

## People

Nancy Reeves

# Star of stage and school

**E**xactly 40 years ago on May Day, Faringdon's private Ferndale School was opened. The lady who started it, Nancy Reeves, retired early in 1979 because of illness, and sold up her pride and joy. Since then, Mrs Reeves has recovered her health — and turned the clock back by becoming a pupil herself, taking 'A' grades in a distance education diploma course of the Methodist Church.

For more than 40 years she has preached in Congregational, United Reformed and Methodist churches over a wide area. One of the first helpers in the Faringdon Tourist Information Centre, she is also works regularly at the general Information Bureau upstairs.

Many Faringdonians will remember her best for her roles both on and in front of the stage as a founder member, along with her late husband, of the Faringdon Dramatic Society. She was in

the very first play in 1949, *The Ghost Train*, and in the hundredth, performed in November 1990, *Ten Times Table*.

It was a wartime romance in a Bournemouth church canteen that brought Mrs Reeves to Faringdon. She met her husband, Bill, while he was serving in the Army Education Corps and she, also a teacher, was helping out as a volunteer behind the counter. He had taught for two years at Faringdon Secondary Modern School in Southampton Street before being called up, and when he returned to his old job in Faringdon in 1946, the new Mrs

Reeves came with him. She also joined the staff of Faringdon School, as music teacher. Their best man, incidentally, had been Bill Carter, a college chum of Mr Reeves.

Mrs Reeves always harboured an ambition to start her own school, particularly one that would give the non-denominational churches a look-in over C of E-dominated schools. She achieved her ambition in 1952 with just six pupils in one room at the back of Ruth White's house, Dunraven. The house had an entrance in Ferndale Street — hence the name of the school which, of course, has since moved.

Among the six founding pupils were Mrs White's own granddaughter, Anna.

Others included Brenda Blissett, daughter of Cecil Blissett and now Mrs David Barber, and Christopher Day, well-known as the homeopathic vet, and his brother

Michael. The schoolroom contained three tables, six chairs, a cupboard, and a teacher's chair lent by Mrs White. Coat pegs were at the end of the room.

In two terms, the school had grown out of that room and was moved to Chieveley House in Gloucester Street, and then in 1956 moved again, to its present site in Bromsgrove. By this time the school roll had grown to 36, and when Mrs Reeves retired it had swollen to 135. She concentrated on providing an intimate and friendly atmosphere in the school, with a philosophy of developing each individual pupil's

potential. They came from Swindon, Lechlade, Highworth, Longworth and Buckland — their parents attracted, no doubt, by the insistence on courtesy, consideration for others and good mannered behaviour, all nurtured within a strongly Christian ethos. The school also earned a reputation for charity work, raising hundreds of pounds for the Victoria Home in Poole, where it supported a named cot.

It delights Mrs Reeves that many of her pupils — not to mention their own children, and in some cases even their grandchildren — keep in touch by letter, card and personal visits. She has attended many of their weddings. She remembers them all by name, and they certainly

demonstrate that they remember her... In some cases she has to admit a little extra pride — such as in the case of Patricia Bethel, now a professor of ancient languages in Canada, whom Mrs Reeves first interested in her subject by reading *Beowulf* to her as a schoolgirl. Christopher Day, she recalls as he learned to read, indignantly refuting the idea that animals could talk! It is all rather like enjoying an extended family, which, along with the support of her only son, Timothy, is particularly comforting to her since she became a widow nine years ago.

She says it was "heartbreaking" to have to sell the school because of

(continued over the page)



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## People : Nancy Reeves, continued

the joint burdens of cancer and arthritis, in 1979. Her husband had joined her at Ferndale, after a career which took him from Faringdon to become head of Longcot School, then back to Tollington to teach children with learning difficulties, and finally to Fitzwaryn School, Wantage. When Ferndale was sold, Mr Reeves retired, too — but died

just four years later.

Mr Reeves, as superintendent of Faringdon Evening Institute, helped to start the dramatic society along with his wife and others, beginning with an acting class. Mrs Woodfield, wife of Faringdon's curate, and Bill Carter were the early producers. Since that first production of *The Ghost Train*, Mrs Reeves has taken

part in 25 productions, and produced 19. She is perhaps best remembered as Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and as Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*. Her son, Tim, has also been an active member since taking the part as Ronnie in *The Winslow Boy* in 1967 — a play in which his father also took part, and his mother

produced. Tim also followed in his father's footsteps as secretary of the society.

Mrs Reeves remembers when the society first began performing in the Corn Exchange — helping to build up the stage with old tea chests. Her first producing role was in 1955, with *The Rose and Crown*. She also wryly points out that in her various acting roles she has 'murdered' both her husband and her son.

Since retiring, Mrs Reeves' health has happily improved dramatically. As well as her preaching, which takes her as far as Banbury, Abingdon and Witney, she is also president of the Women's Fellowship at the Faringdon United Church, and as well as working in the Faringdon Information Bureau, she also acts as driver, taking out mentally handicapped people. That's in addition to having taken the two-year distance learning course which gained her not only four top grades, but also the Alfred Lamb Prize for her Old Testament essay (the other courses were in all-age worship, devotional life, and a historical 'In Quest of Jesus').



Two of Mrs Reeves' archive photographs from the year of 1956. The bottom one was taken on the occasion of a puppet show

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## Planners defy villagers

The Fernham Parish Meeting gave overwhelming support to a planning application for extensions to the Old Manor House in the village.

But despite telling district planners that not only did it "strongly approve", but actually wished to "compliment Mr Brooks for the improvement that the garden and altered house will bring to this area of the village", the Vale Council turned down the application.

Mr Brooks wanted to demolish a lean-to, and build a two-storey extension plus a front porch. But the planners declared that the height, depth and detailed design was out of scale, and would detract from the building's character. It was contrary, they said, to both the Local Plan and to the council's design guide for house extensions.