

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Annie May, The Burston Strike School

The May meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall had a presentation from Annie May. She gave a clear and passionate account of the Burston Strike School. Annie linked the causes of the Burston School Strike to the conditions experienced by agricultural labourers in the 19th Century. They were very lowly paid and lived in squalid tied houses. Farmers could sack their workers at any time and then evict their families from their homes. Fear discouraged complaints by workers.

Annie and Tom Higdon moved to Wood Dalling in Norfolk in 1902. Annie became the headteacher of the village school. Tom was an assistant teacher. They soon came into conflict with the school managers as they complained about the condition of the school buildings, demanding repairs. They began to transform the learning experience of their pupils by teaching typing and use of a sewing machine for girls, and photography for boys, as well as the 3Rs and Scripture. Influential local farmers were concerned that raising the ambitions of the children would deprive them of compliant workers. In addition, Tom was active in promoting the Agricultural Workers' Union. In 1911 events came to a head when Tom was prosecuted for assaulting a farmer who had illegally taken a boy out of school to work on his land. The Higdons were told to accept dismissal or accept another school. They took the latter option and went to Burston School.

Initially, the Higdons were very quiet in their new post. However, the appalling conditions of the school building and the desire to care for and educate her pupils brought Annie Higdon into conflict with the newly appointed Rector, Charles Tucker Eland, who was Chairman of the School Managing Body. The problems were exacerbated by Eland's expectation of deference from the whole community. Petty arguments over the lighting of fires to dry the clothes of children on a wet day, escalated with the election of Tom Higdon and other labourers to the parish council in 1913 as they began to demand improvements to village housing. The Rector appeared to become determined to dismiss the Higdons after the school was closed for a week during a whooping cough epidemic. Eland had been on holiday in Switzerland and had not been consulted but permission had been obtained from the deputy chairman of the school's managers, the Rector of Shimpling.

Two children who were fostered to a Mrs Phillips by Dr Barnardo Homes were used as the pretext for Annie Higdon's dismissal. It was claimed that Annie had severely beaten these girls. This was utter fabrication as Annie was a pacifist opposed to corporal punishment. Eventually, the Higdons were dismissed. The children were appalled. They decided to go on strike by boycotting Burston School from 1 April 1914. A prominent figure among the children was Violet Potter, aged 13, who was Annie May's aunt. The strike began with a noisy march by children around the village.

The Higdons began to give lessons to the children on the village green and then used other temporary buildings as a school. The authorities fined parents for not sending their children to school but these were paid by well-wishers. The strike gained widespread publicity and money flooded in to support what was perceived as a fight for justice. By 1917 sufficient money had been raised to build the Strike School in the village. The strike was only ended by the death of Tom Higdon in 1939. Annie died in 1946 and both are buried at Burston Church.

The strike lasted for 25 years and has gained fame as the longest running dispute in British history. It is still commemorated by the Strike School Museum and an annual rally in Burston on the first Sunday in September.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 22 June 2016 at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD. Richard Smith will be speaking about Medieval Brewing. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy