

**Title:** GUMBER'S BITTER HARVEST

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**Summary:** 'It was just a small piece of notepaper, at first glance similar to an every-day sheet of Basildon Bond, but the handwritten note had huge significance for a farmer, his family and workforce on a remote part of the South Downs.' This paper tells the story of the long ago inhabitants of Gumber Farm, Slindon and their battle to survive working the land.

**Acknowledgement:**

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## GUMBER'S BITTER HARVEST

It was just a small piece of notepaper, at first glance similar to an every-day sheet of Basildon Bond, but the handwritten note had huge significance for a farmer, his family and workforce on a remote part of the South Downs. Six months after signing to renew his lease for Gumber Farm, a couple of miles north of the Downland village of Slindon, near Arundel, it must have been with a heavy heart that William Parlett picked up his pen again on September 23, 1884 to write a few sentences handing the farm back to his landlords. For 14 years William, his family and labourers had toiled on the flinty soil of 600 acres of pasture, arable land, wood and downs, but the tightening grip of the agricultural recession in the second half of the 19th century finally took its toll.

I came across his letter, pinned to the 1884 lease, in a package of documents tied up with a pink ribbon and aptly labelled "Slindon bundle" at the West Sussex Record Office in Chichester. I had already sifted through dozens of pages of formal, stiff and starchy papers, so the highly personal note from this anguished farmer stood out as a moving testimony to the harsh economic realities of his times. He wrote: "Dear Sir, in consequence of the great deterioration in value both of corn and stock since I agreed to hold the Gumber Farm, I feel compelled to give you notice to quit, although I feel grieved at so doing, but if times do not materially alter I cannot possibly hold it and I see no chance of anything better at present. Hoping you will take no offence and thanking you for past favours, I remain yours very truly, William Parlett."

What must have been going through his mind when he wrote the letter? The language of the letter seems restrained, as if William was holding back the anguish. Thoughts about who he was letting down - his wife, his children, his workforce who depended on him for their livelihoods. Worries about his own future, about having to compete probably with other farm hands for a place on someone else's farm. Concerns about losing the family home, and fears for whether they would ever find decent accommodation again. He is aggrieved, defeated perhaps, but still loyal to his landlords. For ultimately his predicament is not their fault.

The two leases point to the struggles facing farmers at the time, the rent actually falling from £270 per annum in 1870 to £205 at the renewal in 1884. Not even a reduction of almost 25 per cent could make Gumber Farm viable. It had been a different matter earlier in the 19th century, when two extra barns were added to the farm and the labourers' cottages were extended, sometime between the Slindon tithe map of 1832 and the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map of 1876. But imports of cheap American food, aided by the relaxation of trade tariffs through the repeal of Britain's Corn Laws in 1846, led to a steep decline in the fortunes of agriculture, with the tenant of Gumber Farm and his workers among the casualties.

By 1886, when a new tenant, James Penfold, signed the lease on Gumber Farm, the rent was even lower, just £100 a year, but even at that level, he resorted to action beyond what was allowed legally in a bid to make ends meet. He seems to have got away with it for a few years, but by early 1896 was asked to pay royalties on 200 tons of flints he had removed from the farmland and sold on. He was in breach of a clause forbidding quarrying, mining, extracting clay and stones, but in January, 1896 signed an agreement allowing him to remove the flints on payment of a royalty of 8d per ton to his landlord, the trustees of the Slindon Estate. It seems ironic that he should have been penalised for improving the farm's soil by removing the stones that, throughout history, have plagued farmers on the Downs.

Around Gumber Farm, that history can be found in abundance, and the Secrets of the High Woods LiDAR survey has added to the evidence of how farming in the area can be traced back to 3,000 years ago, when Bronze Age peoples created a latticework of fields, enclosures and trackways on the Downs. Cultivation continued through the Iron Age to Roman times, when Stane Street was built to link Chichester with London. Marching across the landscape just north of Gumber Farm, this ancient roadway, with its impressive embankment, reaches its highest point, 700ft, at nearby Gumber Corner, with its fabulous vista taking in Chichester Cathedral, the Solent and the Isle of Wight. No wonder it was one of writer Hilaire Belloc's most precious places.

I was fortunate enough to interview amateur archaeologist Robin Upton, for the oral history strand of Secrets of the High Woods, who told me about the thousands of ancient artefacts, including flint axes, he found while working on the land around Gumber Farm. Many of his finds are logged on the Historic Environment Record, tagged as "the Upton Collection". Robin too, however, got into trouble for picking up those stones. His boss chastised him for being just a little bit too distracted by clues to the area's past, as, eyes on the lookout for old flint axes, Robin drove his tractor over the fields.

Today, Gumber Farm is still part of the Slindon Estate, now owned and managed by the National Trust, some of whose staff live in the former farmworkers' cottages. There's a bothy, offering simple accommodation, and Gumber remains a working farm. When a team of Secrets of the High Woods volunteers visited the area for an archaeological field survey in January 2016, to check features on the ground picked up by the LiDAR survey, one of our members made an unexpected discovery - a sheep which had become trapped in a Second World War air raid shelter. We told the grateful shepherd, who was able to free the ewe. That day, we experienced four seasons in a few hours, from summer-like sunshine and blue skies, to brooding clouds and harsh winter hail stinging our faces. It was a reminder of the hard life for those living and working on the land. All the harder for William Parlett, his family and workers, who left in such turmoil all those years ago.