

YOURLOCAL Memories



with Alan Smith

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FACTORY ROLE: Halton Kemp

Why bus firm foreman was saved from going to the Front

This photograph shows the staff of Tilling-Stevens Ltd on June 19, 1915.

Seated on the end of the middle row, on the right-hand side, is Halton Kemp.

Mr Kemp was the grandfather of Christina Brockwell, of Holtys Crescent, Maidstone, who gave us these details: "My grandfather joined the small firm that William Stevens was starting around the turn of the century and he became charge-

hand in the experimental work on petrol-electric engines.

"He worked on the first two buses built at Maidstone. These were shipped to Holland and went into service from Amsterdam to Rotterdam.

"This attracted the bus company Thomas Tilling Ltd, who were the first to adopt the petro-electric system for their London fleet of buses, which meant the partnership of Tilling-Stevens Ltd and

led to a big factory beside the Medway."

The Tilling-Stevens factory, built in 1917, is now the Powerhub in St Peter's Street and under threat of redevelopment.

The Tilling-Stevens buses were the first hybrids. A petrol engine drove an electric generator and the current produced powered the back wheels. Because there were no gear changes, passengers

had an exceptionally smooth ride. Mrs Brockwell said: "My grandfather also helped Mr Stevens to install petrol buses at Hastings. He became the company's general foreman for several years, before resigning in 1921 to start his own road haulage business."

Mr Kemp ran his company, H.P.Kemp Ltd, from premises in Granville Road, Maidstone, until his retirement in the 1960s. He lived to be 97, but

it might easily have been otherwise. During the First World War he tried to join up, and arrived home proudly one lunch-time in his new Army uniform. But by the end of the afternoon, he was back in civvies.

Tilling-Stevens, whose buses were being used to transport troops to the front, had him excused on the grounds that as foreman of the works he was indispensable to the war effort.

Teenage airman is remembered by the village where his plane crashed

The story of a Second World War airman from Maidstone has been recorded for posterity by a local history society – in Buckinghamshire.

Sgt John Wenham, of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, lost his life when the Wellington bomber in which he was flying crashed only 10 minutes after taking off on a night training exercise on January 4, 1945.

The former Tovil Scout was 19.

The five other crew members were also killed.

The crash made a lasting impression on the small community where the aircraft came down, which has echoed across the decades, to the extent that the North Marston Local History Group has just produced a booklet on the crash, including details and photographs of all the crew and eye-witness accounts from villagers who rushed to help

search for survivors. Clifford Cheshire was a boy helping his father deliver groceries in the blackout when the darkened village was lit up by a huge fireball from the burning fuel in the aircraft's nearly full tanks.

Mr Cheshire said: "I heard a terrible crash. From where we were, it looked as if the whole village was on fire.

"We came rushing back and the road in front of us was on fire. The plane had crashed in the field at the bottom of the hill."

John Wenham was the son of Arthur and Susan Wenham, of College Road, Maidstone. The family later moved to Penenden Heath Road.

Arthur was a Maidstone businessman, a partner in the firm Topley and Wenham, grocery and provisions merchants, and had a shop near the town's Style and Winch brewery. He was also



John Wenham and his sister Joy, left, were the children of Maidstone businessman Arthur Wenham who ran Topley and Wenham. Right, John Wenham's cross inside the Scout hut in Tovil



churchwarden at St Faith's Church in Maidstone. John had one elder sister, Joy (now Joy Colbeck). Both were pupils at South Borough School and John was also a Tovil Scout.

In January 1945, Joy had been waiting for a discharge from the WRNS so she could marry, when her husband-to-be arrived with the news that her brother had been killed.

Because their leave had not coincided, she hadn't seen her brother for 12 months.

Mrs Colbeck, now 91, lives in Bedfordshire, but a few years ago she returned to Maidstone to remember her brother at the Tovil Scout Memorial in Cave Hill, where his name is recorded with those of other Tovil Scouts killed in the war – including Dambuster

commander Guy Gibson.

John Wenham is buried in Maidstone Cemetery and there is also a cross in his memory in the Tovil Scout hut off Straw Mill Hill.

The North Marston History Club has arranged for a memorial service to be held for all six airmen in their village church on January 6, the 70th anniversary of their deaths.

The amateur historians are also collecting funds to put up a plaque to the airmen in their local church which they hope to unveil in May.

They would be grateful for any donations. Send cheques made out to North Marston History Club to John Spargo, 10 High Street, North Marston, Buckingham, MK18 3PD.

Electronic versions of the group's booklet North Marston's Wartime Tragedy are available from Sue Chaplin; email chaplin259@btinternet.com.



John Wenham died 10 minutes after taking off on a training exercise in 1945