

Emms Farm

by John Hamilton-Wilkes

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On an acre or so of land to the rear of Reeves Farm and Priory Cottage stand a thatched farmhouse and a thatched barn, known as Emms Farm. It may be approached via Emms Lane, which leads from the [former] Post Office in Melbourne Street. The present [*i.e. in 1992/3*] owners are Christopher and John Hamilton-Wilkes, whose researches, aided and encouraged by Mrs J Morrison, have provided the following notes on the history of the farm.

Once considerably more extensive than at present, it was originally called Southay Farm, since it stood on the south 'hay', i.e. hedge or enclosure, of the hamlet of Milbourne. The original part of the present farmhouse was probably built prior to 1620.

Throughout the Middle Ages farms such as Emms Farm formed part of large estates belonging to manorial lords, who leased them out to farming families, often for periods of three 'lives' or generations. The tenants were given copies of the agreements recorded in the estate archives, and were hence referred to as 'copyholders'. Any given farm would thus over the years pass through the hands of a succession of copyholders, whose 'copies' might or might not have survived, making it very difficult to trace a complete history of the tenants.

It appears from a copy dated 25 March 1626 in the reign of Charles I that Southay Farm belonged to a landowner called William Bromwich. We know that in 1669 his Bratton properties were bought by the Longleat estate, and the farm remained in the ownership of the Thynne family until the end of the 19th century.

From the Longleat archives we learn of a tenancy granted by Thomas Thynne to James Hodges, with his son John as one of the lives, by copy dated 28 April 1681. This copy gives interesting details of the holding, thus:

A messuage or tenement with backside, garden and orchard; three closes of meadow called Southay – four acres; one close of meadow called the Fleet – one acre; one close of pasture in the Marsh – two acres; two acres of meadow in Withy Mead; and 28½ acres of arable. [*This description replaces the wrong one given in the original printing, which actually related to the tenement called Ballards Home Living – Ed.*]

The rent payable was £1 a year, and on the death of the copyholder a 'heriot' or death duty of £5 had to be paid to the lord of the manor. The arable and meadow was scattered around the parish – much of it on what is now the army ranges, and some on land now built up in the village.

The farm seems to have remained for many years in the hands of various members of the Hodges family, who were Quakers, and was usually referred to by the name of

Hodges tenement. [*This paragraph has been altered to correct some errors regarding relationships etc. – Ed.*] In 1701 the barn was licensed to James and John Hodges as a Quaker meeting house. In 1738 John's widow, Rachel Hodges of Warminster, was able to replace the copyhold by a leasehold tenancy, and subsequent leases concerned relatives of hers in the King family. In 1766 one of these leases named Thomas Whitaker and his wife Caroline (née Attwater) as lives, and in 1784 the now-widowed Caroline Whitaker became the actual leaseholder. [*The Whitakers leased several farms, subletting the farmhouses to other tenants.*]

Mrs Morrison has recorded an interesting graffito on the wall of the barn. It reads:

IE 1796 APRIL III
JOSEPH Y 17

A Joseph Emm [*the initial J was conventionally shown as I*] was born on 6 December 1778, and baptised on 31 January 1779. He was the only Joseph baptised in Bratton Church 17 years before 1796, and the age ('Y 17') fits. He was the younger son of Grace and Benjamin Emm, who lived in Lower Road, Bratton. There they had a thatched cottage rebuilt in 1795, on which the still plainly visible inscription reads:

G
B E 1795

It seems likely that Joseph Emm was working in 1796 as a farm labourer at Emms Farm, which was then still known as Hodges, although at that time it was leased to Philip Whitaker and his widowed mother. [*The rest of this paragraph and part of the next have been changed, to correct errors identified by Nancy Cawthorne née Emm in the course of her research.*] Later, Joseph became a prominent local farmer, leasing several farms in Bratton and dying in 1844, but his brother James had meanwhile (in or shortly before 1812) become the subtenant at Hodges/Southay and was there with his wife Mary until his death in 1833. [*The 'Miss Emm' referred to at this point in the original article was in fact Mary Emm, James' widow, who was still running the farm under Philip Whitaker in 1842. She was not 'a daughter of the young graffitist who carved his initials in the barn in 1796' as the writer conjectured. Joseph remained unmarried. – Ed.*]

The Emms were related by marriage to the Flower family. Later in the 19th century the tenant was Mr Harry Flower. By this time much of the land had been transferred to be worked with other farms, and the 1881 census records him farming just 9 acres. There are village residents who can remember the present drive as a farmyard with cattle and sacks of corn in the barn. After the death of Mr Flower and as a result of sales by the Longleat estate, the farmland was sold off, and the house now has only about an acre of land. There is a photograph of the house and farmyard showing Mrs Flower and her chickens, with Mr Flower standing in the doorway which used to be where there is now a bow window. [*Harry Flower senior died in 1908 but his family continued to live in the farmhouse until 1942, when the house and orchard, and a small amount of other land were put up for sale in three lots by the then owner Mrs Marsh. – Ed.*]

In 1942 the house was bought by the parents of Dr Peter J Higgins, who practised locally from 1952. During his stay in Emms Farm Dr Higgins built a small garage in the

yard facing the house, and carried out several modifications to the buildings. A bow window was fitted to the drawing-room, and a new building at the rear between the house and the dairy contained a kitchen, two bathrooms and a small bedroom.

Between 1974 and 1989 the house was owned by various members of the armed forces, the last of whom was Air Vice-Marshal Sir Donald Hall. In July 1989 the house was bought by Christopher and John Hamilton-Wilkes, to whom we are indebted for initiating the researches which supplied the material for this account.

Editor's additional update notes, 2015:

The original article gave a date in the 1680s for the building of the barn, but this appears to have been based on the writer's use of the wrong tenement description from the 1682 survey (which did include mention of a barn). It is likely that the barn has been rebuilt more than once since it was first erected. Historic England's listing of the premises, compiled in the 1980s, dates it to the 18th century.

The house was subsequently purchased by Dr Edwards and family and the barn was comprehensively dismantled and restored in 2007–8. (AJM)