

# HOLMES of Hanney



by FRANK POLLER

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HANNEY HISTORY GROUP — OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 1

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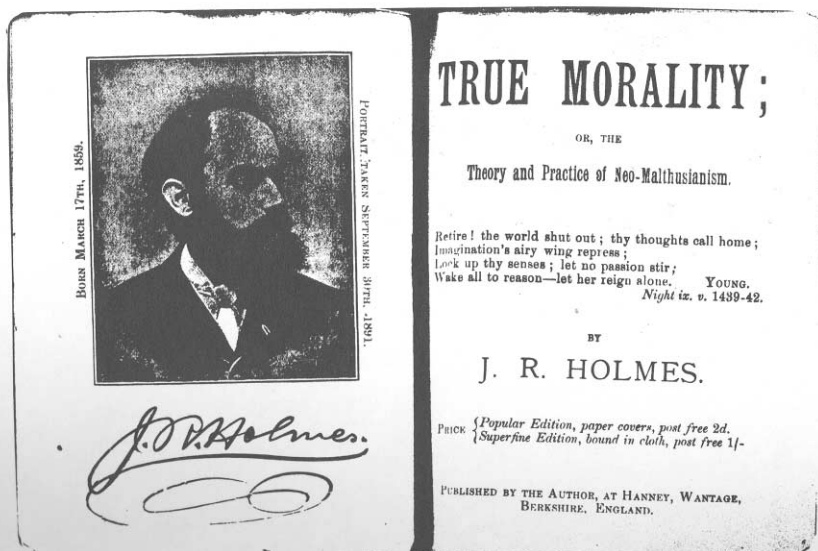
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## PREFACE

When I first moved to East Hanney in 1976 my neighbours, Fred and Maggie Carr, were happy to talk about the village they had known. Their clearest memories were of the owner of The Mulberries, James Robins Holmes, whose signed photograph they still treasured. They recalled with much fondness this remarkable man who had been a great village benefactor in the early years of this century. On his death his ashes had been interred at the entrance to East Hanney under the Peace Oak which he sent Fred Carr to collect from Wantage Road Station shortly after the 1914-1918 war. The Carrs remembered Holmes walking through the village with distinguished house guests such as George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. Even more intriguing were the stories of the mail order contraceptive service which Holmes operated for many years from the village.

When Hanney History Group was formed in 1985 further details emerged about James Holmes in the two exhibitions we staged and it was felt he deserved further study. I was delighted when Frank Poller took up the challenge to discover more. His findings are here in what we hope will be the first of a series of Occasional Papers on Local History to be published by our Group. Good research often throws up as many questions as it answers and we should be delighted if any further details come to light as a result of this publication.

Ann Fewins

Chair Hanney History Group

January 1993

## INTRODUCTION

James Robins Holmes (1859-1938) is remembered mainly for what he did to improve the appearance and amenities of East Hanney where, after his infancy, he spent all his life. Much of what he did for his village is recorded in the Parish Council Minutes, though not all, so it has been helpful to make use of memories of a few older residents to provide a fuller picture. It is, however, his work as a pioneer supplier of birth control aids and literature that chiefly justifies a record of his achievements which is why the larger part of this study is devoted to that aspect of his life. Evidence for his involvement in the birth control movement is available from three sources: the booklets he wrote and which he issued from his home, *The Mulberries*, from 1891 to the 1930s; local newspaper reports of court proceedings against him in 1912 and certain radical newspapers - now defunct - that he advertised in and occasionally contributed to, the chief of which was *The Malthusian*, which was specifically devoted to population issues.

Unfortunately, it has not so far been possible to find out what education and/or experience led to his transformation from 'Grocer, Baker, General Dealer', as he describes himself in the 1891 census, to a man bent on supplying the means of population control. Despite this gap in our knowledge, the Hanney History Group felt a record should be made of what is known. Notwithstanding the developments in contraception since Holmes's time, it is clear from the sad images we see regularly on television, that population control remains as big an issue as ever in various parts of the world whatever political solutions are forthcoming.

The account of Holmes's unpopularity during the Boer War and the riot that took place outside *The Mulberries* on 7th April 1900 does not fit into sections dealing with his business or his local good work so has been dealt with towards the end of this paper.

Frank Poller

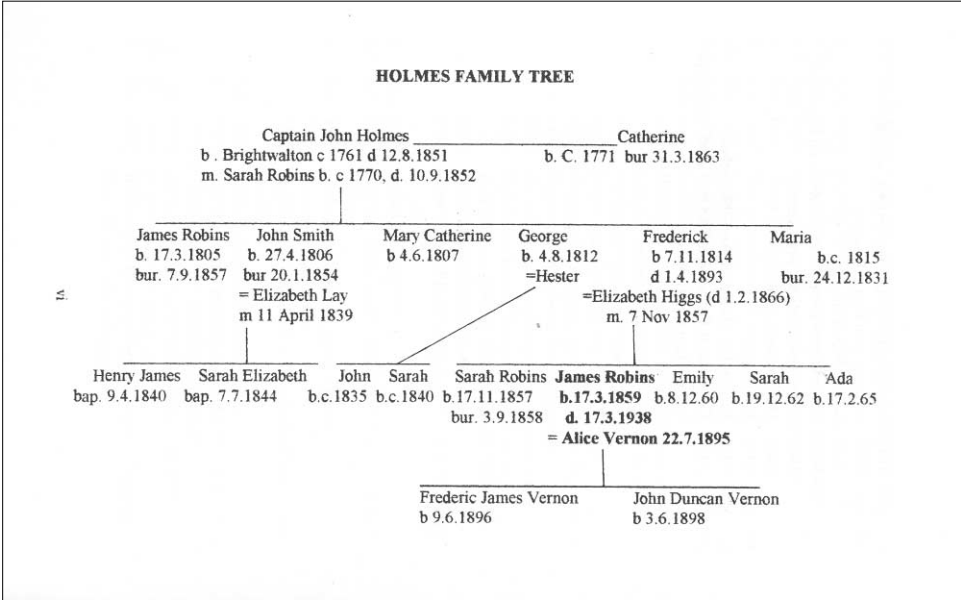


## PRINCIPAL DATES IN THE LIFE OF JAMES HOLMES

7	Nov	1857	Parents Frederick and Elizabeth marry
17	Nov	1857	Sister Sarah Robins born (died September 1858)
17	Mar	1859	James Robins Holmes born in West Hanney
8	Dec	1860	Sister Emily born
1	Jul	1861	Sale of Lydbrook Farm
19	Dec	1862	Sister Sarah born
17	Feb	1865	Sister Ada born
	Feb	1866	Mother dies aged 39
		1871	JRH appears as 'scholar' in East Hanney Census Father, Frederick, appears as a Corn Factor
		1877	Malthusian League formed
		1879	First issue of <i>The Malthusian</i> published
		1881	Working for his father as Grocer Baker Ironmonger
Jun		1885	Begins to subscribe to <i>The Malthusian</i>
		1887	Dr. Allbutt published <i>The Wife's Handbook</i>
		1891	Appears as Head of Household on Census Described as Grocer, Baker, General Dealer
		1891	First publication of <i>True Morality</i>
		1892	Prosecution of Bombay bookseller for selling <i>True Morality</i>
1	Apr	1893	Father dies aged 79
22	Jul	1895	Married Alice Sarah Vernon in Woolwich Register Office
9	Jun	1896	Birth of son Frederic James Vernon
		1896	Bathing place erected
		1898	Application to establish a Telegraph Office in East Hanney
3	Jun	1898	Birth of son John Duncan Vernon
7	Apr	1900	The Mulberries attacked for JRH's Pro-Boer stance
		1903/4	Buys Lower Mill and other properties
30	Oct	1910	James White summoned for selling <i>True Morality</i>
20	May	1911	James White dies in prison
1	May	1912	JRH tried at Wantage Petty Sessions for sending <i>True Morality</i> through the post
1	Jul	1912	Appeal heard at Reading Quarter Sessions
14	Jun	1915	Resigns from Parish Council
		1931	Sells Lower Mill
		1931-37	Chaired one or two Parish meetings on key issues
		1935	Giant Stride Swing Controversy
		1937	Donates seats to the Parish
16	Sep	1937	Makes will
17	Mar	1938	Dies at The Mulberries on 79th birthday
21	Mar	1938	Cremated at Caversham, Reading. Ashes placed at foot of Holmes's Oak

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Census records show that James Holmes was born into a farming family[1]. His grandfather John Holmes married Sarah Robins of West Hanney about 1800. In 1841 there were two farmers named Robins in West Hanney as well as two families bearing the name in East Hanney. John Holmes was born in 1761 in Brightwalton. Early nineteenth century wills show yeoman farmers bearing the name Holmes in Bradfield and Compton. On the 1844 tithe map John Holmes is shown to be in possession of some 62 acres. Most of the farm land belonged to what is now Lydbrook Farm though he also owned two other so-called 'homesteads' in West Hanney. The 1851 census records an increased holding to 86 acres. The letters H.P. after his name on the 1841 census stand for 'half-pay' which appears full stated in 1851 where the source of his income is revealed: retired army captain and his occupation of farmer. John Holmes was, therefore, a gentleman farmer with a military background which may have included service in the Napoleonic Wars. As he was ninety years old in 1851, he must have relied heavily on his three men and a boy and his thirty-six year old son Frederick, the father of James Holmes.



By 1861, John Holmes and his wife had died and the farm had shrunk by a few acres although the farm hands had increased to four men and two boys. By this time, too, Frederick had married Elizabeth Higgs who had been a servant in the household ten years previously. James Robins Holmes, the subject of this paper, was born on 17th March 1859. There had been a sister born earlier, Sarah Robins Holmes, on 17th November 1857 though Frederick did not marry Elizabeth until 7th November. This first Sarah lived only for a year.

James Holmes had three surviving sisters: Emily, a second Sarah and Ada Martha. The 1871 and 1881 censuses show that Ada Martha was not part of the household. She was born in 1865, a year before her mother died, and was brought up by the family of

an uncle, Stephen Higgs. This kind of family support was common. It is not surprising, too, to see another Higgs girl, Martha, as servant in Frederick Holmes's household. Ada was present at the placing of her brother's ashes in the memorial garden and was a witness to the signing of his will.

One member of the Holmes's family not revealed on any Hanney census is the uncle of our James Robins Holmes, a brother of Frederick, and also called James Robins Holmes[2]. Clearly our subject was named after his uncle who died in 1857 aged fifty-two, just two years before the birth of his nephew. He is the only member of the family who has a gravestone, the large flat stone to be found in the extreme north east corner of the churchyard in West Hanney. He had been a surgeon living in Kidlington. His obituary in Jackson's *Oxford Journal* of 5th September 1877 states '*He was universally esteemed and respected and his loss is much lamented*'. No doubt Frederick was proud of his brother's achievements



*Lydbrook Farmhouse*

Frederick's Aunt Catherine, his father's sister, who appeared first in the 1851 census as 'annuitant' is described ten years later, when she was eighty-nine, as 'fund holder'. The likely explanation is that the annuity was derived from her brother's funds which, after his death in 1851 and his wife's the following year, became hers to manage.

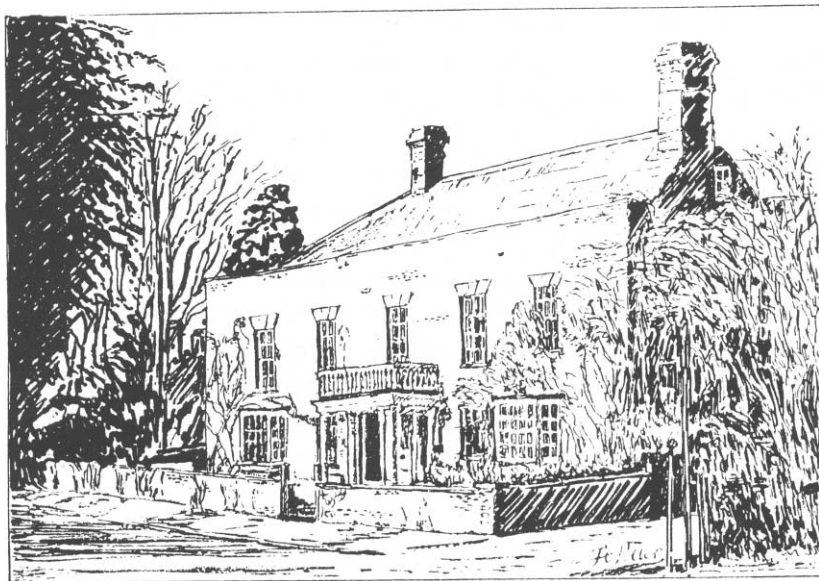
On 1st July 1861 the farm was sold by auction. The details of this are fortunately preserved in the framed sale notice exhibited at The Plough, West Hanney. This shows that Frederick was a tenant farmer. There had been a further decrease in the size of the farm since the census was taken in the Spring, it now being just over 59 acres. John



Holmes had bequeathed the lease of the farm to Frederick at the annual rent of £100 for a period of seven or fourteen years allowing, however, his executors (his wife and all four sons) to sell the estate if they thought it advisable.

It is not clear when Frederick took his family to East Hanney. West Hanney electoral rolls show that after the sale of the farm, he lived in West Hendred before settling in East Hanney. He probably stayed with an older brother, George, who had been farming in West Hendred certainly since 1841 when his household consisted of ten people. One of the occupants was another brother, John, also a farmer, who was living there with his wife and baby son. Assuming George Holmes was still occupying the same farmhouse in the 1860s it was obviously commodious enough to provide accommodation for Frederick and his family. One problem is that the 1871 Census for East Hanney includes Frederick and his family while electoral rolls record him as living in West Hendred for another four years. The Census record will be the reliable one. One must assume that electoral rolls occasionally carried redundant information.

In 1871 then, we find the Holmes family living in East Hanney after temporary refuge in West Hendred<sup>[3]</sup>. Frederick Holmes had lost his wife in 1866 so it is odd that the enumerator defines him as married, not as widower. His marriage had lasted less than ten years and he did not remarry. The young James Holmes was not quite seven years old when his mother died and his sisters even younger, so the effect on the family must have been profound. Susan Lamble, the Housekeeper, probably played a vital role in those years. Frederick no longer appears as 'Farmer' on the census, but 'Corn Factor' at the beginning of a decade that was to see a drastic reduction in corn prices and production as American grain imports increased. Perhaps this explains why he abandoned dealing in corn and by 1881 is trying his hand as 'Grocer, Baker and Ironmonger'. It is interesting that in his old age in the 1891 census, when he was seventy-six, he preferred to describe himself as 'retired farmer' though he had not farmed for about thirty years. In the burial register, however, he appears as 'retired grocer'.



*The Mulberries*

[1] As Frederick Holmes was 'in occupation of' Lydbrook Farm at the time of its sale in 1861, it is reasonable to suppose he was there two years earlier when James Robins Holmes was born. However, an item in John Holmes's will giving Frederick a rent-free property in the village provided he looks after his sister Mary complicates the issue sufficiently to make it not certain that James was born at Lydbrook Farm.

[2] The uncle had left home before the earliest census, 1841, was taken, as had two other older brothers of Frederick's: John and George.

[3] There is no certainty that the family moved into The Mulberries straightaway. It is not until James Holmes produced his first edition of *True Morality* in 1891 that we have a printed record of the house name. The family were tenants for many years for the Tithe Record of 1895 shows Robert Loder as owner. Not until a Tithe Record of 1925 do we know that James Holmes owned The Mulberries. It is also unclear when Holmes took over the large house called in his time The Buddleas, now Hazelwood. A directory entry for 1899 has one Edward Fitzgerald in residence. He was also a witness at James Holmes's wedding. John Stevens, who lived in Lay Cottages in the 1920s, records that when the Dandridges at the large mill went bankrupt in the 1920s, Holmes gave them the tenancy of The Buddleas though he continued to use a room there for his business.

## FORMATIVE YEARS

It has not been possible, so far, to discover where James Holmes received his education. We know from the East Hanney School Log Book that Ada Holmes, his youngest sister, was admitted to the school on 27th October 1873, then aged seven, and Sarah on 2nd February 1873, then aged eleven. There is no reference to James or Emily though that is no guarantee that they were not there. There was no separate record of admissions in those days. The contents of the Log Book were at the whim of the Head Teacher, apart from certain necessary entries such as overall attendance records.

On the 1871 census James and his sisters are designated as scholars before, that is, the dates of the Log Book references. There were dame schools in the parish certainly in 1881 (or as the school inspector contemptuously records 'adventure schools') and no doubt they existed at the time the Holmes children were 'scholars'. We do not know whether Frederick took advantage of these local primitive schools or whether he managed to arrange some more purposeful private education. Frederick's name appears once as a school manager in 1882. King Alfred's School's records do not go back beyond 1897. The fact that James was listed as a scholar in the 1871 census and therefore at home does not rule out the possibility that he was a day boy or boarder at King Alfred's or some other school for he may have been at home for the Easter holidays when the enumerator called. James Holmes sons, Frederic and John, were educated at Ruskin School (no longer in existence) Hampstead. Had James Holmes also received education there?

Though it would be interesting to find where James Holmes was educated as a boy, it would be more revealing to have found out where he received any further education if any. Local newspaper obituary notices relating to James Holmes make no mention of public school or university education so the likelihood is that he was largely a self-educated man, a supposition that one of Hanney's older residents states was locally held to be the case. The letters that appear after his name in *Kelly's Directory* of 1895 M.V.S., M.M.L., and M.N.S.S. (and elsewhere M.N.A.V.L.) are not academic qualifications. These almost certainly stand for Member of the Vegetarian Society, Member of the Malthusian League, Member of the National Secular Society and Member of the National Anti-Vaccination League (the Malthusians were opposed to 'state medicine'). Sometime between 1881 and 1891 when he was putting together the first edition of his main booklet, *True Morality or the Theory and Practice of Neo-Malthusianism*<sup>[1]</sup>, he must have come into contact with some potent influence that was to cause him to devote much of his life to disseminating his ideas on birth control, and supplying the means, at a time when there were few suppliers of contraceptive aids and considerable hostility to those who advocated family limitation, including hostility from the church.

On the other hand, he may have derived his basic attitudes, including his atheism, from inside the family. His grandfather's support for the church is indicated by his donation in 1816 of 12 guineas towards an estimated £18-9-6 cost for alterations to the Sunday School. However, we do not know what influence his father had upon him as mentor. Frederick Holmes's attitude to church observances was, at least, apathetic. His daugh-

ters were baptised at intervals varying from twelve months to nearly six years after birth. Sarah Robins was baptised just prior to her death. Emily and Ada were baptised just after their mother's death and Sarah, the second child with that name, just two weeks later. Illness might have precipitated their baptism. Frederick's marriage to Elizabeth took place by licence only ten days before the birth of Sarah. Perhaps Frederick held secularist views that were communicated to his son. Perhaps also James drew certain lessons from his father's necessary marriage. Whatever he owed to his own early experience of family life, the establishment of the Malthusian League in 1877, devoted to population issues, found a ready disciple in James Holmes. It would help to explain his development if we knew how he came in contact with the League's activities.

On 22 July 1895, then aged thirty-six, he married Alice Vernon, aged thirty-one, in Woolwich Registry Office. One would have to assume he had known her for some time to see her as a possible influence for he had begun distributing his booklets four years earlier. What took him to London? It would have been an advantage for him to be there to attend Malthusian League functions. Did James and Alice meet at such a function? They must have had common views about the lack of need for a church marriage. An obituary on Holmes in *The Freethinker* (27th March 1938) states that '*he had a long-standing personal acquaintance with Bradlaugh*'. Did they perhaps hear the famous lecturer on secular issues holding forth? From all accounts that would have been a 'potent influence'[2].

Whatever brought Holmes to be involved in the birth control movement, once motivated he had started on a course that was to govern the rest of his life. From about 1890 there is enough information to follow his activities without resorting to conjecture but before doing this it will be useful to say something about Malthus himself and the movement that Holmes joined.

[1] This work is variously referred to as book, booklet and pamphlet. Except in direct quotations, 'booklet' has been used for consistency.

[2] Shaw says of Bradlaugh '*He was a hero, a giant who dwarfed everything around him, a terrific personality*'. Shaw was referring to a time when he was greatly relieved not to have to enter into a public debate with him (*The Freethinker* 13 October 1929). See Appendix 2.

## NEO-MALTHUSIANISM

**Malthus.** The term Malthusianism is derived from the Reverend Thomas Malthus, the man who wrote the influential book *Essay on Population* that appeared in 1798. Malthus believed that a happy society is unattainable as population will always tend to increase to the point where there is not enough food to support it. The essay arose from discussions with his father who had been a friend of Rousseau and therefore familiar with Rousseau's optimistic view of the perfectibility of man. Later editions contained several refinements of his view, the last appearing in 1816.

The only way of lessening the effects of this natural law, as Malthus saw it, was moral restraint. He advocated late marriage. His basic theory was not new. For instance, Joseph Townsend in his *Dissertation on the Poor Laws (1786)* explained the inevitable sequence of abundance, increase in numbers, want, increase in deaths in an economy unchecked by reason. Malthus made the concept influential by his considerable thoroughness in collecting statistics both at home and in Europe and by expressing his theory in a weighty style.

Malthus found favour with some of the better off in society resistant to social reform. If the law was inevitable, what was the point of helping? Efforts to bring about any amelioration in conditions would only lead to an increase in numbers and a worsening of the problem. His views were brought into prominence again by the publication in 1859 of Darwin's theory on the survival of the fittest, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*.

**Early Birth Control Manuals.** The term Neo-Malthusianism (new-Malthusianism) seems to have been first used in this country in 1879 a year after it appeared in Dutch literature, its newness lying in its advocates' approval of contraception as a means of controlling family size. Physical checks of one sort and another had been in existence for very many years, so had their promoters. Their use was well established in France. Francis Place, an early writer on population, recommended such practices. He is said to have converted Robert Owen, the socialist reformer, to his views. Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, who emigrated to America, published there his *Moral Physiology* in 1830 a work that contained descriptions of contraceptive checks, though it was not the first book to be published in America advocating what was sometimes called 'conjugal prudence'. Richard Carlisle's *Every Woman's Book* was already available, for instance, and was a very outspoken work.

It was *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a pamphlet produced by a Boston doctor, Knowlton, that caused the establishment of The Malthusian League. Though the book had been circulating for decades, it was attacked in England in 1876 as an obscene book and as a result a bookseller was sentenced to two years imprisonment. In order to challenge the suppression of the work, Charles Bradlaugh, then editor of the liberal journal *The National Reformer*, and Annie Besant published the work and sent it to various authorities. They were sentenced to a heavy fine and imprisonment but set free at a Court of Appeal. The Malthusian League was born out of the excitement this trial created, its first meeting being held on 17th July 1877. There was a further 'immense' meeting a



year later to protest against the treatment of another bookseller who was given a £50 fine and four months imprisonment for selling similar works. The sales of Knowlton's birth control manual leapt from 1,000 at the time of the trial to 185,000 three years later. Alex Comfort, on page 170 of his book *The Anxiety Makers*, states '*from the time of the Bradlaugh trial, the family size of English couples fell steadily*'.

**The Malthusian.** The journal of the Malthusian League was *The Malthusian*, a monthly publication which first appeared in February 1879 and continued until June 1952[1]. It is unlikely that James Holmes attended any of the first meetings (he would have been only eighteen at the time of the inaugural meeting) but that he was early caught up in the movement is certain as his name appears as a subscriber in June 1885. From then on he subscribed fairly regularly until 1909.

The tone of *The Malthusian* articles was passionate, committed and reasoned. Some idea of what could be expected is indicated in the so-called 'Mottoes' which appeared regularly on the title page.

*'To a rational being, the prudential check to population ought to be considered as equally natural with the check from poverty and premature mortality.'* Malthus on Population

*'Surely it is better to have thirty-five millions of human beings leading useful and intelligent lives rather than forty millions struggling vainly for a bare subsistence'* Lord Derby

*'Little improvement can be expected in morality until the production of large families is regarded in the same light as drunkenness, or any other physical excess.'* John Stuart Mill

It was the spectacle of the starving poor that motivated the Neo-Malthusians. From January 1880 *The Malthusian* was subtitled *A Crusade Against Poverty*. An early letter printed in the journal referred to '*the squalor and hopelessness of children who ought never to have been born*'.

Remedies put forward included sterilisation and a tax on babies, '*A plague of babies*' was one headline. Emigration was discussed as a way out of poverty but eventually rejected as a solution. It was the children in towns that were usually focused on by contributors but, in view of James Holmes's village background, it is interesting to read the following extracts from a contributor describing his own rural community. The letter was given the title *Rural Felicity*.

*'.....I live in a village where poor men and very large families abound.....One old lady.... lives by keeping a toffee shop and cleaning out and lighting the fires in the village school and Literary Institute. She... has been a widow for many years and been the mother of sixteen children. I have heard her declare that many a day she had to live on a bit of dry bread and tea without sugar, at the same time suckling an infant. I do not know how many of her children are alive... I only know*

six... Her eldest son is weak and sickly; but his wife will soon be confined with her seventeenth child and the father cannot do a day's work..... I think there are only nine of the sixteen alive but they present a most miserable and pitiful sight. There is another daughter....she is not above 32 years of age and has been the mother of twelve. I think eight are alive and not one of them earning a penny being too young and sickly..... some years ago a gentleman lived here. He was an M. D. and M. R. C. P. and I believe some other titles.... and a preacher..... His first wife gave birth to nineteen or twenty children .... I recollect an old woman making the remark 'She is killed by breeding'. She died when about 45. He married again and had five or six children by the second wife. The regular belief of all creeds around here is that God sends children and takes them to Himself when they are evidently killed by want, neglect, overcrowding or the sickness of the parent. I myself do not believe in these special cases of Divine Providence according to the gospel of St John. Calvin or Mahomet.....' [2]

**Hostility to Neo-Malthusianism.** From the outset The League met with hostility. In the early days, Annie Besant spent much of her time in litigation, though it did not stop her lecturing bravely in towns throughout the country. Church and state were opposed as were the medical profession. The opening article of the first issue of *The Malthusian* refers to a 'priest-ridden society'.

Unlike the situation in America where the birth control movement had considerable support from a number of eminent doctors, the medical press in this country never failed to publish expressions of opinion opposing birth control for forty years after the General Medical Council had struck Dr. Allbutt's name from the register for publishing his work *The Wife's Handbook* in 1887. (This was the most popular of all handbooks produced, first appearing about 1885 and running to several editions so that by the 1930's over half a million copies had been sold.) The prevailing view of the medical profession was reflected in the *Lancet* quoted by Alex Comfort: 'a legitimate check to population is to be found only in prudence in contracting marriage; and all other checks entail evils that are far worse than the disease'. Ibid page 62.

The First World War generated a transformation of attitudes. A very important step forward was occasioned by the address given in 1921 by Lord Dawson, the King's Physician, to the Church Congress, in which he supported birth control. However, even in 1923, eminent gynaecologists were still forecasting sterility and mental degradation as a result of using contraceptives. Even in Cronin's best selling novel *The Citadel*, Manson, the family doctor hero practising in the 1920's and supposedly battling against the bigotry of his colleagues, expresses revulsion when asked by the local minister for practical contraceptive advice.

[1] It changed its name to the *New Generation* between 1922 and 1949 before reverting to its old name.

[2] An unpublished study by Hanney History Group shows that East Hanney families were not as large as those recorded in the letter. However, they were still large. Ebbs Lane was looked at where family sizes of eight to twelve children were noted. The study points out that mothers continued bearing children throughout their child bearing years and that sometimes a child of an unmarried daughter was accommodated too. Aurelia Faulkner of Ebbs Lane died at 36 after bearing at least ten children. These figures are based on 1871 and 1881 Census and Parish records.

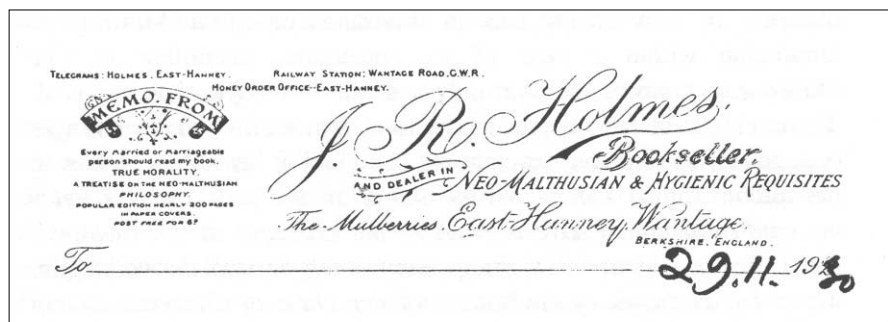
## HOLMES JOINS THE NEO-MALTHUSIANS

Contraception was considered immoral by most establishment figures, certainly throughout the early part of the century when Holmes was supplying aids. The League had to strike a cautious attitude as it feared arousing too much prejudice and therefore desisted from overt practical propaganda, though it unfailingly supported individual members (Holmes was to be glad of this) who ran into trouble.

However, its pages did carry from 1888 advertisements of handbooks that were of a practical nature, including Allbut's and later, on the cover, Holmes's *True Morality*. It was the Leeds Vigilance Society's campaign against Allbut's work in the mid 1880's that led the General Medical Council to find the author guilty of publishing a book cheap enough to reach young men and women and be detrimental to their morals. The Malthusian League collected money for Allbut's defence. In one of the lists of subscribers (April 1888) James Robins Holmes's name appears. Out of the seventy-six names listed, his guinea donation was exceeded by only two others. He was also to contribute in 1891 to the defence of Henry Young whose innocent pamphlet *Some Reasons for Advocating the Prudential Limitation of Families* had been declared obscene.

As early as 1881 *The Malthusian* had received a letter from a reader asking for knowledge of a thoroughly reliable contraceptive, on the grounds that existing advice was not practical enough, for 'married people of the lower classes'. In the July 1887 issue an advertisement appeared for Malthusian appliances concluding with the words 'Agents wanted'. In 1889 there was an advertisement of a list of 'useful' Malthusian appliances available from an address in Leeds. So the aids were available, the need for them had been expressed and Holmes must have decided he would play his part, probably in the early 1880s.

By 1888 he was corresponding authoritatively and in detail on birth control matters in the columns of *The Weekly Times and Echo*. A letter he wrote in August 1888 resulted in a number of letters, some of them 'very touching', asking for information. He mentions replying to eight correspondents on the day he wrote another letter in September 1888. This letter shows him to be his own man for he takes issue with Dr. Drysdale, the President of The Malthusian League, who had advocated punishment for those who have more than four children. 'There are not too many good people in the world', Holmes maintains, going on 'Would we punish a Darwin, a Huxley, a Humboldt, a Stevenson, a Spencer, a Socrates, an Aurelius if they had more than four children?' It is an impressive list of worthies, stimulating again questions about Holmes's education. G.W. Foote, the founder editor of *The Freethinker*, says in the Jubilee Supplement 1881-1931 that his newspaper never lacked 'fundamental brain stuff'. The three radical newspapers that Holmes read all contained serious reviews of contemporary writers such as Hardy so there was plenty of opportunity for an earnest young man to educate himself. Already a respected propagandist and source of advice, in 1891 he was distributing his own pamphlets and 'Malthusian appliances' from East Hanney.



Perhaps at this stage Holmes was still running his father's business (Frederick Holmes died in 1893) as the 1891 census states. The date of the photograph of Holmes, September 30th 1891, reproduced in his booklet, could indicate that he decided to embark on what would be a business as well as a crusade after the census was taken in the Spring. It would not have been difficult for him gradually to allow his business activities to run down one by one as his new venture was established. He had had five or six years at least from the date of his first subscription to *The Malthusian*, to consider his course of action, but it still represented a courageous step.

On his marriage certificate in 1895, he announces his occupation to be 'bookseller'. This was the designation Holmes chose for inclusion in *Vale of White Horse Directories* up to 1915 and in all *Kelly's Directories* from 1899 up to his death. The term was chosen presumably for respectability, and is accurate as he supplied a considerable number of books on population issues. He had to contend with the unsympathetic climate of opinion operating against anyone seen to be actively distributing birth control aids.

Copies of Holmes's booklet *True Morality, or the Theory and Practice of Neo-Malthusianism* are very difficult to come by. Two exist in the London School of Economics held for the British Library as items in a list of British Birth Control Ephemera 1870-1947. There are five other copies in American, mainly university, libraries. In view of the tens of thousands of *True Morality* in circulation within a year of its appearance according to *The Malthusian* it seems odd that only a handful of copies has survived. There must have been copies in chests of drawers in Hanney cottages once. Geoffrey Grigson, seventh and last child in his family, writes in his autobiography<sup>[1]</sup> 'Towards the end of all this parturition, I fancy my mother began to have inklings of the existence of birth control. But I do not suppose that things went much beyond the catalogue, which I once found at the bottom of her chest of drawers.....Birth control must have seemed strongly marked with indecency in 1905, not to mention its difficulty, and I cannot imagine the subject being discussed in the vicarage between my father and mother, even in the privacy between the four brass knobs of the bedstead.' Whatever copies of Holmes's booklets may have existed locally, they would have been similarly well hidden until carefully disposed of, but perhaps a copy of *True Morality* or one of his catalogues may still come to light.

**Contents of True Morality.** The 1905 edition held at the London School of Economics is an expanded version of the original. It is about four inches square containing an odd mixture of roughly a hundred and fifty pages of advice, argument, advertisement and literary allusion. It *'throughout appeals to moral feeling'*. It was a characteristic of the Neo-Malthusians in their writing and lectures to justify their views on moral grounds for it was on moral grounds that they were attacked. Their judgement was that family limitation through physical checks was morally right. In modern political jargon, they were concerned to lay claim to the 'moral high ground'.

The booklet begins with 'An Appeal to the Readers' rich and poor to make the pamphlet known to neighbours. A quotation follows on the dire effect of having too many hungry, poor people envious of the rich. There follows a 'Dedication': *'I dedicate this book generally to all married and marriageable persons and specially (by permission) to the lady who wrote the 'Protest' against Neo-Malthusianism which appeared in The Weekly Times and Echo of September 8 1888, who has since become a believer in the Neo-Malthusian Philosophy, and is now my dear friend'[2]*.

New to the 1905 edition is a report of a Bombay firm of booksellers being fined for selling one of Holmes's booklets, an account of which will follow this summary. Holmes includes a defence of his booklet. In the reprinted first edition preface Holmes writes of the attempts made to prevent distribution of Neo-Malthusian literature and appliances. Referring to the case where a man had been fined £50, Holmes attacks the prosecuting claim that the only check to immorality in this country is the fear of pregnancy. He takes a moral stand on the need to speak out and continue such work despite the threats of fines and imprisonment.

In the style of *The Malthusian*, Holmes quotes a series of mottoes or sayings supporting his philosophy. There is an index of about 125 authors quoted in his booklet. This is followed by his *Essay on True Morality*. In this he states his support for conduct leading to the greatest possible amount of happiness for the greatest number with the least possible injury to any, and looks at parentage in relation to this principle.

A 'Voice of the People' section consists of extracts of letters, mainly to Holmes, selected from many thousands (an indication of the spread of his connections) to show how needful he felt the dissemination of his booklet to be. There are brief 'Rules for the Married' on the desirable frequency of sexual intercourse, followed by 'Rules for the Unmarried', the opening sentence of which is *'True Morality demands that continence be observed till marriage'*. He quotes from *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* to enhance his views. 'What the Ladies Say' consists of supporting comment from eminent activists including Miss Olive Schreiner, Miss Alice Vickery and Miss Annie Besant. 'Some Startling Statistics' is a page on population growth with the remedy: population control through contraception.

At this point there is a thirty page descriptive catalogue of 'Neo-Malthusian Appliances and Hygienic Requisites'. These were the pages of course that customers were mostly concerned with and which could cause offence to others. 'Instructions to Purchasers' pleads for legibility and there is a 'Warning' that 'Letters or parcels addressed to initials



or to fictitious names and Post Offices are sent at once to the Returned Letter Office'. About thirty different items are listed in his catalogue section including ten different varieties of 'Rubber Envelopes'. His concern that the poorest would benefit is revealed in the following quotation: *'In the case of poor laboring folk, when economy is of great importance, these articles may be washed after being used and may then be used again. Directions for using and washing sent with every packet plus testimony.'*

The 1905 edition carries from this point an appendix of more than fifty pages. 'The Picture of Society' is a dialogue between a young and an old man on how life compares before and after the rise of Neo-Malthusianism. 'Marriage Age of Noble Persons' is a list of about twenty famous people who are reputed to have married before the age of twenty including Caesar, Shakespeare and Shelley. Early marriage was recommended by Neo-Malthusians. Holmes' support of this view was perhaps influenced by the knowledge of his father's late marriage at the age of forty-three, though James Holmes himself did not marry until he was thirty-six. Perhaps his experience of having to wait some time before he married was a further or alternative influence. There follows a description of the Malthusian Theory that meets with his approval<sup>[3]</sup>. There is a note asserting that Neo-Malthusianism is our only hope followed by an essay on 'How to Control the Amative Passion' and the long appendix ends with some words of advice for those who wear corsets.

**The Bombay Case.** The case of the Bombay bookseller against whom a criminal action was brought for selling the earlier version of Holmes's booklet received much attention in the columns of *The Malthusian*. The *Times of India's* report of the trial held in July 1892 was quoted extensively. Some dozen pages of Holmes's booklet were considered by the Magistrate to contain obscene matter. Dr Drysdale wrote the leading article on the case in the October issue of *The Malthusian*. He observed that the pages in question were just *'checks which Mr Holmes is prepared to supply to persons desirous of limiting the size of their families'*. Drysdale's is an angry article pointing out that one-fifth of the human race *'vegetate in terrible poverty'* in Hindustan; that the presiding magistrate had failed to recognise that married couples voluntarily attempting to limit the sizes of their families were exercising a moral judgement; that the booklet had been treated as if it was only a price list of goods and the magistrate had ignored the extent to which Holmes filled up much of the work with references to the moral persuasion, commendation and example of worthy people. He also believed that the magistrate had taken a narrow, indefensible view of obscenity going against earlier judgements in similar circumstances in this country, since the advertisements were simply the means of attaining a 'praiseworthy end'. He accused the magistrate of simply objecting personally to such helpful literature being sold for a penny and therefore accessible to the poorest.

The attention focused on the Bombay Case must have stimulated further interest in Holmes's writing and services, as Knowlton's pamphlet had from similar attention. The fine imposed on the bookseller, £12-10s, was slight and the case probably also boosted sales in Hindustan. In the report of Official Notices of the League it was recognised to be highly moral of Holmes to keep his work cheap at 4 annas.

**James White Case.** If it were not for the court cases connected with Holmes's booklet reported in *The Malthusian* and local papers, we would not have known how Holmes's venture was progressing. It is not until the prosecution of James White in 1911 in Durham that further knowledge of Holmes's activities is revealed. James White, aged fifty-four, had been reportedly lecturing for many years on Malthusianism and Free-thought in the North of England and had distributed and sold literature openly, including Holmes's booklet, for twenty years. He was selling Holmes's work in the market in Stanley in October 1910 when the booklet was seized by the police and he was told he would probably be prosecuted for selling an obscene book. About fifty copies were also on the ground ready for sale. White was surrounded by a large group of young men, mostly miners. At the Magistrates Petty Sessions in November 1910 it was announced that the defendant and publisher (Holmes) preferred the case to be tried on principle as more was at stake than the accused's own position. At the subsequent trial in Durham in January 1911, though White declared that in selling the book he was doing work of an educational nature from the noblest of motives, he was found guilty of selling an obscene book in a public market and fined £20 or three months in prison in default of payment. The appeal against the verdict held on 30th January was dismissed. Mr Justice Darling in giving the judgement gave his opinion that the quotations from Malthus and contributions from other writers were simply a cloak for the real purpose of selling birth control appliances.

By this time Holmes had been much involved in legal costs to the tune of £160. Presumably he was present at the Durham trial for he sent a verbatim report to *The Malthusian* which printed a long abstract acknowledging Holmes as the source. The article in *The Malthusian* reporting the case seeks to justify the League's policy not to become embroiled in practical instruction on birth control lest it should ruin its attempt to discuss, in a temperate, reasoned way, the serious problems of population control in *The Malthusian* and on public platforms. Objection was made in the long article reporting the case to the quibbling over legal points that prevented any discussion on the question of the need for educating the community. The League felt encouraged that the prosecuting counsel expressed no disapproval of the teaching contained in the booklet and, though it felt it was reasonable to object to the manner in which it was sold, it felt that a caution forbidding White to sell it in the market would have been sufficient, especially as the good character of the accused was acknowledged in the final judgement.

A Defence Fund had been set up to support Holmes's legal costs in December 1910. The appearance of George Bernard Shaw's name on a select list of people who had agreed to endorse the appeal is worth noting in view of reported visits of Shaw to The Mulberries. Perhaps his visits took place from this time<sup>[4]</sup>. The Defence Fund Appeal in *The Malthusian* outlined events leading up to the trial and states that Holmes would be undertaking the considerable defence costs and that he '*has always subordinated his personal profit to his interest in the cause*'. Those interested in wishing to form their own opinion were invited to write to Holmes for a copy of the booklet. George Bernard Shaw's interest was connected primarily with the freedom to publish. He was not a subscriber to *The Malthusian*, unlike H.G. Wells another of Holmes's distinguished visitors<sup>[5]</sup>. It was the view of The Malthusian League that the Fabian Society to which

Shaw belonged distanced itself from the issue of family limitation seeing over-population as possibly a problem for the future rather than the present.

White was a poor man and wrote asking for money to be diverted from the Defence Fund to help him pay the fine and costs amounting to £30. The League considered that money collected so far and already sent to Holmes was specifically for defence purposes so they asked for separate donations for White's relief. Contributions were slow to arrive but a guarantee was given to pay Mrs White five shillings a week while her husband was in prison.

Events, however, moved quickly. White was arrested in March and imprisoned in a debtors' section of the gaol. The League sent a letter to the Home Secretary urging his release especially in view of his poor health. The Home Secretary replied that he had been informed that the prisoner was in good health and could not find any reason for interfering in the case. Contributions for the relief of White continued to arrive but nothing appears to have been achieved. In the June 1911 issue of *The Malthusian* it was announced that White had died in prison. An inquest concluded he had died from natural causes. There was further correspondence between the League and the Home Secretary but the latter insisted that at the time his original letter was sent the prisoner was in good health. Two letters to Mrs White, one announcing the prisoner's entry into hospital, the other announcing his death, were posted after White's death and reached his wife on the same day. Monies collected, including contributions from Shaw and his wife, were directed to the support of Mrs White.

Although the case was reported very fully, it is not clear to what extent Holmes was involved in initiating a trial that White himself might not have been so enthusiastic to undergo. One cannot help reflecting that a small amount of what went into the Defence Fund might have been better spent on paying White's fine at the outset. Certainly more effort seems to have gone into collecting for defence costs than in keeping White out of prison.

**Wantage Petty Sessions.** There is no sign that Holmes had lost his nerve through this experience for in the following year he was in court again, this time as the accused. It was not *True Morality* that was attacked this time but one of his separately published price lists of books and appliances. The London School of Economics has a copy of the July 1914 'Appeal' edition of one of these descriptive catalogues. The reason for the word 'Appeal' is explained inside its front and back covers. On 1st May 1912 Holmes was convicted at the Wantage Petty Sessions for sending an obscene book, also charged separately as an indecent book, through the post, both charges referring to his descriptive list. He was fined £41 including costs. The book had been sent to a man in Ireland, at the suggestion of a relative of the recipient who had intimated that, if the list was sent, an order would probably result. The receiver of the booklet had got in touch with the Public Prosecutor, concerned that the envelope might have been opened by his family in his absence.

No doubt anxious to avoid litigation costs and with no lack of assurance, Holmes undertook his own defence. It is also possible that he was influenced by the knowledge that

The League was of the opinion that suppliers should respond only to direct requests, not through a third party. He could not, therefore, count on their unqualified support this time. On the other hand, he may have relished the chance to defend his cause.

The Petty Sessions hearing was reported in full in the 4th May 1912 issue of the *Abingdon Herald*. The prosecution held the affair to be of a disgusting nature and asked that in the interests of public morality nobody should be allowed in court except required witnesses. The court was cleared, though at least one press reporter must have been allowed to stay.

Holmes gave a very full defence in which he stated that he had been conducting his business for twenty years without interference. He was obviously as spirited on the day of the hearing as when he wrote about it in 'The Appeal' edition. He maintained at the trial that he had published the booklet to promote human happiness and lessen human misery and contended that there was nothing obscene in the publication. He felt confident that public opinion would justify his act. He said it was an odious charge made against him and, but for the fact that he was well known in the district, the array of legal talent present suggested he was a noted criminal. In defending his booklet from the charge of obscenity he quoted similar cases where the charge was dismissed.

Though he insisted there was not an '*unchaste thought*' or '*nude expression*' in the booklet, the question to be considered by the court was whether there was a tendency to corrupt the minds of those that might see it. Intentions of the supplier were not considered relevant. The magistrates found Holmes guilty on both charges and he paid the fine before leaving, consisting of £10 on each of the two summonses, £11 costs and £10 for the Irish witness's expenses. At his request, the case went to Appeal in Reading in 1st July 1912.

**Reading Appeal.** The Appeal hearing before about thirty magistrates was like a new trial. The *Reading Mercury* report of this on 6 July 1912 is short and calls Holmes's village 'East Woodhay'. It does, though, contain the interesting fact that '*he kept no clerk*'. Fortunately, there is a full account in the *North Berks Herald* of 6th July that is quoted fully in *The Malthusian*. On this occasion, Holmes did have legal representation. He had enough opportunity, however, to speak for himself, mentioning, to establish his respectability and status, that he had engaged in parochial and poor law government and was Vice Chairman of the Parish Council.

He repeated his claim that he had carried on his business for twenty years without anyone taking exception to his activities. In an answer to the question '*You don't dispute having issued the book?*', he replied '*Certainly not. I think it's the greatest honour of my life. It's common practice for doctors to refer their patients to me*'. He averred that most of his applicants were poor people. Of especial interest is his reckoning under cross examination that he had issued about 150,000 copies of his '*Price list of Neo-Malthusian and Hygienic Requisites and Books*'. Responding to the observation made by prosecuting counsel '*A profitable business*', he commented '*But not so profitable as being counsel I believe*'. This drew laughter from the court which no-one had suggested should be cleared on this occasion. Despite any good impression Holmes might have

made and the length of time that was spent in considering the verdict, though the 'indecent' charge was dropped, the 'obscene' was upheld.

The League felt that the case against Holmes could not have been made if he had been able to assure the court that there was no chance of a request for goods coming from someone who was not what he claimed to be. The prosecution suggested the possibility of a schoolboy representing himself as married. At a later Council meeting, The League passed the following resolution unanimously:

*That this meeting of the Council of the Malthusian League, while not in any way advocating the indiscriminate dissemination of information concerning practical methods of family limitation, considers that it is of utmost importance that information concerning hygienic methods of limitation should be readily obtainable by all married persons, especially among the poor, and among those suffering from heredity defects. It therefore considers that a serious miscarriage of justice has taken place in the condemnation of the Price List issued by Mr. J. R. Holmes as obscene, and in the conviction of Mr Holmes for having sent it through the post in view of the fact that he had reasonable grounds for supposing that he was justified in so doing.*

The number of copies of his Price List that Holmes stated had been sent, 150,000, is not likely to have been an exaggeration. Holmes was an honest man and we have the League's estimate, quoted above, of the sale of *True Morality* some twenty years earlier of tens of thousands to bear out the success of his activities. His works had been advertised regularly. The result of the Reading trial did not evidently deter Holmes from continuing his business judging by trade directory entries and memories of villagers. He was confident of the rightness of his views and practice. He had wanted to take the case to a higher court of appeal but this was refused.

No-one sought to prosecute him again so sources of information on his business activities disappear. The next time *The Malthusian* (under its new title *The New Generation*) had occasion to refer to him (in May 1938) it is to quote apparently from an obituary in the Secular Society's weekly newspaper, *The Freethinker*. In fact *The Malthusian* was quoting from a letter written by one Ronald Standfast complaining that *The Freethinker's* own obituary of 27th March 1938 omitted any reference to Holmes's main achievement. Standfast remedied this by placing Holmes in a historical setting.

*One of the later pioneers of working class neo-malthusianism, following in the tradition of Francis Place, and no doubt influenced considerably by Bradlaugh, he had been advocating birth control for close on half a century. In connection with his Neo-Malthusian business at East Hanney, he was for many years one of the Freethinkers few advertisers, and was very proud of being able to carry the line 'Established over 40 years'.*

Though he had not been troubled again by the threat of prosecution, he would have been fully aware of continuing hostility to his practices. Marie Stopes was not able to establish her first birth control clinic until 1921. As late as 1922 a Nurse Daniels



was dismissed as Health Visitor working in Edmonton for simply telling mothers at maternity classes where contraceptive knowledge could be obtained.

If there was hostility to his business in his home village, it has never appeared in print nor been handed down orally. Mrs Vera Harris, quoted in an *Oxford Mail* article in 1972, said that when young people married in the village, Holmes '*just gave us this little book and asked us to read it*'. According to Holmes's son, John, his father was a keen photographer and used to chronicle all the village weddings. Perhaps his presence as a photographer at weddings enabled him to carry out his other, more central role. Mrs Harris's observation that '*he never made a song and dance about it*' suggests an easy acceptance, though it may not have been so in his early years.

It has not been possible to get recollections from those who would have had some knowledge of his trading activities partly because he employed few people, chiefly recalled being Fred Monk, Alfred Harvey and Billy Ferris. Mr Herman said his 'French letters'[6] came in very large chests. Billy Arthur remembered as a youth pushing tea chests of Holmes's outgoing goods on a sack trolley down to Wantage Road Station. Fred Monk visited the Post Office in the village every weekday with packets for despatch and did all the office work for Holmes in later years. John Stevens remembers the evening postal routine well. Holmes would arrive in his office at 4 p.m. (his presence was discernible on dark winter days by the light of an oil lamp surmounted by a red shade). Fred Monk, a neighbour of John Stevens, would collect a Gladstone bag from Holmes at about 5.45 p.m. and cycle down to the Post office where Mrs Stevenson, the Postmistress, would do the necessary stamping and weighing in time for the arrival of Walter Pullen, on his Post Office bicycle, who rode off with Holmes's packets and other mail to Wantage. The abiding memory though, is of Holmes himself, erect and dignified, slowly riding his cycle with a basket of little packets down to the Post Office. Those who saw him had little notion of his high-minded, persistent resolve to help the plight of the poor by preventing the birth of unwanted children from Hanney to Hindustan.

The following advertisement appeared in the 26th April 1936 issue of *The Freethinker*. It justly claims an even longer period of activity than what was given in the paper's obituary of Holmes two years later.

# UNWANTED CHILDREN

In a Civilized Community there should be no  
UNWANTED Children.

An Abridged List (16 pages) of Birth Control Requisites  
and Books sent post free for a 1½d. stamp.

**J. R. HOLMES, East Hanney, Wantage, Berks.**

ESTABLISHED NEARLY HALF A CENTURY

[1] *The Crest on the Silver*. The Cresset Press, 1950

[2] In fact the letter is signed simply 'An Indignant Woman' so it has not been possible to find who this 'dear friend' was.

[3] *The Malthusian* eventually produced its own definition of Neo-Malthusianism that it printed regularly from December 1913. '*Neo-Malthusianism is an ethical doctrine based on the principle of Malthus that poverty, disease and premature death can only be eliminated by control of reproduction and on a recognition of the evils inseparable from prolonged abstraction from marriage. It therefore advocates early marriage, combined with a selective limitation of offspring to those children to whom the parents can give a satisfactory heredity and environment so that they may become desirable members of the community. It further maintains that a universal knowledge of hygienic contraceptive devices among adult men and women would in all probability automatically lead to such selection through enlightened self-interest, and thus to the elimination of destitution and all the more serious social evils, and to the elevation of the race.*'

[4] At the turn of the century there were seven trains to and from London each day calling at Wantage Road Station. It would have been easy for a visitor to call in at The Mulberries and go on to Oxford via Didcot for an overnight stay before returning if he wished.

[5] H.G. Wells's visits are mentioned in one of several articles by Anthony Wood on Holmes and his sons that appeared in the *Oxford Mail* in September and October 1972.

[6] The French called them 'La Capote Anglaise'. Letter is a fairly recent corruption of the word envelope.

## VILLAGE WORK

Parish Council Minutes provide the source of information on much of Holmes's work in the village. Older inhabitants of Hanney recall that Holmes took it upon himself to improve both the appearance and amenities of the parish. He was always 'beautifying' the village was how one put it.

**Seats.** At Lower Mill Holmes set up a little waterfall in a cutting from the mill pond and a seat where people could sit and admire the scene. The seat was a rustic one ('Jimmy's mill seat' one informant affectionately termed it) containing the message NE VERCU TAF RIEND.

Another seat set up by Holmes quite close to the iron bridge was painted white and bore another 'learned' saying: ORE STABIT FORTIS ARARE PLACET ORE STAT. How many users and passers-by were able to see that the mottoes were masquerading as French and Latin one will never know. These seats were a late gift from Holmes, presented with a wish that they should be kept in repair for the use of the public. The offer was accepted by the Parish Council on 31 August 1937 not much more than six months before the death of the giver[1].

Thirty five years earlier he had proposed in a Parish Council meeting that they '*erect a few seats for the use of the Public particularly the old people worn out by a life of toil*'. His sympathy for the lot of the older villagers is at one with his wider sympathies for the poor. The specious Latin was used again in the early 1970's on a seat in Music Meadow when Merton College laid down its river walk on the west bank of the Cherwell between the University Parks and Magdalen College. Mr Robert Hodgson, the Estates Bursar of Merton College, had heard it from an old Hanney resident, Hedley Shepherd, and happily it was perpetuated. The original Hanney seats have long since gone, although the College seat is about to be renewed.

**Bathing Place.** The bathing place was Holmes's best remembered provision. The concrete remnants between the Iron Bridge and Lower Mill still mark the spot where all summer boys and youths enjoyed the water. It was a sizeable structure, about thirty feet long in a remembered estimation, timber-framed with corrugated iron surrounds. A door led to a concrete floor and a bench that ran along its length. There was a corrugated roof shelter that stretched out far enough to allow one or two 'dare-devils' to dive in from a height. Shallow dives were made from the side and from the huge timber baulk that ran along the base of the structure across the brook on the Lower Mill side. Initially, according to oldest inhabitants, the water was dammed, but others remember arrangements being made to let water out of Dandridge's Mill and hold it up at Lower Mill to provide extra depth.

Snuggs Lane was then called Bath Lane by the lads hurrying along to get into the brook. As the screening ran all round the bathing place, some users frequently swam naked. No girls used it as far as could be recalled, though one man remembers girls occasionally peeping through the cracks. Another grew quite nostalgic recalling long summer afternoons in the water and sunbathing on the roof with occasional scrumping forays into the orchard behind Mill Cottages.

Eleanor Hayden walked that way early in the century and gives the bathing place an idyllic setting. The stream she says *'between two mills widens into a full, slow, broad current, fringed with the ever present willows. Through leafy orchards and meadows it creeps, providing a sequestered bathing place for the youth of the island and a quiet walk along its bank for the pensive loiterer.'* (from *Islands in the Vale*, Smith, Elder & Co. 1908)

Girls would have appeared there legitimately at Whitsuntide in the early part of the century to join the company who witnessed the latest converts of a visiting Evangelistic sect being immersed in the brook. The bathing place would have offered a suitable place for the baptism rite. Holmes allowed them the use of his mill for sleeping accommodation. It is clear that though Holmes had no religious faith himself, he was tolerant of the faith of others. At a later period the baptism took place nearer the iron bridge where Holmes's painted seat offered a convenient place for curious onlookers.

The original recommendation for the provision of a bathing place came from another councillor, Henry Broughton, on 5th May 1896 but it was Holmes who was head of the list of the three councillors who were to arrange the erection and Holmes is traditionally credited with its creation. Six months after it was in place, the committee was asked to see to its dilapidated state (the result of a boisterous first season's use?). There are several other references in the minutes to the need to repair the bathing place. It was in use for about half a century for it was not until April 1945 that the place was declared finally unfit for use. In June 1947 the materials were sold off to villagers realising £15 4s which was put into Post Office savings.

**Trees.** Holmes is remembered for his tree planting. The minutes refer to a number of specific proposals not just for planting but for the protection of trees too. He successfully proposed the erection of a barrier around the two chestnut trees on 'Five Ways Green' in July 1902 for example. The following year he improved this area at his own expense. However, he did not always get support. In February 1913 he wanted a lime to be planted each side of the junction between Steventon Road and the main road and three Lombardy Poplars on waste ground, near Charles Tarry's house, surrounded with an unclimbable fence. There was no reason given for the lack of support of his fellow councillors for these proposals.

The minutes give a very limited account of Holmes's efforts as tree planter for in an angry letter to the *Reading Mercury* dated 28th December 1935, which was chiefly about the giant-stride swing (to be explained below), he fulminates *'That I am not opposed to the planting of trees in suitable places should be plain to the meanest intelligence from the fact that I have planted more ornamental trees to beautify the village than all the rest of the inhabitants put together'*. Sadly, it would be difficult to point

with absolute certainty to any tree in the village that Holmes had planted other than the oak in the memorial garden. It would be pleasing to feel that the lime on the Hanney side of the main road at the cross roads was his, despite the original lack of support. George Herman refers to the number of poplars he planted. Among the trees on East Hanney's Greens the pink chestnut on Church Green and the lime on the Village Green were almost certainly planted by Holmes. The iron railings originally placed around them had to be removed by Ted Carter for they were beginning to restrict their growth. Holmes probably planted the prunus that grows alongside the brook wall on the Main Street side of Ye Olde Housen. Any tree that he planted can be little more than one hundred years old.

**Giant-Stride Swing.** The swing that was the chief subject of Holmes's angry letter consisted of a tall post capped with iron from which was suspended a chain enabling youngsters to launch themselves, with a few giant strides one imagines, into space. Holmes's concern in his letter of 1935 was to defend himself against five of the six councillors who were upset over his disapproval of their action in 'grubbing up' the swing. It is a long letter in which he uses the opportunity to attack the council on a number of issues. He denies that the post was decayed as the councillors had maintained. The following quotation gives a flavour of his style and mood: *'I have re-examined it and I have no hesitation in saying that if it was cared for properly, even after being neglected for so long, it would last till I and all those councillors, yea and their "Jubilee tree", too, will be as dead as Queen Anne!'*

Many inhabitants had signed a 'memorial' to have the swing re-erected but to no avail despite a deferred decision. In 1937 it was decided finally to have done with it. Holmes was at the end of his life but he was not just fretting over unwarrantable change; it is a well reasoned as well as an impassioned letter and characteristically supported the villagers.

**Other village improvements.** The Parish Council minutes contain many of Holmes's proposals on a variety of matters such as the use of allotments, the state of ditches<sup>[2]</sup>, unblocking choked 'lawholes' above the two mills (water was needed for human use at dipping points), establishing a Telegraph Office, arranging for wheelbarrow and pram access up the path opposite the Mission Chapel, setting a scale of charges for travelling showmen using the Green, repair of footpaths, getting landowners to keep footpaths open to the public and clearly signposted.

He frequently employed his own men to fill in potholes on footpaths. John Stevens recalls a pit near The Buddleas from which gravel was dug for the purpose. Two similar pits in Blenheim Orchard, which had been worked out, were used as rubbish pits by the villagers with Holmes's permission.

His proposal for Post Office facilities would have facilitated the growth of his own business as well as being of general benefit to the village. The application to the Post Master General for establishing a Telegraph Office was made in 1898. The following year *Nichol's Almanack* of Wantage and surrounding areas shows East Hanney to have a Post, Money Order and Telegraph facilities established.



Ditches and stiles and paths and the like are common pre-occupations in Parish Council minute books. It is the stuff of what is dismissively labelled, Parish pump history, but the picture of Holmes would not be full enough unless we observed him in action over parochial issues as well as the larger issue of population control. What sets Holmes apart in the local scene is the leading role he took in getting things discussed and his energy and generosity in seeing that things were done.

He did not always get his own way. There were times when his fellow councillors found, understandably, that Holmes's initiatives and energy could be irritating and there were a number of occasions when they resisted him. Reasons for their opposition are never stated. Matters came to a head in a meeting shortly before the First World War when a series of his proposals was thwarted. He wanted a permanent fence put around the seats on Five Ways Green and a committee set up to produce estimates and designs. He wanted a permanent committee set up with full powers to spend whatever was necessary to repair the bathing place, seats and barriers. He wanted a drinking place for animals to be erected at Five Ways Green. He wanted monthly meetings to be reverted to (not the first time he had attempted this) in order to get on with all there was to do as he saw it. Not one of the proposals received a seconder. On 6th June 1915 he sent a letter of resignation.

6.6.1915

To  
The Chairman,  
East Hanney Parish Council

Sir,  
*At the last meeting of the East Hanney Parish Council which I attended there was great unpleasantness caused because a committee of which I was a member had spent a few shillings (forty-five, I believe, to be precise) on what the committee was unanimous in considering to be a necessary public improvement. I, in consequence, have not attended a meeting for many months.*

*From information received I learn that at its last meeting the Council complained about another improvement which I have carried out at my own expense. On a rough calculation the cost to me has been not less than thirty pounds.*

*I had flattered myself with the thought that the new improvement was so obvious that it had only to be seen to be highly appreciated. I must confess that I was very indignant when I heard of the Parish Council's condemnation of my work.*

*There is a limit to human endurance and by its last act the Parish Council has sunk lower than I thought was possible, and has strained my endurance to breaking point.*

*I must, therefore, request you to lay this my resignation before the Council at its next meeting.*

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully

(signed)  
J. R. Holmes

*It was proposed by Mr T. N. Stephens seconded by Mr. R.W. Craddock that the resignation of Mr J.R. Holmes be accepted*

*Carried*

Did they see him as a tiresome benefactor whose zeal they would be glad to do without or was there still some assumed opprobrium attached to his name in the wake of his fairly recent court cases? Both causes may have influenced them in not seeking to heal the breach. The letter marked the end of his regular work as Parish Councillor that he had carried out since minutes were required to be kept in 1894. As he appeared at the first meeting as Vice-Chairman under Mr Dandridge as Chairman, he was probably active before that date. Clearly he was unpopular with his fellow councillors at this time just as he was when he was writing scathingly about their plans to do away with the giant-stride swing.

In his last years, we find him back again for a few occasions. He was elected Chairman at the A.G.M. in 1931 and in 1935 and he chaired a full parish meeting at the beginning of 1937 that was concerned with the Wantage Rural District Council's refusal to allow local tenants of condemned houses in the village to occupy council houses built as a result of the recent Slum Clearance Act. The meeting recommended to Wantage R.D.C. that Henry Herman be allowed to occupy the one remaining house. He was elected Chairman at the A.G.M. for the last time on 17th March 1937. A note alongside this record states that he died precisely a year from that date. Despite his age, village people still relied on him to give a lead. It must have given him great satisfaction to be asked to champion their cause. One suspects he was closer to the poorer inhabitants of the village than he was to establishment figures.

The last minutes of the earlier of the two Parish Council minute books refer perfunctorily to his death. These words have been crossed out as if felt to be inadequate. The new minute book contains as its first entry under the heading '*Death of Mr J.R. Holmes*' a somewhat longer reference. "*The Chairman referred to the death of Mr Holmes and the good work done for the village. He had been a member of this council for many years and his interest in the Parish will be remembered for many years to come*". This was dated the day of his death 17/3/38<sup>[3]</sup>.

[1] A rather unusual gift from Holmes was a pair of globes, one terrestrial and one celestial, recorded in the School Log Book on 4th July 1930.

[2] Holmes on one occasion, it is said, had a ditch dug the length of Ebbs Lane with a well-gravelled base but was obliged to fill it in as he had not been given necessary authority.

[3] He also served for two sessions on the Wantage Rural District Council, from 1904 to 1909 and again from 1933 to 1937.

## DEATH OF HOLMES

Holmes made a will on 16 September 1937. In it he desired that his body be *'handed over to a School of Anatomy to which women students are allowed for the purpose of dissection and study (to be approved by Doctor F.V. Squires of Wantage if he will consent to act) after which I desire my remains to be cremated and the ashes strewn around the oak tree in the shrubbery near the Post Office East Hanney (which tree I wish to be called Holmes's Oak)*. As the cremation occurred only four days after his death, it seems unlikely that his desire to donate his body was met. He also requested that someone from the Secular Society be asked to *'deliver an address on the occasion of the strewing of the ashes'*. His personal estate he left in trust to his wife and after her death to be divided equally between his two sons and the National Secular Society. The will was witnessed by Kathleen Ellen Heydon, District Nurse from West Hanney, and his youngest sister, Ada Martha Holmes. In the grant of Probate, though his estate was valued at £4000 plus, the net valuation was nil.

James Robins Holmes died on his 79th birthday on 17th March 1938<sup>[1]</sup>. He had chaired his last Parish Council meeting a year before, and had given up his Rural District work for about a year as his health and eyesight were failing. He died of heart failure though he did not *'take to his bed'* until a few days before his death. Cremation was very unusual in those days. This took place at Caversham, Reading, (Oxford Crematorium was built in 1939) on 21st March, the ashes being conveyed by car up the Steventon Road, along Summertown, past The Mulberries to what was to become the Memorial Shubbery Garden and scattered at the foot of the oak he had planted on Peace Day. A number of older Hanney residents can remember gathering as children to witness this strange spectacle. The service was conducted by R.H. Rosetti, secretary of the National Secular Society, of which Holmes was a member. There were no flowers but from Mrs Holmes and his sons a wreath was laid at the foot of the tree made up of something from each shrub in *'his garden'*. The account of the service outdoors was given in the *Didcot Advertiser* of 25th March. An obituary in the *Reading Mercury*<sup>[2]</sup> reports that at the East Hanney annual parish meeting held on the day of Holmes's death the Chairman, Mr C.A. Beeching, moved an expression of sympathy for Mrs Holmes and the meeting stood in silent tribute to the memory of her husband.

The most obvious aspect of these local obituary records is that no mention is made of Holmes's contraceptive postal business. As facts for inclusion in the newspapers would have come from the family, presumably the family had no wish for reference to be made to his postal business. The account calls him, simply, Fruit Farmer. It is fortunate, then, that Ronald Standfast wrote his tribute to Holmes.

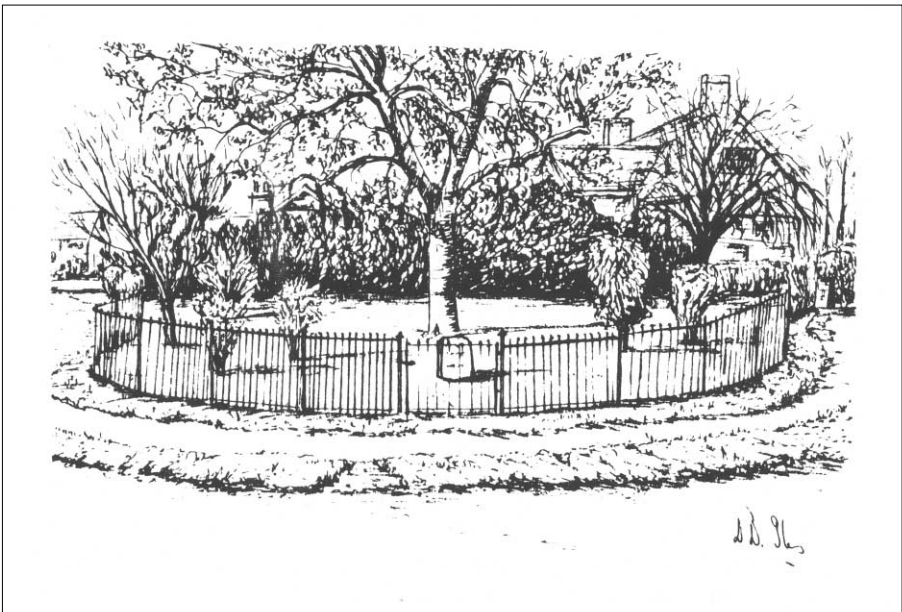
**Shubbery Garden.** Shortly after her husband's death, Mrs Holmes wrote to the Parish Council stating her late husband's wish that the Shubbery Garden by the Post Office corner be left to the village in perpetuity recalling that he had loved and cared for this garden. The clause in the will reads *'I Give and Devise All that piece of land or shubbery near the Post Office East Hanney aforesaid unto the East Hanney Parish Council to be used or preserved by them as a beauty spot for the benefit and enjoyment of the inhabitants of the Parish of East Hanney aforesaid in perpetuity'* This spot at the east end

of the village was once the site of the home of the village blacksmith, William Cox. His son, of the same name, interviewed twenty years ago for the *Oxford Mail*, said that after his father's death in 1901, his mother, not wishing to have the burden of mortgage payments, sold the house to Holmes for £105. Holmes had the house pulled down to provide a green space at the entrance to the village and gradually made it into a garden.

Arranging for its upkeep had its difficulties for the will made no financial provision. The view was expressed at a parish meeting in 1939 that some ratepayers saw the garden as basically a memorial tombstone (a stone was erected giving the name of Holmes and the date of the placing of the ashes) for which ratepayers should not be responsible. However a committee was formed and financial help obtained from Wantage R.D.C. for the first year.

The first regular gardener, Mr Miles, was asked to find a market for flowers from the garden so the need for finance continued. Mr W.C. Shepherd looked after the garden for a number of years. The Women's Institute took an interest in improving it during the 1950's though by 1957 it was reported to be in an unsatisfactory state.

The garden now is well-maintained thanks to Fred Harris who has tended it for over twenty years though he and his late wife, Vera, had to work very hard initially due to its neglect. A satisfactory minor result of this account of Holmes might be that the tree in the memorial garden be again more widely referred to as 'Holmes's Oak'.



*The Memorial Garden*

[1] Another curious coincidence is that he shared the birth date of his uncle of the same name.

[2] The account of the death of Holmes in the *Reading Mercury* was largely a copy of what appeared in the *Didcot Advertiser* but it added one or two facts about Holmes: that he had been a staunch Liberal, a vegetarian and was strongly opposed to 'Summer Time' having expressed his views on this in letters to the *Reading Mercury*. In a letter to the *Weekly Times and Echo* 26th August 1888 he announced '*I am a vegetarian, teetotaller and non-smoker*' so his vegetarianism had remained a concern throughout much of his life. This would have given him further common ground with Shaw.

## SOME MEMORIES OF HOLMES

A few memories have already been incorporated in this study. Memories are frequently just blurred mental snapshots, or brief anecdotes somewhat altered in the telling. In particular, the memories recorded here do not go back as far as one would like. The majority come from George Herman whose reminiscences were recorded on tape in 1985 when he was eighty-three and from John Stevens.

Those alive now who have a memory of Holmes see him as an old man, tall and dignified, with a long beard, slowly riding his cycle through the village. He must occasionally have been seen on his bike in Wantage too according to the cover sketch. Only the length of the beard varies in these recollections. In one such memory, he appears more sharply focused, dressed in a heavy grey tweed suit, stockings, plus fours and a grey cloth cap. The bicycle he rode had a hub extension at the back wheel to aid mounting, an outsize bell and a front brake that operated directly on the tyre. It was a machine that especially impressed the young boys.

An old couple remembered him as a quiet, reserved man, almost a recluse as far as his dealing with the village went, but who nevertheless had many 'rich' friends who called from farther afield (see Appendix 1). It ought to be said that George Herman considered the owners ('toffs' he called them) of the many cars that could be seen lined up near The Mulberries were in fact customers.

George Herman recalled that Holmes had a market garden and three or four cows that he milked at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. (an unusual arrangement according to George Herman.) The skimmed milk was given away to anyone who cared to call for it. He gave away apples too, it was remembered, not only to people in the village but also to the school-children by getting one of his men to leave a barrowload outside the school gates on Fridays. A basket was put outside The Mulberries occasionally too. What is noteworthy here is not the charity of the acts. Holmes was not the only owner of cows in the village who gave away skimmed milk and, presumably, he would have had plenty of apples to give away just as the present East Hanney inheritors of old orchard trees do. The interesting thing is that George Herman remembers him as a man making a living out of conventional rural industry which reinforces the view that in his later years he had probably run down the postal business to some extent.

The market garden reached from The Mulberries to The Buddleas stretching behind



what was Mrs Gilbert's shop and other old cottages. Great quantities of daffodils and other spring blooms were taken to Oxford by Mr Cripps, the carrier. Apples from Holmes's orchards were taken in old Mr Herman's cart to Wantage Road Station destined for London wholesale markets.

One unusual and amusing memory of George Herman's is of being one of a group of lads carrying 'sparrowing' nets borrowed from Dandridge's mill. A walnut tree in The Buddleas, the Main Street house which Holmes used for his postal business, was seen to be clothed so promisingly in ivy that George was persuaded to knock on the door where Holmes was working in his office and seek permission to set about 'sparrowing'. Although George Herman was interviewed as an old man he remembered the ringing tones of Holmes's response: 'I strongly object'. As his vocabulary did not run to interpreting 'object', George returned to the waiting group thinking that permission had been given until one of the better informed put him right. The purpose of catching sparrows was to eat them, according to George Herman. This might have been the case in earlier times but one suspects 'sparrowing' had degenerated into a juvenile blood sport. The mill possessed the only surviving nets George remembers which suggests an outmoded practice.

Another revealing memory is at second-hand. Someone recalled that his mother, who rented one of Holmes's cottages, remembered telling Holmes that she wanted a new door. She lived at one of the three little cottages that stood where Ye Olde Housen stand. Holmes said he was 'broke' and could not buy a new one but would get one made, which he did. He was a good landlord, not 'greedy' for the rent as one informant put it, though another remembered his advice to one tenant that she should always make sure money was put by for rent whatever else she had to economise on. It suggests a harsher attitude but probably reflects some proverbial viewpoint. In money matters he was as in all his dealings a man of principle with clear views. As one resident put it, if he owed you a penny you could be sure of getting it; if you owed him one he expected to be paid.

His sense of responsibility as landlord can be inferred from one of his contributions to local history records kept in Reading Central Library. Referring to a photograph he had sent in 1924 of a building which was once two cottages, one of which had been used as a vaccination station for many years and a place where those 'on the parish' were paid by the Relieving Officer, he notes, *'I send it as a specimen of the disgraceful housing conditions of the "good old days" [1]*' Most of the cottages sold in 1938 Holmes had purchased in 1903 and 1904. Whether this was wholly a business venture or partly prompted by a wish to be an enlightened landlord, the fact is that, apart from those replaced by the Olde Housen, these properties have survived thanks probably to Holmes.

George Herman recalled that Holmes took the whole of Mondays collecting his rents. A surviving sale notice lists fourteen cottages that were sold by auction shortly after his death, mainly in Ebbs Lane. They fetched less than £200. The Mulberries, according to George Herman, fetched less than £1000. Property prices appear to have been very low in 1939.

George Herman states that the rents from the cottages did not cover mortgage repayments<sup>[2]</sup>. Deeds relating to Lower Mill bear out Holmes's uncertain financial position, despite the extent of his property. Holmes bought the mill in November 1903 from Daniel West for £375 including a dwelling house and other premises and an orchard. The price was modest as it had a few months earlier been badly damaged by fire<sup>[3]</sup>. He was to sell this property in 1931<sup>[4]</sup> for £1,500 which would have been a reasonable profit but he had re-mortgaged it in 1910 and £1000 had to be paid to the mortgagees out of the sale money which still left him owing £1000 plus interest. He had perhaps raised the loan to pay for the rebuilding of the damaged upper storeys of the mill and for the two stone mill cottages that he built in place of old stables, according to George Herman.

Why did Holmes buy the mill? He obviously did not intend to use it again as a mill. His motives were probably mixed. This was the time when he was buying several properties in the village reflecting an entrepreneurial urge evident in the variety of activities he had undertaken in a spirit of enterprise inherited perhaps from his father and grandfather. Above all he was prompted by a desire to improve the village he loved so well, like some benevolent, custodial squire figure. Robert Hodgson, currently converting the mill for habitation, attests to the quality of Holmes's restoration work.

It is remembered by one or two residents that Holmes stored apples there but a more unusual activity took place just after the war in the 1920s, as George Herman recollected. Holmes's sons were early aviators with something of their father's pioneering spirit and courage (left out of these pages as they deserve a separate contribution) and used the place for aircraft construction. Large assembly work took place in a barn along the Steventon Road at Yew Tree Farm. According to George Herman, Fred Holmes asked his father for money to help the project but was told, *'I had to start from scratch. You can start from scratch'*. He allowed his sons the use of the mill but they had to pay rent. If the memory is accurate, it seems that Holmes's financial position had never been sound and all his property purchases therefore may have been speculative ventures, though not just to accumulate funds.

What little Holmes had he put to good use and occasionally directly for the benefit of others as for instance at a time when there was little work for men in the village, he employed five men to 'double-dig' (George Herman's memories again) an extensive piece of orchard ground for the planting of two rows of Worcester apple trees. It is said that, on being asked once why he wasted his time and money employing villagers to plant shrubs and flowers by the roadside, he answered, *'I know the villagers like them; they wouldn't take them home if they didn't'*. Holmes found work for boys to do occasionally. One resident remembers taking over from his older brother the job of cleaning Holmes's shoes and pumping water and bringing in wood at The Mulberries. Holmes found work for one young girl who was paid two pence a week for collecting buttercups for his half a dozen tortoises, a touching recollection this for one cannot help feeling it was the welfare of the little girl as much as that of the tortoises that prompted the arrangement.

Holmes is also remembered as a keen bee-keeper. Others who had hives were quick to turn to him for advice.

Holmes's interest in photography has been touched upon earlier. He photographed his son, John, and his plane when he landed in a stubble field near Pound Croft in 1916, his first flight to the village. George Herman affectionately recalled a photograph that Holmes took of his young brother, Jack Herman, dressed just in his vest, standing on the flagstone covering of a well; a 'wonderful photograph' he called it. One wonders what became of all the photographs he took including those of newly wedded Hanney couples and those he took at Women's Institute functions that Mrs Holmes arranged in the garden of The Mulberries. For instance, the W.I. minutes record that on 2nd July 1930 *'everyone enjoyed the beautiful garden on a lovely afternoon. .... Not the least interesting event in the proceedings was the taking of photographs by Mr Holmes'[5]*. The garden at The Mulberries was also the scene of tennis parties when the Holmes's sons were at home during holidays. Fred Monk junior and John Stevens were ball boys on a number of these happy occasions.

Another memory is of Holmes being attracted to the unusualness of a girl's name. He met her in the village shop and was puzzled at first by the shortened nickname used by her companions. He asked her to call on him at 6 o'clock that evening. Such was the respect people felt for Holmes, that she dutifully presented herself and can remember being in a large library room. He looked up the derivation of her name and told her it meant 'truth' and encouraged her always to live up to her name.

The same person who as a child was well-placed to observe Holmes's visits to the Post Office was mystified by the regular appearance of the man and his neat little parcels. She came to the conclusion that every day must be Christmas somewhere in the world.

John Stevens, equally ignorant as a small child of Holmes's merchandise, recalled that the strong white string that was tied round each incoming parcel was much sought after by village children who presented themselves in a fairly steady stream at the door of The Buddleas requesting a handful of the string at the beginning of each whip and top season. However, at the age of about thirteen, along with three friends, he learned the nature of Holmes's business. They were sheltering from a thunderstorm in a tin shed near The Buddleas. Here they came across many empty white cartons and some books written by Dr. Marie Stopes along with copies of *The Malthusian*.

The few memories recorded here are inevitably as mixed as the contents of an attic, but they light up briefly the human side of Holmes in a way that printed records cannot.

[1] Other local history notes with accompanying photographs and sketch maps that Holmes contributed between 1924 and 1925 were on the following subjects:

- a) A quern stone found at The Mulberries,
- b) Skeletons found alongside the Oxford Wantage Road on the south side of East Hanney
- c) The Godfreys, four generations of mowers,
- d) Fossil bones discovered when digging a well at The Mulberries,
- e) The lower part of the Cross Tree,
- f) An old beam in Day's House.

[2] The rents from the fourteen cottages sold in 1938 amounted to about £4 a week.

[3] *The Abingdon Herald* reported that the fire was discovered at 2 a.m. Friday 24 July 1903 'A mounted messenger informed the Wantage Fire Brigade at 2.55 and the bugle having been sounded in various points in the town' they arrived 50 minutes later to find the mill and granary too well ablaze to save so concentrated on saturating the dwelling house and other outbuildings. The mill fire was then got under control in two and a half hours. The brigade left at mid-day leaving two of their number behind until evening. Damage to the mill and machinery was estimated at £1000. Not surprisingly there were many spectators and not just from Hanney.

[4] Holmes also sold at the same time and to the same buyer, William Guy Horne of Philberd's Manor, the three acre orchard to the west of the mill grounds, which he had purchased in 1921.

[5] A few postcard photographs of Women's Institute functions have come to light towards the end of enquiries but they include too many people to reproduce satisfactorily.

## THE BOER WAR AND THE SIEGE OF THE MULBERRIES

On 7th March 1900, Holmes wrote a long letter of some two thousand words to the *Oxford Chronicle*, published on 17th March, supporting the Boers in their struggle and appealing for an end to the war. It is a fierce letter, well argued and, from this distance when we can be comparatively free from xenophobia, apparently well justified. He was not alone in condemning the war. It would do the writer a disservice to attempt to summarise such a powerful, eloquent letter, but a sample will provide an idea of its likely impact.

*It would take more than the whole of your paper to answer everybody who has an excuse for the war; but there is one more I should like to answer: he is the man who says that the war is just because it was undertaken in the interests of the "native"..... Does this man know that the natives of the Transvaal under Boer rule have increased from 20,000 to 700,000 and that a people cruelly treated does not usually increase at that rate? If they grumble about the Boers' treatment of them, it is only natural. The only native race that I ever heard of which does not complain is the Tasmanian race, the "natives" of a country in our possession. And how is that pray? Why every one of the whole race has gone to his maker! The dead do not complain ..... As to the working class they were, according to a return for 1898, getting on average over a pound a day..... If I were to say that the mass of British workmen would gladly give up their votes and welcome a Boer government here, if thereby they could get on average a pound a day, should I be saying what is untrue?*

*Well, they are not likely to get either a Boer government or a pound a day; but I will tell you what they are likely to get (in fact are getting in part now); dearer food, dearer firing, increased taxes on tea, increased taxes on tobacco, increased taxes on beer, maimed sons, maimed brothers and maimed husbands; fatherless children by the hundred and widows by the score. A near prospect of conscription... Do they like the prospect?*

*Tis time, sir, that the British nation shook off the madness which Doctors Chamberlain, Milner, Rhodes and their partners have by their infernal physic wrought up to the present dangerous state. In its madness it has made South Africa a hell-on-*

*earth; and at home it allows yelling, howling, brutal mobs, fit candidates for the gaol if not for the gallows, to terrorise peace-loving citizens and trample upon one of the most cherished of our rights.*

He was shortly to have a mob on his own doorstep. Not only did he publish this letter locally but he made sure everyone in the village knew his views by getting the letter printed as a pamphlet and distributing it. Did he consider what the effect of this might have on Hanney? He did not know until later that twenty-five families in Hanney had a relative in the war. Had he known, it is possible that he might have been more circumspect in canvassing his views, though he was not a man to shun confrontation. It was not long before he was to experience what local people felt and they did not gather to argue their case. Had it been a demonstration confined to Hanney villagers, the protesters might have been less riotous, but the news got about that his effigy was to be burnt in the village and many more protesters came from surrounding villages and Wantage.

At about half past eight on Saturday 7th April 1900 a large crowd of people gathered in front of the Black Horse public house. Here an effigy of Holmes was placed on a truck and the crowd set off past The Mulberries with a drum and fife band at its head augmented by some with improvised instruments<sup>[1]</sup>. The procession paraded through the village and on to West Hanney. When they returned about an hour later, reputed now to be almost three hundred strong, they halted outside The Mulberries and shouted the name of Boer leaders in derision and *'hooted and groaned'*.

Holmes and his wife were in their garden holding lamps before them and peering into the crowd. There was a cry *'Bring the ----- out'* and soon stones, bottles, pieces of wood and eggs were being hurled and windows broken. One missile struck Mrs Holmes on the leg *'doing considerable injury'*. Holmes took his wife indoors and the crowd briefly turned their attention to the homes of other people known to have pro-Boer views. Mr Henry Broughton lost a window though fortunately he had closed the shutters downstairs. According to Dr. Alan Tucker's *900 Years of Hanney*, Mr Broughton also had pea and bean sticks, and other wood set alight. Windows in the Mission Chapel next door were broken. Stones were also thrown at the house of Mr Bosher.

After another visit to West Hanney, the crowd reached East Hanney's village green just before midnight where a large fire was started and the effigy burnt with much joyful jeering. Residual fury spent itself in a further, milder attack on The Mulberries. The house in the morning *'presented a dismantled appearance'*, every one of its twenty windows were smashed including the coloured glass door and side lights and frames, shutters and blinds. Even articles indoors were much damaged.

Such was the description of events that appeared in the *Abingdon Herald* of 13th April. At the subsequent court case, fully reported in the same paper on 19th May, further details emerged and a few slightly variant reports as is usual in describing the behaviour of a volatile crowd. Not surprisingly, it was no party of shame-faced felons who were required to appear before Wantage Petty Sessions. George Herman said that his father took all the local culprits to the court in a *'double-shaft wagon'*. The wagon was



loaned by Mr Dandridge. It must have looked like a carnival procession, the wagon decked with flags while most of the occupants wore khaki-coloured, be-ribboned hats. A large banner with the inscription *'Down with the pro-Boers: we fight for our Queen and country'* headed the procession. They sang martial airs both entering and leaving Wantage, heroes for the day at least.

The court was densely crowded both inside and out. Henry Broughton and his wife were able to identify Charles Herman as the thrower of a stone that broke one of their windows but their son, Arthur, was able to undermine their testimony. Applause greeted the dismissal of the case against Charles Herman.

The attack on The Mulberries was the main concern of the court, the crowd and Mr & Mrs Holmes. A number of Hanney men were listed in the paper being some of *'20 or more'* (nothing was said of the remainder of the crowd), who were charged that they *"unlawfully and riotously did assemble to disturb the peace, and then did make a great riot and disturbance to the terror and alarm of Her Majesty's subjects, this being against the peace of our Sovereign Lady and Queen, her crown and dignity"*.

Holmes, in evidence, said the group when first passing his house threw eggs and an onion before moving on to West Hanney. On their return the truck containing the effigy was taken past his house, then brought back again. One George Cox was with the effigy who used threatening language which Holmes believed was *'Bring the ----- out; we'll twist his neck'*. While the stone throwing was taking place, Holmes addressed the crowd, telling them that *'if they wished to burn the effigy and enjoy themselves, let them do so, but not damage his house'*. Then a stone struck Mrs Holmes and he took her indoors. He said he was outside because he wanted to identify the stone throwers but the stones seemed to come from all directions.

He took his children upstairs where he found glass and stones lying in their room. After the crowd had dispersed, he closed the shutters of the dining room, drawing room and library. Stone throwing took place again from about 11.30 to just after midnight. On the following morning, he found the rooms littered with glass and stones and collected 90lbs of stones from in and around the house.

Under cross-examination he said he was a member of The Malthusian League and Vegetarian Society. He said he had no objection to patriotic processions and he could not say who threw the stones. The crowd, he said, kept shouting *'Kruger', 'Boo', and 'Yah'*.

Mrs Holmes, cross-examined, said she also held an acetylene lamp. She identified Cox as the apparent ring leader and said that disgusting language was used on all sides. Though she identified others who were in the crowd, she said she did not think Hanney men would have done what they did if they had not been bribed with beer by those above them. It was estimated that at nine o'clock the crowd was 300 strong and the worse for drink after they had been to West Hanney. *900 Years of Hanney* records that the event was an organised Hue and Cry gathering, but beer no doubt helped.

Police Sergeant Hall giving evidence did not appear to have had much influence on the

events in East Hanney that he witnessed. Though he told the crowd to move on past The Mulberries when they first gathered, they only did so after both Mr and Mrs Holmes had been hurt. Presumably, the effigy must have been left outside The Mulberries for the sergeant was able to witness Mr and Mrs Holmes leaning over the fence with their lamps to look at the effigy. The defendants were called one by one and each said he saw no stones thrown and no mischief done.

The Chairman of the Bench, Mr P. Wroughton, criticised them for '*almost wrecking their neighbour's house*', bound them over to keep the peace for six months and fined them five shillings each, representing costs. What the newspaper account did not reveal is that, according to local tradition, Holmes actually paid the men's fines.

Mr C. Lucas of Newbury, acting for Holmes, suggested that Holmes's occupation might have prejudiced the people against him, though the occupation was not spelt out. Had Holmes suggested this to his defence counsel as a way of excusing the men of Hanney just as Mrs Holmes had sought to excuse them? Holmes was certainly in a subdued mood, no doubt not wishing to be pilloried any more for the sake of his family.

One would imagine that the violence of the event must have had an almost crushing effect on Holmes and his wife, married for only five years with two young children aged two and four. It is unlikely that his unpopularity disappeared quickly, though fortunately the war was over in 1902. It is remarkable that they stayed on in The Mulberries. Perhaps some sympathetic reaction was shown after the event. Maybe some in the community were impressed with the dignity, reasonableness and courage shown by Mr and Mrs Holmes during the trouble and at the time of the court appearance, as well as with Holmes's generosity. It would have been understandable if they had moved away from the area but Holmes was not likely to allow himself to be driven out and East Hanney had been his home for almost all his life. The event may, however, have influenced them in their decision to send their children away to boarding school in London at a later stage. The event might well have also contributed to the reserve Holmes showed in his dealings with his neighbours as remembered by the oldest of Hanney's present inhabitants.

His subsequent good works in the village, treatment of tenants and involvement in Parish Council deliberations eventually brought about the respect in which he was generally held in later years but the memory of that night when his home was under siege must have lived with him and his wife throughout their lives.

[1] One Hanney resident recalls that this music was called 'rough music' made with sticks and pans and anything that could make a noise and was resorted to when villagers wanted to show their disapproval of the behaviour of someone.

## TWO POEMS

The finer feelings of Holmes were rarely apparent to those outside his home though they may help to account for the visits of friends. Such feelings had not, however, escaped George Herman who remembered that during thunderstorms Holmes could be seen at an open window relishing the spectacle. When asked by the interviewer why he thought Holmes did this, George Herman said it was his '*ambition*'. He admitted elsewhere on the tape that his vocabulary was not wide and obviously ambition stands for some such word as passion or delight. George Herman saw too that Holmes was a man apart; '*took a lot of understanding*' was the way he put it. Though *The Freethinker's* own obituary failed to record Holmes's pioneering birth control activities, it did mention that he was a '*keen humanitarian and lover of nature*'.

That he was a deep thinker and read widely is clear from the number of literary allusions he makes in *True Morality*. A telling instance is the quotation he chose for the front of his booklet, taken from, to give it its full title, *Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* by Edward Young, a mid-eighteenth century work of some 10,000 lines of blank verse. Another instance of his serious reading is his quotation from *Paradise Lost* in his letter to the *Weekly Times and Echo* of 26th August 1888, lines Milton put into the mouth of Eve on the effects of refraining from '*love's due rites*'. Further evidence of his love of books is that one of the rooms he drew the shutters on, when The Mulberries was being attacked, was the library.

Remembering the difficult role Holmes had played over the years in championing birth control, and the efforts, not always welcomed, he made to improve the parish, it is gratifying to discover two poems written within a few months of each other that he contributed to *The Freethinker* late in life. Not remarkable as poems, they nevertheless give us satisfying proof that he had his contented, reflective moods too. The first is perhaps more valuable for its preceding words of explanation, letting us see Holmes in his garden, than for the poem itself, but the second has power and makes a suitable ending to this attempt to record what we know of a man to be remembered.

*"Gloomy" November 1928*

*On the morning of November 18, I sat writing in the summer house, the sun was shining brilliantly in a lovely blue sky, in which, low down in the south, were a few wisps of cloud. The lawn was a beautiful green, on which were blooming daisies, buttercups and (alas!) dandelions. A bunch of red roses crowned a rose-bush near by: there were white and blue violets, aubretia, primroses, marigolds and other flowers in bloom in the garden: "burning bushes" added a touch of colour, and the holly glistened in the sun-shine.*

*The air was soft, sweet and clear: a gentle breeze was moving the twigs, and small branches of the trees. My dog lay near my feet basking in the sun; the rooks, lazily croaking and cawing, floated along overhead; the starlings were chattering in the orchard opposite; a robin sang his plaintive song in an apple-tree; a cock was crowing in the distance; a tit was "chippering" and a thrush was filling the air with melody; whilst the "tweet" "tweet" of the "perky" sparrow added to the general charm.*

*I was moved to drop into poetry, and here is the result.*

*LINES COMPOSED ON A SUMMERLIKE MORNING IN NOVEMBER, 1928*

*Come out, though 'tis November!  
 The Sky o'erhead is blue;  
 The gnats in the sun are dancing,  
 Why shouldn't I - and you?*

*Come out, though 'tis November!  
 Not bare is every tree;  
 The thrush with joy most blithely sings  
 Why shouldn't I - and thee?  
 Come out, though 'tis November!  
 The garden's fair to see;  
 The flowers still bloom; the robin sings;  
 Then why, WHY shouldn't we?*

*Come out, though 'tis November!  
 Bask in the glorious sun;  
 The birds, the beasts, the insect do;  
 Why shouldn't everyone?*

*Come out, though 'tis November!  
 The air is calm and sweet;  
 The Elms are clothed in golden leaves;  
 'Tis grand: to sight a treat.*

*Come out, though 'tis November!  
 The month, they say, of gloom,  
 Fill up the day with work and play,  
 For sadness leave no room.*

*J. R. Holmes*

*WHEN I AM GONE*  
*(written on my seventieth birthday)*

*When I am gone, the sky will still be blue!  
 The fields be green!  
 And scarlet berries bedeck the yew,  
 By me unseen!*

*When I am gone, the meads will still be pied  
 With daisies white!  
 Still high o'erhead the stars in heaven will ride  
 To gem the night!*

*When I am gone, the thrushes still will sing!  
The larks will soar,  
And make with joyous songs the welkin ring  
As heretofore.*

*When I am gone, the world around the sun  
(Of light the source)  
In empty space, amidst the stars will run  
Her yearly course!  
When I am gone, the Seasons will return  
As they have done  
For aeons past! Brave youths and maids still yearn  
To be as one!*

*When I am gone, (for I must go ere long  
To my last sleep)  
Invoke no god! chant no religious song!  
No vain tears weep!*

*No sable garments don! With tongue and pen  
Work bravely on  
To make the earth a happy home for men!  
When I am gone!*

*J. R. Holmes*

## APPENDIX 1 HOLMES AND MARIE STOPES

There has been a local tradition that Marie Stopes was a friend but the following memo from her and Holmes's response suggests otherwise.

*20th April 1932*

*Mr. J. R. Holmes*

*East Hanney*

*Wantage, Berkshire*

*Sir,*

*My attention has been drawn to your catalogue, page 55 where you say I "so strongly recommend" the Pro-race Pessary. Would you kindly read the enclosed with care and see that no such further use of my name is made?*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Dr M. Stopes*

*Memo from J. R. Holmes*

*Bookseller and Dealer in East Hanney, Wantage*

*Neo-Malthusian Hygienic Requisites Berkshire, England*

*Every Married or Marriageable*

*person should read my Book,*

*TRUE MORALITY,*

*A treatise on the Neo-Malthusian Philosophy*

*Railway Station:Wantage Road G.W.R.*

*Money Order Office: East Hanney*

*Telegrams: Holmes, East Hanney*

*23.4.1932*

*To: Dr Marie C. Stopes*

*Madam,*

*Your letter of the 20th inst. and the enclosure are to hand.*

*As one who has become an advocate of birth control for about half a century, and who has been under the impression that the Pessaries sold by me as 'Pro-Race' were the identical ones which were made specially for you and so strongly recommended by you I must confess that I am astonished at the tone of your letter and enclosure.*

*However if I have been 'misled' I can only express regret.*



*I will delete, by causing a pen to be passed through the said recommendation and, if I live to issue another edition of any catalogue, will have it omitted altogether.*

*I am, Madam,*

*Yours faithfully,*

*J. R. Holmes*

## APPENDIX 2 BRADLAUGH AND HOLMES

Holmes had claimed a '*long standing personal acquaintance*' with Charles Bradlaugh. This charismatic radical freethinker, pamphleteer and orator was a hero figure for many and Holmes may well have been much influenced by him. He would not have been acquainted with him for very long however, for Bradlaugh's appearance in London free-thought circles, in the mid 1850s, after varied occupations as office boy, coal merchant, soldier in Ireland, errand runner and solicitor's clerk, had taken place before Holmes was born.

Bradlaugh began lecturing and debating in the provinces by the end of the 1850s '*leaving*' as his daughter describes, '*a trail of excitement in his wake wherever he went*' but this was mainly in the north and west and it was not until 1875 that he first lectured in Oxford. It is just possible Holmes may have seen him then or at a later lecture in Oxford in 1877 when Holmes would have been 18 years old, though it seems more likely he saw him in one of the many London locations where Bradlaugh could be more frequently seen.

Bradlaugh took up many causes such as electoral reform, land reform, public education, republicanism in Europe and America. However, he became notorious for publicly declaring his atheism which he argued with as much passion as an evangelical minister saving souls. He gained notoriety too for his sympathy with the Neo-Malthusian cause. Eventually, after being three times elected as M.P. for Northampton, first in 1880, he was allowed to take the oath in 1886 and took his seat where he became a respected figure in the last few years of his life.

It would have been difficult for Holmes to have made a personal acquaintance with him at one of the crowded lecture halls. Audiences in the open sometimes reached several thousands. It is possible Holmes visited him. Bradlaugh's daughter records that he was regularly receiving calls at his home. It is also possible he may have corresponded with Bradlaugh remembering Holmes's appetite for letter writing but there is no way of verifying this as Bradlaugh destroyed his correspondence.

The extent of Holmes's personal closeness to Bradlaugh may be questioned but there are interesting parallels between the two men. Bradlaugh was a courageous advocate, as well able to defend himself in a court of law as on a platform. Did Holmes have Bradlaugh in mind when he was defending his own book from obscenity charges in Wantage and Reading?

Both were Liberal in politics. Both were outspoken, leaving no one in any doubt of their opinions. Both were ready to express their views in writing. Holmes's distribution of his letter concerning his Boer War attitude is comparable to Bradlaugh's practice of arranging for his printed speeches to be circulated. Both men had a certain physical dignity: upright Victorian gentlemen with a touch of the puritan in them despite their unconventional views. At the end of Bradlaugh's life his debts were greater than his assets. It was the same with Holmes.

The comparison is made not to suggest an equality in achievement but to suggest that Holmes may well have been inspired by the older man to the point of emulation. Even the decision to publish his booklet *True Morality* in 1891, after the death of Bradlaugh in January of that year, prompts the speculation that it may not have been just a coincidence.

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**Libraries and Record Offices** British Library (Newspaper Library and Library of Political and Economic Science at London School of Economics). Bodleian Library. Reading

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