

Reepham personalities and institutions

At the beginning of this century Reepham was a small Norfolk market town with long-established families living in a smaller community than today. They all knew each other very well, often being related by marriage, mostly working locally in the town or on the surrounding farms and estates. Some of the older families still remain and have contributed immensely to the records of the recent past of Reepham.

As Reepham has grown and new houses are constantly built, new people have increasingly moved into the town. Many of them will be unaware of the contributions to the community made by former inhabitants and the origins of some Reepham institutions. Following the long gap since the publication of the last Reepham Society Magazine, this seems an appropriate time to record a little about some of those who have contributed to the life of the town and who have helped to make Reepham the lively and caring community that it is.

One message which comes over very strongly, even in these short profiles, is just how much people's lives were disrupted by the effects of the two World Wars of the last century.

Jessie Brown MBE

Jessie Vera Lawford Brown died on 14 April 1983 at the age of 95. She had a remarkable career, one achievement being the foundation of the Reepham Housing Trust – eight bungalows for the elderly or disabled known as Sun Barn Walk. “My hope is that there will be accommodation of this kind in every village in the country,” she said.

Jessie was the only daughter among the seven children of Colonel F.D.M. Brown VC. Her early education was directed by a series of governesses but, later, she studied history at the Oxford Home Students, now St Anne's College. Her academic career was discarded when she joined her friend, Olive Sankey, and answered an appeal from Agnes Hunt,¹ the founder of a new hospital at Baschurch in Shropshire, to train as an orthopaedic nurse. After two years, Jessie went on to pass the examination for the Society of Trained Masseuses, later to become the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists. At the outbreak of war in 1914, Agnes and Jessie went to France but were very soon frustrated with conditions over there and returned to Baschurch which had then become a

¹ Agnes Brown and Sir Robert Jones, a pioneer orthopaedic surgeon, were responsible for the foundation of the orthopaedic hospital in Oswestry which carries their names and remains one of the leading orthopaedic hospitals in the country.

military hospital. It soon became obvious that after-care clinics had to be established in the main market towns in Shropshire but transport was a problem. Undaunted, Jessie acquired a second-hand motor bike, learned to ride it and, by 1917, 13 orthopaedic clinics had been established throughout Shropshire. In 1918 Mr G.R. Girlestone asked Jessie to help set up clinics in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. He could offer no salary but arranged a small sum from a special Red Cross fund if a survey of all disabled people could be carried out – just the sort of challenge Jessie enjoyed.

In 1924 Sir Robert Jones, the prominent orthopaedic pioneer, received a call from Nepal. Princess Mani, the five-year-old niece of the King of Nepal, was ill with poliomyelitis and it was decided to send Jessie to help. Within three days she had set off by sea to Bombay, then overland to Kathmandu. There was no road from India into Nepal in those days so Jessie was carried or rode on the back of an elephant for the three-day journey. During the next 10 years Jessie visited this brave little girl several times and after Mani's death in 1935 a ward was built in the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre as a gift from her grateful parents.

Everyone who knew Jessie Brown was constantly reminded of her aims – that every patient must be instilled with the joy of life, irrespective of their handicap, and that one must work until each disabled person is as independent as possible and able to contribute to their community. It became necessary for Jessie to return home to Yateley to look after her ageing mother but she soon had the outbuildings of her home converted to be a unit where physically handicapped people could learn hand-block printing. Grace Finch, a patient at the Henley Clinic, was persuaded to go to Yateley to help and, together, they soon had money raised and a training scheme for handicapped girls was launched. New buildings were opened in 1952 and bungalows in 1956. Yateley Industries is a successful residential sheltered industry and employs more than 40 men and women.

Jessie placed little importance on personal possessions and was able to move on without regret, always full of enthusiasm for a new venture. In 1952 her work was recognised by the award of an MBE, but she was always far more interested in the success of her many projects. In 1968 Jessie “retired” to Reepham. It was during her retirement that she became the inspiration behind the building of the eight bungalows on Sun Barn Walk which formed the core of the Reepham Housing Trust. Today, the trust is managed as a charity by local trustees, sharing a warden with the Wherry Housing in Ewing Close. Many in the town feel privileged that she touched our lives and hope to pass on her enthusiasm and joy of living to the full.

We are grateful to Jan Henry for this piece on Jessie Brown.

Ben Stimpson

Ben Stimpson was born at Salle Moor Farm in 1910, a member of a well-known local family here in mid-Norfolk. He is a forceful and well-respected character in both Salle and Reepham and has given much service to the two communities, both as an active member of a number of organisations and as a benefactor to the communities. The Stimpson family farmed at Salle Moor for several generations as well as running the family business based in Reepham. It was Ben's grandfather who opened the Salle Coal Company at Reepham Station, a company that continued in business as a general agricultural merchant under several names until 1980.



Ben Stimpson

Some of you will have read the book on Salle written by the Rev. Parsons who was vicar of Salle from the early 1920s until after the Second World War. It was Rev. Parsons who married Ben and his wife Margaret in 1937. They came to live in Salle House, the house in which they still live, and Ben gradually took on the management of the family business as well as his other work in the community. For many years he was chairman of the Salle Parish Meeting and succeeded his father as churchwarden there, a post which he held for more than 40 years. Added to his father's tenure of 50 years this gives nearly a century of continuous service to Salle church by the Stimpson family. To this can be added the tireless work of Margaret who was also a member of the parochial church council (PCC). The role of churchwarden was not a sinecure as there have been a number of major problems, including a lightning strike, in keeping up the fabric of Salle church – one of the medieval gems of rural Norfolk – as well as the day-to-day

routine of the church. It is largely due to Ben's efforts that Salle church has been able to maintain itself so successfully in recent years. A tribute for this work for the church was published in the November 2000 issue of *Town and Country* when Ben retired as churchwarden and was given a tremendous send-off by the congregation. Needless to say he remains a member of the PCC.

During the war Ben played his part in the local Home Guard as well as helping his father with the family businesses. The activities of the Salle and Reepham platoon are well documented in *Standing up to Hitler*² which tells the tale of the Home Guard in Norfolk. It was Ben Stimpson who provided the comprehensive records of the local units which now form a considerable portion of that book. Ben had led the local platoon since May 1940 but by the latter part of the war the 17th Battalion Norfolk Home Guard was based in Reepham with its headquarters at The Bays in Norwich Road and led by Lt Colonel G.E. Gurney with Ben as his second-in-command. Duties included airfield defence, defence of bridges and liaison with other units backed up by weekly training and regular battle exercises.



Ben Stimpson leading the local Home Guard contingent at a parade in Reepham.

Stimpson's Piece

Perhaps the most memorable mention of the Stimpson name to present-day Reepham residents is in reference to Stimpson's Piece. This piece of land was originally six acres, leased to the parish of Reepham by the Stimpson family for

² 1997. A. Hoare: *Standing up to Hitler*. The Story of the Norfolk Home Guard. Published by Geo. R. Reeve, Wymondham. ISBN 0 900616 50 4.

use as a playing field. Following the Second World War a pavilion was built as a war memorial and in thanksgiving for victory. The pavilion has been rebuilt since then but the memorial plaque remains in the present pavilion built in 1995. In 1987 the land was gifted to Reepham and extended by the parish council with a further seven acres to form the present Stimpson's Piece.

Despite all he has contributed to Reepham, Salle remains Ben's first love and he has become closely identified with that village and, as you can imagine, he knows a very great deal about Salle, its past, its present and its people.

Wesley Piercy

Wesley Piercy is the man we all turn to when we want to find some elusive detail of the past of Reepham. Wesley was born in Reepham in 1917, in a farmhouse on Saleyard Hill. For those who are comparative newcomers to Reepham, this was the old road going up from Town's End Corner towards the old sale yard and curving up behind the cottages which presently look down onto Station Road. Later, the family moved to Cabbage Court – Railway Cottages on New Road – before moving back to the farm until 1940. After leaving the Hackford and Whitwell School, now the site of Reepham Primary School, Wesley first of all worked in Cawston before going as apprentice to Reeder's, the baker in Back Street. The premises were known as "house and baking office" and are now represented by the house known as The Old Bakery.



Wesley Piercy

Although he had moved just before the war to work in Wells, as a member of the Supplementary Reserve, Wesley was called up immediately. He had quite an interesting war. He went out with the British Expeditionary Force to France in 1939. In the confusion of the retreat from France, Wesley was separated from his

unit when he had a brief spell in hospital. He was discharged from hospital to the base depot near St Nazaire which was then being readied for a division of Canadian troops who were, at this stage, the only available unit still fully equipped to fight. However, it became necessary to evacuate all troops following the capitulation of France.

Wesley then spent the next six months out in England before embarking for the Middle East and the Western Desert in 1941. His unit was now with an army group later known as the Desert Rats (the Eighth Army) which then crossed to Sicily and fought its way up Italy. In 1944 "time expired" men were replaced by new recruits and Wesley returned to the UK. He then returned to Aldershot where he found that all the bakehouse jobs had been taken over by the women of the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service]. After the end of the war Wesley was demobbed in 1946.

As you can imagine, returning to civilian life was somewhat of a culture shock and Wesley left baking for more active jobs. He eventually found his way into the Eastern Electricity Board, for whom he worked for 23 years until he retired in 1982. His love for history and the past of the Reepham area was never lost. A number of historians and archaeologists had an interest in the local history and ran a number of WEA [Workers' Educational Association] courses in Reepham during the 1970s. Wesley enthusiastically joined to expand his knowledge of the past.

Following his retirement in 1982 he was able to follow up his great interest in history. He started an Open University course, wherever possible completing history units, to qualify for his Bachelor of Arts. His life also changed in another way around this time when he met his wife Olive on holiday. By this time, the Piercys were living in the bungalow where Wesley and Olive still live in Park Lane. As a result of his encyclopaedic knowledge of Reepham and its people Wesley has spoken to many organisations in the town over the years. He remains an active member of the Reepham Society – and still the fount of knowledge on the past of the town.

Tony Ivins

Tony Ivins remains the president of the Reepham Society to this day though increasing age and frailty prevent his active involvement. He was also a founder member and, with Susie his wife, a driving force in the development of the society. Born in South London in 1915, Tony gained a diploma in animal husbandry at an agricultural college in the south of England. In the late 1930s, he joined the staff of the Forest School in Hampshire. The school was a progressive co-educational boarding school in the New Forest. Its ethos was to teach

children how to respect the countryside and make use of natural resources. In 1938 the school had to move to new premises and an educational trust was set up to enable the purchase of Whitwell Hall and grounds. This is where Tony met Susie Dommen who became the matron at the new Forest School where Tony was now the bursar. Not long after the move the Second World War broke out, the school was evacuated and the army requisitioned the hall.



Tony Ivins

Tony enlisted in the air force where he became a navigator. His war years were spent in Africa where his squadron's role was to reinforce the British role by ferrying diplomats and heads of state around the country. From this he acquired an abiding love of Africa and has many albums of photographs from that time, especially aerial views. Meanwhile, Susie joined the Land Army and worked as a farm secretary at Sparham Hall. At the end of the war Tony and Susie were married and returned to Whitwell in 1946. Due to the financial costs involved, a decision was made not to re-open the school. Instead, Tony set up a pig farm at Whitwell Hall which brought in sufficient finance to enable Tony to set up a country centre offering schoolchildren an opportunity to enjoy a week under canvas, or in the house, and to experience the country, the wildlife and the natural resources. Tony and Susie's children, Sally and Hugh, were born here and Hugh still lives with his family in one of the cottages which was bought from the estate.

Tony came to love Whitwell as well as the educational trust which had always been dear to his heart. It was his interest in finding out about Whitwell and its past which stimulated Tony's broader interest in history. With Susie's drive and enthusiasm, they not only developed the country centre at Whitwell but gave a great deal to the village and to Reepham. It is largely due to them and several

other early members of the Reepham Society that we have been able to develop such comprehensive archives for the society. Tony's work at Whitwell Hall enabled him to meet numerous well-known Norfolk folk. His friends included Ted Ellis, Dick Joyce and Philip Wayre of the Norfolk Wildlife Centre who shared many of his interests. Tony was also chairman of the Norfolk Deaf Children's Society and one year he was able to show the Queen Mother round the NDCS stand at the Royal Norfolk Show.



A young Tony Ivins working with older boys in the kitchen garden.

As wardens of Whitwell Hall, Tony and Susie had lived in the hall itself but when he retired, they moved to Hillside Cottage on Whitwell Hill. Tony now became chairman of the country centre and continued his life-long work for Whitwell Hall and its 40-acre estate.

Whitwell Hall Educational Trust

A great many people are unaware of the existence of the Whitwell Hall Country Centre, its unique history and unusual development. We think it is worth telling a little more about one more interesting aspect of the Reepham group of parishes. Whitwell Hall itself was, of course, a private house. The previous history of the hall, park and deserted medieval village has been described elsewhere in earlier

Reepham Society magazines, often relying on information from Tony Ivins himself.

Forest School was started in 1928 near Godshill in the New Forest and consisted of 100 acres of woodland overlooking the Avon valley in Hampshire. It was bought by Earnest Westlake, the son of a Quaker and wealthy industrialist from Fordingbridge. He became a humanist and educationalist and, as a result, founded the order of Woodcraft Chivalry – the Woodcraft Folk – where families met together under canvas, later in huts, and learned to live in and appreciate the natural environment. Loosely built on the ideas and culture of the North American Indians, its aim was to enable children to find out about themselves by offering opportunities for development and self-discipline rather than by imposing learning and discipline. Other schools, such as Dartington and Summerhill, developed from similar roots as did organisations like the Guides and Scouts.

After the war, it was decided by Tony and Susie and the school secretary, who lived in Cambridge, not to re-open as a school as such a large financial investment would be required to renovate and repair the buildings. Instead, Tony set about earning an income for the trust by utilising his training in animal husbandry and set up the pig farm in the existing outbuildings on the site. Each summer, former pupils of Forest School continued the tradition of camping activities with their families until the late 1950s when the Forest School was set up again to continue elsewhere.

In the early 1960s contacts were established with teachers and education authorities in Norfolk and Suffolk at a time when such bodies were keen to encourage children to spend time out of doors. From this grew a thriving Country Centre which continues to provide opportunities for many groups of children to spend a week or weekend camping in the grounds, or living in dormitories, while undertaking country activities which are totally new for some city children.

Tony Ivins, the original warden of Whitwell Hall, was assisted by Susie as house mother until the 1970s. By this time, it was necessary to take on more staff. Sue and Brian Evans joined the staff and later took over the running of the centre which they continue to manage down to the present. On his retirement, Tony became chairman of the trust and worked tirelessly for the centre, a role which his son, Hugh, has now taken on after him. The Country Centre is always looking for ways to broaden its activities and a number of local groups and pupils from Reepham High School use the house and grounds for a variety of activities. Any group can contact Brian and Sue Evans to see if the centre can accommodate

their requirements – always bearing in mind that it is limited by its status as an educational trust.

Our grateful thanks to Hugh Ivins for his help in preparing this profile of his father and the outline of the development of the Whitwell Hall Country Centre.

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