

Free Gardeners Myrtle Lodge 1658



The offices in Portland Road in [1986](#)



The tiny building sold in 2007 - now a bungalow

The Argus, Friday 1st April 1898, transcribed by Kay Collins

Free Gardeners Myrtle Lodge

The club night is postponed until Monday, April 18th.

Geo. Harris (secretary)

1910 Phillipson's Directory

National United Order of Free Gardeners.

"Myrtle" Lodge, 1658, meets at the Church Room, Coffee Tavern Road, for contributions on the first Saturday in each month at 5.30pm, and for business on the second Wednesday at 8pm. Secretary, Mr. G. Harris, 1, Essex Road.

Rushden Echo, 14th July 1916, transcribed by Kay Collins

The Juvenile Free Gardeners had their annual outing on Saturday, about 250 children journeying by brakes to Bedford. They left Rushden at 1.30p.m., and broke the journey at Milton Ernest. Tea was served at Russell Park Pavilion, Bedford. The committee making the arrangements were Messrs. G. Barwick, G. D. Bass, W. Hall, E. Richardson, J.

Robinson and [J. Adams](#) (secretary). Mr. Asher Abbott supplied 13 brakes.



This picture was mounted and headed National United Order of Free Gardeners - Myrtle Lodge 1658 and captioned "Juveniles' Outing - Peace Year - 1919".



c1920 a parade passes the Royal Variety Theatre



1935 opening the Free Gardeners' Building in Portland Road

Rushden Echo & Argus, 4th February 1938, transcribed by Kay Collins

Free Gardeners—A diminution of sickness is mentioned in the **51st** annual report of the "Myrtle" Lodge of Free Gardeners. The amount expended in sick pay was £1,232, in funeral claims £130 and in respect of members' wives who

died £53. The Distress Fund expended £95, and the combined funds now total £11,434. Membership has risen from 1,316 to 1,346, exclusive of widows and hon. members. Officers for 1938 include Bro. Fred A Greaves, Lodge Master, Bro. Fred Smith, Deputy Master, and Bro. W Frisby, secretary.

Bedfordshire on Sunday May 24th 1981, by Mick Anniwell (Magazine Article supplied by Mr Charles Watts)

As Jarrow men marched by; A memory of a visit 50 years ago.

Why do I remember the weather on a particular Sunday fifty years ago? It was fine, dry, some sun - just the day for a long walk, that's why!

We lived at Keysoe. I had an old Norton motor-bike I bought from Felmersham for £4. My father said, "Come on, boy. Got a job for you. You can take me to Wymington Turn and then bring me back from Milton Ernest." [Places in Bedfordshire]

When we got to the rendezvous at 10-30 they were waiting for us. Hundreds of men, it seemed, grey with the pallor of semi-starvation, in threadbare clothes sitting on the grass verge. Some lying down, talking quietly amongst themselves.

My Dad walked the length of the column, handing out a few fags here and there. Then he came back and said, "Some look bad boy. Tag on behind and pick up the drop-outs. If there's many of 'em, take 'em two at a time". He was the police officer in charge. He went to the head of the parade and called out - "Ready, lads?"

They got to their feet, some of them painfully, but they all stood and formed up on the road four abreast under their marshals, the banner at the front.

God, they were small! It wasn't that my father marching at the head of the column, ex-Coldstream Guards, was six feet four and sixteen stones, simply that they looked to have shrunk inside their jackets and trousers, mufflers and scarves making their scrawny necks thinner. Their peaked caps, the comedians "flat 'at" gave shade, and deep-etched lines to faces that even the long march hadn't managed to colour.

They were split up into sections of perhaps 40 men each to avoid traffic problems, each with a mouth organ to lead it. It had never been played for a better purpose, keeping the rhythm of tired, aching limbs going, persuading backs and shoulders to stay upright.

Some of the men limped. They'd worn their boots down gradually all the way from Jarrow, and while they slept Saturday night in the old workhouse at Irthlingborough, local boot and shoe workers, themselves on short time, collected the worst of the

boots and mended them overnight. It was as awkward to walk on the new soles and heels before they were worn in as it had been on the worn-out ones.

George Bass, Charlie Odell, Eddie Freeman, Ernie Harlow and a few more now dead, repaired 60 pairs of boots overnight free.

One or two of the marchers dropped out, sitting quietly by the roadside, an example of the discipline imposed by the leaders and accepted by the marchers. It was the first time I had seen blood literally running out of laceholes. One such man would not accept help. They had their own transport for this purpose, an old bus carrying iodine, plasters, stomach powders and chest medicines.

I watched them struggle down Long Leys Hill and up Temple and over Sharnbrook crossroads. I watched the sunshine on my father's war ribbons and I thought, "Is this what he fought for, one of four survivors out of a company of 120 men?"

The Milton Ernest policemen took over. The men went plodding on, the measure of their intention, perhaps of their bitterness, was that every man except one who started from Jarrow finished on his feet in Westminster. That one man had malaria.

We went back to Keysoe thoughtfully. The old fellow was always quiet when he had no fags, and he'd given them all away.

Mick Anniwell.

Note: George Bass, Eric Harlow & Mick Anniwell were Rushden men, Charlie Odell from Irthlingborough and Eddie Freeman. All five men were members of the Rushden branch of **The Free Gardeners Society.**



The medallion on the large sash



The regalia of Myrtle Lodge



The medallion on the collar sash

<http://www.rushdenheritage.co.uk/leisure/freegardeners-history.html>

Rushden Research

From an interview with Charlie Watts - by Margaret Shelton. Transcribed by Sue Manton.



Free Gardeners in Rushden

by Charlie Watts



The Free Gardeners building 1986 - sold to Toc H

The Free Gardeners History started in 1848. The first annual meeting was held at Huddersfield and it started at 2d per week and you got 2/- if you were sick and 5/- when you died or something like that. It continued until 1916 when it had to be postponed until after the war. The aims of the Society were to provide sickness benefits for people who go through bad times, sickness, hospital. My mother first signed me when I was about twelve, she signed me at the office there. It provided sickness benefit, it provided funds for hospital. In those days there was no help with hospitals. It provided endowment, they paid in for a long term endowment and got a lump sum after, paid glasses, teeth all them benefits. It was a Godsend to working people in those days. I think my mother paid 6d per month when it started but it went up and you were paying about £1 a week for hospital and everything. There were different grades of level. Some people paid for just sickness benefit, some paid for sickness and death benefit, some paid for sickness benefit, death benefit and the whole hog. You paid what you could afford. In about 1960 we started the hospital scheme. That was a good thing. If you were in hospital you got so much per day. There was a bus that took you to the hospital, it picked it up at the Lightstrung and took you to either to Kettering or Northampton. There were two buses and they were free, they used to wait there until you came back. I think they ran Sundays or did they run Saturday and Sunday. I think the Saturday bus went to Northampton and the Sunday bus went to Kettering.

The Free Gardeners met at the bottom of Portland Road, it has been converted to a house now. During the war it was loaned to Jack Osborne for a store room for his goods, wireless things. Then, in 1956 we had an office on the High Causeway opposite Townsend's Garage and then we moved back into our old office and we were there until the amalgamation with the Order of the Druids in 1996

which is now where the members have been transferred to. It still pays out its sickness benefits to members and an annuity to all members, funds for teeth, glasses, hospital, you name it. I have received more, a hundred times more out of the Free Gardeners than ever I have paid in, and I'm still receiving benefits for teeth, glasses, hospital.

There was no ritual when you joined, I think you were just proposed and seconded. When you became the District Marshall there were rituals 'I promise to serve the society to the best of my ability' that sort of thing etc. There were no secret signs. Although they are called the Sheffield Society of Druids there were no secret signs, I don't think friendly societies have any secret signs. We didn't have any uniform but there was regalia. That would be the Masters, a ribbon with a badge on the bottom that says 'United Order of Free Gardeners'. If you were on the board management of Free Gardeners you wore this, a beautiful sash, royal blue with red stripes edged with gold trim. You started on the board as the Outside Tiler, then the Inside Tiler, then the Deputy Master and then the Grand Master. You each had a different sash. You can have those if you like for display.



Free Gardeners' Sashes and Badge

Did religion or politics play any part? No I wouldn't think so, probably more leaning to Labour because of the beverage thing. It was non political really. The role of women, they were on equal footing if they paid. My wife, Joan, she was on an equal footing with the men. She joined just after we were married in 1960 and became the minute secretary. The minute secretary had a ribbon. Then she went on to become the lodge Master, then on to the District President. She was the first lady in the Northampton district to become the District President; in fact she was the only woman to become District President. She went on the board of management and just as she was becoming a Grand Master, the same as me, they changed the rules to say people had to retire at a certain age to allow younger people to take it on and so she never became the Grand Master, unfortunately.

Why did it cease, well like every organisation it lost lots of members. The National Health really took over, people didn't want to save any more so they dropped out and they relied on the National Health. So after years of declining membership we joined the Sheffield Order of Druids which guaranteed us all our benefits as before. At its height of popularity we had a thousand people in the organisation in Rushden. We were the biggest lodge in the Northampton District, in fact we were probably the biggest lodge in the order. There was a lot of lodges at the annual conference - Barnsley, Bedfordshire, Walsall, Brierly Hill, Cottingham, Gainsborough, Heckmondwhite, Huddersfield, Leeds, Moulton.

I played cricket for Rushden Town. I played football for Rushden when I came back on leave from the army. I had been on an assault course for four days up in Scotland, and the trainer said. 'Just the man we need to play on Saturday'. I said. 'Yes, I'll play'. He said. 'Come training'. I said. 'Not likely'. I wasn't going training. He was a bit huffy but I wasn't going training after all that. I played cricket and football for Rushden Town, I played golf for Rushden. I joined the choir "Wellingborough Orpheus" competitions for the town after care, chairman of the British Legion. Do you know [Jack Tear](#)? Yes, a good friend of the Society, lived along Cromwell Road.

I became chairman of the British Legion for about five or six years, I became Vice President. I'm still with the British Legion but I'm not Vice President, I'm with the benevolent committee now. It deals with old soldiers that are in need, there is great need now. Problem case now when his wife has left him and he's got no money. I'm still involved with the British Legion, sing in St. Mary's church choir, play bowls for Rushden Town. It was a good active life. You have to keep active.

I've got my garden. I grow me own broad beans, kidney beans carrots. Unfortunately we couldn't have any children. We've got a lovely lot of relatives, of my sister's children. People now are not so neighbourly, I suppose it's because of the television. When I was little next door used to come in for a cup of sugar or a loaf of bread. You used to lend them it and they would pay it back. You don't know so many people any more. So many newcomers in.

I went to Harpendale and stayed with a lady on the lake and her husband was shot down in 1940 around Norfolk and she married again and her second husband had his arm blown off and it was sabotage. He was working in the munitions and her first husband was shot down. When I came back I thought I would find out where he was buried. So I wrote to the local British Legion and they found her husband's grave in Norfolk and there were four of them all buried in the same cemetery. So I went and I took a photo of his grave and sent it to the lady that I stayed with and she was ever so pleased, she didn't know where it was, and also every year I place a wreath on that grave in honour of her husband. That was a wonderful occasion.

<http://www.rushdenheritage.co.uk/people/watts-charlie2.html>

Rushden Research

Author not known



Charlie Watts



Watts family

Sam Watts, Charles Watts, Bert Walker
Joan Watts, Elsie Flowers, Carol Walker, Joyce Riddle, Pauline
Walker, Kathleen Walker, Rose Riddle

Charles Watts started his working life in a local Shoe Factory's Clicking room and like a good many lads starting work in that department no doubt was asked to clean up, fetch and carry and be general dogsbody, but it didn't take Charles long to get on the Board (Clicking that is), finishing his working life as foreman clicker.

As a young man he was an enthusiastic sportsman and word has it that he was particularly good at Football and Cricket. Anyone knowing Charles will of course realise that the 'word' was his. Should you have seen some of his performances over more recent years you will have no doubt drawn your own conclusions.

Charles did his War Service in the Army and came through that dreadful experience 'bloody but unbowed.'

Over the years he became involved in many activities:-

Captain of the Rushden Methodist Boy's Brigade, very active in Church Affairs, [Royal British Legion](#), [Trade Unionism](#) and of course attaining the exalted position of Grand Master of the [Free Gardeners Friendly Society](#). He has also been involved with many other organisations too numerous to mention.

The Grand Master

Our Grand Master Charles is a jovial chap
He's not one to worry or get in a flap
He conducts all his meetings with a joke and a quip
But get out of line and he'll soon crack the whip.

But the thing we love most about Charles is his Bluff
He'll tell you the tale and all sorts of guff.
Tales of his war days when serving the flag,
He tones them all down 'cos he's not one to brag.

He tells all his tales and in passing will mention
The wound in his leg, wot he got for his pension,
And then he goes on about sport just the same
If you're willing to listen he talks a good game.

Remember the time (at Llandudno I think)
When Joan took a swing on the Great Orme's golf link,
Determined to hit the ball a long way
She slipped, lost her footing and started to sway.

She fell to the ground and rolled over and over
Then, came to rest in a lush patch of clover,
We rushed to her aid as she lay on that spot
Whilst Charles, unconcerned, addressed his next shot.

But let truth be told as this tale comes to an end we're
all very proud Grand Master Charles is Our Friend.

It is well known that Charles also served as a Special Constable with [Rushden Police](#), being called upon to help in the organising of various Police functions, so when John Church, Rushden's former Senior Police Officer telephoned him he probably thought 'what do they want me for this time'. In fact it was to inform him of an Award, and when David Reeves, President of Rushden [Rotary Club](#), presented him with an engraved Crystal Bowl awarded for Community Services, it was just reward for his Good Humoured and Unstinting Services to the People of Rushden.