essex species.

Photo: Philip Smith



Joe Firmin and his wife Linda in 2004 planting the oak tree which commemorates Joe's long association with Bunting's, now a Colchester Borough Council Local Nature Reserve.

Photo: Philip Smith



Joe Firmin with the special information board on Bunting's Meadow produced by Colchester Borough Council in 2004 (see below).

It shows how the site looked in the days of the G.A.Bunting Seed Company's trial grounds with some of the photos featured in this book.

Photos: Philip Smith

Farming Heritage

The earliest record of farming at Hilly Fields shows that the Papillon family of Lexden Lodge grew crops and grazed animals here in 1740.

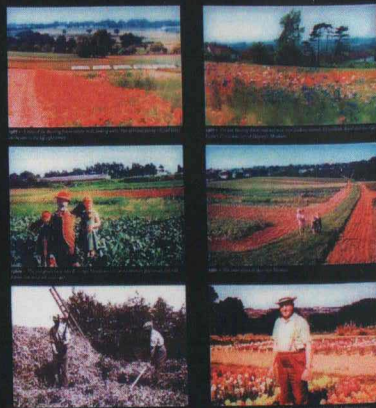
Cymbeline Meadows countryside site – across Remembrance Avenue – was also part of the Papillon family estate.

Cattle grazing continued on parts of the Hilly Fields until the 1960s.

From 1890 until 1967, this meadow was used by the G.A. Bunting company for seed production and it now known as Bunting's Meadow.

Local naturalist Joe Firmin, who grew up on the Bunting's seed farm, recalls: "Hilly Fields was a young naturalist's paradise. It was like my own private estate! It was a prime site for the now rare Red Backed Shrike."

Hilly Fields Local Nature Reserve managed with and for local people
www.colchester.gov.uk



Pictures from the Firmin family album show the landscape during a period when the land was used as a seed farm.



left: The Essex skipper. This butterfly still has a colony on a grassy bank at Bunting's where Joe first found some in 1938.

Photo: David Barnard

Below: Butterfly trail leaflet for the old Bunting's seed farm, now transformed into a Local Nature Reserve

Bunting's Meadow Butterfly Trail



- 1 Spring time butterflies to enjoy include Orange Tip, Green Veined White, and Holly Blue.
- 2 Look out for these butterflies along the field edges Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Small Tortoiseshell, Small Heath, Small Copper, Common Blue, Large Skipper, Essex Skipper.
- 3 Spot the Purple Hairstreak in the oaks in July or August.
- 4 Watch out for Wall Browns and Peacocks.

- Produced with the support of Joe Firmin and the Glen Residents Association.
- 'Butterflies in our Borough' leaflet available from High Woods Country Park Visitor Centre, Visitor Information Centre, and Angel Court.
- For further information on how we look after Hilly Fields and Bunting's Meadow, call 01206 853588.



In this little book Joe Firmin transports us back to a vanished era, before the spread of urbanisation, universal car ownership and the mechanisation and intensification of agriculture. It is the story of the people and wildlife that lived side by side on an Essex seed production farm in the middle of the 20th century - a happy hunting ground for a boy with a passion for nature in the years when sturdy horses provided the power for cultivation and harvesting.

The farm is now just a memory but 25 acres, saved from the developers, have been transformed into a Local Nature Reserve, a haven for the much of same wildlife that transfixed this budding field naturalist all those years ago. As this story ends, another is just beginning.

£7.50

ISBN 0-9516315-2-5



0-9516312-2-5