

Poultry farming in Hathern

Poultry rearing and egg production was a popular occupation in our village. There are occasional references to the press that demonstrate that it was a serious concern at least from the 19th century onwards. The Reverend Edward Smythies kept chickens on glebe land bordering the Whatton Road. He attended the Birmingham Cattle and Poultry Show in December 1852.¹ He was undoubtedly involved in a series of three meetings that took place in the Charity Rooms in November and December 1899 in which the guest speaker, James Woodin of the Midland Dairy Institute discussed all aspects of poultry-keeping, disease management and egg production.² There is also mention of a certain Samuel Henry Tollington, poultry farmer, in the 1911 Census who later died as the result of an unfortunate fall in the vicinity of the Cross.³

There were two large farms operating in the village in the last century. One was owned by Richard Maurice Benton Senior who started his working life in the hosiery industry in Loughborough. In 1906 he became landlord of the Dew Drop Inn on Loughborough Road. His son, also Richard Maurice, took over the pub in 1918 and continued to run it until 1925. Grandfather Richard, pictured in the photograph below, purchased a plot of land in Hathern on the South side of the A6 in 1918 in order to raise hens and produce eggs, and named it Hillside Poultry Farm. He also bought the house called Hollydene across the road as the family home, and this is where his grandson Richard, who married Barbara, was born. On 23 June 1955 the business was sold at auction for £78.6s.2d, and the assets included three acres of mowing grass, a hut, seven poultry houses and 102 hens and cocks.



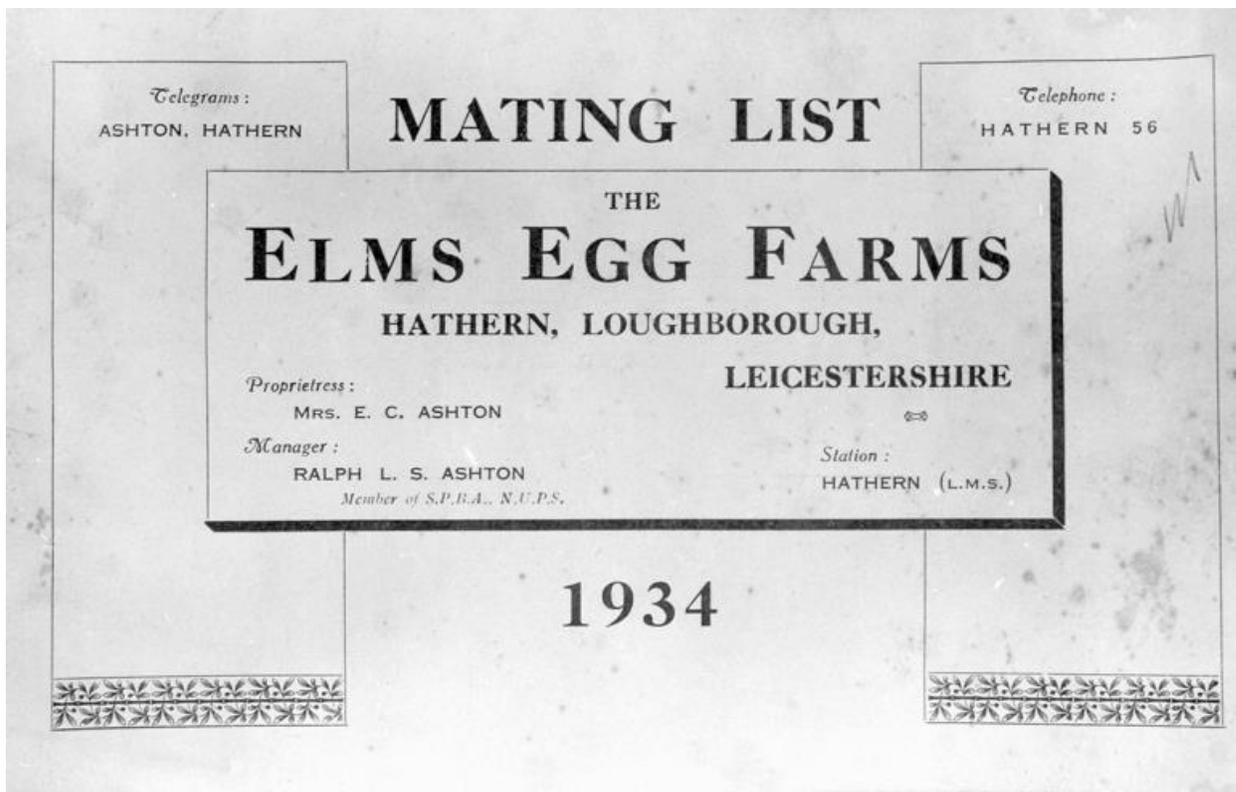
¹ Leicester Journal, 17 December 1852.

² Leicester Chronicle, 25 November and 9 December 1899.

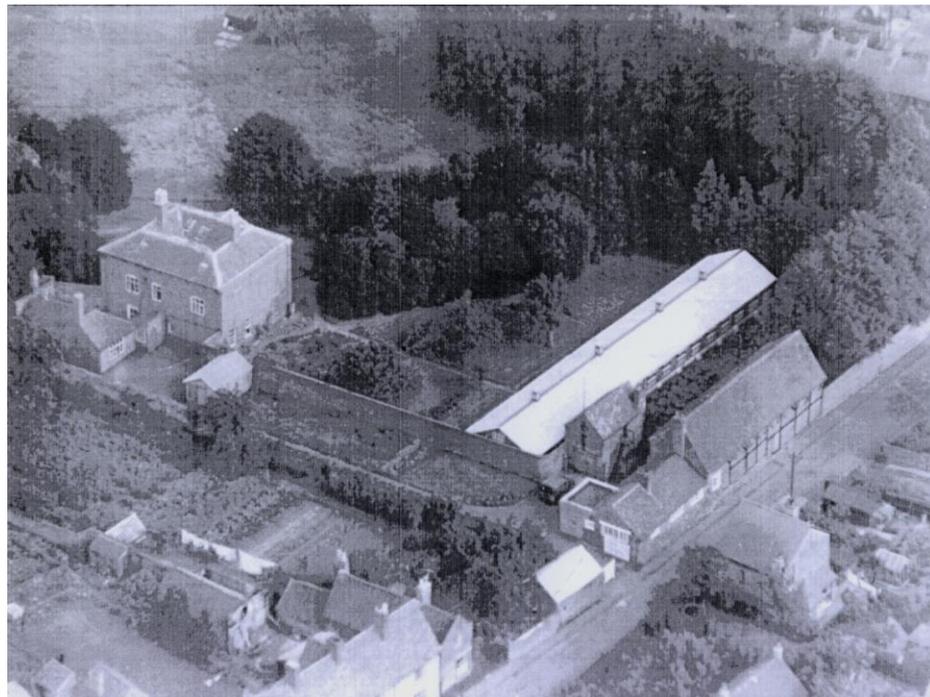
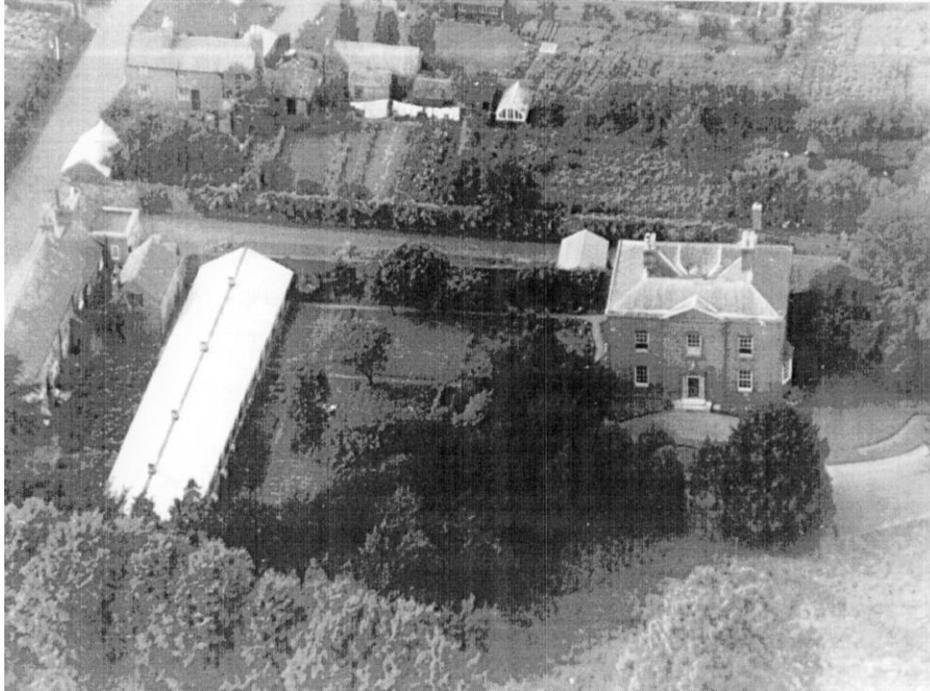
³ Nottingham Evening Post, 11 August 1930,

An even larger-scale poultry farmer in Hathern was Charles Ashton purchased the house known as 'The Elms' off Dovecote Street in 1920. The South and West aspects of the original three-storey house had already been rebuilt around 1800, although most of the features now visible relate to the early part of the twentieth century. The timbered building along Dovecote Street dates to the sixteenth or seventeenth century; in recent times it was divided to form two dwellings, The Barn and Barn Cottage.

He and his wife, Elena, managed the estate which consisted of seven acres of grounds and grassland. The much-travelled Charles had been born in Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire, and after working as a mining engineer in Peru, he settled in Saxilby in Lincolnshire. He also purchased an additional 27 acres of fields on the Whatton Road and an even larger farm in Ellistown which he sold at the outbreak of the Second World War. These three plots of land formed the basis of a thriving poultry breeding and egg production venture. This poultry business was well established by the time that an article appeared in the 27 February 1925 edition of *Poultry News*. It contained a four-page spread devoted to his achievements at the Elms Egg Farms at Hathern. Charles Ashton reared and kept five separate breeds of chickens in two large semi-intensive houses of the Toovey type, but his favourites were white leghorns. On the Elms site alone he had 450 of this breed, and 1,923 hatched birds produced an average of 237 eggs each. He used to make up five tons of dry mash at a time to feed the chicks and hens and the majority of the eggs were taken to Manchester, although some were sent to markets in Leicester.



A business card for the Elms Egg Farms. Note the short telephone number and reference to Hathern Station



The above two photographs show two views of the house, timbered barn and chicken houses

Charles ran the poultry farm for eleven years until he died on 17 December 1931 aged 52. Elena survived him for another twenty years, and both are buried in Hathern Cemetery. One of their two sons, Ralph, continued the business for many more years. Jack, the other son, married Ida Taylor and went to live in Canada. Ralph had a son named Charlie, and

his daughter Anne married Mr. John Gilles-Shields of Isley Walton. The Elms eventually began to require substantial repairs, and Ralph was forced to dispose of a lot of his land to finance them. The roof was retiled and the leaded-glass dome was replaced by a fibreglass version. The remaining part of the estate was put up for sale in 1981 and the grounds were developed to accommodate additional housing.

I can well remember the hen houses on the Whatton Road. For some years after John and I moved into Hathern our dogs used to run through the hedge at the bottom of the garden and make a bee-line for the pile of rotting hen carcasses at the poultry farm. They often brought us back evil-smelling, maggot-ridden 'presents.'

Andrée Bagley