



# BRIZE NORTON NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

## APPENDIX 25

*Version 3 - February 2022*

# MARY ELLIS

*“our village  
our community  
our future”*

**MARY ELLIS (NEE WILKINS)**

**(1917 – 2018)**



**APPLICATION FOR A BLUE PLAQUE**

THE MANOR  
MANOR ROAD  
BRIZE NORTON  
OXFORDSHIRE

# **APPLICATION FOR A 'BLUE PLAQUE' IN RECOGNITION OF MARY ELLIS AT THE MANOR, MANOR ROAD, BRIZE NORTON**

## **BACKGROUND**

Brize Norton Parish Council was asked if they would like to provide road names for the new development in Brize Norton, which was also named by the Council and is known as Brize Meadow.

The Council agreed to this initiative and proposed using the names of the 18 Brize Norton men and boys who gave their lives in WW1.

The men's names are identified on the village war memorial as well as a plaque which is mounted on a Cotswold stone plinth adjacent to 18 memorial trees in the local recreation ground.



WAR MEMORIAL (2019)



MEMORIAL PLAQUE (2014)

One of the men to be remembered is Albert Joseph Wilkins who was killed in action at Roex, France on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

A road has now been named after Albert in Brize Meadow which is known as Wilkins Close.

As part of the Council's 'due diligence', they asked the descendants of Albert Wilkins for permission to use his name.



## **FAMILY BACKGROUND**

Charles Wilkins (b 1860) and Martha Sessions married and had six children

One of these children was Albert Joseph Wilkins (b1891 d1917).

Although Albert had no children, his eldest brother Charles (b1885 d1972), who married Nellie Clark (b1885 d1967), had five children who were named, Lewis (b 1914 d 1989), Herbert (b 1916 d1989), Mary (b Feb 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917, d July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018) Edward (b 1918 d2000) and Dora (b 1919 d2016)

When asking permission to use Albert Wilkins name, the Council approached the four descendants of Edward Wilkins (Jane, Susan, Sheila and Andrew).

These four descendants are the great nieces and nephew of Albert Wilkins and having consulted with other family members, they gave their permission to use his name.

## **THE MANOR**

Albert's eldest brother Charles was a farmer by profession and in 1928 he moved from Leafield to Brize Norton. He leased 'The Manor' on Manor Road, along with 670 acres of land from Christ Church College Oxford and moved in with his family.



THE MANOR (2020)

The Manor is a Grade II listed building (16<sup>th</sup>C) and is the second oldest building in the village, St Britius Church (11<sup>th</sup>C) being the oldest. The Manor is detailed in the document 'A British History Online – A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 15, Bampton Hundred Part 3'.

It is interesting to note that some of the fields farmed by Charles, are the very same fields on which the Brize Meadow development is now being built and where his brother Albert, is forever remembered. The name of the original field in which Wilkins Close is built, was called Lark Hill.

### **DISCOVERING MARY ELLIS (nee WILKINS)**

It was whilst discussing the use of Albert Wilkin's name with Jane, Susan, Sheila, and Andrew, that the Council discovered that their aunt (Charles's daughter) was a lady named Mary Wilkins (she was Albert's niece).

When she married, her name changed to **Mary Ellis**, the lady famously known as 'A Spitfire Girl'. What is remarkable, and probably Brize Norton's 'best kept secret', is that Mary, aged 12, moved to Brize Norton in 1928 with her mother and father and lived in The Manor until she left in 1949, aged 32.

### **MARY ELLIS'S CAREER**

It was in 1925, at the age of eight, that Mary's father treated her to a 'joy flight' in a De Haviland Moth which ignited her passion for flying. When she was 16 and living at The Manor, she was allowed time off school to take flying lessons at Witney aerodrome. By 1939, at the age of 22, she had gained her coveted pilots' licence. – a rare achievement for a young woman at that time

In October 1941 she was accepted to serve in the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) and was known as Second Officer Mary Wilkins No.56. During her war service, she flew 76 different types of aircraft, ranging from Spitfires to Lancaster Bombers.

In the summer of 1945, First Officer Mary Wilkins as she was now known, became one of only two ATA women to fly the RAF's first jet, the Gloster Meteor, ferrying it from the factory at Moreton Valance to 222 Squadron at RAF Exeter. She said that she had no special training except a warning to "watch the fuel gauges, because it goes from full to empty in 40 minutes".

From 1949 she was fortunate to continue her flying career as a personal pilot for a wealthy businessman. Then, in 1950, her employer purchased Sandown Airfield on the Isle of Wight and she was offered the role of Managing Director. From 1950 to 1970 she built up the popularity of the airfield, helping develop it as a commercial airport for passenger flights, including to and from Europe and became Managing Director of the charter company 'Bees Flight Ltd'. Mary went on to become Europe's first ever female Air Commandant.

On many occasions, when visiting her parents at The Manor, she would land her plane in the field opposite on the west side Manor Road, which was known as 'Gossons'.

Mary also loved driving and won several awards rallying her Allard motor car.



PICTURE OF MARY WITH HER ALLARD MOTOR CAR (1955)

Whilst living on the Isle of Wight, she met former Fleet Air Arm Pilot Donald Ellis, who she married in the Autumn of 1961.

Mary Ellis appears in the book 'Bomber Girls – In It Together' written by M J Foreman, 'The Female Few' written by Jacky Hyams and 'The Hurricane Girls' written by Jo Wheeler but arguably, she is best known from her biography written by Melody Foreman called 'A Spitfire Girl'.



BOOK COVER 'A SPITFIRE GIRL' (PUBLISHED 2016)

Mary's action-packed career spanned almost a century of aviation. From Tiger Moths to Hurricanes and Spitfires, from Wellington Bombers to post war jets, Mary's desire to take to the skies, even in her 100's, never faltered.

To quote Mary:

*"I am passionate for anything fast and furious. I always have been since the age of three and I always knew I would fly. The day I stepped into a Spitfire was a complete joy and it was the most natural thing in the world for me."*

She also went on to say that:

*"Everybody was flabbergasted that a little girl like me could fly these big airplanes all by oneself!*

*Up in the air on your own, you can do whatever you like. I flew 400 Spitfires. Occasionally I would take one up and go and play with the clouds which was so delightful and lovely. I can't tell you how wonderful it was."*

Mary Ellis (nee Wilkins) passed away on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2018, aged 101.



MARY NEXT TO A SPITFIRE (2015)



## **BLUE PLAQUE**

In 2019, Brize Norton Parish Council became aware that former WWII ATA pilot Mary Ellis, well known for her vast experience ferrying hundreds of aircraft during the war, lived most of her early life with her farming family at The Manor in Brize Norton.

This truly remarkable and inspirational lady should never be forgotten and that is why Brize Norton Parish Council has applied for a Blue Plaque to be placed on the garden wall of 'The Manor', facing the road for all to see. The Blue Plaque Society have awarded this designation but the PC are awaiting permission from the owners of 'The Manor' to have this award placed on their property.



THE MANOR GARDEN WALL, MANOR ROAD, BRIZE NORTON (2020)

#### ADDITIONAL RECOGNITIONS TO MARY ELLIS

- Brize Norton Parish Council have named the new Country Park which runs along the north, east and south sides of the Brize Meadow development and is now referred to as 'Mary Ellis Country Park'.
- Brize Norton Parish Council are working in conjunction with West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) to investigate the manufacture of a suitable piece of 'Public Art' which will encapsulate the spirit of Mary Ellis and her association to Brize Norton. This will be funded from the S106 'Public Art' funding provided by Bloor Homes Ltd.



MARY IN 1944 AGED 27



MARY IN 2015 AGED 98

LG 17/02/2021