

“A Striking Village” – Burston School Strike by Anne May

Anne May began her fascinating account of the Burston School Strike with an account of the political and social circumstances that led up to one of the most extraordinary strikes in English history.

In the nineteenth century life was very harsh for agricultural labourers and their families. Poor harvests resulted in a very high price for bread. The Irish potato famine in the 1840s caused widespread poverty. In 1834, the Tolpuddle leaders were transported to Australia, having been accused

of swearing an illegal oath.



Wages for farm labourers were very low. While the Rector in Burston was paid £11 a week a farm labourer received just 7 shillings. A loaf of bread cost 1s 6d! This period saw the rise of Primitive Methodism which encouraged people to think independently. At the same time labourers started to form farm workers' unions.

Tom Higdon was the son of a farm labourer and went to London as a pupil teacher. He met Annie, who was a better qualified teacher– a pacifist, a pianist and singer. They both taught in Wood Dalling, a tiny village, supplying many resources themselves and trying to improve conditions for the children. Tom Higdon complained about the children missing school in order to go stone picking. This infuriated the governors and despite their good relationships with the parents and children, the Higdons were sacked. They were subsequently offered Burston School, where Annie became Headteacher. The Rector, Charles Tucker Eland, known locally as ‘the Snatcher of Land’, loved his hunting and shooting and was not impressed with the Higdons liberal views. Annie was a Christian Socialist and a pacifist and Tom was a Primitive Methodist. Before long they fell out with the Rector. Conditions in the school were quite grim. The children walked to school but it was cold, gloomy and poorly resourced. They enjoyed the Higdons’ teaching so naturally were shocked when their teachers were sacked on the basis of false allegations. On one occasion, Annie, apparently lit a fire to dry the children’s clothes after a very wet journey to school. On another, Annie closed the school to prevent a whooping cough outbreak from spreading and finally, Annie, known for her

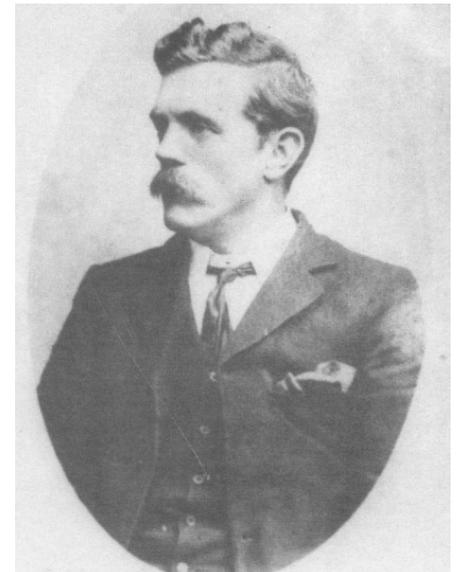


pacifist views and gentle nature, was unfairly accused of beating two foster children.



Anne May's aunt, Violet Potter was thirteen at the time. She bravely canvassed 72 children and 66 voted to go on strike to support their much loved teachers. The parents supported the children when they came out on strike and Violet's father (grandfather of our speaker) was fined for non-attendance. Supporters in Diss paid the fines for children who had joined the strike and they were taught for a while on the village green until the village carpenter offered them accommodation in his workshop. Due to the overwhelming support of local people, £1200 was raised to build a new school, now a museum. It was opened by Violet, aged 17 "with joy and thankfulness"..... "to be forever a *school of freedom.*"

Tom and Annie are buried in Burston churchyard but their memories live on. Every year there is a rally and march in Burston to commemorate the 25 year strike led by a determined group of children and their families.



Photos: Anne May, Burston Strike School, Violet Potter, Children outside carpenter's shop and Tom Higdon

The next meeting of Diss U3A will be on Thursday 1st October, starting at 10.30 am in the United Reform Church, Diss.

The guest speaker will be [Andy Smith](#) who will give a talk entitled, "A Life in Music" – an amusing view of life with song and performance on a wide range of instruments.

For further information on Diss U3A please visit the website: www.dissu3a.org.uk