Newbold Verdon Parish Archive

PRODUCED WITH THE HELP OF FUNDING BY

Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council in collaboration with THE VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR

The Major Pays a Visit

Recollections of Major Ronald Statham MBE visiting our family in the early 1960s
(Neil Brearley July 2025)

Forward

In the early years of the 20th century, two sons of David Statham lived next door on Dragon Lane. Ernest Statham lived at number 37 with wife Mary Anne and George at number 39 was married to Amy. In 1906 Ernest and Mary had a daughter Agnes Olive Statham who was to become my 'Grandma Aggie'. Two years later in 1908, Amy and George celebrated the birth of their first child, Ronald Henry Statham.

By 1917, Ron had a brother, Neville and two surviving sisters, Eileen and Freda. Aggie had two brothers, Thomas and Ernest Leonard (known as Len).

Aggie stayed on at her parents' house after marrying Frank Hill in 1926. In 1929 Aggie gave birth to my mother, Joy Doreen Hill. All three generations were still residing at number 37 until Frank purchased the small bungalow at 24 Dragon Lane in 1944.

Ronald stayed with his parents until he enlisted in the army as a private in the Royal Horse Artillery aged 21 in 1930. Soon after the outbreak of WW2, Ronald was promoted to Lieutenant and in October 1941 he was serving in the Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment in the Far East. After the fall of Singapore, Lieutenant Statham was captured by the Japanese and spent time in several PoW camps. This included working on the notorious Burma Railway and the Bridge over the River Kwai where many thousands of allied prisoners perished. He was finally liberated from Nakhon Nayok camp in September 1945.

Despite this dreadful ordeal (he is recorded as weighing just 6 stones 7lbs on release), Ron stayed on in the army. In the early 1950s, he moved to work in army command at Whitehall where he was promoted to Major. But tragedy struck again when his wife, Lillian, passed away aged 44 in 1958. A little later, in 1960, Major Ronald Statham was awarded the MBE for his services to the army.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Ron's life and career was extremely rare and remarkable for a boy from a very humble background. In those days, very few men that joined the ranks were offered the chance to start officer training in the OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit) and even fewer passed this rigorous programme. Simply surviving his incredible ordeal in the Japanese camps would not have guaranteed promotion to the senior ranks and a job at Whitehall - let alone being awarded the MBE. It is likely there is much that we still don't know about his contribution both during and after WW2.

Long after the war, his mother and father, (my uncle George and aunt Amy) continued to live at 37 Dragon Lane. Hence the Major would visit his parents and later call in on us, barely 100 yards down the road. Sometimes he would visit in full uniform and arrive in a staff car with a 'batman' driver.

Despite being a shy boy in the early '60s, I was starting to look forward to these visits. Major Ron would have me stand to attention and occasionally perform a march up and down the drive at number 24. He also liked to set me little 'puzzles' and was always very full of praise if I got the correct answer.
So, the following account is most likely a 'fusion' of two or three of these encounters. Of course, I can't remember the exact words spoken sixty years on but the story of Aggie's cakes and the little puzzle I describe both became 'family lore' for many years after.

The Visit

It's a bright Saturday morning in early summer, 1963. But up to now, it's been a disappointing start to my day. Dad is at work, mum and gran are both busy in their kitchens and grandad Frank is watering tomatoes in his greenhouse. I've scanned the reccy for friends but no luck so far and now any seven-year old's greatest challenge is creeping up - how to avoid getting bored.

My next option is to check for any interesting cars and lorries that might be going up or down Dragon Lane. So, I go and sit on the little wall that marks the start of grandad's drive.

A green Ford Popular grumbles past; that scores 2 out of 10 at best. Now a bright red Mini with white stripes; much better, at a least a 6. Next comes a huge Brown's Blue double decker bus – easily a 7 since we may be catching one to Coalville this afternoon. Then for the next few minutes … nothing. Time to give up perhaps?

But hang on, that's a black Austin coming down the road towards me. It's highly polished because I can see the sun reflecting off the doors. Then I catch sight of two little Union Jacks, positioned either side of the bonnet, just above the headlights. Oh, my goodness, it's Major Ron!

The car pulls up at the bottom of the drive and the Major emerges in full uniform with his baton held up. I know exactly what's coming next - as do the little hairs at the back of my neck.

"Attention!! "

Now the rest of my body follows automatically and a moment later the Major is staring down at me.

"Very good, in fact excellent young man. First stop is your grandfather's greenhouse."

"Ready now and … wait for it … Quick March!"

I stride down the little path to the greenhouse; the Major follows but pauses to savour the high wall of sweet peas along the way. He joins me at the greenhouse door and we both enter. The hot, moist air is mixed with the intense scent of ripening tomatoes.

"Good morning, Frank. I trust you are well?"

"Never better Ron, was it 5lbs you wanted?"

"Yes, please Frank. Now what do I owe for that young man?" he asks, turning to me.

Fortunately, that's an easy sum now this year's price is one and six per pound.

"Seven shillings and six pence" I chime.

"Spot on, well done, well done indeed" the Major chuckles.

He reaches into a pocket, pulls out a wallet and extracts a pristine ten-shilling note. I take it and scratch around in the money tin looking for a half-crown change. Ah, I've found one hidden under the pile of coppers. I proffer the coin which the Major takes. He winks at grandad Frank-

"All too easy Frank, we need to make him think a bit harder"

Here comes the challenge and in one swift move the Major picks up our rusty old two-pound weight and hides it behind his back.

"With the weights you have left, how would you give me three pounds of tomatoes?"

The pressure's on now as I scan the remaining weights. I can't make any combination add up to three pounds; but then it suddenly comes to me. Finally, I pipe-up -

"Put the four-pound weight on the weigh side and the one pound in with the tomatoes"

The Major roars with laughter.

"Now that is brilliant, my goodness Frank, my goodness."

Grandad smiles and Major Ron turns to leave the greenhouse -

"Goodbye Frank. Let us go and find your grandmother next young man."

Now it's back along the narrow path to the bungalow; I'm handed the bag of tomatoes to hold while the Major goes inside to meet gran. They chat for a minute or two and when he emerges, the Major is carrying a very large tin of Aggie's cakes. He gently lifts the lid to observe the contents and bends down to whisper in my ear -

"You do know you are one lucky boy"

I look up, puzzled now. Then he explains -

"I've dined in London's finest cafes and restaurants."

He pauses to let that sink in – I've never even been to London.

"But nowhere can match the taste of your grandmother's cakes"

He nods to make sure I've understood and then turns to go.

"Now I must be going, could you help carry those back to the car?"

The driver sees us coming and quickly extinguishes his cigarette. He gets out to open the passenger door for the Major and I reach across to hand over the heavy bag of tomatoes.

"Goodbye young man and pass on my best to your mother and father"

The car pulls away and I'm still fizzing with excitement. It rounds the corner at the bottom of Dragon Lane and disappears. I go to put my hands into my pockets as the adrenaline slowly starts to ebb. But what is this in one of them? How did the half-crown change get there? Hmm, I think I'll keep quiet about that. Now, are any of my friends in the reccy yet?

Postscript with a sad ending

Soon after this visit, the Major retired from the army and married Doris May Measures. They settled to live in Surrey but although his mother Amy had passed away in 1962, the Major's father George was still going strong. From then on, the Major's visits were more often on weekdays and so I would be told that 'Major Ron asks after you' when I got home from school.

Then, some years later, towards the end of 1968, I was informed I'd missed another visit. But clearly something had occurred that had left my mother and grandma in a very excited state. I was puzzled until mum explained: -

"You're going to London in the Spring, then to Buckingham Palace with the Major!"

"You might even be introduced to the Queen!!"

Now I was even more confused, why me, why Buckingham Palace?

It turned out that the Major was invited to a private garden party where the Queen would be present. He was allowed to take one younger guest, and, on this occasion, he asked if I would like to accompany him. You can guess that my attendance was 'already assured' well before I arrived home from school!

As the weeks passed, I did start to get excited. What might it be like to meet the Queen, what might Her Majesty say to me and how would I respond?

Then soon after starting back to school in the new year 1969, I came home to more emotion – but this time it was tears. The Major had passed away suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 61. There would be no garden party and no meeting the Queen.

But I hope you can gather from these few words why my memories of Major Ron as just as vivid now as they were all those years ago.

P.S. You may be wondering, as I did, why Major Ron might need so many tomatoes and cakes. It was explained to me (much later) that this would be his contribution to an army 'gathering' and that another batch of Aggie's cakes would be considered 'very welcome'.

