

Spanton and Wills

The Bridge and District Branch of the British Legion may justly claim to be one of the most successful units in this great national organisation of ex-Service men. It is estimated that about 90 per cent of the men in the area who have served in the Forces are members of the branch, whilst apart from furthering the specific objects of the Legion, a great deal is done to promote the welfare and happiness of the people in the district. A great part of the credit for the success of the branch must be given to Mr S Waghorn, the extremely able and energetic Hon. Secretary, who puts his whole heart into the work. Sir John Prestige, who succeeded the late Colonel the Hon. MG Talbot as President, takes a deep personal and active interest in the movement, and the branch has a most popular Chairman in Mr HB Spanton. On Armistice Day and on other occasions the members always turn out in force to pay fitting homage to the old comrades who fell in the war, and the branch is to be represented at the forthcoming rally on June 2 [1932] at Preston Hall, which will be attended by the Prince of Wales. The branch may be said to be almost the mainspring of the social life of the district. Entertainments, social evenings, and treats of various kinds are organised, all of which provide keen enjoyment, and the dinner which is held by the Legion every year is a memorable event.

Mr HB Spanton, the Chairman of the branch, is a typical representative of the agricultural life of the county. The family originally belonged to Spaunton, near Pickering, in Yorkshire. Subsequently, a branch of the Spantons migrated to Norfolk; in the latter years of the 18th century Mr William Spanton came to Canterbury, and in 1792 married a Miss Furley, daughter of a builder in the city. Since that time the Spantons have been very prominent in the agricultural industry of East Kent. The late Mr Harry Spanton, the father of the Chairman of the Bridge branch of the British Legion, who farmed for many years at Chislet Court, was not only extraordinarily popular and an exceptionally good farmer, but in face, figure and characteristics he was a perfect representative of John Bull. His younger son, Mr Frank Spanton, still carries on Chislet Court.

Mr HB Spanton, who farms some 400 acres at Lenhall Farm, Bishopsbourne, in his early years forsook agriculture for the 'call of the sea'. Educated at Sandwich School, after a period 'on the farm' he qualified as a master mariner, and subsequently held a commission in the Royal Naval Reserve. When he had served 13 years in the Mercantile Marine, Mr Spanton retired in April, 1912, but was mobilised on April 22, 1915, for active duty in the Great War, serving on HMS Ark Royal and HMS Empress respectively. He was demobilised on October 2 1919, and returned to his old occupation on the land. After being tenant of Howletts Farm from 1922 to 1926, he took Lenhall Farm, Bishopsbourne. He was married to Miss Edith Jane Castle in 1924 at Petham Church.

Mr HB Spanton takes a keen interest in agricultural politics, and is Chairman of the Canterbury branch of the National Farmers' Union and an active member of the old-established Canterbury Farmers' Club. A forceful and humorous speaker, contributions from 'The Admiral' are always welcomed by his fellow members.

The Grand Old Man

Bridge is justly proud of Mr Charles Wills, the village's Grand Old Man, who will celebrate his 84th birthday next week. He has earned the gratitude of the residents by reason of his long career of useful public service. As a boy, he attended the Commercial School at Canterbury and later the Dane John Academy. He then entered his father's bakery business, of which he assumed control on his father's death in 1896.

Of charming and sympathetic disposition, he has prominently identified himself with nearly every phase of the village life. For some 70 years he assisted the St Peter's Church choir, and in the years gone by was always a popular entertainer in the district.

Perhaps, however, Mr Wills' chief claim to distinction is his connection for over 50 years with the Bridge Fire Brigade, of which he was Chief officer for over 30 years. Upon his retirement

he was elected Hon. Chief Officer. At the recent Fire Brigades Tournament at Canterbury his health was enthusiastically honoured by the officers of the South Eastern District.

Among his official activities may be mentioned his long service on the Bridge RDC and the old Board of Guardians, his chairmanship of the Parish Council, of which he had been a member since its inception, and his secretaryship for nearly half a century of the Bridge Gas, Coal and Coke Co.

During the [first] war he was nightly on duty at the canteen run at the Reading Room for the benefit of the troops stationed at Bourne Park.

In his youth he was a keen cricketer and turned out for the local club for many years, while upon his ceasing to take an active part in the game, he assumed the duties of scorer. Despite his 84 years, 'Old Charlie' is remarkably active and vigorous. He comes of a long-lived family. His aunt, the late Mrs. Hayzen, who lived with him, was a centenarian, and it is the sincere hope of everybody in the village that he himself will keep up his wicket and run into three figures.

(Kentish Gazette May 28 1932. Williamson 172-3)

[Mr Wills died aged 94 in 1943]

Mr Charles Wills, of The Terrace, Bridge [ie Albany Terrace], near Canterbury, is affectionately referred to as Bridge's 'grand old man'. His records of long service in village affairs which earn him the title are as follows: - 68 years member of Bridge church choir; 51 years member Bridge Fire Brigade; 36 years Vicar's Churchwarden; 42 years Secretary of the Bridge Gas Coal and Coke Company, and a member of the Parish Council, of which he is now chairman, ever since it was formed.

Born in the year 1848 he attended the Commercial School, Canterbury, now known as the Simon Langton School. On leaving he assisted his father in his baker's business, which he took over upon his father's death in 1896. A man of charming manners and genial disposition, Mr Wills has been closely connected with nearly every branch of sport and social life in Bridge. He has been a member of the St Peter's Church choir for 68 years and has a fine falsetto voice. In his younger days he was in great demand in the district at concerts. He has also been the Vicar's Churchwarden for the past 36 years. For 51 years Mr Wills has been a member of the Bridge Fire Brigade, and for the past 28 years he has been its Chief Officer. These years of fire service must surely constitute a record. Mr Wills has always been a keen cricketer, and played for Bridge CC for many years. He remembers playing in such good company as Mr C Howard (the local veterinary surgeon), who on one occasion played for Kent, Arthur Webb, who afterwards became one of Hampshire's leading professionals, and Tom Kersley, who later qualified for Surrey, and was on the ground staff at the Oval for several seasons. Even now Mr Wills does not forsake the game, and can always be found scoring for his old club. Although 79 years of age he is still a very active and busy man, being a member of the Bridge Rural Council and Board of Guardians, Chairman of the Parish Council and Secretary to the Bridge Gas Coal and Coke Company, a position he has held for the past 42 years. Those who during the Great War were in camp at Bourne Park or any of the [other camps] that were around Bridge will recognise [in] Mr Wills the old gentleman who assisted every night without a break at the canteen that was run by the late Mrs E Wilson for the troops at the Reading Room.

Mr Wills comes of a family noted for longevity and is the nephew of Mrs S Hayzen who celebrated her 100th birthday on February 25th, and who lives with him and his two sisters. The combined ages of the four people living in that house total 335 years. That Mr Wills, or 'Old Charley', as he is affectionately known, will live to celebrate his 100th birthday is the wish of all in the village. They are proud of him.

(Kent Messenger March 12 1927. Williamson 192)