



Dan's Fund for Burns

Registered Charity No: 1098720

Web: www.dansfundforburns.org

Alfred R Wagg (ARW) and the Guinea Pig Club

ARW, his brother Henry and his sister Elsie grew up in a prosperous household based in Brighton and London. Their father's firm acted as stockbrokers for the Rothschild's. The Wagg children were intelligent well educated offspring brought up to contribute to society and show care for others. Somewhat remarkably each of them achieved national recognition for their contributions in their chosen fields of voluntary and professional import. ARW, who had been a scholar at Eton and at Kings College Cambridge, once told me in a typically self effacing style, just after the award of his CBE, that his brother Henry had previously been awarded an OBE for all the work he had done on behalf of the blind and his sister Elsie an MBE for her charity work, particularly that connected with the setting up of the National Garden Scheme. To Alfred's way of thinking it was Elsie who merited the greatest recognition as compared to any achievement of his in applying financial acumen in the city when he had established and presided as Chairman of the merchant bank Helbert, Wagg & Co for over thirty years at 41, Threadneedle Street. In its day that institution was described by many who were in the know as the Claridges of Merchant Banks.

One of ARW's financial projects, in the immediate post 1929 crash era, had been to re-establish the solvency of the Bank of Iceland and for which he had been awarded Iceland's highest honour as a Knight of the Falcon. Ignoring the prevailing financial wisdom that his undertaking was risky he argued that the national pride of Iceland's inhabitants would ensure that the backing he secured for them would not be misplaced and he was proved right. For many years he served on the Court of the Fishmongers Company and was its Prime Warden 1945-46. Two innovations which he established at the bank were widely adopted by almost every other City company in due course. His was the first establishment to issue luncheon vouchers to its workers and also to arrange for all the staff to be able to enjoy a winter holiday break in addition to the traditional summer holiday.

The nurturing and development of the once beautiful garden at "The Hermitage", East Grinstead, had been one of Elsie Wagg's great labours of love. It was the first private garden to open its gates on set weekends in the spring, the summer and the autumn, for public view in a scheme, the success of which snowballed. There is now a thick yellow book, published annually, giving details of all the participating owner's gardens. Each visitor to the gardens is asked to contribute modestly to support funds to provide for home visiting nursing schemes. In the early days it was mainly District Nursing but since their absorption into the NHS the funds are now directed to the MacMillan nursing of cancer patients.

After weekday working in the City, ARW would join his sister at their home in East Grinstead for weekend relaxation. This included visits to various parts of the Ashdown Forest which he'd purchased on behalf of the Eton Manor Trust, for use by Scouts, Guides, London School Journey Assn and other such organizations. These both protected large areas of the Forest from inappropriate development before the days of statutory control and offered youngsters from deprived areas of London the chance to experience adventure holidays in a rural environment in places like Blacklands, Broadstone Warren, Hindleap and the Isle of Thorns.



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During the Second World War (1939-45) Alfred was Chairman of the Royal Victoria Hospital Trust at East Grinstead. He used his business contacts to persuade the Canadian Government, who were already helping the war effort in a great variety of ways, to supply a shipload of prefabricated cedar wood (Cedar exudes a scent/smell that deters moths and other small creatures) buildings for rapid assembly to provide new wards, that would be naturally as sterile as possible, to house the growing number of war time burns victims many of whom were airmen. Another of the Trust committee members and generous benefactress of the hospital was the redoubtable Miss Beale, whose former home Standen is now a National Trust property which attracts many visitors.

Among the Victoria Hospital staff at that time was the flamboyant, energetic, independent minded New Zealand surgeon, Archie McIndoe. He was obviously acquiring a considerable reputation, on a par with that of his older cousin, Sir Harold Gillies, for his innovative skills in treating burns victims. Many of them required substantial facial restoration of eye lids, lips or noses after having been trapped in burning cockpits whilst flying fighter planes defending the skies over Southern England or later in the war as the 'tail end charlies' who served as rear gunners in the turrets of bombers on raids over occupied Western Europe or to Germany.

Knowing the importance of keeping the morale of the burns patients as high as possible while they faced a series of often very painful treatments to alleviate burns damage ARW decided to try and recognize the empathy and fellowship which naturally developed between fellow sufferers. He did this by the formation of The Guinea Pig Club. Sir Harold Gillies, Archie McIndoe and AR Wagg were among the very few of its members who had not themselves been the victims of severe burns. Among many awards and precious artefacts at The Hermitage one of ARW's most treasured possessions was a large hand thrown pot beautifully decorated and glazed. It had been specially produced by a Guinea Pig Club member who had become a skilled potter. Initially this had been part of his rehabilitation therapy and then his livelihood. The inscriptive decoration on the pot recognized ARW's part in the establishment of The Guinea Pig Club.

For many burns victims the painful processes of first overcoming the life threatening risks to re-establish physical stability, followed by a series of operations to restore essential functions such as provision of eyelids to allow patients to blink and then all the physiotherapy to help them reactivate muscles and regain movement. Another important process is the often more psychologically stressful one of reconnecting with and resuming one's place in society. Close friends and family normally give wonderful support. Within the wider arch of acquaintances there is sometimes risk of awkwardness. ARW adopted the view that in making initial steps to reintegration it was sometimes easier for a recovering burns patient to meet with people who they had never previously met, so no 'before and after' impression of appearance was possible. To that end having himself established contact with recovering long term patients during his hospital visits he would invite them either individually or in pairs to meals or weekend house visits at The Hermitage where they would be looked after by his household staff and be able to enjoy walking around the large garden to admire the plants, trees and views or to play croquet on the lawn. At meals they would meet other house guests from a whole variety of backgrounds who would have been warned to ignore any disfigurement and treat everyone as normally and informally as possible. Many of the people they met were influential in their own sphere of career or profession including academics, bankers, civil servants plus family, relatives and friends of ARW like his ex-Etonian contemporary Sir Rupert Spiers, then the MP for Hexham. Other East Grinstead families extended the same welcome to their homes and this became part of the town's war effort.



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Stress was not the only prerogative of patients so sometimes burns unit doctors or nurses were also invited to relax and play chess or scrabble, to read some of the many books in the library or otherwise entertain themselves. Among the regular visitors at The Hermitage was Archie McIndoe. When I first met him there in 1944 he must have been about 45 years old and it was shortly before he was awarded his OBE. His well deserved knighthood came in 1947. He came bounding into the drawing room, sat himself down at the mini grand piano and began playing for all his worth with energy and skill. He appeared to know by heart a considerable and varied repertoire. You only had to tell him the name of a current song or tune and he would think for a moment, strike a few notes and then produce a very passable rendering of it. After all the tension of the precise facial surgery he had to carry out day after day he found piano playing one of the ways to unwind and relax the tension in the muscles of his arms and hands. After the war, Sir Archie McIndoe moved on from East Grinstead to the large modern hospital that was built for Basingstoke when it was rapidly expanded as one of the new towns to absorb London's population overspill and to address the extreme post war accommodation shortage. This remarkable and highly skilled innovative surgeon died in 1960 in his sixtieth year.

One of the Guinea Pig Club members who was to become a regular weekend resident at The Hermitage was an Icelandic lad whose name was one of those quite unpronounceable Nordic names so everyone just called him "Iceland". His wooden built home burnt down one Christmas time when real candles on the Christmas tree had caused a conflagration in which he had been trapped. He had to wear a wig as the whole of his skull and much of his face had been badly scarred by burns. He recovered well, reintegrating into society with a great sense of fun and joy of life. In due course he became the boss of the London offices of Icelandic Airways and started the boom in tourist flights from London to Reykjavik.

The above, for what they are worth, are my recollections of more than 50 years ago when I was still a pupil at Christ's Hospital. ARW was one of the Governors of that Religious Royal and Ancient foundation; as son of a naval officer killed at Crete I was one of his Presentees. In the City much of his charitable efforts were concentrated on support for the Eton Manor Club at Hackney Wick and as a member of the Fishmongers Company Court. The splendid hall of the ancient senior livery company stands on the NW end of London Bridge. Unlike many halls which, with the Guildhall itself, were destroyed, gutted or badly damaged during the blitz the Fishmongers hall somehow survived thanks to the vigilance of firewatchers.

One of ARW's far sighted acts that has proved invaluable to the development of East Grinstead was the formation of a war memorial committee whose members were persuaded to invest the collected community funds to purchase the East Court Estate which not only has a public memorial rose garden park but the original residence is now the town hall; the new police station and fire station are also located there. ARW arranged for transfer of The Hermitage to the Eton Manor Trust and, after his death, they were eventually persuaded to sell the site to developers. As it was so near to the town centre and has excellent views over the landscape to the Ashdown Forest's highest points on the horizon it was very valuable. The assets were used to support all the Trusts worthwhile activities but sadly the old house and beautiful garden are no more. The townspeople of East Grinstead were proud of their support for the Victoria Hospital and its burns victims; one of their public houses is called 'The Guinea Pig'.



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A recent book about Bomber Command contains a passage referring to men in the burns unit watching the clock with dread as they awaited the daily arrival of the duty nurses. At that time the only way to keep infections at bay involved regular painful removal of all dressings and scabs to prevent accumulation of puss. Only then could the gradual healing from below slowly dry out the wounds. Fortunately, there are now many less painful modern aids. Waxed gauze has been replaced by spray on artificial skin. Mask moulds reduce the need for minor grafts, the whole issue of pain management has been vastly improved and above all the advent of antibiotics replaced salt water and minimizes the risks of secondary infections. Even so burns victims still face momentous challenges. They and the staff whose skills support them deserve all the support and respect that others can possibly give.

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