

Cliff Izzard Tribute, 29 January 2025

Clifford Walter Izzard was born on the 20th of June 1931 at the home of his Grandmother Mrs May Munt in Stafford Road, Bedford. Cliff was the only child of Kathleen Elizabeth and Walter Sonny Izzard. The young family moved first to Shortstown near Cardington airfield then, around 1933, to a house built for them at Box End, Kempston. Roystone was, at that time, one of only a few houses in Box End and the residents formed a very close community. You can imagine, with the company of children of the same age that it was an exciting place to grow up, with access to the river, fields, woods and orchards. In his childhood Cliff learnt to fish, swim and skate on the water meadows, which frequently flooded and froze in winter months, activities he would continue to enjoy as an adult. In the summer he would help out with the harvest on local farms.

Cliff started his school days at Church End Primary School before moving to Bedford Road School Kempston. His daughters recall that when attending any local event or hostelry he would always find somebody for a chat and when asked who the person was would reply, "I went to school with them". In 1945 he attended Luton Technical College. On leaving college in 1947 he began an apprenticeship at WHA Robertson and continued to study at North Bedfordshire and later Luton and South Bedfordshire Colleges of Further Education. On finishing his apprenticeship, he completed two years of National Service in the RAF, 1953 – 1955. The stories he told of his service days were mostly of the very cold Shropshire winters, regular trips to the skating rink and constantly getting his boots repaired. On completion of National Service, he returned to work at Robertson's rolling mill drawing office where he was working under Bob Anstee whose grandson, Jeremy would 25 years later, on marrying Judith, become Cliff's son in law.

Cliff remained at Robertsons until 1966 by which time he was a Chartered Mechanical Engineer and had been Head of the Cold Rolling Mill Department for a number of years. Following Robertson's merger with Loewy Engineering, Cliff was reluctant to relocate his family to Poole and opted instead to take redundancy. He subsequently joined Davy and United Engineering Co. Ltd as Assistant Chief Engineer with responsibility for the design office at Mile Road, Bedford, where most of the 60 staff were ex-Robertsons. In 1980 the Mile Road office closed, and Cliff again faced with the option of moving, chose redundancy. With the support of the senior engineering staff at Davy, Cliff and a small group of colleagues set up Cygnus Engineering Company at the Old Swan Laundry buildings at Box End. Cygnus completed numerous UK and international contracts, amongst them the transfer and re-assembly of a steel mill from the UK to Surabaya, Indonesia. Cliff retired in 1997 after seeing that job through to completion.

Cliff's career took him all over the world, including Europe, the States, South America, Africa, Asia and Australia, during some interesting times in history. He was in Budapest, for example, shortly after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and told of his official guide taking him to their home, turning up the radio to mask their conversation and showing him a collection of relics from the revolution which were hidden in the false bottom of the wardrobe. Letters to his wife Anne indicate how different foreign travel and communication with home were in the 1950s and 60s compared to today. One letter tells of Cliff's efforts to get back from Japan for Christmas when fuel was rationed due to war in the Middle East and flights were few. Phone calls were rare but on one occasion Cliff rang from Brazil to explain that the taxi he had been travelling in had been in an accident and he had broken a small bone in his foot. Anne was incredulous, remarking that he didn't have any small bones in his foot or indeed anywhere else! A week or so later Cliff arrived home with crutches and both his ankle and his arm in a cast. It seems there had been a subsequent incident involving a hole in the pavement.

The family missed him terribly when he was away and always looked forward to his return. He would bring gifts, dolls in the traditional dress of the country he had visited (to be kept in a box and not played with!) and jewellery items, carefully chosen. Cliff was always very grateful to Anne who coped stoically with his absence, running a busy home and managing the girls as they grew up, enabling him to travel and focus on his career.

Cliff first met Anne in the belfry here at All Saints. His association with All Saints Church had started earlier, first as a young choir boy and later, in 1945, after his voice had broken, he learnt to ring, joining his father Walter and uncle Ernest in the belfry at Kempston, where at that time there were just 6 bells. Kempston belfry appears always to have been a very sociable place. In the late 1940s/early 50s Cliff was one of a group of youngsters ringing here who formed a lasting friendship, the bicycles of their youth finally giving way to the motor car as they continued to enjoy ringing tours as the Bedfordshire Young Ringers well into retirement. Anne wasn't a ringer when they first met but visited the ringing room frequently to access the organ loft, she was soon persuaded to join the ringing crowd and a special relationship with Cliff followed.

Cliff and Anne married at this church on 2nd June 1956, the reception being held at Church End School. They moved into Green Acre, Box End, the house they had built on land gifted to them by Cliff's parents who had had the foresight to acquire the plot opposite their own house many years before. Their first daughter, Judith was born in 1957 and she was joined by Helen in 1962 and Gill in 1966. His daughters are very grateful for the childhood that Cliff and Anne gave them, providing a comfortable home, a large garden which was appreciated by many children from Box End, and frequent holidays and outings, including memorable fishing days at Hemingford Grey. Cliff was very close to his Mum, Nana, and she was an integral part of family life, whilst Cliff and Anne pursued their ringing and social activities Nana would entertain the children, with games and singing and would have something special to surprise everyone at Christmas, that would have Cliff in stitches, most notably a one-man-band set up, constructed out of household items and indoor fireworks that scorched the ceiling and dropped ash in the festive trifle. In 1986 Nana moved across the road to live with Cliff and Anne. Cliff was a much-loved Father, nearly always calm but tremendous fun, having inherited his mothers' enthusiasm for both singing and storytelling. Cliff was also very knowledgeable and an excellent teacher encouraging all his children and later his grandchildren Martin, Rachael, Michael and Chris to be curious about the world.

Cliff's teaching abilities are apparent from the number of people he taught to ring over the years, many of whom have become very accomplished ringers. All Saints Kempston remained a very welcoming place with Cliff as Tower Captain and ringing at Kempston followed often by visits to the Three Horseshoes, West End (the Green Pig as it was known locally) was well supported by locals and visitors and ringing thrived as a result. Kempston ringers coach outings of the 1970s and 80s were well attended by ringers and members of the church congregation. Attractive villages, interesting churches, good bells and decent pubs were carefully researched, with the Izzard family reconnoitring the route and sampling some of the delights well in advance to ensure all went smoothly on the day. The singing on the coach after a few beers was legendary! Whilst Cliff enjoyed the more secular side of ringing, he always regarded Sunday service ringing as the most important, a principal that he did his best to impart to others.

Cliff became Tower Captain here in 1974, a post he held until 2010. Cliff was the inspiration and the engineering brain behind the re-hanging and the augmentation here at All Saints in the 1970s, providing both the enthusiasm and technical ability to get the plan off the ground and through to completion. In 1947 the existing 17thC oak frame had been altered and subsequently weakened to accommodate the 8 bells following that augmentation and was in a very poor state, the movement of the frame within the tower was making the bells very difficult to ring, with a risk that they would soon fall silent. Cliff drew up the plans for a new steel frame to accommodate 10 bells, in the hope that sufficient money could be raised to augment the peal, and oversaw the volunteer army of ringers and friends who completed the construction and installation of the new frame. Repairs to the tower were completed and the restored bells were installed in January 1979. The achievement of four years of effort was immense and the enthusiasm and momentum to complete the ambition of Kempston becoming a ring of 10 continued. A loan from the PCC, quickly repaid from continued fund-raising efforts, enabled the two trebles to be added in 1980. The treble bears the simple inscription, "For All the Saints. CW Izzard, Tower Captain, Taylors Loughborough 1980".

Cliff rang his first peal in January 1947 on the treble of the original 6 bells at Kempston. Between then and 1953 he rang 30 peals locally, including a local band peal at Kempston on the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. There is then a considerable break in his peal ring activities until 1973, work and family taking priority at this time. He went on to ring a total of 262 peals. He was particularly proud to ring for royal occasions ringing peals to mark the Silver, Golden and Diamond jubilees of the late Queen and took part in ringing for her Platinum jubilee.

Cliff had many interests. He was most comfortable in his boiler suit and cap and was never without a project or two. The apple press he built was installed in the garage and used for making cider in its first year, but the result was so potent that in subsequent seasons he settled for producing apple juice instead. The pressing resulted in pieces of finely chopped apple stuck to most surfaces, including Cliff himself. After the first occasion he remembered to take the car out of the garage first. Being able to work with both wood and metal enabled Cliff to produce many items, from model steam engines, ornamental fruit, egg cups, toilet roll holders and even a mechanical organ. He loved a tidy lawn and spent many contented hours mowing.

Following retirement in 1997 Cliff found more time for his interest in astronomy and on moonless nights could frequently be found with his telescope in the back garden tracking the passage of the planets. Cliff kept up to date with modern technology and retained an interest in world events. At his eightieth birthday in 2011 he realised a life-long ambition, driving a steam train on the Great Central Railway, sporting the trademark boiler suit, cap and large grin. Retirement enabled Cliff and Anne to enjoy overseas travel together, including taking a train across Canada from Toronto to Vancouver and an extended trip travelling around New Zealand and Australia, enjoying new experiences and catching up with old friends. The active years of retirement together were sadly fewer than they hoped as Anne began to show signs of illness which prevented travel. Anne passed away in December 2013.

Cliff continued to enjoy the company of friends and family. He was extremely proud to have four grandchildren who gave him a lot of pleasure and in their early years also enabled him to rekindle his enthusiasm for playing games. The space that the garden provided continued to be well used with football, cricket and rounders often played. He especially liked setting up the Aunt Sally skittles which could prove a little dangerous when played over enthusiastically and which often caused Anne a little panic. In the last couple of years, he was also very pleased to welcome three great granddaughters to the family.

In recent years Cliff's health began to deteriorate but he never let that get him down, continuing to tinker in the garage, mow the lawn when the girls weren't looking, take pleasure in day trips, family gatherings and holidays. Four months ago, in September, he was back in Southwold, the location of many memorable holidays with friends and family, checking on the quality of the beer and fish and chips and the progress of the railway restoration projects.

Cliff was a big man in many ways, "impenetrably cheerful" and an inspiration to many. He achieved so much to be proud of in his 93 years. He will be much missed by his many friends and his family but would wish always to be remembered with joy and laughter.