

High Wych History – 50-1 - John Sapsford.

Having paid homage to Grace Dunn, I should now pay attention to another local history luminary. John Sapsford (1922 – 2010). John did leave about a hundred typed A4 sheets of writing which have already proven a rich source of inspiration for me. John's father Arthur, who was born in 1897 later became foreman at Rivers Nurseries. The name Sapsford is both old and local and does, as John himself noted, come from the same roots as the name of the town Sawbridgeworth.

John's grandparents, Alfred and Louisa, had originally come from Woodside Green near Great Hallingbury. In 1903 they had moved over the county border into Sawbridgeworth where Louisa became housekeeper to Henry Rivers and Alfred a horse keeper. They lived at Sweetbriars Cottages. Young Arthur had gone to school in High Wych where he met Elsie Smith, two months his senior, who later became his wife and John's mother. Elsie was the seventh child of Annie and Charles Smith, the local blacksmith whose forge was on the Village Green.



1907 The clans gather at the wedding of Alice Sapsford and Walter Bird. Louisa Sapsford third from left middle row. Arthur Sapsford second from right bottom row.

Arthur and Elsie were married in 1920 and the couple went to live in the Gilders farm house owned by the Rivers family. In 1922 son John was born. A few years later the family moved to Glebe Cottages. John too went to High Wych school. In his memoirs John wrote extensively about his school days, his friends, local tradesmen coming round with milk, meat, bread, paraffin for lighting and how water was drawn from a pump. He also wrote about his love of nature and his interest in things mechanical which might have been awakened when a biplane made a forced landing in a field near Moblitts.

John was a precocious child. He learned to read and write before he went off to school. He was a voracious reader with an inquisitive mind. In all these things he was encouraged by his parents. His interest in airplanes continued. Age 11 he flew for the first time when on the occasion of an Air Pageant at Shingle Hall he paid 5 shillings (25p) for a 15 minute flight over Stortford in a De Havilland DH84 Dragon. Around that same time he won a scholarship to Bishop's Stortford College travelling there every day by bus. In 1937 he helped out at an archaeological dig near Rowney Farm. One year later he assisted some surveyors who were doing measurements for a possible Sawbridgeworth bypass that was to go through the Rivers land. The bypass never came about but John Sapsford gained valuable experience working with all the equipment.

1939 was an eventful year. John took the Higher School Certificate exams for Chemistry, Physics, Maths and Advanced Maths. An outbreak of polio sadly caused the school close for a time so through no fault of his own he failed Chemistry. He did, however, gain a distinction in Physics. During that time it was also that he became acquainted with Joan Cross who he already knew from the school bus. Joan later took a job in the office at Rivers.

Nowadays and even then if circumstances would have been different then, a young lad of John's talents would have gone to University. Instead possible jobs were lined up and at the end of the summer he started at the Holbrooks Engineering Company in Harlow. War meanwhile had broken out and the company could hardly cope with demand. John became an apprentice draughtsman.

On 24th August the reality of war became clear when 200 bombs were dropped on the nearby airfield at North Weald. For weeks afterwards there were air battles every day. Holbrooks' staff was supposed to go into the air shelters then. Most, however, did not but stood on the roof and watched. When a Heinkel went down just over the Stort Valley people cheered. That same month of September 1940 the Holbrooks headquarters at Stratford were damaged.

It should be said that John Sapsford was a keen archivist; some would say a hoarder! At several points he expresses his regrets at documents getting lost or keepsakes thrown away. Still, it is thanks to those documents and keepsakes that we have such a wonderful record of his life. Some of the above information came from correspondence between John and his later wife Joan when the latter was in hospital recovering from an appendix operation. All those love letters were kept!

They were busy times those war years. In 1942 Joan and John, after a short interruption, carried on their courtship and became officially engaged. John had started to study for a degree with the Institute of Mechanical Engineers by way of a correspondence course. He still had time to build aircraft models though. Some were used in shop window displays to raise money for the Royal Air Force. Finally, together with his colleague Mike Elsdon, he decided to join the Home Guard. That story was of course already well documented in an earlier article.



In early 1945 John and Joan, having found furnished rooms in Hoestock Road, decided to get married. The date was fixed for 28th April which turned out to be two weeks before the end of the war. The wedding took place at Great St. Mary's, Sawbridgeworth. Joan's two friends Pat Woolard (now Cousins) and Joan Sims were bridesmaids. With clothes rationing in place the clothes presented a problem for Pat and Joan but in the end the necessary coupons were somehow acquired. Joan borrowed a wedding dress from Nina Elsdon, wife of John's colleague Mike. The weather started out fine and sunny but by the time of the ceremony it snowed! Of course it did not spoil the day!

To be continued next month.

Sources this time: John Sapsford's memoirs and John's daughter Wendy Oxborough. The High Wych History Project still needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, positive or negative. E-mail theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone 01279 725468.