

## George William Reeve

George Reeve died in May 1984, aged 94, after a very active and eventful life; his return to this area in the late 1940s quickly earned him the apt description of “village lad made good”. He was born in Bawdeswell, where his parents kept a public house, in December 1890 but after about three years the family moved to a house in Booton Street.

He started his education at Booton School, but for some reason he couldn't settle down and it seems that the remainder of his schooling took place at Lyng where he went to live with his grandmother. An early job, possibly during the school holidays or shortly after he left school, was as “odd job boy” at the Moor House. One task was attending to the pumping of water to a tank situated at the top of the house by a mule driving a pump in the garden.

The clearance of undergrowth at the Moor House in the last year or so has uncovered this old pump situated in the corner near The Moor turning, off the Norwich Road; the remains of the machinery are clearly visible to passers by.

Little is known about the next few years but in his later teens he worked in London for a corn merchant and even managed to purchase a car, quite an achievement around 1908, although on his own admission he “had to run it mainly on paraffin to keep expenses down!”. While in London he became friendly with some American students who apparently spoke highly of prospects in the United States so George decided to go with them when they returned to their homeland, selling his car to pay for his passage, but being completely broke on arrival.

Throughout his life George would always find a use for his undoubted talents and making use of his motoring experience he obtained employment as a chauffeur with a well-to-do American family. Around 1914 he obtained a job with a government construction firm in Washington (New Jersey) which with the outbreak of war in Europe became engaged almost totally in producing war supplies. He was there for just a few years and during this relatively short period he enjoyed remarkable employment success, rising to the position of chief inspector by 1918. One of his most treasured possessions was a silver cup presented to him in 1918 at a dinner given in his honour by his own staff; it was inscribed “as a token of esteem by his inspectors and checkers”.

This dinner and presentation was recorded in the local paper at the time:

*Washington Park (NJ) Government Man Honoured 18 May 1918*

*A party of 35 men inspectors and checkers from Woodbury and vicinity gave a theatre party Thursday night in Philadelphia to their chief George W. Reeve.*

*After the theatre, the gentlemen were escorted to Krugler's magnificent banquet hall where a well-loaded table provided for all the wants of the inner man.*

*Many pleasant after-dinner speeches were made, Mr W J Charlton acting as toastmaster.*

*Bobbie Nash of Billy Watson Co., now playing at the Casino Theatre, was an honoured guest and pleased the boys with many anecdotes and stories. Mr Charles Hill presided at the piano and with his delicate touch brought forth melodies that inspired the boys to do the two-step. During the evening Capt. C P Budd on behalf of his fellow employees presented an inscribed cup to Mr Reeve who responded with a few well-chosen words, heartily thanking everyone for their loyalty and support.*

After the war there was a decline in the type of work that he had been involved with during the past few years and he decided he wanted to make his way so he traded on his own in the business of removals; he built this up and for a number of years was successful and employed several drivers to carry out the work. The large influx of immigrants to the USA in the early post-war years meant there was a considerable transient population at this time and George's decision to be his own boss was more than justified.

Information about the next few years is hazy. These were the years of the Wall Street Crash and the Depression which hit America so hard and then spread over most of the major manufacturing countries of the world. During the mid/late 1920s George had some connection with the manufacture and selling of oil burner stoves with the trade name of "Islander".



It is not known whether George dealt with the “Islander” as a sideline to his removal business, whether the manufacture and selling was carried out under licence or whether George actually invented the stove.

After a gap of nearly 30 years George returned to England in July 1936 but, as he had acquired American citizenship in the previous years, he was only allowed an Alien Permit to land for six months and with no authority to find or enter into any employment. After a few months he returned to America but came back in 1939 with permission to stay for 12 months.

For a time he stayed with his sister, Mrs Muddle, at Lyng and for some time at his parents’ house at Booton. In 1940 he stayed at a hotel in Thetford which seems to have had something to do with the restrictions on his activities as he was still classified as an alien. He had by then managed to acquire another car and, according to an entry in his passport, was officially “allowed to use his car in connection with his business”, whatever that was at the time. In February 1941 he was exempted from the “Alien Restriction Order” on such occasions as when called upon for ambulance duties, and unconditionally exempted in October 1941.

Soon after the end of the war he started building a house on the Norwich Road/Moor Corner in Reepham. This was a house with a character entirely of its own and built in the American style with a big basement and an off-the-ground veranda which went all round the building. George made the hollow concrete blocks for the walls and he also made individually the concrete and sand-red tiles. The house was centrally heated with an automatic burner using diesel oil which was thermostatically controlled with the main unit situated in the basement. In 1946 such a unit in a house in this country was indeed unusual, but his years’ manufacturing the “Islander” obviously played a great part in the innovation. The unit provided heating for the whole house as well as producing the domestic hot water.

George moved into this house, always known as “New House”, Norwich Road, thereafter, in 1946 and within a few years had developed the garden; pedestrians along the Booton end of the Norwich Road were well rewarded as they glanced through the open gateway with a vista of well laid-out flower beds and quasi-natural shrubberies. He established a tyre business in a separate building which was situated just inside the gateway and he carried on with this until the mid-1960s although one of the large metal signs remained visible to passers-by until the house was sold.

On the domestic side of his life it appears that George at some time married a British girl who joined him in America but could not settle to the life there. She returned to this country and they were subsequently divorced; there was one son from the marriage. George later married an American girl and his son from that marriage is

still in America. It seems that this marriage was over before he came back to this country in 1936.

During the last 10 years of his life George's health declined and he received devoted care from his housekeeper, Mrs Betts, who gave much assistance in the original compiling of the notes that led to this article.

For many years there was an ironwork seat which stood on the Moor Corner looking up the Norwich Road towards Booton Street. George placed it there and cemented it in when he heard that the authorities were planning to widen the road by taking in the wide green verge, which he claimed belonged to him. At that time, the road was not widened and the seat remained. A number of years later (and after George had died) it was widened and the seat was moved to the opposite side of the road.

Sadly little remains today of the items that George so profoundly stamped on this corner of Reepham. The house has been replaced and his garden and shrubberies were swiftly and sadly removed by mechanical digger. The outbuildings, the metal advertising signs and the ironwork seat are now gone. It is ironic that the only thing that George would recognise today is the remains of the mule-driven pump in the corner of the Moor House grounds – the one item that was there before all the others!

*From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine, 1993*



The Reeve family circa 1900 at Booton. George is next to his mother, and the other boy is Walter who lived at Hackford Vale and for many years ran a carrier business' he was also a JP and served on the local bench. In the centre is Violet (now Mrs Muddle); in 1984 at the age of 96 she drove up from her home in Kent to visit George.



The "New House" shortly before it was sold in the late 1980s.