

WOKING LINKS WITH STALINGRAD HOSPITAL

The Lightbox, Woking's new museum and art gallery, was given an Allotment Cup and a cutting from a local paper dated 22 October 1943 saying that fruit and vegetables from a produce show had been sold to raise money for the Woking Ward in Stalingrad (now Volgograd) Hospital. How did this come about? Searching through back copies of the *Woking News and Mail* was fascinating as the story unfolded.

January 5th 1942 saw the inaugural meeting of the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee being mooted in a letter to the *News and Mail*, by Mr B.G. Ralph-Brown, Chairman of Woking Ratepayers' Association and later a councillor for Chertsey Road Ward. It stated that the committee was outside the domain of any political party and hoped to receive co-operation from them all, and would, with the support of the Council, be holding an Anglo-Russian Friendship Week from 14th to 21st March. In due course the *News and Mail* ran a large display advertisement giving details of all the events being run for the week, and reported on them the following week. The week began with an inaugural meeting address by Edgar P. Young, a retired naval officer, who extolled the Soviet war effort and way of life, with its tolerance of 80 nationalities, lack of rich or poor, full employment, etc., and called for a second front; on the same day Dr Osiakovsky spoke on Soviet art and culture, on the Monday the Brotherhood held a talk at the Labour Hall by Rev. H.J. Taylor on Anglo-Russian friendship, on Tuesday the Workers' Education Association sponsored a talk by Mrs King on life in Soviet Russia, while Wednesday saw Dr Jack Cole speaking on the Soviet artist in war and peace. On Thursday the Playfellows put on J. Hastings Turner's play "The Lilies of the Field" in Christ Church Hall, and on Friday the Women's Co-operative Guild presented Mrs Naftel and Mrs Rust speaking on women in the U.S.S.R., Friday was a balalaika concert by the Medvedeff Orchestra, with the apparently well-known singer Zoe Valeveska, and on the final day Ivy Bastable, principal of a dancing school, organised a children's fancy dress parade. Throughout the week there was an exhibition of Soviet art and achievements in the Gas Board showrooms, and dances and whist drives throughout the district, run by a variety of organisations, including many Women's Institutes and the Royal Army Service Corps. Admiration for the struggles of the Red Army as well as the excuse for an evening out in the dark days of the war, seem to have led to enthusiasm in running and attending all these events by many people, not all of them traditional supporters of the Soviet view, and all the praise of the Soviet system was reported by the *News and Mail* without comment, or response from the readership. The minutes of Woking Urban District Council for 21 April 1942 also reported on the Anglo-Russian Friendship Week and the minutes of 12 May 1942 record that the Week had raised £1200 for a mobile X-ray unit for Russia and this was presented in Woking Park at 3 p.m. on 17 May. The original Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee was dissolved after the fund-raising week, but a new committee was formed soon afterwards.

The minutes of the Urban District Council for 9 June 1942 mention a letter received from the secretary of the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee asking the Council to fly the Union Jack and the Soviet flag from the Council Offices (then in Guildford Road) on the occasion of the first anniversary of Germany's attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June. Permission was given and the flags flew. The same minutes indicate that another letter from the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee was laid on the table, asking the Council to appoint representatives to attend a conference to discuss the question of forming a permanent committee to promote knowledge of the Soviet Union.

The *News and Mail* for 10 July 1942 tells us that the new Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee hoped to raise money for spare parts for the mobile X-ray unit provided earlier in the year for the Russian forces. It also hoped to spread information about Russia. Mention is made that the Council's Allotment Committee was represented on the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee. The new Committee seems to have been extremely active, with a range of fund-raising activities, some of which are mentioned here. The *News and Mail* for 11 September 1942 advertised a film show to be held in Christ Church Hall on the following Wednesday with a speaker, Miss A. Williams-Ellis, from the Ministry of Information, showing a film on the Soviet Union at war. Tickets were 9d (4p) and available from the Gas Showrooms: a subsequent report of the meeting said that the hall was packed. The cause of this great interest was, without doubt, the reports from Stalingrad of the beginning of the German siege and offensive against the city, bitterly fought over and reduced to rubble until the German surrender on 31 January 1943.

September 25th 1942 sees the *News and Mail* printing details of the Woking Co-operative Society's dividends, and from the total benefit derived under the allocation of members' dividends ten guineas (£10.50) was allocated to the maintenance fund for the mobile X-ray unit. More films were shown in October 1942 when the *News and Mail* reported on 23 October that an audience of over a hundred saw two films. The meeting was arranged by the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee and presided over by Mrs Rhoda McGaw. A resolution was passed at the meeting expressing the fullest support for the Government's declaration about the opening of a second front in Europe. On 20 November it was reported that Mrs McGaw had received a letter from Mr Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador, thanking her for the message of greeting received on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the founding of the U.S.S.R.

The next two years saw the people of Woking continue to be very actively involved in fund-raising to help Russia. On 22 January 1943 the *News and Mail* reported that the Woking branch of the National Union of Public Employees have agreed to contribute 1d a week from each member towards the upkeep of the mobile X-ray unit, and on 29 January Woking Auxiliary

Fire Service Committee were reported as having sent another £50 towards the maintenance of the X-ray unit. The entertainment section of the Auxiliary Fire Service Committee was busy organising social events to raise funds, including a dance at Woking Electric Supply Company's Hall, Walton Road – music was by Billy Pitcher and his band and funds were raised by competitions and auctions. On 5 February it was reported the Highclere Hall, Knaphill, was the venue for a dance and entertainment evening to raise money for servicing the mobile X-ray unit, and there over 400 people danced until midnight. There was a variety of turns, including Mr Bale and his performing flea, Oscar, and Mr Ray Smyth and his squeezebox: £25.2.6 (£25.12) was raised for the cause. On 20 March 1943 a concert was held at the County School for Boys when the soloist was Adelina de Lara, a pianist and once pupil of Clara Schumann, who lived at Wych Hill. Tickets were available from Maxwell's price 5/- and 3/- (25p and 15p), and 1/- (5p) at the door. A report of the concert was in the *News and Mail* of 26 March.

The *News and Mail* for 14 May 1943 tells us that Rhoda McGaw had received another letter from Mr Maisky saying that the money received had been used to purchase Westinghouse apparatus obtained from the United States, and that the equipment had now been delivered. In the 20 August 1943 issue of the *News and Mail* we learn of a meeting of the Woking Auxiliary Fire Service held in the Temperance Hall, Church St, Woking, to make an effort to establish a Woking Ward in Stalingrad Hospital, which the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid is hoping to build. The meeting agreed to try to present a Woking Ward. It was hoped that various organizations and areas of the town would each raise £150 to pay for the cost of a bed in the ward. Any doing so would be entitled to have a bed named after them, e.g. Horsell and Knaphill bed. The effort to raise the money should be completed by 7 November, Soviet National Day.

While the people of Woking seemed to have entered enthusiastically into fund-raising for Russia, not everyone was happy. A letter of the editor of the *News and Mail* in the issue of 31 August 1943 reminded people to remember their priorities, and that Great Britain is one-third the size of Russia in population. The local paper for 22nd October reported that the Allotments prize-giving had raised £70 for the Stalingrad Hospital and this is when the cup in the possession of the Lightbox was presented. The paper for the following week tells of yet another concert to raise money for the Hospital, this time specifically for the Knaphill bed. Reg Bale and his concert programme were the main attractions. The Knaphill area continued at the forefront of fund-raising for its bed, and in October a dance was held at the Highclere Hall, organized on behalf of the Woking Wardens, with Mr Sowden, the Chairman of the Council, as M.C. £33.8.1½ (£33.41) was raised and a further £31.11.9½ (£31.59) had been raised by a dance the previous Monday.

The fund-raising still continued after Soviet National Day, with a performance at the Grand Theatre, Woking, of a new edition of the Children's Theatre programme of forty-five items, presented by Ivy Bastable: £55 was raised for the Stalingrad Hospital from tickets at 5/-, 3/-, 2/- and 1/- (25p, 15p, 10p and 5p). The *News and Mail* reported that £63.14.0 (£63.70) had been collected by the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee by courtesy of the Ritz Cinema where collection had been made in the lobby and hall of the cinema while "Mission to Moscow" was being shown (described in Helliwell's *Film Guide* as "a stodgy but fascinating wartime propaganda piece viewing the Russians as warm-hearted allies").

A letter was read to Woking Council asking for the Council's co-operation and requesting that ten beds at £250 each be sent to the Stalingrad Hospital, and it was agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Woking Council should represent the Council on the organizing committee. The main fund-raising was now over and the next we hear is in the *News and Mail* of 28 January 1944 when it was announced at a meeting of Woking Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee that £1832 had been raised for the Woking Ward at the Hospital. This was deemed to be a splendid effort and contributions had come from all sections of the community. Special thanks were given to Capt. Casani of the Royal Army Service Corps. The Secretary, Miss H. Cowan, reported every outstanding effort, including Woking Wardens' Service with £216, the Home Guard with £35, and that on the basis of contributions received twelve beds had been named in the hospital – Wardens, Sorbo Works, Cinemas, Schools, E.K. Cole Ltd [makers of Ekco radios], Knaphill, Byfleet, Co-operative Society, Westfield and Child Dancers, James Walker Ltd, and Home Guard, Chobham and Woking subscribers. Two more beds were provided in another ward.

On 3 March 1944 a cheque for £1800 was presented at a ceremony in Woking Council Chamber to Mrs Joseph MacLeod of the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid. Tribute was paid to those who had suffered in Stalingrad and Mr Ralph-Brown of the Woking Committee spoke in praise of Russia. Mrs MacLeod spoke of prejudice and hoped there would be real and lasting friendship between Britain and Russia: she mentioned the plight of the women and children of soldiers in the Red Army, who had had warm clothing taken from them by the Nazis, and she appealed for knitters to make garments. The next week the *News and Mail* reported that Rhoda McGaw, the Secretary of Woking Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee had received a letter from Mr Maisky acknowledging the cheque for £1800; he wrote "This is an excellent achievement. Please convey to all those who have worked so generously my warm thanks and appreciation". Given her vigorous activity in the Friendship Committee and the genuine support and admiration for the valiant struggles of the Russian people and army on the Eastern Front, which tended to obscure the deep political divide between east and west, it is not entirely surprising that when local elections were held again in the Spring of 1946, Mrs McGaw was elected a Communist Councillor for the Chertsey Road ward, and was the long-time Secretary of the Woking Branch of the Party. Following the Hungarian uprising of 1956 she represented Labour in Central Ward and was in 1963-64 the first and only woman chairman of the Urban District Council. She

died, aged 63, in 1971, by then a respected elder figure in many aspects of Woking's life, and the town's amateur theatre, first in the Centre Halls complex and now in the Peacocks-Ambassadors precinct was named after her.

The Joint Committee for Soviet Aid, mentioned above, was founded in 1942 on the suggestion of the Russian Ambassador and Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary; its chairman was Hewlett Johnson, the 'Red Dean' of Canterbury. At the end of the war it published a lavish volume 'The Stalingrad Hospital Fund Album' (a copy is in the British Library) with endpapers bearing the arms of all the local authorities which had contributed and a page for each contributor showing the gift and dedication sent to Stalingrad. The total target had been £75,000 but £223,837.18.0 had been raised. Wards had been contributed by thirteen authorities, including Woking, and beds by a considerable number of other authorities, work forces, clubs and individuals. In Surrey four groups in the Chertsey and Weybridge areas contributed through their local councils: the Anglo-Soviet Friendship Association of Chertsey and Addlestone provided five beds, Weymanns of Addlestone one bed, the Walton and Weybridge Anglo-Soviet Committee one bed, and employees of Vickers Armstrong two beds. The web site of the Worksop Miners Welfare Band (www.worksopminerswelfareband.org.uk) tells of similar work in Worksop and refers to the Panorama Museum Volograd (www.panorama.volgadmin.ru) which has records of British war-time aid to Stalingrad, from which details of the album were discovered.

So ends the story of Woking Ward in Stalingrad Hospital. If anyone has any memories of fund-raising or attending any of the events in aid of the hospital, I should be very interested to hear about it.

Rosemary Christophers

richard.christophers@virgin.net