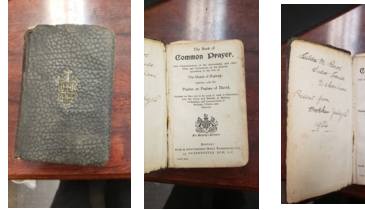


The Well-Travelled Prayer Book

The Debenham History Society was recently contacted by Mr Dixon from Mobile, Alabama, USA, who, when working on a road construction project, discovered a prayer book. When he opened it, the inscription showed that it had been gifted to Hilda M Rowe on the 12 July 1924, for her 14th birthday, by her mother.



So why contact us?

Hilda lived in the Tudor House, Debenham and Mr Dixon wished to return the book to her family.

Hilda Madge Rowe was born on the 12th July 1910. The 1911 Census shows her as one of ten children borne by George (a tailor in Debenham) and Annie Rowe.



Hilda as a young girl at Tudor House, Debenham

Hilda married Richard E Hammond in 1933 and the 1939 Census shows them living and working on Valley Farm, Yaxley, with their two daughters, Joan and Jill. Their farm was about a mile away from Eye Airbase, the Second World War US airbase. Richard was also the Head Warden, Air Raid Precautions, East Suffolk during the Second World War.



Hilda & Richard on their way to a family wedding.

Having had the good fortune to trace Hilda's daughter Jill, I was able to visit her at her Suffolk home, where she very kindly shared family stories of visiting her grandparents George and Annie at the Tudor House in Debenham, the front rooms of which were used as the tailors shop and also of growing up on Valley Farm during the Second World War.

Valley Farm was a mixed farm and worked with Suffolk Punch horses. Being located so close to the airbase during the war was not without risk. Jill remembers a plane loaded with bombs crashing on to their farmland, with the explosion so loud, it blew some of the windows out from the farmhouse; and of her Mum, Hilda, being shot at by a lone German plane while feeding her chickens, resulting in Hilda diving in to a hole in the bottom of a haystack for shelter.

How did the prayer book end up in America?

There were plenty of opportunities for villagers and air force personnel to socialise, with events held in local village halls and children's parties and dances on the airbase.

Hilda and Richard befriended USAF Lieutenant Harry Bergmann. Records link him to the 872nd Chemical Company, Eye Air Base and the 869th Chemical Company, Thorpe Abbots. These companies were responsible for the handling of incendiary and smoke bombs from the time they arrived on the base until they were loaded on to the planes ready for action.



Lt. H. Bergman
C. W. Officer

Harry would visit the farm with gifts of nylons and chocolate and he gave Jill the nickname of "Spitfire" because of her lively nature.

It is through this friendship with Hilda and her family that we think the prayer book found its way back to America. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to find any post war information about Harry.

And what of Hilda and Richard?

They continued to live and work on Valley Farm until Richard died in 1981. Hilda then moved to Thornham Magna until she passed away in 1994.

It was a pleasure to meet Jill and to learn more about Hilda and her family. I am especially grateful to Mr Dixon for taking the time to make contact with us. His consideration and interest has made it possible to return the prayer book to Jill, ninety six years after Hilda first received it.

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Family images courtesy of Jill Graham. Military service information and images courtesy of The American Air Museum & Contrails My War Record, by Henry H Arnold.