

AN ITEM OF INTEREST FROM THE HERITAGE CENTRE

This month we have a change from an “object” to a “person” who is a resident and is connected to our Heritage Centre. The person is an Honorary Life Member of our Civic Society and donator to the Heritage Centre, he agreed to be interviewed so I could write a brief life history so far, of a dear friend of us all

NEIL QUINCEY



Neil was born in 1925 in the village of Friday Bridge in Cambridgeshire. His parents were William and Ethel (née Bates), William was a Journeyman Baker who plied his trade in the very early hours, then delivered them by horse and cart around the villages during daylight hours. He and Ethel were married in 1910.

William had served in WW1, initially in the Royal Navy but was then transferred to the Army. This was quite common, as the Army was losing men at a terrific rate, whereas the Navy (the largest in the world) after having blockaded many enemy ports was over-subscribed with manpower. It was decided to transfer sailors into the Army, which were formed into Battalions named after their ships. William's was Drake Btn and after a few injuries, including a gun-shot wound to his elbow, he returned safely to his home town after the war, and in 1925 Neil was born.

Neil receiving his Honorary Membership H&DCS in 2019

Neil was educated at the local school in Friday Bridge, and when he left school, just before he was 15, he worked on a local farm, initially with horse and cart. But fortunately for Neil, the farmer bought the very first Fordson tractor for the princely sum of £110, complete with solid metal wheels, no cab and a metal seat, but without instruction's Neil learnt to drive it.

Then along comes WW2, Neil was too young to join up so had to wait until he was called up and then joined the RAF. After completing his basic training, he was picked out to train aircrew in their different skills. Regular medicals were done and on one it was found that Neil had TB. That unfortunately ended his military career. In some ways it was a blessing in disguise, as if he had been one of the aircrew, his life expectation at that time was officially estimated at 30 missions. At times in reality it was actually put at 3 missions over Germany.

He was advised to move to the coast, where the air was cleaner and hopefully he would recover. And what better place to move to than 'Sunny Hunny', after all it was advertised as being ideal for curing respiratory and chest complaint's and convalescing with its clean air and had several Homes specifically for such problems.

At first, Neil lived in a caravan on his own towards the end of South Beach Road, on a site called the Pit.

Once cured, Neil applied for a licence to become a taxi driver which was approved, so he then set about getting a new style uniform which looked more like a chauffeur, different to an RAF one he had been used to. There were only a handful of taxi's allowed by the Urban District Council, other drivers included Bob Bird and Arthur Lawson.

Neil met Betty (née Verley) back in Friday Bridge, and they got married in 1945 at Betty's village in Cambridgeshire. They settled down to married life and started a family, living at South Beach Road in what we today call a chalet bungalow. Supported on large heavy concrete blocks. From an upstairs window/ door, access to a wooden balcony was possible. At the back of which was a couple of chalets, one of which was frequently rented by Bert Bradshaw the pianist and his wife and dog 'Monty', during his summer seasons here.

Then in January 1953 came disaster, on the evening of the 31st January, Neil was at work in his Taxi, he had a fare at Kings Lynn and Norwich.

Remember, mobile phones were not invented then so communication was by telephone land line or word of mouth.

Neil's wife Betty knew where he was driving back from and had been phoning public houses along that route home, and of course the local pubs including The Railway Inn (now The Wash & Tope).

To warn them that the Sea defence was breached and mass flooding was upon them and the sea front chalets. The first Neil knew of it was when he popped into the Railway Inn, The landlord, Vic Coombs shouted "have you spoken to Betty, she's tried to find you", Neil rang home from the pub and was told that the water was Knee deep. Neil replied that he was coming home straight away, and not to worry as a couple of years before this had happened and the water was knee deep. Betty then told him "but we are upstairs!" Panic stations, this was serious.

Neil got in his Taxi and raced down to the Level Crossing that was at the top of South Beach Road (where Tesco's roundabout is now) and was flagged down by some USAF personnel and Sgt Spencer of the local police. The sea had reached this far inland and was just crossing the railway line.

The Airman were waiting for reinforcements and a 'Weasel' (an amphibious vehicle) to arrive from RAF Sculthorpe. These duly arrived and Neil asked if he could get into the Weasel with them to get to his wife and children. Initially they said no, it was too dangerous and that they were in charge. I must add here that most of the residents living in that area at that time, were Americans.



But Sgt Spencer pointed out that Neil lived here, knew where the homes were and who lived in them, plus, if they wouldn't let him come aboard the Weasel – he would go on his own somehow. Common sense prevailed and Neil joined the crew, they set off and although close together they had to shout in order to hear one another, it was dark and the flood water was very choppy and the wind speed was around 100 mph. When nearing Neil's home, they had to turn along the waves, which tried to tip the Weasel, they kept going, praying it would not turn over. On reaching the balcony of the home, they all

scrambled onto it and the Weasel was caught by the waves and sank. The water was 11 feet deep and was up to the underside of the Balcony on the 1st floor. The time now was around 10.30pm.

Miraculously, the telephone was still working so the US officer and Sgt Spencer could



The remains of Neil's home

communicate with their respective rescuers 'on land'. After some hours, (some 6 hours) the water receded as it spread over the fields, but by then so many homesteads had gone, demolished or just floated away collapsing as they went.

Worse still was the final count of 31 people that had drowned.

Around 4.30am, the water was about 4 feet deep now, and in the distance they could see a tall American in a protective suit pulling a rubber dinghy, it was Reis Leming 'their knight in shining armour'. At one point, the wind got hold of the dinghy and blew it up in the air, with Reis holding on to the rope and Neil grabbing it as well they pulled it down onto the water. Neil had his 7-month old son tucked inside a warm Parka his 2 daughters and wife Betty on the balcony, one by one they jumped into the dinghy and Reis pulled and the other crew members pushed them to dry land near what had been the fairground. They were taken to the station which became a rescue centre, then they were put up in the Railway Hotel. By now it was early morning, the next day his family were driven back to Friday Bridge to Betty's parents, whilst Neil was back down to the flooded area helping where he could. A friend was there to attempt getting to his house, Neil said he would come with him, suspecting what they would find, true enough when they managed to get near, all they could see was the chimney stack, the building completely gone, including his friend's wife and child.

Neil's house had to be demolished but remember earlier, I spoke of the home being built on concrete pillars, they held the structure in place and without them his too would have floated away.

Neil had the unfortunate task of identifying many of the adult bodies found as he lived amongst them, the children were identified by the school Headmaster.

Neil's family was the only 'complete' family to have survived this terrible disaster.

When life returned to some sort of normality, the family moved to an apartment in Northgate, Neil carried on taxi driving and later Betty took over an Ice Cream shop on the front of Tamworth House and after many more years, eventually retired. Moving to the house he lives in now, since then sadly he has lost his wife and a daughter.

Still today, he is in communication with retired members of the USAF Squadron that saved his family and others on that terrible night.

NB. This was intended to be a brief story of Neil's life so far.

I have only just touched on the history of the Flood, much more information is displayed in our Heritage Centre for reading and viewing.

Our thanks to Neil for his life's story so far, long may it continue.

Interviewed and written up by Tony Armstrong, a volunteer at the Heritage Centre.

Sadly Neil died at QEH, King's Lynn on 23rd March 2022.