

## Childhood memories of Reepham

*By Ann Dickinson*

*This account of life in Reepham in the 1920s and 1930s was handed to the chairman recently. Mrs Ann Dickinson now lives in Hunstanton but she was born in Reepham, a member of the Gibbs family who have contributed so much to the records of the recent past of the town. Ann's parents were married in 1918 and she was born in 1923. She looks back on her childhood in Reepham with great affection.*

After receiving a copy of the Reepham Society Magazine from my life-long friend Peggy Hurn, I began to reflect on my wealth of memories of Reepham. To begin...

At the age of three years, we attended Miss Bull's kindergarten, situated at the back of the Brewery House. There was me and Peggy and her brother John, Pat Hall, Kenneth Hilton and Joyce Wagg. A year or two after, we were attending dancing classes at Miss Holah's at Rookery Farm. The dancing school put on shows for parents and friends at the town hall. I remember dancing in *The Wedding of the Painted Doll* with John Kerridge, son of the bank manager, who was Jumping Jack.

Sunday school was conducted by Donald Chapman who, with his sister Olive, ran the post office at Iona House.<sup>1</sup> Donald ran a flourishing and well-attended Sunday school. We had wonderful outings and prize-givings. Miss Wasey taught the senior children and, when we reached her class, she insisted that we learned the Collect for the coming Sunday off by heart and we had to recite it in turn. I remember her with great affection and appreciation.

My mother was organist at St Michael's when the Rev. Geake was the incumbent at Whitwell Rectory. Both churches were used for Sunday worship then. Frequently, the congregation of St Michael's would still be waiting for the sermon to end when we could hear the congregation in St Mary's singing their last hymn. The Rev. Moore, in charge of St Mary's, invariably finished his service first! With the retirement of the Rev. Moore, and when the Rev. Geake left the parish in the early 1930s, the parishes of Reepham with Kerdiston and Whitwell with Hackford were finally united into one parish. The Rev. B.P. Lipscombe was installed and the present communicating door constructed between St Mary's vestry and the chancel of St Michael's.

Often, I had to pump the organ for my mother, watching a lead weight rise and fall, paying attention so that it should not fall below a certain mark otherwise the organ let out a tremendous sigh and faded out. Mother had played a church organ from the age of 14 and she later took over St Mary's from a Miss Jewel. The Rev. Lipscombe

---

<sup>1</sup> Iona House is in the Market Place and is now Diane's Pantry. The post office was where Meloncaulie Rose now trades.

was extremely musical and could coax ability from the least able. Under his jurisdiction my mother became an excellent organist.

We had a fantastic choir under his leadership, singing oratorios at special church festivals – the *Messiah*, *Elijah*, *Olivet to Calvary*, to mention just a few. Occasionally we incorporated the voice of Mr Broad from Heydon although Donald Chapman did very well in solos, supported by his fellow tenors, Fred Alford among them. Apart from church music, various members of the choir founded a group to entertain during the year, putting on many Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. This group included Donald and Olive Chapman, Elsie Varley, Mabel Utting and Mr Cocking. The latter ran a boot and shoe shop, which later became Gwen Hardesty's fruit and vegetable shop and is now the bridal shop.

The Market Place was a grandstand for the Reepham Town Silver Band under the baton of Mr Ruffles from Fakenham. When the weather was kind, and it invariably was, they played for the town's entertainment after the evening service at church on Sundays until nine or ten o'clock. Reepham also boasted a fine Salvation Army Band. They shared the Market Place as their meeting place on alternate weeks. I have memories, too, of carol singing with the choir and the hand-bell ringers in the snow.

In those days, the seasons seemed more seasonable! In the spring we would pick primroses at Broomhill, snowdrops grew like a carpet at Catchback and the perfume from the violets at Reepham Moor was unbelievable.

Father, who was invalided out of the navy with tuberculosis, put his talents to good effect when he settled in Reepham. My mother loved to tell of when motor cars became the "in thing". My father built one around an engine and chassis and, so anxious to try it out was he, that one Sunday afternoon he drove mother and an aunt and uncle to Cromer and back. Father, being the driver, sat on the kitchen chair and his passengers on upturned orange boxes. The sides of the car consisted of chicken wire draped with old curtains but when they reached 10 mph the curtains flapped alarmingly and had to be removed!

In between bouts of illness, Father dabbled in photography, watch and clock mending, garage and battery charging and, when confined to bed, built models, two of which, a ship and traction engine, drum and elevator (threshing machine) were housed with the Reepham Society.<sup>2</sup>

Mother started a business making hats, which flourished and this eventually became a fully-fledged drapery, millinery, tobacco and confectionery shop.

---

<sup>2</sup> We still have the threshing machine, but does anyone know what has happened to the ship?

The garage, erected to service the growing car trade, was built at the rear and side of the shop, over an old Baptist immersion pool. This site has now been rebuilt as Lesley Tooley's hairdressers and Reepham DIY. I am sure it needed very little demolishing as it was built chiefly of corrugated iron but the side facing our garden was all glass, consisting of photographic plates of almost every photograph my father ever took. Part of the garage was given over to the engine room where Father had a generator from which he produced electricity and proudly wired our house – the first in Reepham to have electric light. This was in 1928 or thereabouts. He also made me a doll's house and fitted that with battery-powered electric light.

Towards the end of my father's life I remember that the trees in our orchard had to be felled as they were old and barren. They had given shelter to the goats and bantams that we kept there. Mother's ambition of having a tennis court built in the old orchard began to take shape. Father wanted to oversee the project and make sure the ground was quite level. This proved a problem because he was now on constant oxygen. Not to be thwarted, he asked Dick Hatley, who worked with him, to get an inner tube from a car wheel and inflate it with oxygen, added a piece of rubber tube to connect with the valve and, by slinging the tube over his shoulder with a clip to control the flow of oxygen, he was able to walk up the garden and inspect the new tennis court for himself, returning before the tube was deflated.

We were now able to have tennis parties, comprising Donald and Olive Chapman, Jean Hawes, Evan Symonds, Ricky and John Lambert, Ruby Barnes, Len Wilkinson, mother and myself. My great friend Peggy Hurn and I had other delights in common. Her father, and both of my uncles, Edward Gibbs senior and junior, were among the company which formed the "Black Minstrel Troupe".

We look back with such affection to our childhood in our beloved Reepham.

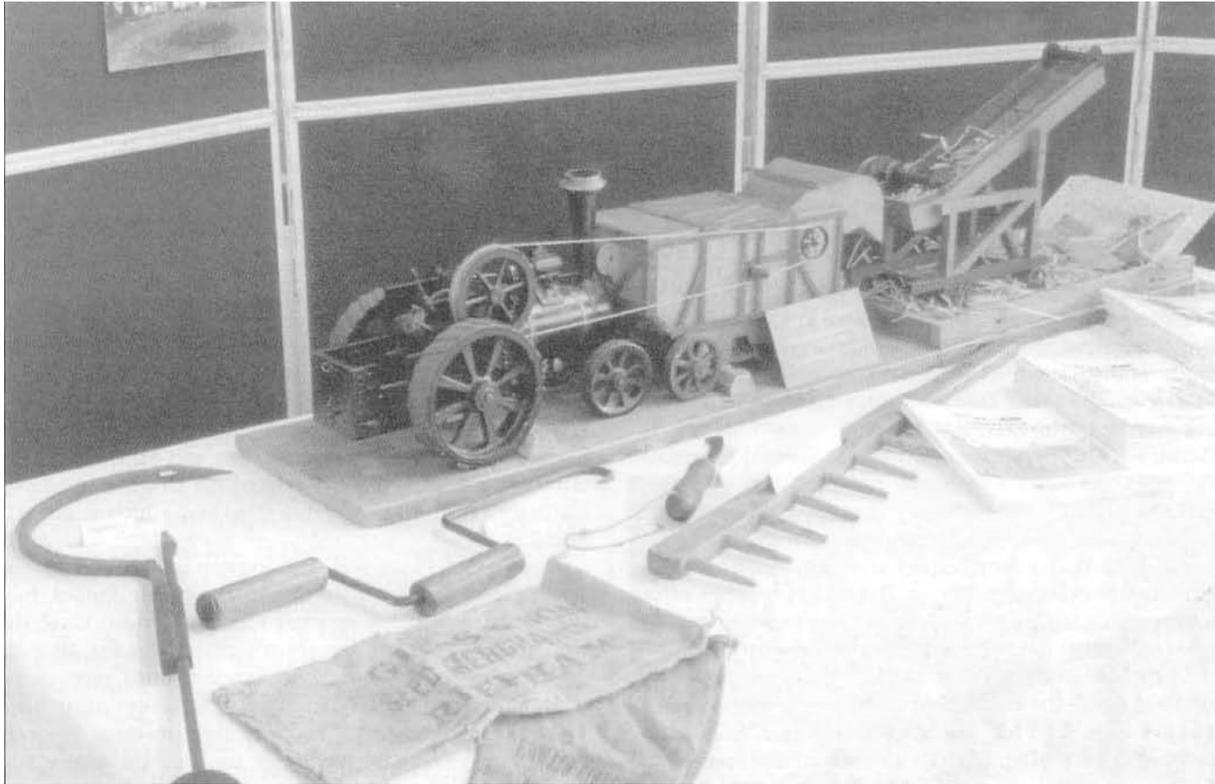
*From the Reepham Society Magazine, Millennium Edition, April 2001*



*The Reepham Post Office and postmen in 1913. In those days it occupied what is now Meloncaulie Rose. It is possible to recognise the door into the café at Diane's Pantry on the left.*



*Rev. Geake with members of his choir outside the porch of St Michael's.*



*This model combine harvester was made by Fred J Gibbs and was later presented to the Reepham Society. In this photograph it was on display with other agricultural implements at our previous Historical Exhibition.*



*A tennis party at Towns End Corner. Ann Gibbs (now Dickinson) is seated on the right next to her mother.*



*This was the site of the shop formerly run by Mr and Mrs Fred J Gibbs at Towns End Corner. It has now been pulled down and replaced by the new development containing a hairdresser, DIY shop and electrical shop.*