

EASTONS OF BUNWELL

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The founder of the present farming business was Frank Henry Easton, who was born on the 10th October 1907 at Cowgate in Norwich, where his parents kept a Post Office and General Store. He was educated at the City of Norwich School in Eaton Road before moving to Bunwell at the age of eighteen.



Figure I Frank Easton

With the help of his parents he bought a wooden bungalow and a few acres of land in Bunwell Low Common, where, starting with four cows, he learnt to farm by trial and error. The milk was taken in churns to Forncett Station by pony and trap before being sent to Norwich by train. In Norwich it was collected by his father who took it to his shop in Cowgate and sold it to the public. It was from this modest beginning that the present large milk haulage business grew.

He obtained a contract with the Norwich Co-Operative Society for a daily supply of milk to their Chapelfield Road premises. To do this he bought extra milk from local farmers in Bunwell and the surrounding parishes. Because his pony and trap could not cope with 17-gallon milk churns, he bought a model-T Ford lorry in 1926.

With this upgrade further contracts followed, including one with the United Dairies in London. This latter contract also involved profitable return loads of groceries for delivery to Norwich Co-Operative Society shops in the city. The present family believe that the general strike of the 1920's (when rail transport failed), and the growing business of carting other local farmers milk, also led to the decision to mechanise.

The formation of the Milk Marketing Board (a government monopoly) inevitably brought changes. They were to buy all milk supplies, and the transportation of same also came under their authority. Contracts were arranged between Eastons and the Milk Marketing Board, a good relationship which lasted for the whole of the Board's life.

Frank married Yensie Clark, originally a Londoner, but then living in Norwich, in 1930. They set up home on a smallholding on Bunwell Low Common, which Frank called Cowgate, in memory of his Norwich origins. Shortly after, World's End Farm at Aslacton became available for rent and this, together with Bungalow Farm and Cowgate, became the nucleus of his growing farming enterprise. He increased the numbers of cows and also began to specialise in Aylesbury ducks and Rhode Island Red hens, as well as continuing general farming.

He also added a milling business in Aslacton, which catered for the needs of his own farms, as well as the additional sale of feedstuffs, ground corn and mixed meal to other local farmers and stock owners. The Aslacton Milling Company was run until its close in about 1989 (when all livestock went from the farms) by his son Richard. The writer can remember being taken there by his father in the 1950's to collect bags of feed, and like all schoolboys, filled his pockets with anything vaguely collectable (in this case the various bag labels for the different varieties of milled product). Some examples of these labels have fortunately been preserved by the company. They bear product names which include "Layers Mash", "Growers Mash", "Creep Feed", "Mixed Corn" and "Pig Growers". It is believed that some pet food was also supplied, but that this was bought in from elsewhere.



Figure2 Examples of Aslacton Milling Company's Product Labels

The writer's father, Arthur Percy George Day (known to all locals as Percy) became the Farm Manager for Frank Easton in the late 1930's, having previously worked for another local farmer, Harry Stimpson, at Ruby Farm on the Low Common.¹ He continued this employment for the rest of his working career. Initially the farm manager was housed by the Eastons at Peris Hall (Perse Hall), from 1948 at Banyards Hall, and finally, from 1960, at Church Farm.

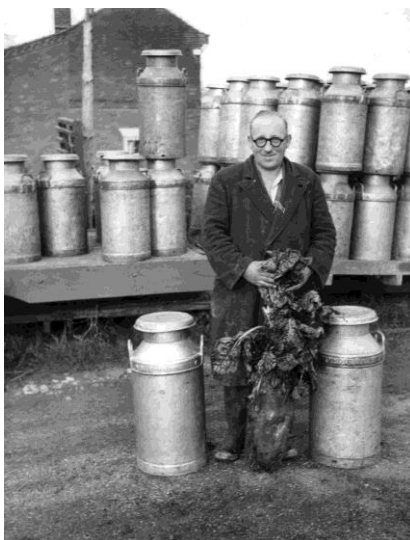


Figure 3 Percy Day, Farm Manager 1947

Bigger premises became necessary to accommodate the growing haulage business and Villa Farm on the Turnpike (previously the site of the building firm of Eldon Smith) was purchased. This became the family home. In 1938 the firm of G. Easton & Son Ltd. was formed. By then the fleet consisted of 8 vehicles, comprising 2 AEC's, a Leyland and 5 Albions (the latter were to dominate the fleet in the coming years). For many years after the war redundant vehicles were parked in a meadow behind the farm yard gradually decaying away, before they were finally sent for scrap.



Figure 4 Albion CH3 CHIEFTAIN of 1947

¹Percy's father, Arthur George Day had kept the nearby Farrier's Arms Public House in the 1930's.

A farrier's forge was maintained at the Villa to service the needs of the farm horses; shoes were manufactured and the Suffolk horses shod on site. A range of buildings accommodated the servicing and garaging needs of the lorry fleet, as well as that of the farm machinery. The company offices were part of this complex. These still exist today with much the same function, except that a modern office building has been built beside the old Turnpike Road.

During WWII Eastons' lorries were often utilised after their daily milk deliveries to transport bombs to the various airfields in the area, most of them USAF bases. Once, when delivering bombs to Broome airfield, a lorry collided with a B17 Flying Fortress, knocking off the plane's tail. A heavy insurance claim was avoided as the lorry driver was judged not to be at fault.

Frank Easton served on the War Agricultural Committee and was the chief Air Raid Warden for the area as well as the issuer of petrol coupons. His wife, Yensie, was involved in the Women's Voluntary Service and the issue of Ration Books. Four Church Army Canteens were stationed at Banyards Hall and these went out Monday to Saturday, with a Mrs. Moll as driver, to visit the many aerodromes and camps around South Norfolk and Suffolk (sticky buns having been picked up in New Buckenham first). The younger members of the family later recalled the generosity of the American servicemen with their gifts of gum and candy, whilst in return the servicemen were always assured of a warm welcome at the Villa in their off duty times.

At the end of the war the sale of skimmed milk for feeding stock was started and gradually increased. By 1981 the firm was transporting about one and a half million gallons a year, mainly for pig feeding.



Figure 5 Company Calendar 1954

In 1948 Banyards Hall farm was added to the firm and at the age of one the writer moved there from Peris Hall with his family. Milk was transported in churns from the cow sheds on the farm to the end of the farm lane at Cordwell Corner by pony and trap for collection. On one such journey Percy Day was thrown from the trap, breaking his wrist. Horse breeding was carried out at Banyards Hall as they were still being utilised on the farms alongside the incoming tractors. The writer remembers being photographed for a company calendar of 1954 standing in a horse drawn tumbril, surrounded by Rhode Island Red hens, on the 'Clear' at Banyards Hall. Also remembered was the purchasing of horse harness and accompanying

horse brasses from the Norwich Co-Operative Society to kit out the horses on the farm (one of these brasses was recently found on the farm and returned to the family).

The last horse left the farm in about 1964. Her name was Clara, and she pulled the tumbril used to muck out the piggeries. Mark and Andrew Easton, then aged 4 & 5 years old, remember watching from behind the farm gate the fateful day that the vet was called to the stables. Nothing could be done to extend Clara's useful life; the young boys were ordered away and told to stay out of sight. They complied, and never saw Clara again. It would be nice to think she was buried on the farm where she spent her working life, but it is more likely she was taken away by the knacker's man like so many other redundant farm animals of the period.

In 1952 Bunwell Wood was cleared of all its central tree growth and the first cereal crops were harvested in 1953. Although the binder was towed by a tractor, the sheaves of corn were still being carted by horse and cart. The writer remembers trying to catch rabbits with a stick as the last rows of corn were cut. Subsequently the area was grassed down to provide cattle pasture before finally becoming an arboretum under the guidance of John Easton. For many years, by courtesy of the Easton family, a 'Daffodil Sunday' was held in the arboretum to raise money for charity.



Figure 6 First Harvest in Bunwell Wood 1953

The former woodland to the east of Bunwell Wood had been cleared before the war and was known by the name 'The Clear'. Here after the war Frank established a large acreage of chicken huts to house the Rhode Island Red hens that he became well known for. An incubator house was built at Banyards Hall as well as two long rearing sheds, and the sale of day old chicks became a weekly ritual. The man in charge of the chickens was Sid Lammas.

He had begun his employment with Frank Easton at Cowgate Farm, rearing day old chicks as well as killing and plucking older hens for the table (some probably sold locally to the butcher, Mr. Dade, on Bunwell Hill). Sid was famous for his yodelling skills, as the writer can confirm from his childhood.



Figure 7 Incubator House, Banyards Hall 1953

The writer often accompanied his father on the weekly delivery run throughout Norfolk and Suffolk in Eastons' 'Imperial Crimson' coloured Ford van, and remembers being transfixed watching the chicken sexers in operation in the incubator house. However, the chickens attracted many feral cats which took up residence under the huts, as well as foxes who did the same. Hundreds of moorhens roosted in the hedges nearby having taken a liking to the free chicken feed available. Culls of all three species became a regular farm ritual in the late 1950's and 1960's.

In 1952 Tollgate Farm was bought with all its land in the Little Green and Cordwell Common area. By now Frank had three sons, John, Richard (Dick) and Peter, all of whom were to subsequently play major roles in the family firm.

In the 1950's Frank arranged a lease with Morse's Nurseries of Norwich whereby 150 acres of roses were planted in Bunwell every year for 10 years. Their perfume became a welcome summer smell as did the colourful sight of their blooms. The frequent small summer whirlwinds (locally known as 'rogers') added to the experience, with clouds of petals raining down like confetti after their passing. The women who budded the rose stocks carried out this work in the cart sheds at Banyards Hall, as well as in the old slaughter houses at Little Green, filling the area with their noisy chatter and the raffia offcuts. The plastic name labels from the rose varieties were to be found in the plough soil for many years after they left (and still are according to the Eastons).

In 1955 a haulage depot at Alford in Lincolnshire was opened and this continues in operation at the time of writing. In 1961 the first bulk tanker for milk collection went on the road. Instead of lifting ten-gallon churns of milk, the drivers now connected up hoses and pumped

the milk direct to the vehicle. Milk churns finally disappeared by 1977, along with their familiar clanking sound.

In 1956 his sons Richard (Dick) and John both married, and the farming enterprise was formed into a limited company. With increasing mechanisation the Suffolk horses which had worked the land were sold and the way left open for the tractors and combine harvesters. By 1957 the youngest son Peter, who had worked for three years on the farms, now found his niche as the haulage company manager. This meant that all three sons now had their own enterprises: John in charge of the farms, Richard the milling, and Peter the haulage business.



Figure 8 John Easton at Church Farm with Philip Balls 1957

In common with other farms locally, F. H. Easton Ltd. also had to install a bulk milk tank. By then they had four herds of cows; at World's End Aslacton, Villa Farm Bunwell, Banyards Hall Bunwell, and Whitehouse Farm Tacolneston (the latter having been farmed by Frank with his uncle Harry Saunders). The latter wishing to retire meant that Frank assumed his share of the farm. Rationalisation of the dairy operations then took place, and a new cowhouse, milking parlour and bulk milk tank were installed at Villa Farm. From then on all dairy operations were reduced to one herd and operated from Villa Farm.

The purchase of White Lodge Farm at Carleton Rode was financed by selling World's End Farm at Aslacton. Old Hall Farm at Tibenham was also bought, bringing the farm acreage to 1000.

Frank Easton twice stood as Parliamentary Candidate for North Norfolk as a Conservative but was narrowly defeated both times by the Labour Party member. With his sons by now in charge of the business he devoted more time to local affairs. At various times he was an alderman on Norfolk County Council, chairman of the Highways Committee from 1954-1970. He served on the old Depwade Rural District Council from 1934-1971 (5 years as Chairman). He spent 24 years on the management committee of St. Andrew's Hospital and 21 years in a similar role for Little Plumstead Hospital. He was chairman of Bunwell Parish

Council in 1964 and also chairman of the Village Hall Committee. He was a member of the Norfolk Executive of the National Farmers Union, the executive of the Road Haulage Association and the Joint Haulage Committee. He also managed to serve as a magistrate, on the Tax Commissioners' Panel and River Board, as well as being a Freemason at the St. Giles Lodge in Norwich.



Figure 9 Frank Easton, Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for North Norfolk,
Photograph for his Election Notice 1949

Frank died on the 23rd November 1983 and was buried in Bunwell churchyard. The firm continued in the capable hands of his sons, as it does today with their successors. His wife Yensie passed away in 1989. Villagers still remember them fondly, particularly for their hosting of many village fetes at Villa Farm. Bowling for the Pig on the well manicured lawn of their house was one of the big attractions on those occasions.

By 1981 the firm had grown from its modest beginnings to a flourishing business with over a thousand acres, 110 cows, 2 herds of pigs, mixed arable crops, and a fleet of 31 vehicles carting 25 million gallons of milk and 20,000 tons of sugar beet and corn.

The company has gone from horses to the latest farm tractors; from horse drawn binders to giant combine harvesters. At one time in the 1960's combines were driven as far as Norwich to cut corn on contract. In the early days sugar beet was hoed by hand, and ditches and hedges also dug and cut manually. Now machinery takes the strain with the subsequent lack of need for a large workforce. Wheat, barley and sugar beet are the main arable crops, whilst the pigs and cows have been phased out. Small fields and their attendant wildlife haven hedges have been replaced by large combine friendly fields.

John Easton was conservation minded enough to leave a legacy of dedicated wildlife areas on the farms with some naturalised meadows and set-aside field margins, as well as additional tree plantations. He was subsequently rewarded for this work when the Queen personally presented him with a conservation award at the Royal Norfolk Show in 1986. The company

board room proudly displays a framed photograph of this event today. John Edward Easton died on the 10th November 2003 aged 69 years following a long illness and, along with his parents and grandparents, is interred at Bunwell.

The farm acreage, by now increased to nearly 2000 acres, is run in 2011, by John's son William, growing mainly wheat, sugar beet, triticale (a hybrid of wheat and rye) and oil seed rape. Willow coppice is also grown as fuel for electricity production. The conservation theme has been carried on with 10kms of hedging having been planted in the last 10 years. Frank's great grandson (George) Miles Easton, is now employed full time on the farm, making him the first of the fourth generation involved in the business.

There are 25 lorries on the road today, managed by Peter's sons Mark and Andrew. Truck numbers are still what they were in the early 1980's, but the area covered is much greater. Previously confined to Norfolk and Suffolk, they now collect milk across one third of England. Vehicle size continues to increase, the largest loads comprising 28,000 litres, and the total annual volume stands at 180 million litres. Following the breakup of the Milk Marketing Board, the haulage company now has contracts with half a dozen major dairy companies, and continues to haul sugar beet and grain in season.

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Personal recollections Peter Day

Additional information from Mark & William Easton (2011)

Personal recollections of Mollie Howes née Easton