

SPOT ACRE:-

Spot Acre is a minute hamlet just a mile south-west of Fulford. It belonged to the Kibblestone Quarter in Stone ancient parish and stands on a high ridge overlooking Sale Brook dell and the Trent Valley with Stone in the distance. The name Spot Acre is said by some to have been taken from the Celtic 'yspytty' and 'Acre' from Acre in Palestine, the headquarters of the Knights of St. John of Keele. Others think the name came from Wulfric Spot, the founder of Burton Abbey, or maybe that Wulfric took his name from land here called Spot.

It is thought that a Hospice was built in the Spot Acre area in the 7th century that was connected with Stone Priory, and it is known for certain that a Hospice was built in about the 13th century by the Knights of St. John at Keele and so was connected with Burton Abbey. In old deeds this Hospice was called '*le spot grange*'.

On the left of Hilderstone Road when travelling towards the 'Wheatsheaf', and just a short distance from Spot Acre cross roads, is a stand of Beech trees known locally as 'The Rookery'. According to local lore the gibbets used to stand here, hence the overgrown lane which runs down past Idlerocks to Moddershall being called Gibbets Lane. The practice of hanging executed people in metal gibbets until they rotted and their bones fell to the ground was eventually abolished in 1834. Charcoal burners were once employed in woodland close to Gibbets Lane, and even into the second half of the 20th century charcoal was being ploughed up.



Gibbets Lane



a gibbet....



and the bridge near Hilderstone where the boggart appears

There are records of a boggart (a mischievous type of ghost which takes on the form of whatever is most feared by the person it encounters – a horseshoe over the door keeps them away!) being seen close to Hilderstone, by the bridge over the brook in Spot Lane which runs from Hilderstone School to the 'Spotgate', the only pub in Spot Acre.



Among the past landlords of the 'Spotgate' are:-

J. Dunn	1818
Thomas Burgess	1860

John Fairbanks	1863 to 1880
William Shaw	1884 to 1890
John Myatt	1896
James Smith	1928 to 1940

The big landmark at Spot Acre for over one hundred and fifty years was John Hill & Son's Nursery which over the years occupied land on both sides of Hilderstone Road and both sides of the Stone Road at Spot Acre crossroads, some 66 fields in all, reaching from 'The Wheatsheaf' in the north to Farthings and Spot Farm in the south, and from Moddershall in the west to Crossgate in the east. These fields had such wonderful names as Starvation, The Gibbets, Burton Piece, Hyde Park, Tongue Piece, and Jacks Banks.

The story of John Hill & Son's Nursery starts with Elijah Hill, who was born in 1807. He was a farmer and waggoner at Trent Hay which lay on the west banks of the Trent between Stoke and Shelton and which became Stoke City 'Victoria' football ground in 1863. As a farmer and waggoner he hired out teams of men, horses, and carts, moving all sorts of goods between mills and canal wharves to farmers and estates. In about 1825 he married a lady named Rosannah and between then and 1846 they had nine children, John, Jane, William, Anne, Elijah, Roseanna, Thomas, Joseph and Francis. Not long after their marriage Elijah and Roseannah moved to a farm at Wetley Rocks near Leek called Ladyfields. Detailed diaries which Elijah kept of the business between 1832 to 1848 are still in the possession of the Hill family. The first entry in 1832 was:-

"7th April 1832

Acc^t of Expenses in Labour work done in the Church Lane on the Kingsley Turnpike Road

William Ferny	12 days @ 2/-	£1. 4s. 0d.
Charles Dawson	8 days @ 2/-	£ 16s. 0d.
Elijah Stile	12 days @ 2/-	£1. 4s. 0d.
Thomas Clockey	11 days @ 1/6	£ 16s. 6d.
Thomas Massey	6 days @ 1/6	£ 9s. 0d.
John Birtles	6 days @ 1/6	£ 9s. 0d.
John Birtles Jun ^r	6 days @ 1/6	£ 9s. 0d.
David Brough	6 days @ 1/6	£ 9s. 0d.
William Snape	6 days @ 1/6	£ 9s. 0d.
James Birch	2 days @ 1/6	£ 3s. 0d.
		£6. 8s. 6d."

By May that year the number of people on the payroll had risen from ten to twenty and by September to twenty-four people. Work continued on the Kingsley Road turnpike until April 1833 and by 1835 the Hills were working on both the Penn Road and the Oakamoor Road, work on the later continuing until June 1842. In 1836 they were working on Penfold Bank and this was followed by the Huntley Road.. Then in 1848 two letters appear in the diary:-

"To Thomas Marsden

20th December Lady Field Wetley Rocks N^r

Leek

Sir,

I write to you to enquire if the Mortgages are agreeable to receive the Mortgage and Deliver up the Deeds next Lady day as I shall be prepared to pay it, You will please write back as soon as convenient to let me know, by so doing you will much oblige.

Yours E.Hill"

"Lady Fields, 11th March 48

Dear Sir

If you will fix a day when most convenient to you to meet at Leek I shall be prepared to settle up our affairs, of course the Mortgagees must attend to Sign off and Deliver up the Deeds The third or fourth of April will suit me very well I have paid no Income up for the last two years and I think there is no demand after the of three years from the commencement of the Act whereable (these two words and the whole of the last sentence and the signature are illegible).

The diaries also show that Elijah Hill's two eldest sons John and Elijah, especially John, saw the possibilities of growing hedging materials for the newly surveyed turnpikes that were being constructed across the county. Initially these turnpikes had been strongly fenced off from farm animals, but the fences had a short life and so they began to be replaced by hedges of quickthorn, etc., which was being brought in from elsewhere. This was the opportunity that John and Elijah Hill saw.

In about 1846 John, who had been born in 1825, married Louisa Maria Fox of Wetley Rocks and between then and 1870 they had eleven children, John Claudius, Henry Arthur, Selina Jane, Emily Annie, Edmund, Edgar, Louisa Martha, Ernest, Gertrude Lindley, Roland, Ernest and Percival. Three

years later John went into partnership with Louisa's brother George Tipping Fox and a man named William Grosvenor, both of Wetley Rocks. However, according to Hill family legend, he and Elijah cycled over to Spot Acre to view some land at Spot Acre near Fulford that was being offered for sale by the Stallington Hall Estate. The piece of land, which up until at least the end of the seventeenth century it had been part of Witnall Forest, turned out to be moorland situated 900 feet above sea level which was often swept by bleak winds from the Cheshire plains so that the wild heather was always stunted. Nevertheless John saw the possibilities. Despite this John Hill decided they should set up their business there and, after persuading his younger brother Elijah to provide the means of buying the land, he terminated his contract with George and William in 1855. John Hill's love and knowledge of trees ensured that his trees flourished on this piece of moorland. It was John Hill who gave the business his name, 'John Hill & Sons'. As he got older John handed his knowledge on to his sons and grandsons and his nurseries eventually become one of the largest in the country, covering 80 acres in 1872, growing rapidly to 200 acres in 1896, and eventually covering some 400 acres by the end of the 2nd World War.

Meanwhile John's and Elijah's younger brother Thomas stayed with his father at Ladyfields and when Elijah died on 1st November 1867 he bought the farm from the Executors for £2,535 in order to pay the residual legacies of £292. 5s. 7d. each. However the contracting business was slowly declining at more and more turnpikes were completed and so Thomas went back into full-time farming.

In 1865 Henry Arthur Hill was following the family tradition of keeping a daily account of the various activities at the nursery:-

"Saturday January 23rd 1865

This morning went by Edward Brains of the outlanes about the income Tax to Meaford Hall and Saw Mr. Smith enquired about planting some 2 acres of ground with Larch which will be done when the frost goes then called on Mr. Thomas Shardlow from there to Mr. Birtles of Darlaston Grange with a Small Bill for Cabbage Plants and returned by Stone very wintery at this time"

"Thursday 2nd February 1865

This morning started out for Stafford by Train But being one minute too late had to walk there called on a few Persons with small a/c went on pretty well too late for the 20 minutes past 2 Train had to walk until 6/30 Thawing but indications of Freezing tonight"

"Thursday February 16th 1865

Shooting wood pigeons off cabbage plants. Very deep snow and frost"

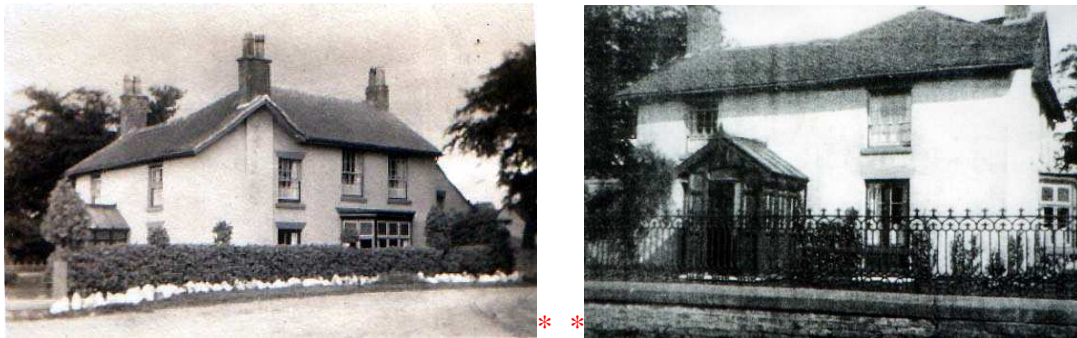
By now the Hill family owned three houses at Spot Acre, a large house at the cross roads, on the site of the present Equestrian Centre, which was called 'Spot Acre House', a house just up the road from the 'Spot Gate' public house which was called 'Stanley House', and another large house just a short way along the Stone Road from the cross roads, thought originally to have been called 'Withnall Cottage' but then being renamed 'Fox Earth'. 'Withnall Cottage' was a spacious late 19th century residence having 5 reception rooms, 7 bedrooms, kitchen, scullery, cloakroom and bathroom, and was set in about 1 acre of garden with a croquet/tennis lawn and a garage and wash-house. It was sold in the early 1970's for about £40,000 and became a residential home but sadly now stands empty.



Fox Earth, originally Withnall Cottage – photographs courtesy of the Hill family via Bill Weston

Which of these three houses was the Hill family's original home is unclear. We do know that a William Booth, a wool merchant who had been living at 'Whithnall Cottage', died in 1876 and that

nurserymen Henry Arthur Hill had then moved in, but that by the time of the 1881 census he had died leaving his 32 year old widow Elizabeth nee Sargent living there with her 4 children, Elizabeth, Florence, William and Gertrude. At the same time Elijah Hill was living in 'Spot Acre House' with his wife Annie and his children Mary and William (Elizabeth and Ada were born after the census).



Spot Acre House – photographs courtesy of the Hill family via Bill Weston

The business at Spot Acre had its ups and downs and it was realised that it couldn't properly support John Hill's large family and so Elijah of Spot Acres was persuaded to go to Australia to seek his fortune. Sadly his health failed while he was there and shortly after he returned to England he died, in February 1887. John then continued to run the business, helped by his sister-in-law Annie nee Sargent, until his sons and Executors John Claudius and Percival joined him.



Stanley House on Hilderstone Road in 2004



Two aerial views of John Hills & Sons nursery at Spot Acre Cross Roads.
Spot Acre House stands on the cross roads and Fox Earth was the just a short way along the row of trees that lines Stone Road. Stanley House was down the Hilderstone Road on the right of the photo'.
(photographs courtesy of the Hill family via Bill Weston)

On 12th June 1891 John Hill received a letter from Knight & Sons, Solicitors of Newcastle-under-Lyme, refers to various leases of land from Stallington Hall-

“Dear Sir,

I send you as requested the draft lease from Sir Smith Child for you to look through and also the old leases. Please return them all when you have looked them through and I will have the lease engrossed. You will observe that Sir Smith Child has conceded the point as to fencing any land that he make take from you. I think that this stipulation as to planting Burton’s Piece three years before the expiration of the term is hardly definitive enough and therefore I have inserted the words ‘At distances of five feet apart’ after ‘forest trees and larch’ I find there was a note in pencil on the outside of the draft ‘plant larch to 5 feet apart and a few Scotch firs’. Do you think the clauses I have altered would be sufficient or would you suggest anything further?

Yours faithfully”

Just over two years later, on 11th September 1893, John Hill died. He was buried in St. John the Evangelist churchyard at Oulton near Stone. There was a lot of antagonism between John Claudius Hill and Percival Hill due to general business problems and John Claudius’s gambling, resulting in a temporary receivership until eventually Percival took over on his own. In 1900 he married Ellen Dumberton and they had three children, Frederick Roberts, Helen Irene and then Percival Francis, but sadly Ellen died on 11th April 1908, just a month after giving birth to Percival Francis. Two years later Percival married Ellen’s sister Jennie.



Percival Hill (1849 – 1940) – photographs courtesy of the Hill family via Bill Weston

By the late 1880’s John Hill & Sons was employing up to 26 men lifting, pruning, propagating and cultivating for between 4 and 6 days each, many of them being members of the same families, as can be seen:-

Samuel Alcock	John ‘Jack’ Jenkinson	William Leese
George Bolton	Richard Jenkinson	John Lowe
George Bolton Snr.	Ephraim Knobbs	Henry Moss
Thomas Bolton	Edward Key	Jack Moss
Samuel Brain	Alfred Leese	William Moss
Jack Carter	Charles Leese	Edward Painter
Geoff Foster	Frederick Leese	Albert Rushton
Richard Guildford	James Leese	John Walker
Samuel Harper	Thomas Leese	

By the early 1900’s John Hill & Sons were regularly supplying plants, not only to hundreds of individual buyers and small organisations such as Stone & District Lawn Tennis Club, Cheddleton Asylum, Stafford Victoria Park, Walsall Hospital, and the Midland’s Farmers Association, but also to large organisations such as the County Borough of Stoke, Birmingham Corporation, Manchester Corporation, Leeds Corporation, as well as to people such as Lady Salt and to the estates of the Earls of

Dudley, Jersey, Lichfield, Plymouth, Powis, and Shrewsbury, and the Duke of Bedford.

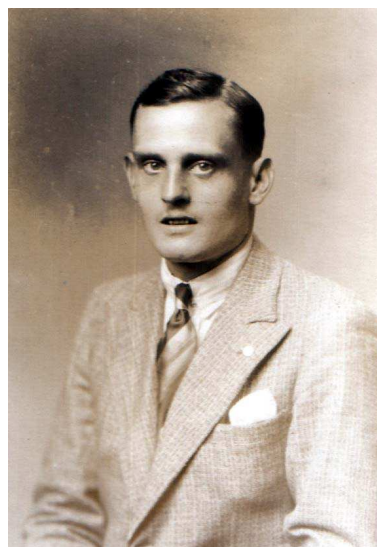
The First World War meant a total grubbing-up of the nursery stock. However a huge expansion in the production of Ox-cabbage seed and plants was made possible by the use of free P.O.W's. This meant that the business was saved and so a sound financial base was laid ready for a return to normal nursery production when the war finished. Also Percival had been able to buy out his two financial supporters and but cheap land locally

In 1921 and 1928 Percival Hill was recorded at Fox's Earth, and at the same time Frederick Robert Hill was living at 'Stanley House'. His wife Sylvia, nee Shotbolt, was a teacher at Fulford's County School.

In 1920, though still known as 'John Hill & Son's', the nursery began trading as 'The Moddershall Estate Company Limited', and by now they were the principal landowners in the area. Percival Hill was managing director, with Frederick Robert Hill and Percival Francis Hill being the other two directors.



* Brothers Frederick Robert Hill (1901-1952)



and Percival Francis 'Frank' Hill (1908-1981) *

Photographs courtesy of the Hills family via Bill Weston

By now Percival Hill was keeping a daily account of the various activities at the nursery:

"Thursday April 24th 1924.

Brooks finished ploughing at Knenhall. Seabridge ploughing at end of Gibbett Lane in the morning, and finished it in the afternoon. Boulton took 500 Rhodos to Stone Station for Birmingham with lorry. A. Leese drew Rhodos out in morning; Spooner fetched stuff in all day, he fetched a load of turf for Miss. Hollings, & fetched 15,000 Plants in from Pedleys field in afternoon from Jack Moss. A. Leese fetched a load of hay from Henshaws."

"Monday November 24th 1924.

Beautiful day, mild with a slight wind. Brooks ploughing next to Copelands Garden in Pedleys Field. Spooner fetching stuff all day, Seabridge drawing stuff in all day. Will Boulton went to the station. Charlie Boulton went to Mr. Johnson's of Clayton with a load of trees. Jack Jenkinson planting a few standard trees from Van de Bom's, at the back of the house by dog kennels. I and chaps lifting Rhodos in Spot Gate field all day, & lifting a few std. trees first thing in the morning."

"Thursday August 13th 1931.

South-east wind – cloudy, although fine. Capewell mowing headlands at Starvation. Rushton scuffed the bottom end of the Jacks Banks, also the banky piece in the Stumpy Hill (old C. ground). Ellis carting off rubbish out of first Blacklake Field. Despatched from Stone Station 6,000 Sprouts, 6,000 Savoys, and 2,500 Ox, all @ 6/- per 1,000. Chaps weeding and badging, etc, etc,. Carter potting Double Gorse across the Greenhouse. Pattison 'bogging out' 1 yr. Conifer at the Greenhouse."

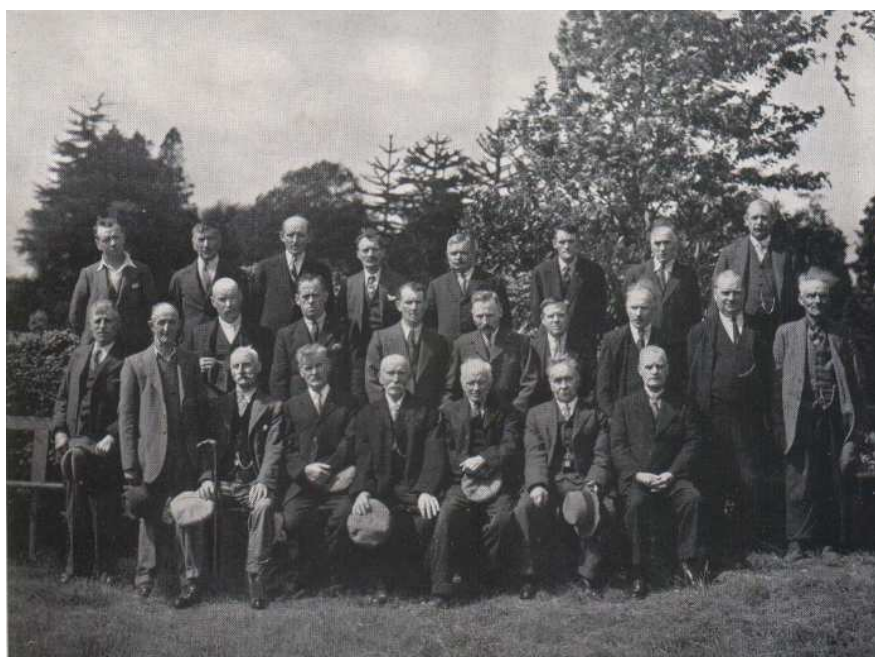
"Monday November 2nd 1931.

Another glorious day, considerably milder – South West wind. Stamper delivered 25,000 Quick to Shrewsbury for Bayley @ 26/- per 1,000. He then delivered 1,000 Cup Allumii 1½/2 foot for

a customer at Solihull & oddments. Boulton delivered 5,000 Quick & 3,000 Privet to Stafford for Mr. Pemble & then delivered 114 Standards to Rowley Regis Park. Rushton took two loads of stuff to Cresswell Station & brought back with him Stuff from Van de Boms – Acacias – Prunus Pissadii. Moss headed Acacias, etc, etc.. Pattison laying same in opposite Pedleys in Copelands Garden. Eli Smith finished making up 16,500 Quick for Lancashire Main Roads. Will Leese making up 17,000 Quick for Copelands Barn Field for 'Tarmac Ltd.' @ 38/- per 1,000. Harry Moss commenced today to lift stuff for Bethlem Hospital – the first order. We today despatched 5,000 Oval Privet 1½ to 2 foot for Forest Products. Forest orders coming in very slowly as yet". Percival Hill died on 4th April 1940 and so his sons Frederick Robert Hill and Percival Francis 'Frank' Hill continued as directors of the nursery. The Company telephone number at this time was Blythe Bridge 32.

Frederick Roberts had married Sylvia Shotbolt in 1936 and Percival Francis married Muriel Dodd in 1940. In its hay-day in the 1930's and 40's the nursery covered almost 400 acres and sold a vast range of hardy and ornamental general nursery stock, fruit trees, climbing plants, heath and rockery plants, rhododendrons and roses, and employed up to 120 lifters, pruners, propagators and cultivators, 24 of whom gave more than 25 years service. Their names are listed below, together with the number of years service achieved in 1945:-

Charles Boulton	44 years	Henry J. Leese	29 years
Samuel Boulton	44 years	William Leese	38 years
John Brookes	26 years	Frederick J. Mayer	40 years
George Capewell	41 years	Edward Moss	36 years
Joseph Foulkes	37 years	Henry Moss	60 years
Richard Hawkins	37 years	Rupert Moss	42 years
William Hawkins	27 years	Thomas Moss	36 years
James Jenkinson	43 years	William Moss	46 years
John Jenkinson	58 years	Ernest Plant	28 years
Richard Jenkinson	56 years	Eli Smith	25 years
George Leese	26 years	Israel Stanier	33 years
Henry Leese	26 years	Livi Wildes	32 years

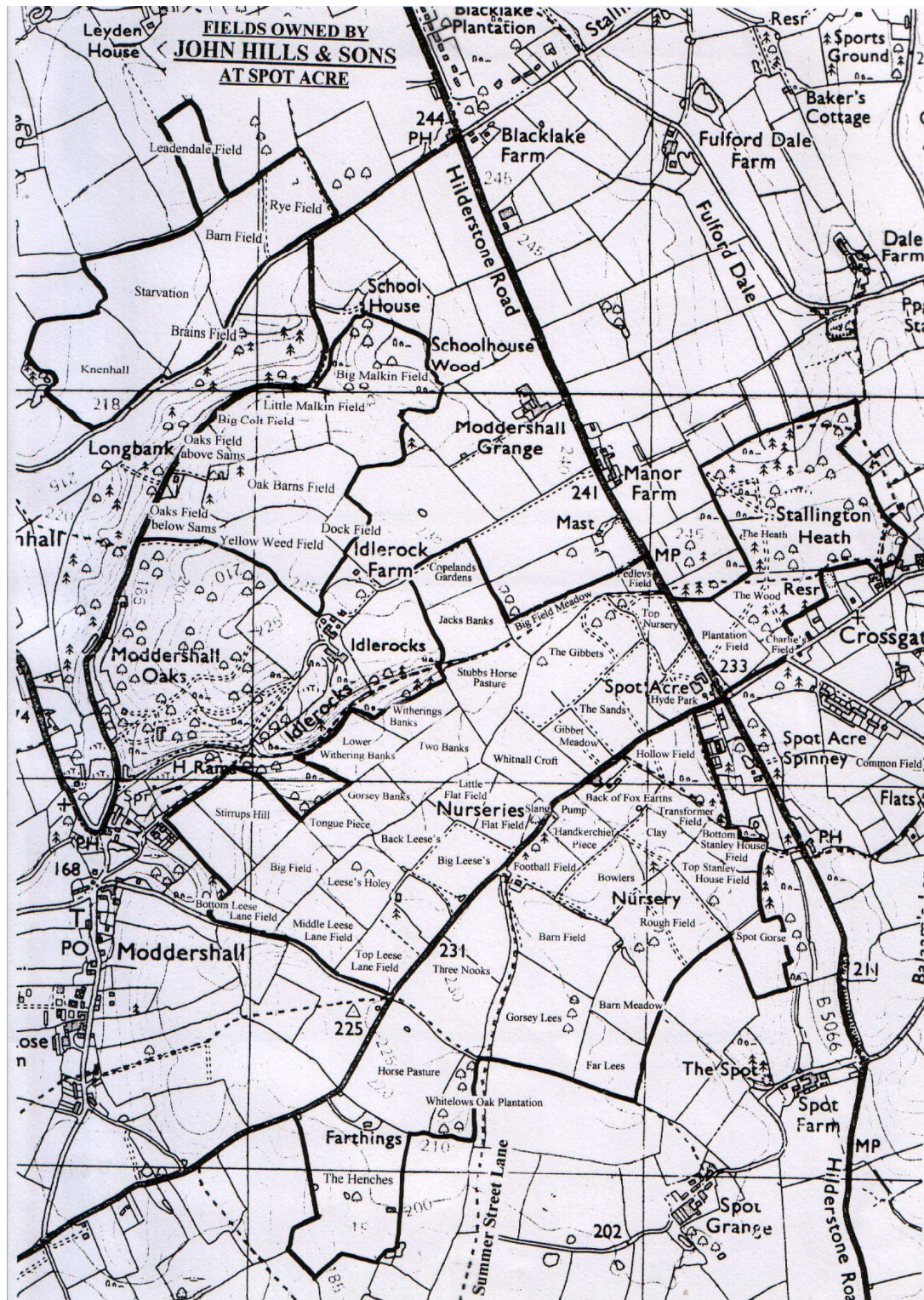


Photograph courtesy of the Hill family via Bill Weston

The 24 employees of John Hills & Sons Nursery who had completed at least 25 years service. From left to right they are:-
 Back row – Eli Smith, Thomas Moss, William Hawkins, Ernest Plant, Israel Stanier, John Brookes, Edward Moss, Henry Leese.
 Centre row – Frederick Mayer, Samuel Boulton, William Leese, Henry Leese, George Leese, Richard Hawkins,
 George Capewell, William Moss, Rupert Moss, Joseph Foulkes.
 Front row – Levi Wildes, James Jenkinson, Richard Jenkinson, Henry Moss, John Jenkinson, Charles Boulton.

There were also women workers at the nursery at this time, including Millie Alcock, Lillie

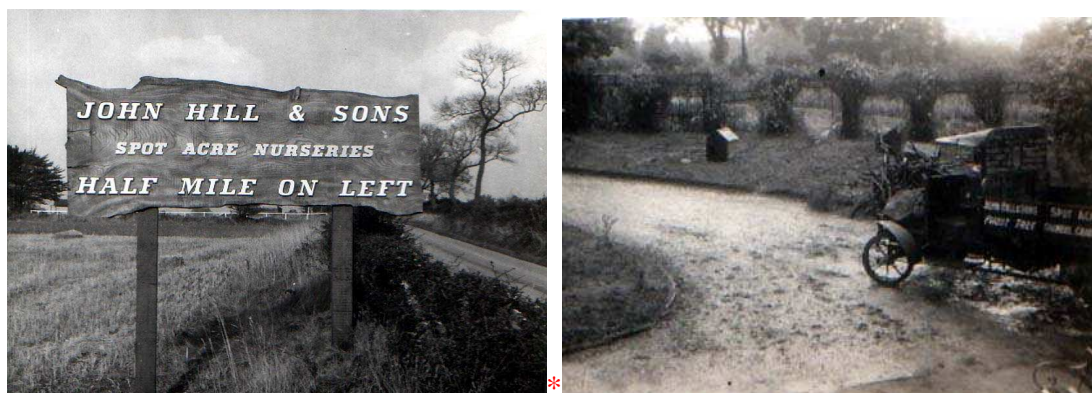
Hawkins, Bertha Lees, and Philys Lees. First World War veteran George Jackson, whose wife Elizabeth had been born at the 'Shoulder of Mutton', also worked at the nursery for at least 44 years. George Capewell was still working at the nursery when he was over 90 years old. By then his eyesight had failed and so one of the inmates from Stallington Hall would go to George's house at the top of Cockieshall Lane and lead him to the nursery where he would dig all day long, and then the same person would walk him all the way home again in the evening.



This map was produced by the author and is based on O. S. Map 'Pathfinder 830' showing the fields owned by John Hill & Sons Nursery in its prime, together with the name of each field. Thanks to Bill Weston for naming the fields.

The start of the Second World War once again saw the whole nursery turned over to Ox-

cabbage seed and plants, and again large numbers of P.O.W's were brought in from local camps to work at no expense to the Company, and so when the war ended the Company had every opportunity to go ahead with confidence. Arthur Leese was the Company manager. In August 1946 the Company gave a party for the children of Hilderstone School. The party was by way of being a Victory celebration and included a tea for everyone and a Punch and Judy show.



Hills sign when approaching from Mier Heath, and one of their delivery lorries in the nursery.

Photographs courtesy of the Hill family via Bill Weston

Everyone knows the nursery rhyme “*Sing a song of sixpence a pocket full of rye, four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie*” but not many people know that it was first recorded in the mid-18th century and that it referred to what was a common practice at that time of buying rye seed to feed the birds which were then caught and cooked and eaten as a delicacy. Blackbirds and other songbirds were often used, but the favourite seems to have been young rooks that have a similar flavour to pigeon. Indeed Rook Pie was recently revived as a fashionable food in one of Sir Terence Conran's top London restaurants, the reason being that rooks are readily available and are not under threat as they do not have a predator apart from man. Historically farmers have always had to cull particular birds, but they need a license to shoot game. The Hill family at Spot Acre kept the tradition of the annual rook cull going for very many years, holding a cull at the Rookery in Gibbet Lane at fledging time every year and then entertaining local farmers and other invited guests with a feast of rook pie at their residence at ‘Fox Earths’. The last such feast took place in the late 1940's, though Mr. Percival Francis ‘Frank’ Hill continued to conduct the annual cull of rooks until about 1955.

A typical recipe for Rook Pie was as follows:-

*6 rooks pepper and salt
3 hard boiled eggs
½ lb of rough puff pastry
1 pint warm water 1 oz butter
1 lb steak
½ oz of Cox's instant powdered
1 oz flour gelatine*

Wash the rooks well, taking care to remove the livers and backbones. Cut it into neat joints and also cut the steak into pieces. Toss in flour, pepper and salt then fry the rooks in hot butter and then put onto plate. Brown the steak, add warm water and simmer for one hour. Put the rooks into the mixture and simmer for one hour longer. Boil the eggs, remove the shells and cut the eggs into quarters. Put the rooks, meat and eggs into a pie dish. Pour gravy over the gelatine and stir until the gelatine is dissolved. Pour this over the rooks and, when cold, cover with pastry, decorate, and brush with a beaten egg and then bake for half an hour. Pour in the gravy and serve cold. If using an oven with automatic control, set at No.8 or letter H.

There is still a rookery in Gibbet Lane.

In about 1965 John Hill & Sons was faced with the approaching retirement of the General Manager, Arthur Leese, who had spent all of his working life at Spot Acre, many of those years as Manager, and so the Company started to search for a suitable replacement. In 1966 Chris Sanders joined the Company and he became Manager when Arthur Leese retired. By this time the Company had already started work on a new development plan which included virtually rebuilding the propagation department and implementing modern propagation techniques, building new potting sheds,

and installing and installing a new cold storage unit.

In 1968 Percival Francis Hill, by now a widower, brought his second cousin William Sargent Hill on to his board of directors. William Sargent was a Bank Manager at the time but joined the Company full-time when he retired from the Bank in 1978. William Sargent Hill's younger son Franklin William Hill had been employed by the Company since 1970, and in 1984 his older son Peter John Hill became Secretary designate.

In 1982 John Hill & Sons Nursery celebrated it's 150th anniversary. At that time there were five directors, William Sargent Hill, Elijah's great-grandson, Mrs. Sylvia E. Veitch, daughter of Frederick Robert Hill and John Hill's great-grand-daughter, Charles Venables, H. W. 'Bill' Weston of Mossgate, and Chris Sanders, but later that year both Chris Sanders and Bill Weston left and so the running of the Company returned to the Hill Family. Franklin Hill was the Landscape Manager.

In about 1990 the Company began to run into difficulties and soon the 'Receivers' had to be called in, with the result that after 160 years John Hill & Sons Nursery closed it's gates for the last time. However there are still many reminders of the Company all over Staffordshire (and elsewhere) in the form of many unusual trees and ornamental shrubs that started life at John Hills. Amongst those to be seen growing locally is Rhododendron 'Victoria' (possibly the only surviving example in the country) which is in the garden at the corner of Fulford Road and Moss Lane, and there is a flowering cherry from Hill's collection in Grindley Lane, Meir Heath, which is almost certainly no longer available. It is believed that there are many more rare specimens still to be found in places like Westlands at Newcastle-under-Lyme, and the Weeping Cross area of Stafford.