

Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

Local Girls Rescued Circus Ponies

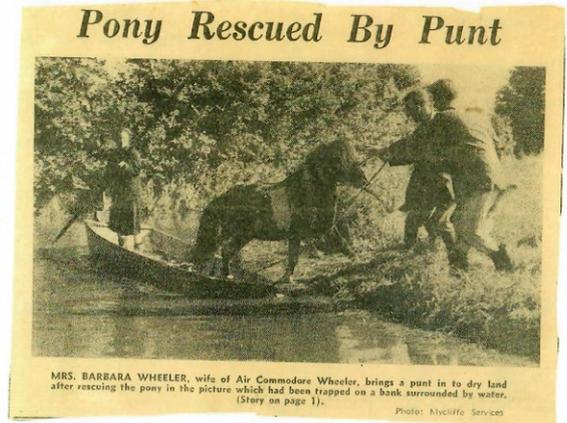
Jeremy Gilmore

This year, so far, we've not had the heavy rains that can easily result in the Thames flooding. Back in 1960 they were not so fortunate and there was widespread flooding from Maidenhead all the way to Reading. It was in the early hours of a Monday morning in October that a tributary of the Loddon started to flood, endangering Lucken's Travelling Circus that had made camp nearby. As well as the circus caravans there were a dozen circus ponies, a horse, two sheep and two donkeys.

At daybreak Wally Lucken found that there was water lapping at the knees of the ponies and "within a quarter-of-an-hour they were up to their tummies". With his brothers, Arthur and Maurice, Wally moved the animals to a nearby stable but at 9am the water was still rising fast and it was clear that they needed to find higher ground.

Wally battled through over half-a-mile of flood water to the Twyford house of Air Commodore Allen Wheeler to break the news of his circus's plight. Commodore Wheeler and his wife, Barbara, took their punt to the scene of the flood to set out on a Noah's Ark rescue.

They were joined by two local girls, Sarah Brinsden and Iris Scourfield, both 13, who were on a day's holiday from Piggot School (because of the Queen's birthday). Describing the hazardous journey through the flood, Commodore Wheeler said: "We had one or two nasty moments fighting our way through the flood water which was travelling so fast it dragged at one's feet. At one stage the two girls were riding ponies through the water and the animals



went under. The girls were flung off and they, too, went under for a moment. I thought we had lost them but they surfaced with the animals."

Said Mr. Lucken: "I was up to my chest at times. Without the help of the Wheelers I do not know what would have become of us".

The Wheelers together with Sarah and Iris were widely reported in the press – everywhere from the Berkshire Chronicle to the Daily Mail – and the story of how the girls rescued the ponies was immortalised in Animal Ways, a children's comic of the time.



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The Robert Palmer's Almshouse Charity

Alastair Moncur, former Clerk and Treasurer

The earliest records of the Robert Palmer's Almshouses in Sonning have not been passed down through the many generations of trustees, and their whereabouts are not known. The date over the central archway of the Almshouses is 1850, and it is known that Robert Palmer (1793-1872), no relation to the Palmers of Huntley & Palmer, provided the cottages for the benefit of people who had worked or would work on his estate.

There are minutes of management and trustees' meetings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which my wife and I lodged for safekeeping with the Berkshire Records Office more than 20 years ago. That office already had some relevant papers, and an impressive painting of Robert Palmer of which they seemed very proud. Those minutes give an inkling of just how harsh life could be in those days. One example is the widow of a worker on Frizer's farm who was kicked out of the tied accommodation when her husband died, but was lucky enough to be awarded one of the six almshouse cottages.

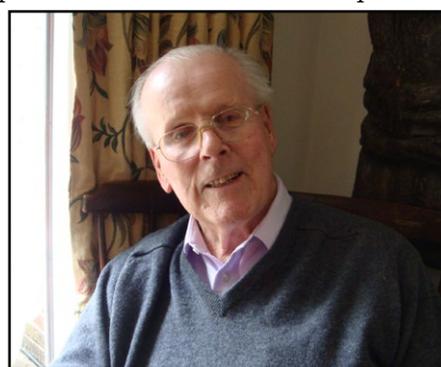
In addition to the small and quite primitive cottages, residents were allocated a share of the large area behind the cottages, on which they could grow some part of their food requirements. It became the practice for the trustees to give residents seed potatoes, and later, coal, as a Christmas present.

The present era of the almshouses started in 1981 with the setting up of the current registered charity, The Robert Palmer's Almshouse Charity, with a set of rules authorised by the Charity Commission. The rules provide for eight trustees, five of them nominated by the parishes which historically had made up the larger parish of Sonning, the Vicar of St Andrews, with the remaining two being chosen by the first six.

Mark Bodley Scott was one of the first of the 1981 trustees, and remained a trustee until he resigned in 1994, having been Chairman, sometime Clerk, and occasional solo dogsbody — with no disrespect intended to Janet Hanna, Bob Vincent and others who were in position and worked hard for part of Mark's



Left: Robert Palmer MP painted by Eden Upton Eddis
credit: Berkshire Records Office



Right: Mark Bodley Scott

Memories of: Penny Feathers

Interviewed by Annabella Marks

Penny has played an important part in the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society for many years. She was secretary to the Society's Executive Committee for 5 years and also was chair of the Education and Social Committee. She still plays a very active role in the society.

I spent an interesting afternoon talking to her about her life.

'I originally came to Sonning because my husband, Bob, was working in London and we were looking for somewhere from which he could commute easily and we bought a house in Charvil. Bob was a native Californian and was an American Consul assigned to the Embassy in London for a while. He had joined foreign service many years before and his first assignment was Japan, where we met. I was there with my parents. Father was with atomic power constructions and they, with Westinghouse, were building the first atomic power station in Japan. I was 18 years old and it was a magnificent experience.

Bob and I were married at a lovely little church in Yokohama on the bluff - a lovely day - and then sailed immediately to San Francisco, where I met his grandparents. We then moved to Washington DC for a tour and our first overseas trip was Singapore, just after independence. It was a wonderful introduction to living overseas.'

Where did you go after that?

'Algeria. We were there during the '67 war and were evacuated. Bob stayed on for a while but finally joined me in London. After six months he was reassigned to Uganda. It was a very pleasant place to

live and had a strong British Expat community. We both got involved with local amateur dramatics - Bob was a very good actor - and we had a lot of fun there.'

Where else did you go?

'Athens. It was one of our more difficult postings. What disturbed me, personally, was that when Bob had to go back to the States, he literally had to write to everybody who had been supplying us with oil and things for the house and give me permission to order them while he was away!'

A very patriarchal society.

'Yes! But we then had some wonderful tours. Denmark for three years, which I loved, and then back to Washington DC, and after that, Belize where we jointly owned two boats and I learned to sail. We also had a small motor launch - named Sprue, after a tropical disease! Then Bob was assigned to London and we came to this area. Our last tour of duty was the Azores, a place I dearly love.'

Did you get to know the locals?

'Very much so. But it was only towards the very end that the state department allowed women to go to the Foreign Service Institute as well to actually learn the language. It was an interesting experience and I did that before we went to the Azores, so not only did I learn Portuguese but also learned about the history of that part of the world. I even did strange things like learning defensive driving because at that time in the world diplomats were being kidnapped from their cars. Quite fascinating. Not something you would expect.

That was our last posting as Bob became sick in the Azores and took early retirement, and we came back Charvil.'

A very hard time.

'Yes'

But as you had been part of the village for a while, you had some support?

'No, I didn't actually. We occasionally went to St. Andrews but Bob was not a church person. After his stroke he wasn't confident in meeting new people, so it wasn't until after he died, two years later, that I started to go to church more regularly. I was really supported by our then vicar, Chris Morgan, who sort of took me in. He asked me to help Armine Edmunds with the Parish magazine, which I really enjoyed. I used to help clean the church and I remember him introducing me to others in the village. People were just so welcoming. Funny, when you lose somebody who has been such an important part of your life, you lose your confidence too. One day Joan Pearce said she had a spare theatre ticket and would I like to go? It actually took a lot of courage and the closer I got, the more frightened I got about doing it by myself, but everyone was so welcoming, so warm. That was what the village has been to me; warm people who made me welcome.

