

FRANCIS LEAPER MASTERMAN

BORN STILLINGTON 1st September 1900

Died SUNDERLAND 7th May 1984

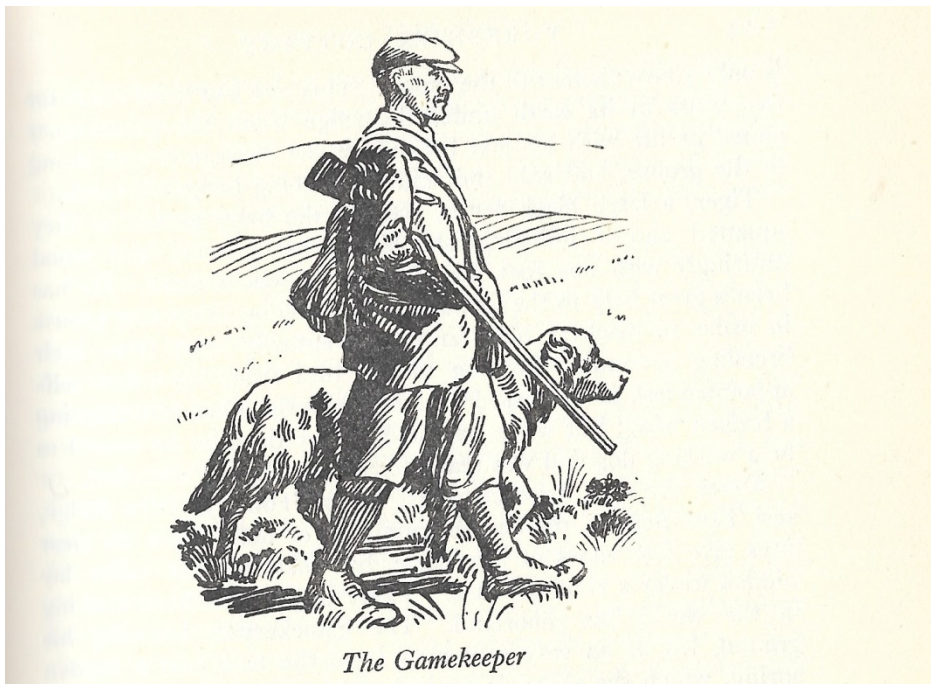
A Brief Autobiography of my Early Years

I was born early on Saturday morning on September the first 1900 and learned later that I had a cane over my face which at one time was believed to be lucky and that the owner would never die of drowning. Sailors in the old sailing ships days used to buy them to take to sea.

My earliest recollection is of tearing the seat of the pants when trying to climb over a low iron fence between our front garden (Fern Cottage) and Corbett's (Holly Croft Cottage on S.E. side of Main Street) next door.



My father (William Masterman born 1865 in Cassillis near Ayr) was gamekeeper to Squire Liddell, a wealthy mineowner who owed his position to scores of badly paid miners living in County Durham. My grandparents on my father's side I scarcely remember; in fact I do not remember my grandfather (Francis Masterman b1835 in Cassillis, Ayr. Died 1905 in Coxwold, gamekeeper to Newburgh Priory) and the only thing I can remember about my grandma (Rebecca (ne Rymer) b1901 at Coxwold. died Stillington 1907) was being taken to see her in her coffin (a custom in those days). The Mastermans came from Coxwold and I remember being taken there to visit some relations (*probably his grandmother's family*) when I was very young but my father was born in Scotland when his father was gamekeeper to some notable (*Cassillis Castle, near Ayr owned by the Kennedy Clan*), then later to the Squire at the Hall.



The Gamekeeper

My father had three sisters (Elizabeth b.1860 in Coxwold., Annie born 1863 in Newbold and Emily born 1869 in Ayr). The oldest, Annie was a spinster. I remember that that she lived in a house next to Hawkswells shop (now Nos 1 and 2 Glebe Cottage) opposite the Wesleyan Chapel. Aunt Annie was a very clean tidy houseproud person as I remember her and spread newspapers on the back kitchen spotless floor if it were raining and I was visiting her the back way through a passage next to Hawkswell's shop. I never used the front door, unless I was with my parents. Sadie my cousin, resembles Aunt Annie, only she looks more miserable or did the last time I met her which was two years ago, when we met at my sister's house after a lapse of more than twenty years. Sadie's mother Aunt Emily was my father's youngest sister, who after a short nursing career married Harry Jefferson, a successful farmer living at Haxby.

I liked Aunt Emily the best of all my fathers' sisters and spent many happy holidays on the farm. Aunt Annie died when I was quite young and I remember visiting the other sister, Aunt Lizzie, who lived in Lord Mayor's Walk, York, and had married a retired coach painter and sign writer called Hawkes. He

probably was quite good painting coats of arms and heraldic devices but some of his oil paintings, he had filled his house with them after his retirement, were mainly of grossly fat cows and pigs but he also produced some beautiful delicate work on shells and eggs. We used to have a goose egg adorned with beautiful life-like flowers, set in a plaster stand. Old Hawkes was a queer old man with a long white beard and moustache tinted yellow around the nose and mouth because of snuff taking, which he performed every half hour or so, taking from his waistcoat pocket a silver snuff box and sniffing the pinch which he placed on the back of his hand, first up one nostril and then the other and then dusted himself down with a coloured silk handkerchief.

I used to travel to York with my mother on the village bus; not far removed from the old stage coach in appearance, only smaller, a door at the back, small windows on either side and form seats on which people were packed tightly so that when full inside it carried ten people. There were generally two rows of seats on the top outside. It was quite a thrill to ride on the top with the driver, but only in fine weather, as all were exposed to the elements; only the baskets of eggs, butter, plucked fowls etc being contained by a low metal rail and packed tightly on the flat top of the body of the coach being protected by a tarpaulin. Pulled by two non-descript horses generally getting on in years the "bus" arrived at the Black Swan or Mucky Duck as the locals called the pub in Gilly Gate, after two or three stops to take on more dairy produce. It took longer to return, for the stops, generally at pubs, gave many of the male passengers an excuse to stretch their legs and quench their thirst. I can, when I think of those of those journeys in the dark nights, wedged tightly between a fat farmer and a stiff well corseted female, smell again the strange mixture of tobacco smoke, whisky or beer fumes, a whiff of orange, cheap scent and body odours as we travelled homewards after a long exhausting day in the city.

As I mentioned earlier I spent a great deal of my school holidays, as I grew up, at my uncle's* farm, Haxby Lodge. I generally rode there on my bicycle, a short journey of eight miles and gradually I learned to drive the horses, milked cows, hoe turnips, stook corn, use a scythe and generally be very useful as cheap labour. In those days men were hired for a year to work and farm. Full board and lodging, an occasional day's holiday, often working Saturdays and milking all days, a bullocky as he was called would earn annually little more than £12 and a horseman usually four or five pounds more depending on his record and experience. * *according to church records this was Harry Jefferson (b 1895) who married Phyllis Emily Masterman (b1896), Aunt to of Francis Leaper Masterman.*

I remember my uncle hired a lad as a horseman with several years' experience and he backed a horse and cart into a deep pond (marl hole). He was carrying "wickens", long string-like roots which choke crop plants, a vicious weed of the grass family, and he should have tipped them at the edge of the pond but backed the horse too far and the animal was drowned. I remember my uncle, mad with rage, sacked him on the spot and pitched his tin trunk out of the back bedroom window smashing in the side and bursting open the lid scattering his few possessions all over the paving. I sometimes had a meal with the two men my uncle employed and marvelled at the way they ate huge lumps of fat bacon, which they put away with slice after slice of bread and butter. They didn't have one egg, which satisfied me, but sometimes three, eating them, hard boiled, with two bites after shelling them. Eggs were 24 for a shilling then! There were no battery fowls, they roamed all over the farm yard and stackyard and a roast chicken, three or four pounds weight, was delicious, far different from the factory birds of today.

I remember when I was a small boy staying at the farm and going with Sadie a few years younger, to take the allowance (loance) down to the fields where the men were haymaking or harvesting. My Aunt Emily used to fill a basket with lovely scones (generally made with buttermilk) and chunks of red Dutch cheese which we carried down to the hungry men who washed it down with mugs of strong tea while Sadie and I shared a bottle of ginger beer (collectors items today).

That is a brief picture of rural England before the first World War. There was a great deal of poverty but there was peace!

Haymaking c 1900 at Farlington



It was the custom in the early part of the century, up to and during the First World War, for many villages in Yorkshire to have an annual fair or “feast”. It usually lasted about a week when the village (Stillington) was invaded by numerous wagons and caravans all making their way to the green to set up the various side shows and stalls.

There were coconut shies, Hoop La, Swingboats, Shooting Galleries, Aunt Sallies and a huge roundabout brilliantly lit up at night with dozens of coloured lights powered by a steam engine & dynamo. There were other smaller stalls selling brandy snaps, hot mushy peas and water squirters. The last having lead tubes similar to toothpaste ones, filled with water which we squirted over the girls. All the side shows were illuminated by naphtha flares and were not wired up for electricity until after the war.

I remember the Shooting Galleries had jets of water constantly climbing up to a foot or so in height with a ping pong ball floating on the top. To hit one of the balls, whilst they were constantly bobbing up and down on the end of a miniature fountain seemed almost impossible yet it happened occasionally as the lead bullets banged merrily away on the metal sheet in the background.

On the swings made for two, you each pulled on a decorated rope and the stronger you pulled the higher the ‘boat’ went.

One year I remember we had a visit from a famous exhibit – “Anita the smallest lady in the world”. She was 26 inches in height, a perfect midget, but I remember she looked very old in spite of her painted cheeks and golden hair (wig). She was Austrian I believe and spoke little English but she was human and was seated in a beautiful tiny well-cushioned chair.

I remember the sheep with 6 legs, two useless ones sticking out of its chest; a duck with three legs and of course the ‘bearded lady’ whom I believe was really a man.

Often the annual Flower Show coincided with the 'feast' and was usually on the final Saturday when the Squire allowed the big tents to be erected in the lower park where the village cricket matches were played. They seemed to be fine August days when the sun shone, the band, hired from York or Easingwold, played and we lads roamed about from tent to tent noting especially if the same persons had received first prizes as in previous years for their bread, tea cakes, quilting, butter, eggs, dressed poultry and all the garden produce. There were competitions for school children and I remember winning first prize for a painting of nasturtiums in a vase and I won a prize for the best decorated bicycle; it was covered with sprays of roses, mostly Dorothy Perkins, with a bower of them over the handlebars.

After the First World War the mansions and country houses with their numerous servants gradually disappeared and Stillington Hall site today is a middle class housing estate and all the lovely gardens and velvety lawns have gone. Only a few of the big trees and shrubs have been left to grace the new lawns and gardens of the elegant bungalows and villas occupied by York business men and retired tradesmen.

I remember well the Christmas before the War when we lads roamed the village with our bullseye lanterns with their sliding shutters, singing carols accompanied by a squeaky violin and Joe Cooper with his falsetto voice rising above all others. I remember trudging through the snow to sing at the outlying farms and finishing at Applebys, where we were always given bowls of lovely meaty soup and mince pies.

I remember the Christmas party at the Hall for all the servants, the huge Christmas tree in the large hall covered with tinsel and lighted candles, with a footman standing by with a sponge on a long pole to put out any candle in danger of setting fire to the pine needles. The squire's first wife, a kindly old woman, gave out presents from the great pile heaped around the tree. They were good presents. I remember being given a 'circus' with clowns and animals with jointed limbs which enabled one to fix them in various positions. I remember particularly the big grey wooden elephant, tusks and all which was so jointed that it could stand on its back legs.

I used to enjoy the winter and the snow and on Christmas morning I remember feeling down to the bottom of the bed I shared with Malcolm and finding one of my father's long hand knitted stockings containing a few cheap toys and always an apple, an orange and plenty of nuts.

For our Christmas dinner we always had either roast goose or turkey given by the squire to all senior servants such as head gardener, head groom and the butler. Mother was a splendid cook and the plum pudding and mince pies were always first class. On Christmas morning, before it was light, when I was ten or twelve, I went out "lucky birding" which meant singing an age old ditty outside the door of certain houses which you knew would welcome you.

My first call was next door to the post office, (*now part of "The Cottage" next to Weddells Cottage*) where Thirza Gibson let me in, to sing up stairs to her father and mother still in bed.

*"Lucky bird, lucky bird, luck, luck, luck
Master and Mistress it's time to get up.
If you don't get up you'll have no luck
Lucky bird, lucky bird, luck, luck, luck."*

That and similar ditties have been handed down from generation to generation, I wonder if they still have them to day?

After a few more Christmassy greetings delivered in my hearty treble voice I was given a large slice of Christmas Cake, a chunk of cheese and a shilling. I would visit a dozen houses, be invited in to one or two and given various sums of money ranging from threepence to half a crown which I received from my grandpa Leaper as well as a glass of ginger wine (home made and potent) and usually arrived home with various amounts but never much more than six or seven shillings. A few also gave Christmas cake which I usually put in my pocket to eat leisurely at home.

Another old custom was "Blue Stocking" (?) as it was called, a kind of Mummer's Play hundreds of years old. We lads turned our coats inside out, blackened our faces with burnt cork, one carried a wooden sword and another an old frying pan, then we were ready. I've read various variations of the play but the main characters are usually the same King William, his enemy the Turkish knight Belzebub, the little doctor and Johnnie Junny(?).

We used to burst into a house without warning and often left immediately if the occupants didn't want to hear us but we generally knew the people who would welcome us and it only happened once or twice in the winter months. We gave our hearers the whole gamut of the age old drama –

*“In comes I King William, Bold Slasher is my name.
If you mean it fight
I mean to win the game.
My back is made of iron, my belly’s made of steel,
My knuckle is made of knuckle bone and that I’ll let you feel,
Mince pie hot, mince pie cold.
I’ll knock you to the ground before you’re three day’s old”.*

and so on to the doctor who cured the fallen one with a miraculous pill, to end it with Johnny Junny(?) who gathered all the money. We were lucky to get three pence for our performance but we enjoyed it and it made a break in the longer winter evenings.

Of course we were mischievous when we tried out another age old prank of ‘pin and button’ and had many an old dame out to see who was tapping gently on her window, we being around a corner gently pulling the strong cotton thread.

Sometimes for a laugh we tied the door handles of two adjoining doors slackly together with a piece of stout rope (probably cut off a stack sheet in somebody’s barn). Then we knocked loudly on both doors and retired to a safe distance. First one would try to open, then the other would pull it close again and choice language would reach our ears before one of them produced a knife and cut the rope then looked out in the dark and threatened vengeance but as there were no lights in the village except a faint glimmer behind dark green blinds of houses he failed to discern the miscreants.

I was often in trouble, sometimes it happened unintentionally as in the case of the dead duck. We were skimming flat stones across a pond near the village when a lovely white duck swam out from some rushes and was knocked on the head and killed. We had the duck for dinner, Mother had to buy it, but I did not partake!

My grandfather & grandma on my mother’s side I knew very well. (*Thomas and Elizabeth Leaper*) The Leaper family lived near Sutton and were farmers and my grandma also lived near there. The both lived to a ripe old age each in their eighties and were victims of the influenza epidemic of the early post war years.

My grandfather, before my time, was landlord of the Bay House and ran a Saddler’s Shop as a sideline. My mother (*Jane Edith Leaper*) and her sister Kate (*Catherine Beatrice Leaper*) worked in the bar and both were accomplished horse riders and were bonny lasses my grandpa used to tell me. My mother had two other sisters beside Kate (*Margaret Louise and Elizabeth Leaper*) and one brother William.

Bay Horse Inn c1885



When my grandfather retired from the pub he bought two cottages with an extensive garden and outhouses. He must have had a bob or two for he bought the Carr Wood and adjoining fields which lay down the York Road and ran up the Huby Lane for a quarter of a mile. It was only a strip of a wood bordering the roads but contained some good timber in the shape of beech, oak and sycamore. On one of his fields, a grass pasture with a wooden barn and shed, was a fairly large pond with an island (*since drained*) covered with elderberry bushes and a few pines. Some of us boys, I was the leader since my grandpa owned the land, used to cross over to the island on a flimsy raft made of boards nailed to an old gate. We built a shelter of boards, branches and old discarded tin roofing and constructed a rough fireplace of old iron grating on which we made a fire to roast potatoes and boil water to make tea. I remember one night; it must have been late in the year for it was growing dark; when the fire spread out of bounds and set fire to some dry elderberry sticks and soon a lot of bushes were blazing merrily as we rafted as hard as we could for home. The farmer, who rented the fields from my grandpa, rushed down, fearing it was his barn on fire but it soon burned itself out; but I remember being in trouble over it and being warned to keep away from that vicinity.

Grandfather Leaper was a very active old man, with a pepper and salt beard like George V and smoked an awful smelling mixture of black twist and tea leaves during the late war years when tobacco was scarce. Very energetic, he worked a big garden, grew splendid vegetables and with my assistance sawed piles of logs for the fires. Every day he walked down the village to see his favourite daughter, Jinnie, my mother, generally carrying a bag of fruit or vegetables.

In my younger days when I was attending the village school, my Aunt Maggie, mother's eldest sister managed the Brandsby Stores, (*BATA now (2023) a hairdressers*) a shop next to the council school. It was a new school built about 1910 to replace the school on the village green which became a Recreation Hall.



J.B. Hutchinson on day of opening his shop on his own
Account 6th April, 1921.

Aunt Maggie had three daughters, Lily, Sally and Janette and a son Tom, a year older than I and wore a rabbit skin hung around his neck because of a weak chest! (*Thomas Richard Cartwright*).

Aunt Maggie was a good business woman and when I joined the army was in charge of the Ebor Hotel in York and I was allowed to stay there for a few days before being sent down to Clipstone Camp in Staffordshire.

My grandfather's only son, William, must have been a disappointment to his parents since he failed to make a living in any of the jobs he took up. He failed as a small farmer and then as a milkman. I remember him coming round with a pony and cart measuring the milk into jugs with a pint measure from a big churn. Finally he became a daytal (?) farm labourer, walking three miles to a farm every day – he made a better servant than a master and worked there for years. Aunt Lizzie, his wife, took in lodgers during the war. The school master Metcalfe stayed with her until he married, and another lodger was Nellie's mother (*Hanson*) a lovely well educated young woman, made pregnant by her officer lover, who was killed in action, had her baby there, leaving the child (*Nellie Hanson Leaper*) to be adopted by my Aunt (*Elizabeth Leaper*). She loved Nellie dearly and spoiled her worse than if she had been her own child, but Nellie repaid her by taking her into her own home after she had been a widow for years and fallen ill, and she lived with Nellie for many, many years until the age of 92.

My mother had an uncle living in the village called Longstaff, who had been a jockey and race horse trainer. He was a little wizened gnome of a man who lived alone and detested children. He had made a letter box, fixed to his door like a cigar box only bigger and deeper, which we blew to bits one Gunpowder Plot night, but putting a flash bomb in it.

There wasn't much vandalism in those days. I don't remember any graffiti or petty pilfering or mugging and many people didn't bother to lock their doors at night. We lads helped ourselves to apples and pears

from convenient orchards and an occasional turnip if we felt hungry but no one sold vegetables for most people had gardens and there was generally a surplus of such as lettuce, potatoes and cabbage.

I suppose we were fairly well off, compared with many of the villagers although there wouldn't be a great deal to spare on the money my father brought in once a month. The old Squire always paid the last Sunday afternoon of the month, being a Catholic, the afternoon was free. Ten golden sovereigns before the war years and then a cheque for twelve pounds my father earned and that was much more than most of the men living in the village received. When one takes into account all the extras we received I suppose we were well off. We had free coal (the best since the Squire owned the pit) free paraffin, no rent or rates and by arrangement with the head gardener who lives next door we received a weekly supply of vegetables and fruit in season in exchange for occasional rabbits and chickens. I remember my father bringing in bushels of lovely filbert nuts and chestnuts – he had large inside pockets on each side of his coat and he had to walk through the nut walk on his usual way home.

Every year the tailor, Mr Jackson, came from Farlington to show him patterns for a new suit which was provided by the Squire. On two occasions I had one instead of my dad and I remember a lovely check tweed I took to college. I was wearing it when I met Edith and I remember her telling me later how she had admired it and my K shoes which I have always worn since that first pair I bought with my mother in York before going to college.

I think the introduction of Scouting gave me the greatest interest when I was a youth. The Squire had married again, a widow from London named Harcourt. She had a boy Vernon, a boy two or three years younger, than I, and a lovely girl Dorothy a year older. I think she was bored with the country and wanted something to interest her so she started the Scouts at the beginning of the war. With such a patron ready to spend plenty of money there was a good response and with a valet the first scoutmaster the Stillington Scout Troop was formed. We had uniforms provided, khaki shirts, dark shorts, neckties, lanyard, whistle, hats, the whole caboodle except stockings and shoes. At first there were two patrols. I was made patrol leader of the Stag Patrol and Charlie Denton P.L. of Swallow Patrol, but we had more later and at the most numbered twenty which was rather good for such a small village.

Of course many of them managed to pass their tenderfoot (?) badge but a few of us after a year or two had become first class scouts and I became Troop Leader and a King's Scout. We were very fortunate in having such a good patron and every Wednesday night and Saturday afternoon we met in the club-room in the upstairs wing of the hall above the servant's quarters. We were given tea and buns every Saturday and banged away on the drums and tried out new tunes on the bugles and flutes all provided by Mrs Liddell. We beat most of the neighbouring scouts from Huby, Sutton and even Easingwold in various pursuits, Attack and Defence, Map Reading and Signalling and entered for our badges at Easingwold where a Miss Dennison was District Commissioner.

One glorious summer I remember some of us spent weeks sleeping in a bell tent by the river and going to the Grammar School after frying our bacon or sausages and washing or having a hasty dip in the nearby river.

To go back to my early school days I have vivid recollections of the types of games played in those days. The games went with the seasons. There was a top season, hand spinner (?) and whip. In the late autumn we played Conkers and I remember gently baking a horse chestnut and stringing, then challenging someone. The object of the game was to try and smash the other's conker suspended on a string by taking the string of your conker wrapped round your fingers and leaving a short length contrive to strike your opponent's nut as hard as possible. You each had two strikes, 'slings' included, which meant if your strings became twisted and you failed to contact. If you shattered your opponent's conker you added its age (taken from the number of nuts it had destroyed) to your own.

We also played tip cat similar to rounders but instead of a ball you struck a round piece of wood or a stick to five to seven inches long, sharpened at both ends. You first tapped the 'cat' lightly at one end to lift it off the ground and while it was airborne give it a good wallop and run as in rounders. It needed a good eye and open ground to play it properly. The opposing team, usually three or four in number, retrieved the 'cat' and had to throw it into a large circle. We played marbles, ringy (?) with the small ones and 'knuckly' with the large pot penkers (?) or big glass alleys.

The game I enjoyed was 'Backers'. There was four or five a side, the smallest stood with his back against a wall, the next bent down to rest his head against his middle, gripping the other's arms to hold himself steady. The third boy bent down to grip the second boy round the waist and so on until there was an unbroken line of backs. The other team had to run hard, open their legs and jump as far as possible on the backs presented, one following the other and all must ride; the ones bearing the weight must not

break or allow the others to touch the ground for a count of 10 seconds. One had to be really tough to stand the weight especially the middle men who sometimes had to support two heavy bodies but it was good fun and didn't do us any harm.

Of course we played football with a small sorbo rubber or tennis ball and as one goal was in the front play ground and the other in the back with a narrow 30ft passage connecting them the most vigorous action took place there. You wore boots in those days fitted with toe and heel plates and a few hard kicks were given and received.

This was in the council school, built about 1910, where unless you won a scholarship you stayed till you were fourteen. There were formerly two schools, the Church school on the green which I attended and the Chapel school standing behind the Chapel. There was a great deal of rivalry between the two schools and I can remember a snowball fight when I was struck on the head with a snowball with a stone in it. I can just remember writing on a slate and spitting on it to rub out and make it clean. I had a rag but many used their coat cuffs which resembled shiny leather as their noses were also wiped off there too. My mother told me I started school when I was three, she was friendly with Miss Able in Infants' teacher, and I was still going at 14. I must have liked it!

The grammar school in Easingwold was five miles away. There were no buses and each morning just after eight, four of us, three boys and one girl, cycled come rain or shine. We usually met two others, who joined the road from Huby, Luther Ward, whose father was a lay preacher and Lottie Herring, whose father was a Methodist Minister. With me in the Stillington quartet were my pal, Charlie Denton, Wilfred Hugill (he played the big drum in the scouts) and Dorothy Wood. They are all dead now. I attended a memorial service for Charles Denton who had become headmaster of the village school, only a few weeks ago. It was the first time I had been in the old village church for over forty years; the church where I was baptised, christened, sang in the choir and confirmed. It was good to take communion there again in my 80th year. (1980)

Typed verbatim from Mr Masterman's notes