

Interviewer - *I'm in the house of John and Joan Hill, Renville Oast and I'm talking with John who has been chairman of Bridge Parish Council for a long time and has done many things for the village. John when did you and Joan come to the village?*

We lived in Orpington, nearer to London, but still in Kent. I was appointed Branch Manager of a large insurance company in Canterbury in 1967 and that's when we came to Conyngham Lane. Before the actual purchase of house had gone through, I drove the car onto the drive in front of the garage and somebody came over and said "I gather you're moving in here and come from Orpington". I was very impressed with the intelligence service of the village and how very friendly everybody was.

We arrived on a Thursday and by the Sunday we'd been invited to a sherry party at the Williamson's. We had sherry parties in those days!

*Did you have children before you came?*

We had two – Jonathan aged 4 and Robert aged 2. Our youngest son Nick arrived the following year, 1968.

*They went to school at the local school, Bridge Primary School?*

Nick did, the others didn't.

*Your youngest son, Nick, is of course a friend of my son. Did they actually go to the old school?*

No, Nick didn't go the old school. As far as I remember, we lived in Conyngham Lane while the new school was being built. Nick went in 1973 and I think the school was built in about 1971 Nick and your son were in the same class, and are long-standing friends. They're both now married, with families of their own, and still keep in touch.

*Obviously you found Bridge an hospitable place but when did you actually become involved in let's say the public affairs in Bridge, trying to improve the facilities in Bridge?*

I was fairly busy. I had an office in Canterbury and then we moved that over to Maidstone so I was very involved in work for a number of years. Then in 1975 there was a big meeting in the village hall about sports facilities in Bridge which were entirely lacking. There was talk about a bowling green and also about a tennis club. I had been playing tennis in Bridge on a private court with a group of friends and I think knowing that, David Pentin who was then a councillor was at the front of this village hall meeting and said "We need someone to start a tennis club". I think I was the only one who played tennis so I got lumbered, as it were. That was in 1975. We were trying to get funds and we had a small committee. We wrote to everyone in the village and then I approached the Parish Council to see if we could get some funds and assistance from them and also to ask if we could put the tennis club on the recreation ground. I was duly allowed to present the case to the Parish Council and I was allowed five or ten minutes. Then I was dismissed by the then chairman who said "We've wasted enough time on this". You know, thank you very much, goodbye. I was rather incensed by this and thought this doesn't seem the way to run public affairs so I subsequently put myself up for election and then got on to the Parish Council.

*You've been continuously on the Parish Council for thirty six/seven years.*

That's amazing actually when I come to think about it.

*How long was it before the Tennis Club was up and running?*

It was up and running the following year actually, probably eighteen months.

*The money was raised by people who wished to play tennis.*

It was very interesting actually. We put a circular round the village and a number of people, older people who had no chance whatsoever of playing tennis in the future, were happy to put money in because they'd enjoyed playing tennis in the past. Other people put lesser amounts in. We had a loan scheme in the form of debentures. We asked people to put in a loan of £100 that would be repaid. I think we had a draw every year for who was to be repaid. We also got money, grants from the Kent Lawn Tennis Association and the National Playing Fields Association. Both at very good rates of interest or even nil in some cases. So that was how the money was raised. We then got a local builder to lay the base of the courts and put on tarmac. In fact during the course of negotiations he ran out of money. The price of lean concrete went up and he put in chalk rather than concrete, which caused problems in later years, but that's another story.

*I guess one of the great things apart from adults is that you've had young children learning to play tennis have you?*

Yes indeed. Joan my wife ran a coaching course and for fifteen years coached the youngsters up to fifteen, I think it was. She ran a tournament with a cup for the winner, every year, and it was very competitive. She achieved some jolly good success with the youth of the village and sometimes, when they had left school or were at university, they would come back and play with the adult members. It was really nice to see them return and now, some even bring along their own children! The tennis club has gone from strength to strength. We started off with two courts, then added a third. We then added floodlights so that members could play longer into the evening; and finally, in Millennium year, a new tennis pavilion was built. Having been the first Chairman of the Club, I was proud to be asked to be President, and Joan was made an honorary member.

*The issue of the village hall for Bridge has been something which has exercised people's minds as long as I remember in Bridge but you had success with the existing village hall in terms of extension.*

Yes. We decided that first of all the kitchen facilities were totally inadequate, not to put too fine a point on it. If you remember, Martin, it was a corrugated iron extension almost open to the weather at the back, with one gas ring or something. We decided it would be a good idea to do something about that and to build on an extension. We had an architect on the council, Mervin Gulvin. He drew some very good plans. Then we found that to actually build this, we needed to own the whole building. At that time it was owned by the Marquis of Conyngham and I had negotiations with him or his agent, Charlie Gooch who worked for Saville's, their agents. The Conyngham Estate agreed to sell the hall to the village for £5,000. We were then able to launch a fundraising scheme. Again I wrote round the village with a letter in every letterbox. I can't remember what the extension cost but it was more than the original £5,000 for the main hall. One of the main benefactors was the previous local GP, Roger Hunter who gave a large amount of money. I think it was £5,000, from memory and that was why we called the room above the original kitchen, to be used as a meeting room, the Hunter Room. He unveiled it.

*It's good to have that recorded. You also had a hand in the cricket pavilion on the playing field?*

The Parish Council did that. We used to have a very thriving cricket and local football club. That was supported at that time by a local builder, John Knight and he did help build that at

cost price. The Parish Council originally funded it, again with grants from various sporting funds.

*Tell me how the Village Sign came about?*

I put it to the Parish Council that it would be nice to have a village sign for Bridge. They agreed, but as no-one came forward to take it on board, I found myself undertaking the task! We had a competition for the design, which was won by Julian Kirk, a young man from the village. It had to be made of oak, for its durability, but was very expensive. When we were on holiday in France, I came across a saw mill that was selling oak at a very good price, and would cut it to length - so, instead of returning home with a car boot filled with a good quantity of wine, we came home with a load of timber instead. Joan took some time to forgive me! It took nearly two years to complete, as the planks had to be glued together and then the sign, with the church spire, etc. had to be carved out. Joan was very relieved when all the wood shavings, which seemed to permanently fill part of our house, finally disappeared! My claim to fame is that, for some reason, it was featured in the Daily Mirror!

*If you look back over these thirty six/seven years are there high points or big issues that the Parish Council had to deal with?*

I suppose the biggest thing in Bridge's history is the bypass that was completed in 1976. That changed the whole village. The Parish Council can't claim any credit for that because it finally came through what was then the Ministry of Transport. It made an enormous difference to the village, it became a quiet, pleasant place to live whereas before it was extremely dangerous. It was the main route from London to Dover and a traffic count showed that a TIR lorry passed through the village every 3 minutes, as well as all sorts of other traffic. I'm sure other people may have already said, that a TIR lorry went through a shop front and in the upstairs bedroom, the bed was shunted right across the room. Fortunately, no one was harmed – only the building.

When the by-pass was built, it was a great time for the whole village to celebrate. Years previously, many villagers had sat down in the High Street to make their protest against all the traffic. On the day of the celebration, there was a long procession of adults and children in all sorts of costumes, led by a brass band, with lots of banners and flags everywhere. Tables were set up all along the road and there was a huge tea party, and dancing in the street. It really brought the whole village together, whereas before, the traffic had cut it in two.

Another important event, I suppose, was a proposal about twenty years ago by Saville's, the agents for the Marquis of Conyngham, to build what they called a mini village round the far side of the recreation ground, between the recreation ground and the then new A2. The Parish Council was in favour of the development because it was going to be a mixed development of houses for families and affordable housing for people who wanted to come back into the village or stay in the village who couldn't otherwise afford it. In addition, and this was one of the key items, was the idea of having small workshop units backing on to the bypass, almost tucked out of the way. This we felt was a very good thing for the young people and others in the village to have some new employment. Otherwise, the village would become a dormitory, with people living here but working in Canterbury - and there's a sort of soullessness about that. Also we wanted to encourage support for the shops.

It wasn't going to be excessive growth and we thought this would do quite a lot for the village. Unfortunately there was a small but very vociferous minority who were dead against this. They wanted to preserve the village in aspic and in the end Saville's and the Conyngham Estate pulled out of the whole scheme. I think, looking back, that was a pity.

Just recently, and we're talking about March/April 2012, the City Council has published a strategic plan, which indicates all the areas in Canterbury and around where there are possible sites for development. This same site has come up for building a possible hundred houses, and several other sites as well. It's rather strange how it's come round again.

*The Parish Council has had a success in planning and actually implementing a small number of affordable housing, how long did that take?*

It took some time. The Parish Council was very keen on the idea and we started working on the plan, I think, six years ago but unfortunately another small but vociferous minority started campaigning against it. We couldn't understand it because they were people who had lived in the village a number of years, but seemed determined not to let other people return to the village or to stay here. There were all sorts of, I can only use the word 'ruses' to try and discourage us and the Housing Association from building.

There were various surveys that they instigated: the great crested newt survey - despite not one having been seen in the vicinity for a number of years. There was also an alleged sighting of a red kite. I'm a bird watcher and I do know there have been no red kites anywhere near here. The nearest I think was in the Chilterns, although one did blow down to Dungeness a year or two ago. After that, the protestors made an application for the site we had chosen (having looked at eighteen other sites in the area), to become a village green. That went to a public inquiry, we had to defend; the City Council had to defend and the Conyngham Estate had to defend, using barristers. This was thrown out very forcibly by the Ministry Inspector, but it delayed the plan by about three years altogether and cost the City Council i.e. the tax payers, a lot of money.

*It must give you great pleasure to see them now built and I believe families moved in?*

Families have moved in and in my opinion they are very attractive to look at and are well appointed inside. They're just what we wanted. The one snag is that there are only eight of them. I think we will probably have another housing needs survey shortly and find out if there are any more required. When we had a survey at the beginning of the saga, there were fifty-six people who showed interest in acquiring an affordable house.

*On a personal level we're in this lovely home of yours, Renville Oast. What is the age of the building?*

We don't know for sure but there is an identical oast in Patricbourne that has a date stone on it, 1879. It has three round kilns and the same windows (they're cast iron diamond-shaped windows and are part of the Listed Building features), so we assume it's 1879. We bought the oast in 1984 and moved into it in 1986, when we had converted it from a farm building into a family home. We have now lived here very happily for the last twenty-six years, and celebrated our golden wedding anniversary here with all our family and friends, last summer.

*Hop growing has virtually disappeared apart from one area in Bishopsbourne, which I think is kept going as a hobby but do you know where the hop fields were?*

Yes indeed. If you look out of the window you will see there are still wild hops growing in the hedge, so the hop gardens, as they call them, were all round here. Our elderly neighbour, Nelly Sharman lived in what was the original old farmhouse, which had been divided into two cottages. Her husband was the farm foreman and I have a picture of him on a horse-drawn cart, loading hops into our oast here. Nellie said she used to bring food round for the workers who had to stay twenty-four hours in the oast while the hops were drying, because of the danger of fire. So they had all their meals here. Doris Jones from the village, who you mentioned earlier, was a friend of Nellie's and remembers coming here for dances. They were held in the barn area on the first floor. The farm workers, and I think the soldiers who

**John Hill** – interviewed in 2012 by Martin Vye

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were billeted in the village, came to them. Yes, the hops were all around, and it's rather sad that they have disappeared - but sheep are now grazing in the fields around us, and it's still very pleasant countryside.

*John, thank you very much, for your interesting contribution.*