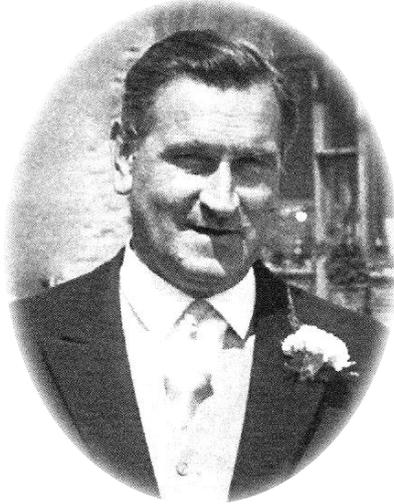


An Affectionate Tribute to Eric Standen 1919 – 2012

by David Stuart-Mogg



Eric Standen in 1948

Within the space of just twenty-four hours last October, the *Living Villages* community lost two much-loved and respected nonagenarians: David Powell, whose life was celebrated in November's *Living Villages*, and Eric Standen.

Eric Standen was born in St. Ives, Huntingdonshire on 19th August 1919; one of the five children of Frank and Florence Standen. Frank Standen was the principal of a long-established family firm of agricultural engineers and farmers, F.A. Standen & Sons Ltd. This family business dated back to at least 1800, when Elias Standen ran successful blacksmithies and wheelwright businesses in Gransden, Huntingdonshire and Waresley, Cambridgeshire. Eric duly joined the family firm upon leaving school at the age of 14 at 'five bob a week' (25p). Long recognised as being headstrong and very much his own man, much to his father's exasperation Eric volunteered at the very outbreak of the Second World War even though he qualified for exemption from military service by the nature of his job in agriculture.

Eric joined the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) and saw service in the Far East with the XIV Army in the Indian 19th Division (the Golden Daggers) with 57 Infantry Workshops Company. Embarked upon a troopship sailing to Singapore, the ship cast a propeller just out from Durban, South Africa and had to return to port. The ensuing delay before the journey could be continued proved advantageous as Singapore surrendered to the Japanese, undoubtedly saving Eric from internment or worse.



Eric with Tommy gun, Burma 1944

Sergeant Eric Standen saw active service both in both India and Burma and experienced jungle warfare at its most brutal, bloody and barbaric in the thick of the fighting that led to Burma's liberation. His experiences of hand-to-hand combat with rifle and bayonet, under orders not to take prisoners and witnessing at close quarters decapitations meted out by the Ghurkhas with their fearsome *kukris* upon an equally unrelenting Japanese foe left an indelible mark.

A typical contemporary account describes the fighting thus: *'Grenades, bayonets, kukris and even stones were freely used, but our men hung on to their hard-won ground with a dogged determination that was magnificent'*. A member of the Burma Star Association, to the end of his life Eric refused to be drawn on his clearly traumatic wartime experiences.

Post war, Eric and his brother Peter successfully developed a branch of their family's agricultural engineering business on a four acre site purchased in 1947 at King's Dyke, Whittlesey, with key agencies which included John Deere and Massey Harris / Ferguson. Peter's inventive prowess and natural aptitude for the mechanical engineering aspects of the business and Eric's aptitude for business development, public relations, marketing and sales was to prove a successful and profitable combination of skills. A notable mechanical innovation was the invention of the hugely successful Standen Sugar Beet Harvester which removed much of the hard, manual labour required lifting this highly important local crop. Eric's realisation of the cash flow problems frequently faced by the farming community was evident in his judicious and astutely applied use of 'pay after the harvest, if it will help', which undoubtedly assisted in building a loyal and growing customer base.

In 1948 Eric married Aileen Tunnington, who had served in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) during the war in a classified, highly secretive capacity at Beaumanor Hall, near Loughborough, Leicestershire. At that time Beaumanor Hall was one of the most important of the small number of strategic intercept stations, or 'Y stations', capturing German radio transmissions and relaying the information for decryption and analysis to 'Station X'; now known to be Bletchley Park. Aileen predeceased Eric in 2001 at the age of 85. They had no children.

In addition to managing a highly successful business, Eric had a long association with the world of archaeology and was a significant member of the Museum Society based at Peterborough, excavating a number of sites during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. During the 1950s Eric also became involved with the Water Newton Excavation Committee which was set up in 1958 to tackle the excavation work required in advance of the widening of the A1 trunk road around the Roman town of Durobrivae, between Alwalton and Wansford.



Eric helps to lever an excavated Roman coffin on to a truck at Water Newton 1953

With the expansion of Peterborough and its designation as a New Town, a new group was formed out of the old Water Newton Committee and renamed the Nene Valley Research Committee. Eric became its Honorary Secretary and was responsible for processing with his customary zeal and determination the inevitable

bureaucracy to enable excavations to proceed; and later employing full time staff to deal with ever present and continuing threats to Peterborough's archaeology.

Eric later became a Trustee of the Fenland Archaeological Trust responsible for setting up and running the Flag Fen site, one of the finest Bronze Age archaeological sites in Europe. Throughout his life Eric was serious collector, especially of Prehistoric and Roman artefacts. Within the local archaeological world, Eric will be remembered for his enthusiastic knowledge of Nene Valley archaeology, his generosity of time, his financial support for many archaeological projects - and in particular his excavation parties which are legendary in the memories of those who were still standing at the end!

In about 1960 Eric purchased the flooded gravel pits (excavated in 1929 for the minerals required to build what is now the Wansford Bridge A1 southbound) at Stibbington and for a time lived there in what he described as his 'floating cottage'. Again, Eric's zest for living life to the full manifested itself in the lively parties he held during which skinny-dipping was not an entirely unknown phenomenon... Although offered an amount equivalent hundreds of times what he had paid, Eric, a keen ecologist, later most generously donated the gravel pits to The Wildlife Trust. In around 1970 Eric and Aileen built their house on Yarwell Road, benefiting from some 40 acres of pasture rolling down to the River Nene and enjoying spectacular views of Wansford encompassing the whole of the old bridge, the Haycock and the houses stringing the Stibbington bank. Aileen planned and planted a two acre wood there some forty years ago and it was here where her ashes were later scattered. It is also here that Eric is now buried having bequeathed the wood to a trust. In recent years, Eric donated the 9½ acre field (now known as Standen's Pasture) situated on the opposite side of the road to Wansford Surgery to The Wildlife Trust. These and similar, remarkable acts of generosity, some yet to be shared in the public domain and which include the bequest of a significant acreage of meadows abutting the river to an appropriate rural charity, were a key feature of Eric's singular character. It also exemplified his native English countryman's love for his natural environment and his resolute determination to do his bit to conserve a shrinking natural asset from speculative greed which, he fervently believed, has done so much to destroy the environmental and architectural integrity of our rural landscape and ancient villages.



Eric with Rita Bullivant at Eric's 93rd birthday party on 19th August last.

An exceptionally modest man, keen to share his many and varied interests and wealth of knowledge with like-minded friends and colleagues, time and again he proved himself of stern stuff; not least in his latter years as he lost his left leg by

degrees from the ankle, knee and then hip. General household management and, increasingly by this time, Eric's care were handled with singular vigour and empathy by Mrs. Rita Bullivant who, over a twelve year period, proved wholly uncompromising where Eric's comfort, needs and wants were concerned. Adjusting his lifestyle to his new circumstances, Eric purchased two battery-driven chairs (his 'chariots'); one for use in the house and a larger, more robust model to drive around his fields and down to the riverside, usually accompanied by a dog or two. He would also drive himself on occasion to The Angel at Yarwell where he thrived on the convivial bar-room banter. I consider it to have been a considerable privilege to have been numbered amongst those whom he invited to join with a small band of friends at the ad hoc parties he held at his home throughout the year, all carefully choreographed and managed by an irrepressible Rita Bullivant. The *craic* was seldom less than legendary. Eric, I salute you.

Additional information thanks to: Mr. Edward Standen, Mrs. Rita Bullivant, Dr. Stephen Upex, Mr. Peter Harrison and the Burma Star Association.

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email: david.stuartmogg@btinternet.com