

Marjorie Gibbs 1899–1992

Marjorie Gibbs was a founder and life member of the Reepham Society and in my early days as magazine secretary she contacted me and offered me assistance with whatever detail she could supply in connection with prospective articles about Reepham.

In recent years I had made a number of visits to Marjorie and had spent many interested hours in her sitting room, listening, discussing and learning of the minutiae of Reepham detail that her memory so prodigiously recalled.

One afternoon in the early summer of 1992 I went to see Marjorie at The Laurels, her home in Dereham Road, Reepham, as I wanted some additional information about the Black Diamonds, a local minstrel troupe which performed in Reepham in the years just before and after the First World War – a troupe which included her father, who was a founder and subsequently a leading member.

As usual we sat and talked in her sitting room, a room that could recall a family's history and events that reflected the past century, a room that breathed memories and nostalgia. Here was the bureau that Marjorie so often went to, to find some item that contributed to her particular topic of conversation. Photographs of her father and his business, old account books that clarified a point, somewhere one of the drawers held "the bones" that her father fashioned and then used when he was one of the four cornermen in the Black Diamonds. Her father was Edward Gibbs, who figured greatly for many years in the business, parochial and religious life in Reepham and many words must have passed between the members of his family as to how the town would organise, cope with and enjoy coronations, jubilees and other celebrations and how the families in this close rural area would cope with the tragic unfurling of events of both World Wars, particularly the first which was to take the lives of so many young men of the area, many of whom Marjorie knew and whose names she could so easily recall.

Disasters, happiness, grief and joy – this room could recall them all; the pictures, the carpets, the furniture, some of it decades old, was seeping with this memory. Its very presence recalled clearly to Marjorie her life; a life synonymous with Reepham. Her childhood spent in Reepham when this area of North Norfolk was still decidedly rural – a ruralness of silence, of dusty roads rutted by horses and cartwheels, a countryside innocent of oil and petrol. A youth spent in the slow and timeless years leading up to the First World War and in a small market town which was the central point of business for the surrounding area. A time when work was hard and long and when many weeks of endless work were intermittently broken only by the high days and holidays that the town organised and enjoyed.

At this visit, which so unfortunately turned out to be my last, she recalled the Black Diamonds and particularly the fete in the summer of 1912 at which the troupe gave their first and possibly their best-loved performance. Her memory brought back details of that day nearly 80 years ago as though she remembered it from yesterday. How at 12 years of age she had helped with the refreshments and how her father had allowed her to stay up late and go back for the evening entertainment.

Marjorie spoke of the friends she met and with whom she enjoyed herself, and her recollections of that day vividly described an era of Reepham's history that is long past and sadly no longer in the recall of most local people.

Many times Marjorie put her memories into the written word with articles in local publications, earnestly reflecting the oral history that on many occasions I was privileged to enjoy. It is ironic that this latest Reepham Society publication contains three articles which reflect the ability and detail that Marjorie could offer; their inclusion was planned long before her death and I have no hesitation in dedicating them to her memory. She had a great love for Reepham, its history and its inhabitants and the town has lost a dear friend with her passing. May Marjorie Gibbs long and fondly remain in its memory.

Michael Black

From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine, 1993