

The Bircham Centre

At the beginning of the 20th century the building now known as the Bircham Centre was Hackford House, the home of Mr and Mrs John Spencer. In 1911, after the death of her husband, Florence Spencer went to live in Norwich with her sister-in-law, Fanny Wellsman Spencer, the house having been sold by Fanny to Samuel Bircham.

During the First World War Sam Bircham handed over the main building to be used as a Red Cross Hospital, the north wing being retained for use by his daughter-in-law, Agnes.

After the war in 1919 the main building was renamed the Bircham Institute and conveyed by Sam Bircham as a war memorial to be "a Reading Room and Club for the use of the inhabitants of the respective parishes of Reepham, Kerdiston, Hackford next Reepham and Whitwell and other adjoining parishes".

The management and control vested with the following trustees:

- Edward Verdon Perry – Medical Practitioner of Hackford
- Anthony Creak – Clerk in Holy Orders of Whitwell
- William Robert Collyer – Squire of Hackford
- Richard Watts Austin – Butcher of Hackford
- Herbert Temple Owen – Bank Manager of Reepham
- John Sharpe – Farmer of Kerdiston.

In his will written in 1922 Samuel Bircham left the rest of the building, the north wing, to the trustees in exchange for an annuity of £10 to be paid to his daughter-in-law Agnes during her life or for 30 years, whichever should be the shorter.

Samuel Bircham died on June 4th 1923 and probate was granted to his executors, Sir Bernard Bircham, Brigadier General Charles Scudamore and Arthur Ricardo. The following year Agnes Bircham signed over the northern wing on behalf of Merrick Bircham, her son, and four years later both properties were vested with the Charity Commissioners.

Since then over the years the trustees have, of course, changed, but the system of management remained the same until 1979 when a more representative scheme of management was drawn up. The building was from then to be managed by three members elected by the people of Reepham at the annual general meeting and 10 representative members of local organisations, the Parish Council, the Parochial Church Council, the Methodist Church, Young Farmers, Women's Institute, Oddfellows, British Legion, Red Cross, Scouts and the Reepham Society. This list has been amended recently to replace discontinued organisations.

In 1985 a massive refurbishment plan for the Bircham was launched – the name was changed to the Bircham Centre and so far, £36,000 has been spent.

Sam Bircham gave Reepham a magnificent gift. Does Reepham appreciate it? I wonder!

Jan Henry

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