

Brian William George Rochester (1936-2016)

by Hilary Matthews and Theo van de Bilt

One day in January 2018 Greg Leary, a member of the Sawbridgeworth Local History Society came across a message posted in a phone box near the corner of West Road and London Road. It announced monthly walks in and around Sawbridgeworth to take place in 2013, starting from the car park in Bell Street. Naturally intrigued, he contacted fellow members who tried to find out how and why this came about. The below is what we found out.



Brian Rochester was a Sawbridgeworth man born and bred. He attended 'The National School' in Sheering Mill Road (now Lane); it was situated as long-standing local people will understand 'at the top of school hill'.

Having left school, Brian worked for Emery Electrical Contractors, then located along London Road. He did not want to be conscripted into the Army for two years' National Service so, aged 17, he volunteered to join the RAF for five years and became a corporal. When Brian was at Bovindon Air Force Base he played for the local football team. He could have played for a 'division' team but was too short to play in goal! After the RAF he had several jobs with different firms in the locality, including a stint as a lorry driver for Burton's Mill Company, delivering flour to bakeries. When the Mill closed Brian went back to work for Emery's and was responsible for the erection of the Christmas lights in Bell Street. He met his wife Sheila in 1959 and they married at Farnham Church in the summer of 1961.

Commencing in 1961 Brian became a Retained Fireman in Sawbridgeworth for 22 years and rose to be Leading Fireman. After he left active service he continued to work for the Hertfordshire Fire Brigade Benevolent Association and was a diligent fund raiser for the organisation, for example one summer holiday Brian and Sheila were sponsored to walk the North Downs Way and raised £700.00 for the association. Another summer they were sponsored to walk the Essex Way. Each evening other Sawbridgeworth firemen came to a designated location, brought them home and returned them to the same spot for another day of walking the next morning. Brian kept a detailed diary of these walks and began by thanking Sheila for her patience.

During this time Brian joined the Diving Club at Harlow Swimming Pool and became a Diving Officer. This led him and another diver to form the Snorkel Club for Children at Leventhorpe School Pool.

Brian cared passionately about our environment and its history. Having retired from work he became a member of the Bishop's Stortford and District Footpath Association (BSDFA). To encourage people to use the footpaths, his aim was to clear and repair as many public rights of way as possible in and around Sawbridgeworth. He welcomed help but was not deterred by having to work on his own. He also led walks around Sawbridgeworth for the BSDFA. On his own initiative Brian conducted local monthly history walks.

Through Brian's love of walking he joined the Countryside Management Team helping to preserve our countryside. He took a course in Rights of Way Legislation and Responsibilities and how it related to parish paths. In doing this he was able to inform Sawbridgeworth Council about which areas were the responsibility of East Hertfordshire Council and those for which the Town Council was responsible. He took a course in map making and drew maps of walks of the Sawbridgeworth environment.

So for a number of years he was the honorary footpaths officer. In recognition of his work in July 2005 he was then co-opted onto Sawbridgeworth Town Council. He was elected to the council in his own right in May 2007 and remained on the council until his resignation, due to his declining health, in July 2013.

He continued to regularly patrol and clear footpaths with his mower and strimmer virtually every day and the current Town Clerk estimates that he probably contributed about £10,000 of labour each year. He left a huge gap when he retired which the Council has struggled to get Herts County Council and East Herts District Council to make up.

He is survived by his wife Sheila, two sons and his grandchildren.

With thanks to Sheila Rochester, Greg Leary, David Royle and Council Staff.