

Ron Milnes

"I do have a tale or two to tell..."



Ron and Edna Milnes

We have both found it a great privilege to talk with Ron and Edna Milnes about their lives in North Muskham. They have shared many memorable stories, as we gathered around their dining table looking at family photographs and discussing personal memories and anecdotes. We have decided that the best format for this biography will be to record Ron and Edna's own words, after a short paragraph from us to set the context of their story.

Geoff and Anne Readman

Ron begins his story:

I have to confess that I do have a tale or two to tell. So, here goes... I have lived in North Muskham all of my life. I was actually born in 1940 at The Grove. The Grove was a house that was demolished in order to make way for the A1 Bypass. There are not many photographs of The Grove, but my Auntie Betty, Betty Needham, wrote the following description of the house:

"The Grove was a large house built on the corner of Vicarage Lane facing The Great North Road. It had three bedrooms at the front and a landing, and down four steps to another landing, with a window and a bedroom on either side. Mr. Fineral had the room over the kitchen made into a bathroom with a toilet. Downstairs, were two large front rooms, and each had a fireplace. There was a large hall, with a heavy oak front door and a passage with a tiny pantry at the bottom. At the back of the house there was a small kitchen, with a black cooking range; just an oven, no boiler, a stone sink, and only room for a table and four chairs. It was very draughty; it could have done with a porch or conservatory. At the other side was a large wash house, with a copper and a stone sink. A water toilet was built inside, with a door outside. There was once an outside toilet, next to a brick coal house. The Grove had a large garden and orchard." Betty Gatley (nee Needham)

Ron continues: I was christened at St Wilfrid's Church North Muskham in 1940. My Mum, Nancy, ran the petrol station and my Dad, Sid, the Accident Recovery Service. Mum and Dad were married in North Muskham Church in 1937. When Sid did war work Nancy managed the garage. She did 'all' the book keeping and looked after me, her first son. Nancy learned to drive Sid's first car, an old Ford 8:Reg.AAL 37. In 1935, she drove in the quiet lanes near Bathley.



The Garage at the end of Walton's Lane

In her teenage years, my Mum, then Nancy Needham, was very active in sport, music and Bell Ringing. Her sister Betty, in a note written in later years, describes how



Nancy had 'a love for tennis and playing the piano'. In her leisure time, she belonged to the "Beaus and Belles" church concert team in Muskham. The group toured the local district performing songs and sketches, helping to raise enough money to buy a new bell for St Wilfrid's Church. She and her brother Tom were both keen bell ringers'.

(Please see Nancy's description in the Village Groups, under Bell Ringers on this site)



Ron and his mum Nancy

My School Days

Ron's own school days were largely spent at schools outside of the village, as he explains:

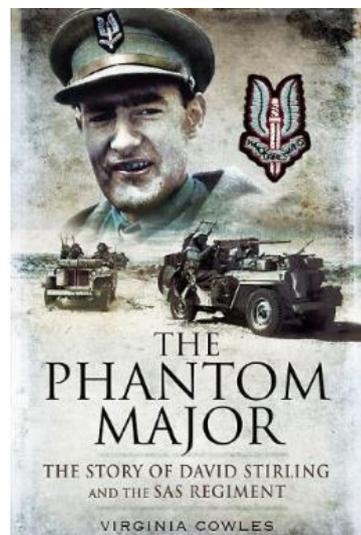
My friend, Mark Lewis – whose dad taught at the Magnus School, and who also taught Trevor Frecknell – was ridiculously clever. He could do his homework – and mine – in a fraction of the time it took me. But somehow, the teachers worked out that he was also doing mine! It was perhaps something to do with the fact that my homework was always very good, but my class work was not quite so good!

The Head teacher at Muskham School was called Norman John King – and he ran the school through fear. One of the classes was gardening – the boys did gardening and the girls did cookery. I'm not really sure how or why, but I finished up at Sutton on Trent school. I do believe that my parents had a dispute with Mr King. What happened was that, I was off school ill and he sent

the school inspector around to our house to check up that my parents weren't making it up. The inspector arrived and found me in bed quite ill, but Mr King wouldn't apologise to my dad.

After Sutton on Trent, I won a ticket to a school that did engineering in Nottingham. I passed an entrance exam and, partly because my dad was an engineer, I was accepted. It was called Cambridge House School. It sounded better than it was really. This was the mid 1950s and I had to get the train every day to Nottingham.

Of all the teachers that I had there was one at this school, one guy called Mr Hugget and he was ex SAS. He was a star man. His discipline was amazing and he had great respect and we got on so well. He used to tell us some stories of his military days, but we didn't quite believe everything he said. We used to say, 'yes, nice one sir'. One day he said, 'I tell you what, boys, buy yourselves a copy of the book *The Phantom Major* and check me out'. Well you couldn't just get hold of things in those days – there was no internet – but eventually I got my parents to order it and the book arrived. I remember Mr Hugget saying 'find page so and so; look at the photograph; do you recognise him?' And sure enough it was him, in the desert, in a jeep – all the stories he had been telling us turned out to be authentic – he commanded so much respect, and those that didn't respect him regretted it, as in those days you would get a clout.





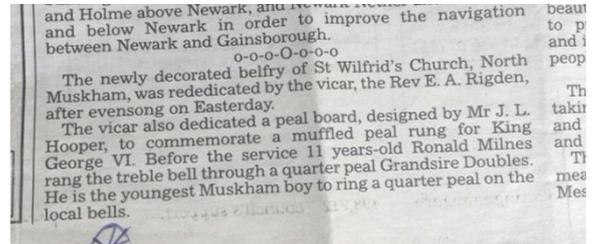
I did actually get the cane once - six of the best as it was called – for being honest!

My rugby ground was at Gedling Colliery and some spirits had been stolen from it. Myself and a guy called George knew who had taken them, but this was a big problem because the guy who did it was the school bully. Anyway, we were very courageous in going to Dr Purdey, the headmaster and said 'we know what happened'. He said he really appreciated us telling him and our honesty and he went on to tell us that the guy concerned was going to be expelled. He said that he would be telling the school what happened and because we had been so open and honest he wanted us to be his eyes and ears when he was not there! He then went on to say, I know that this will sound harsh, but I am going to give you the cane to maintain your confidentiality and cover!! So we had the cane – which was bad enough – but the biggest problem was explaining to mother what the lines were on my backside!!! The good thing about it all was that because of this I was made a prefect and I was very proud to have a tassel on my cap. I've still got it to this day.

My Teenage Years in North Muskham: church and village life.

One of the places where young people could meet and have the opportunity to join in activities was the Church. St Wilfrid's Church in the 1950s was no different to other churches. Ron describes some of the group activities and the importance of beer in stories about Church Youth Work in bygone times - certainly those in which Ron was involved!

My friend Mark Lewis lived in North Road House. This house has also been called Muskham Hall and the Old Vicarage. Mark and I were big buddies – we spent lots of our time together and cycled to places like Matlock and got up to all sorts of things. Anyway, we were made choirboys in St Wilfrid's church. From there I was given the privilege of carrying the cross by a Mr John Gascoigne who insisted that I polished it before every service. Each Sunday I carried it in front of the church procession and Mark walked behind, both of us dressed as angelic little boys in cassocks and surplices (a white linen or cotton tunic, reaching to the knees).



Ron rings the treble bell

We also rang the bells and I have a newspaper cutting (see above) from the Newark Advertiser highlighting how I was the youngest in the village to ring a peal of bells.

[John Gascoigne's story is posted under Village History. Simon Barley also describes Bell Ringing with Ron in the Bell Ringer's Section of this site]

The Reverend Hilary Dunn, who became Vicar when the Revd Rigden died, asked me and Mark to carry the cross at Rev Rigden's funeral. We were to parade before the coffin as it was carried from the Vicarage to the church. Our instructions were to walk 'eyes fixed, straight ahead and at a sensible pace'; on no account were we to look around at the procession following. This we duly did, but things didn't quite go to plan ...!

After walking for some time, we eventually arrived at the church door and decided to have a sneaky look behind us to see who was behind us. When we did we were horrified to realise there wasn't a soul there! The pace we had set had been too fast and the rest of the folks were still way back down the road. We scurried back to them and tried again, this time more successfully.

However, I was very pleased to be asked to carry the cross at this funeral, because the Rev Rigden was a brilliant guy, ex naval padre. He lived at what was the vicarage in South Muskham with his Mother.

Choir and bell-ringing practice was on a Friday evening and there were lots of young people involved in those days. Afterwards we all went down to the Muskham Ferry which was run in those days by Mr Bowles. It was during this time that we were introduced to a little bit of beer – IPA: Indian Pale Ale. To get one or two bottles free, we had to walk to Cromwell Lock and take some

crates of beer up to Mr Barker who was the lock keeper there. We had this contraption on wheels and the wheels kept falling off, but eventually we got it to the lock and the beer was safely delivered – our reward ... and we must have been about 14 years old ... was a little bottle or two. I should point out that they were little bottles in those days, not pint size or the like.

Also, some of the beer was stored in the church – behind the organ. Sid – who was the organist – loved a little tittle himself and that is where he kept the beer! Now, you have to remember that at this time there was no electricity in the church and it worked by being pumped by hand. We had to take it in turns pumping this organ manually, and our reward – again – was some of the beer! Sometimes if we got way-laid or got slower, the organ would gradually run out of wind and this reflected badly upon the organist who then used to tell us off - in no uncertain terms. One day, when we began to dream and our thoughts wandered, we were brought to earth with Sid Thurston's cry of:

‘Will you pump the bloody thing’!!

Mind you, I will never forget the time that Robert Fearn, one of the Vicars, made a very funny comment to Sid Thurman, who sadly suffered a lot of pain in his hands. The particular hymn was proving difficult. The Reverend looked across and whispered;

‘Sid, you’re just not playing what we are singing this morning’.

Bell Ringers’ Outings

We also used to go on bell-ringing outings and Mr Thomas’s buses used to take us. Mr Thomas was Councillor Sue Saddington’s dad who was a friend of my dad. We always used to load up the bus with everything, but the first thing the bell-ringers used to load up was a crate of ale from The Ferry. Beer drinking was culturally accepted in the day. We were also allowed to go in a back room at The Ferry, providing they didn’t walk through the main pub area!



This is how the Parish Magazine looked in 1940 – it was called *The Symbol*. This was the year Ron was born and this edition details his Christening Service.

Winding the Church Clock

It was quite funny in those days as the spiral staircase up to the church tower bell ringing room did provide an opportunity for the teenage boys to glance upwards as the girls walked up the stairs. In order to stop this happening [and rightly so], the boys had to leave the room and go and stand in the main part of the church whilst the girls climbed the staircase. The boys were then allowed to go up – either before – or after.

My friend, Mark Lewis, and I were also tasked with winding the clock up in the church tower. And also, on a Friday night, we used to light the stokehole (the *hole* in the furnace through which the fire was stoked) for the heating of the church. We used to have sticks and papers and load the thing with coke. Sometimes, if we got it a bit wrong, we could get this huge cast iron heater glowing red hot – but the at least the church was warm on a Sunday and people were never cold.

The Village Snooker Room

Another thing the girls and boys used to do after church bell-ringing was to meet at the snooker room, where we used to play snooker and darts. It was in Chapel Lane, now Chapel Yard, at the old blacksmiths. And just down the lane was the old village fish and chip shop, run by Mr. Lyn. It was always advisable to take your own newspapers to wrap the chips in because they never had any proper paper to wrap them in. We used to get our chips and then take them up to the snooker



room. We had to go through the blacksmiths shop and then go up a rickety old ladder.

The village policeman was always suspicious that we were up to no good and that we were doing something up there that we shouldn't. Anyway, he used to sneak up the ladder and then burst through the door to try and catch us saying 'Got you now!' But of course he hadn't because we weren't doing anything wrong. We got fed up of this so we set a booby trap down in the Blacksmith's shop. It was very dark down there and hard to see the ladder, so we took two or three rungs out of the ladder and put a load of tin cans around the *foot* of it. We did it so we could put the rungs back for our use, but not for unsuspecting and unaware visitors. So, when all of a sudden, the village bobby tried to climb up there was such a clatter and a banging and we then knew he was on his way!

I can still hear him swearing at us now!

Pocket Money and Part-time work

At Christmas I used to do the post in the village for the Postmistress, Mrs Dye. We had a regular post-woman – and I think she was called Betty – but I helped out at Christmas and it was good fun going around the village. I used a bicycle that butchers had with a great big tray on the front to hold the mail. I got paid for that job. I can't remember how much, but I do know some cigarettes were involved in the payment! Part cash and part cigarettes – du Maurier – and I can remember it was a red packet with a gold line down the side of it. The world has changed so much since those days.



Football Fines, but no suspensions!

I occasionally got into trouble playing football. There was a football field down by Mackleys Lane in those days. It was a bit rough but, as the home team, we always had the advantage of knowing where the rabbit holes were. The football club was run by a Mr Johnson and we played every week. However, I had a bit of a bad start as I played rugby at school and it took a while for me to find out that the rules of the game were (apparently) not quite the same! The referees and I didn't always see eye-to-eye over what a foul was and what wasn't. I worked it out once that over the years I collected £25 in fines for getting booked. In those days that was an awful lot of money.

Starting Work for Real!

I joined my Father in 1962, roughly at the time when the new A1 by-pass opened. The photograph below shows the Police stopping the traffic to give Dad priority and permission to drive down the new road. He was the first person to drive South to Coddington.



Ron's father driving the first car down A1

The garage business specialised mainly in agricultural machines in those days and we did a lot of police recovery work, car repairs and agricultural dealership. We were registered dealers with Allis Chalmers and New Holland. My Uncle Tim, Betty's husband, came to join Dad as a salesman there...just after the War. He regularly played cricket for North Muskham.

North Muskham *capturing memories*

www.muskhammemories.uk



Milnes' new garage on the A1

When I'd finished school, Dad sent me to college for a little while before I went to Brooks Motor Company to serve an apprenticeship. An apprenticeship in those days was for 5 years and a very happy 5 years they were. If anyone is interested the workshop was where Ann et Vin's wine shop is on Castlegate. Before that it was a funeral director's garage.



Ron and his father Sid Milnes in 1961

I spent many years there and you can still see the old ramp in the battery shop. This is where my girlfriend, who is now my wife, used to come and have lunch with me. The battery shop makes for a very romantic setting! At this time, Edna, my wife, was window dressing supervisor for the Scotch Wool Shop.

At Brooks, the manager was Sid Willows. Now, I remember one particular incident when we were actually down Farndon road, at the depot at the side of the River Devon. A cow had somehow ended up in the river.

The police and a farmer who owned the beast had just discovered it. Suddenly, they both came panic-stricken into the Reception area of the Depot shouting; 'Can you bring your lorry to pull my cow out as it's stuck in the Devon and we can't get it out? We could do with a bit of a tow!'



Milnes' garage on the Great North Road

So Sid Willows, a very, very droll Yorkshire man, didn't even look up from his notepad and said 'I will, but can you tell me if it's in the AA or the RAC?' Well...we all just cracked up laughing and realised what he had said. However, we got the truck out and successfully pulled the cow out.

Other Rescue Memories



Recovery with Kerry in Lincoln Dyke





Roger, Ron's brother who was tragically killed in a car accident.

Celebrities visit the garage

Arthur Scargill was leader of the National Union of Miners, came to fill up and came into the office. Julie, who was on duty that day, recognised him straight away and she said "Mr Scargill, please could I have your autograph?" He was a bit 'bolshie' about it before eventually saying "of course you can". So she got the book out. (This is true). After he signed it, he said to her "Do you collect autographs of celebrities?" Julie replied "I do, but I have two autograph books, one is for celebrities but this one is for 'Pratts'"

A second celebrity who I remember very well was Lady **Henrietta Tiarcs** of Wolborn Abbey. Lady Henrietta was absolutely gorgeous in appearance. She got a flat tyre. We offered to help, but she said she was in the AA or RAC - she couldn't remember which. After she got in touch with them, they gave the Relay job to me. We couldn't find the spare wheel in the Bentley! So we relayed the vehicle back down to Bedford.

During the time when my Dad was very much more active than I was, he was called to a vehicle that had broken down. It was **Kenny Ball** and his Jazzmen! Kenny was playing at the Newark Show. We worked overtime on the vehicle and got it going. We then took it to the Showground. Not only did Dad get paid for his troubles, but he got a big mention - in the show - from Kenny Ball who publicly thanked **Sid Milnes** for all his efforts in getting him to the 'Show on Time'.

There was an occasion when the Scottish comedians Chick Murray and Maidie, who were then a very famous husband and wife team, had an accident not too far from the Garage. They were really popular and regularly appeared on the television. The insurance company wrote it off and Dad bought it. I can still remember the Reg. of their car - PSG 83. Dad ran it for years before selling it to Ralph Talbot.

One infamous 'celebrity' was of course Michael Sams from Sutton on Trent. He would come to the garage each day and I used to collect his packet of twenty cigarettes and take them to his car – he found it very difficult to walk. We had no idea about his prison history or about what he was up to. However, we did find out that he was under suspicion for a very serious crime, because the police asked if they could install a camera in The Little Chef cafe to record him.

One very generous story arose when Mrs Needler, of the chocolate factory in York, flipped her car over on the forecourt. She needed hospital treatment. However, the family were so grateful to us for helping her, they regularly sent through a box of chocolates to the garage, usually once a month.

Perhaps the most amazing call-out was on the old road to Newark, just near Smeaton's Lakes, where an Aston Martin hit a tree; it ended up with the front end in the branches and the back end holding it up from the floor! Quite a sight!

So many memories

I have so many memories of my life in North Muskham; memories that will always be treasured. However, I don't know if anyone else is like this, but although. I can recall childhood events in vivid detail; I often have to ask myself 'What did I do yesterday?'