

MEMBERS MEETING 5th-June 2007

“Miss Ruth Barber – An Edwardian Childhood” a talk by Jill Sparrow illustrated with 200 photographs and various artefacts.

Before Jill started her talk she explained that her partner Richard was Ruth’s grandson. Ruth raised Richard when his own mother died when he was very young. It is due to Richard that Ruth’s photographs, memoirs and artefacts have been preserved and they form the basis of the talk.

The story begins on 19 March 1995 with the death of Mrs Ruth Haslam who was almost 96. She was until the last few weeks of her life a sprightly character with a razor sharp memory and wit. Ruth was laid to rest in the churchyard of All Saints in South Wingfield. Everyone knew her. She was the longest serving member of the W.I. who presented her with a wooden spoon for her 60 years service (1934-1994) and a champion of dumb animals. She left behind a record of her life in words and pictures of a world that has now vanished.

Ruth was born at Ivy Cottage, Church Street, Eastwood on 8 May 1899 when Queen Victoria was in the 62nd year of her reign, roads were cobbled and lamplighters did their rounds. Elsewhere in Eastwood lived David Herbert Lawrence (age 14) who was to become famous in the literary world.

Eastwood was a mining area. Ruth’s father was Dr Robert David Barber a surgeon, the son of Samuel John Barber, a chartered surveyor and architect and his wife Ann Margaret. Dr Barber grew up in Church Street with his brothers; John Stenson (a veterinary surgeon); Percy Eaglesham; Reginald Bradshaw; and sisters; Mary Ann; Susannah Margaret; Frances Eliza and Cassandra who was his housekeeper until she married a police constable, Mr Lumley.

Robert attended the Collegiate School in Belper. One of his books “Flowers of the Field” was awarded to him, age 14 in 1878 “for diligence”. He qualified as a doctor at St Bartholomew’s in London.

In the early 1890’s Robert met Alice Georgiana de Seilan, widow of Count Charles Louis Isidore de Seilan. He had died from consumption in 1893. They had married by special licence in 1892 at a cost of £32.6s.8d.

Alice came from an aristocratic background. The family was the Strelleys of Strelley Hall in Nottingham. Their motto was "Honor Virtutis Praemium" – Honour is recompense for valour.

Alice never lived at Strelley Hall, her ancestors had drunk and gambled away their wealth. They lived at Holly Bank House in Oakerthorpe (now a nursing home). Alice was born here in 1864 the daughter of Richard Clayton Strelley and Frances Johanna Moore. She married Dr Barber on 29 March 1894 at All Saints Church, South Wingfield. Ruth Barber was their only child and sadly her mother was widowed again in 1901 when Ruth was almost two. Dr Barber had had a severe drink problem. Ironically he was presented with a Royal Doulton whisky jug by the grateful parents of a child he successfully treated (one of the artefacts). His was not an easy profession. Often he could not alleviate suffering and death was commonplace. Surgery was grim and perhaps alcohol helped. Alice recalled paying respects to deceased patients. The first was an elderly lady who had lived a very hard life. She was clad in a beautiful nightdress, yet the hands were gnarled. She had saved the best finery for death. The second, a child laid out on a meat platter decorated with flowers, looked like a suckling pig.

Ruth was taken back to Oakerthorpe under the care of her unmarried uncle Clayton Somerville Strelley known as "Clatie" and his spinster sister Maria, whilst her mother went to Bournemouth to stay with her sister Maud.

Ruth's memories of this period include helping her uncle fill cartridges and her aunt roll pastry. She searched the fields for guinea fowl eggs and formed a love of animals and birds. She used to free sparrows from the traps her uncle set. Her aunt Maria was not used to children and Ruth was strong willed. She hated new starched clothes and one day was sent to the Anchor Inn with a parcel. The landlady Mrs Eales read the enclosed note and redressed Ruth in the clean clothes. In a rage Ruth lay down in a pool of slurry. For this Ruth received a thrashing with a hairbrush.

At this time, long before telephones, telegrams were delivered by a man riding a pony. If anyone needed a doctor someone cycled the 3 miles and gave the doctor the message. The doctor then arrived at the patient's home by horse and trap.

Ruth experienced how less wealthy people lived. At the Peacock in Oakerthorpe she was taken into the kitchen. Here a baby was sucking a

dummy. From time to time it dropped it. The dummy was picked up and returned by various people who first put it in their mouth. After this she always had her own cup and glass. In 1902 the coronation of Edward VII was celebrated in Oakerthorpe in a massive tent with trestles spread with food. Ruth got a thrill from being able to drop crumbs – unthinkable at home.

Although only 3 Ruth explored the land around Holly Bank House but there were dangers. There were mantraps in the wood to deter poachers and unfenced mine shafts. Oakerthorpe colliery was nearby to which the Strelleys owned the mineral rights.

Alice's search for a new husband ended close to home. In 1902 she married her childhood sweetheart Reginald Arthur Christian the son of the vicar of Wingfield.

Ruth was retrieved and taken to live with the couple in a house they leased on the corner of Mansfield Road and Meadow Lane in Alfreton. For the first time she was allowed to play with local children. However, one little girl had an infectious disease and she was banished and replaced by a large black retriever dog. Sadly the dog was poisoned, an act of revenge as her stepfather was the Registrar of County Courts. Reggie a solicitor was fond of animals and kept dogs. He proved to be a wonderful stepfather to Ruth and always treated her as his own child.

In July 1903 Ruth returned to Holly Bank House for a week when Alice gave birth to her first son, Richard Frederick, known as "Mins". Later that year the family moved to Manor Cottage in South Wingfield. Ruth was then 4 years old and their staff of servants included a nurse.

Later the family rented a large old house in South Wingfield. Ruth whose nickname was "Boddo" after her love of birds, acquired a menagerie of animals. She had a pet hen, a tame jackdaw and lots of chickens. The family also kept a donkey but this was sold after Boddo fell off it.

Reggie bought the children toys from Hamleys in London, trains for Mins and dolls for Boddo, however, she was more interested in boyish pursuits. For one of her birthdays at Manor cottage Reggie arranged for a barrel organ (her favourite) to be played under her bedroom window.

Ruth played in the fields at the back of Manor Cottages. She hid in one of the stooks of hay to surprise the farmer but was struck by the pitchfork

when the stook was being loaded. This resulted in a nasty wound to her arm.

She incurred the displeasure of the Manor Cottage gardener Willy Slater by springing the mousetraps he had set in the pea rows and leaving notes in them "best wishes from Mr Mouse".

Reggie felt sorry for local man Mr Collishaw who had many children. He told him he was welcome to take some vegetables to feed them. When Reggie asked Slater to bring a cabbage he was told there were none left as "Mr Collishaw has a great many children sir".

Gifts of pheasants, chickens or duck were left at the back door of Manor Cottage. As Reggie was the County Court Registrar he had to return them as they were often bribes.

One visitor to Manor Cottage was a farmer obsessed with buying any piece of land or cottage that came up for sale. He was clad in farm overalls, coated with cow muck and sour milk and he smelt. As soon as he had left Reggie would shout, "get the coffee on". The spent coffee grounds were then spread everywhere the farmer had been as an air freshener.

A developing tank and dark room were housed in the cellar at Manor Cottage. Photography was a novel hobby and Boddo never lost her fascination for it.

Boddo and Mins were often involved in pranks. Once they were in a room away from the grown-ups. They devised a game throwing balls of plasticine at the ceiling to see how long they would stay. The room had been newly decorated and the plasticine left yellow stains. Sore bottoms for that misdemeanour.

As Reggie was the vicar's son the family were expected to attend church on Sunday. The children didn't attend Sunday school as they were kept away from the village children. On one occasion the children set off for church but were followed by their dog Patrick. He was sent home but ran away and joined them in church. He sat quietly until the organ was played when he howled like a wolf. He and the children were taken to the door and shut out.

One of the treats that the children enjoyed at the vicarage was to be given glasses of warm cow's milk. They liked to visit the lavatory

because the bowl had a willow pattern. There was an outdoor privy with two large holes and two smaller ones but these revolted them.

The children enjoyed their visits to Grandma and Grandpa Christian because they had a swing, a pony called Poppy and cows. Ruth also remembers being taken to Alfreton in the dog-cart driven by her Grandma who was a real martinet. Her husband could only smoke in the garden and his sermons were kept short. They had a volatile relationship and once the vicar's wife threw her husband's breakfast through the window. The vicar was famous for his dinner parties where the wine flowed freely. Sometimes the guests were too intoxicated to stagger home. Things were very different at the Zion Methodist church where Boddo watched the congregation beat a wooden beer barrel to show their aversion to the demon drink. The Reverend Christian died in 1909 age 74.

In 1908 the Strelley family were declared bankrupt and Holly Bank House had to be sold. Aunt Maria emigrated to Canada and uncle Clatie died the next year.

Antony Hugh (or Ant as he was known), Ruth's youngest brother was born in 1909. By this time Boddo and Mins age 10 and 7 had forged a firm bond. They resented the new baby and decided to do away with him by letting his pram run down a steep hill, the pram turned over but as he was strapped in he came to no harm but they were never allowed to wheel him again.

Boddo and Mins had little contact with other children because their mother would not expose them to diseases like measles and scarlet fever so there was no school for them. However, they observed the local children of their own age; the little Maycock boy who fell over the rocks and lost a leg; Poor Violet Haycock whose sight was impaired from birth, cruelly stoned by boys and taunts of "blind eyes"; Jonty Cramp who accidentally hit his father on the head with a pitched rock and Liza Bowler who was bedridden with a swollen leg (elephantiasis) contracted from mosquito bites in the river Amber.

Ruth and her family took holidays in Scarborough (where Molly Christian lived) or Sheringham. The whole family went for a month at a time to a rented house and Reggie would join them at weekends.

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Boddo had taught herself to read and her favourite authors were Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London and Arthur Ransome. The children had a series of governesses. They had to be C of E and able to teach the catechism. Some were resident and some came daily. As Mins was often ill with bronchial asthma his mother coddled him. His father (who had experienced the character building rigours of Rugby school) could not face sending his son to such a place. One of their governesses was a Miss Thompson, a favourite, known as "Doozy". Ruth became bored, she was bright and wanted to learn. When she was 12 she was sent away to school at Buxton. The school was The Grange run by Miss Irene

Dodd the headmistress, feared by all and Miss Lena Dodd who taught music and scripture.

For the first 2 years Ruth boarded at The Grange. As she had had little contact with other children she had a rough time. She was a tomboy who liked climbing trees, fighting and getting into mischief. Still a keen photographer she took her camera to school and recorded the school day in detail. Although the school was strict Ruth soon settled down and found an ability to write. She won a prize for a religious doggerel.

Her best friend at The Grange was Peggy Penny who also had a camera. They took pictures of the nicer Mistresses, Miss Pymm, Miss Neill, Miss Firkin and the French Mistress Mademoiselle Elene, but they never took pictures of the Misses Dodd.

Boddo forged another friendship at The Grange with a girl whose surname was Italian. Her parents were "in trade". Miss Irene Dodd said that Boddo's parents would not approve as being "in trade" was frowned on. Boddo ignored her. Her friend's surname was Ferranti and they were in the electronics industry and probably very wealthy.

The Grange kept a donkey to pull the lawnmower and roller on the grass tennis courts. The girls hated to see the donkey made to work and they teamed up in its place.

Ruth's report for 1913 placed her 8th out of a class of 12. Most of her subjects were assessed as "fair" and the headmistress' comment was "good and obedient, must try to obtain more than 'fair' for her reports next term".

Mins was now aged 9 and it was decided that he should go to a boarding school, Holme Lea, in Buxton. He was not keen on education. He had difficulty with spelling (probably dyslexic) and was thoroughly spoiled. His main talent, apart from drawing and art, was absconding which he did regularly and when he wasn't disappearing he was fighting. The headmaster hit on an idea to stop him. There were 3 Brazilian brothers Lisbore Major, Minor and Minimus. Lisbore Major was 14 years old and like a man, with a moustache and muscles. The headmaster told Mins that if he persisted in brawling he would be made to fight Lisbore Major. This stopped him.

In 1913 Ruth was informed that as her youngest brother had an infectious illness she would be unable to go home for Christmas. Instead

she was to spend Christmas with distant cousins in Derby. She was 14, shy and gauche and didn't want to go. However, she had a good time at Eastwood Hall with her cousins Mark and Molly Fryer. They were her age and had horses and dogs.

Back at home Ant age 4 developed diphtheria. Instead of going to hospital a mobile unit came to the house to perform a tracheotomy. His mother felt unable to nurse him so an ex matron from a diphtheria hospital in India nursed him for 3 weeks and saved his life.

By 1914 Boddo had left school as a boarder and the family had taken a lease on a house at 8 Duke Street, Burbage, near Buxton so that Mins could go to school daily at Holme Lea.

In August 1914 the Great War started and life changed a lot for the Christian family.

When Boddo was away at The Grange Reggie gave away her much loved puppy to Squirrel the gardener. The dog died of distemper and Boddo was furious.

Ant , who was now age 5 and still recovering from diphtheria did not go to school. He was confined to a bath chair for a year after his operation.

The house at Burbage was near to The Hall and as Mr Christian was a friend of Mr and Mrs Hubbersty (Mr Hubbersty was a magistrate) the family were often invited to Sunday tea. The footman handed round sandwiches and cups of tea. This impressed Boddo.

Mins still persisted in running away from school and on one occasion was bound into his brother's bath chair and wheeled back to school kicking and screaming.

The Great War was in full swing and Buxton was heaving with soldiers. The family made friends with a local couple whose son, John Duncan Macbean (known as Smiler) was in the King's Own Borderers. Boddo then age 16 developed a schoolgirl crush on him.

By June 1915 Boddo decided that she had suffered the rigours of The Grange long enough. She packed up her things and walked out. Her school report indicated that she could achieve greater things if only she made the effort. Realistically as a female her horizons were limited. She wanted to be a barrister but her step-father informed her that "girls don't

become barristers". So the family returned to Manor Cottage and Mins and Ant went to Derby school as "day boys".

In the summer of 1915 a small convalescent home was set up in South Wingfield for the walking wounded from France. The Manor Cottage youngsters helped to wash the dirty linen but Dr Sidney Bingham expressed his concerns to Dr Christian that the soldiers could be suffering from TB or Syphilis and the children were no longer allowed to help.

There were also events like whist drives, dances and concerts in which doctors, nurses and local gentry took part. The hospital catered for 12 walking wounded. They received full medical attention, a good table and they went back to larger institutions after a month fitter and happier.

Ruth's childhood ended in 1915 when her mother had a heart attack and she took on the task of running the household. Her brothers made their careers, Mins in the army and Anthony in brewing. Tragically "Smiler" died of shrapnel wounds in 1917. Ruth married William Haslam whom she had known since childhood when she was age 30 and she had a baby daughter. Sadly the marriage failed and she didn't marry again.

It is thanks to her grandson Richard that Ruth's life story can be told in such detail. He preserved her writings, photos and belongings when she died. One of her possessions was a silver napkin ring bearing the hallmark of 1892 and the initials AGB – Alice Georgiana Barber. This may have been given to Alice when she married Robert Barber in 1894.

Ruth's story is a bridge between the past and the modern world.

A vote of thanks on behalf of members was given by Vera Rose.