

# FLORA THOMPSON

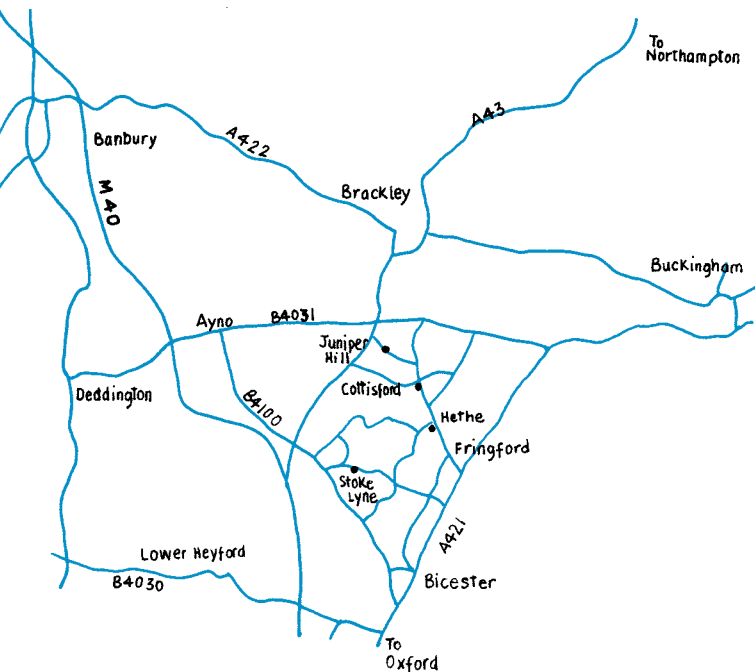
LARK RISE  
TO CANDLEFORD



*Cherwell*

DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

# MAP OF WHERE FLORA THOMPSON GREW UP



Written by: Christopher Wise

Map illustration: Julie Barrett

Designed by: [www.touchmedia.uk.net](http://www.touchmedia.uk.net)

© Cherwell District Council 2008

FRONT COVER:  
FLORA THOMPSON

REF NO. OPA/76/29/2

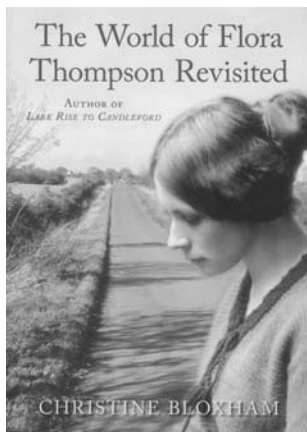
# FLORA THOMPSON

THE WRITER FROM JUNIPER HILL  
IN NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Flora Thompson is famed both for her literary skills and for the valuable contribution she made to social history. Her acclaimed trilogy “Lark Rise to Candleford” tells of the rural community in North Oxfordshire where she grew up in the late nineteenth century.

Unlike some of Flora’s contemporaries her written work deals with the ordinary people in rural society, who are vividly brought to life through such characters as Queenie, the lace-maker and bee-keeper, and Dorcas Lane, the postmistress.

Flora Thompson’s masterpiece was achieved without the benefits of an expensive education, wealth, or encouragement from many of those closest to her; a remarkable feat considering that her best work was not written until the last ten years of her life, when she was in her sixties.



# HAMLET CHILD

Flora Thompson grew up at a time of change, when the traditional country way of life was disappearing. Through her extraordinary powers of observation Flora captured the essence of this bygone age.

She was born Flora Jane Timms in 1876 at Watford Tunnel Cottage in the Oxfordshire hamlet of Juniper Hill. While she was still very young Flora's family moved to the End House, which stood "a little apart and turning its back on its neighbours". The cottage where Flora was born has been demolished together with half of the End House. On the wall of the remainder of the End House (now renamed Lark Rise Cottage) a plaque marks where she grew up.

Flora was the eldest of ten children, of whom six died young. Her father was Albert Timms, a stone mason, who worked in Brackley, and a mother, Emma, had once worked as nursemaid at Fewcott Rectory.



END HOUSE



PORTRAIT OF QUEENIE MASSEY, LACE-MAKER AND  
BEE-KEEPER IN LARK RISE EARLY 1890s.

REF NO. OPA 76/50/3

In later life, Flora described her childhood as “somewhat harsh and restricted”. However, she bore no grudge as poverty was common to all the hamlet people.

Behind the End House was the thatched cottage of Queenie the bee-keeper and lace-maker, lovingly remembered by Flora: “Queenie at her lace-making was a constant attraction to the children... every bobbin weighted with its bunch of bright beads and every bunch with it’s own story”. Queenie’s cottage still stands behind Lark Rise Cottage, though it now has a slated roof.



THE FOX INN, JUNIPER HILL

REF NO. OPA 76/44/27

A short distance along the road through Juniper Hill is the site of the old Fox Inn (the Waggon and Horses of **Lark Rise**). It is now a private house called The Old Fox but the building is little changed. It was here that Flora's father and other men of the hamlet gathered nightly, to sup their halfpints of ale, sing songs and 'wrangle' over politics.



THE OLD BAKE HOUSE, FRINGFORD



### HAY HARVEST, 1890s FRINGFORD

REF NO. OPA 76/44/3

The hamlet of Juniper Hill was settled in 1754 when two cottages were built for the homeless poor. After the enclosure of common fields in 1854 the hamlet expanded until by the end of the nineteenth century there were 30 cottages. Few of the original cottages remain.

Life was hard for the families of the hamlet, who were looked down on by the inhabitants of neighbouring villages and regarded as 'gypsies' or 'squatters'. Apart from Albert Timms and the local publican, most of the men of the hamlet worked as farm labourers on the local farms.

They worked hard, long hours and in all weathers for the meagre wage of ten shillings a week with which their wives had to keep their large families clothed and fed.

From the age of seven, Flora went to the local school at Cottisford, walking the mile and a half from her home with the other children from the hamlet: "Up the long, straight road they straggled, in twos and threes and in gangs their flat, rush dinner-baskets over their shoulders and their shabby little coats on their arms against the rain". The school building still stands at the village crossroads. It is now a private house.

COTTISFORD SCHOOL, c1902

REF NO. OPA 76/50/1





THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY, COTTISFORD

REF NO. OPA 76/44/58

On Sundays the bells of St Mary's Church in Cottisford called the people of the hamlet to worship. Flora's parents rarely went to church, so she and her brother Edwin would attend services alone, sitting in their grandfather's pew opposite the church door. The congregation was made up from all ranks of rural society, with the squire's family from Cottisford Manor occupying the pews in the chancel.

Flora's "little squat church" has not changed. Above the pew where Flora and Edwin used to sit is a brass memorial plaque commemorating those who died in the First World War. Edwin's name, along with other young men from the hamlet, can be found near the bottom of the list. He was killed at the battle of the Somme in 1916.



THE FORGE IN FRINGFORD WITH FOREMAN  
AND SMITHS 1890s

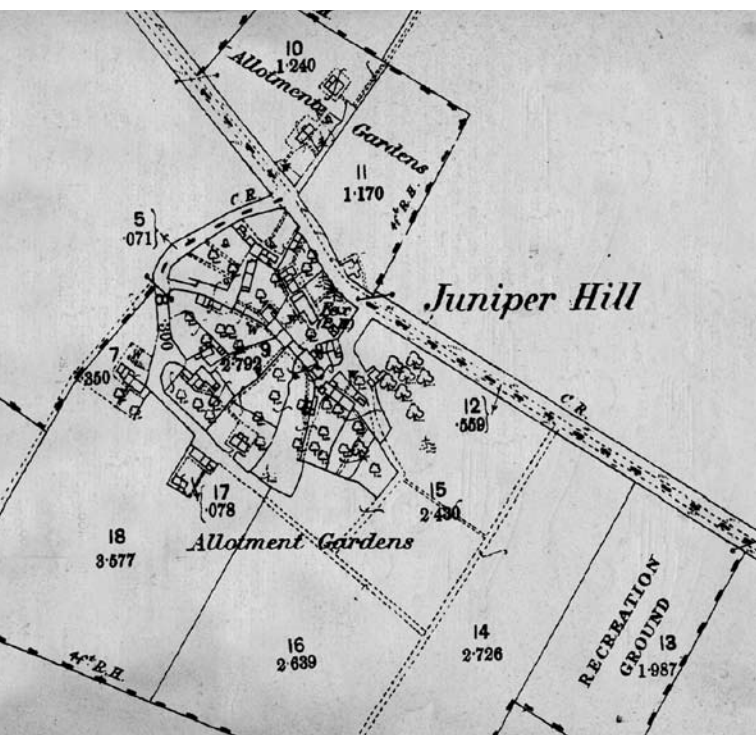
REF NO. OPA 76/44/1

When Flora was fourteen she was employed as a post office assistant at Fringford Post Office and Forge. Her employer was Mrs. Whitton (Dorcas Lane from 'Candleford Green') who, Flora wrote "had more influence than anyone in shaping the outward course of my life".

Access to Mrs. Whitton's library enabled Flora to continue her own literary education, while her new-found freedom deepened her solitude and rapport with nature. The post office and forge, now a private house, still stands near the village green at Fringford.

In 1897 Flora left Oxfordshire to work at a post office in Surrey, and later in Essex and Hampshire. At the age of twenty-seven she married John Thompson, a junior post office clerk in Bournemouth. They had three children, Winifred, Basil and Peter. In 1928 John Thompson was promoted to postmaster at Dartmouth.

During the Second World War Flora's youngest child, Peter, joined the merchant navy and was killed when his ship was torpedoed. Flora never fully recovered from the shock of Peter's death, and she later developed pneumonia, which left her with a weakened heart. In 1940 John Thompson retired from the post office and he and Flora moved to Brixham, Devon.



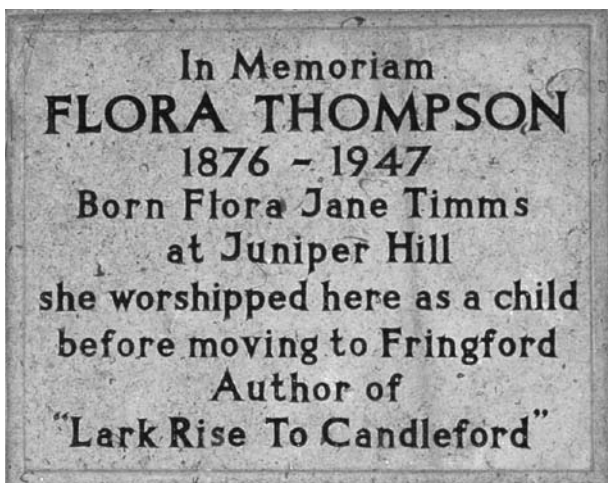
If you decide to visit any of the places mentioned in this publication, please respect the privacy of the local people.

# LARK RISE TO CANDLEFORD

Flora's earliest efforts as a writer were nature essays and love stories. These initially met with disapproval from her husband, but, his attitude changed when her work became profitable.

During the late 1920s she began to write sketches of her childhood, which became the basis for her successful books. '**Lark Rise**' was published in 1939, '**Over to Candleford**' in 1941 and '**Candleford Green**' in 1943. In 1945 the three books were published together as a a trilogy.

The characters, villages and towns featured in Flora's books are based on real people and places, though she took care to alter their names. Flora herself becomes Laura and her brother Edwin is Edmund; Flora disguises Juniper Hill by calling it **Lark Rise**, the name of the biggest field near her childhood home. **Fordlow** the 'mother' village is really Cottisford, while the fictitious town of **Candleford** is a combination of Banbury, Bicester and Buckingham. She largely bases Candleford Green on her childhood memories of Fringford, where she worked in the village post office from 1891 to 1897. In many ways village life had changed very little in the decades before 1876 when she was born and her recollections and reflections offer us insight into this period before the agricultural depressions of the late 1800's. Flora wrote stories and poems for many years but it was not until 1945 that the Lark Rise trilogy was published.



The glowing reviews which her books received took her by surprise; "Twenty years ago I should have been beside myself with joy, but I am now too old to care much for the bubble reputation". After **Candleford Green** Flora wrote **Heatherley**, a fourth volume which continues her personal story from the time she left Fringford to her marriage. She was not, however, satisfied with this work and it was never published. **Still Glides The Stream** was completed a few weeks before her death. The following words are taken from the last paragraph... "We come, we go, and as individuals we are forgotten. But the stream of human life goes on, ever changing, but ever the same and as the stream is fed by well-springs hoarded by nature so the stream of humanity is fed by the store of accumulated wisdom and effort and hard-won experience of past generations".

Flora Thompson died in May 1947 in Brixham and was buried in Dartmouth with her son Peter.

A festival was held at Shelswell Park, Cottisford, in 1976 to mark the centenary of Flora Thompson's birth. In the same year the BBC broadcast a tribute to Flora in their series 'Authors and their Homes'.

A stage version of "Lark Rise" was written by Keith Dewhurst and first performed by the National Theatre in March 1978. A year later Dewhurst wrote "Candleford" which covers the remainder of the trilogy and had its debut in November 1979. In November 1980 Cherwell District Council with the assistance of Oxfordshire County Council's Museum Service carried out a survey of Cottisford and Juniper Hill. Shortly after, Cherwell District Council made Cottisford and Juniper Hill conservation areas.

The 60th anniversary of Flora's death was commemorated in 2007 by the first performance of "Lark Rise" at Juniper Hill and the opening of the permanent Flora Thompson exhibition at the Old Gaol Museum in Buckingham.

## FURTHER READING

*Thompson, Flora*

'**Lark Rise to Candleford**' Penguin 2000.

*Bloxham, Christine*

'**The World of Flora Thompson Revisited**'

Robert Dugdale, 2007. Tempus Publishing.

*Greenwood, Martin*

'**Fringford Through the Ages**', 2000.

*Greenwood, Martin*

'**Villages of Banburyshire**' Wychwood Press, 2006.

*Lane, Margaret*

'**Flora Thompson**' John Murray, 1976.

*Lindsay, Gillian*

'**Flora Thompson**' Robert Hale, 1990.

Thanks to the BBC, Martin Greenwood, Ted Flaxman and Fringford Village Hall.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

Copies of photographs from this publication can be ordered from:

### **Oxfordshire Studies**

Central Library, Westgate, Oxford, OX1 1DJ. Tel: 01865 815749.

Email: [oxfordshire.studies@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:oxfordshire.studies@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

## MUSEUMS

### **The Old Gaol Museum of Buckingham**

Market Hill, Buckingham MK18 1JX

Telephone: 01280 823020 for more information.

Email: [buckingham.t.i.c@btconnect.com](mailto:buckingham.t.i.c@btconnect.com)

Museum displays illustrate the history of Buckingham and include the life and work of Flora Thompson.

### **Banbury Museum and Tourist Information Centre**

Spiceball Park Road, Banbury, Oxon OX16 2PQ. Tel: 01295 259855

Canal-side museum offers permanent and temporary exhibitions, canal side café and events for the whole family. Hands on displays tell of the town's origin and history.

Museum Open: Monday - Saturday 9.30 - 5.00, Sunday 10.30 - 4.30

Admission Free. For further information visit

[www.cherwell.gov.uk/banburymuseum](http://www.cherwell.gov.uk/banburymuseum)

[www.visitnorthoxfordshire.com](http://www.visitnorthoxfordshire.com)



In 2008 the BBC serialised *The Lark Rise to Candleford* trilogy, dramatised by Bill Gallagher, and described the drama as a heart-warming series teeming with wit, wisdom and romance. Set in the small hamlet of Larkrise and the wealthier neighbouring market town of Candleford, the series chronicles the daily lives of farm-workers, craftsmen and gentry at the end of the nineteenth century and is a love letter to a vanished corner of rural England.

# FRINGFORD HISTORIC VILLAGE TRAIL

## Walk in Flora Thompson's footsteps...

The Fringford Historic Village Trail is one of a series of 12 circular walks and village trails published by Cherwell District Council to aid exploration of North Oxfordshire. It takes you on a historical stroll around this delightful Oxfordshire village which is four miles north of Bicester off the A4421 Buckingham Road. The route is one and a quarter miles long and is mostly on metalled roads except for a quarter of a mile stretch which can be wet and muddy, especially in winter.

The Trail starts from the village pub (Butchers Arms) and takes in a variety of points of interest including cottages, Fringford Manor and Ghost Alley. The classic setting of a medieval village around the Green survives to this day; and the Old Forge, now a private dwelling, used to be the forge and later also the sub-post-office where Flora Thompson worked as assistant postmistress from 1891 to 1897.

We hope that your walk will help you appreciate this beautiful corner of Oxfordshire where the events "Lark Rise to Candleford" happened.

The Fringford Historic Village Trail is available for purchase from Banbury Tourist Information Centre or downloadable free of charge from [www.cherwell.gov.uk](http://www.cherwell.gov.uk) under Leisure and Culture, Countryside - recreation.

