

Empire Day in the Goring Gap

Last year the Queen's Diamond Jubilee was celebrated in great style not only in Goring and Streatley but in the rest of the country and throughout the Commonwealth. In 1897, Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was also celebrated nationally and throughout the entire British Empire with a public holiday, parades and receptions. The image of a motherly Queen Victoria as their paramount ruler was shared by 450 million people in a quarter of the entire globe.

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was so successful that it was suggested that there should be a day every year to remind children that not only were they an integral part of the British Empire but also that its future depended on them. However Empire Day was not introduced in this country until the year following the Queen's death in 1901, when it took place on 24 May 1902 (which had been Queen Victoria's birthday).

The Empire Day movement was spearheaded by the Earl of Meath. He said in 1905 that 'the Empire celebration should be the outward sign of an inner awakening of the peoples who constitute the British Empire to the serious duties which lie at their door'. By 1906, 7,500 UK schools were celebrating the Day but by 1916, when it was first officially recognized as a national annual event, the number had increased to 70,000. It was seen as an opportunity to raise knowledge of the Empire and encourage physical fitness, discipline, patriotic feelings and collective identity in children. Although it was up to the individual school authorities to organize an event, children would usually march past and salute the Union Jack, sing patriotic songs and hear speeches about the Empire, before being let out of school early in order to take part in local concerts, maypole dances, bonfire parties and more marches. In the summers of 1924 and 1925, the country was transfixed by the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley and Empire Day continued to be celebrated every year with ever greater enthusiasm. By the 1930s, the Day had progressed to larger and more formal patriotic gatherings such as public luncheons, church services and special ceremonies at which commemorative medals struck by the Royal Mint were awarded.

Local celebrations

For more than 50 years, Empire Day remained an essential part of the school calendar, celebrated by millions of children and adults alike. An idea of how important the event was to local people is provided by an account in the *Goring Parish Magazine* of July 1930 when the celebrations were held on 24 May on the Gardiner Recreation Ground.

It was attended by a Vice Admiral and two recipients of the Victoria Cross, the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces. Early in the afternoon, the bells of both Goring and Streatley churches were rung to announce the start of the event. Assembled at the Recreation Ground were Scouts, Cubs, Guides and Brownies from Goring, Streatley, South Stoke, Goring Heath and Aldworth; members of both Goring and Streatley Women's Institutes; school children; members of the local branch of the British Legion, the Legion Prize Band and a large number of the general public.

At exactly 3.00 pm, the bugle call 'Stand Fast' rang out and all present sang the National Anthem while the Union Jack was hoisted by Vice Admiral Gurner from South Stoke. Captain Sir Beachcroft Towse, VC from Goring then introduced General Phipps-Hornby, VC from Sonning who addressed the assembly. In a stirring speech, he emphasized the meaning of Empire Day and the responsibilities of citizens of the Empire, concluding with special remarks to the children to 'Fear God, love the brotherhood and honour the King'. General Phipps-Hornby then presented book prizes for essays to a boy and a girl from both

Goring and Streatley schools. This was followed by the choirs of both villages' Women's Institutes leading the singing of 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

The ceremony then ended with the march past and the saluting of the flag, the salute being taken by General Phipps-Hornby. A little later, performances were given by the Scouts and Cubs, and national dances by the Goring Girl Guides; according to the *Parish Magazine* the Guides' dances were so well appreciated, that an encore had to be given. Teas were then provided for the British Legion Prize Band and the 75 visiting Guides and Scouts. Between 7.00 and 9.00 pm the Band played a selection of music and according to the report 'never had they performed better'! Obviously a splendid time was had by all.

Captain Sir Ernest Beachcroft Beckwith Towse (1864-1948)

[GSLHS collection]

Sir Ernest was a well-known Goring resident for many years. This distinguished soldier had served in the Gordon Highlanders and also won a Victoria Cross in the Second Boer War. He was mentioned in dispatches twice and also won the Queen's Medal with three clasps. He was said to be the pluckiest officer in the regiment and had already been recommended for valour when he lost the sight in both eyes in action. On the day he was blinded, together with only 12 men, he took up a position on a plateau when a force of about 150 Boers approached. Neither party seemed to see one another until they were 100 yards apart. When some of the enemy were about 40 yards away, they called on Captain Towse to surrender but he ordered his men to open fire, charged forward and continued firing until his eyes were shattered by a bullet. He put the Boers to flight despite their numerical superiority and was then taken from the battlefield to a hospital some distance away in a jolting ox wagon. On the way his wounds, which included some brain damage, were treated by a doctor who later recalled that whilst riding he had to inject Towse with morphine 'by starlight, on the open veldt'. Queen Victoria, it is said, shed tears when pinning on the decoration.



Despite his loss of sight, this brave man went on to lead an active life and served in the First World War as a staff officer working with the wounded in hospital. He was Chairman of the British and Foreign Blind Association and in 1940 gave his house as its first rehabilitation centre, having previously lent it for war time activities in the First World War. He also founded the British Wireless for the Blind Fund in 1929 and was a trustee of The Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind. He lived at Longmeadow Lodge in Manor Road in Goring and was President of the local branch of the British Legion from 1921 until his death in 1948.

There are many local stories of his incredible success in overcoming his handicap. He was a keen boating man and it was said that he could pole a punt with the best. Guided only by hand claps and sound signals from a member of his household on the bank, he would take a punt out on the river as if he had full vision and bring it back into the correct boathouse unerringly. Another anecdote relates that he often went by train unaccompanied to London with only his stick to help him. The grave for this remarkable man can be seen in St Thomas's churchyard in Goring.

The end of Empire

By the 1950s the Empire was in decline and Britain's relationship with the other countries that formed the British Empire was changing as they began to establish their own identity. Political parties of the far left and pacifist dissenters began to take advantage of Empire Day as an opportunity to attack British imperialism. In response to this, in 1958 it became known

as British Commonwealth Day, then Commonwealth Day from 1966, when the date was altered to 10 June (the official birthday of the present Queen).



General Phipps-Hornby addresses the audience on the Gardiner Recreation Ground [Pat Taylor)

The date was again changed in 1977 to the second Monday in March, when each year the Queen still broadcasts a special radio message to the youth of the Commonwealth. However, the world has changed entirely and our Empire is no more.

These days, Empire Day is largely forgotten and very few people remember the school children's chant which at one time echoed around every playground: 'Remember, Remember Empire Day, the 24th of May'

Alan Winchcomb

Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to Pat Taylor for permission to reproduce her photograph of Empire Day in 1930.

Reference

Goring Parish Magazine, July 1930