

JAMES EDWARD BLACKSELL, MBE, BA
1912 – 1987



Edward Blacksell, as he was normally known, was well-known in several walks of life – as a Barnstaple headmaster for most of his adult life, as a national promoter of the Arts, who played an important role attached to Archibald McEndoe's work with the Guinea Pig Club in East Grinstead in rebuilding the bodies and lives of badly burned aircrew in the Second World War.

He was born on 17th June 1912 in Eccleshall Bierlow, West Riding of Yorkshire, and attended Reading University, where he was awarded the Degree of Bachelor of Arts. In March 1936 he married Joan Simmonds Yates in Blackburn, Lancashire. Edward and Joan subsequently had three sons, Mark, Simon and Henry, and one daughter Rosalind.

It seems likely that he came to Barnstaple within a year or two of his marriage, as he was on the staff of the Senior Boys' School in Barnstaple prior to moving to their new premises which were opened on the site of the Miller Institute in Vicarage Street in September 1939, within days of the outbreak of the Second World War. At this time Edward and Joan were living at 31 Abbey Road, Pilton.

He enlisted in the armed forces in the autumn of 1940, hoping to join the Royal Navy, but was rejected, joined the RAF on 16th December 1940, and was given the rank of sergeant. Having no physical training experience, he was sent to the Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead, where the hundreds of badly burned and disfigured aircrew who had survived to return to Britain were being treated to reconstructive surgery by Archie McIndoe and his team of plastic surgeons. Edward Blacksell's

important job was to look after the welfare of the men during what was often years of treatment, and also to prepare the relatives before visiting, so that they would not show distress or horror at the sight of their loved ones with their appalling injuries, but to treat them as normally as possible. He and Archie became firm friends, and he was known as 'Blackie' throughout his time at East Grinstead, where he installed barrels of beer in each ward and encouraged the men not to think of themselves as patients, but to prepare for living as normally as possible. For his work with the Guinea Pig Club, which was formed to rehabilitate the men, Edward was awarded the MBE. He is photographed here with HRH Prince Philip, who has been Life President of the Guinea Pig Club to date since 1960, when he succeeded Archie McIndoe in that position. [Photograph kindly loaned by Frank Kidwell.]



Edward Blacksell with HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh in July 1986

Edward was instrumental in arranging for Bill Foxley, known as the most seriously injured airman of them all, to come to Barnstaple, where he ran a tobacconist shop in Boutport Street for some years, which he coped with bravely having very badly burnt face and hands. Many local people still remember him and his pretty red-haired wife, who had been his nurse at East Grinstead.

[Full details about Bill Foxley can be found by just entering his name in an internet search engine.]

Edward Blacksell returned to his post as a Barnstaple schoolmaster on 17th December 1945, exactly five years after leaving to enlist for the duration of the war, and six years later, in September 1951, he commenced duty as Headmaster, on the retirement of Phillip Heppenstall. At some time afterwards the Blacksell family left Abbey Road and went to live in Orchard House, Bellaire, where he and Joan remained for the rest of their lives.

This, however, was not the sum total of Edward Blacksell's interests, for while he remained at his post in the Boys' School in Barnstaple, he became involved in the arts scene as co-founder of the Taw & Torridge Festival in 1951, together with

Ronald Duncan, playwright & librettist, and Lord Harewood. This will probably account for the many productions of Shakespeare's plays which were staged at the school in the 1950s, as a number of photographs in Terrance Trump's book on the school 'Pursue Excellence' can bear witness. Some very famous names from the world of the arts became involved with this festival – Henry Moore, Henry Williamson, Robert Helpmann, T.S.Eliot and Jacob Epstein were all Vice Presidents. In addition, partly through his association with a friend of Archie McIndoe, he became much involved with The English Stage Company Limited, which was formed in July 1954, with the intention of bringing modern authors to the London stage. With this in view the Royal Court theatre became the venue for the Company's plays, with many famous actors and playwrights involved in the productions.

Meanwhile, back at his day job, Edward Blacksell continued as Headmaster until his retirement in 1974, at the age of 62. He died aged 75 in October 1987, followed by his wife Joan less than a month later.

Their sons all became successful in their chosen careers:-

[1] Andrew Mark Blacksell, born 1942, educated at Barnstaple Grammar School and Baliol College, Oxford, read geography and attained D.Phil. and later Professor of Geography, spending some years at Exeter University and in the U.S.A. He sadly died on 12th January 2008 at the age of 65, and is buried at Belstone on Dartmoor.

[2] Simon Blacksell, born 1944, is Director of Bradfordians Dramatic Society, based in Bradford-on-Avon.

[3] Henry Blacksell, born 1948, is a barrister in the Middle Temple, London and now His Honour Judge Blacksell Q.C., who was appointed to the South East Circuit in 1996.

Little is known of Rosalind Blacksell, who seems to have led a comparatively private life, and spends some time in each year in New Zealand according to Frank Kidwell, a long-term friend of the family.

Edward Blacksell lived in Pilton for almost fifty of his adult years, and is remembered by hundreds of his former pupils and many Piltonians as a colourful and caring man who contributed much to his school and other interests.

Margaret Reed

[Footnote – The above information is taken from biographical information of members of the family on Google, from Terrance Trump's book 'Pursue Excellence' on the history of the Senior Boys' School Barnstaple 1939-1972, and from the personal reminiscences of Edward Blacksell's friends and contemporaries.]