

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2024

Alf Beckford, a true Wargravian - Maureen Prince

Wargrave Local History Society meetings when local Wargrave residents recall their memories of the village in time past are always popular. In October Maureen Prince, who was born and grew up in the parish, shared some of her family history, starting with her father, Alf Beckford.

Alfred was also a true Wargravian, the son of Agnes Annie and James John Beckford, having been born on 28th November 1894 in Jessamine Cottage in Tag Lane, at Hare Hatch, where his family had lived for more than a century.

Alf became a pupil at the Piggott (now junior) school. He would have to walk there and back each day on unmade roads, without any street lighting, which would have been especially difficult in the winter. At the turn of the century, pupils arriving at the school had to go to the back to enter the building, as only dignitaries and school managers were allowed to use the front entrance. Although many of the families were relatively poor at that time, the pupils looked well dressed, with their waistcoats and flat caps.



Pupils at the Piggott School in the early 1900s, with Alf Beckford stood on the far right

Alf became one of the first members of the Wargrave Scout troop, which was formed in 1909. In 1979 the Scouts marked their 70th anniversary at an event in the Woodclyffe Hall, where Alf - by then aged 84 - was welcomed by the Wargrave Scout leader, Michael Pope. A special celebration cake had been made by Mrs Froud, with the icing decoration by Janet Elliott depicting various Scout badges, and - surrounded by the Cubs of the time - Alf was invited to perform the ceremonial cutting of the cake. At the same occasion, Scouts Mark Elliott and Julian Sheppard received their Chief Scout Award, whilst four of the Cubs - John Buchanan, Andrew Dudley, James Freeman, and Andrew Parsons - received the Jubilee Cub Award for the best all round spirit of Scouting during the year.

As was normal at the time, Alf left school at the age of 14. He then embarked on an apprenticeship, learning the trade of a hairdresser at Charlie Lunn's shop in Wargrave High Street. When the barber's shop was less busy, he was also taught how to make umbrellas and parasols - in due course, the first present he gave to his fiancée being a white parasol.

Having completed his apprenticeship, Alf was then called up for military service in February 1916, being enlisted into the Royal Engineers, and attached to the Royal Signals Corps. He was described in the military papers as an electrician, his task being to run out the cables along the military lines from on horseback. By the time the war ended in 1918, he had been promoted to be a Lance Corporal, and was then enrolled into the Army Reserve in September 1919.

After the war, Alf returned to hairdressing. At first this was in Christchurch, in Hampshire, then he moved to Staines in Middlesex, before returning to Berkshire, where he worked in Maidenhead. As well as gaining more experience, he could earn more than if he directly returned to work for Charlie Lunn!



*Holt Cottage, Hare Hatch
- Alf's family home for over 50 years*

It was whilst he was working in Maidenhead that he met Dorothy Taylor at a local skating rink. Her father had been chauffeur to William Grenfell, later Lord Desborough, of Taplow Court. Sadly, Dorothy's father caught pneumonia, and died at the age of 35, but the Grenfell's were kind, and allowed her mother to stay in the cottage at Taplow, and also gave her a pension. Alf and Dorothy were married at St. Nicolas Church, Taplow, in 1923. Within a couple of years, they had moved to Wargrave, living at 'Dene Croft', where their first daughter, Phyllis Rosina was born. The family later moved to 'Holt Cottage', next to the 'Queen Victoria', and this became Alf's home for over 50 years. It was here that their second daughter, Maureen, was born in 1939. Maureen recalled that it was the work of Dr John McCrea that enabled her to be born - and that when it was time for her to have injections, his hand would be shaking as he did so.

There were many fruit trees in the garden at Holt Cottage - including Blenheim apples, damsons, Victoria plums, peaches and cherries. There were several council houses nearby, one family having 8 children, whilst another had 10. The children would come and ask "Mrs Beckford, can we collect the windfalls?" - and then be seen pulling down the branches to collect more fruit!

Having moved back to the parish of Wargrave, Alf returned to work at the barber's shop in the High Street. It still belonged to Charlie Lunn, who lived in Church Street at Wyatt's Cottage alongside the Woodclyffe Hostel. His wife was Annie Wyatt, of the family who had run the St George and Dragon hotel in the village since 1845, but the Wyatt family had sold it to Simmonds



and Co, the brewers of Reading, so that they could concentrate on their boat building business.

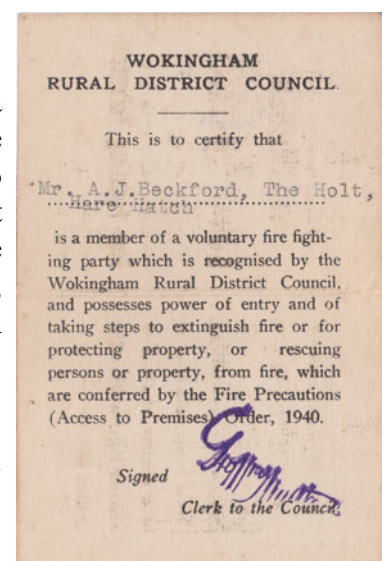
Charlie Lunn eventually decided to retire from the business, so Alf went - at some expense - to a firm of solicitors to prepare to buy the premises. That, however, did not happen, as Charlie sold it 'over the fence' to a neighbour 'next but one' in Church Street.

The hairdressing business continued, however, with Alf as the only hairdresser. (*seen, left, stood in the shop doorway*). There was a flat upstairs, reached by a separate door inside on the left that led to the stairs. There were 2 rooms on the ground floor, and in addition to cutting hair, the shop sold expensive brands of tobacco and cigarettes, such as State Express and Passing Cloud, and briar pipes, and also catered for anglers by selling fishing tackle, rods, bait and maggots.

Later, some of the other shops in the High Street decided to start selling cigarettes and tobacco, in competition to Alf. He decided that if they could do that, he could sell sweets, so a counter was put on the left-hand side of the shop to sell wrapped confectionery such as Smarties and Spangles.

Over the years, Alf became well known as a hairdresser, even by those in the London area, and his clients included people such as Lord Trenchard (founder of the RAF, who had earlier studied at a college in Wargrave), the actor Robert Morley, his son Sheridan, and his son and daughter, Wilfred Hyde White, Sir Ernest Cain, Col Trimmer Thompson (of Crazies Hill), amongst many others. Nobody made an appointment - they just sat in the salon to await their turn. If the local electrician, Stan Bennett, was not particularly busy, he would stand leaning against the door, and reel off lots of jokes to the waiting customers! Alf would open the shop at 7.30 am, so that business men on their way to London could call for their tobacco, cigars, etc. Although he was the only hairdresser, ladies from the village would assist in the shop, and from the age of 18 that included Maureen on a Saturday morning (and, depending on the weather, afternoon). On a Saturday, the cash takings would amount to £150 - people coming in to buy 200 cigarettes at a time - although the gentry would normally pay on a monthly or a 3-monthly account (it was rare to see any cash from them). In the 1950s, the High Street was a busy place, as few people had a fridge, so had to shop for food on a daily basis. The coming of yellow lines, however, meant that less people came to shop in the village, as parking was difficult, so trade dropped. Both the International Stores and Budgens (grocery shops) closed, but John Weatherlake took over the International Stores, which he ran as High Street Stores to help the people of Wargrave without a car.

Apart from the shop, Alf was involved in many other aspects of village life. During WW2, for example, Wokingham Rural District Council (*right*) recognised his work as a volunteer fire fighter, and he was also in the Home Guard (for some reason, attached to the Twyford Platoon).



His father was a founder member of the Ancient Order of Foresters 'Pride of the Village' Court, which Alf joined as a young man in 1912. It provided for those having medical needs, such as dentistry, podiatry or spectacles, and in due course Alf became in charge of the welfare aspect. The meetings were usually at the Horse and Groom - a good place to meet with a pint of ale, and when that changed, the Court met at the Queen Victoria in Hare Hatch - again for a pint of ale.

Alf also joined the Wargrave Rifle Club, winning his first prize from the Miniature Rifle Club in London aged 19. In 1913 he also won the J E Rhodes Cup - the accompanying medal (*right*) being engraved with his name on the reverse. The club was based in the chalk pit, in the area which is now a nature reserve - the Bayliss family still having their lime kilns there to supply lime to farmers and brickyards. Alf represented the Wargrave Rifle Club in competition at Bisley, and won various trophies. However, as they lived close to the A4 road, frequented by tramps in those days, his wife would hide all of these precious items under the bed, in case anyone was tempted to steal them.



When a Wargrave Branch was established for the British Legion, Alf was a founder member, and served as a committee member for many years. He organised fund raising events, such as weekly solo whist drives held in the Working Men's Club at the Woodclyffe Hostel. As he was a member, playing snooker there on Fridays, he was not charged for use of the room so all the proceeds went to British Legion funds. Another event was an annual darts match in the Woodclyffe Hall, for which local builder Clifford Maidment would put up hardboard around each dartboard, to protect the hall walls from stray darts! In 1950 Alf was presented with a silver tankard in recognition of his work for the British Legion, and in 1963 he was further recognised by the award of a British Legion gold badge (*left*), whilst his 90th birthday was marked by the presentation of an illuminated certificate. He became a Vice-President of the Wargrave branch, taking part in the annual armistice day parades, and on occasion taking the salute as it passed the Woodclyffe Hall.



For many years, Alf served on the Wargrave Parish Council, and became a School Manager for the Piggott infant and junior schools. As one of the oldest former pupils, he was one of the VIP guests at an open day there in 1971 (*below, right*), contrasting the equipment available, such as a pottery kiln and microscopes, with the "3 R's" of his school days. To celebrate his 80th birthday, the infant school held a party in his honour in the morning, and there was another at the junior school in the afternoon. He was presented with a card signed by all the infant pupils, whilst the junior school had created a scrapbook for him about the school, again signed by every pupil.

Alf had continued to run the shop until - on Dr Black's advice - he retired in 1966. He continued to cut the hair for his customers, who would visit Holt Cottage, where his tools would be set out in the kitchen, or - if a nice summer's day - outside in the garden. Following a small stroke, however, in 1976, he moved to live at Elizabeth Court, choosing a flat where he could see the children going to and from the school, although as the hedge grew that became difficult! He still cut the hair of friends and Elizabeth Court residents until he was aged 89.



Following another stroke, Alf moved to a retirement home in Maidenhead, but when The Mount opened in Wargrave Dr Paton and the vicar, Revd John Ratings, agreed it would be perfect for him to return to the village, within sight of the school which had meant so much to him. He died there, following morning coffee, a year later at the age of 92.

For more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>