



SWANNINGTON NOW and THEN



The Heritage Trust Newsletter
Autumn 2000



DENIS – WithoneN

It is twenty years since the seed of what was to become the Swannington Heritage Trust was first sown. Our Chairman, Denis Baker, more than anyone, has overseen its safe germination and careful nurture to the point where the Trust has come close to achieving many of the ambitions which seemed so unrealistic in those early days.

The only child of Walter and Fanny Baker, Denis was born in October 1930 and brought up in a comfortable, caring, Baptist family on Forest Road, Coalville. He was a bright child and would undoubtedly have progressed to university after his time at Ashby Grammar School but for the untimely death of the father he so much admired when the boy was only 16. So Denis, at a peculiarly vulnerable stage in his development, had to get through, not only the emotional crisis, but also to cope with the severely straitened circumstances in which he and his mother found themselves. Though Mr Baker had for years worked for Ashby Rural District Council, both as a Relieving Officer and as a Registrar, there was no pension for the surviving family, a scandal which one hopes and believes could not happen today. A number of people helped him through this tragic period. One to whom he still pays tribute is the late Len Matthews, Matty, whom generations of Ashby boys may well have seen as an austere master rather than a compassionate friend.

Deprived of the opportunity of going up to university, Denis took a post as a trainee at Genatosan, later to become part of the Fisons group, at the same time reading for an external BSc degree which he gained in 1953. Formal education complete, his deferment from National Service expired but, as a qualified organic chemist, he was offered as an alternative a position at the Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment. One may assume that Aldermaston provided a rather better salary package than the forces could offer and marriage was a realistic possibility. Be that as it may Aldermaston



was the choice and he worked there from 1954 until 1957, his tenure being extended because of the regrettable Suez imbroglio.

He had become enamoured of a Swannington girl, Gwenda Thurman, and in 1955 they embarked on a marriage which, touchingly, they both maintain was the best day's work they ever did. They lived in the Baker family home in Forest Road and Denis commuted to Berkshire each week. On 30th March 1957 Denis completed his stint at Aldermaston returning to find that Gwenda had that day given birth to their elder son, Ian. Four years later came the birth of their younger son Gary and the Bakers settled into a period of domestic tranquillity.

Denis had joined Bagworth Precision Rubbers to set up a laboratory to investigate the properties of polyurethane and its potential commercial application especially in the motor and aircraft industries. Bagworth Precision Rubbers flourished and over the years attracted the attention of predators being taken over first by John Bull Rubber and then by Dunlop which in turn amalgamated with George Angus. Bronchial asthma had curtailed his ability to work in the lab but his appointment as applications manager seeking out and advising on commercial applications for an expanding range of products provided a challenging and satisfying promotion. One job in which he was involved was the installation of a new type of high speed conveyor system at Snibston Colliery, a job that regularly took him underground and stimulated his already burgeoning interest in the industrial history of the district.

In 1965 a Workers Educational Association course on the development of transport in this part of the county was given by the well known historian Philip Stevens and proved so popular that the students, including Denis, demanded a further course, on the industries of Coalville, the following year. These two courses, and courses on related topics elsewhere in the county particularly at Barrow, led directly to the formation of the Leicestershire Industrial History Society, an organisation of which Denis is still vice president.

It was very soon after this that, on one of their rambles around Swannington, the Bakers, father and son, discovered the old boiler, now at Snibston, in Califat Spinney. The story as told is roughly that amongst the impenetrable undergrowth of the spinney Ian went AWOL. The anxious parent's call was greeted by a very muffled response, "I'm here", "Where?", "Inside this bomb", "Don't be daft, there aren't any bombs in Swannington", "Yes there



are and I'm inside one of them and can't get out." The upshot was that Denis located the miscreant inside the almost completely buried spherical boiler which proved to be part of the old Newcomen engine that had been used at Califat mine. With agreement from Wyggeston's Hospital, members of the newly formed Leicestershire Industrial History Society dug it out and Fred Combes lifted it onto one of his heavy lorries and took it to the Abbey Road Museum in Leicester.

In 1972 Denis was approached to set up a science department at Coalville Technical College where hitherto only mining science had been taught. This was a new challenge and though without teaching qualifications or training, he found that the communications skills, acquired in his job as applications manager at Dunlop, stood him in good stead at Bridge Road. At various times he found himself teaching building science and mining science, as well as acting as the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative Co-ordinator and Staff Development Officer. However it was in the teaching of general studies that Denis found real satisfaction. Together with Ava Farrington, his head of department, and Nick Carter, both of whom are still active and valued members of the Trust, they set about providing the vital academic constituent of the well rounded technical education that employers were calling for and that the students would need if they were to progress in their careers. By so doing they gradually raised the profile of the department within the college and further afield to the extent that it became something of an exemplar to other institutions. When Ava left Denis succeeded her as head of department.

In 1980 the Bakers suffered the most grievous tragedy that can befall a close knit family with the death of their younger son, just nineteen years old, in a motor cycle accident. Those who attended the service at the Baptist Chapel recall it as the most moving and beautiful memorial to a loved son. Gary's ashes are interred with those of his grandparents in Swannington churchyard.

Affiliates of the East Midlands Industrial Archaeological Conference take turns to host the annual series of lectures and discussions and mount an exhibition. The turn of the Leicestershire Industrial History Society came in 1980, which also happened to be the 150th anniversary of the passing of the act authorising the construction of the Leicester and Swannington Railway. As may be imagined the railway featured heavily in the exhibition and the delegates themselves opted for a visit to the Incline. Agreement was obtained from the owner, Fred Combes, and the intrepid



explorers were able to hack their way through wrist thick undergrowth and climb over great mounds of spoil to seek out the remains of the demolished engine house and the incline itself. Those who eventually found their way back professed it to have been of real interest. There could be no doubt about its importance in the industrial development of the East Midlands. The success of the conference led directly to further events. In 1981 Denis, a new Parish Councillor (the family had moved to Hospital Lane in 1979 on the death of Gwenda's father), reminded the council that the following year would mark the 150th anniversary of the opening of the first section of the Leicester and Swannington Railway. Did it not behove the Council to mark such a significant anniversary? The Council allowed that it might and appointed their junior councillor to see to it. Thus came about the Swannington Festival of 1982 and after it the formation of the Swannington Heritage Trust, events previously recorded in these pages.

There is one thing you can say for Denis, if he gets a good idea, he makes the most of it. The following year saw the mounting of a substantial exhibition at the Technical College to mark the 150th anniversary of the extension of the railway to Coalville. As a result of these activities a good deal of interest was aroused, many people looking out photographs and mementoes; and Coalville 150 was formed to copy and catalogue this flood of material. At this time the director of the Leicestershire Museums Service, Patrick Boylan, was actively canvassing for a Coalville Industrial History Museum at Snibston and it was thought that the archive being amassed by Coalville 150 might form the nucleus of exhibits. Leaving Coalville 150 to concentrate on this task the Coalville Local History Society was formed to cater more generally for the people whose interest had been aroused.

During this period Denis published "Coalville - the first 75 years" which was and remains the definitive history of the area and a masterpiece of detailed original research. Other works wholly or in part by Denis Baker include a history of Ebenezer Chapel, "Whitwick Schools at War", three compilations of old photographs of the town and "Coalville Remembered", an oral history. He also wrote the text for the Swannington Village Trail and the commentary for the Trust's millennium video. Recently he has been updating and revising the Coalville Trail

In 1993 Denis suffered a heart attack, he underwent a triple bypass operation the following year and took early retirement from the Technical College. If Gwenda thought that that would slow him down she must have been sadly



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Denis Baker

is hereby named a

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in appreciation of tangible and significant assistance given for the
furtherance of better understanding and friendly relations among
peoples of the world.



Robert G. Baker
Chairman, The Rotary Foundation Trusts

Frank J. Green
President, Rotary International

disappointed. In 1994 he succeeded to the chairmanship of the Trust. He is still active in the affairs of all the voluntary organisations mentioned in this article as well as the Whitwick Historical Group. He and Gwenda remain stalwarts at Ebenezer Chapel where, following in his father's footsteps, Denis is now the authorised person to register marriages. Though suffering recurrent episodes of heart irregularity which demand a less physically strenuous life style, his work in the administration of the Trust and his programme of lectures and guided walks remain prodigious. He finds relaxation in water colour painting and turns out desirable pictures almost all of which he manages to retain for his own enjoyment, only occasionally offering them for sale.

Two events in the last few weeks have given Denis particular pleasure. In September he was named a Paul Harris Fellow by the Rotary Foundation for his contribution to understanding and friendly relations among peoples, a very rare and prized honour for a non Rotarian. In October Gwenda arranged a surprise dinner party for his seventieth birthday. Round the table were people who had in varying degrees played a part in each of his seven decades, ranging from his cousin, Alan Ratcliffe a friend and companion of his earliest years to his two grandchildren, James and Lesley Ann, in whom Denis and Gwenda now take such pride and pleasure.