

Joseph Plumb

Born 1845. Gardener.

Life story by Peter Barnes.

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1. Introduction

Joseph Plumb was born in the summer of 1845 in the village of Balsham, about 9 miles south-east of Cambridge. He was baptised there on 10 August 1845. Joseph was the second of the three sons of Ann and Robert, an agricultural labourer. The family lived on the High Street and that appears to have been their home until at least 1881, although all three sons had moved away by the time of the 1871 census.

In the 1861 census Joseph (16) and his younger brother, James, were working as agricultural labourers. By 1871 he was living with his older brother, William (b.c.1843), his wife and young son, in the village of Brinkley, about 4 miles north-west of Balsham. The two brothers were working as grooms. As Brinkley is 8 miles from Newmarket it is possible that their employment was linked to horse racing.

On 27 March 1873 Joseph married Fanny Short, probably at Holy Trinity Church, Balsham. Fanny was born in 1848 in Lytchett Matravers, Dorset, the daughter of a gamekeeper who later became a shepherd. In 1871 she was the sole servant of Overton Hebblewhite, an 84-year-old retired draper, who lived at London Road, Trumpington, Cambridge.

At some point during the first four years of their marriage Joseph and Fanny moved about 60 miles west, to the village of Simpson in north Buckinghamshire. There appear to be no family connections in the area, so it seems most likely that Joseph moved for work. They were certainly living in Simpson by 1877 as the first of their four children, Frederick Joseph, was born in the village on 17 April. Their second child, John William, was born on 17 October 1878. The couple's next two children had only short lives: Edith Honor, born in the summer of 1880, died in 1881; James, born prematurely in November 1881, died before the end of the year. (1).

All four children were baptised at St Thomas's Church in Simpson. On each occasion between May 1877 and November 1881 their father's occupation was recorded as groom. Frederick and John both attended Simpson School, being admitted at the ages of 3 years 2 months and exactly 3 years. (2).

2. Simpson

Simpson lies about two miles north of Fenny Stratford and Watling Street (the A5). Until the advent of Milton Keynes in the 1970s the road through the village was the route north to Newport Pagnell and on to Northampton. From the early 1800s the Grand Union Canal ran north/south, roughly parallel with the road. At the time of the 1881 census there were fifty-five occupied dwellings and a population of 258 men, women and children. The commonest male occupations were connected with agriculture; other jobs related to the canal, the railway, brickmaking, the timber trade and brush making. The Plumb family lived in the centre of the village; it is impossible to identify the property with any precision. Joseph's occupation was recorded as gardener, with dom (domestic) added in a different hand/letter. This differs from what appears in the parish registers at the same time (see above), which suggests that his employment embraced both roles.

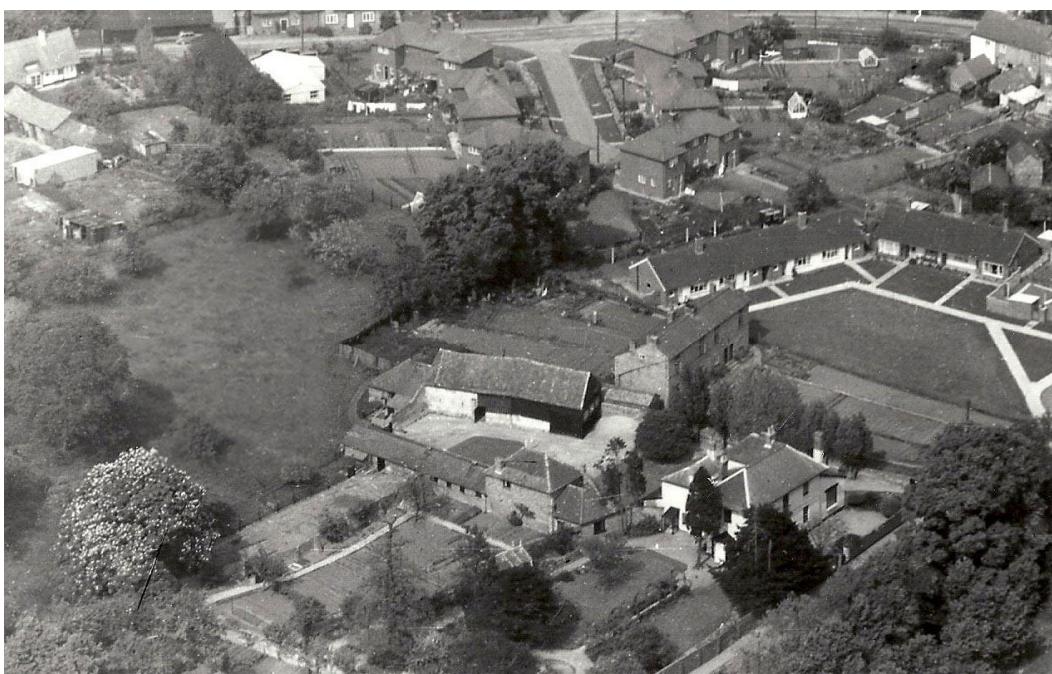


Figure 1. Simpson House in the 1960s, showing the gardens and outbuildings.

Where might Joseph have worked? The sole credible candidate is Simpson House, the only substantial property in the village besides the Rectory and three farms. The house was built in the 1830s by and for Charles Warren (1798-1872) on the site of a former farmhouse in the middle of the village. (3). An indication of how the house and grounds appeared is provided in Sheahan's *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire* (1862): a handsome villa residence, with 'tastefully laid out pleasure grounds, summer-houses, grottoes, rock-work, fountain, fish-pond etc [which] sets the place off to great advantage'. (4). An aerial photograph from the 1960s [Fig. 1] shows the property fronting the road through the village, with the

gardens and outbuildings to the side and rear. The outbuildings included accommodation suitable for a gardener/groom.



Figure 2. A plan of Simpson House and its gardens drawn in 1939, reproduced by kind permission of Eric Gates.

A plan drawn in 1939 [Fig. 2] (5), together with photographs taken in 1967 [Figs 3 and 4] (6), provide an indication of what the 19th century garden was like. The formal gardens were to the west of the house, together with conservatories and a walled vegetable and fruit garden. The whole garden was enclosed by a high brick wall. There was a vinery with ornamental stone and shell-work in front, and several summerhouses, similarly decorated. The area of the combined formal and vegetable gardens was 0.62 of an acre.

Charles Warren died in 1872. In 1875 the house and land were purchased first by Octavius Burrell and, shortly afterwards, by Thomas Kench and his wife Maria. In about 1878 a large side extension was added to the house.

In June 1884 Thomas Kench put Simpson House up for auction. The agent's description gives a further indication of the scale and nature of the garden, grounds and outbuildings:

Simpson House, standing in its own grounds occupying 3 acres, together with tastefully designed flower gardens, unique summer houses, ornamental fish pond, fountains, statuary and conservatory; extensive kitchen gardens, well stocked with fruit trees; convenient courtyards, stabling and coach houses, and buildings well adapted for loose boxes; a

rich grass paddock to the rear, and cottage, adjoining, for groom and gardener.



Figure 3. Simpson House garden with busts of Shakespeare and Milton, 1967.



Figure 4. Simpson House garden Charles Warren's vine and plum tree, 1967

The house was not sold and a subsequent auction in August 1888 did not find a buyer. Nine months later Thomas and Maria both died at Simpson

House on the same day - 18 May 1889. The Kenchs were childless and ownership of the house passed to Thomas's great-nephew, Robert Kench Perry, who took up residence with his wife and children early in 1890. According to Warren Dawson 'he kept horses and it is said by those who remember him, lived extravagantly'. (7). In the relatively short time that he resided at Simpson House, Robert appears to have taken an interest in the garden: in August 1890 he participated in the Annual Flower Show of the nearby Fenny Stratford Horticultural Society, where he won 2nd prize for his peas.

In the 1891 census, in addition to the Perry family, three servants are listed at Simpson House. One of them was Arthur Inwood, a groom and gardener, born in Simpson in 1868.

The significance of the above account for the story of Joseph Plumb is that Simpson House offered unrivalled employment opportunities in the village for both a gardener and a groom. Joseph's confirmed dates in Simpson (1877-81) overlap Thomas Kench and may well have begun earlier and ended later (see below).

When and why did the Plumb family move away from Simpson? They were still resident when their fourth child, James, was baptised in November 1881. By 1886 Joseph was living in Little Brickhill, a village on Watling Street, about four miles south-east of Simpson. Was he attracted to another job there? If so, it may have been at the Manor House, the only large house in the village. It was owned by a Major Finlay, who was described as 'the epitome of a hunting, shooting and fishing squire'. (8). Was he affected by Robert Kench's attempts to sell Simpson House, beginning in 1884? Note that the auctioneer's description implies that the accommodation for the groom/gardener is vacant. Was Joseph dismissed? No answers to these questions are readily available.

3. The County Asylum, Stone

The next confirmed date in this saga is 4 January 1887, when Joseph was admitted to the Buckinghamshire County Asylum at Stone, 3 miles south-west of Aylesbury. He was 42 years old. The Medical Register of Admissions recorded his form of mental disorder as Melancholia. The Case Book provides the asylum doctor's report on Joseph's state of mind and behaviour on admission. His local doctor described 'great despondency, alternating with fits of mental excitement'.

Fanny reported that her husband had been very depressed for the previous 6 weeks and that he had said that he was tempted to murder her and the two children (aged 9 and 8) and then destroy himself. This very disturbed state – what would now be labelled a bipolar disorder – persisted until the end of January. Significant improvements were then noted and on 7 February he was 'working outside in the garden'.

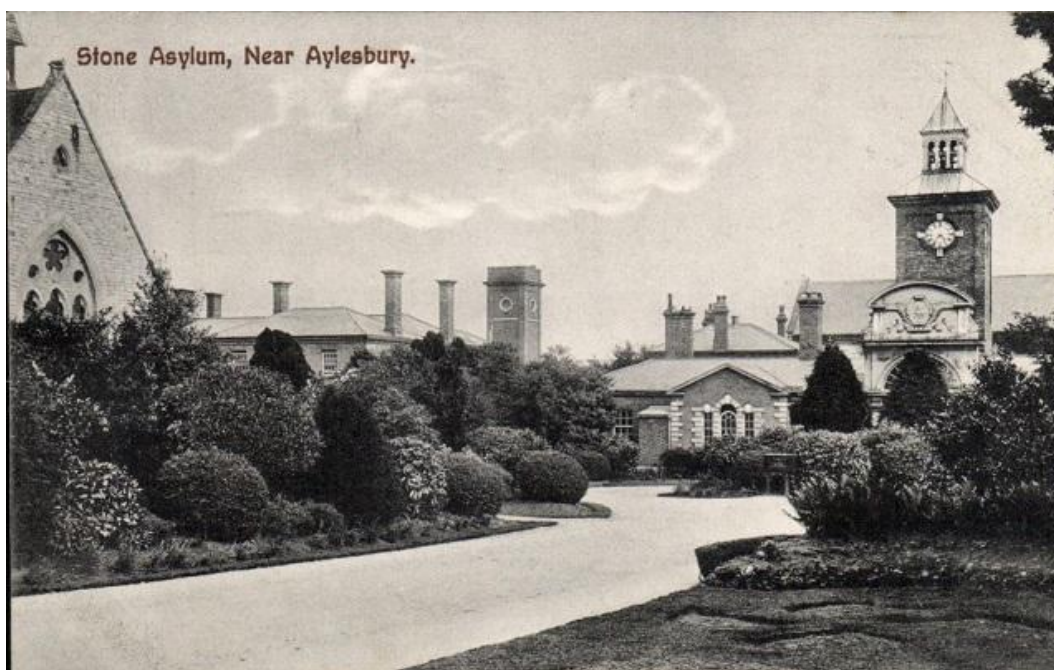


Figure 5. The Buckingham Country Asylum. Undated postcard.

The Stone Asylum, opened in 1853, was a large building set in extensive grounds [Fig. 5]. The 1891 census listed 440 patients; in 1911 there were 687 (a 56% increase over 20 years). The gardens were probably a mix of ornamentation and the cultivation of fruit and vegetables to supply the kitchen. In any event, it would appear that Joseph's experience as a gardener was put to good use.

After the initial detailed notes about Joseph's behaviour in 1887, the entries in the Case Book tend to be spread out and briefer – one or two lines, quarterly. They also vary in tone, depending on the author. One doctor with clearly held views wrote on 22 October 1888: 'A very industrious worker –

he should either be discharged or sent to the workhouse; a cowardly fellow in good health'. Regardless, Joseph remained in the asylum. In January 1890 the same doctor recorded his continuing frustration: 'in good bodily health, yet professes weakness; by rights he should be dismissed from the asylum in the interests of his wife & children.' However, Joseph was working hard for the House Steward – he 'acts as footman to the Steward!!!', wrote the clearly exasperated doctor. The theme reappears eighteen months later, in June 1891, when Joseph was working for the Steward as coachman and groom 'and yet says he is too weak to work for wife and children'.

Such accounts are open to interpretation. Had Joseph become institutionalised? Was the Steward only too happy to have at his disposal an inmate with useful skills and experience and, in return, to provide him with a degree of protection? Whatever the explanation, it would appear that Joseph was content to remain within the asylum and leave his wife and sons to get on with their lives. And that pattern continued. In October 1903 he 'is quiet and industrious and is allowed a great deal of liberty: he says he has no confidence in himself and could not work away from here'. In March 1908, after 21 years at Stone 'he appears afraid to make a trial away from the asylum.' And there, indeed, he stayed – in September 1912 he 'works well in the garden'.

A year later Joseph was reported as 'becoming more depressed and inactive and now does little or no work'. His general health declined, with evidence of 'cardiac degeneration' and he was transferred to the infirmary, where he died on 8 September 1914, aged 69.

4. Fanny Plumb and her Sons

During the 27 years that Joseph lived in the asylum there is only one reference in the Case Book to a visit from his wife and children – early on, in July 1888. That doesn't mean that there weren't other visits and the Case Book was not necessarily the place where they would have been recorded. Fanny continued to live in the area to which they had moved in the 1870s. In 1890 and 1891 she is listed on the electoral register at an address in Napier Street, Fenny Stratford, less than two miles south of Simpson and a similar distance from Little Brickhill. The same address is recorded in the 1891 census as the home of Frederick Plumb (13), working as an errand boy, and his brother John (12), a scholar. Fanny does not appear but there are two lodgers/boarders: John Attwood (54) and James Herbert (61), an elementary school teacher. Paying lodgers would appear to have been a means of supplementing her income.

Between 1899 and 1915 Fanny is listed in the electoral register as living at Victoria Road, Fenny Stratford (adjoining Napier Street). She and her sons are recorded there in the 1901 census: Frederick (23) was working as a railway carriage cleaner and John (22) as a grocer's assistant. From that, it might be assumed that the family was financially self-sufficient without any contribution from Joseph.

By the time of the 1911 census Frederick was married, living in Harlesden, north London and still working as a railway carriage cleaner. John and his wife were living close to his mother in Fenny Stratford; he was still working as a grocer's assistant. Fanny Plumb died in 1920 in Fenny Stratford, aged 72.

5. Tidying up the Plot

Some features of the above account are based on documentary evidence - census returns, parish records and asylum records. Others are open to interpretation and speculation. Did Joseph experience mental health problems prior to his admission to Stone in January 1887? If so, were these related to his employment? If, indeed, he was a gardener at Simpson House, did he lose his job because of it or were his problems related to Kench's plans to sell the house in the mid-1880s? How was he affected by the deaths, in quick succession, of his two youngest children in the second half of 1881? Were there tensions between him and Fanny? It is unlikely that we will ever know but it would be good to think that the beauty and productivity of the gardens of Simpson House and, subsequently, those at Stone Asylum owe something to the life and labour of Joseph Plumb.

6. Notes & Acknowledgements

1 Information on the four children comes from the parish registers of St Thomas's Church, Simpson, Buckinghamshire Family History Society, 2013.

2 Admission Register for Simpson and Woughton School.

3 The account of Simpson House, its owners and its gardens draws on the research of the present occupant, Eric Gates.

4 Sheahan, J.J. *The History and Topography of Buckinghamshire*. Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1862, p.604.

5 The plan was drawn by a firm of chartered surveyors in Woburn Sands in May 1939 at the request of Warren Dawson, the owner of Simpson House from 1936 until his death in 1968. He was an Egyptologist of some repute and also carried out a range of local history research, including a detailed study of Simpson House.

6 Source: Michael Warren, great-grandson of Charles Warren.

7 Dawson papers DAW/2 31/61, *Bucks Archaeological Society*, pp. 118-31. Undated; probably written in 1941. Courtesy of Eric Gates.

8 www.little-brickhill.co.uk/History accessed 30 December 2019.

Acknowledgements

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