

Mike O'Neill

Stella O'Neill



Mike's grandparents, Patrick O'Neill (1856-1928) and Bridget née O'Halloran (1860-1941), emigrated from Ireland as a consequence of the Irish Potato Famine (1845-52). Patrick was said to have tutored Keir Hardie, founder of the Labour Party, in reading and writing. By the time their 8th child, Michael Patrick (1894-1971), was born they were living in Millwall, Isle of Dogs, London. Michael and his wife, Ellen (Nell) Frances née Chamberlain (1896-1987), had two children: Ellen Kathleen (1922-94) known as Peggy - who married George Busby, a Deddington fireman, in 1954 - and her younger brother Michael (Mike) Edward (1930-93).

1948. Mike in his REME uniform

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Mike's school closed because most of the children had been evacuated to the country. Mike, with time on his hands, quickly realised that there was an opportunity for an enterprising lad. They lived close to the India Docks which was bombed heavily during the war and, while people were not necessarily left with much if they were bombed out, what they were left with would need moving to safer accommodation. So he made a barrow from scrap wood and old bicycle wheels and he was in business. However, he did get caught out on one occasion when the air raid siren sounded early one evening and Mike was nowhere to be seen; the bombs rained down during the night and his mum, Nell, who was in the shelter was convinced Mike - 'our boy' as she used to call him - must be dead. After the 'all clear' sounded, Nell and his dad, Michael, along with the Air Raid Wardens started searching for him; Mike was found later the next morning ... under his upturned wheelbarrow - fast asleep!

His parents had refused to let him be sent away when all the other children were evacuated but this incident convinced them that if they didn't get him out of London quickly 'our boy' would indeed be dead. As it happened, Michael was in touch with a friend who helped arrange a job at the Northern Aluminium Company, known locally as 'The Ally' in Banbury. Although he was in the ARP in London, he considered working at 'The Ally' equally important war work as they were developing and producing spares for Spitfires. While visiting Banbury to see about the job Michael also arranged a place to live before returning to London to work his notice and settle matters there.

So in 1941 he sent Nell and Mike on ahead to Deddington. They got off the train at Aynho Station and walked to the village taking two rooms in Councer House, Hudson Street [later Council House and now Corner House]. His sister Peggy worked her notice from her secretarial job in London and joined them.

Having settled in to Deddington Primary School and village life, Mike quickly found ways to make a few bob by doing odd jobs for folk and selling the vegetables he grew in the grass verges around the village.

At 15, he got his first proper job which was as a labourer with the firm of Hinkins and Frewin where he stayed until he started his National Service (NS) in 1948 (p.22). He resumed working for them when he was de-mobbed from the NS but soon left to start his own business using the skills he had gained with the REME.

While working on a building site in Southam in 1950 he met Frances Marlow who he married in 1955 and they moved in to Cats Cottage in Philcote Street. In 1956 he purchased a plot of land in the Hempton Road and started to build what was to be the family home for more than 50 years, Karmilla. Their first daughter, Michele was born in 1957 and the family finally moved into Karmilla in 1958 where Stella was born in 1962 followed by Karen in 1963.

Mike went on to build and renovate many houses in Deddington on sites such as The Holly Tree Bungalows, Castle End, Hempton Road, The Tchure, Goose Green, St Thomas Street and Hopcraft Lane, as well as in surrounding villages, over the next 20 years or so before ill health forced him to retire.

Whilst he had a very busy working life, he also had many hobbies; most notably he was a member of the England Clay Pigeon Shooting team from 1966 to 1979 and was selected to shoot for Team GB at the 1972 Munich Olympics from which the GB team withdrew as it was thought to be too dangerous. They were proved only too right when members of the Israeli team were taken hostage and a number killed by Black September, the Palestinian terrorist group.



Mike developed a passion for motorbikes during his National Service days which grew into his becoming a skilled vintage bike restorer; most of the bikes started out as 'basket cases'. He entered for the Banbury Run in 1991 and 1993 (pictured) and, although his health was deteriorating by then, he finished the runs in a respectable time. His collection of motorbikes remains in the family to this day.

Banbury Run 1993

In 1975 Mike intricately carved a Litany Desk for the Church, it resides in the Lady Chapel and is used every Sunday; he dedicated this to the Home Guard of the Parish. In 1978 he carried out extensive woodwork repairs to the Norman dome of the Church roof.

Mike was an active and long serving member of Deddington Parish Council and at the time he retired in May 1990, had given some 20 years' service to the Parish.

He enjoyed his vegetable garden and painting - he painted several village scenes - he also loved animals and always had a dog or two by his side. Mike passed away following a long but courageously fought battle with cancer in December 1993.

Editor's note: Stella is currently Manager at Deddington Library.