

HERITAGE CIRCLE - JULY 2016 REPORT

The author and poet Georgette Vale took on the persona of Lucilla Reeve to tell the moving story of her life in the villages taken over by the Ministry of Defence as a battle training area in World War II.

Lucilla was born in the late 1880s and lived at Tottington with her grandparents and single mother who worked at the “big house” for Lord Walsingham. An anonymous donor paid for her education in London and after college she worked there for a printing company.

At the end of The Great War she returned to Tottington to live with and care for her grandmother who was now alone. She got a job as Land Agent for Lord Walsingham and also took up writing and broadcasting mainly on farming and countryside matters. She went on to serve on the Rural District Council and various food and farming committees.

In 1938 she managed to buy Bagmore Farm in Tottington. It was run-down and dilapidated but she managed to pull it round with good care and use of the land and was able to make a profit breeding sheep, whilst carrying on as Land Agent – despite the army manoeuvres being carried on in the nearby forest.

However, on 13th June 1941 an Officer from the War Executive Committee informed her that 90 acres of her fields was needed for the army. Despite her protests she had to accept the fact to help the war effort.

Exactly one year later it was announced that the battle area was to extend taking over five villages – Longford, Tottington, Sturston, West Tofts and Buckingham Tofts & Hall – covering 18,000 acres. Eight hundred people were given one week's notice to leave. As Land Agent Lucilla fought to get that notice extended to one month and helped the villagers with the move ensuring they all had somewhere to live and they were told they could come back when war ended.

Lucilla was offered two packing sheds on a nearby duck farm. She converted one to living accommodation and used the other, together with some sheds she built, for her sheep and she carried on breeding lambs. In 1943 she bought Gt. Ellingham Farm, outside the battle area, putting a tenant in the farmhouse and continuing to live at the duck farm. She got workers to help on the new farm and this way managed to make a living out of the two. She sold it after the end of the war to the tenant, hoping to use the money to retire and move to the Broads.

The war ended but there was no indication of moving back for the villagers; the area was total devastation. Years of arguing with the M.o.D. followed until in 1948 it was announced that the villagers would never be going home. Lucilla said they were told they would be compensated so they waited, and waited, then in January 1950 they were informed their compensation would be at 1938 prices – when property prices were of course a lot lower.

Several who had been tenants before were given council houses with rent fixed for their lifetime at 2s 6d, but previous home-owners had to accept their meagre compensation, including Lucilla who had inherited her grandmother's home. So her plans for the move to the Broads fell through.

She was devastated, not just for herself but because she felt she had let everyone down in the end, and she went into deep depression. She was admitted to hospital in August suffering from “melancholia and delusions”. On her release she returned to Bagmore Farm but was still depressed and unable to cope; in October she hung herself in the Barn. She was buried outside the boundary of the Churchyard in her beloved Tottington. Later, in churchyard clearance by the army, the boundary

was moved to around her grave.

The emotional story kept the members of the Circle enthralled and raised many questions and much discussion.

The August speaker will be Tessa West on the History of Bury Gaol, and in September the AGM will be followed by Linda Sexton on A Short History of Shopping. Contact the Secretary on 01379 898561 for details.