

# Lofts Cottage - A History



The first Lofts recorded in Little Downham was Peter Lofts who married Ann Holmes on 30th September 1712. Peter was in his twenties, it is not known for sure where he was born but it is likely he was from an area around Linton and is possibly the Peter Lofts born in Horseheath in 1685.

Over the next 300 years there have been a large number of Peter's descendants born, lived and died in Little Downham and this article deals specifically with the line that produced Benjamin Lofts and his daughter, Eva, proprietors of Lofts Shop in Main Street, Little Downham. Some generations of the family were non-conformist and are missing from the parish registers and so some of the dates of birth are approximate.

Peter's fourth son was Dennis was born in 1719 and married Catharine Chapman in 1743. They had a daughter, Anne, and a son William.

Dennis's son William Lofts, born 1745, made a will in 1833, in which he is described as a Yeoman, had several acres of land around Third Drove, Second Drove and Fodder Fen. He married Lucy Waits in 1778 and, when she died in 1793 married Frances Carter. He had thirteen children by these two wives and his land was divided up between several of them. Frances lived long enough to be the first of this family to appear in the

census records. In both 1841 and 1851 she was living with her son Robert and his wife Elizabeth at Main Street. Robert was a bricklayer and this later seems to have become the family profession.

Williams son, John Lofts was born around 1796 and was left land in his father's will: " I give and devise unto my son **John Lofts** all that my copyhold piece of fen or marsh ground containing by estimation 6 acres lying in the south side of the second drove in Fodder fen aforesaid formerly Ellington's and late Simperon's and numbered in the aforesaid Map and Lot book 239. To hold the same with the appurtenances unto my said son John Lofts his heirs and assigns forever Subject nevertheless and charged and chargeable with the payment of the sum of £40 further part of the said principle sum of £270 together with the interest due in respect of such portion thereof at the time of my decease. I also give and bequeath unto the said John Lofts the sum of £100 now due from him to me upon a mortgage he paying the interest thereon to the time of my decease."

John was the son of William and Frances and married Susanna Cornwell of Ely in 1814 and they had eight children. John died in 1840. In the 1841 census Susanna was described as a farmer and in 1851 a landed proprietor of Main Street, which suggests that the land John inherited remained in the family.

John and Susanna's youngest child was Joshua Lofts, born around 1833.

**OBITUARY.**—The death of Mr. Joshua Lofts occurred on Saturday at the residence of his niece, Mrs. W. Hull, Cannon-street, at the ripe old age of 88 years. Deceased was the oldest inhabitant. He was for over 50 years deacon and a leading member of the Baptist Chapel. The funeral took place on Tuesday, Pastor W. Hudson, of Cambridge, officiating in the chapel and at the graveside. The principal mourners were: Mr. B. Lofts, son; Mrs. W. Hull, grand-daughter; Mr. B. Lofts, grandson; Mrs. F. Few and Mrs. B. Lofts, grand-daughters; Mrs. J. Lofts, daughter-in-law; Mr. W. Hull and Mr. F. Few, grandsons; Mr. and Mrs. Richmon Cornwell, nephew and niece; and many adherents of the Baptist Chapel, including Miss Helen Cooke, Miss Kerkman, Mrs. R. Hull, Mrs. W. Hopkin, the Misses Thompson, Mr. A. J. Sennitt, and others.

Joshua inherited land from his grandmother Frances and property from his father John. This may have been the cottages which later became the shop and then Lofts Cottage. John married Elizabeth Carr of Wiltshire, possibly at Islington in 1854 , and they had three children, Sarah Jane, John and Benjamin. In 1861 Joshua was a bricklayer living at Main Street and, in 1891

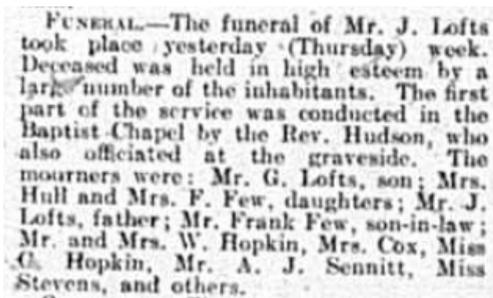
Back Street.

In 1899 Joshua was violently assaulted in Ely by William Quantrill, another bricklayer and also a publican whilst building some new houses at Back Hill. The assault was unprovoked and seems to have occurred after Mr Quantrill spent a long lunch in the Royal Oak.

In 1901 he was living in Cannon Street with a housekeeper, Mrs Jane Carr, presumably his sister-in-law. Joshua died in 1921 and the entry for his burial in the St Leonard's registers refer to the Burial Law Amendment Act. This suggests that it was a non-conformist burial.

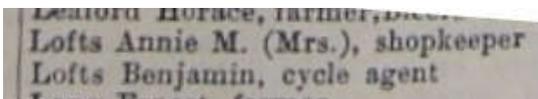
Joshua's son, John was born around 1858. By 1881 John had become a bricklayer and married Mary Ann from Stradsett in Norfolk in 1882, they had six children and in 1891

John and Mary Ann were living in Little Street. In the 1901 census John was listed as a bricklayer and an employer, he also had an entry in Kelly's street directory so things must have been going well. By 1911 Mary Ann had died and the family had moved to Cannon Street. John died in 1918.



FUNERAL.—The funeral of Mr. J. Lofts took place yesterday (Thursday) week. Deceased was held in high esteem by a large number of the inhabitants. The first part of the service was conducted in the Baptist Chapel by the Rev. Hudson, who also officiated at the graveside. The mourners were: Mr. G. Lofts, son; Mrs. Hull and Mrs. F. Few, daughters; Mr. J. Lofts, father; Mr. Frank Few, son-in-law; Mr. and Mrs. W. Hopkin, Mrs. Cox, Miss G. Hopkin, Mr. A. J. Sennitt, Miss Stevens, and others.

John's son Benjamin (Ben) was born in 1887. in 1911 Ben was still living with the family at Cannon Street and is described as a whitesmith, which is someone who works with tin, tinsplate and other light metals. Ben married Annie Harrison in 1913. They lived in Cannon Street and they acquired the shop in Main Street that was to become Lofts Cottage. There is no indication in the 1901 census that there was a shop in this location but the picture below is from the 1920s. Ben specialised in bicycles and Annie ran a grocery shop and they had an entry in Kelly's Street Directory. Annie's obituary states that she was of 7 Main Street, which may have been the address of the shop or of a neighbouring property. In May 1913 Ben



Lofts Annie M. (Mrs.), shopkeeper  
Lofts Benjamin, cycle agent

was a witness in the case of the stolen bicycle lamp. The Ely Standard carried a

substantial obituary on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1968:

"With the death of Mr Ben Lofts Little Downham has lost one of its best known residents. Mr Lofts, who was 81 years of age, died at his home of Friday.

A native of Little Downham, he was the son of the late Joshua Lofts of Cannon Street. His familiar figure was well known by generations of Little

Downham people. He had been the proprietor of the shop which sold "everything" for 61 years.

In the early days of motoring Mr Lofts was the first person in the village to retail petrol, and he also ran a taxi service. He served as a special constable for many years.

Possessing a deeply religious nature, Mr lofts was a founder member of the Methodist Church in the village, and was a Sunday School teacher for 50 years. Loving children, he had an ever-open bag of sweets for his Sunday School scholars.

Besides his Christian interests, Mr Lofts was for many years closely connected with local sports. He was chairman of the former Ely and District Football League and chairman of Little Downham's football and cricket clubs. He was also instrumental in forming the now defunct local bowls club.

It is, perhaps, not widely known that many of the local activities with which Mr lofts was connected have been indebted to his quiet generosity; indeed, some would have floundered without his timely assistance.

He has been a widower for eight years and one daughter is left to mourn."

*(Although it states that his father was Joshua I am fairly sure that his father was John and that Joshua was his grandfather).*

As well as his above activities there are memories of selling paraffin from a barrow that pushed around the village. Annie died in 1960.

The shop was taken over by Ben's daughter Eva. Eva was born in 1917 and married David Hillen in 1951. They lived in a house next to the shop, it became a general store and was always known as Loft's shop. The shop was popular with children as a sweet shop and was sometimes known as Mouldy's because the large window would catch the sun and turn the chocolate



mouldy. The shop has been described as dark and foreboding and a scary place for children to enter. It was very much frozen in time. As other shops opened in the village Loft's became less profitable and closed in the late 1980s.



After the shop closed it was bought by Richard, an Architect, and Phyllis Ambrose. The property was quite run down and the upstairs was accessed by ladder. From its appearance it would seem to originally have been three separate cottages, built in the 1700s, which were combined to become the shop and then the current cottage. Mrs Ambrose remained friends with Eva and gave the cottage the name Loft's Cottage.

**Robin Pearl**