

Paying Reverence to Mr and Mrs Percy Holmes
Stories within a story – by Philip Henry Shucksmith

The minutes of the meetings, arrangements and accounts in preparation for both the Silver Jubilee of George V 1935 celebration and that of the coronation of George VI in 1937 also gave a special mention to one couple; Mr and Mrs Percy Holmes.

They were mentioned because of their total dedication to local society and a good cause. Both the celebrations were held in the 'White Barn' at White Barn Farm, Alvingham. This was still the time of no electricity so one of the chores the Percys volunteered for was to provide boiling water for tea, etc, boiled in their house a considerable distance away!

So, who was this couple?

My remarks are made with the utmost sincerity to their memory; a very ordinary couple who give an insight into village life around the 1930s onwards.

Percy, a bachelor, lived at Stop Cottage with his father and mother, namely Richard and Anne. Percy worked at White Barn Farm mainly with horses and he also carried out general farm work. Percy's future partner, Maud Minnie Mumby, who was a spinster from Kirmond Le Mire, was a domestic help for Henry and Louisa Thompson at the Grange at Alvingham. It just so happened at that time that two male evangelists visited Alvingham. They had a horse-drawn caravan and parked on the corner at the east end of High Street. The caravan had only very basic facilities. I lived at High Street House with my parents, father Thomas White Shucksmith and mother Edna May and my brother, George Basil. Stories of the evangelists were only hearsay but they were rather mysterious. Edna May looked after some of their dietary requirements and I am told they made quite a fuss of me as a toddler. Father – of 'vague denomination' – financed them.

However, they held meetings and people attended, including Percy and Maud. They walked home together, a long way back to the Grange and so began their association which led to their marriage. I often heard the story of the evangelists when I was a boy and the fact that they achieved no conversions but resulted in Percy and Maud getting married. Indeed, it was the only result of their efforts! Apparently, their choice of hymns at the wedding raised some comment! "O God our help in ages past" was one; always a favourite with Maud.

Going back to the evangelists, they moved on, apparently working on the East Coast. No more was heard of them around here until 1940 after Dunkirk – they were arrested as German spies! In retrospect, it is perfectly possible they were spies. They were in Lincolnshire before the War started and they would have noted the airfields being built at Stenigot, Manby and others.

To proceed with Percy and Maud; they lived in various cottages at Mr Bourne's, at America Farm and at Church Lane – a mud and stud thatched house. They never had a tied house. He worked on various farms, mainly with horses. He was a useful ploughman but not a craftsman. His other fortes were thatching and working as a stockman or shepherd. Maud was a diligent, hard-working woman, small in stature and only knew one thing; work!

Percy's father, Richard, (who died in 1932) and mother, Anne, went to live with Percy and Maud. She was a formidable lady both in stature and presence. She had a lot of grey hair, held in a bun. Once a year, our mother invited her to tea and what an experience it was for Basil and myself! She used to sit in mother's wooden armchair, completely filling it! Once settled, she talked and could she talk! It was continuous; regardless of where my mother was in the house, it never stopped, except to eat!

I described her as a cross between Norman Evans (of over the garden wall fame) and Les Dawson's portrayal of a lady bursting with information. Sometimes, she got so involved, she ran out of breath! She was like someone immersed in water to the point of drowning. And then coming up for air and gasping for some time before she recovered! Her visit to us, even for such a short time, must have been an immense relief to her daughter-in-law, Maud. I rarely saw her after the War, possibly occasionally seeing her waiting for the bus to visit relatives. She died in 1960 aged 97.

Maud did domestic work for several ladies in the village if requested. She would work every day, sometimes half a day, going home only to do her own housework, cook, sleep and get up very early, also ensuring Percy did not waste his time; his only extravagance was his pipe which was rarely out of his mouth. I remember his pipe, much reduced in size by burning, until it would hardly hold any tobacco; only then would he replace it, unless he broke it.

Maud would bring home various things from the houses where she worked, such as old papers, sometimes food and clothes, nothing refused. They did not have a wireless until quite late in life.

Percy was almost a case of triumph over adversity. Born somewhat handicapped, his feet were apt to get in the way of one another. His affliction led to poor circulation, causing severe chilblains in winter and severe cramp was always a problem. His appearance was not enhanced by the fact that his dressed-up footwear was boots and polished leather leggings.

Both Percy and Maud attended chapel regularly, front pew, left hand side. Maud's singing was quite unique, accompanied with bodily movements! Percy invariably nodded off during the sermon and Maud would slide a hymn book under his posterior to wake him just before the sermon ended. His pipe was lit immediately on exit.

They both helped at all functions connected with the chapel. The chapel meant a lot to them, possibly their only respite from the daily round and common tasks. Maud had been a great help to my grandmother at the White Barn Farm House, washing floors and scrubbing clothes, which was her forte.

So when my wife and I moved in in about 1953, Maud expected to continue working as usual. This took a bit of getting used to; Molly (Maureen Shucksmith) had never been used to domestic help and Maud did a lot of cleaning very quickly, so quickly it did not enhance the results. Dusting was a flick here and there and washing up was rapid and costly, unless the pots were metal or something similarly hard-wearing. She was absolutely lethal with cut glass! In a slight difference of opinion I had with her, I found it diplomatic to give way to her. The carpenter, who was a witness to the disagreement, reminded me that Maud was part of

the inventory of the house; that was the way she had always done it and that was the way she would continue to do it! Progress eventually resulted in Maud's work disappearing with the advance of washing machines, vacuum cleaners and wall-to-wall carpeting, all becoming part of a modern household. On the farms, tractors replaced horses and Percy was not mechanically minded; a tractor did not stop when you shouted, "Wo"!

Gradually, they both slid into retirement. Percy died in 1967 at the age of 79. Maud later moved to a cottage in Charles Street and died in 1977 aged 88. They were both a good advert for hard work and plain living. There are two substantial memorials in the churchyard to Richard and Anne, Percy's parents, at the east end of North Cockerington Church, St. Mary's, with the quote:

If God has made this world so fair
Where sin and death abound
How beautiful beyond compare
Must paradise be found

The memorial has a rectangular surround headstone with the inscription:

Percy 12-2-1967 age 79
Maud Minnie 25-3-1977 age 88

I respect the memory of these two very ordinary people.