

Ann Shirley – interviewed in 2019 by Martin Vye

I'm in the house of Mrs Ann Shirley who has lived in the village for quite a long time and I'm going to ask her about her time in the village but also about her career, so Ann how long have you been in the village?

I came in May 1966 so it is quite a long time.

I know that you were married to Laurie our postmaster. When did you meet Laurie?

That's quite a tale, because I'd had a year in Australia and New Zealand making a list of polar manuscripts in various repositories there and Laurie had been building a hospice for Group Captain Cheshire in the Himalayas so when the money ran out he decided to see more of the rest of the world and I was going to come home so we both inadvertently, separately of course before we met, booked a passage on board a ship called the Menanasia which was run by Messagerie Maritime of Marseilles and so we met en route between Sydney and Marseilles. This was a passenger cum cargo ship which called at all the French colonies including Tahiti where we spent nine days. We were loading copra i.e. coconut. So that's how we met and we got engaged in Curacao in the West Indies. So that's how we met, it's a romantic story.

You came down to live in Bridge did you?

Well not immediately. His father was a policeman and on retirement they looked for a post office where they didn't have to do newspapers. So they moved here, they lived in Havant in Hampshire, with an elderly aunt and uncle and another elderly person. So that's how they came to be here. Laurie was always rather proud of being a Hampshire man. He stayed in Hampshire working as a young builder. We got married and my job was in Cambridge of course working in the Scott Polar and although he very nobly said he would come up to Cambridge and abandoned all his contacts in Hampshire. Of course I little knew at that time as a builder that meant an awful lot of contacts. So he had some very good customers but he also had some rather bad ones.

Then when his father died suddenly in 1965 just before Christmas leaving Gran Shirley who was the secretary at the school and also did a lot of teaching of young children, teaching reading and so on. So it meant she was here on her own and Laurie's brother was elsewhere so we decided for one thing that Kent was a much better place to bring up children than Cambridgeshire and of course also the main reason was to look after her. So he took over as postmaster and it was a completely foreign thing for him to do to be anchored behind a desk but he had some very good helpers in the end. Several nice ladies who would take over from him when he was off. He became county councillor and so on as you know and he was able to escape for site meetings and soon leaving these excellent and very efficient ladies in charge.

On Laurie, just because it's quite topical at the moment, I believe he had quite a bit to do with safeguarding the Brickfield site that's correct isn't it?

Well I can't say I know a lot about that. Marie would know about that. Well we did go into that because it's within four feet away of our house which is a listed building. We found out about the history of it and the area had been exchanged between the Marquis of Conyngham and possibly the Bridge/Blean Council I'm not sure. Exchanging land in Patricbourne for land over here and when the council put in to build so many houses on that land obviously we must have objected and in the end the council refused themselves permission to build which is remarkable. But they built this extraordinary hedge a forest of trees and of course it's gone on growing and growing and it's no longer a hedge but has some very large trees in it one of which fell on the house a few years ago.

Now can we talk about your career? You've worked for the Scott Polar Research Institute and you're still working for them and we ought to note that this is the hundredth anniversary of Scott's journey to the Pole. How did you get interested in this field?

I suppose like many people of my generation we were brought up, and my mother was very fond of writers like Manville Fenn and other sort of Victorian adventure stories, Ryder Haggard and so on you see so I'd read Ryder Haggard and Arthur Ransome but I wasn't particularly geared towards Captain Scott but then my first job was in Aberdeen University Library and a friend who did work for the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge wrote to me or phoned me after I'd done about two and a half years at Aberdeen telling me there was a job going in the Polar Institute. So I applied for it and I was interviewed by Sir James Worthy and the then director Colin Bertram and Sir Vivian Fuchs although he wasn't Sir Vivian Fuchs then and they appointed me rather to my surprise. I became an assistant librarian there. I can tell you what that involved if you like but I don't want to go on too long.

There was a librarian called Harry King or H.G.R. King who in fact worked for the Manchester Guardian. He'd been in the army during the war. He was an extremely nice person, you couldn't have nicer person and we got on extremely well. My job was to catalogue books of course and it was the foremost, well probably still is the foremost collection of polar books and manuscripts possibly in the world I'm not sure. Possibly the Arctic and Antarctic Institute in Leningrad possibly, I don't know what their holdings are. But anyway that was one of the things. From these catalogues which Harry also took part in because we had not just books but articles, we had a vast numbers of articles coming in. From that we produced recent polar literature which was published at the back of the Polar Record which was the journal, a learned journal really, which was learned articles and then notes about the polar regions history and science both together published by the Institute itself and the editor's desk was just round the corner from mine. So that was the main thing but then gradually over the years I took over some manuscripts which included some Scott diaries and some of the very fine Arctic diaries and pictures and also maps and charts. The Institute was only a very small place of course I think there were only four established posts on the staff and I was being paid by the Defence Research Board of Canada but not directly of course but through the University. But Harry and I made quite a lot of different visits to various places like the National Maritime Museum and the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and various other places so we did spread our wings to a certain amount.

I know you've done quite a lot of travelling around the world following your research.

Yes a certain amount. I still haven't been to the proper mainland of the Antarctic. I've been half way there with the Australian National Antarctic Research expedition as an assistant phycologist looking at seaweeds and so forth on the Quarry Islands but I've done much more in the Antarctic. I belong to the Rupertsland Record Society. Rupertsland is this huge area around Hudson's Bay which was when the Hudson Bay Company was founded in 1670 this was called Rupertsland and the company operated from the City of London but then eventually, I should think fifteen years ago or possible twenty years ago the company which then operated mainly from Winnipeg authorised the carriage of all these very, very historic records to do with Canada all these Hudson Bay Company posts and so forth going back to the seventeenth century to be transported back to Winnipeg where they still are.

So when I came to write The Voyages of the Discovery, the history or biography of Captain Scott's first ship which is now preserved in Dundee, I went twice to work in the Hudson's Bay Company records because the Discovery, after she came back from Scott's first expedition was sold to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1905 and was owned by them for twenty years. So in the First World War she actually went to Archangel and carrying munitions from Brest. And she also carried bacon along various ports in the Netherlands I think it was mainly and that was in the First World War. She also went to South Russia, the logs are all in Winnipeg, through the Dardanelles and she and the little, I think it was either the Penguin or the Pelican were probably the first vessels through the Dardanelles to go into the Black Sea into South Russia a place called Port Novorossiysk. Then of course the Russian Civil War was going on, a terrible business altogether.

Talking of Russia you've been to Leningrad haven't you or what was then Leningrad, obviously in pursuit of research into Arctic matters. And you met with leading academics in that field in Russia?

Yes, well particularly M.I. Belov, Professor M.I. Belov who was probably the authority on the Russian Arctic and the Soviet Arctic a lot to do with trading, furs and this sort of thing. At the Institute I mentioned my and Harry King's contribution to recent polar literature but all the Russian literature was done by a man called Dr Terence Armstrong, T.E. Armstrong who was again a very fine colleague indeed and he and Brian Roberts who was the senior research person at the Institute and they had previously made a journey to Leningrad and were very much welcomed by the Soviet people there in the sixties. It was purely by chance really that there was some money left over at the National Maritime.

By then I'd moved to the National Maritime Museum and there was this money at the end of the financial year that had appeared and somehow or other I found myself fixing up a visit of some sort and I chose to go to Leningrad. It was most interesting because the Arctic and Antarctic Institute is a huge body of people and they operate the northern sea route between Europe and the North Pacific. Not that all the ships go along there but they do at least in part between the great rivers and so forth so of course through

being at the Polar Institute I knew a certain amount about the history and Terence Armstrong had written a fine book about the northern sea route so it was a great thing to be able to go there. They made us very welcome and I met one of the researchers who funnily enough had been in the Arctic on Spitsbergen in a Russian ship of course at the same time when I had been a guinea pig in Spitsbergen and then there was somebody else I met so the three of us had been in that area at the same time. I also visited the Arctic and Antarctic Museum because the Russians did a lot of work on drifting stations drifting round the Arctic so there were some of the tents and it was in an old church. I wonder now because nowadays a lot of the churches have been reclaimed whether these exhibits have been chucked out but it wasn't a very big church so perhaps not.

I believe you're not retired, you're still working. Can you say what you're working on at present?

Well I've been working very hard for at least ten years on the South Polar Times. Now this was the magazine I suppose is the nearest way to describe it rather like a school magazine that was produced in the winters on Scott's first expedition in 1901 to '04 in Discovery and the last two winters, well the only two winters I should say of Scott's Terra Nova expedition of 1910 to '13. Of course Scott's last expedition. It happened that in 1907 the Discovery volumes were published more or less in facsimile which I have over there and then when Scott's last expedition came home the 1911 winter volume was also published. But there was a fourth volume done in the winter of 1912 by the people including Cherry-Garrard who edited it, left at Cape Evans on Ross Island and this was not published because it was thought not to be of the same standard as the others you see. It didn't have Wilson's watercolours and Scott's reports and all that sort of thing.

So Cherry-Garrard's widow gave it eventually to the Polar Institute where it had lain for forty years something like that. I was asked to edit it for publication by the librarian of the Institute, William Mills and supported by an American Mr Joe Bugeja who gave me a small fee. It was a very complicated thing altogether and Mr Bugeja dropped out and it was taken on again by a man called John Bonham and the Polar Institute itself and eventually in 2010 it was published in the most beautiful volume by Vera Brice who was head designer of Harper Collins whom I got to know during work on some of my other books.

But then poor old John Bonham has been overtaken by the Folio Society because they, earlier this year published this magnificent edition. They published my commentary as a separate volume but then they published all these twelve little issues of i.e. school magazines really but they're not really because they had officers and men and things about the weather and sledging and all that sort of thing, published in a slip case and in a thousand copies and the thing's been going so well. I've belonged to the Folio Society for many years and I had a letter from them saying "Hurry and buy your copies of the South Polar Times". I think they'd sold seven hundred copies and poor old John Bonham and the Polar Institute had only sold about less than two hundred of the single volume so it's very sad. As far as I'm concerned of course it's marvellous but it's sad that more copies of the single volume didn't get taken up. So that's really what I'm working on and other things.

If we can turn back to Bridge now, you were in Bridge from the mid 1960s. First of all you found it a place where you could establish family life and bring up your children. They went to the local school?

That's right, yes.

Who was the Headteacher at the time?

Mrs Knight.

Of course that would have been in the old school house in Patrixbourne Road.

Yes, John my older son started off in Patrixbourne and of course the sewage and all that was not terribly desirable and some of it used to flood I believe. The very kind person who, because I found life in Bridge after being in my marvellous job at Cambridge and all my splendid friends there and I didn't know a soul here. Laurie was well established by the time I got here.

One day somebody knocked on the front door of the post office because we lived in the post office house which as a dreadful house. It was a lady called Mrs Wonfor, Rose Wonfor and she said "Do you want any help dear?" Anyway I certainly did want help because I had a baby and a young son. John had scarlet fever and so on. She was marvellous, she came and helped me. I don't know whether anyone else mentioned her as a Bridge character. She had one of those old sit up and beg bicycles but she never rode it. She used to carry her shopping on the handlebars. I used to get little notes saying "Have taken your washing away". She lived up in what were the council houses in Mill Lane. We were in the post office house for some years until we were lucky enough to buy this one.

Going back to the education. Mrs Knight, I won't say she was on her last legs but she had an unfortunate marriage and then she also had a staff who didn't really respect her. So things were not very good at the school then.

But of course I think Laurie helped quite a lot with campaigning to get a new school. I think he was chairman of the PTA. That was the amazing thing. I found he'd been here for about five months and found he was on the Village Hall Committee and he eventually became chairman of the PTA and goodness knows what. And Mr Prickett, he had the grocery shop in the High Street and I think it was Mr Prickett who suggested he should stand for the Bridge/Blean Rural District Council. So that's how it all started. I think John did alright at Bridge School but Nick younger son...My mother in law was then secretary so we used to hear that instead of clustering round the teacher to read he was playing in the sandpit and there was a very formidable lady called Mrs Collier, but in spite of being poked by Mrs Collier he didn't get on.

Of course we're in a home which is only a few feet of the Nailbourne. Have you got any stories to tell of the Nailbourne? Has it actually flooded your house at all?

No because we're on a knoll so it never has but one year when we had particularly bad floods and I think people down the valley really were flooded in Patrixbourne and so

forth it became a little lake at the bottom for ducks. I have a friend, who's sadly dead now but he was an economic historian to do with shipping and that sort of thing, nautical. He lived at the Anchorage at St.Margaret's Bay, Robin Craig. He came here once and he saw the way there's a sort of rubbing off at the corner of the house and he said "Oh there must have been boats coming up." Of course I remember Harry Hawkins one of the elderly persons in the village, one of the old families here. He said in his youth they used to swim in the Nailbourne so it must have been much deeper and maybe there wee boats that used to come up here. We had geese in the garden but some of them mysteriously disappeared before one Christmas. They were very good guard birds these geese, better than Liffy.

We've had a lot of people talk about the shops in Bridge. Where did you do your shopping as a young mother?

Well it was quite dangerous to do one's shopping there. We used to come down from Cambridge at weekends now and again and with a baby in a pram, you know the old fashioned sort of pram and a young toddler at my side going down the High Street. My father in law who was then the postmaster said "No, you mustn't do that because of all the traffic that was going through between Dover and London." It was really heavy traffic. I always tried to shop locally actually as the owner of the local post office and shop I always have. I still do, I always shop locally.

We've always had a butcher, two at one stage.

Mr Welch was one of them.

Yes and a greengrocer of course, Mrs Turner. A general store more or less where Mervin Gulvin has his practice. I can't remember his name but that was where the lorry crashed into the front.

That's right yes, on the other side. That was dreadful.

I don't know whether there's anything else Ann you'd like to say about the village or living here.

Well I always think we're very lucky to live in this area. Lots of wonderful walks and so on and very nice people living here. A lot of interesting societies and a lot of good shops. I think we're so fortunate to have those shops within three miles of Canterbury which I think is quite remarkable. I always get upset when people do most of their shopping in Canterbury. I realise there's more choice in Canterbury but on the other hand it's very important to keep the local shops going.

Thank you very much Ann.