

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2009

Memories of a Vicar



*John and Barbara at their farewell service.
Photo by Tim Hodges.*

John Ratings gave an entertaining and thoughtful account of his *Memories of a Vicar* to a packed Hannen Room for the February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society.

John had previously spoken to the Society about “Eccentric Vicars of Wargrave”, based on research in the Parish Magazine (and later included in *The Book of Wargrave*). He suggested that the Parish Magazines of the last 37 years might reveal his own eccentricities - one of which was that he is an optimist, where as most people are pessimists. John defined a pessimist as ‘one who puts prunes on top of their all-bran for breakfast’!

One of his disappointments over the years had been that in the past the memories of old village characters had not been recorded. Much had been changed after World War 2 - previously the rich had depended on the ‘working class’ to look after them, tend their gardens etc, and the working class had depended on the rich for their livelihood. People ‘knew their place’, but there was an interdependence between them all which created a community.

As he had got older, John had felt more interested in the community. The church had become too inward looking, and needed to involve itself more with what the village as a whole. Wargrave, he said, was still ‘at heart’ a community - a place that people delight in and love to share in community activities - a place that people don’t want to leave.

When he was appointed, John was advised by the then Archdeacon of Berkshire not to take the position, as Wargrave was ‘all gin and jag’. It was an exaggeration, but the affluent part of the parish did enjoy drinks parties at that time.

The parish of Wargrave was in some ways four communities at that time - the old part of Wargrave, the Victoria Road area - an interesting road with a rich variety of houses), the ‘Highacres’ (or Macleans) estate, which was fairly new when he arrived in Wargrave, and Highfield Park, on the site of an old American army base. They did not relate well to each other, and John wanted to find a way to reconcile these four communities. In 1975, he set about having a Village Festival. Many thought he was crazy - that it would not work, it would affect other village activities etc. The purpose was to unite the community and have fun together. Despite opposition from the rest of the committee, he involved the fledgling Wargrave Theatre Workshop, which ‘saved the Festival’. A ‘black tie Ball’ was also included in the schedule - now something ‘grown out of proportion’ for a village event - and it did seem to cut off a large part of the village. The Festival has - not without difficulty or controversy - gone on from strength to strength.

The most important aspect of John’s time in Wargrave had been the time with ‘people’. It was important for a vicar to be able to relate to ordinary people in their lives. He was known by those at the Greyhound as

well as those at the church. (although his welcome by the (then) landlords of the Bull was less encouraging when he was told they wanted a 'better class of customer'!). His experience sitting as a 'friend of the court' alongside Judge Murchie had highlighted the challenging nature of the decision making involved in difficult cases, especially when 'put on the spot' as to what his view was.

When, as a curate, he had asked the name of a choirboy, getting the reply 'I told you that last week', John vowed to learn people's names, and to give them communion 'by name'. However, he did recall a service when he used the wrong name for the deceased at their funeral!

Funerals and weddings in Wargrave could be momentous events. Some gave rise to 'unusual' happenings. For one wedding, the bride's mother stated that 'as she had paid for it', she wanted a better seat! John often had to waste time waiting for a bride, but on one occasion the bride and groom had already walked down the aisle - together - before he had arrived. Clifford Maidment, the village undertaker, appeared at the back of the church at one funeral holding his arms out with an ever widening gap between the hands. John said some extra prayers, and Clifford kept indicating that he continue, until eventually the hands were brought together again, and a 'thumbs up' signal given. It transpired that the hearse had broken down, and Clifford's workmen were outside, pushing it up and down the access road to try and get it going again!

The next meeting is on Tuesday April 14th when Angela Spencer-Harper will return to tell us about historical artefacts found in S-E Oxfordshire, as recorded in her latest book *The Old Place*.

All are welcome to our meetings, which begin at 8 pm - normally in the Hannen Room, Mill Green. For more information about the Society, visit www.wargrave.net/history