

# THE PARAGON

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## THE MEMOIRS OF LILIAN BIRKHEAD

### OPERETTA

In 1921-2 while I was still at College, our young people at Green Moor decided to get up an operetta – *Sherwood's Queen*. Some years before, our Head teacher Mr. Prew had produced the musical version of this, with its sweet and tuneful solos and choruses. It was now decided to give it again, this time with a script and in costume.

In the years between we had given a quite creditable number of miscellaneous concerts, with part-songs, sketches and instrumental items. George Wright was our very popular comedian. Rehearsals for the part-songs and sketches were a good way of getting our young people together. Sometimes we were asked to give these concerts in other places.

My brother Sidney, who had been appointed Choirmaster in 1918, following Mr. George Bramall's 33 years term of office, conducted these part-songs. He continued as Choirmaster until 1978, when he retired at the age of 87 after 60 years in office – a truly remarkable record. We still hold our two traditional anniversaries – one on the first Sunday in May, to commemorate the opening of our first Chapel in 1812, and the Sunday School Anniversary in July.

Back to *Sherwood's Queen*: My brother, who played the violin, had a number of friends in orchestral circles and managed to get an orchestra together. The performance of 1922 proved very popular – the homemade costumes added to the effect. I came home for Easter and was so delighted with the Saturday performance that when it was decided to repeat it the following Saturday, I invited my two College roommates for the weekend, so that they might see it. What a weekend it was! It began to snow during the Friday night and continued all day Saturday. My two friends had to walk from Wortley Station – and in most unsuitable footwear. (No buses or cars in those days!) I had to lend them shoes and stockings (black cashmere). The snow had a disastrous effect on the audience – only 33. But the performers and we enjoyed it immensely. My brother Leslie and I escorted my friends back to Wortley Station on the Sunday night, they having experienced the hardships of winter in the country, but having enjoyed the rural performance, which went on in

spite of the Arctic conditions. They still talk of it, even after more than fifty years.

### GILBERT AND SULLIVAN

The success of *Sherwood's Queen* inspired the newly formed Company to tackle something more ambitious – a Gilbert & Sullivan opera. It had to be one of the smaller ones that would not make too heavy a demand on a small, immature, but enthusiastic company and cast. *H.M.S. Pinafore* was our choice, and a very popular choice it turned out to be, with its bluff, rollicking sailors' chorus, the pompous Sir Joseph Porter and his simpering sisters, cousins and aunts, the lovely Josephine, the gallant Captain Corcoran and the warped, scheming Dead-eye Dick.

*Pinafore* – our first Gilbert & Sullivan opera- what a happy company we were! We made our own costumes out of butter muslin, sailors' costumes from calico, only having to hire the elegant naval uniforms of Sir Joseph and Captain Corcoran. We also made our own scenery. The principals were Walter Swallow as Sir Joseph, Dan Webb as the Captain, Dolly Woodhead as Josephine, Annie Calvert as Little Buttercup, Harry Froggatt as Ralph Rackstraw and Jim Shore as Dick Deadeye. I was Hebe, Sir Joseph's simpering cousin and leader of his "sisters and cousins and aunts".

We must now keep up with the tradition we had begun, and the next year we gave *The Pirates of Penzance* – another of the shorter Gilbert & Sullivan operas. This time we decided to hire costumes from Simmonds of Manchester. It was very exciting, opening the hampers of costumes when they arrived. Again we performed at Green Moor and then

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at Stocksbridge, where we were very well received.

There followed *Iolanthe*, *The Mikado*, *Yeomen of the Guard* and *The Gondoliers*. After *Yeomen of the Guard* my brother gave up the conductorship and Clarence Elliot conducted *The Gondoliers*. After this Walter Swallow took over and conducted *Patience* and *Ruddigore*, but by this time the opera was only performed in Stocksbridge, more Stocksbridge people became involved and took over. The opera lost its Green Moor identity and eventually the Green Moor Operatic Society ceased to be.

Wilfrid Walton, my elder brother, was the piano accompanist throughout. Miss Edith Shore was prompter and assistant stage manager. The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company would come to Sheffield Lyceum (those good old Lyceum days!) and we would go to see whatever opera we were working on and I would take copious notes. My libretto book had almost more notations than libretto.

I believe that to have produced Gilbert & Sullivan operas over a period of twelve years in a little village like Green Moor is an achievement we can look back on with pride and pleasure.

## THE DIARY OF WILLIS BURGIN

### MY BROTHER'S LAST LEAVE

I saw my brother Sidney when he was at home on leave from France at the beginning of 1918. He came to see me at Belton Park and my C.O. allowed me to spend the day with him. We had a meal in a café in Grantham and had a long chat about home.

I asked Sid what it was like on the Front Line in France and he did not answer for some time. On the table was a half-open newspaper, and on the newspaper was an ordinary housefly. Sidney watched it for a moment, then said, "You see that fly on the paper, Willis? Well, I couldn't kill that fly if you asked me to, but in France, the things that Jerry has done are awful, and it puts a hate into you - you feel differently about killing. Need I say more?" "No, lad!" I said, "Let's forget it."

We went to the cinema, and it was a war picture!

### TO THE FRONT

We heard the news in the camp that all the NCOs and soldiers who had not yet been overseas would soon be on their way there. Every time I had been home on leave people would say, "Are you still in England?" and I would reply, "The war will end when I get out there!"

One thing that had worried me at this camp was having to give Physical Training to soldiers who had been wounded and trying to make them fit

again for overseas.

On a night in July 1918 300 officers, NCOs and soldiers marched from Belton Park through the streets of Grantham on our way to the railway station for the troop train to Dover. There were crowds of friends on the road to see us off and to wish us good luck. But as we neared the railway a sergeant, wearing dark glasses, pushed his way to front of the crowd and touched my arm, saying, "So, they've got thee at last!" and his manner was anything but friendly. This was the P.T. Instructor, Jock, who had been sent to France, was gassed and wounded and sent back to Belton Park.

One good thing the Battalion had done for me was to promote me from Acting Sergeant to full Sergeant, to go overseas. We travelled by night on the train, with plenty of stops, but never at a station. Our stay in Dover was a day and night, sleeping on a hard, wooden floor with one blanket in empty boarding houses. We crossed the English Channel on a calm sea in a paddle steamer and made it before dark. We had three days in a camp on a hillside at Boulogne.

Then I was given a list of names: two corporals, fifteen soldiers and I were to report to the 56<sup>th</sup> Battalion Machine Gun Corps at Etaples, a large camp near a railhead. At this camp I was told that the Battalion had moved the previous day to Quierres near Corbie, five kilometres from Amiens, and I was ordered to take the next train with my party from the railhead.

The journey was made in cattle trucks with open side doors. I found it more comfortable to sit on the wooden floor with my legs straight out, but for a change I pulled my knees up to my chin - the side of the wagon made a good backrest. The springs underneath the wagon were poor, so we felt every rail joint. Our speed was 25 to 30 miles an hour - sometimes so slow that the soldiers could take a bit of exercise, walking alongside the train. The journey took a whole day.

Then we had a 4-mile march to Quierres, where we found the HQ of the 56<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Machine Gun Corps in the front room of an empty cottage. I was sent to D Company and took over as Sergeant of the 16<sup>th</sup> Section. I found my Section in a barn with half the roof gone. We were four miles from the front line. I soon got settled and got to know my officer and each soldier of the Section.

I had only been in France a short time and was in the trenches when I received a letter from home. It was bad news - my brother Sidney had been killed in Action on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1918, at the age of 22. He was a Leading Seaman in the Royal Marines. It was strange! My Section was only twelve miles away and I could mark on my fighting map the place where he died.



Sydney was born 10<sup>th</sup> December 1895, second son of Helen and Thomas Knott Burgin, at Marsh St. Haywoods Park.

## MY WORKING LIFE

During this time I was picking up a good all round knowledge of locomotives – keeping plenty of water in the boiler so that the lead plugs would not melt; how to fit and pack new gauge glasses so that they could clearly show the water level; keeping the firebox doors shut during frosty weather to prevent the tubes from leaking; how to clean a fire so that a good head of steam should build up better; cleaning a smoke box out (oh, the joy of a windy day when that fine dust would get into every aperture it could find!)

By the time I was fifteen I was moving these steel monsters around within the confines of the loco shed, although under supervision. I think that today's youth would find that incredible.

At this time I also seemed to be selected for doing errands for the office staff. The first time I was sent anywhere was to ask a man to come in to work for 10 O'clock to do a 12-hour day shift. This man was something of a character, nicknamed Whitewash because of his oft-repeated boast that his wife could "whitewash any colour". He lived up Hunshelf Bank by Brick Lump. But my lack of familiarity with the area led me out of the Works' exit at Smithy Hill and up Hunshelf Lane. I got to his house, only to be told "Tell them I am not coming in, kid!" I retraced my steps and said he was not coming, only to find that he had cut through the yard and was already working.

My next trip out was a bus ride to fetch the Departmental Manager's false teeth. Mr. Simpson had been out the previous evening and arrived at work, only to realise that his teeth were still in a glass at home. I met this gentleman a few years after he had left Stocksbridge when I was on holiday at Cleethorpes, and we spent a pleasant half hour admiring and discussing the model railways in a shop window.

Yet another errand reminds me of a silver-haired old gentleman of around eighty years of age. He was a Mr. Oliver, a watch repairer by trade, who repaired the paraffin hand lamps and headlamps and kept them topped up with paraffin. Remember that this was wartime and such workers were kept on, who had the required skill and the necessary fitness to make their own way to work. And shortages were accepted as the norm, so on this occasion when the General Stores had run out of paraffin I was sent to Knowles's Garage at the top of Smithy Hill to purchase a gallon of paraffin from them.

The main reason for my being there was that each Monday to Friday a locomotive was in the shed to have its boiler washed out with a high-pressure water hose. This was fed into the boiler by Mr. Jack Hannay, a little, round fellow with enormous strength in muscle and lungs – as you would hear as he called for the pipe to be turned off, against the noise of the water pressure. While this was taking place, I was on top of the engine, with cotton waste and paraffin in hand, removing a fortnight's grime – roughly the interval

when that particular engine had to be washed out again.

When Jack and his mate had finished their work it was usually after lunchtime, and then I could work on the wheels and side rods, these having had a good wash down with all the water shooting around during the morning. There were rare occasions when the high-pressure pipe came out of the bolthole in the boiler, and then, look out! The steel end of the hose used to bounce up and down on the concrete floor, shooting water all over the shed, and anyone close by got really soaked. But this was all part of life's rich pageant, and people were expected to take care of themselves more than they do today.

It was on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1946 when I was approached by Reg Shaw, the yard foreman, who said, "Roy, you will be sixteen tomorrow, won't you?" I felt great – someone had remembered my birthday! "Come on the 10 to 2 afternoon shift tomorrow; you will be working with Eric Roebuck and Ken Milnes on No. 19 Loco." That was it – in at the deep end on my birthday! Being October, it fell dark just after tea, so I had to learn to scramble about in the dark with a hand lamp for the first time in my life. And this shows that socialising took second place to earning a living – that was the way of things a few years ago, but if you worked well and showed you could be trusted, you were well thought of according to the standards of those days.

*Roy Mallinson*

## VICTORY CLUB RECORDS

THE MINUTE BOOK COVERING THE PERIOD MARCH 1950 TO DECEMBER 1951 WAS ALSO REVIEWED BY SOCIETY MEMBER VAL DODGSON.

General Committee meetings took place fortnightly and were attended by 18-20 members. Agendas included Minutes of the Finance, Billiards and Social Committees. They dealt with approval of new Club Members, the letting of rooms for various functions, correspondence and applications for donations and grants, repairs needed, income comparisons, new purchases, draught beer stocks, beer prices and trial of new beers and breweries. Brewery representatives were only seen by appointment.

Often breweries would send a dozen or two bottles to be sampled, but they did not often buy or order any more, even if they liked them!

Correspondence included a letter from a member whose coat had been burned by a gas jet at the end of the bar, claiming compensation. The claim was rejected, but the gas jet would be removed.

Ever-ready Razor Products wrote, offering supplies of razor blades to be sold over the bar. This was not to be entertained.

A circular form Stocksbridge U.D.C. asked for all unsightly pieces of land to be tidied and, where possible, planted with trees,

STOCKSBRIDGE & DISTRICT  
HISTORY SOCIETY

COMMITTEE  
CHAIRMAN

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SECRETARY

BASIL SPOONER—TEL 288 4456

TREASURER

BETTY MCKAY—TEL 288 2269

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MEETINGS ARE NORMALLY HELD ON THE SECOND  
THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH, AT CHRISTCHURCH HALL,  
MANCHESTER ROAD, STOCKSBRIDGE AT 7.00 PM.

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MEETINGS

❁ PROGRAMME 2009 ❁

MARCH 12<sup>TH</sup>

THE WOODHEAD LINE—JOHN QUICK

APRIL 9<sup>TH</sup>

TOWN LIFE IN ROMAN BRITAIN—FRED COUPLAND

MAY 14<sup>TH</sup>

VICTORIAN SHEFFIELD—PETER MACHAN

JUNE 11<sup>TH</sup>

A GRAND DAY OUT

JULY 9<sup>TH</sup>

SHEFFIELD TOWN CENTRE THROUGH THE AGES—  
MARTIN OLIVE

AUGUST

SUMMER RECESS

SEPTEMBER 10<sup>TH</sup>

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR—ROBERT BRAGG

OCTOBER 8<sup>TH</sup>

S. YORKSHIRE CHURCHES— PATRICK McCLAUGHLAN

NOVEMBER 12<sup>TH</sup>

A CORNISH MISCELLANY— CHRISTINE MCKAY

SAT. 12<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER

CAROL SUPPER

etc. This was approved.

An appeal for donations to the Jamaican Hurricane Relief Fund revealed that Committee Members received attendance fees, as they pledged these, and officials also contributed, as well as all profit from the following Sunday Draw.

A letter was sent to J.B. of Spring Mill Terrace, accusing him of stealing coal. He replied, admitting the charge, apologising and returned the coal. It was agreed to take no further action unless he did it again!

An anonymous letter about betting in the Club resulted in the Secretary sending a written warning to those concerned. Betting was strictly forbidden and would result in immediate suspension.

Other disciplinary measures were threatened after it became apparent that Committee business was being discussed outside. Resignation of the culprit would be demanded.

The doors to the large hall were damaged by a certain member of Les Buxton's Dance Band one Saturday night. Repairs were done and the bill sent to the perpetrator.

Complaints were made about noise in the Card Room on Saturday nights, about holes made in the outside walls of the Gents' toilet, about children trespassing on adjoining land and plants being damaged. Response to the last matter was a letter to the Headmaster of Stocksbridge School.

The Committee dealt with a complaint that the Large Hall floor was too slippery for concerts by having wet sawdust spread after dances. The untidy and dirty approach to the Club was to be swept by casual labour. But responsibility for repair of railings leading down from the main road took some time to establish.

The Concert Secretary complained of having received an electric shock when coupling up the microphone. The Secretary was instructed to put it right himself if it was a minor fault or to get an estimate, if a major one.

When a member, J.H., was knocked down, it was established that the incident was not deliberate, but further trouble involving the same man resulted in the Chairman giving him a warning.

Problems of procedure sometimes had to be considered. A doorkeeper had allowed a non-member to sign in two others, but it was admitted that he could not be expected to know every member. The policy of not allowing games to be played on Sundays was again confirmed.

A growing problem was the accommodation of lady visitors, involving resistance to their being allowed at all. Chief among the objections was always the lack of toilet facilities. Eventually it was resolved not to deviate from the original decision to permit Members to bring their wives to occasional Saturday night concerts in the Large Hall. Only visiting artistes were allowed to use certain lavatories at particular times.

A burglary was committed in October 1951, when the safe was blown open and cash, etc. stolen. Damage was done to doors, but surprisingly, little missing from stock. An Insurance claim was made.

But a less straightforward, growing problem from mid 1950 was loss of stock, Bar Account deficits and the failure of the steward, Mr. G.N.S., to explain these. Eventually he was made to hand in his notice, the posts of steward and wife were advertised and filled by Mr. & Mrs. G. Rossington.

*To be Continued*