

Our hovel man is unmasked!

OUR clever readers have unmasked the mystery man whose Marie Celeste-style abandoned market gardening hovel so puzzled the Market Gardening Heritage project researchers.

We can reveal that the gent who walked out of the homebuilt hut on his Cleeve Prior grounds, leaving behind his specs on his book along with everything else, was Mr Edgar Wheeler.

The North Littleton bachelor, who very much kept himself to himself, would probably have been quietly amused at the stir he has caused.

"I'm not surprised that he found fame in the Vale Mag, because he was a real character," says Reg Wheeler, a distant cousin of Edgar.

"He would have been tickled by the fact that his hovel and his story have become so high profile."

Reg was one of an astonishing number of people who got in touch after reading our April article on the hovel and the project.

We knew our readers would be a mine of information, but even we were surprised by the scale of the response. Archaeologist Nina O'Hare, the Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service (WAAS) Community

Project Officer and her team were blown away. "It was a massive response. It's also amazing how many people have come up to us at events, saying they'd seen the article. It has been really valuable to have such a high awareness of the project."

The two year Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic England-funded project will produce a permanent record of the enormous importance of market gardening to the Vale and its people.

WAAS-trained volunteers have been busy surveying the hovels, recording local memories and helping with wider research.

They are toiling away alongside WAAS, in partnership with Vale Landscape Heritage Trust, Worcestershire Farmsteads Project, Cleeve Prior Heritage Trust and Cleeve Prior Parish Council.

Edgar's once bramble covered 'ovel, is one of three to be restored and transformed into heritage hubs.

Edgar's is the first to be feted with a special open day, on September 21.

His life too will be celebrated at the event, fuelled by our readers and collated by the volunteer team led by Ian Robinson, Chairman of the village history group, the Chroniclers.

The event will run from 11am to 4pm and will be a hive of activity for all ages. There will be refreshments on offer and you can take your own apples for pressing (don't forget bottles to take the results home in).

There will be bug hunts for children, a display of market gardening tools, plus two guided history and nature walks.

Researchers will be there too, keen to hear your market gardening stories and to explain how the heritage project is progressing.

"Edgar's story is fascinating, but it's just one of many," adds Nina.

"The project has really captured people's imagination, and it's really lovely to see how many people, of all ages, it resonates with, both local or newcomers.

"It's unusual because it's not about the long ago or the extraordinary, but about everyday life that connects to many people's personal family history.

"A lot have said they didn't think anyone would be interested in their memories. But this is about the people on the ground, literally. There is incalculable worth in those intensely personal local stories that are so very powerful."



Edgar the football lover. Picture supplied by Gill Gould. The Littleton Football Team at the 1931 Winchcombe Hospital Cup photo. Edgar is second from the left and trainer Joe Stephens is the man with a bag and towel over his shoulder.



Meet Edgar Wheeler

THE heritage project team knew a bit about the owner of Cleeve Prior's mysterious time capsule of a hovel, because he left so much behind.

He was clearly a reader, wore glasses, loved marrowfat peas and Birmingham City FC.

But they hadn't a clue who he was... until our readers started getting touch.

First to contact us, days after the magazine hit the streets, was Worcester lady Margaret Buchan, whose mum, Margaret Creed, was Edgar's niece, and executor of his will.

Then the calls just kept on coming.

So, meet Edgar Wheeler, a North Littleton chap who was born in 1905 and died, on Christmas Eve in 1993 at the age of 88.

"I realised it was our Edgar as soon as I saw the article," says distant cousin Reg Wheeler, who lived just a stone's throw from him.

Edgar took on the Cleeve Priors two acre ground on a 40 year lease from the Manor in the 40s.

He grew artichokes, asparagus, onions, beans, sprouts, peas, asparagus, wallflowers and more. But he got the best return on fruit, including plums and cherries, which were to be his undoing.

He toiled opposite the home of Joseph and Doris Stephens, whose children would occasionally chat to him.

"He was very shy and never had much to say, but he was always busy," recalls Gill Gould, now a mother of three, grandmother to eight, a great gran to 14 and back in the house where she was born.

Gill remembers the market gardeners gathering in one hovel to munch their bread and cheese lunch and brag about who had the best produce.

An enterprising chap from Middle Littleton used to cut the men's hair in a shed along the road.

"He was as honest as the day is long"

Edgar never married but it could have been so different. "He was interested in a young lady he met, a schoolteacher from Sheffield. He tried to get in touch with her, but couldn't," reports Reg.



"Edgar as a youth, long before he became a very eccentric bachelor!"

Picture supplied by Margaret Buchan's cousin Joy Hewitt.

Edgar didn't just enjoy watching the Blues, he supported his local team too and sent match reports of Littleton FC games to the local paper.

"Our relation Jack Wheeler also played for the Blues, Sheffield Town and was caretaker manager at Notts County," adds Derby supporting Reg, who says his cousin once worked on the railway at Littleton.

"They said he was the best man on the railway there."

Both Gill and Reg are delighted that Edgar and market gardening are being enshrined with the WAAS project. They also have rich memories of their own.



Gill Gould

Gill's dad was a market gardener too and she well recalls, at the age of four, helping her mum tie the onions.

"It used to be all market gardening round here. It's sad to see the decline, but it's great to celebrate what we had," says Gill, who went on to work in the greenhouses in Offenham before earning a deal more at Evesham's Richmond sausage factory.

Reg grew up to become an estate agent whose properties included the Marine Ballroom. But he recalls making a packet as a school holiday plum picker when he was Blackminster pupil - £146 for a total seven tonnes one season.

Edgar, he reveals, was a real character. "There used to be characters in all the villages, but not now.

"He really was eccentric. He took the stairs out of his house and put them up an apple tree. He used a ladder to go to bed.

"He lived like a bit of recluse, but that didn't mean he was simple. He just liked to keep himself to himself."

Edgar left his hovel intact because he was moved into a convalescent home after being injured falling out of a tree.

"He had cherry trees and he'd be sat up there trying to keep the birds off," says Gill.

"He loved the land and growing," adds Reg.

"He was well liked by those who knew him and never hurt anyone or owed anybody any money.

"He never stuck his nose into other people's business and he was as honest as the day is long."

What a lovely, lasting tribute.

The lady and the wallflowers

NOW that the Cleeve Prior mystery has been solved, there are others you might want to get your teeth into.

For starters, initial research at Littleton, home to the two other hovels ripe for restoration, has unearthed a most unusual market gardener... a she!

"It looks like one of the grounds there was being worked by a Mrs Moore, which is interesting," tempts WAAS' Nina O'Hare.

"We know a lot of women helped out on the land, but there are not many plots bearing women's names.

"She was certainly using the corner plot in North Littleton, in 1940 and so may have been part of the dig for victory drive." Watch this space.

Among the gems is a treasure trove of letters written by schoolchildren about market gardening in 1933, thanks to Sir John Russell, of Hertfordshire's agricultural research centre Rothamsted Experimental Station.

Sir John had been preparing for a BBC series entitled What the Counties Do and Badsey and Pershore Senior School pupils supplied 60 letters telling him. They are kept at the Rothamsted library, which has gifted copies to Worcestershire archives. The Badsey Society has digitised all the letters from its area, which you can read online.

Pershore's are currently being scrutinised by a volunteer.

"There are some interesting stories about cut flowers," says Nina.

"Apparently one particular Pershore grower was the only one who could produce exactly the right shade of blue cornflowers for George V's silver jubilee.

"We've also been told that red wallflowers were grown for dye for the textile mills and would love to hear more about that."

Over to you, readers! You can get even more stuck into the heritage project by becoming a volunteer.

"Having reviewed the items within the hovel, we've decided that it would

be helpful to have an additional team of volunteers to help us clean and catalogue the items over the autumn," adds Nina.

There will be a Conservation Workshop for the hovel items in Cleeve Prior on September 30, plus a final research volunteer training session at Evesham Library on September 24.

You can find out more via www.explorethepast.co.uk; email explorethepast@worcestershire.gov.uk or telephone 01905 766352.

You'll be part of a fascinating exploration of the Vale that was.

LYNNE POWELL

Visit the Hovel's!
OPEN DAY
CLEEVE PRIOR
21st Sept 11am-4pm
Hive of activity for all ages!
Come and share your
market gardening stories.
See details on page 48 & 49



Nina O'Hare with Reg Wheeler at the site of Edgar's hovel in Cleeve Prior