

AN OBJECT OF INTEREST FROM HUNSTANTON HERITAGE CENTRE

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A WANDERER FROM THE START

– the third in a series of interviews with local people

*by Margi Blunden.*

HUNSTANTON &  
DISTRICT  
CIVIC SOCIETY

## Part 1

This is the consolidated article about **Ivy Scales's** life.

Sitting in Ivy's house, I am aware that this one chat will not suffice to cover the many experiences which have filled her life until now. Every wall, showing pictures of French liners, prints of Gaugin, posters of Geneva, villages in the Jura mountains and all kinds of other colourful and intriguing pictures, speaks of her adventures.

But her story starts locally in Stanhoe in 1937 when the world was quite a different place. The war was looming and although Norfolk being a quiet, rural county was not used to much disruption, the conflict would bring its surprises to the little village with two pubs and a sweet shop and a two mile walk to the train station.



*Ivy Scales Uncle's Ironmongery in the High St.*

*where the SmokShop is currently located*

The family initially lived in Pond Cottage overlooking the green and pond, next door to her maternal grandfather. He was a farm foreman and was very much part of their lives. Her parents had met at the Dormy House Hotel in Brancaster where her mother worked. The Scales family, having originally come from Normandy, had been tenant farmers and occasionally publicans all over Norfolk for centuries.

From the start Ivy enjoyed exploring her surroundings. One of her earliest memories is from the age of four when having been told by her mother she could not go out as Grandad was busy and couldn't look after her, she determinedly put on her red wool coat. She disliked being confined, was cross that Grandad couldn't take her, and once outside the back door planned her route across the field to see him. The men were picking the sugar beet as she made her way diagonally over the field.

Her mother, pregnant with her sister, red faced and panting, appeared running down the road towards her. Ivy's recollection is that she felt quite pleased with herself despite the consternation from the grown ups she had caused.

Of course by now the war was on and it did not go unnoticed by the village children of whom Ivy was one. The social life however carried on through the war and everyone went to the blacked out village hall for dancing, games, singing and mounds of sandwiches.

The children became familiar with the different sounds of the plane engines and knew when they should run for cover.

Playing one day at the top end of Station Road they witnessed a plane nose diving over the village only to crash in the field in front of them. They rushed to the plane, uninterested in the dead pilot slumped in the cock-pit. They were after the anti radar ribbon which, for a reason now forgotten, they wanted.



Ivy mentioned here that all the dead German pilots from the area *Ivy Scales in 2015* were buried in Great Bircham churchyard and to this day a few gravestones can still be seen.

She recalls the Italian prisoners of war who helped in the fields. They loved the children and would give them wooden articulated animals which they had carved.

Although there was a lack of schooling at this time due to teacher shortages, Ivy's curiosity about the world was satisfied by reading any book she found in the bookcase at home and listening to the radio. She was not interested solely in children's books but read books about WW1 and the newspaper.

There was in the Scales's house a big steamer trunk which had the labels of steam liners on its exterior. Like his brothers, Ivy's father thought it might be a good idea to emigrate to Australia and decided to prepare by buying the trunk. Ivy would examine the labels advertising the Cunard line with fascination dreaming of the day when they would leave. That never happened but these sources of information fed her conscious wish that at the age of eight she wanted to see the world.

However that had to wait. In the meantime she was delighted to be taken by train from Stanhoe via Hunstanton and Kings Lynn down to Esher in Surrey where her Aunt Ivy lived. She loved the journey observing details like the black out blinds on the train and drinking in all the views of the stations and their gardens on this busy line.

Her knowledge of history was expanded further when the family moved into the pub The Norfolk Hero. This old inn (which lost that status when Ivy's father became the tenant) had two staircases and the spiral one, constructed of brick and wood, led to Ivy's bedroom. Here, many years before her, Nelson had taken his rest, using the inn on his way to Burnham Thorpe.

The way of life was still simple – each morning Ivy would take her ewer (a large jug) downstairs to fill it with water from the sink behind the bar, return to her bedroom and fill the basin for her wash.

Her eagerness to be part of something larger than Stanhoe and then Fakenham Grammar School from the age of 11, made her a lively girl who refused to accept the conventional boundaries of the time.

When she announced to her father she would like to be a sailor the response was:

*Girls don't go to sea.*

She felt devastated.

However knowing that she had to earn money once she left school, she entered nursing. This proved to be totally unsuitable for her and after thirteen months she left and found employment in King's Lynn at Plowright, Pratt and Harbage.

She was put in the Despatch Department with employees who had been there a long time.

One day packing parcels and amidst the general chat she burst out with the words:

*I didn't go to Grammar School to pack parcels!*

Her fellow workers were astonished but Ivy left and found another job with Cooper Roller Bearings.

Looking out from the room where she worked, she would notice bearings lying in the grass outside getting rusty and wondered what they were doing there.

What she discovered was that the bearings had to become rusty before they were put in the engine of a ship.

But what she didn't realise at that moment, was that there was a significant connection between the bearings and the direction in which her life took her.

For Ivy, ships became the instrument by which she saw the world and the means by which she made a living.

How she got from the interior of a manufacturing business in King's Lynn to the interior of a merchant navy ship is for the next instalment of this fascinating life story of a girl born in the unassuming village of Stanhoe.

## **Part 2**

We left Ivy as a very young woman working in King's Lynn in the 1950s.

Her next move was to secure a job as a stock control clerk at USAF Sculthorpe in the PX, where military personnel could shop. Suddenly her life opened up.

Sculthorpe base was a lively place then. It employed many people involved in flying American planes, amongst other places to the Russian border. The noise, life and vibrancy of the place made Ivy feel alive for the first time.

Her sister Mary also worked there and met a Norwegian airman at the base and married him. Her future life was in Trondheim which is where Ivy would go at Christmas by rail and boat. Her memories of the skiing and the Trondheim Cathedral full of 2000 people are still bright for her.

Two years later she moved to the commercial transportation offices at the base which had electric typewriters. Again her view of the world expanded as she was allowed to use the base library where she started to read American authors like John Steinbeck. Her curiosity about the world was starting to be satisfied.

Despite loving this work she knew it would not last forever and she made the bold move of going to London. Here, despite the WW2 bomb sites still very evident in the city, London provided a lively setting for Ivy's new life.

The easiest way to find work was as a temporary secretary. They were known as temps and Ivy was one of them. She lived in Brixton, which at first frightened this country girl, but the liveliness of this area became quickly familiar.

She went out to meet life and was soon meeting new people one of whom was Anne who was Scottish. She had worked on the Continent and now ran a dental surgery in Knightsbridge. They became great friends and Ivy's interest in Europe grew.

The 'swinging sixties' of which Ivy and Anne were a part was underway. Ivy was now living in Bayswater, partying at the weekends and visiting London museums on Sundays. She now had a job in Berkley Square in the international money section of Morgan Guaranty Bankers.

At the Hammersmith Palais during this time, she met an engineer off a ship. He offered to show her his ship in the London Docks. Did she fall in love with him? No! She fell in love with the ship and whilst on board she spotted a typewriter in an office.

'Well', she thought to herself, 'Girls do go to sea!'

This incident inspired her to apply for a job on a ship with the Shaw, Savill Line in 1964. She got the job of junior officer but was told firmly that there was “no promotion for women.”



*The Southern Cross*

Undaunted she started her marine career on the *Southern Cross* a splendid ship built by Harland and Wolff in Belfast in 1955. This ship was remarkable for its time and had innovative features like the funnels and engines aft and all 1100 passengers were offered the same class of accommodation.

So off she went sailing from Southampton to New Zealand round the world 4 times a year –

three times westbound and one eastbound.

On her initial trip she worked in the office (which was bedlam she said) as well as helping the passengers to settle in, which involved entertaining them with fancy dress parties and various deck games. She found herself organising the Purser’s Sunday Night Quiz when her job was to ring a bell after the minute was up for the contestants to answer. Once she fell asleep, got poked in the ribs by her colleague, whereupon she rang the bell vigorously but of course at an inappropriate moment. There was uproar from the floor!

Her life on the sea had begun and she did this for five years not only working hard but having fun too.

As her first journey on the sea progressed “... the sun got stronger and the sea got bluer, pale-skinned young ladies appeared in bathing costumes around the decks, glistening in Ambre Solaire sun lotion, becoming bronzer daily,” she recalled.

Eventually the ship called in at Tahiti – this became one of her favourite ports of call.

Of one such visit she said:

“Next stop Tahiti and all its loveliness. So good to be there again. Leaving at 0600 the next day I was up early to throw my flower lei over the stern and watch it get lost in the wake.....

The day before leaving Julie (real name forgotten!) and I went over by boat to the beautiful island of Moorea, just 12 nautical miles off Tahiti, of which it was like a smaller version. The big difference was that it was still undeveloped and as Captain Cook found it. There were high, green peaks and a bay where he anchored in 1777. One tiny hotel stood alone. No-one else came out to the island all day. Paradise.”

When the *Southern Cross* was finally withdrawn from service in 1972 due to competition from the air, she disembarked in Perth, Australia and lived there for ten months.

During that time, she recalled:

“It was a State holiday and I was leaning over the bath washing something. My feet were clad in some beloved Fijian straw slippers and suddenly they had a row of bumps pass

underneath them. Surprised, I grabbed the side of the door when a loud roaring noise began and the door was twisting! I opened the outer door and came face to face with the brick wall of the opposite apartments moving in and out like a wave all along.”

Was it the frightening experience of a 5.3 earthquake there or the desire to be back on the sea which caused her to rejoin Shaw, Savill on the *Northern Star* as it went eastbound back to London?

When this ship too was withdrawn in 1975, she started work for United Newspapers in London where she had the job of executive assistant to the chair of six printing companies. This was a busy and fulfilling job however Lord Barnett died in post and Ivy was not enamoured of his replacement.

It was time to take an initiative and seek pastures new.

Another crunch point had arrived in her life.

### **Part 3**

If you read the first two parts of this interview with Ivy Scales you will recall that she was now back in London having sailed round the world several times.

Never one to sit back and be swept along by life's tide, when her current boss did not suit her she applied for a typist's job in Geneva at the United Nations.

Whilst waiting for the outcome of various tests and interviews she hopped on another cruise ship and typed her way round the Mediterranean.

Once the U.N. job was confirmed off she went to find herself in a typing pool in an office overlooking Lake Geneva, the Savoy Alps and on occasion Mont Blanc glowing pink in the setting sun.

For nine months she plodded along as a copy typist, becoming bored with the reams of drafts that she copied and finding herself regretting her decision to move to Geneva. What she yearned for was some responsibility and the opportunity to take initiatives.

However, life moved on when she got a job as secretary, also in Geneva, to a retired American Admiral whose main interest was in research and was so absorbed in this that Ivy's assistance was mainly involved running around various departments checking documents. Sharing an office with three others, she (and they) found plenty of time for growing plants on the window sills and developed a collection of thirty varieties!

Although work had not quite come up to her expectations, life outside had more to offer. Free language courses were offered and so she started to learn French. She also decided to take sailing lessons on the Lake. She and a friend were quite confident that they would be able to cope with the French instructions – one such lesson proved to them that they had not yet learned quite enough of the language and they ended up in the cold, dark waters of the lake entangled in the ropes and sails of an upturned boat!

She made the most of Geneva's location in Europe and at weekends would sometimes take trains to Italy, Germany, Austria and Belgium.

The two years of her contract being up she then made for the UK on the Orient Express. Back in London the Greek shipping company J. G. Carris which bought the *Southern Cross*, needed a secretary in their offices. Her job was to procure spare parts for the six ships now owned by the company. Here she was happy to still be in contact with the ships she had

loved so much and when she was invited to the relaunch of *Southern Cross* it was an emotional moment for her.

However, working back in London, she missed her continental friends and the flavour of European life.

So she phoned an old friend in Geneva who quickly made some calls and found Ivy a job back in the UN with a man who knew what a good secretary Ivy was and immediately asked her to be his personal secretary. Ivy's future was assured!

The following years in Geneva were settled and Ivy became fluent in French, established many friendships and enjoyed the breadth of culture which her European life afforded her.

For the British person working abroad there will always be a moment when a big decision has to be faced. Do you retire where you have worked or do you return to the UK for your retirement? Connections with places and people in the place of your work have become important to you and to break with those is not an easy thing to do.

Ivy was torn but felt the tug of family back in Norfolk. As her sister lived in Dersingham it made sense to her to retire there.

Wherever she was, Ivy always sought out whatever it was which interested her. So she joined the Hunstanton and District Civic Society and discovered a group of people who were keen on local history, architecture and the well-being of the future of the town. Her experience at the U.N. was soon noted and she joined the committee.

One of her achievements during this time was to research the history of Ringstead Mill. The result of this was a leaflet which is still available today, as is the leaflet she also contributed to about Hunstanton's local Arts and Crafts architect Herbert Ibberson. Both leaflets now incorporated into the Hunstanton Guide Book published by this Society.

Her love of history and the place of people in it dovetailed very well with the ethos of the Society. She joined the group of volunteers who opened the Heritage Centre eagerly giving her time to welcome visitors into the showcase for the story of Hunstanton and District.

From her early escape as a little girl across the Stanhoe fields in search of a world beyond the confines of home, Ivy has fulfilled that desire to explore and understand cultures, peoples and histories she then knew nothing of.

All she knew then was that she had the desire to wander and wander she did – out of Norfolk, out of the UK and round the world.

She brought back home with her the treasures of memories which she has been generous enough to share, giving us a glimpse of a life rich in experience and knowledge.

Thank you, Ivy, for sharing your life story with other members of the Society. Perhaps it might prompt others to share their life stories.

Margi Blunden, December 2021.