

WHO LIVED IN JOHN BUNYAN'S COTTAGE?:

THE COLEMAN, FISHER AND FIRMAN FAMILIES OF COLEMAN GREEN

by Reg Auckland

The very small hamlet of COLEMAN GREEN is situated 3½ miles northeast of St. Albans, in the parish of Sandridge, at the summit of a 120-metre hill that commands an impressive view of the River Lea Valley. It is quite remote and during the winter months it becomes almost inaccessible during heavy snowfalls. In Roman times there were five roads forming a crossroad at its southern end, only two to three hundred yards from the cottage under discussion, suggesting that it was once a thriving community. One of these roads was successfully excavated in the 1950s disclosing its camber, composition and a Roman coin. There is also a very large common, or waste, which can accommodate several hundred people for an open-air meeting. On the east side of the green is a dense wedge-shaped wood said at one time to have hidden some cottages; another and larger wood is on the west side. Today there are only four or five cottages, a boarding kennels, a wood-yard, a public house, and — nearby — the remains of a tall brick chimney, once covered with ivy, with oak beams set in broken walls. There is also a flue which appears to have been divided and still shows the deposit of heavy soot that it once funnelled to the sky. A complete ingle recess and part of another are still visible. Placed high up in the chimney breast is a fading stone inscription which informs those readers with good eyesight that “JOHN BUNYAN is said by tradition to have preached and occasionally to have lodged in the cottage of which this chimney was a part”. However, the ruin is not of one cottage but of a joined pair. Nearby on the same plot was a single detached cottage. All three were labourers' tied cottages and located on a triangular piece of land at the north end of the hamlet at the junction of two lanes, one of which leads past Chalkdell Farm to Marford Road. The other is now only a bridle-way trailing to the same road but which for many, many years was a negotiable highway for carts and waggons. The cottages are believed to have been built timber-framed with wattle-and-daub and brickwork which were considered as substantial constructions in Tudor times.

Although the derelict chimney is Coleman Green's primary claim to fame it has another in the field of husbandry. A blacksmith of this small community during the 18th century, namely James Henman, had voluntarily served for three years in the Hertfordshire Militia prior to 1780 and was therefore not liable to be chosen by public ballot to serve again. Despite this ruling, the parish constables chosen for the years 1781 to 1785, some of them both illiterate and innumerate, had to rely on other inhabitants to do the necessary clerical work. They persistently listed James' name erroneously on the parochial Militia Lists which were compiled annually. Happy to relate, each year when

the final copy was written and sent to the Justices of the Peace at St. Albans for onward transmission to Hertford, his name had been deleted.

By 1786 Henman had moved on and now worked outside the parish, but for the five years he was in it he worked at the blacksmith forge that at one time was behind the present day public house at Coleman Green. According to what Dr. Griffith, vicar of Sandridge, wrote in the 1880s, James Henman should be credited with making the first wrought-iron plough in Hertfordshire, instead of wood-style tipped with iron. This achievement gave rise to a local saying, "Your name like old Henman's, is up!", no doubt a reference to a person being "up (i.e. expert or well-versed and consequently superior in social class) in the world".

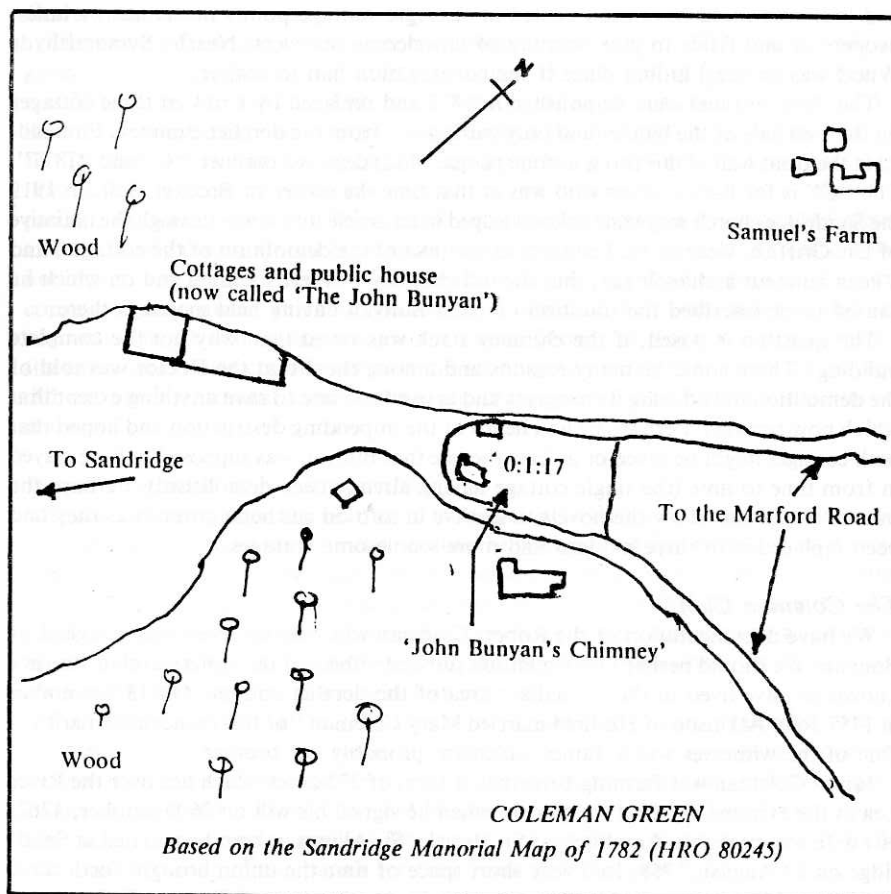
Topographical changes over a period of more than three hundred years and the almost total destruction of the building gives a false impression today that the two cottages once fronted the green at Coleman Green. The Sandridge manorial map of 1782 clearly shows that they were sited parallel with the modern bridle-path. There is a square on the map in front of the cottages and close to the lane which marks the site of the single cottage. The map is annotated with the information that the tenements are on a plot of land measuring 1 rood and 17 perches (roughly 100 square yards). This measurement corresponds exactly to that given for the identical plot registered with the Tithe Award for Sandridge in 1843. Dury's county map of 1766 shows the cottages as two indistinct blobs. No trace is left of the cottage which stood on its own although an excavation might reveal its foundation.

Tradition

Who, when and how started the verbal tradition that John Bunyan, the Baptist founder, lodged at and preached from one of the cottages in Coleman Green, and in particular the one inhabited by a Robert Coleman? That Bunyan preached from the hamlet must have been known by word-of-mouth for approximately 150 years before it first appeared in print just over a century ago.

In 1872 the Reverend John Griffith arrived in Sandridge after the village had been without a resident vicar for half a century and during which time the parishioners had been served by four successive curates. Born at Hamles (Winchester) in 1817, John was educated at Cambridge University where he gained degrees of Master of Arts and Doctor of Law. It was here that he met his wife, Sarah Elizabeth. They moved to Brighton where after some fifteen years at the College he retired into private life. At the age of 55 he was presented by Earl Spencer, whose tutor he had been, to the living of Sandridge in 1872, which he kept until within two years of his death in 1890, aged 73. He came from a Nonconformist family and had Puritan views, expecting his children and all others to renounce the devil and his works, including dancing and sports.

Doctor Griffith, as he was known to everyone, is quoted in *Nonconformity in Hertfordshire* written in 1884 by the Reverend William Urwick, as saying that he firmly believes that John Bunyan, during his wandering years of preaching, stayed in the cottage of Robert Coleman at Coleman Green. Perhaps it was because of his strict religious life that the Doctor professed such an interest in John Bunyan's cottage. Urwick goes on to say that the Doctor based his belief on three reasons. The first was that "Robert Coleman told Mr. William George that John Bunyan used to use the cottage". The second



that "the young companions of Bunyan (died 1688) were the old companions of Robert Coleman", and the third reason that Robert Coleman was born in 1751 and died in 1844, aged 93. The vicar also said that "Robert Coleman . . . lived in this cottage". It is an assumption, however, that the Coleman family were in this particular cottage for a number of decades, possibly going back to Bunyan's lifetime.

The Baptist John Bunyan began his religious gospelling in 1653 as an itinerant preacher at the age of 25, five years after serving in Cromwell's army for three years. In 1660 he was arrested for his dissident, nonconformist teachings to the people and was imprisoned at Bedford for twelve years. On his release in 1672 he was then aged 47 and it is not likely that he did much county-wide wanderings after the spell in prison. The period when he is most likely to have visited Coleman Green, not once but several times, is between 1653 when he first felt the urge and seven years later when he was arrested. Coleman Green is an ideal remote place for an illegal gathering. There is plenty of space

and lookouts could have been posted at strategic vantage points in the nearby lanes, hedgerows and fields to give warning of unwelcome prowlers. Nearby Symondshyde Wood was an ideal hiding place if the congregation had to scatter.

The three cottages were demolished in 1877 and replaced by a row of three cottages on the west side of the hamlet and only yards away from the derelict chimney. Embedded in the front wall of this trio is a stone plaque which depicts a coronet, "C" and "1877". The "C" is for Earl Cowper who was at that time the owner of Bocket Hall. In 1919 the Sandridge church magazine acknowledged in an article that it was through the initiative of Dr. Griffith, vicar of St. Leonards at the time of the demolition of the cottages, and a keen amateur archaeologist, that the old chimney was left standing and on which he caused to be inscribed the tradition of John Bunyan having held meetings there.

The question is posed, if the chimney stack was saved then why not the complete building? There could be many reasons and among them that the Doctor was told of the demolition only during its progress and arrived too late to save anything except that which now remains. Perhaps he had heard of the impending destruction and hoped that both cottages might be saved or at least the one that Bunyan was supposed to have stayed in from time to time (the single cottage having already been demolished). Perhaps the owners would not allow the hovels to survive in toto on aesthetic grounds as they had been replaced with three modern and more wholesome cottages.

The Coleman Clan

We have documentation of the Robert Coleman who was involved with a legend of Bunyan. We should perhaps now mention those members of the Coleman clan who are known to have lived in the immediate area of the derelict cottage. On 13 September in 1757 John Atkinson of Hatfield married Mary Coleman "of this (Sandridge) parish". One of the witnesses was a James Coleman, probably her brother.

James Coleman was farming Bridehall, a farm of 375 acres which lies over the River Lea at the extreme north of the parish, when he signed his will on 26 December, 1762. His wife was probably Ann Fitch of St. Peter's, St. Albans, whom he married at Sandridge on 13 August, 1758. In a very short space of time the union brought forth three daughters, Mary, Ann and Martha. He made his brother-in-law, Edward Fitch, one of two trustees for his children, and left a house in St. Albans in the occupation of Joseph Welsh to his wife.

The several Coleman baptisms to be found in the Sandridge registers are:

20 February 1725	Marthen	daughter of Michael and Mary
5 October 1727	Mary	daughter of Michael and Mary
3 June 1729	Thomas	son of Michael and Mary
9 November 1730	James	son of Michael and Mary
13 July 1759	Mary	daughter of James and Ann
4 November 1762	Martha	daughter of James and Ann
18 July 1779	Mary	daughter of Robert and Ann
16 September 1781	Hester	daughter of Robert and Ann
9 November 1783	Sarah	daughter of Robert and Ann
7 May 1786	Hester	daughter of Robert and Ann
7 April 1822	And(?rew)	son of James and Sarah

Robert Coleman

The Robert Coleman listed in the Sandridge militia lists of 1778 through 1780 and given the status of "labourer" is the same Coleman who lived in Bunyan's cottage; he was 30 years old. In 1781 the List makes him the father of one child who was his first-born and whom he baptized Mary. The following year, however, he is without a family. In 1783 there are still no children against his name but in 1784 and 1785, the List shows that he has three children. He does not appear on the last of the soldiers' rolls of the parish in existence — that of 1786 — and so no further information about Robert Coleman and his family can be traced from these documents. Gross omissions and errors were not uncommon in these military lists as most Constables who had to draw up the names considered it an unenviable and irksome task. Some of them were illiterate and consequently the job had to be passed to the Parish Clerk who was not very pleased with the extra chore. Not considering that the scribing was part of his duties as Clerk, he did not pay the detailed attention that the drawing-up of the Militia List statutorily deserved.

Direct Communication Impossible

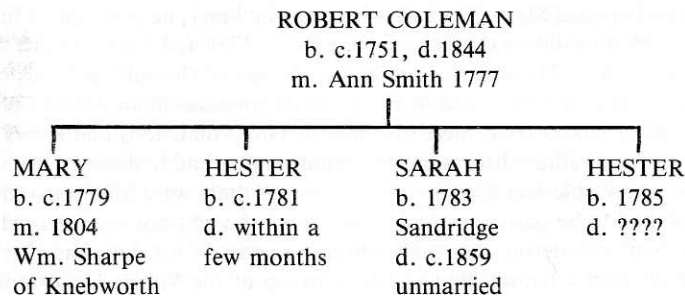
It was not possible for Dr. Griffith to have spoken to Robert Coleman after he arrived in Sandridge to take up the vicarship because the cottager had died in 1844. This is proven confirmation that it was William George who passed on the story of Bunyan's Cottage to the vicar. George may have related the story when Dr. Griffith arrived in the village in 1873 or a few years later or even when the cottages were actually being torn down. He may have known in which of the two cottages Coleman actually lived and passed on that information orally, but which is now lost for ever.

William George (b.1813, d.????) was born at Samwell's Farm, Sandridge, and was the third son of Thomas George — nicknamed "Stump Apple" — whose family had been at the farm since at least 1691. The ownership of the farm was, and still is, in the hands of the Brocket family. In 1841 William and his brother Edward were assisting their father on the farm comprising 390 acres which employed thirteen labourers. William was Stone Warden of the parish for four years and People's Warden for two before he left Samwell's at the age of about 30, around 1845, to take up the 360 acres of Oak Farm just over the parish boundary. During the time he was at his father's farm he had many opportunities to converse with and listen to Robert Coleman who undoubtedly worked on Samuel (or Samwell) Farm. Seen from the farmhouse a few hundred yards away, the old chimney and hence the cottages that were once there, stand out very prominently on the hill against the background of the eastern wood. A 5-acre field called Rowsons borders up to the plot on which the cottages once stood.

Marriage Banns

The banns of Robert Coleman and Ann Smith of Dunstable Hooton, Bedfordshire, were announced three times in Sandridge church (30 March, 6 and 13 April, 1777), but the register does not show that the marriage was solemnized at St. Leonards. The record may have been omitted or the solemnization taken place in the bride's parish in Bedfordshire. If Ann and her husband (whose birthplace in Hertfordshire is unknown) were

influenced in early life by Bunyan's religious teachings the marriage may even have taken place at a Baptist meeting house.



The married couple's four children, however, were baptized at the parish church of St. Leonoard's. Ann, Robert's wife, died in 1809 and was buried on 27 October, when he was 48 years old. Sarah, the penultimate daughter and still unmarried at the age of 26 when her mother died, stayed at home and forwent marriage to look after her father in his assumed ill-health. There is no doubt whatsoever that this Robert Coleman is the same who spoke to farmer William George.

It is a fact that Robert Coleman lived in the now-demolished cottages as there is contemporary documentation and it is certain that he heard the Bunyan story second-hand, possibly from his grand-parents or other relative. Only at the extreme could he have heard it from a contemporary of the preacher himself. The span between Bunyan's death in 1688 and Robert's birth in 1751 is 63 years. To establish a first-hand account must be added a minimum leeway of ten years at each end making an 83-year gap. A contemporary of Bunyan's would have to have been at least 10 years old to have retained knowledge of the preacher and 83 years old when he passed it on to 10-year-old Robert in 1761. Such a theory would connect "young companions" and "old companions" but it is a most tenuous thread.

John Bunyan, whose home was at Elstow, just south of Bedford, was unlikely to have lodged in Robert's cottage as a permanent resident. More likely he was accommodated for a few days during which time word would have got around that he was in Sandridge. His followers would then make their way to Coleman Green to hear him preach. Having given his flock spiritual satisfaction, Bunyan then moved on to the next "safe" cottage to continue his secret preaching. He certainly did not live at Coleman Green as a parishioner.

Poverty

Entries of the people who lived in the aforementioned cottages can be found in the village's Overseers of the Poor Rates Book of 1833/35, the 1841 and 1851 censuses and other surviving records. The Rates Book of May 1833 assessed Robert Coleman's cot-

tage at £1.10.0d and he paid 1/6d rates. In August he paid the same amount. The following November he paid another 1/6d for a further rating, but there is a memo against his name: "Returned. Very Poor. On Parish" meaning that he was in receipt of charity money from the vestry. In February 1834 when the rates were again due he was once more singled out for special treatment with the entry: "Returned through Poverty". Preparatory to the April 1834 rates the Churchwardens and Overseers had reduced the assessment of all cottages rated £1.10.0d and above by 10/-, so that those previously rated at £1.10.0d now paid 1s. but even this amount was hard for him to find and the Overseers noted in their book for this month: "Paid and Returned through Poverty".

By July 1834 Robert's financial situation had not improved (he was now aged 83) and for the fourth time the parish returned his money noting his state of poverty. In January 1835 the Poor Overseers took a more serious awareness of Robert's plight and in addition to returning his 1/- rates placed him on the Pension List, although no sum is mentioned. In modern parlance this meant that he became eligible for and received Income Support. June 1835 is the last of the Rates Lists extant and in this Robert Coleman is shown as paying his 1/-. Presumably he had to pay this out of the Pension which the Overseers had granted him or alternatively, the rate collector has failed to make a correct entry in the book showing that Coleman had returned his money.

Taking the Census

Census day in 1841 was Sunday, 6 June; one of the two Sandridge enumerators was Thomas Oakley. After he had collected all the forms from the villagers which had previously been delivered to them, he began entering the returns on the summary forms starting at Waterend Farm, which he himself farmed. Then followed Wacketts, Chalkdell and Samuel farms and from the latter went to the group of three cottages at Coleman Green. In the first cottage was Robert Coleman, aged 90, whose occupation is given as agricultural labourer; his unmarried daughter Sarah, aged 55, and described as a straw plaiter; and Andrew Coleman, agricultural labourer. The scripted entry by Oakley of Andrew's age is ambiguous and could be 15 or 75 and therefore a relationship to Robert and Sarah is indeterminable. It is hardly credible that Robert was actually working as an "agricultural labourer". This was his former occupation and he was probably so described out of respect for his great age. This was infinitely better than describing him as a "pauper", even though he may have been receiving parochial assistance and despite two live-in members of family to help with household finances. Earlier, in 1831, Robert's daughter Sarah had joined the weekly Penny Club when it started on Monday, 3 January. This was towards the purchase of new clothes when required and was a club organized and subsidised by the very philanthropic family of Marten of Marshalswick.

Living next door to Robert Coleman was James Fisher, aged 55, agricultural labourer, his wife Rebecca, 50, straw plaiter, and their five children: William, 25, agricultural labourer; Ellen, 13, straw plaiter; David, 10, agricultural labourer; Joseph, 8, and Sarah, 5. It is not known where James was born in Hertfordshire but his wife was born at Hertingfordbury and all their children saw light of day at Sandridge. Fisher had lived in this cottage since at least 1827 and probably a lot earlier, when he was described at Ellen's baptism as a "labourer of Coleman Green". The rateable value of James's cottage in May 1833 was £1.10 for which he paid 1/6d and the same amount again in August.

But when he paid 1/6d in November it was returned to him by the Overseers as he was "very poor". When the gross rateable value was reduced to £1 in February 1834 this was still too much for James Fisher financially, and consequently the parochial authorities returned his 1/- (as they did with his neighbour Robert) "through poverty". Thereafter, however, he seems to have managed. James may have been on the poverty line since his early days and in receipt of occasional monetary gifts. For example, in 1809 the gentry of Wheathampstead raised a subscription for the poor to commemorate and honour King George III's Jubilee. The money collected was distributed among the poverty-stricken, both parishioners and non-parishioners. One of the latter was a James Fisher who may have been the man who lived at Coleman Green.

No Settlement

In the solitary cottage which was in close proximity to the other two lived John Firman, junior, 80 years old, an agricultural labourer and who was coping on his own, but who received assistance from his neighbours when wanted. He was born at Coleman Green in 1761/72 and at one time was living illegally in a parish other than his own. In 1788 the Wheathampstead vestry had refused him a Settlement Order and a Removal Order had been made against him. This meant that he had to quit the parish. His certificate was endorsed with a statement he was 26 years old and that after various services on Sandridge farms had hired himself at Michaelmas (29 September, quarter day) 1786 as a ploughman to William Harrowell, farmer, of Wandon Green, King's Walden, and stayed there until the following Michaelmas. He was paid £5.5.0d for the year's work. For him to have remained in King's Walden lawfully he should have found another job. He returned, jobless, to Wheathampstead and thereby found himself at variance with the law because by returning without a job in hand he was technically placing himself as a possible financial burden to the parish. The vestry wanted to "pass" him on to his legal parish before they might have to spend any money on his upkeep. He would have had no problem if he had returned to Sandridge where he had a legal Settlement, even without work. Wheathampstead successfully persuaded Thomas Marsham, a Justice of the Peace, to sign the Removal Notice on 18 March.

The reason for John's disregard for the law was love. The day after the Removal was signed he married Ann Groom by Licence at Wheathampstead. This, however, did not prevent him, accompanied by his wife, from being "deported". They were escorted by the Wheathampstead constable to the parish boundary where they were met by the constable — universally nicknamed "Charlie Parish" — of Sandridge and handed over. The bride and groom then most likely took up residence with the latter's parents at the cottage where possibly they stayed until the end of their lives.

John Firman the Younger may have stayed permanently in the parish having been evicted from Wheathampstead, because in May 1833 he was paying 1/- for an annual assessment of £1 rateable value for his cottage. The difference of 10/- gross value from the other two cottages which were rated at £1.10.0d would indicate that his cottage was probably smaller with less amenities, even though it was "detached".

Firman the Elder

The occupant of this cottage prior to John the Younger was his father, John the Elder.

He was born c.1717 and buried on 31 December, 1812, at Sandridge churchyard, aged 95, when his namesake son would have been 51 years old. John had married Ann (maiden name unknown) who was buried in the same graveyard as him on 1 September, 1813, aged 86. They had raised a family of at least five children. John had been listed for militia service in 1760, 1761 and 1762 when he was about forty years old and is described as a labourer in the latter year. At this period the top age for induction into the militia was 50. At the time when his son was being evicted from Wheathampstead in 1788, the father was stated to be a labourer and was settled in Sandridge. This meant that by the Settlement Act of 1662 he had occupied a property worth less than £10 per annum and stayed there for more than forty days. He was therefore legally entitled to reside in the parish. If he was sober, industrious and no trouble either socially or financially to the parish authorities then he was left alone.

Tithe Award

The Tithe Award of 1843 declares that the three "cottages and gardens" at Coleman Green were occupied by "John Firman and others". "The others" must mean, of course, the families of Coleman and Fisher. The tied cottages were owned by Viscount Melbourne and all three families worked for one of the estate's farms, the nearest being Samuel's.

By the time the 1851 census was taken Robert Coleman had died and his daughter had moved away. Their place had been taken by Daniel Matthews, 27, agricultural labourer, and his wife, Mary, 25, a Brazilian hat maker. Daniel was born in Kimpton and Mary at Hatfield. His 22-years-old married brother John lived at Church End in Sandridge.

The Fishers still lived in the adjoining cottage but now Rebecca was head of the household and had been so since the death of her husband. Her children William, David and Ellen had flown the nest, but Joseph was still at home working as an agricultural labourer and Sarah as a straw plaiter. On 30 March, the day of the census, the enumerator found Sarah Coleman, now aged 71 and unmarried, with her old neighbour Rebecca Fisher which obliged him to enter her as a "visitor". When asked, she gave her occupation as a straw plaiter. Had Sarah moved to Wheathampstead and walked up the country lane to Coleman Green to visit Rebecca, or did she live further away and someone had brought her in a pony-and-trap or horse-and-cart for a short visit to her one-time neighbour? These are two possibilities, but there is reason to believe that Sarah was not a visitor at all but a lodger. When her father died and the tenancy had to be given up for another labourer, it is likely that Sarah moved in next door to become a lodger. The elderly Mrs. Marten of Marshalswick and her brother Thomas organized a Coal Club for the village and gave away free coal to poor people. The Club was sustained by charitable donations and half-a-dozen farmers in the parish gave free labour and transport to collect the fuel from St. Albans and deliver it around the parish. The Coal Club's records show that in January 1854 "Coleman with Fisher" — indicating that they may have lived in the same household — received two lots of coal each of 1 cwt. from Marten's Gift. During the winter of 1854/55 "Coleman" (no forename) was one of twenty-three "most necessitous" persons who received 2 cwt. of coal. In the winters of 1855/56, 1856/57 and 1858/59 "Sarah Coleman" was given 4 cwt. of free coal on each occasion.

Following the presumed demise of John Firman, his cottage was occupied by Charles Waller, aged 54, agricultural labourer, and his wife Hanna, 51, straw plaiter. Four children living with them were Charles, unmarried, 22, agricultural labourer; Sarah, unmarried, 16, also a straw plaiter; Daniel, 12, farm labourer and finally James, 8, scholar. Neither parent knew their own birth-place, but all the children had been born at Welwyn.

Scattered Bunyans

Some people may believe that Bunyan actually lived in the cottage but this cannot be so as it is well-known and established that his permanent home was at Elstow in Bedfordshire. However, there were Bunyans living in the parish. The early Sandridge Militia List of 1762 includes the name of Jonathan Bunnyane and classes him as a "labourer". The terms "labourer" and "servant" in this century are synonymous, but the social and distinct difference between the two is lost. Without a more specific titling such as "road labourer" or "house servant", it probably denoted working on the land. It may even be that "servant" denoted a bachelor and "labourer" a married man.

A similar List for c.1775 shows both "servant" James Bunion and "labourer" Jonathan Bunion as between the ages of 18 and 45 and liable for military service within the United Kingdom. The 1785 list quotes Jonathan Bunion, a "servant" who is noted as having served his three years as a militiaman — either as a volunteer or one who was "drawn", or ballotted for — and the entry deleted. He may have then been a foot soldier when the Hertfordshire Militia was embodied, i.e., placed on active service between 1778 and March 1784 during the American War of Independence. During these years the regiment performed "Home Guard" service in southeast England. In 1786 Jonathan appears again on the Militia List, still with the status of a servant, but he is now called "Josh" and has only one eye. Despite this, his name is not deleted as a potential soldier!

A few Bunyans can be traced in the Sandridge registers. In the baptismal section it is written that William Bunion, son of Jonathan and Hannah, was presented at the font on 8 October, 1775. On 24 October 1791, a Sarah Bunyan witnessed the wedding of Andrew Peacock and Ann Welch. In the 19th century there are two burial entries: one of 27 February 1810, for Jonathan Bunyan, aged 73 (b.1718), and the other on 6 January 1820, for Hannah Bunyan, widow of Jonathan, and who were possibly the parents of William. Thereafter the name of Bunyan disappears from Sandridge parish.

None of the men noted for military service nor those written in parish registers are considered to have any direct lineal connection with John Bunyan, the preacher of Elstow. It does, however, raise the interesting theory that a family named Bunyan may have lived at Coleman Green in the cottage later occupied by the Colemans. Over the course of decades village gossip and folk-lore associated this family — particularly if there was the common forename of John or Jonathan among its male members — with *the* John Bunyan and thus there started the word-of-mouth traditional story which was not put to paper until the 1870s.

An Enigma

In the folder of Dr. Griffith's Papers are a number of jottings amongst which is the enigmatic memorandum:

“My Grandfather & the family before him used to sit at home & talk upon village & neighbouring subjects. We have told W. Paul (my informant) that the tinker John Bunyan from Bedford way used to come secretly to Coleman Green to preach there. I have heard my Grandmother say her Mother & Father (William Lawrence) used to go to hear and go in secret.”

Scrawled across part of this ink passage in pencil is “her grandfather and grandmother”. There is also an added note which says that “William Paul, bachelor, married Mary Lawrence, spinster, on May 20 1782”. Perhaps enigmatic may be too strong a word to use but the sequence of the recorded tale is not very clear. Nor is it clear as to which of the descendants is the story-teller.

The only “W. Paul” that Doctor Griffith could have met was William Paul III, village carpenter, builder and shopkeeper, the grandson of a young man aged about 25, who in 1781 had arrived in Sandridge and was also named William Paul. He was a tailor and took up lodgings with William Lawrence, the community’s carpenter, who lived at Church End. Among Lawrence’s children living at home was Mary, a few years younger than William whom she married within a year of his appearing in the village. Where he came from or what part of the county or country is still unknown. He continued his profession of tailoring but showed a great interest in carpentry and worked with his father-in-law. In 1786 he assisted Mary’s father to carry out the extremely delicate task of lowering the old roof of the church without removing the lead by about three feet, as well as making attic windows.

In 1803 William Lawrence died and it appears that Paul then gave up tailoring and made woodwork and joinery his future profession. As son-in-law he inherited four cottages which his wife’s late father owned and which he was able to pass on to his son when he died in 1831. His son was William Paul II (1787-1847) who was succeeded by William Paul III (1821-1901) — the “informant” in Dr. Griffith’s note.

Particular Baptists

Supporting evidence that William Lawrence and his family were Baptists can be seen three years before he died in the Return of Places of Religious Worship wherein “a house in the parish of Sandridge, now in the occupation of William Lawrence, is set apart as a place of public worship of Almighty God for Protestant dissenters, called Particular Baptists”. Dated 17 April, the certificate was signed by the minister at St. Albans, Joseph Harris supported by William Lawrence and John Carter. Particular Baptists are a sect which stemmed from John Spilsbury who in 1633 seceded from an independent church in London and established a Calvinistic church, from whence originated the Particular Baptists. The Bethel Chapel of the Particulars is in Verulam Road and was opened on 13 September, 1853 (it is now used as offices).

Information given in the Griffith Papers clearly indicates that the Pauls were Baptists and that the early members of the Lawrence side of the family were prepared to take risks to go to Coleman Green for secret congregations, but at what period of the 17th century can only be surmised. It must have been some time before 1689 because in that year the Toleration Act, which ended the persecution of Baptists, was passed. The earliest record of a Paul in the village is 1781 and antecedents prior to this date have not been traced, although they may have been close by in another parish.

Fortunately for posterity, a St. Albans artist has left a visual impression of the old cottages at Coleman Green. Water colourist John H. Buckingham, (1800-1881) painted "Cottage on Coleman Green Sandridge 1877 where John Bunyan is said to have lodged" in the year of its demolition. Buckingham, like vicar Griffith, may have heard of the impending demolition and hurried to the hamlet to make a painting. Buckingham painted his picture of a pair of symmetrical cottages with doors together in the middle and the ivy-covered chimney stack on the left end. This is inaccurate: where is the chimney which served the right-hand cottage? As the two cottages appear in the water-colour it seems that the right-hand cottage has no fireplace for cooking or heating. The woman in the foreground feeding the chickens is most likely to be Ann Slow (Slough) or Elizabeth Millard who were neighbours living in the cottage.

SOURCES

Baptismal, Marriage and Death Registers of Sandridge.
Sandridge censuses.
Hatfield Registers.
Dagnal Street Baptist Church, St. Albans.

Sandridge Militia Lists.
Sandridge Rate Books.



*Cottage on Coleman Green', by J.H. Buckingham, 1877
(By courtesy, St Albans Museums)*

FOOTNOTE

Among the Papers of the Rev. Griffith, vicar of Sandridge, deposited at the Hertfordshire County Record Office, is this cryptic note written in his own ecclesiastical hand:

"Coleman used to go moaning. He and another killed a packman and buried him in Water End. He confessed before he died to it, but they were not to tell. Skeleton was found. His daughter used to wear rings, etc."*

* This undoubtedly refers to the Robert Coleman who is at the centre of this article.

Translated, it would appear to say that Robert Coleman was in a perpetual state of grief about the murder of the packman, or travelling salesman. Such an itinerant carried his goods for sale on the donkey he rode or in a small cart it pulled. By a system of deduction, Coleman's partner in crime may have been a man called Woodward. The daughter most likely to have had the jewellery resulting from the crime was unmarried Sarah who lived with her father. Sarah was born in 1783 and was 26 years old when her father became a widower in 1809 at the age of 58. She thereafter looked after him for the next thirty-five years. Unfortunately, there is no indication of the year or period in which the murder took place, nor of Dr Griffith's source of information.