

Mary Fennell lived in the same street as H.E.'s grandfather in Higham Ferrers when she was a girl. This is her recollection of H.E., his family, and life in Higham, as told to H.E.'s biographer, Dean Baldwin.

### Grandfather Lucas

I remember H.E. Bates as a child – he spent a great deal of his time with his maternal grandfather George Lucas who lived with his wife Lizzie in York Rd, Higham Ferrers. I was born in the house next to his grandparents and *my* grandparents, an uncle and an aunt lived in the same terrace - so our families were familiar with each other.

George and Lizzie Lucas had two daughters – Elizabeth (Liz as she was called) became H.E. Bates' mother, and Florence (who was always called Flo) who remained a spinster all of her life. My mother and Liz Lucas sat next to each other in the choir in the Higham Wesleyan Chapel and they appear in a photograph of the opening of the Chapel. George Lucas earned his living as a smallholder, his smallholding being between Higham Ferrers and Chelveston; it was not very big, but he also rented a field behind Chichele St. in Higham Ferrers where he grazed his horse and grew a crop of hay. He grew crops of vegetables which he hawked around the houses in Higham with a horse and cart. He was not very kind to his horses – they grew thinner and thinner and finally dropped dead one after the other.

Every Saturday morning and every day in the school holidays young Bert – that is H.E. Bates – accompanied his grandfather on his rounds calling at the houses and selling the produce. During the holidays he lived and slept at his grandparents' home occupying the small back bedroom, which in those days overlooked fields. Old Father Lucas, as we children called his grandfather, was a tall gaunt man, slightly stooping and with the largest hands I've ever seen. He was a strict teetotaller and one of his favourite sayings was "Water is strung enough fer lions so its strung enough fer men". He always spoke in the local dialect and H.E. Bates uses this in many of his stories.

Grandmother Lizzie was a small slim woman with hair drawn tightly back from her forehead and was very careful and economic in her housekeeping. They lived mostly on what they could produce themselves.

Father Lucas kept pigs – I remember seeing him kill one beside the pump that in those days provided the houses in the terrace with water. We children gathered around and accepted it as a way of life. After he had cut the hay in the field that he rented we children would spend hours tossing it in the sunshine. He also grew a crop of corn on the smallholding and it was then the custom of ‘gleaners’ to go over the field after the corn had been cut to pick up the stray ears of corn that had been left. We children loved a day ‘gleaning’ - our mothers came too and my aunt’s twins were left in the shade of a tree whilst we busied ourselves picking up the corn. We wore specially made linen aprons with a large pocket in front into which we put the ears as we gathered them. We spent all day in the field, eating sandwiches in the middle of the day and drinking cold tea from a bottle. We were not allowed to glean a field until all the sheaves of corn had been carted away. Old Father Lucas was crafty – he left one sheaf of corn standing in the field, thus preventing the gleaners from entering until his wife and family had covered the field first. We always knew there wouldn’t be much to glean in Father Lucas’ field. The corn gathered by the gleaners was used to feed their backyard poultry during the winter.

Father Lucas, like many of his generation, was a great talker and at that time everyone knew everyone else for some miles around and knew all their business, habits and much of their private lives. As he jogged along on his cart with young H.E. beside him he recounted what he knew of the various people with whom they came into contact – and many of the characters appeared in H.E. Bates’ stories. Many of the names he uses are local names.

### Matilda Waters

Grandma Lizzie had a sister, Matilda Waters, who kept the Chequers Inn at Yelden – unfortunately it burnt down during the War and the present one is a modern building but many an American serviceman must remember the old Inn which again appears in H.E. Bates’ stories. Tilly Waters, like her sister Lizzie, was spotlessly clean and the floors of the Inn and the deal tables were scrubbed and scrubbed. I remember as a child hearing my father say that ”Tilly Waters tables at The Chequers are as white as the driven snow!” and I was very disappointed one Whit Monday when we drove over to Yelden and I sat at one of the tables in the yard at the back of the Inn with my bottle of ‘spruce’ – that is lemonade – to me the scrubbed deal table looked no different from our own kitchen table at home. So although all of H.E. Bates’ family were teetotallers he did come into

contact with people who drank, sometimes to excess, when he visited the pub at Yelden. Again, many of these characters creep into his stories. He evidently had a great capacity for looking and listening and storing up all that he saw and heard and looking back I suppose most of his free time as a young boy was spent with his grandfather.

### The Bates' Family

Liz Lucas, H.E. Bates' mother was a very good looking woman with naturally curly hair and even in her eighties was upright and attractive. She eventually courted and married a Mr Albert Bates of Rushden. My mother told me an interesting story concerning Albert Bates which I have never seen printed anywhere – in fact I doubt if H.E. Bates himself knew. It appears that Albert Bates was the illegitimate son of Miss Deborah Bates who lived with her mother in a row of cottages called Kilsby's Cottages, which led off the hill between Higham and Rushden.

The area is now called Kilburn Place. The father of her child was a Mr Lawrence who had a very possessive mother and would not allow her son to marry Deborah when she became pregnant. She even tried to stop the marriage of another son by objecting in Church when the bans were called.

Deborah Bates never got over the disgrace of being an unmarried mother and she died whilst her son Albert was still quite young. My mother said she died of a broken heart. My mother lived with her parents and family next door. Old Mrs Bates became a semi-invalid and was unable to get upstairs, so her bed was brought downstairs and she and the young child slept in the living room. My grandfather, Mr Alfred Colton, who, as I said, lived in the cottage next to Mrs Bates, was in the habit of going in early every morning and lighting Mrs Bates' fire which of course would be her only means of cooking and heating. It was quite common for neighbours to help each other in this way. One morning my grandfather found Mrs Bates dead with young Albert asleep beside her. According to my mother his natural father had married and he and his wife took the young boy into their home and brought him up and later he went into his father's shoe manufacturing firm of Knight & Lawrence, but he never changed his name and remained Albert Bates. When he married Liz Lucas they lived in York Rd Rushden and had three children, H.E, Edna and Stanley. They had a much higher standard of living than the Lucas's and were staunch members of the non-conformist church.

### H.E. Bates' Formative Years

After H.E. started at Kettering Grammar School he spent less time with his grandfather but he must have retained a store of material that he had gained from their relationship. Pupils attending Wellingborough and Kettering Grammar schools had to travel by train from Higham Ferrers and Rushden in those days and H.E. always seemed rather remote and haughty. This increased as he became a teenager and I can see him now striding down Rushden High St in the middle of the road – not much traffic then – with his red tie flying and a couple of library books under his arm. It was about this time that he began to take an interest in girls and one of his first girlfriends was my cousin Edna Colton - she was quite disappointed that he did not mention her in his autobiography. It was not very serious, to Edna it was just an episode when she quarrelled with her regular boyfriend. I think she was really too sophisticated for H.E. However on one occasion he suggested taking her up to London to see a matinee performance of Sean O’Casey’s play *Juno and the Paycock*. Well, in those days, sixteen year old girls did not go off to London with a boyfriend and Edna knew that her parents would not give their consent, so she told her mother there was a netball match on at school – County High School, Wellingborough, - and that she’d been asked to help with the refreshments and off they went to London! When she came into the train the following Monday morning we were all agog to hear what had transpired. I remember quite well how she plonked herself down in the carriage and said “What do you think? – he’s going to write a book”. We all just roared with laughter and thought it a great joke. About this time he tried to form a play-reading and Dramatic Society with another cousin of mine, Arthur Britton, a schoolfriend of H.E.’s. It never came to anything although they managed to get a subscription from my grandfather Colton.

### Madge Cox

He started going out with his future wife Madge Cox whilst he was still quite young. Madge was a member of the Park Rd Baptist Chapel in Rushden. She was a rather demure, attractive girl with a very striking pink and white complexion. She dressed nicely, but rather soberly and I remember her best in a navy blue dress with a white collar and cuffs and a white hat – we always wore hats then, and white gloves. When she was a very small child she lived near us in Higham Ferrers, in a row of bungalows just off Walnut Tree Lane – proper name is Kings Meadow Lane. The bungalows were called Kennel Row because they had been converted from kennels used for the hounds of Earl Fitzwilliam who at that time owned most of the land in Higham Ferrers. At the time H.E. started courting her she lived in Harborough Rd, Rushden and during the War when the bombing started

H.E.'s daughters came to Rushden and lived with Madge's mother whilst attending school in Bedford.

### Higham Feast

One of the great events of our young lives was the Annual Fair, or Feast as we called it, which was held in the field behind The Green Dragon. The Fair people travelled by train in those days and we children sat on the high wall between the Dragon path and the churchyard and as each wagon rumbled down the station yard we called out, "A show!

A show!!" This was the idea behind his story *The Feast of July*.

### Ice Skating on the Wharf Meadow

In the winter we went skating on the meadow around the wharf at Higham Ferrers. There was great excitement when the news spread that the ice would hold and people flocked to the meadow every evening after leaving work. We wore old fashioned wooden skates that had to be screwed into the heels of our boots, but a couple of enterprising men, equipped with a bench and a bradawl, made holes in the heels and screwed in the skates. Some fathers took along a wooden kitchen chair and skated along with one child in the chair in front of them. There was a great deal of laughter and falling over and young girls crossed hands with their boy partners and enjoyed the fun. I remember there was always a trestle table with an urn steaming away and it was possible to buy special mugs of OXO. They were white with a blue rim and the letters of OXO also in blue. H.E. gives an account of these skating sessions in *Love for Lydia*.

### The Watercress Man

In *The Watercress Girl* he mentions gathering watercress from the brook – this was Stanwick brook where the water was clean and fast flowing and we regularly gathered the watercress from this brook. I remember a character we called 'Watercress Harry' - he was a well educated man, a remittance man who lived at Oundle. Every Saturday he came by train from Oundle to Irthlingborough with a baby's pram full of watercress. He always took the wheels off the body of the pram when he put it in the guards-van – by doing this he didn't have to pay for the pram! When he got to Irthlingborough he put the wheels on again and proceeded to call on the houses in Higham

selling his watercress. My mother always bought a plateful from him and we had watercress for tea every Saturday during the season. There were many colourful characters around in those days and H.E. would know them all, as I did, and I am sure used them in his stories.

### The Local Characters

There was 'Weary Willie' – William Chambers – who drank far too much and was a great worry to his mother – but every Sunday morning he dressed up in his best clothes and always wore a fresh flower in his button hole. I remember when William was called into the Army during the War – people said "He'll come through alright, the devil always looks after his own!" – and he did, although as a small child it puzzled me that the devil took care of him. Then there was 'Lazy Smith' the lamplighter – a big man who had a tiny, thin wife and, more often than not, she could be seen early in the morning and late at night clamping around the town in all weathers pulling on and off the gas lamps with a long pole – it was *his* job really!

### Poaching and the Local Characters

A great deal of poaching went on in the twenties and thirties when times were hard and many a family would have been hungry without a poached hare or rabbit. Our supplier was a man called Billy Nurrish and often on a Sunday morning we would find a rabbit and a bag of mushrooms on the back doorstep. Billy had been up at the crack of dawn making the round of his traps – all he wanted in payment was a pint of beer in The Green Dragon! Rushden had a colourful character in the form of its Town Crier, Buck Turner. Buck dressed in white buckskin breeches and wore a high silk hat. After ringing his bell and making his announcement he always ended by saying "and dawn't say ole Buck ain't told yer!"

### Baptisms

In his story *The Mill*, H.E. Bates refers to 'Holland's Mill' – there was a Holland's Mill just off the bottom road between Higham and Stanwick. The Holland family were members of a religious sect called Plymouth Brethren and once a year there was an open air public baptism of people converted

to the faith. Young people crowded to the Mill to see the converts dipped and come up spluttering and dripping with water.

### The Enchantress and Shoemaking

His description of Bertha's mother in *The Enchantress* reminds me of Mrs George Newell who lived in Wharf Rd, Higham Ferrers. When her son was in his teens she was still wearing the costume, hat and boots she'd been married in. They had long been out of fashion – the costume that had once been navy blue had turned green with age – her flat straw hat had a rusty look and her side-button boots had long been out of fashion. When kindly friends tried to point out how ridiculous she looked she replied that George loved to see her as she was the day he married her. Evidently he never noticed the moustache that had grown over the years. H.E. Bates mentions Bertha's mother as closing boot uppers – that is machining together the pieces of leather that make the upper part of the shoe or boot. Many married women did this work at home and were called 'outdoor closers'. It was a very skilled job and needed expert machining.

### The Shoemaker's 'shop'

Many rows of terraced houses that were built at this time had what was called a 'shop' – this was an outhouse with a fairly large window and a fire-place where women sat at their machines closing the uppers. As he says in the story they usually wore a black sateen apron and at the end of the week the finished uppers were taken to the factory wrapped in the black apron and the money due collected – I've done this many a time! Most of the girls who grew up with me went into a shoe factory when they left school at the age of fourteen years and their first job was usually 'knot tying' - that is tying into knots the ends of each row of machining on the uppers. Most of the boys also went into the shoe factories – some became 'clickers' – men who cut the various shapes that were machined together to form the upper. They were called 'clickers' because as they worked the special curved knife that they used made a clicking noise. Then there were the men operating a welting machine and the tappers who attached the sole to the uppers by knocking in tacks – small nails with a large head – with a hammer. Clickers were paid more than tappers as it was a more skilled job and so a phrase common in this area - "a notch above a tapper" was used to describe a slightly superior person. H.E. Bates' father worked in the factory of Knight & Lawrence.

## Final Encounter

I married in 1931 and left the area, as did H.E. Bates, and the last time I saw him was during the War when I visited Rushden Feast with my young daughter. We entered a side-show to see the smallest woman on earth and there was Bates with his children, no doubt recording the Feast – that is, the Fairs of his childhood