

Frank Diggon: an appreciation

by Dorothy & Peter Webster

Photos: Stephanie Diggon

It's time to celebrate a long interesting life, well-lived and full of love.

This is our personal tribute to Frank and some of our memories. Those of you who knew him will no doubt have personal memories, too.

Frank was a kind man, a gentle man and a real Gentleman. Forever courteous and considerate in his approach to life and people, he was principled and loyal in any venture. He was a good listener, able to provide a sounding box to help people in decision-making and to provide support to those in difficult circumstances. We know this from personal experience, for as when Peter was ill for a significant period, the support of the Diggons was much appreciated.

He maintained many life-long friendships from school days to the present, and was always warm and welcoming. Frank was always delighted to see visitors "Well hello there! How are you? Lovely to see you". We would chat over a cup of tea and a cake at the kitchen table, and this was sometimes followed with an invitation to share his lunch.

Origins

Recently, over these cups of tea, he would talk, when prompted, about his origins. Raised in Tottenham, he showed an early sense of adventure and exploration. He made many long cycling excursions with his friend, even to remote areas such as the West Country and the Lake District. He was a member of the Woodcraft Folk. This organisation leaned more towards the environment than other more regimented youth organisations of that time. With them he explored locally and attended camps around the area e.g. on Hampstead Heath. Camping was an activity which he later continued into his family life.

He recalled that he was camping-out with the Woodcraft Folk at High Beech the day war was declared. Having heard the news in the local pub that evening, he had to make his way back to his tent, in the dark, across a field, now laced with tin cans, these having been laid by the local troops to warn of imminent invasion. He was desperate not to trigger the warning clatter!

Employment and conscription

Frank joined the Alliance Assurance Company Limited in 1939 as a junior clerk in Forest Row, Sussex at a salary of £75/year. Initially, he stayed during the week at Kidbrooke Park where the company had erected long huts each with 30 beds to accommodate its staff, cycling to the family home in Walthamstow at weekends. Later he and his friend Geoff Crake camped together at Great Oddynges Farm near Horsted Keynes.

From the office in Forest Row, he and his colleagues saw the London docks burning (in 1940) after an air raid, and had a grandstand view of the Battle of Britain later that year as they were in the direct line of flight!

Conscripted in October 1942, he was selected for initial pilot training in the Navy. To undertake the training he sailed on the Queen Mary, then a troopship, from Glasgow to Halifax in the company of Winston Churchill, a passage Frank described "as one of the safest ever wartime crossings". His eyesight was not up-to-scratch for flying. However, he then became an instructor, using the Link Trainer, to familiarise other pilots in the use of flying instruments. Unfortunately, the equipment rarely functioned, which amused Frank, and left him time to enjoy Scotland. VE Day saw him sailing through the Suez Canal and he spent a year in Selur, India, where American aircraft supplied under the lend-lease agreement were collected from across South East Asia, inspected, test flown, and then flown to Cochin from where they were loaded on aircraft carriers and dumped in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

He returned to work at Head Office in St James Street, and it was with them that he came to Horsham in the 1960s. He was responsible for the introduction of computerisation of their accounts and records. In those days he was using IBM machines which filled several large rooms and gave off enormous amounts of heat. In his later years, he marvelled at the power of the modern smartphones, with a computing power many times greater than those great banks of humming IBM machines.

Interests

Frank had many interests, which he pursued throughout his life despite, in later years, his failing health. We saw him participate in many activities, some of which we mention here.

The large garden was a great joy to him, always beautifully maintained with occasional help from sturdy sons-in-law and grandsons and aesthetic support from daughters. Flowers bloomed in profusion near the house but the vegetable garden was his greatest interest. He grew many crops, and was always generous in sharing the produce at times of



excess. The call would come to help to harvest the beans, or the raspberries, et al. We still miss his chard, beans, apples, tomatoes and cucumbers, to name but a few. As we look around our garden now, we see so many plants which came as cuttings from the Diggons. There can be few local gardens without drifts of Cyclamens, usually called "Millie's Cyclamens".

His garden was large enough to accommodate several beehives. He was a leading member of a Sussex Beekeeper Association and we remember watching him work on the hives in clouds of smoke. At honey-time the kitchen was full of bottling activity. The honey was sold to raise funds in support of various charities. We remember him with Millie in Horsham Park manning the beekeepers stall. He was often called in to remove swarms of bees where they were causing problems. This activity only ceased when he suffered a severe anaphylactic shock, when he was unloading a swarm from the boot of his car, resulting in a night spent in Crawley Hospital!

Another interest was music, and in particular, singing. He was a member of a number of choirs during his time in Horsham, and continued, with support from friends, to attend rehearsals and concerts in his advancing years. We often found him practising his bass parts at the kitchen table or listening to a professional version of the pieces for the next concert. He only gave up choir membership when, to quote Frank, "it took me longer to stand up than it took the rest of the choir to sing the piece". He also enjoyed the lunchtime recitals in Horsham.

The early environmental influence of the Woodcraft Folk showed later in his life. When Warnham Nature Reserve first opened in Horsham, Frank was an early volunteer, taking part in many strenuous working parties, chopping, hacking and clearing ponds. We once came across him waist deep in mud, clearing a pond of unwanted reeds, still managing to shout a cheery greeting.

Frank enjoyed travelling, with the help and support of his daughter Stephanie. Together they visited China, antiquarian sites in Turkey, and Greece, and during the sixteen years (2003-19) of shared travel, they visited 26 countries. They walked the Milford Track in New Zealand visited both Arctic and Antarctic, and sites in Europe, North Africa, South Africa and Canada. On return from each journey, the next journey started with a question from Stephanie, "where shall we go next Dad?". They also toured the UK catching up with old friends around the country.

Frank was very well-read, taking a particular interest in biographies and autobiographies, environmental issues, and politics. His daily newspaper, 'The Times' was always spread over the kitchen table for us to pore over together, and later under his arm as he sat in the lounge at Skylark.

Horsham Geological Field Club



Frank at the Club's 40th Anniversary party in July 2017

And so we come to the club, HGFC. The history of the club is well-documented in Stonechat, where Frank's contribution is recognised, but we can offer a few extra snippets. Frank was a founder member and throughout the whole of his life in the club he was either a committee member or office holder. He was our Chairman and, even when he officially retired from this post he continued in it! He was eventually awarded the accolade of honorary life membership in 2019, a gesture by which he was most touched and amused. He last attended a committee meeting of the club in his pyjamas, in the lounge at Skylark. That's dedication!

Frank liked to keep the Club in touch with matters scientific and geological. He gleaned snippets of information from papers and periodicals which he then pinned to his notice-board and brought to every meeting. He was always seated in the front row, right hand side, aisle seat, so that he could pay close attention to the lecturer and to the lecture.

In the Club's early years, he and Millie enthusiastically attended many field trips, barbecues and other social events. It was during camping field trips that we became aware, throughout the camp, that Frank was an enthusiastic snorer. Subsequently, new male recruits were left to find this out for themselves when they needed to share accommodation on a field trip. Millie was our "hospitality lady". She would have her camping stove on, the kettle boiling and a cake-tin open as we trudged back from many a cold and tiring field trip.

They hosted many and various summer events for the Club in their garden. We remember the Diggons holding a large barbecue at Ashleigh Road where Millie fried us some ostrich eggs.

As our lecture programme organiser Frank would entertain speakers to a meal before the talk if they had come from a distance. He also kept in regular contact with many of them afterwards.

Family and later years

Frank was a loving husband, father and 'Papa'. He and Millie were a strong team, and "my three girls" were a continual source of pride and delight to him. He followed with a keen interest the life and careers of his five grandchildren. He was delighted to be able to attend, at the age of 95, Emma's wedding over in Ireland, his first "grandchild-wedding".

Now to think about his final few years. Frank was quite pragmatic in dealing with the situations resulting from his increasing age. He found changes "interesting", and a challenge to be overcome or accommodated. When he realised he needed extra care he took time to find a suitable place to stay. He visited a number of care homes for a trial period before opting for Skylark. He settled in well and was soon a great favourite with staff and residents. He enjoyed a walk around the garden, as well as the many social entertainments and activities. Moreover, he looked forward enthusiastically to his meals. He was often to be found at the centre of a Scrabble game in the lounge, surrounded by "helpers". He was also fortunate enough to be able to return to Ashleigh Road with Steph for the weekends. This enabled him to extend his enjoyment of his own garden. Many friends, acquired during his varied activities, visited him at Skylark regularly,

In conclusion, Frank lived a full and wonderful life, packed with interest and activity, to the end. He was an inspiration to us all. With admiration, great respect and much love, we say goodbye.