

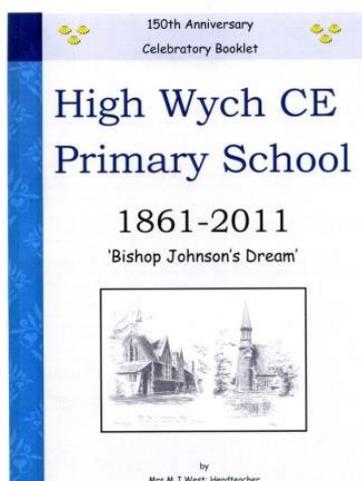
## Tales of a village historian.

My name is Theo van de Bilt, a Dutch national and retired publishing professional who has been resident in High Wych, East Herts for some 35 years. For the past few years I have been our village historian. The job is well paid and I had to undergo a rigorous selection procedure. That last statement was blatantly untrue of course. Local history is a satisfying hobby, but its rewards are definitely not of the monetary kind.



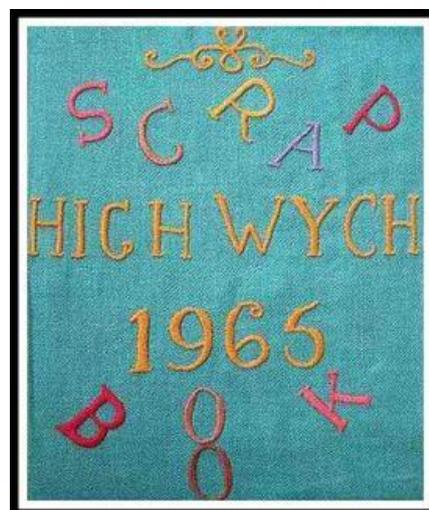
High Wych in 1913

The initial inspiration for taking up my new hobby came in the summer of 2011 when I visited an exhibition at our village school which then celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A memorial booklet was published on the occasion. As you can imagine, the exhibition gave rise to some fascinating conversations with and amongst older residents. There was for instance the challenge to name certain people in a photograph of the (now defunct) cricket club and the equally difficult task to identify members of the home guard. A few months later I came upon a scrapbook published by our Women's Institute in 1965 when they celebrated their golden anniversary. My first article was in fact based on that scrapbook.



The High Wych School Memorial booklet

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The 1965 WI scrapbook

Those articles are printed in our parish magazine, the Link and I have now produced 38 of them. Every article is on a different theme or subject. Sometimes a subject is spread out over more than one issue. Over the last three years I have written about: pubs and restaurants (the Rising Sun, the Half Moon – Chandini, the Hand and Crown), local businesses old and new (The Blacksmiths – Dixons Garage, builders Helmer and Dyer, crime and policing, well known families and personalities, excavations, parties, fetes and entertainments, centenarians, our village hall and our local shops. Two subjects I have hardly touched upon as yet but definitely should, are farming and the church.

I am not the first person to write about High Wych's history. Grace Dunn, a lady who passed away aged 95 in 1988 went before me. In the 70s she produced 5 stencilled pages of reminiscences which were very interesting but sadly without any mention of sources. Still, she did come up with some interesting snippets. Most impressively was her claim that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century High Wych was known as "Little Hell". I found that hard to believe. Why would High Wych residents be more criminally inclined than other locals? But then I found an article in the Chelmsford Chronicle of 1880 praising our first vicar Henry Johnson (later a bishop) telling us how "twenty years ago High Wych was looked upon as one of the dark places of the earth." Combine that with the fact that Grace Dunn was the daughter of a policeman and you can understand how the "Little Hell" story came about.



1942: the High Wych Home Guard

Another local historian was John Clarke who wrote very entertainingly about the history of Gilston and Eastwick, villages neighbouring High Wych. John very kindly gave me a lot of advice as did Wally Wright, the Sawbridgeworth historian. Which brings me to another important point: up till 1861, when St. James's Church was built, High Wych Parish was part of Sawbridgeworth. Up till 1901 the village was part of Sawbridgeworth in the civic sense. Those facts have to be taken into account when searching for information on the web, in archives or in old newspapers. The most elaborate history of High Wych to date did in fact treat High Wych as part of Sawbridgeworth. "The Story of Sawbridgeworth" was published as three booklets as the result of many years work by a local group under the stewardship of Lionel Munby. Most prominent amongst them was Mary Waterson, a Gilston lady who was particularly interested in education. Sawbridgeworth, Gilston, Eastwick and High Wych naturally have a lot of common history. For that reason I have

generally stayed away from writing about “early history” which for my purposes is defined as anything that happened before 1850. Why should I repeat the work of others who often have already done things better than I ever could. Another complicating factor is that over time our village went under a number of different names: Wyches, Highwick, High Wick, High Whites and finally High Wych. Finally, not being a native English speaker I have great difficulty in understanding the language of old documents, particularly those of the legal kind.

Talking to older residents is inspiring: a real joy. Their stories definitely need recording but, as I claim to be a serious historian, they also need to be checked. People do not lie on the whole. However, they do exaggerate and sometimes their memory fails them. One example concerned Bill Clements a neighbour who has meanwhile passed away. As a child Bill lived in Windmill’s cottage next to where a windmill once stood. Bill liked to tell us how that windmill was taken away on a low loader with six horses. The story proved to be untrue: the mill was taken away in 1870 and Bill was born in 1900! Of course our old neighbour was not lying; he simply had heard the story so often that he had made it his own.

Interviewees sometimes come up with stories of a scandalous or salacious nature. I cannot see the point of using these. Mostly, they cannot be checked and even if they can, what is the point in upsetting the living relatives of the people in question. Neither is there any point in stories of family feuds or neighbourly disagreements. In those cases where I wrote about crimes and misdemeanours they concerned happenings of at least 150 years ago.



1962: High Wych Cricket Club

So where do I get my information from? We already mentioned the most important one: actual local people. My own wife Janet, who is a native of our village can always be counted on as can Eric Willison who over the years built up an impressive archive of photographic material. Then there is the internet. Being able to check things on Ancestry.co.uk, the newspaper archive of the British Library or various specialist sites is a joy. For instance, when writing an article about Stan Kempthorne, a local who spent time during WW2 as a POW in Silesia, I came across a group of people researching Stalag VIII B, the camp where Stan spent so much time. One of those, Roman Janas, a Czech

national, came up with evidence that Stan had been working as a “Steinschleifer”, a stone polisher. That work most probably caused him breathing difficulties in later life. Finally I have to mention HALS, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies. Every few weeks I spend some hours going over documents and old newspapers. I take my camera with me and take pictures, then at home save the resulting files on my PC for later study. The staff at HALS are truly wonderful, they are always ready to help and offer advice. I find that particularly inspiring as during my “proper” career I visited librarians selling them subscriptions to scientific journals and in later years electronic access to journal collections. So I changed from selling stuff to libraries to being a consumer of library services. As a result I became more appreciative of the work librarians and archivists do. Their jobs have changed much in recent times. Information technology provides many a useful tool and librarians need to be aware of the latest developments in order to properly help researchers on the ground, us, which they do very efficiently. Our government really could do better than cut services at libraries and archives. We badly need them.

Special mention should be made of the first world war centenary. Sawbridgeworth is particularly active in that respect and I am happy to be one of a group of people organising events in commemoration. There has already been a nostalgia day, a special Christmas truce football match and particularly referring to High Wych a history evening and exhibition which raised money for the Hertfordshire Regiment Memorial. That monument is an initiative of the Herts at War people and hopefully it will be erected at St. Julian in Flanders in 2017. Herts at War has a website which attempts to list all Hertfordshire soldiers who perished during that tragic conflict. Herts at War is also involved in an upcoming exhibition in Sawbridgeworth honouring the memory of local soldiers. Five of my articles were on subjects relating to the “Great War” and a lot of time was spent reconstructing the stories of local men who went to war and never came back.

Interviewing people, listening to their stories, checking them against archival material, combining information from a variety of sources and presenting them within a wider context, that is what makes the work of an (amateur) historian so rewarding. Yes it is only a hobby but it has brought me far closer to my community, it has won me many friends. I have encountered many generous people willing to help. It has opened many doors. One very selfish reason for writing this article is that you, dear reader, might come up with suggestions for future articles. If so, contact me on [theo@vandebilt.co.uk](mailto:theo@vandebilt.co.uk). Or perhaps you just want to read my articles, if you do, just say so and I will put you on my mailing list.

Finally I would like to tell you about one history related “achievement”. It concerned a participant in the WW1 history evening: Vernon Ingram, grandson of Frank Ingram the first High Wych man to fall. Vernon and his wife came over specially for the event from Milton Keynes and brought some memorabilia with them. On the morning after the event Vernon was there again attending the memorial service as was Jean Pedder a senior villager. Jean was born a Kempthorne as was Olive, Frank Ingram’s wife and Jean’s aunt. Jean then showed Vernon where in our churchyard their communal grandmother was buried. So I introduced two cousins who had never ever met previously!