

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Pip Wright, The Whistlecraft Family of Rickinghall

The November meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall had a captivating talk by Pip Wright where he told a series of stories from the life of Joe Whistlecraft, a 'wrong'un' who lived in Rickinghall.

Joe was born in the Hartismere Workhouse in 1876. He was part of a large family who moved to Rickinghall and came to live in Rose Cottage, Water Lane. His father, William, was notorious in the village as he was often in and out of prison for poaching on the estate of the Wilson family. He taught his sons how to shoot a gun, how to set a snare and how to train a dog. It was a rough upbringing during which Joe learned when to run and when to fight.

When Joe went to school, the family's reputation was well established and he was continually in trouble. It was not a surprise that he would eventually end up in court. His first offence was being drunk and disorderly, and swearing at and threatening a police officer. He was fined 15/- but was unable to pay and so he had 8 days in prison. Here he learned that prison was not that bad as you were given a bed, three meals a day and a haircut. A number of other prosecutions followed, including assault, robbery, failure to pay a dog licence, and arson for which he served three years in Chelmsford Gaol. In total, Joe spent over 20 years in prison. He and his family seemed to have been in a continual battle with the authorities and those who were wealthy. This intensified when his elder brother, Solly, died in Ipswich Prison from what appears to have been neglect in 1904.

In February 1914 two of Joe's brothers, Herbie and John, emigrated to Canada but they returned to Europe almost immediately when World War I broke out. Joe found himself the only member of the family at home as all of his brothers went to war and his sisters were in service. Joe was 38 years old but the major reason for not enlisting was his loss of two fingers in a shotgun accident. During this period, Joe committed an offence that he claimed he was not proud of, he shot his father. There had been a major argument between the two men as Joe was accused of 'grassing' on one of his friends who had broken a window in the church. This ended in Joe firing shot into his father's back. Fortunately for Joe, the charge of attempted murder was reduced to unlawful wounding.

In 1929 Joe faced a much more serious charge, murder. There was a longstanding enmity between Joe and the family of a local gamekeeper, Ernie Cornwell. Joe went poaching to Stubbing's Wood with his youngest brother, Ernie. They arrived separately on this dark, wet night. Joe fired his gun into a tree hoping to hit a roosting bird but this only attracted the attention of the game keeper and his assistant, Mike Scott. Joe had reloaded his gun by the time he was caught in a bright light. He seems to have shot at the light and Ernie Cornwell was killed. Mike Scott had not witnessed the shooting but found Ernie before he died and was given Joe's name as the assailant. Joe disposed of the gun but was arrested and held in Norwich for trial. He was fortunate that his barrister was able to undermine the evidence presented against him and he was acquitted. However, he was shunned by the village as he was known to be guilty of the murder. Soon after this, Joe moved to live with one of his sisters in Hinderclay. During the Second World War he got an honest job as gamekeeper for the Wilson family at Hinderclay Hall. He was able to use his knowledge to raise birds and manage the woodland. He finally died in 1960 at the age of 84. This was the end of an eventful life.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 14 December at The Village Hall, Rickinghall will be the Christmas Social. David Reeve will be talking about his life as a royal bodyguard. The price of £10 includes a buffet. Entry is by ticket only. These are available from Brenda Deaville on 01379 898561. Tony Diamond will speak about Rudyard Kipling at the meeting at 7.30pm on 25 January. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy