

High Wych History – 51 John Sapsford – continued from last month.

In the summer of 1945, thanks to an aunt moving away, John and Joan moved in to “Amethyst” on Sayesbury Road. Setting up home in the days of scarcity and rationing was not easy. As newlyweds the two were entitled to extra furniture coupons but once again that hardly proved enough. A bed was built thanks to help from Len Helmer, the builder, supplying a bedboard made out of pre-war mahogany and aunt Lou’s connections with one of the London stores resulted in metalwork being provided. The new marital home also had a nice garden. That same summer was also memorable for the street parties organised to celebrate the end of the war.



1945: The Sayesbury Road postwar street party. 1949: The first Sapsford family car.

Life for the young couple, as life for most other people in the UK, improved considerably during those immediate post-war years. John’s professional career advanced. He joined a trade union, the Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen, A.E.S.D. but found the discussions there much too politicised. He would have preferred to just talk about professional standards. At home John, together with his dad, rebuilt a caravan which both couples then took on holidays to Pembrokeshire. A neighbour, Percy Pipe, meanwhile got John interested in both photography and motor racing. And in 1948 a car was bought. It was a 1936 Rover 10 which had the number plate BYR 264. Buying a car was not exactly usual in those days but John’s love of mechanics, inside knowledge and just plain luck came to the rescue. The previous owner of the rather sporty vehicle was a Mr. A.N. Rawes, then managing director at Rivers Nurseries. It was in fact bought for the costs of the repairs.

In 1950 John and Joan’s daughter Wendy Frances was born, Eighteen months later she was followed by Elizabeth Anne.

Workwise, John passed all three parts of the Mechanical Engineers exams in consecutive years from 1948. He went to lectures at the Institute, went on work visits to Vauxhall and Battersea Power Station, visited the machine tool exhibitions at Olympia and avidly read the technical press. Soon it became obvious Holbrooks could not offer him the career he was planning for himself, so in 1952 John accepted a position as production engineer at Sunvic Controls.

Through Syd Haselton, an old colleague from Holbrooks, John joined the Harlow Car Club. The president of that organisation was a certain Roy Dixon, owner of the High Wych garage. Together with the aforementioned Syd Haselton John took part in a rally. Syd was supposed to drive and John navigate but in the end the roles were switched. Sadly the good times at Sunvic did not last. The company was bought and John found himself in the middle of a power struggle from which there was no way out but to resign.



John and Joan with Wendy and Elizabeth



1959 John with his "country garden car"

At home the fifties were happy times. There were holidays at the seaside, in the Lake District and in Scotland. The family also became heavily involved in local events during that decade. In 1954 the Sawbridgeworth Carnival started and one of the organisations taking part was the ladies Keep Fit Club of which Joan was a member. The first year the ladies just went in their group uniforms, but as the years went by there were elaborate floats and displays: South Sea Islands, Vikings, Harem Girls and St. Trinians. John designed and built some of those floats and lots of fun was had. Daughters Wendy and Elizabeth remember it with fondness: wonderful creations such as a huge golden papier mache Buddha, for instance, that lived in the porch for some time afterwards.

When the girls joined the Brownies Joan became a helper and later Brown Owl. The Brownies took part in the annual Carnival as well so then there were two floats to design and build, three, in fact, as the family car was also decorated for the occasion, once as a Dutch scene complete with windmill. As a result, John then became known to many as "Mr. Brown Owl".

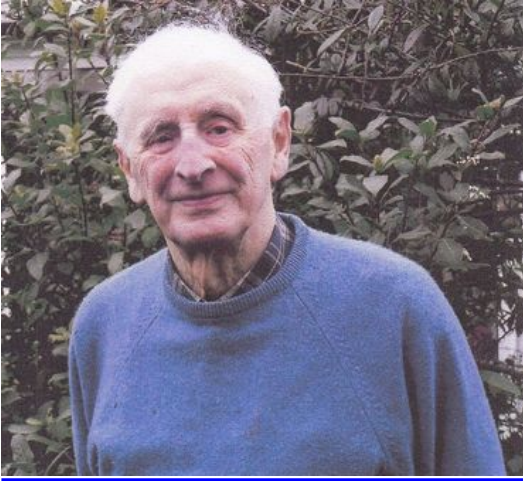
Upon leaving Sunvic John was offered a job at Walter Lawrence, the joiners, Three difficult years followed with lots of changes, some good some not so good. At one point the company considered buying a data processing machine, an early computer. John recalls being told what wonderful things could be done with it. During one of those sessions a colleague stood up and asked what would happen if you fed incorrect data into the machine. "Then, sir", the sales man answered glibly, "you would get an incorrect answer but far more quickly than by any other method".

John left Lawrence in 1960. Thanks to his technical expertise, his knowledge of production methods and his knack for problem solving he found employment at Marconi. It was there that his talents were most appreciated and where he spent the rest of his working life. There were a number of mergers during his time there but on the whole it was a happy and productive time. There were trips abroad to attend exhibitions, trade fairs and companies abroad to visit. He went to Italy, France, Germany, Norway, Canada and the United States. He especially enjoyed going to Japan. Being particularly knowledgeable about production techniques, he ended up publishing an in-house magazine on the subject for Marconi. Always the aeronautics buff he kept a careful log of all his flights complete with dates and the type of aircraft he flew in.

In October 1986, following a cataract operation, John had to stop work. He only returned 6 months later for a ceremony to mark his official retirement. He had been lucky enough to hand over to a trusted colleague and was not sorry to leave. In December 1988 Elsie, John's mum, died. Less than three years later John's father Arthur died. Joan, meanwhile, had been diagnosed a diabetic and gradually developed various complications such as asthma and angina. After a difficult 1993 she passed away on New Year's Eve 1994. After 49 years of marriage John found himself without his trusted partner.

Despite all these setbacks John kept himself busy in retirement. Neighbours Susan Bennet and Audrey Clarke helped out so that he was not too lonely. Daughters Wendy and Elizabeth, both now married and with children, came round as often as they could. John also became involved in local history. His knowledge of pre-war flying activities helped greatly when Paul Doyle wrote "Where the Lysanders were" about the Sawbridgeworth air field. Other memories helped Hazel Lake, a Harlow Lady who wrote a book about Burnt Mill village. Wally Wright was helped with organising an exhibition 50 years after D-day. Ken Cooke, who wrote for the Herts and Essex Observer was often provided with bits of historical information of local interest.

Through daily walks John had meanwhile become aware of the increasing dereliction of the Rivers Orchard area. Rivers Nursery itself, where John's dad Arthur worked for so long, had closed down in 1987. In the first half of the nineties however a group of locals had decided that action needed to be taken. Articles in the local press recognised the site's importance and whilst indeed a hospital was built on former nursery land, the rest of the site, thanks to the grants from East Herts District Council and Sawbridgeworth Town Council, was saved for the community. Many townsfolk volunteered and John was, of course, one of those. As daughter Wendy recalled: "He went to as many clear up days, planting and picking days as he could. He produced a grid so the trees could be identified, and helped out whenever he could. When the Rivers book was being written by Elizabeth Waugh, the author visited him regularly to discuss each chapter and try to discover all the detail of those times. Dad even asked me to research some things such as the ploughing machines pulled across fields by traction engines. I had seen these working at local steam fairs in Devon." Seeing the orchard restored to its former glory must have given him a lot of satisfaction.



John Sapsford in his later years - Rivers Orchard in September 2016

John Sapsford passed away in 2010. At his funeral apple blossom was used for decoration. Daughter Wendy read out her father's eulogy using much information from John's own hand. John, so Wendy said, tried living in harmony with his fellow beings and was always considerate. On the subject of religion he believed in God but considered his church to be the open air and fields. His idea of paradise would have been the flower rich meadows and hedgerows of his youth, resonant with the songs of birds and the buzzing of insects. In reality he wrote that he felt that one's life continued to exist in the memories of those who remain.

Sources were John Sapsford's memoirs, John's daughter Wendy Oxborough and Elizabeth Waugh's book on River Nursery. 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@vanderbilt.co.uk or phone 01279 725468. You could also check my blog at <http://vanderbilt.co.uk/history/>