

# **A Biography of My Grandfather**

Leonard Reeves

1895 – 1987

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## Introduction

I am writing this account of my grandfather's life not because he lived a spectacular life or was famous but so that future generations will be able to read some of the many stories he told. I think it would be sad if these details were otherwise lost and the 91 years of Grandad's life forgotten.



## The early years

Grandad was born on 25th March 1895 in Goldenhill, in the Potteries, at the “Traveller’s Rest” public house apparently whilst my Great Grandmother had the pots on the boil! This in itself would seem strange as Grandad was always a very strict tee-totaller, It seems probable that these early days in this pub helped to mould his views.

Leonard Reeves was the last of ten children. There was a big difference in age between oldest and the youngest. This was emphasised from the story Grandad told of being taken



for a walk as a toddler suspended between his eldest sister Esther and her fiancé.

Early years were probably typical of any child about the turn of the century. If you knew Grandad you would probably think him rather a serious individual most of the time. As a child though, he was probably as mischievous as any other youngster. On one occasion when the local doctor called in his horse and trap, Grandad decided that it would be nice to trim the horse's mane as he'd seen done with other horses. When the doctor came out he apparently was *not* well pleased.

Much of his childhood revolved around the local Methodist Sunday School. Grandad's father helped build the foundations of Goldenhill Methodist Church. It was sad to stand with my Grandfather just a few years ago and to see the foundations again, this time after the demolition of the building. Church life was very important at the turn of the century and it always remained a central part of my Grandad's life. Sunday was a day of rest except for the female members of the family who were still expected to cook a Sunday dinner. Playing with other children, games, studying or gardening always remained unsuitable things to be done on a Sunday. Instead, church or Sunday School twice a day was the norm. Any spare time was to be taken up reading the Bible or, if my great-grandparents were feeling lenient, "Pilgrim's Progress" was allowed. This lifestyle, although it seems rather extreme

by today's standards, had I suppose some advantages in that it made a definite break in the week and must have been a big education in self discipline.

The Sunday School was a very strict affair. The first session was at nine in the morning and the second at two in the afternoon. At the end of each session the school would line up in silence whilst the superintendent stood on the stage at the front listening to the clock ticking by. At the moment the clock reached the right time he would solemnly announce "female adults". The said class would then depart in silence. Next the second most senior class of females would be announced and they would file out. Then it was the male's turn starting with "select class" and so on. If any one should break the silence at any stage the superintendent would call a halt and there would be silence until the clock could be heard slowly ticking again.

During his formative years, the family moved to several farms. As in most farming communities harvest time was a season for the whole family to join in with work in the fields. Traction engines would be brought in for threshing and other parts of the harvesting process. The hard work was broken up by drinks of root beer. My Grandad always used to enthuse over this particular beverage which was perhaps a little ironic considering it was probably pretty alcoholic. The harvest time seemed to take up most of the month Grandad was off school.



The biggest thrill was a ride on Mr Atherton and Papa Wilson's hay cart.

At other times of leisure the local children would organise a game of cricket amongst the local colliery pit mounds. The disused colliery they played in was the "Starvation" pit. (Many pits had nick names it seems. Another was called "Up an' at it" and another "Bread an' herrin".) The wicket consisted of a pile of bricks and the bat was carved out of a piece of cheap wood with a penknife and broken glass. Apparently you didn't half know about it when you hit a boundary.

Another game played was called “Flop and Bridge it” which consisted of trying to see how far a spool could be catapulted off two pieces of wood arranged like a see-saw when struck with a stick.

The scene around the farms in which Grandad lived would have been quite a busy one. The Potteries were nearby and the lanes around where he lived were used by farmers bringing straw from Cheshire to the Potteries to pack their china. At Kidsgrove an extra horse was needed to pull the carts up the steep hill and men made a living from hiring their horse to pull up each cart in turn. At the top of the hill a certain rather plump character, one Old Dick (Cartwright) sat, providing water for the thirsty horses.

The fastest things on the roads at that time were usually pushbikes. To give warning of their approach a whistle was part of every cyclist's vital equipment. If a car appeared it was a red letter day.

Another sight on the roads in those times were the street hawkers. “Smasher Plant” was one of the characters who came selling damsons from Biddulph. Although very little educated, like many of his type he was certainly pretty shrewd. He offered 1 pound of fruit for  $1\frac{1}{2}$ d and 2 pounds for  $3\frac{1}{2}$ d and apparently people fell over each other in their anxiety to buy 2 pounds.

“Cracked Jack” was a man who sold crockery from the Potteries. He must have been a pretty fit man as he carried his wares in a basket on his head which he lifted up and down when the customer requested to examine some article. His manner of attracting attention was to smash two plates together like a pair of cymbals. Another hawker came selling water cress carried in a large clothes basket slung around his shoulders on a leather strap. “Fish Jack”, not surprisingly, sold fish which he transported on a small trunk which he pushed apparently escorted by all the local cats.

Finally there was the scissor grinder who came to visit from time to time. He had a foot operated emery wheel which was in turn mounted on wheels so he could travel from village to village selling his service.

There was not a great a deal of money to spare amongst the Reeves family in those early days. At Christmas it was a real treat to be given an orange. However this has to be set against the fact that fresh fruit from abroad was not as common as now and oranges were probably quite a luxury. Grandad remembered the introduction of bananas into this country — they contained seeds at that stage. One Christmas Grandad really set his heart on something a little more than an orange. He desperately wanted a pocket knife and was very disappointed when it didn’t arrive on Christmas morning. He was so disappointed in fact that he wrote another letter to



Santa asking for another present for New Year. Santa obviously listened but unfortunately was not impressed — Grandad got a knife and a fork!

Health care in Grandad's youth was to say the least primitive. The routine of one Sunday was broken on the way home from Sunday School when Grandad came across a big crowd blocking the roadway. This was because doctor had arrived at one Mrs Barrow's house and was at that moment carrying out an operation. Conditions of course were somewhat primitive and the normal operating table was a door taken off its hinges and rested between two trestles, smooth side up. It helped if it had a ledge around the edge, for obvious reasons! Despite this, the lady concerned apparently lived to tell the tale.

To put this period of his life into context, Grandad remembered many of the events occurring around the time. The Boer war, the death of Queen Victoria, the particularly notable appearance of Halley's Comet were some of the events he could recall (admittedly somewhat vaguely). The sinking of the "Titanic" he remembered as being a disaster that really rocked the nation with the vast loss of life from the "unsinkable" vessel.

Grandad's school days were spent at the local board school but came to an end in 1908 when he reached the age of thirteen. His education, even if it was of good quality, certainly lacked a little in quantity compared with today's standards. I

find it amazing to think how much he achieved in later life after such a basic start. One of the things that really stuck out in Grandad's mind from those times were the school outings organised by a teacher affectionately known as Daddy Lindop. The Potteries was a grim industrial area at that time and the favourite area to visit was the beautiful countryside of the Manifold Valley near Leek. In an age where transport was still fairly difficult, this represented a real adventure into the unknown and the magic of the countryside was planted in the young Leonard Reeves' heart. Well into his eighties he still walked in this same valley. Holidays were a luxury largely unknown by the Reeves family, and Grandad was sixteen before he first saw the sea.



## **A first job**

Grandad's first job was at the local colliery; Birchenwood pit was one of the largest local employers in the area. There were in fact two main industries in the area — the potteries and the mines. Grandad got a job as an Assistant to the Building Manager which sounds very impressive, but he was undoubtedly a very junior employee. Anyway his work was mostly in the offices and so it was probably considered a good position for a youngster. It would certainly have been a better option than the underground work. He left a note book which listed some of the jobs he carried out around the works. These were mostly errands passing various messages or such exacting tasks as fixing the blinds in the main office. His note book of that time was fascinating to look at. It included, apart from the list of tasks to be done, such diverse matters as the result of the 1912 Crewe by-election and the dimensions of a new push bike that Grandad would have liked. Amongst the list of books to be read is Blackmore's "Lorna Doone" set in Somerset. This, written in an area Grandad came to be deeply fond of later, perhaps sparked off an interest years before he actually visited the place.

There must have been a busy scene at Birchenwood in those days as there were always several faces being worked. To keep excess water out of the workings there were many steam engines around the site. These made a thumping rhyth-

mical noise and had nick names such as “Old Goliath”. All mines were privately owned in those days and the rich owner would visit occasionally in his carriage. His lifestyle would have been a stark contrast to the grim working conditions underground. Men would chew tobacco as they weren’t allowed to smoke, and had to leave their matches on the surface in holes in the wall to pick up at the end of the day. They took bottles of cold tea to drink during the shift. Grandad did not mention whether there were many casualties but it would be surprising if there were not.

Grandad clearly remembered the introduction of the eight hour working day for miners. This Act of Parliament caused considerable controversy at the time as it stated that the eight hours should be spent down the pit and did not allow for time in raising or lowering men to and from the surface. It meant that some men could go as long as eight hours between meals. The act’s introduction apparently brought protest marches at such tough conditions.

Grandad’s progress at Birchenwood was not as swift as his family had hoped. They had assumed that he would become Managing Director in a few weeks. When this failed to materialise they decided he needed a change of job. Initially, it was decided he should take up potting like one of his brothers. To further this “ambition” (Grandad was not what you would describe as artistic) he started evening classes at Burslem Art

School. This involved potting and sketching classes, the latter included opportunity to draw nudes which must have been an eye opener to an innocent adolescent!

It became apparent gradually that the likes of Royal Doulton and Wedgewood were not going to be set alight by the name “Leonard Reeves”. Grandad, no doubt a bit depressed at his lack of expertise, realised that he had to do something with his life and that pottery wasn’t the answer. This suddenly became apparent whilst listening to a notoriously bad preacher, one W. Frith, at the local church. He spoke of the wise and foolish virgins, and for some reason this particularly struck home in Grandad’s mind. He worked up enough courage to discuss his job dilemma with his parents. They knew that if he were to undertake something more worthwhile it would probably mean the loss of a wage and the payment of some sort of premium. However, they were prepared to back him, ambition was there but the question now was how it was to be channelled. The answer came from Grandad’s brother Ambrose. Reading the paper one evening he came across an advert placed by one H. V. Lynam, Surveyor to Alsager UDC, wanting to take on someone to serve articles. “This is the job for you Joe” Ambrose commented, and so Grandad’s career began. (Incidentally, it has always rather amused me that in a family of ten, nicknames should be used — I would have thought it was confusing enough already, Grandad said that he



was called Joe because he was the youngest, in keeping with the biblical story of the family of Jacob and his sons. Again, this is bewildering because the youngest son was in fact Benjamin so the meaning of it all remains a mystery. . . )

So the time came for him to leave Birchenwood. Grandad had worked under a man called Mr Ball; a stern looking man with a big droopy moustache and bowler hat. He was a man Grandad greatly admired and often mentioned. On his last day Mr Ball called together the group of workers who were with Grandad. Mr Ball made a speech, and there was a presentation of a stationary stand made by one Percy Micklewright.

Mr Ball's talk made a big impression on Grandad and he wrote it down in his notebook. He always kept these few scraps of paper and valued them greatly. This is what he wrote:

*The following advice was given by Mr Ball on the day that I finished. Shaking hands with me with one hand (with a grip that made me tremble in the circumstances) and putting the other hand on my shoulder he said in a firm, low but clear voice with all the sincerity and truthfulness that it is possible for a human being to command, "May God help you and bless you and give you strength to make a man". I stood there for a moment with a lump as big as an egg in my throat not being able to move for I was held by an invisible hand, dumb-founded with such valuable advice. I tried to say "Thank you" but I could not even manage that for the lump grew bigger. Suddenly with my head bent I turned round and left the room and when I got outside the tears ran down my face. Mr Arrow-smith shouted, "Goodbye, Good Luck!" but such advice seems too good to come from a human body's lips.*

*If this book should get lost will the finder kindly return the above portion to me the under signed as soon as possible — for such advice is more precious than gold.*

*Leonard Reeves  
Oldecott Farm  
Goldenhill  
Stoke-on-Trent*

*February 15<sup>th</sup> 1913*

## **A young man**

So a new phase in the life of Leonard Reeves began. From the last extract it is obvious now that here was no longer a boy being organised by his family, but a young man who felt that he had a calling. Something that may seem a fairly ordinary set of comments to us was obviously the spark needed to light ambition in the young Leonard's heart. He had obviously made an impression at Birchenwood, but now he was feeling inspired.

The first thing that must have been obvious to him was that he had a lot to catch up on when it came to education. He studied subjects to advance his career for long hours to give him the necessary background. Amongst these French — much of which he remembered with an accent that few Frenchman would recognise, with most words being pronounced absolutely literally. The journey to Alsager was laborious with long walks at each end and a train ride in the middle. This journey would not be wasted and Grandad would sit reciting verbs etc. as he made his way to work each day.

Things had also changed in a new significant way. Grandad had met a certain Elsie Windsor, who also lived in Goldenhill and attended the same church. Thus began a long courtship lasting around 15 years and ending in 1929 with my Grandma marrying Grandad. Grandma's family was smaller with two brothers, Eric and Leonard, but there mustn't have been much



privacy for a young couple in love. They spent many happy hours therefore walking in nearby Bathpool. This is now a recreation area and has been changed by the formation of a reservoir and the cutting of the Manchester–London railway line through the parkland. It would not seem a particularly beautiful place to anyone nowadays, but then it was an oasis of peace and quiet in an industrial desert.



## The First World War

Grandad's career was making good progress until outside events intervened. The First World War began in 1914 with massive public enthusiasm for a brawl with the wicked Kaiser. "It would be all over by Christmas" was the promise. Two years later and the full horror of a massively destructive and wasteful war was becoming apparent. So, Grandad was called away from his developing career to serve King and country.

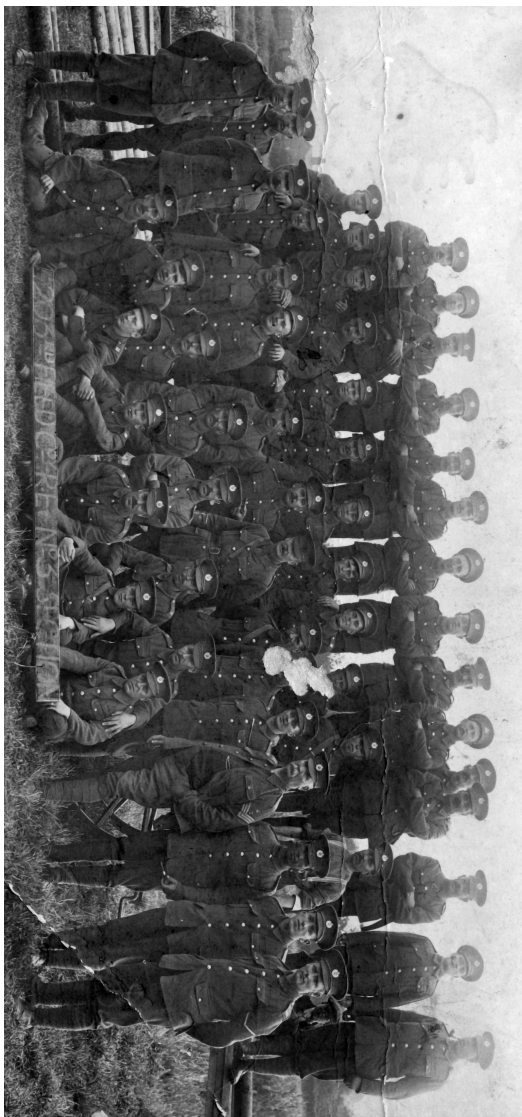
As he had received some training in engineering matters he was called to join the Royal Engineers. He became part of the 203<sup>rd</sup> Field Company (Camps). So, just at the stage when



his career should have been taking an up turn Grandad was embarking on a troop ship to France, leaving a loved one and the world he knew and understood for a seemingly pointless conflict in a foreign land.

In July 1916 the Royal Engineers became involved in the battle of the Somme and it seems that this was Grandad's first taste of war. The aim of the British attack was to try and make a decisive break through the German lines. The battle lasted over four months with a massive loss of life. The regular spells of bombardment, along with the first deaths amongst the Company must have been very upsetting. All around the villages were reduced to rubble. There were shortages of food and water, dead horses lying about, trees uprooted and shell holes everywhere. The work here consisted mainly of digging trenches for the infantry and setting up barbed wire entanglements in the Trônes Wood area which was very severely bombarded. Although the area was called a wood, the trees had been stripped a long time before of all foliage. The 203<sup>rd</sup> company left the Somme at the end of August, although that particular battle was to go on for many more weeks and thousands were still to die there.

The next move was to Arras. Here the fighting took place in a town but the main purpose of the Company's work was preparation for a big offensive which was planned for April 1917 as a diversion for an even bigger attack by the French



elsewhere. Again this manoeuvre was planned as a way of making a breakthrough but yet again it was to fail. Christmas that year was spent at Arras, and it was not much of a celebration; Grandad was treated to a Christmas dinner of stew and rice pudding.

During the bitterly cold winter of 1916–17 Grandad's company was moved on to take over a French sector around Rossieres en Santerre and the village of Lihons. Oh the way they stopped at an old prisoner of war camp where they slept on the floor amongst numerous rats.

Conditions in the trenches they inherited were abysmal. The mud was so deep that it was not unusual for a man to get stuck up to his thighs in mud for anything up to 6 hours. Lihons had been razed to the ground during the fighting and the men had to be billeted in dugouts as there were simply no buildings above ground level. The rats were here again, living with the men eating all they could — including the Major's soap.

In March 1917, it was discovered that the enemy had in fact retired from the part of the front occupied by Grandad's Company. The British advanced, finding the area booby-trapped by the Germans. Their main task was to fill in the roads sufficiently to allow the passage of artillery. This was no mean task as some of the holes were 50 feet deep and the same in diameter.

In October 1917, the Company was moved again, this time to Belgium. They arrived in the middle of the third battle of Ypres (“Wipers” as Grandad called it), also known as Passchendaele. The aim of this particular offensive was to gain control of the Belgian coast and to outflank the German lines. Once again due to bad decisions by Generals the battle was very costly in terms of casualties, and a waste of time in terms of making gains in the war. The terrain around Ypres was flat like the Fens. Consequently it was very difficult to drain and it was impossible to dig trenches, so much time was spent in laying duck boards. If anyone was to err from these routes they were likely to end up waist-deep in mud.

Christmas 1917 came round with an improvement in celebrations over the previous year. Grandad sent a card home in common with his comrades. He carefully copied the lettering from a newspaper and used the card he found off a box of chocolates for decoration.

During 1918 Grandad developed what we believe to be trench foot. It deteriorated to such a level that it necessitated his return to Britain and a stay in the Bath Military Hospital. To keep the troops occupied they were encouraged to do embroidery. Grandad thus fashioned the badge of the Royal Engineers and his needlework survives to this day.

Eventually he returned to France and the fighting. It was during this period that the Company came under some of the



heaviest fire yet. Grandad told of an occasion when they were building pontoon bridges. This was in the action taking place around Cambrai; the Royal Engineers' task was first to bridge the St Quentin Canal and then the River L'Escant. Suddenly the Germans began a block barrage on the section in which they were working. This meant that an area of ground was systematically bombarded, bit by bit.

For the foot soldier it was a terrifying experience as there was little escape and it was a case of waiting to see whether the shells would land far enough away to miss you. As the shells fell around Grandad he ran. The man next to him fell, killed. He often mentioned that at this time he felt somehow

safe even in that hell as if some invisible hand was protecting him from being hurt. Even then he obviously still felt guided.

Despite this, things took a turn for the worse when he came under the command of a sadistic sargeant who was determined to make his life a misery. Grandad told me that, during this period, he did not care whether he lived or died.

The flame of enthusiasm was only temporarily dampened in Leonard Reeves though and he was put forward to go on a course to qualify for a commission. However things were changing, and when he reached Boulogne for the homeward journey to England he was turned back with thousands of other men. The date was November 10<sup>th</sup> 1918 and the reason for the delay was the coming of the Armistice. Grandad found himself in Arras on the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup>. There was little excitement at the imminent end of the war, probably for a number of reasons. Firstly, the war had reaped death never known before or since and had nearly wiped out a generation of Europe's young men. It was no longer a great crusade to the men in France, but a series of muddy killing fields: there did not seem much to celebrate in 17 million deaths for a war that started out of a lust to satisfy egos. Secondly, the world had changed for ever and for the young men who had survived, such as Grandad, there was now the prospect of a dramatically transformed civilian way of life.



Grandad vividly remembered talking with his neighbour that night, speculating on the future. Suddenly, the conversation stopped as his partner realised that things at home would be unalterably changed following the death of his brother in action.

When the armistice did come, Grandad was at Mons where the fighting had started back in 1914. In the cemetery there, he found the graves of men of the Royal Irish. At that time there were men of the same regiment serving in Grandad's division. They had finished where they had started, which only served to emphasise what a waste the whole war had been.

At the time, this feeling of "time thrown away" was also very much in Grandad's mind. Looking back on the experience in later years he changed his mind; in an atmosphere where death was more certain than life and the worst of man's inhumanity was displayed, in an environment completely foreign to him, he began to realise the things that were really important in his life. His Christian faith grew and he began to feel that if anything was worthwhile in life it should have this as its foundation.

Whilst seeing the worst of human nature it was also a time of great camaraderie. He made friends that were to last for many years and experienced goodwill and friendship within

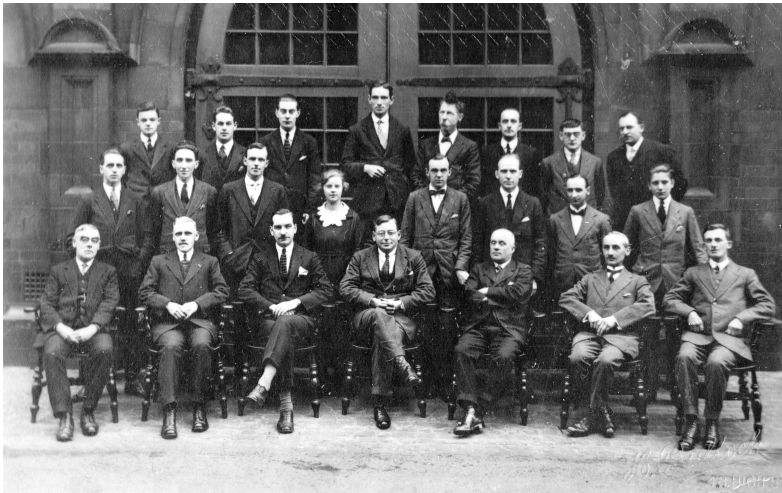
the group who had been thrown together under such adverse conditions.

Again fired with enthusiasm, he immediately wrote off to the Borough Surveyor of a large town enquiring about vacancies. Unfortunately the army did him the disservice of sending him off to Germany and so delayed his return to “Civy Street”. Amongst other places, he was sent to Cologne to construct hurdles and totalisation boxes on a race course.

## Training for a career

Eventually in 1919 he returned to England and demobilisation. His first concern was to get a job. He applied for two jobs and accepted a post with Crewe Borough Council as a Temporary Engineering Assistant working under the then Borough Surveyor, Captain Wilkinson. Wilkinson was a good boss, keen to help the junior, and was not one to be aloof. He and Grandad struck up a friendship that was to last until Mr Wilkinson's death.

Grandad continued the studies he had started, and by October 1919 he had become a Professional Associate of the Sur-



veyor's Association. Promotion came quickly too and by 1923 he had risen to the position of Deputy Borough Surveyor.

Life was full of challenges at this time, and he was chosen to act as Resident Engineer on a "sewer in tunnel". He'd never done any work underground before and this was obviously a very different proposition to working on the surface. Grandad had decided in his own mind that if he was going to get on he would have to do jobs that he had never done previously and for which he would not be immediately suited. Consequently he read up the techniques he had started to learn back in 1915, studied the plans in depth and discussed the job with a mining engineer friend. He then went on to do the job and to complete it successfully.

Work undertaken at this stage was done with little mechanical assistance. Picks and shovels were mainly used along with horses and carts. As a matter of interest the rate for a horse, cart and man per day of  $9\frac{1}{2}$  hours without tea breaks was 16 shillings (80p).

After the First World War, Crewe was in need of much work by the Borough Surveyors. The roads were made of water-bound macadam which meant that in dry conditions copious dust was produced whereas when it was wet the road became such a quagmire that mud was thrown up the front of some of the buildings. In streets where private houses were built the contractors did not make up the road but left it to the coun-

cil who then had to claim back money from the new house owners.

Treatment of sewage, (a subject which used to cause an immense amount of interest to Grandad, much to our amusement), was somewhat primitive. A certain proportion of houses were still on privy pails and ash pits; there was room for much improvement.

Crewe had no water supply of its own, and depended on the goodwill of the railway company who supplied it from boreholes some miles away. The town centre was drab, with few public buildings — the railway company owned the town hall and the library. Most of the schools were in a fair condition but two were in a very poor state with classes sharing rooms divided by curtains.

So it can be seen that there was much work to be done to improve the Borough of Crewe.

Grandad worked hard at his job, travelling daily from Kidsgrove on the train. He still lived at home, courting his beloved Elsie. They had decided they would marry but they were determined to wait for Grandad to get well established in his job. Most would have thought that becoming Deputy Borough Surveyor was achievement enough, but Grandad was not satisfied yet. The wasted years in France had still to be made up for. The examinations continued and in 1926 he became an Associate Member of the Institute of Civil Engineers.

## Borough surveyor

Towards the end of the '20s, now qualified, he started looking around the country for jobs as Borough Surveyor. He applied to Taunton, amongst other towns, but didn't get the job, he was told afterwards, because he was not a Freemason. However after a short while the post at Crewe became available and at the unusually young age of 34 he was given the chief's job in March 1929. He had achieved his aim of making good from very unpromising beginnings — a short formal education and an early career disrupted by taking part in one of the most awful conflicts of all time. It is true that in modern times it would be totally impossible to follow a course similar to Grandad's without a full academic background and it is also a fact that such opportunities were taken by other young



men to make a good career from humble beginnings. However there remains the truth that Grandad did get a top post within his profession through honest hard work and obvious belief in his own abilities. He often said that he had “dreamed dreams” and looking back on events now I think I know what he meant.

An amusing footnote to Grandad’s appointment was the announcement of his new job in the press. He had been asked to submit a picture of himself and due to some mishap the picture got mixed up with that of the new Conservative candidate. Underneath it appeared the caption “Bombshell for Crewe”. As if that was not bad enough, some days later Grandad was stopped in the street by an old Crewite who shook him by the hand saying “I’ve just told so and so that they have got themselves a damn good candidate at last!”.

With his job becoming more stable Leonard Reeves decided that now was the time when he could get married. After a marathon courtship he and Elsie were married at Goldenhill Methodist Chapel, on the 3rd of January 1929 of all times. After a reception in the Sunday School they went off on honeymoon to Bournemouth.

Grandma had been working as a secretary up to now, but in common with most who could afford to, gave up work at the time of her marriage. They bought a brand new house in Lunt Avenue, Crewe at a cost of about £300. On December

8<sup>th</sup> of the following year their first child, Margaret, was born. They both wanted more children but this was not to be. Elsie had a rhesus negative blood group and this caused a complication that meant she was unlikely to have future children. She did become pregnant at least once more (there is some doubt over whether there was a second occasion) and gave birth to Kathleen who died shortly after she was born.

Grandad now had a car for transport, a twelve horsepower Morris Cowley! Up to this time he had had a motorbike — he had had a B. S. A. to start off with and then a more powerful Douglas. The latter was belt driven and although a beautiful machine when running well was a continual nuisance when the belt kept breaking. He and Elsie used to spend the day out on the bike. There was no pillion seat and so she would borrow a cushion from home and sit on the carrier. On one occasion out near Leek the belt broke in the middle of nowhere and they ended up returning home on a truck with Grandad and the bike on the back and Grandma in the front.

Motoring was generally a little unpredictable in those times. On one trip with Crewe Corporation to the Peak District by charabanc, the risk of the engine stalling on the steep hills was so great that one member of the party had to run behind with chocs to put under the wheels if the vehicle came to a halt. On another similar trip someone started to smell some-



thing as they were coming down the hill into Kettlethulme — the brake linings had caught fire on that occasion.

Returning to Grandad's career; he was now starting in his new post at the time of countrywide depression. Despite this he achieved many works during this period of which he was particularly proud.

Grandad had plans to convert Crewe from a railway dominated, one-industry town to a more attractive and prosperous community. The plan of this involved firstly a new water supply for the town and secondly reconstruction of the town centre. To get this work done the council had to get a bill put through parliament. This involved many trips down to London to give evidence before committees of the Houses of Parliament.

The significance of an improving water supply would be to free the town from the control of the railway and to allow industrial expansion. Two new boreholes were sunk to 600 feet at Eaton near Tarporley. Water was pumped from there to a reservoir at Gorsty and combined with the railways water. This gave enough pressure to attract Midland Rollmakers and Rolls-Royce. Room for further expansion had to be written into the bill and Grandad had cause to be grateful for such forward planning during the Second World War. At one stage during the war years the supply from Eaton was reduced and the manufacture of Spitfire engines was threatened. The fa-

cility to increase supply saved the day and Rolls-Royce could carry on.

Improvements to the town centre involved altering the road system and improving the quality of the roads. As bus traffic was gradually increasing Grandad satisfied himself that the plans had to centre about the formation of a new bus station. He decided that to allow full development of the town centre, an area of land should be purchased to the west of the town square. Furthermore any profits arising from the new developments should be shared with the corporation.

In time, therefore, an area of land was purchased containing a few shops and 160/170 houses mostly abutting unmade private streets. The area was to be developed with new roads and incorporating a bus station as a central feature. The idea was that the land remaining would be further developed with “high street” shops thus solving the twin problem of bus and road traffic and giving the town a focal centre.

Grandad’s overall hope was two fold: that with the new arrangement the townspeople would be encouraged to shop in the centre and also to attract new industry and so help overcome the problems of a one-industry town.

Grandad was always mindful of the fact that once private development started in piece-meal fashion amongst the old cottages — and it was dead ripe for development — it would be the end so far as the corporation was concerned except

that they would have to bear the cost of certain road improvements whilst the profits from development would go to private investors.

As the scheme went through its parliamentary stages it was difficult to give firm estimates of cost as there were so many variables. For instance the income from ground rents paid by developers of the new shopping area was uncertain; would people be prepared, in the first place to develop the area further, what would they be prepared to pay? As events turned out the corporation made a good income from the ground rents and the sale of freehold in certain cases. They increased the rateable value to a considerably higher level than it had been for the original properties.

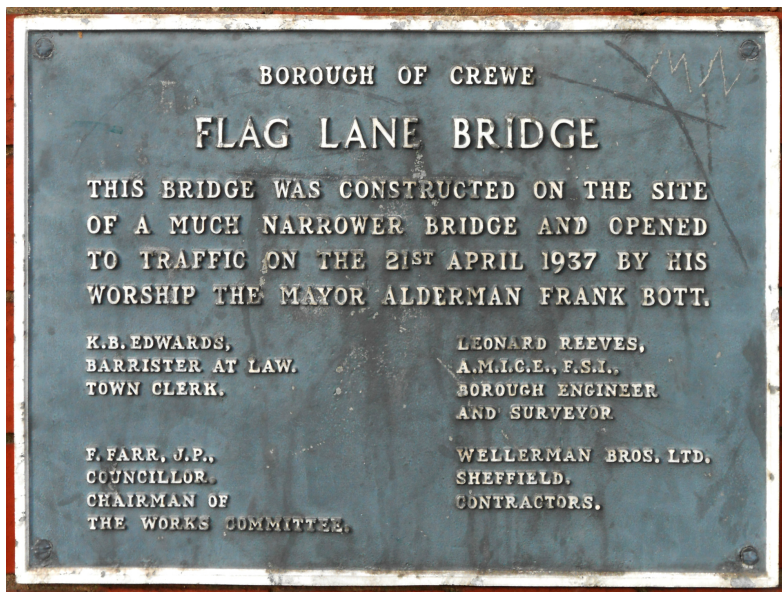
The bill finished its parliamentary stages in the summer of 1938 and became known as the Crewe Corporation Act 1938. The intervention of the war meant that the project was delayed until 1946 but the fulfilment of the plan meant that the centre of Crewe was changed completely.

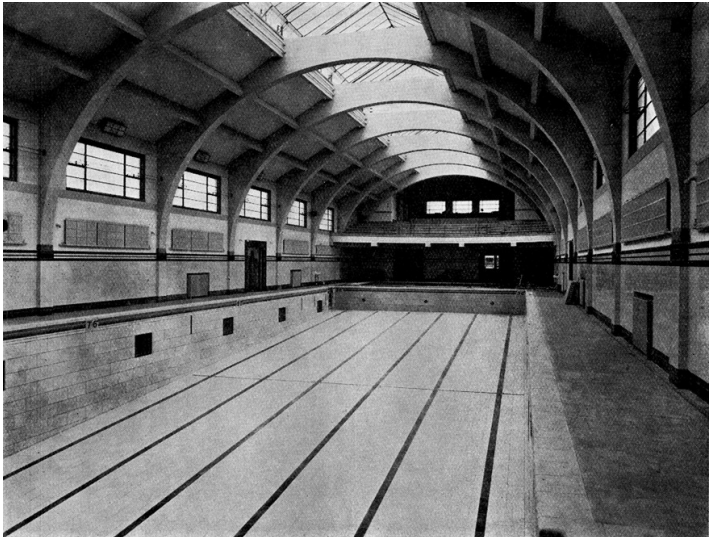
During the '30s Grandad carried out two jobs of which he was particularly proud — namely the rebuilding of Flag Lane Bridge and the construction of the swimming baths.

Flag Lane Bridge does not look a particularly remarkable bridge at first sight. However, there were three major problems which made its construction tricky. Firstly there was running sand so that piles had to be driven about 80–40 feet into

the ground. There were further problems when the machine used to drive the piles into the ground could get no deeper than 16 feet. The solution was to do the job by hand and this was some task when you consider that if all the piles used were laid end to end they would have stretched for a mile. The second problem was the space in which the bridge could be built was restricted. It was near to the town centre and was being constructed to help relieve the traffic, so the blocking off of the road would hardly help. It was also in the middle of a residential area. The third problem was that the bridge crossed the railway and in particular the Crewe–Chester line. Work must have been continually interrupted and to be organised around keeping the line open.

The baths were built a few yards down the road from Flag Lane bridge. They cost £36 000 to construct and featured a large and small pool with a spectator's area and cafe at one end. My sister and I used to love going to swim when we visited Crewe and I was always impressed, (and slightly frightened), by the very high diving boards up at the deep end. The windows around the top of the building gave a lot of natural light and were specially designed to prevent misting up by being surrounded by heating coils. It's quite ironic Grandad so enjoyed designing the baths as he could never swim and was actually scared stiff of water!







During the '20s and '30s several measures were undertaken to improve the lot of Crewe's residents and to create a more healthy environment. For instance in the early '20s a large house, Linden Grange, was bought and converted into a maternity hospital. This may seem a fairly unremarkable event in these days of the National Health Service but at the time it was considered an advanced move.

Grandad always was very proud of his sewer work and a big improvement in the '20s was the construction of the Northern outfall sewer connected to a sewage works and the end of the practice of spreading the sewage on fields. Apparently the field used for this purpose was rented on the understanding that if ever the agreement was to cease the field should be returned to its original state. This turned out to be such an impossible task that the field had to be bought by the corporation.

In the '30s the vast majority of the remaining privies and open ash pits within the borough were done away with and replaced with water carriage systems.

Another major health improvement was the building of a proper refuse disposal works. Up to that point rubbish had been disposed of by tipping. Now anything worth salvaging could be extracted and the rest could be incinerated.

The first building Grandad constructed as Borough Surveyor was Ludford Street Primary School. The building of such



premises was the responsibility of the local authority in those days. Grandad chose a new design based on a quadrangle to take up to 1040 pupils. The cost was £46 000. Major changes were also carried out in other schools including the provision of playing fields and changing rooms.

The 1930s was probably Grandad's most exciting time in his job. There was the money and commitment to get Crewe changed.

Grandad was enjoying life to the full. He bought a new house (Selworthy No. 2) in Wistaston. Although somewhat box-like from the outside it was a beautiful big house with a



massive garden. There were four large bedrooms and a “box” room almost big enough for another bedroom, four large reception rooms, a big pantry, kitchen and outhouse. The latter smelt of apples stored there from the orchard. Grandad planted the orchard when he first moved in. It was a close decision though as he almost decided on a tennis court!

Grandad had certainly moved up in the world, but he never let money dominate him. He was never really interested in personal wealth as long as he had enough to be “comfortable”. This is a common aspiration, I suppose and is rather derided as most people always “need a little more” to be comfortable. However, Grandad was grateful for the money he had and really did seem to be completely oblivious to it as long as he could carry on life as he and Elsie wished.

In the early 1930s the Rotary movement was starting to become established in Britain and Grandad became a founder member of the Crewe club in 1932. He never became President of the club but held many other posts. During the '30s he was involved in helping the unemployed of the town both through his work and with the Rotary Club. This mainly involved making up roads that had been privately owned up to that time. In fact most of the roads in the town were in need of reconstruction and many were remade with the inclusion of new services of gas, water, electricity and telephone cables in duplicate under the pavements. Grandad maintained his in-

terest in the Rotary club at Crewe to the end of his life. He was proud to become an honorary member of the club and was the last surviving founder member. Someone unconnected with Rotary may think of it as a slightly snobbish mutual admiration society. In fact though this may represent the motives of a minority of members Grandad along with others was attracted by the motto, “service above self”.

## The Second World War

In 1939 the world was plunged once more into war. Grandad suddenly, like most of the rest of the population, found his job completely changed. He was now involved in defending the town against the likely air attacks by building air-raid shelters, providing sand bags etc. It remained a mystery to all concerned with Crewe as to why the town received only scant bombing by the Germans. The town was an obvious target in the sense that it was a major railway junction. Grandad would be called occasionally to go off in the night on war duties and sometimes messengers would call with “secret” communications telling him such things as that another lot of sand bags were to be delivered!

The house at Crewe had to be altered so that it was prepared for an air attack. The kitchen, pantry and scullery had a second wall built within and without. This was to act as a blast wall and was said to protect the house from anything but a direct hit. It had a big hook in it where it covered the window so that it could be collapsed to allow the occupants to crawl out. During nights when there were air raids, the three members of the family slept under the stillage in the pantry.

There were occasional visitors to the house from the armed forces. The church had appealed for people to put up troops on their way home on leave. These servicemen found a warm welcome and some who stayed on several occasions became

friends of the family. Sometimes Grandad would have to take them by road for part of the way and this involved long trips at night on unlit roads with no proper headlights. Fuel was in short supply and so if later the family wanted to spend the day out they would all set off on their push-bikes.

With the end of the Second World War peace returned, but not prosperity. There was enough money however for the central town improvement to go ahead with a large clock tower as its centrepiece. The war had been a very busy period for Grandad although it had achieved little in forwarding the town. It was another reminder for Grandad of the futility of war and he never did any other job with as much enthusiasm as was the dismantling of the air raid shelters and other war buildings.



## The post war years

However the end of war brought most development to a halt because there was a scarcity of both materials and labour. There was an enormous shortage of houses and before any project could be started its contribution to the housing market had to be assessed. If it did not provide any benefit in that direction it had to be shelved. These shortages also meant that all sorts of unorthodox constructions had to be adopted, sometimes against Grandad's better judgement.

Several new and expensive housing estates were built. Often there were expensive ancillary works involved such as the mainage works for the Middlewich housing estate costing £130 000 a considerable sum in those times.

At home Margaret was growing up and a pupil at the Nantwich and Acton Grammar School. She chose a career in radiography after finishing in the sixth form, and in the late '40s left to start training at Manchester Royal Infirmary.

Grandma and Grandad were enjoying life together. Highlights were holidays to the seaside particularly the favourite, Llandudno. Grandad went to North Wales most years and loved walking around the Great Orme with his Elsie as they had done since their courting days. His love of the area had started when he had done some of his army training at nearby Penmaenmawr.

In 1951, an important event happened. The family had decided to take their holiday in Scotland. They often toured around by car but this year they chose to stay at Dunoon Methodist Guild. They met two young men, Martin Heathcote and his friend Graham who had come on holiday with Martin's parents. Margaret was immediately attracted to Martin and so began what seemed to be another holiday romance.

The families returned home and the couple lost contact for a few months until one day Martin rang up Margaret from his home in Whaley Bridge. He happened to have been given two theatre tickets (in fact he had got hold of them specially) and was she interested in going? And so another long courtship began which was to end up with the young couple being married in September 1957.

Grandad got on well with his future son-in-law. They shared several interests; a love of the countryside, tennis, membership of the Methodist Church and Margaret of course! Grandad and Grandma visited Martin's parents in Whaley Bridge and they came to visit them.

At work, Grandad was reaching the end of his career. Amongst other works he was responsible for updating and improving the new theatre in Crewe. More houses were built and on one estate the council wanted to name a road after him. Grandad preferred instead to have it named after Selworthy, a name he had given all his own homes. This particular village town in



Somerset was another favourite spot of his. Grandad's final job was the building of the new Crematorium chapel, a job which would, I suppose, seem a bit morbid, but he enjoyed it like all the rest.



## Retirement

In 1958, Grandad took retirement at the age of 62. He had enjoyed his near thirty years as Borough Surveyor and had worked hard, at times to the detriment of his health, as in 1947 when he had a nervous breakdown. It would seem likely that with retirement there would be a massive change for a man so devoted to his work. However, although he often looked back on his working life with great pleasure he adjusted to this new change of scene without complaint.

I feel it was one of my Grandad's greatest characteristics in later life that when he came to an age when he had to give up something he would say "Well, that has given me great satisfaction, but it is now just another stage in life completed". This is amply illustrated by the time when he finished driving. It had become apparent to everyone that he should stop and then one day he just announced that he had done so. No feeling sorry for himself or complaints about getting old, it was just another part of life complete and he was grateful for the years he could look back upon.

With a sudden increase in spare time Grandad developed new interests. He had always wanted to play a musical instrument well and although he had had a few piano lessons he had not kept it up and was a poor player. He thus decided to start having piano lessons again although he was always frustrated with his lack of progress.

Selworthy, as I have mentioned, had a big garden and now Grandad had the time to give to it. He grew produce but although he loved growing it he then had the headache of going round trying to find enough people to give it away to! I remember visiting as a child and being amazed by the marrows growing to what seemed enormous sizes. The wonder was further increased by seeing my initials growing on the skin of one (my Grandad had scored its outer surface). There was always a big crop of apples from the orchard which were stored in the wash-house giving it a lovely smell.

Grandad continued playing tennis well into his fifties and really enjoyed the game. However, in the characteristic way I have described he realised that the time had come when he should give up such an active sport. He took up bowls instead and enjoyed regular games at the Crewe club for many years.

In September 1959 Martin and Margaret, then living in Sandbach, had their first child, Kathleen. She was a bonny, bouncing baby unlike her brother born  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years later in Macclesfield (apparently I was a bit of a scrawny specimen). Grandparents on both sides were delighted with their grandchildren. Over the years we spent many happy times at Crewe and Whaley. Grandma and Grandad Reeves came over at weekly intervals to visit and we all went on several holidays together.

In the late '50s Grandad's mother-in-law came to live with them at Crewe. She was in her nineties and couldn't live on

her own any longer. According to Grandad they all lived together in total bliss but my mother tells me that there were more than a few disagreements! In any case they did seem fairly happy together and Grandma Windsor continued to share their home until her death in 1962.

During the '60s life continued in Crewe in much the same way but it was apparent that the big house at Wistaston was too much. Each year another bit of garden had to be given away to turf and the house was more and more of a chore to keep clean. My grandparents were encouraged to move somewhere smaller but they preferred to stay where they were.

Then in the late '60s a bombshell struck. Grandma, after some delay, finally went to the doctor to discover she had breast cancer. Tragically it had been diagnosed too late for a cure. Despite this Grandma struggled on bravely.

It now became imperative to move and at last they bought a bungalow in Macclesfield, and left Crewe. Although it was a big break they were much better off with a smaller house and the family around to help out.

Unfortunately, only a relatively short while after their settling in Macclesfield, Grandma died in March 1973. Although the rest of the family knew Grandma was terminally ill, Grandad preferred not to be told, but he must have known. Despite this his wife's death hit Grandad very hard. They had been very happy together and it was difficult for Grandad to pick up the

pieces. In addition to the sense of loss, Grandad was now living on his own for the first time in his life. It is true that he did not even know how to make a cup of tea and he had no idea of how to look after a house.

With a lot of help from Margaret, he began to learn how to cook. Grilled ham was his speciality and his rice pudding was legendary! He kept the house spotlessly clean again, with a little help. Every Christmas he would lay on a party for the rest of the family. Hours of preparation went into these events, and they were certainly different to any other part of the festive season. We would almost always end up with a full-blooded dose of old songs, with Grandad leading in a rather less than melodious way.

Life had to continue in other ways and so he carried on with his bowling, and became active in Macclesfield Beech Lane Church. Each week, on a Friday, he would go off in his car for a 'spot of lunch' somewhere and then on for a walk in the afternoon. He would often walk around the Bathpool area in the Potteries, the area where he had been brought up many years ago. If I or Kathleen were on holiday, he would offer to take us with him and tell us all the stories of his youth at Birchenwood. We would sometimes go to Mow Cop, and the site of the famous Methodist camp meetings. The Manifold valley was a favourite trip walking down the same paths he



had walked as a boy on school trips, and with Elsie in their courting days.

When he gave up driving we thought his trips may have to come to an end. They didn't however as he would catch a train or a taxi to the same spots, and if that wasn't practical he would just go somewhere local.

Every year he would try to go and stay at Llandudno. Even when he was limited in transport he was happy to do numerous circuits of the Orme during the week he was there.

In 1977 we all went on holiday down to Sidmouth and were enjoying the week when Grandad became ill suddenly during breakfast. After a visit to the local doctor it emerged



that he had had a stroke. This came as a shock to everyone because he had really enjoyed near perfect health up to this point. Over the remaining years of his life he was to have many more strokes.

The first stroke affected Grandad's speech in particular, and he could initially put hardly any words together. However, gradually with the help of an excellent speech therapist he started to get better. He would spend hours practising his writing that had also been affected. Although he never really did recover his speech totally there was a massive improvement, partly, no doubt, due to natural healing taking place but equally, I feel, due to his own determination.

Grandad did get frustrated by his disabilities at times but we all used to have a laugh about his mistakes together. For instance, he would always call Kathleen by some other name such as “concrete” and his spectacles were always his “bicycles”.

In the late '70s and early '80s, with further strokes and a pacemaker needed because of heartblock, Grandad's health gradually deteriorated although to within six months of his death he was still walking 3–4 miles a day around Macclesfield. As he became more infirm he became more reliant upon the rest of the family. Although he was the first to acknowledge their help and was grateful, he did his best to try and carry on as if his disabilities were but a minor irritation. This could be frustrating for people looking after him but I believe this was his way of maintaining some dignity in his illness.

There were two events towards the end of Grandad's life which he enjoyed immensely — the weddings of his two grandchildren. He took to the new members of the family, Chris and Jenny, with great enthusiasm and enjoyed the opportunity to tell his stories to someone new.

Another highlight was his ninetieth birthday celebrations. He had been asked how he would most like to celebrate it, and characteristically chose a get-together with his family. Margaret prepared his chosen menu — tongue, and of course for dessert, a trifle! He was presented with an album of pho-







tographs taken from a surprise “This is your Life” slide show, showing many events from his life, and some of his engineering achievements. This album was to be a treasured possession, and he needed no encouragement to open its pages and retell his old stories.

He carried on living in his own home until 1985, although for some years he had been having his meals with his daughter. With deteriorating eyesight he continued to amuse himself reading large print books. These were mainly non-fiction —

biographies if possible. He would listen to the radio as well, until he found he couldn't keep up with the speed of the talking.

Eventually Grandad joined Margaret and Martin at their own home in his 91<sup>st</sup> year. During this last year and a half his health deteriorated further and gradually he became able to do less and less. However, though obviously frustrated at times he complained little and tried to make the most of his books the words of which he could now barely make out. It was with some sense of relief I am sure for him and for the rest of us that he died of pneumonia after a stroke in Macclesfield District General Hospital on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1987.

His funeral took place during the following week at Beech Lane. It was strange really because, although sad, we could not really be initially full of grief. Grandad was a devout Christian. He often said that he couldn't have done many of the things in his life had it not been for his faith. The reader of this narrative may have his own views about Christianity but it cannot be denied that Grandad had a complete faith and was sure about where he was going. He would not have expected us to be sad — I suppose he would have said that it was just the end of another phase. . .

## **Conclusion**

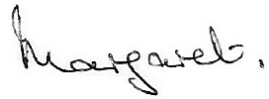
Having read this account, perhaps you would agree with my opening comment that there was nothing particularly spectacular about my Grandfather's life. However, building on the firm foundation of his faith, whatever he did, he did it to the best of his ability. He refused to compromise his beliefs for others. A true gentleman, he was honest and genuinely cared about others. He valued his family and was loved and respected by them. Spectacular it may not have been, but if a few more 'great' men bore such qualities, this world would be a better place.

### **A note from the ‘middle’ generation. . .**

‘Bouquets’ must surely be in place after reading this biography. As the ‘middle’ generation representative, I must say it is written very sensitively and thoughtfully. The ending is so true — his outlook on life so well summed up. He never talked of death, but lived life to the full — or as much as his health permitted.

Grandad would have been proud of your work and delighted by it. His first love in books was biography and his main love in life, his family and their achievements.

Well done, author and proof reader!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Margaret".

### **A note from ‘another’ generation. . .**

I was not fortunate enough to have known my Great Grandad Reeves except through the tantalising excerpts from his life passed down by those who knew him. It has been a great privilege to read this marvellous biography. It is as much a fascinating window into history as an inspiring and timeless account of a life well lived. Few are so lucky to have such a personal and loving record of their family.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jonathan".

## Photographs

This 2019 reprinting of “A Biography of My Grandfather” includes a number of photographs not present in the ‘first edition’<sup>1</sup>. Their sources are acknowledged below.

### 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday ‘This is Your Life’ Album

- Page 2: Contemporary portrait.
- Page 3: Traveller’s Rest.
- Page 6: One of the farms Grandad lived on.
- Page 14: Birchenwood Colliery (Mr Ball on front row, 3<sup>rd</sup> from right).
- Page 10: Grandad’s school.
- Page 17: Grandma.
- Page 18: World War I portrait.
- Page 27: Crewe Town Hall Staff, including Captain Wilkinson.
- Page 41: Ludford Street Primary School.
- Page 45: Central town improvement, Crewe.
- Page 48: Crewe Crematorium.
- Page 53: Mow Cop.

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<sup>1</sup>Any errors are the responsibility of Jonathan Heathcote.

- Page 54: Llandudno.
- Page 56: Family weddings. Kathleen & Chris Gibbs (Top), Richard & Jenny Heathcote (Bottom).
- Page 57: 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday.

### **Roll-of-Honour.com**

203<sup>rd</sup> (Cambs) Field Company Royal Engineers 1915–19. A Short History. <http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Regiments/cambregt203.html> Accessed December 2018.

- Page 20: The 203<sup>rd</sup> Field Company, Royal Cambs Engineers. Date unknown.

### **Crewe Swimming Baths**

Barbara Billups. Crewe Swimming Baths – An Architectural and Social History. Self-published 1984. Republished online 2011.

<https://www.bathsandwashhouses.co.uk/archive/your-local-buildings/crewe/crewe-swimming-baths-an-architectural-and-social-history/>. Accessed December 2018.

- Page 30: 1930s portrait.
- Page 38: Flag Lane Baths interior.
- Page 39: Flag Lane Baths plans.

## **Bing Maps**

Microsoft Bing Maps 'Bird's Eye' photography. <https://binged.it/2GXF7Tc> Accessed January 2019.

- Page 37: Aerial photograph of Flag Lane bridge.

## **Wikimedia Commons**

Wikimedia Commons user 'ReptOn1x'. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_Lane\\_Bridge\\_plaque,\\_Crewe.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_Lane_Bridge_plaque,_Crewe.JPG) Accessed December 2018.

- Page 37: Plaque on Flag Lane bridge.

## **Personal Photograph**

- Page 23: Royal Engineers embroidery.