

## Walter Lee - A Life

The Manchester Evening News printed the obituary of Alderman Gilbert Burrows in 1902. He was described as one of the most prominent men in the town of Stockport. For many years he had been the Conservative councillor for Portwood Ward and also acted as the Conservative party agent in Stockport.

Gilbert married Elizabeth Robinson in 1862 and they had five children. Their daughter Sarah Elizabeth married John Lee in 1893 and their son Walter was born in 1895. Walter was given the middle name of Burrows, in honour of his grandfather. Sadly Sarah died shortly after Walter's birth and his father John remarried. Walter's stepmother was Milinda (Minnie) from Peterborough.

Walter didn't get on with his stepmother and turned to rum at an early age. He left home at 14 and went to work at the Ford Motor Company in Trafford Park, Manchester. He stayed in lodgings until the Great War broke out and joined the 8th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, where he swapped his tobacco for rum. The Fusiliers were sent to Gallipoli but Walter was invalided out after he caught malaria and dysentery. After recovering Walter was sent Egypt and, being a good swimmer, he swam across the Suez Canal.

After Egypt the fusiliers crossed the desert into Palestine and were about to enter Jerusalem when they were sent off to the Western Front as part of the big push of 1918 against the Germans. "We went to France, where we had to fight for the first time. I didn't care which way it went so long as I could get out of it and go Home," said Walter.

When the war ended Walter went back to Manchester and Stockport but couldn't settle down with his step-mother again, so he set off to tramp round the country. He crossed the Pennines and ended up in Wisbech in about 1925 as a fruit picker. Between the wars he moved all over the area, living with the Salvation Army at Wisbech ("They tried to convert me, but it was useless"), lodging at Walsoken, working on the "Hump" railway lines in March. He also lived for a time at Downham Market, and after getting married in Wisbech he left his wife and ended up just before the 1939 war in a caravan at Mr Ron Gillett's farm at Little Downham.

He met his wife when he went for some new lodgings in Wisbech but the marriage didn't last long. "We just couldn't get on together so I left her and came to live at Little Downham. she was going with another man so I didn't have to pay any maintenance or anything."

It was while working at Little Downham that Walter started going to London. He used to work on the land here in the summer, and then go down and join the tramps in the East End in the winter. Once he had a regular job in London with a room in Westminster Bridge Road and he spent hours on the bridge looking out over the Thames in the shadow of the Palace of Westminster. But mostly he had to scrape his living in various down-and-out ways, sleeping on the streets or in some rough hostel.

To raise money he pushed his barrow around the city streets collecting waste paper. Then he'd buy a bag of corn, split it into smaller bags, and sell them off at a profit to tourists at St. Paul's Cathedral to feed the pigeons. At other times he just went to Waterloo station and offered to carry luggage. When Walter needed a roof over his head he had to go to the Metropolitan Asylum Board on the Embankment. They gave out tickets for various doss-houses in the city, and he could get a few nights in one of them. "The worst one was the Salvation Army hostel in Whitechapel Road in the East End. It was dirty, and if the foreman didn't like anybody he'd catch them alone and give them a bashing. When I stayed there there was always drunkenness and fighting." One place was run by a highly religious member of the Charrington's brewing family, Walter said "We used to go there because we could get a twist of baccy and a piece of cake if we stayed for the service afterwards. We all used to stay, and then go to the pub over the road."

The second world war broke out when Walter was in Little Downham, and he never visited London again. "I worked on the land in the war and served for a while in the Little Downham Home Guard. But I was sacked because I didn't turn up for parades. They held them on a Sunday and I didn't like Sunday work."



After the war Walter settled into the routine that some people in Little Downham still remember. "Before I retired I used to work on the land in the daytime, then at night go to the pub and get drunk on rum. After I retired nine times out of ten I got my pension and spent it all in the pub the same day. But I never got violent or did anything criminal." Walter's local was the Plough sometimes he went to sleep in the armchair and they would leave him there until he sobered up. The landlady of the Plough, Mrs Keys, said: "I used to let him have three large rums and no more. But that was enough,

he had usually been somewhere else first. In all the time I knew him I never saw him walk up Lawn Lane in a straight line. But he was a great character, and in all his time here he never had any bad debts, and if he borrowed any money he always paid it back."

There is story that during one session he drank 32 pints of beer and the pub landlord said "there are only four pints left in barrel, if you can drink them I will give them to you free" and Walter replied "I'll drink them somehow." And so that day he drank an entire barrel of beer by himself.

After a heavy drinking session Walter sometimes tried to make it back to



Walter revisits his old caravan

his caravan at Bield Drove, but he often gave up half-way there. "I used to go inside a farm, find some sacks to wrap around me, and go to sleep there. In the morning I would be gone by six and nobody would be any the wiser. At other times I used to get to the village green and go to sleep under the seat there." Just for a change he used to spend a couple of days getting drunk in Ely . "I used to drink all day long.

Several times the police arrested me when they found me lying in the road in the afternoon. They used to summons me but let me out 10:20 in the evening so I could have another drink before I went home." If the police found him dossing down in a dyke or by a country roadside, they were more than helpful he said. "They used to give me a lift home so I didn't get hurt." One Sunday morning in 1969 Walter's caravan was burnt to the ground. He had left his dinner of liver and bacon to cook in an oven heated by an oil stove while he went across the drove to speak to neighbours. As he watched them go off to church he saw smoke rising from the corner of the field where his caravan was standing. The caravan was a fifteen year old model and had its own bath. Walter had two gallons of paraffin in the caravan which eventually exploded. The owner of the field, Mr Gillet, called the fire brigade but there was nothing to be done. Walter lost all his possessions. But help was soon on its way, the Rector, Rev. M E H Suter, asked the children of the parish when they attended Sunday school to help in collecting clothes and linen for Mr Lee. Walter moved to an old caravan whilst other arrangements were made, "I don't want to move from here," said Walter, "The Rector is trying to find me another caravan. He is being extremely kind to me." On Christmas eve Walter was able to move into a

second hand caravan which was paid for by the British Legion and a grant from the Lancashire fusiliers."

Over the years Walter got steadily fed-up with the idea of getting drunk. "I realised I would have got on a lot better if I'd given up drinking. I don't blame anybody but myself for it, I tried to give it up a hundred times. Drink has been a great weakness in my life, and in the last few years it led me to neglect myself. I'd have a drink instead of good food."

In January 1974 he was so exhausted he left Little Downham behind and looked for help in March. After spending one night in a draughty loco shed at March station, he turned up at the police station and asked for help. The police called in the social workers, who fixed him up with a place at Cambridge, which turned out to be out of the frying pan into the fire. "That was a terrible place. There were Irishmen and Scotch people there who used to get violently drunk and start fighting and throw stones at the windows. I used to get under my bed to get out of the way. You had to get drunk there to get to sleep."

After a harrowing few weeks there Walter was offered a place at St Mary's Lodge, Ely. "I decided when I came there that I would have to give up drink. The staff here have given me the right help and encouragement and I've done a lot better for it." But with a smile he admits to a few lapses, "I had a lapse a few weeks ago and came home intoxicated, but I think Matron's forgiven me now. It's not fair on them when I get drunk, and I feel really sorry when I let them down. But I don't get drunk often, even though Matron lets me go to the pub. Since I came here I'm a completely reformed character, it's been a miracle. I'm quite happy here, and I don't intend going on my travels again." Walters favourite pastime at St. Mary's Lodge was watching people and traffic go by. He died in 1981 and is buried at Little Downham cemetery.



**Robin Pearl**