Two Stalwart Supporters: A Local Profile *interview by Billy Count*

Hilda Kent and Margaret Howse are both talented women. Hilda is an artist and each week creates fantastic three-dimensional displays for the Bush Club, to provide a focal point for the meetings. She uses a variety of materials including her own photographs, models and pastel drawings. Margaret is a keen gardener and has magnificent displays of flowers and a flourishing kitchen garden.

They first met in Witney when both were in the Land Army; Hilda was running a hostel for milkers and recruited Margaret as an experienced milker. Able to work by hand or operate machinery, she eventually became Hilda's assistant. Hilda moved to Bampton, about 40 years ago, to look after her father who had been evacuated from the south coast during the war and was in lodgings here. She helped in winding up the hostel in Witney and then became the local driving instructor until about 10 years ago.

After leaving the Land Army Margaret came to stay with Hilda whilst "thinking what to do". She worked as a bus conductor for some years before setting up her own private car hire service, retiring in 1988.

Since then and because they had friends already involved and wanted to help, they have both become active supporters of the Cancer Relief Macmillan Fund. For the last three years Margaret (Hilda describes herself as "the back-up") has held a sale outside the house on the Morris Dancing day and this year raised over £1600 for the Fund. She helps with coffee mornings and collecting for the charity outside local supermarkets. This year all the money raised locally will be staying in Oxfordshire and they are hoping to fund the training of two extra nurses in areas such as pain control and counselling.

Hilda is a supporting member of the Horticultural Society whilst Margaret is on the committee; they are both interested in the countryside and the environment. Margaret is the gardening enthusiast whilst Hilda is the "dead-header"! The Society put on two big shows a year, and the committee organise other events like the recent demonstration of flower arranging, lectures and social events for members.

Both women are also involved with BEWG and believe in conservation and planning; "We all care about Bampton and what's happening to it, and don't want it ruined. We want to maintain an environment people would like to live in".

Hilda Kent

First of all, I'm going to ask Jeanette Brown to make her own personal tribute. Her connection with Hilda in the last few years has centered on Terry, the last in a long line of pets in Hilda's life, and I think that these personal reflections will help to lead us into a wider resumé of Hilda's long and remarkable life …

I'm quite sure that others here have their own particular snapshots and longer stories to tell, and it was Hilda's wish that after her funeral service people should gather for 'a meal and fun conversation'. You are indeed all warmly invited for refreshments in the Village Hall afterwards for that precise purpose and Hilda also added the comment that she will be listening.

95 years is a long time – and over those years there have been many events, many stories, many friends made and experiences shared – and Hilda was a woman who loved life, enjoyed the company of people and animals, and seems to have made the most of every opportunity that came her way.

She was born in Bexhill-on-Sea on 17th December 1916 and after school she went on to study in the 1930s at the Slade School of Art in London. Amongst other artistic and creative activities which followed on from that, Hilda helped to make costumes for Sadler's Wells Ballet.

When war came, Hilda's organisational and practical skills were quickly recongnised and in the early 1940s she moved to Cromwell House in Bampton accompanied by her father and Margaret Howse, Hilda being in charge of the Land Army for Witney Area for the duration of the war. The work inevitably involved driving and Hilda went on to become a professional driving instructor.

She was, of course, extremely good at it, which she was at everything she turned her hand to, and so her skills were very much in demand. Among others, she taught many of the nurses at Witney Hospital to drive, and she held a driving license herself for over 70 years, still a familiar sight at the wheel until her early 90s.

Her artistic talents were certainly not neglected either and she was much in demand as a talented local artist, photographer and, perhaps in particular she was much sort after as a painter and drawer of many people's beloved pets. The importance of animals in Hilda's life has already been mentioned and her appreciations of the living world enabled her to catch the spirit of a creature in a uniquely sensitive way through her art.

Also, again into her 90s, Hilda taught therapeutic art to people recovering from strokes and she always delighted members and visitors to the Bush Club with her wonderfully inventive and topical, and often amusing displays which graced the entrance to the bush Centre on a Wednesday.

Hilda's desire to help others and bring some joy and happiness to their lives was also evident in the charitable work she undertook – especially the efforts she made together with Margaret Howse to raise money for Macmillan Cancer Support. The fund-raising stall outside Cromwell House was a firmly-fixed feature of Morris Day every year which brought in a lot of money for the cause.

And who can forget the parachute jump?
It takes nerve and a real sense of adventure for anyone to leap out of an aircraft and trust themselves to a piece of material and ropes to get them safely to earth; but when you are 89! But Hilda was adventurous; nothing seems to have fazed her; and if it meant that more money could be raised to make more people happier and comfortable then she would do whatever it took.

This love of a challenge also showed itself in Hilda's enjoyment of travel. She was a great traveler and visited many countries during her lifetime, including a trek to the Himalayas when she retired at the age of 65. Again, it's no small thing to go to such regions when you are no longer in the first flush of youth – and this trek was no gentle stroll on tourist-friendly paths on the foothills. It was an arduous expedition and required serious preparatory training, but Hilda, unlike many of the younger members of the party, actually made it to Base Camp on Mount Everest – a remarkable achievement which proved that here was a lady who was made of some pretty stern stuff!

Also, while on that adventure, Hilda made time to visit local people in their homes and get to know something of their way of life, the simplicity of which made a lasting impression on her. That interest in, and concern for, other people was an essential part of Hilda's character, and she was always kind, tactful and thoughtful in her dealings with everyone she met. She had an unquenchable 'glass half full' attitude to life, and a great sense of humour which meant she always saw the funny side of life and looked for the good in everyone she met.

And so now we have come to say goodbye and God speed to this remarkable, unique person, who has blessed so many through her warmth and zest for life, through the

sharing of her gifts and skills, and through the tireless work carried out to support organizations and individuals.

Life, far all of us, is a gift – and we have the freedom to reject it, and live selfishly and narrowly for ourselves alone, or to embrace it and lose ourselves in serving others and make the best of such talents we have to add to the joy of the world. Hilda chose the second way and so we can commend her with confidence today to the God who created her and who gave her the gift of life.

Jesus promised his disciples that death was not an end but rather the beginning of a new adventure**.** ***I go to prepare a place for you***, he told them, ***that where I am you may be also***. A place prepared for us in God's house of many rooms – many dwelling places – in God's eternity of wonder where we can go on becoming the people we are called to be. With love and affection and in gratitude for all that she was and all that she did, we pray that Hilda is now enjoying her own place on that other shore and in that greater light, as we pray:

Rest eternal grant to her, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon her. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.
Amen.

KENT Hilda Passed away peacefully after a long and full life on Monday 11th June 2012 at Witney Community Hospital, aged 95 years.