



NEWSLETTER NO. 7 SEPTEMBER 2021

### Up-coming events

This is the month when we expect to be able to restart our meetings in the Methodist's Hall at 8 pm on Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> of September. The speaker is Mike Storr and we hope he will be able to cheer us all up with his [Masters of Mirth](#). Mike is an excellent mimic and not only will he be talking about Music Hall and its origins he will remind us of the voices of the comedians .

In this month's Newsletter we also tell the story, from a series of telegrams, of a Bradwell-born man who was interned in the Suez crisis of 1956.

### For BHS committee members

The next committee meeting will take place on Monday 15<sup>th</sup> November in the Shoulder of Mutton at 7.30 pm.

### Reg Ashton

#### **Caught by history: a Bradwell man in the Suez Crisis, 1956.**

Reg Ashton, younger son of Charles Bradwell Ashton, was working as an engineer for Suez Contractors Ltd (SCL) in Egypt when President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. At the time, the canal, which joins the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, was of enormous strategic and economic importance - 80% of the oil for Europe passed through it - and was in a Canal Zone controlled jointly by Egypt, France and Britain. Diplomacy and attempts at military intervention by Britain and France were a failure and British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden resigned. The Suez Crisis was also a crucial point after which Britain turned away from the remnants of the imperial past towards closer alliance with the United States (despite President Eisenhower's failure to add any support in the venture).- a change whose repercussions are still being felt.

Reg's wife Doreen and their daughter Susan had fortunately left just before events came to a head, but Reg and several hundred other British men working in the Canal Zone were interned and taken to Cairo. Reg's family was consumed with worry and did all they could to find out what had happened to him, bombarding the authorities with letters: some of the replies to his mother, Mary, are quoted below. Diplomatic relations had been broken off and only scraps of information emerged via the Swiss Legation and the few British subjects who were allowed to leave. At first, the men were housed in the Khedevial School in Cairo, but later were split up: Reg's group was moved on Nov 18th to the English School in Heliopolis, a Cairo suburb. News, when it finally came, was mixed.

**From: Suez Contractors Ltd**

To: Mrs Mary Ashton, Bradwell 27.11.56

*... 'living conditions are now much better...but there is still shortage of food. Internees are allowed out for one hour...and are permitted a cold bath daily. There has been no epidemic...Internees in the Victoria school can buy food.'*

It was only later that the family found out that Reg was at the other school! Many internees had had to leave all their possessions and personal documents in their houses, and money was short, though the Swiss Legation tried to supply their needs.

**From: British Red Cross Society, International Relations and Relief.**

To: Mrs Mary Ashton 30.11.56

*... 'it is still impossible to send letters or parcels to the employees interned in Egypt. ...the delegate who visited the internees said that food, housing and sanitary conditions were satisfactory.'*

More detailed news followed when Brandon Laight, ex-headmaster of the English School, was allowed to leave Egypt, and reported to SCL:

**From: Brandon Laight**

To: Sir John M. Duncanson, Chairman, SCL. 4.12.56

*... 'we were put out of the building on 2.11 and your personnel were moved in on 18.11... Naturally, no kind of detention is tolerable to British people, but apart from this they seem to be looked after and in good health.....the men seem to have organised themselves into Committees...everyone seems to be cheerful...'*

This was comforting, though not everything was as peaceful as it seemed: after he arrived home Reg told of hearing the Cairo mob yelling for blood outside the school. Luckily, the Egyptian commandant was in control of the situation. Diplomatic efforts redoubled and by mid-December contingency plans were being made for the evacuation of the internees.

**From: Suez Contractors Ltd**

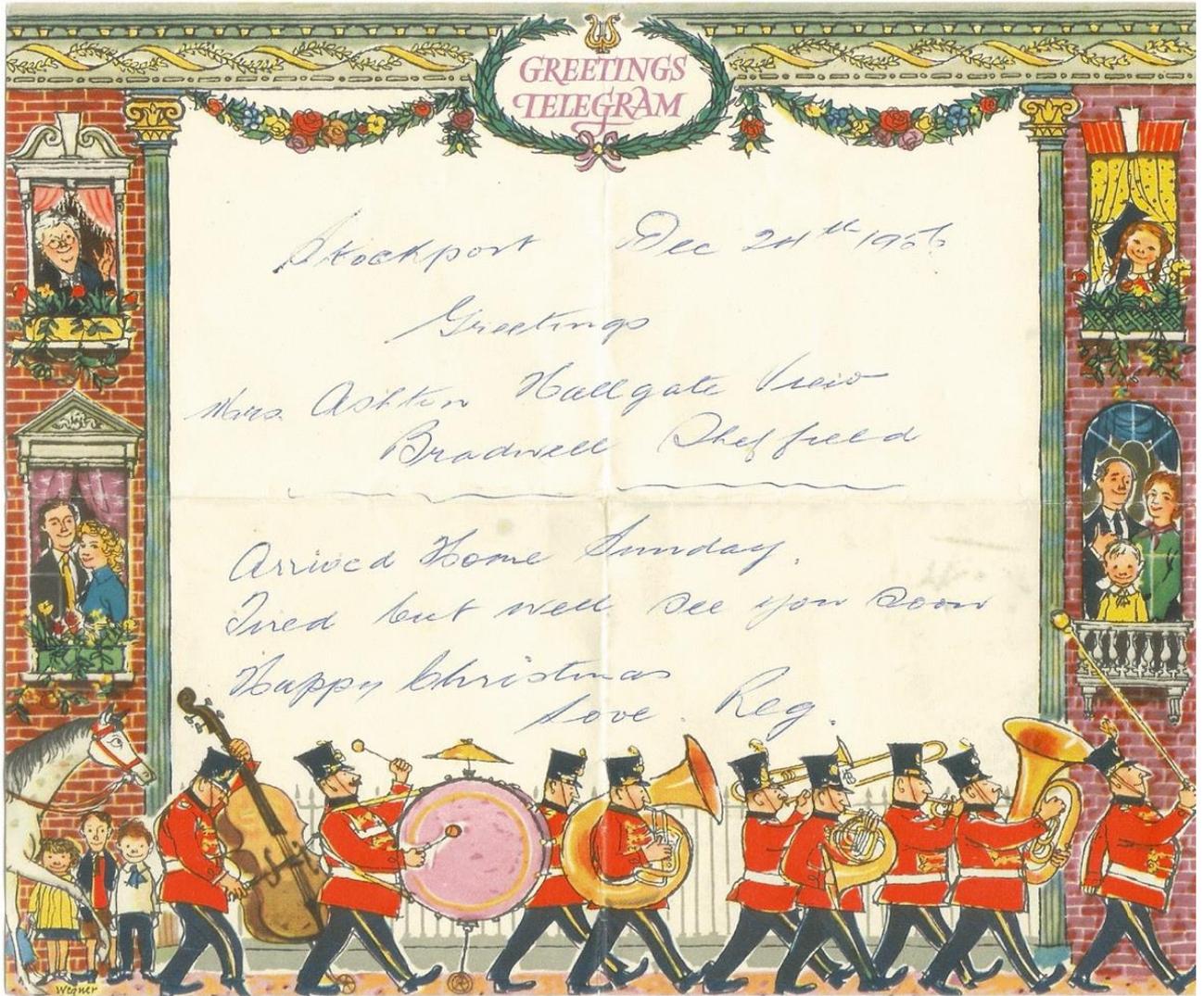
To: Mrs Mary Ashton1. 2.12.56

*... 'we do not yet know when our men will leave Egypt...arrangements cover the reception at airports, including the provision of food, heavy clothing and comforts. ...a fully qualified medical service will be available...Our men will be put in funds...we will provide, where necessary, food especially suited to personnel who have been on a restricted diet. Wives and next of kin are earnestly asked not to meet them, but to remain...at home. Please on no account send any clothes or suitcases. '*

It was made clear that any movement would be at short notice and that it wouldn't be known who was on which aircraft, keeping uncertainty high till the end.

Finally, on Christmas Eve 1956, a telegram arrived in Bradwell:

*Arrived home Sunday. Tired but well. See you soon. Happy Christmas. Love, Reg.*



'Caught by history' was written by Christine Skerrow about her Uncle Reg Ashton.