

Kenneth Ernest William Allen

1909 - 1992

An Appreciation

by Ronald Beresford Dew

Seventy five years ago everybody with a good education would have been more or less familiar, from their schooldays, with our national history. It would have been quite unfashionable for an adult to spend serious time delving into his local history; and pioneers must have been very determined, to overcome the difficulties.

One of these pioneers was Kenneth Allen (KA); who, in spite of a professional career in London and his many other interests, succeeded in researching and recording volumes of historical information about Blakeney, where he was born. Why should KA have devoted over many years so much time to his local history? And who was this man?

His father, Ernest, was a Blakeney blacksmith. His uncle Walter was a carpenter. Like all the village boys, he went to the elementary school in the village. But, in 1922, he won a scholarship to the famous and ancient public school of Gresham's, in Holt; only four miles away. Thus already by the age of 13, KA must have been comparatively well instructed.

His school days ended, 7 years later, in 1929. He still had not decided what he should do next, when he happened to meet my father who had just brought us all down to Blakeney for the month of August, to stay at Ivy House, near the top of the High Street, with a distant relative who took holiday boarders (as we were every year until 1939).

Blakeney, for children, of all ages, was full of excitements, and a wonderful place. We made our contribution to the economy, by winding up the water for the household in the big galvanised buckets from the eighty foot deep garden well; though we omitted to confess that we sometimes dropped toads down it, as we knew they would prefer to live down there. One, because he was so magnificent, we christened James William Jellybelly.

In the years before the First World War, my father, his brothers and three cousins, had all taken their annual summer holidays together, in

Blakeney. All knew the Allen family well. So it was natural for KA to discuss things with my father and he decided to become a Chartered Accountant like him. He was introduced to and duly articulated to a firm of accountants in Norwich.

So for the next four years he worked in Norwich, to study accountancy by day, and to spend much of the rest of his time studying Art. He was to maintain a close interest in all manner of artistic things for the rest of his life.

He then determined to get himself into the Civil Service. This I regarded as a form of life imprisonment, but he declared that he would get a good pension and he would expect to live on it for another 30 or 40 years. We had a friendly argument about it, but that is what he proceeded to do. Years later, when he retired to Blakeney, he reminded me of that argument, and said with glee that he would now live at his ease forever! So he spent almost all his life working in central London, close to many of the great archives of our history.

There is nothing in this short record to tell us why he should have chosen to devote so much of his life to old documents and all other sources of information on Blakeney's past, and to have done this with such care, and so thoroughly. But that the studies were all of a piece with his character becomes clearer when we turn to his other personal interests, any one of which might well have absorbed most of the time of a less determined man.

I knew KA a little from our earlier holidays and though he was some years older than I was we seemed instantly to take to each other. He asked me to join him on expeditions. These would open up new worlds to me.

One of the first was to go out in a boat to fish on a high tide. This meant walking out over the mud flats, carrying worm-forks, to dig lug worms for bait; and then, before the incoming tide arrived, dragging the boat out to the spot where the Blakeney and Cley channels met,

then nearly opposite the Watch House.

There was more water and more fish in the channels in those days; and with two lines each we pulled in a huge haul of great flat fish! A great memory! And an exhilarating experience, one which I would copy many times in later years. The Pit was then full of fish; and the seals, now such an attraction to tourists, were to be shot if possible; though they knew all about guns and disappeared at the sight of one.

Another expedition might be to cycle to see churches. We once cycled to Binham Abbey, on a bicycle hired for me from Mrs Potterton's very lame son, who let them out for sixpence a day. Binham was much further away in those days. The roads were narrow and dusty and bumpy, the only traffic an occasional farm cart. Our journey seemingly took hours.

Finally we reached the Abbey, which Kenneth wanted to study: the cows munching up to the old walls, the interior damp, and dark and mysterious – and such a stupendous height – and eight hundred years old! It captured the imagination and filled us with romantic thoughts about the Middle Ages.

One day we managed to get our boat right up the Cley channel, to the old Cley windmill, to catch eels, on lines baited with strings of wool; as boys must have been doing, on this spot, for centuries. Or we might just set out to explore, perhaps starting at the quay by watching the daily mystery of the flow or ebb of the tide, sweeping past as since the beginning of time.

We might go up Westgate Street, then called Pig Street; passing the King's Arms, until we came to Walter Allen's house, standing opposite what is today's Spar store, with his big shed behind his house. This was his carpenter's workshop, where he made all manner of things. A carpenter's craft then called for great strength; all heavy timbers had to be cut and planed by hand, with heavy long wooden planes, which created enormous shavings. The whole end of his shed was full of them, to the roof; a class one fire hazard if ever there was one.

I remember my excitement at seeing, half built, the flat bottomed children's boat Walter A was making for us. A flat-bottomed heavy boat was made usually by each man, for himself, who had turned for his living to the hard and lonely life of dredging mussels. Many families lived off the mussel beds in the wintertime, as they had once also lived off the great oyster beds, before these had been wiped out by a devastating disease which destroyed all the oyster beds along the coast. The fisherman's boats were painted white, with black tarred bottoms, but this much smaller edition for us was half decked, and painted a bright pillar box red with white decking. She was a splendid sight with a mast and a sail, but no centreboard, and steered with an

oar. (So we usually chose to row or punt at low tide!) Even after 75 years she is still taken on an annual trip by my son down the Morston Creek to The Pit.

Further along Westgate Street, came the long half bungalow on the corner, with its big old orchard, then full of traditional Norfolk apple trees. Here lived old Man Baker, once a school-master, and old Mrs Baker, a little lady, nut brown, always in carpet slippers, always standing at the door, always smiling. Most memorably, she once said to me, in her broad Norfolk: "Have you been down to the Point now? Isn't that a m-a-a-a-a-avellous place?" And so from that moment it has always been a marvellous place for me.

Then, just before the lane down to Greencroft, one reached the big new garage, recently built by Herbert Pye on the site of the old tannery. This it was said, always stank to high heaven, but in the days of village self-sufficiency, it was necessary to produce the leather for boots, shoes, harness, buckets, and so much else. Herbert Pye was just transferring to cars from horses and carts, and traps for travellers via Holt station, usually having to return to the station to collect all the luggage. There were very few cars or vans in Norfolk at that time.

On the other side of the Morston Road came the green fields, rising to the Downs, seas of gorse, ablaze in gold and yellow, their heavy scent unforgettable. Here one might idle away an entire afternoon watching and listening to the innumerable yellow-hammers, and linnets, and the skylarks turning it all into an enchanted island.

There were no houses then on the south side of the Morston Road, nor on the Langham Road, nor up the Saxlingham Road, nor, on the New Road other than at the top end near the church and which was then lined with big allotments, where every man who could grew vegetables and fruit for his family. Most of the east side of the Back Lane from the church down to the quay, lay alongside open fields dominated by the old windmill.

Blakeney's heart and soul was the quay, a long road up to the church, and a short one round to the Morston Road. There was a sense of tight community surrounded by great open space. The Manor House was then a farm, at the one end of the quay, and at the other end, another farm, often with sheep and pigs.

Yesterday's world was evident everywhere. The quays were rotting. The warehouses, once packed with fine sails and spars, and all the gear needed to maintain wooden sailing ships, were empty, dusty, dirty places, provocative and exciting, full of things once so needed and now rusting or falling to bits. Half way along the

quay, was the smithy, where the smith would teach boys to blow the bellows for him (“up high, down low, up quick, down slow”), full of all sorts of ironwork and fittings which would never be wanted again.

Out on the marshes were abandoned boats falling to bits, their days on the sea in trade now long past. Some had been converted into house boats; but during the war they had been deserted and vandalised for their contents and fittings and dismantled for wood (as happened again in the last War when even a splendid house boat on Pinchen’s Creak full of good books and fine things was turned into a hen house).

Many houses were barely occupied. Lodgers would always be welcome. Pubs in the High Street had closed for lack of custom. There was little activity, for the active life of the past had gone. Visitors were few, tourism had hardly begun.

Along the Carnser were bits of once huge wooden posts to which the big boats would have tied, as they waited their turn at the quay. Such relics of better days were all around. The sand hills below the windmill had been the site of shipbuilding. Once, digging there, we found iron chains. A hollow in the corner was the site of a saw pit where all the ship’s ribs and planks had been so laboriously cut. By tradition, there was an entrance to a brick tunnel going up to the priory. Every village in Norfolk claims to have a tunnel or two, but Bernard Starling, the farmer, declared that his plough fell into a big hole, a collapsed brick tunnel; and he had had much difficulty getting his horse and plough out before he filled it in. But there were more significant relics? There had once been a great priory overlooking the sea? The so-called Guild Hall was evidently centuries old.

So the Blakeney into which Kenneth was born, had already been in a long decline, from the fine busy port of its greater days, as it yielded to the silting of the channels and the power of the railways. Although in the previous half century much of England was expanding to heights of prosperity never known before, Blakeney’s population had fallen dramatically. It was now little more than a poor village on the bleak east coast.

Then, when he was five years old, came the colossal impact of The Great War of 1914 which affected everybody and everything. 18 Blakeney men, a significant loss of the fittest men to be able to go to war, were killed. With no trade, life must have been at a low ebb, even before the further impact of the great Recession. Thus for all his early years, he lived under the wide skies of this world of the marshes and the sea, conscious of the great silence out on the marshes

under the moon and the stars, other than the call of birds and the distant waves; a great fathomless, beautiful, natural world, disintegrating.

To prepare for his retirement he bought a piece of land off what is now Pintail Drive, then at the foot of the Downs; and here he designed, in every detail, the house he had built. His drawings were professional; his arrangements were impressive. He included a steep pitched roof rising to a tall apex over a great open attic space from one end of his house to the other, and here he arranged his collections.

The first of these (apart from his researches) and the one which took the most room, was his collection of pictures – but it was a collection with a difference! They were not original works, nor even kept in frames. He had saved all kinds of reproductions, prints and photographs to be found in art magazines and elsewhere, of the works of different artists. For each artist he created a great file of hardboard about a yard square, held by cords woven along the bottom edge, opening like a giant oyster, and in this he arranged his pictures on giant sheets. The ‘oysters’ were on mobile racks, and the house roof had big louvre windows; so there was good light, supplemented with roof lights. Even the chairs were just the right height.

There was plenty of room to sit back before one of these big oyster shows and thus enjoy a splendid hour or two of Breugel or Turner or any other artist he cared to choose; with maybe a mug of coffee to hand – many had been chosen before the day of films and transparencies. It was splendid in its simplicity and, he claimed, all he could afford.

He painted many pictures. He was no mean artist, and delightful examples of his paintings and drawings were displayed around his house. He took his painting seriously. Thus he painted one watercolour of Morston Church (he loved to paint churches) all in shades of blue, in token of his interest in Picasso’s Blue Period, which had created such an impression at the time.

He was a member of a book club; but again it was a book club with a difference! A member received for each month a book in a different language. I think there were three languages, French, Italian and German or Spanish, but there may have been four. As a member you had to read that book during that month. I was astonished. He taught himself these languages as he went along, keeping notebooks, in which he wrote whatever he wished to remember. How did he find the time?

He taught himself to interpret old Latin manuscripts and medieval documents in English or old French, none easily read. But such challenges never daunted him. Education then started with Latin, so he had a good base. He had put together an interesting library with many refer-

ence books and he took great care of them, fitting each one with a transparent cover. Some he particularly treasured. One a most beautiful book on botany, full of lovely illustrations. I recall it because it had been given to him by Walter Dew, who lived at the corner of the High Street and Little Lane, in the house later occupied by John Wallace, who would leave many cottages to the Blakeney Neighbourhood Housing Society.

To music he was devoted and he was himself a good pianist, with a splendid Bluthner in his lounge. But he played to please himself! Once when he was playing a piece by Chopin, he suddenly stopped. "You are thinking that I am missing a lot of the notes! But, you see, I do not care! My mind supplies the notes my fingers fail to touch!" He had been taught by his mother, a pianist herself in the days before wireless and when every house in Blakeney must have its piano.

For gardening he had no interest. Indeed he hated gardening in any form. But in his garden he kept bees, because they intrigued him, or for their honey? He once spent a long time demonstrating a beehive to my sister when she was a schoolgirl; and she remembers to this day how much she enjoyed his talk and the trouble he took.

He accumulated knowledge for its own sake. He loved especially all natural things. But he was not attracted to any form of physical exercise! Early on in his life he went into training to avoid all forms of physical exercise as a waste of good time and seemed to thrive on this diet! Some of these interests and personal traits may be detected again in his devotion to the history of his native village but they do not explain it. He may have been lucky with his history master at school; or his mother, who was well read, like so many other mothers, may have started his interest. But, perhaps, he may have been drawing on much deeper well springs altogether?

Blakeney was another world, remote and with so few people. If boys dragged a boat through the shallows of the channel at low tide to collect giant gillies, for gilly racing across the mud flats, they might take all morning over it, and see only an odd bait digger trudging past – and this in the middle of August! At the Watch House or the Far Point, one had this world to oneself. It would have made an even deeper impression on a sensitive local than on a visitor.

Many careers would have been open to him; but by contrast he would now be vaguely aware of the extent of our national depression, poverty and unemployment. For the great majority, life was too full, and too difficult to start looking backwards. Did he then decide that he preferred his own once flourishing village? Perhaps it was then that he first thought about Blakeney's debt

to its past – and decided this was where his interest lay? He would work for a good living – but not because it would be his interest.

One summer day, in the year 1976, long years after his research was all over, Kenneth invited me again to go with him up into his great attic. This time he pulled out of the shadows two heavy cases which he opened, to take out a collection of files in cardboard covers, frayed at the edges, in various faded colours; and of big envelopes; full of handwritten papers, some loose, others stapled. He took them out and spread them about on the floor on which we were now kneeling, or sitting. It was spellbinding.

We were there for a long while, lost in the fascination of descriptions and enquiries into our local history of so long ago. These were his personal manuscripts, and notes, and records of his researches undertaken over many years and brought together into this collection but which he had not looked at since he put all his papers together when he and his wife packed up their London house on his retirement to Blakeney.

We were like two excited schoolboys! But now he could research no more. He was too remote, too removed from his sources of information. He was becoming infirm. We were life-long friends. He was anxious for the future welfare of his papers. He wished to give them personally to me. With my experience and interest and with every facility in my University, he knew I would care for them, perhaps even add to them. By giving them to me he knew his work would be safe. I felt overwhelmed to be entrusted with my old friend's work of his lifetime. I could not promise to add to them; but I could, and did promise to mind them, just as he wished.

He would have no delay! He insisted that we lugged the cases straight out of the house and immediately into my car. And so, I am sure full of emotions hidden under his light laughter and gentle friendship, he said goodbye to all his work. Afterwards he was never disposed to talk about his papers; so gradually I ceased to ask. I arranged them to be kept in so many binders, after photocopying them so that duplicates could be kept elsewhere in case of fire. Such unique documents must not be lost.

A memorial to a man with few material ambitions, who may sometimes be thought to be a weak character, but whose life shows the contrary. He was a very determined man who knew what he wished to do. Easy, amused, patient, self-contained without material ambitions, able in his own words to be asleep right through a Civil Service meeting without anybody noticing, content to stay in his niche because at the end he would get a good pension on which to live for

ever. No urge to travel, no wish to change the world. He made no deep impression on his contemporaries, but as a friend incomparable.

After some years it became clear that there was a growing public interest in Norfolk's history and that it would be altogether better for these research papers to be in the Norfolk Record Office. I made it a condition that they were kept together at all times, and entitled the 'Kenneth Allen Papers'.

The Blakeney Area Historical Society is comparatively new but its published researches and its other activities are impeccable. It is therefore with the greatest pleasure that I have given the duplicate set of the Kenneth Allen Papers to the Blakeney Area Historical Society, where they are now available to all serious students.