

High Wych History – 50/51- 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. According to John Sapsford's writings the people in the above photograph are: Backrow left to right: Frank Bury, Susanna Thurgood, Percy Saban, Harry Tucker, William Bird, George Childs, Emma Thurgood, Nellie Thurgood, William Sapsford, Jim Eaton, Bertha Rickett, Minnie Rickett. Middle row left to right: Lilian Bury, May Tucker, Louisa Sapsford, Walter Bird, Alice Bird, Alfred Sapsford, Liza Saban. Bottom row left to right: Leonard Thurgood, Harold Thurgood, William Bury, George Rickett, Emily Tucker, Arthur Sapsford, William Rickett.

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 Mobletts.

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.



1924: Arthur and Elsie Sapsford with young John

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 to 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 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, 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 were supposed to go into the air raid 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.

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 day 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 rationing still in place the clothes presented a problem bride and bridesmaids 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! But of course it did not spoil the day!

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 prewar 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. One did indeed take place in Sayesbury Road.

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!



1945: The Sayesbury Road postwar streetparty.

Life for the young couple as life for most other people in the UK, improved considerably during those immediate postwar 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 re 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 these 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.



1949: The first Sapsford family car.

On 30th May 1950 John and Joan's daughter Wendy Frances was born. Eighteen months later she was followed by another daughter, Elizabeth Anne. John wrote: "Both were born in the Herts and Essex Hospital Bishop's Stortford the midwife in both cases being Sister Christie. For such important events there is surprisingly little to say. No panics and no problems."

Workwise, John did pass 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. It also obvious that Holbrooks could not offer him the career he was planning for himself. Meanwhile Harlow Town was being built and in 1952 John accepted a position there as production engineer at Sunvic Controls. Sunvic built pneumatically operated control instruments under licence from the Moore Product Co of America. He found himself part of a young and enthusiastic team trying to meet "an insatiable demand as industry really got into its stride to recover from the war years."

The time at Sunvic was not all work though. Many outside activities were organised such as sports days. And through Syd Haselton, a colleague who had followed him 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 300 mile rally. Originally 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. Rapid expansion lead to financial pressures. The company was bought and sold and the new owners were not prepared to be as enterprising as the old ones. John found himself in the middle of a power struggle from which he saw no other way out other than to resign.



A picture from the fifties: John and Joan with Wendy and Elizabeth

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 by there were elaborate floats and displays: South Sea Islands, Vikings, Harem Girls and St. Trinians. John designed and built the floats and lots of fun was had. Daughters Wendy and Elizabeth remember it all with great 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 too was decorated for the occasion, once as a Dutch scene complete with windmill. As a result John became known to many as "Mr. Brown Owl"



John and Joan were also very much involved in the parent teachers association of the Fawbert and Barnard School attended by both their daughters. John became secretary and found himself organising speakers and arranging summer visits. A more serious aspect involved fighting local authorities to win improvements for the school. In 1958 for instance the secondary school in Sheering Mill Lane had to be taken over "temporarily" by Fawbert and Barnard. Several local buildings were then put in use as overflow classrooms. Three years children needing a visit to the toilet still had to walk the considerable distance to the main school. The situation was only resolved after John had left the PTA.

Upon leaving Sunvic, Tom Felsted, an old friend from the Home Guard, now managing director at Walter Lawrence, the joiners, suggested John join that company. He started in October 1956. Barely two months later, Tom Felsted and his daughter were killed in a car accident. As a consequence the power balance within the company changed, and John was delegated to work with a management consultant. Three difficult years followed with lots of changes, some good some less so. 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 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 much quicker than by any other means".

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 and 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. 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.



Meanwhile of course Wendy and Elizabeth were fast growing up. In 1968 John and Joan went on holiday on their own. The girls had decided to do their own thing. It did not take long before boy friends came on the scene. Wendy eventually married Roland Oxborough in 1971 and Elisabeth Timothy Burt in August 1973 in 1965. Wendy lived in Trumpington Cambridge, and eventually settled in Devon. Elizabeth lived in Canada for a year then Bristol, Oxford and Durham. In 1976 Gareth Oxborough, the Sapsfords' first grandchild was born

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 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. Wendy and Elisabeth 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 along when he organised 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.

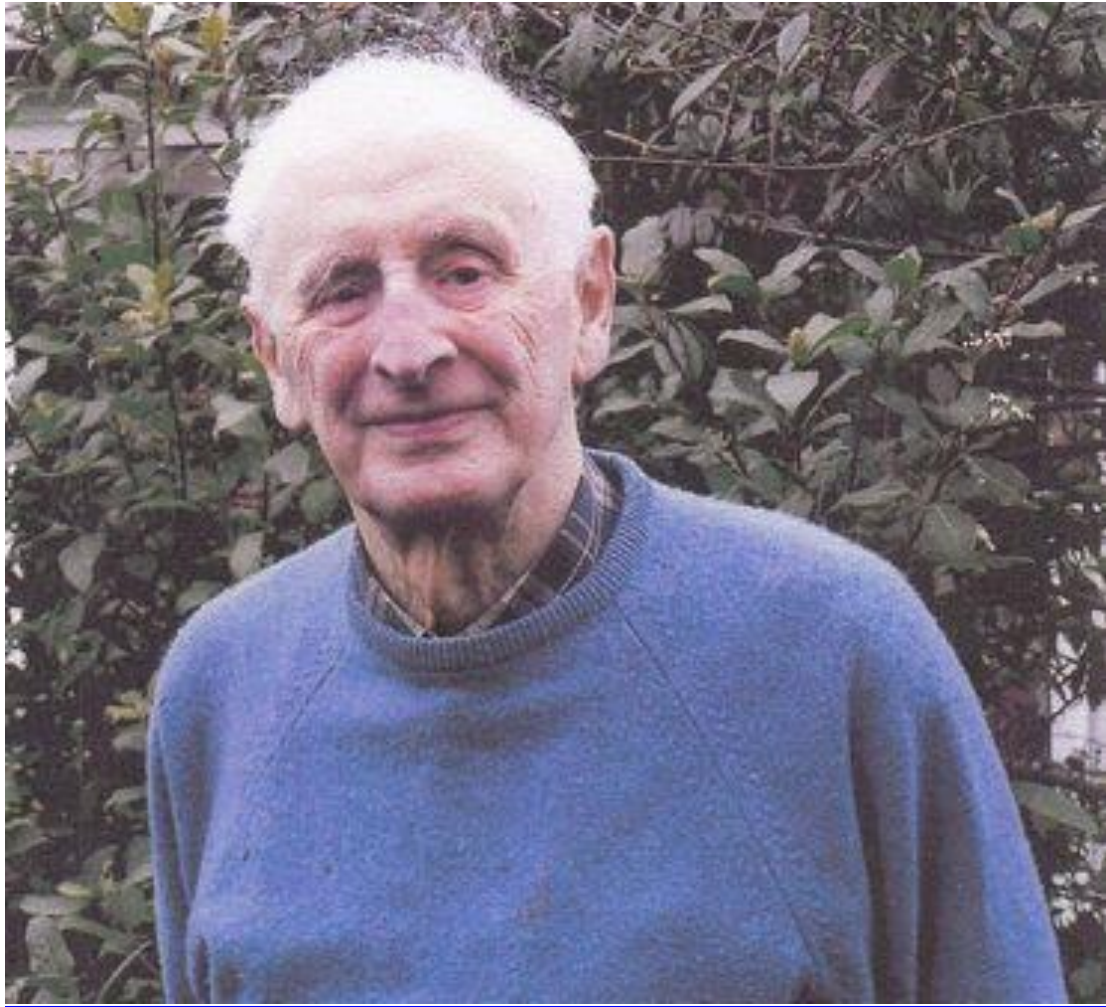
Through daily walks John had meanwhile become aware of the increasing dereliction of the Rivers Orchard area. Rivers Nursery itself, where John's dad Arthur worked for so long, had closed down in 1987. In the first half of nineties however a group of locals had decided that action needed to be taken. 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 townfolk volunteered and of course John was one of thos. 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.



The Rivers Orchard in 1996



The Rivers Orchard photographed on 1st September 2016



John Sapsford in his later years

John's 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 bussing of insects. In reality he wrote that he felt that one's life continued to exist in the memories of those who remain.

Sources this time: 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@vandebilt.co.uk or phone 01279 725468.