

"WHEN I WAS IN THE RAF"



An affectionate reminder of **ARTHUR GASKELL** by **Dick Riding**

From the early 1930's right through to the early 1970's, except for five years wartime service in the Royal Air Force, Arthur Gaskell taught Geography at SGS. His lessons rarely passed without at least one mention of his Royal Air Force service as a meteorologist, invariably preceded with the immortal phrase quoted above. At the mention of his name many will have a mental image of a gentle, laid-back, bushy-browed master standing in front of the form wearing an ancient gown that was once black but in later years took on an iridescent hue likened to the plumage of a Starling. Years of off-duty cigarette smoking had left its mark on his fingers and generous growth of hair. Each day he would be seen riding up Northbrook Road straight-backed and unhurried upon his trusty Raleigh bicycle, eyes straight ahead but invisible beneath those shaggy characteristic eyebrows.

Arthur Gaskell was born in Orrell, Wigan in 1907, where he attended Upholland Grammar School before moving to Liverpool University. Graduating with an MA Arthur took up his appointment as Geography teacher at Swanage GS in 1930, taking Maths as a second subject. It will come as a surprise to later pupils to learn that Arthur had a distinct Lancashire accent at this time! In 1938 Arthur met his wife-to-be, Madge, who was then a librarian at Boots in Swanage. They met through their mutual interest in Badminton and both attended the Methodist church. Just months after meeting they became engaged and the couple married in 1940, by which time Arthur had taken on duties as a local air-raid warden.

In 1941 Arthur joined the RAF as a Pilot Officer and for the first year service life was much the same as Civvie Street - he spent the whole time marking papers! Bored with this he applied to be moved to RAF Bomber Command and 1943 saw him promoted to Flying Officer with the awesome responsibility of preparing meteorological forecasts for the crack RAF Pathfinder Squadrons, whose pilots flew ahead of the bomber squadrons to mark the targets for the night with flares.

After demob in 1946 Arthur returned to Swanage GS to continue teaching geography. In 1949 he became a member of Swanage Urban District Council, becoming Chairman during 1960-62 and remaining on the council for 20 years. He was also Chairman of the Liberal Association and Chairman of the local Battle of Britain Association. In 1970 Arthur became Deputy Head to Mr. T.C.Sims and in July 1972, 42 years after joining the school, he retired, only to die of cancer six weeks later.

Arthur Gaskell was passionate about the future of the school and the demise of the local railway, and fought tirelessly to save both. According to Andrew P.M. Wright, author of the excellent book *The Swanage Branch*, published by Ian Allan in 1992, Arthur Gaskell was a vociferous, painful and annoying thorn in the side of British Rail during their five-year battle to close down the Purbeck branch line. Arthur claimed to have embarrassing information that proved British Rail was deliberately exaggerating its losses on the line. Arthur was at this time chairman of the Swanage Urban District Council works committee and he accused the Railways Board in London of "juggling the figures" and making "a blunder". He claimed that his information was accurate and came from a reputable local source. Though pressed he would not reveal this source, and never did. The story of the Purbeck line's scandalous demise is well documented; the subsequent story of the Swanage Railway's long battle to restore the line to working order is one of triumph - what a pity though that Arthur Gaskell never witnessed the reversal of the line's fortunes.



Arthur Gaskell with Pamela Burdett and Jean Fennessy on the school field in 1954.

Many thanks to Arthur's widow, Madge, for giving the details of Arthur's early life.

You are visitor
number
18475

[Back](#)