

RUTH SHERWOOD (A Lady with a Secret)



by

JANET JORDAN

September 2026

This article was written for a display entitled 'Everyday Histories' for an Open Day at Holy Trinity Parish Church, Sutton Coldfield, in Heritage Week, 11th-20 September 2026.

This 'Everyday History' is about Ruth Sherwood who grew up in Sutton Coldfield in the 1920s, but, after a time studying art in London, returned home where she later volunteered as an Ambulance Driver during WWII. However, there was a totally different facet of her life that remained a secret for many years and that, you will discover, when you read on.

*Janet Jordan
September 2026*

RUTH SHERWOOD

(A Lady with a Secret)

(1907-1990)

by
Janet Jordan
(Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group)



Ruth Sherwood
Self Portrait c1931

Ruth Sherwood was an unusual lady, without a doubt! However, unlike many of the well-known female personalities of Sutton Coldfield, you have probably never heard of her. And yet, a record of her early life was accessible on the library shelves in Sutton Coldfield for 34 years.

But her life was anything but ordinary!¹⁺²

Two new books were published in 2013 and 2015 with an amazing revelation and yet she still seems not to have become noticed in the town where she grew up.³⁺⁴

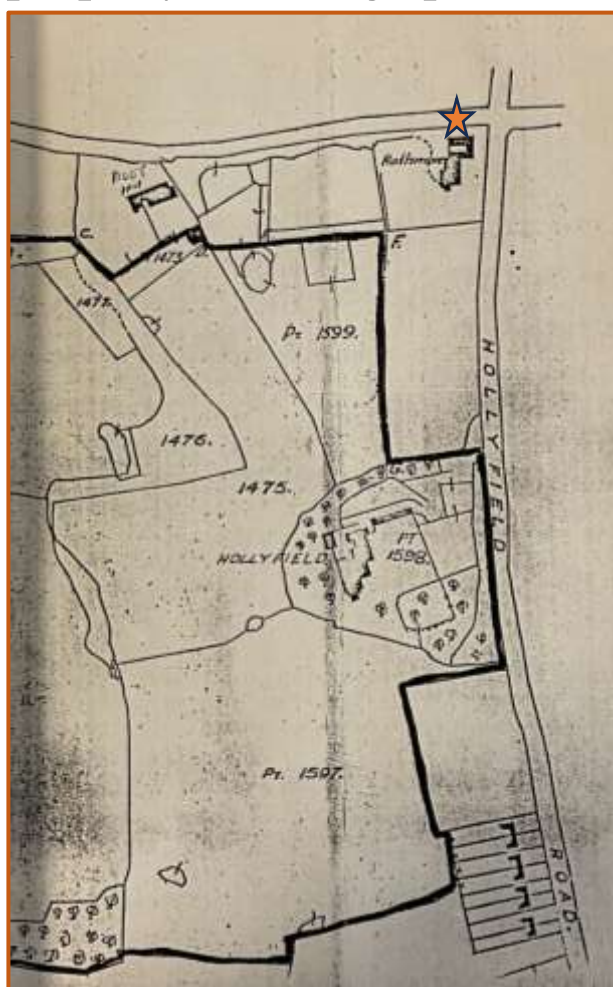
This is a potted account of the events which made up Ruth's remarkable life, making use of the above material.

Janet Jordan
September 2026

The Life of Ruth Sherwood

Ruth's parents, Wilfrid Sherwood and Biddy Sherwood, née Parkes, both came from affluent families. Wilfred's were silversmiths and Biddy's were involved with the Spade-Mill Pool in Sutton Park in earlier times. A later member of this family, being involved with Bessemer's who were famous in the steel industry, invented the steel digging fork, thus making him a modest fortune.

In the early 1880's, a while before she was born, Ruth's maternal grandfather, Richard Parkes, built a substantial property on a large plot of land which he called



Rathmore (see map), later changing it to *Derrymore*, on the corner of Rectory Road and Hollyfield Road in Sutton Coldfield. ★

It is said to be the first house in England to have had metal window-frames.

Map taken from Albert Fentiman's Collection, Sutton Research, Box 4, Birmingham Archives & Collections Library



*Rathmore (Later Derrymore),
Rectory Road, Sutton Coldfield
(corner of Rectory Road and Hollyfield Road)*

Ruth's parents married in 1903 and she was born in 1907. Initially, her family lived at *The Woodlands*, *Whitehouse Common*, not far from *Rathmore*.



The Woodlands, Whitehouse Common in 1921

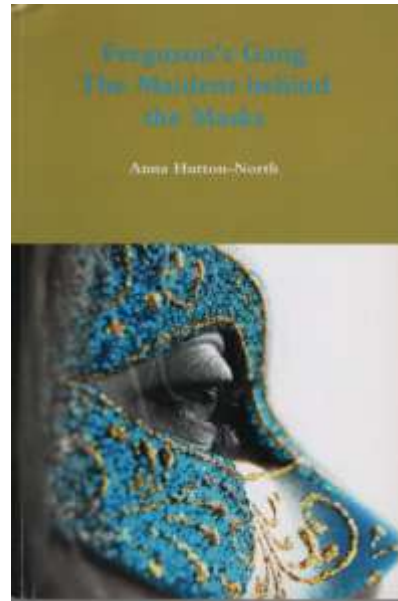
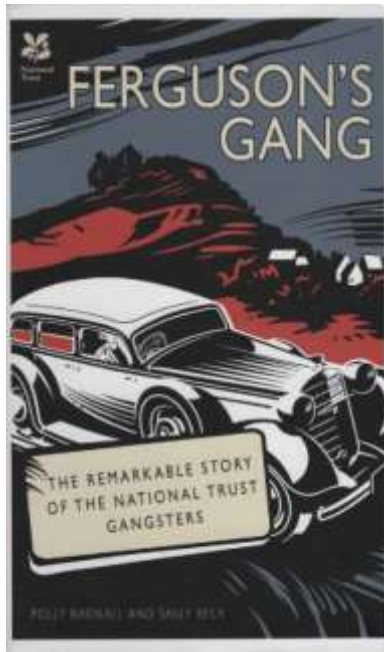
Although she appeared to be a less than able pupil at school, it is now thought that she was dyslexic. However, she was blessed with a strong aptitude for drawing and was sent to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London under the famous Professor Tonks (who came from the same family who lived at *The Rookery* opposite Moat House in Sutton Coldfield).

In 1926 her grandfather built another, smaller, house for his retirement between *Derrymore* (as he then called the larger house) and the *Boot Inn*, Rectory Road, combining the two gardens, and Wilfred and Biddy Sherwood's family moved into the larger house. Ruth was probably living in London by now.



The 'smaller house', Rectory Road

Details of these years in Ruth's life are sketchy, but the publication of two books *Ferguson's Gang: The Maidens behind the Masks* by Anna Hutton-North in 2013 and *Ferguson's Gang* by Polly Bagnall and Sally Beck in 2015 finally disclosed the events of these unknown years, a secret of which she shared with the Ferguson Gang.



The two books that revealed the secret

The books tell us that in 1928 she first became acquainted with a member of this group, named *Sister Agatha*, who shared the same lodgings as Ruth. It was this encounter that had a remarkable effect on her life.

She joined the Gang, who became a small band of women, upset in the 1920s to see so many beautiful Stately Homes and the countryside being destroyed due to lack of funds to maintain them. Being well-educated and affluent women, with similar backgrounds, they decided to raise money for the National Trust, it being an established organisation they felt they could support.

Their idea was to remain anonymous, so they gave themselves strange names, e.g. *Bill Stickers*, *Sister Agatha*, *The Lord Beershop*, *Kate O'Brien T.N.* and *Red Biddy*. Others, including some men, who were later

conscripted to help, were called *Poolcat*, *Erb the Smasher*, *Pious Yudhishthira*, *Uncle Gregory*, *Black Maria*, *O'Moyle*, *The Artichoke* and *The Wife of the Artichoke*.

Ruth's full title was *The Lord Beershop of the Gladstone Islands and Mercator's Projection*, but, not surprisingly, they kept it short - she was always known as *Lord Beershop* or *Is Bludiness*.

The manner in which they ran their organisation was bizarre! Their deeds were recorded in a Book, but as there wasn't room for the letter 'k' on its cover, it was always referred to as *the Boo*.



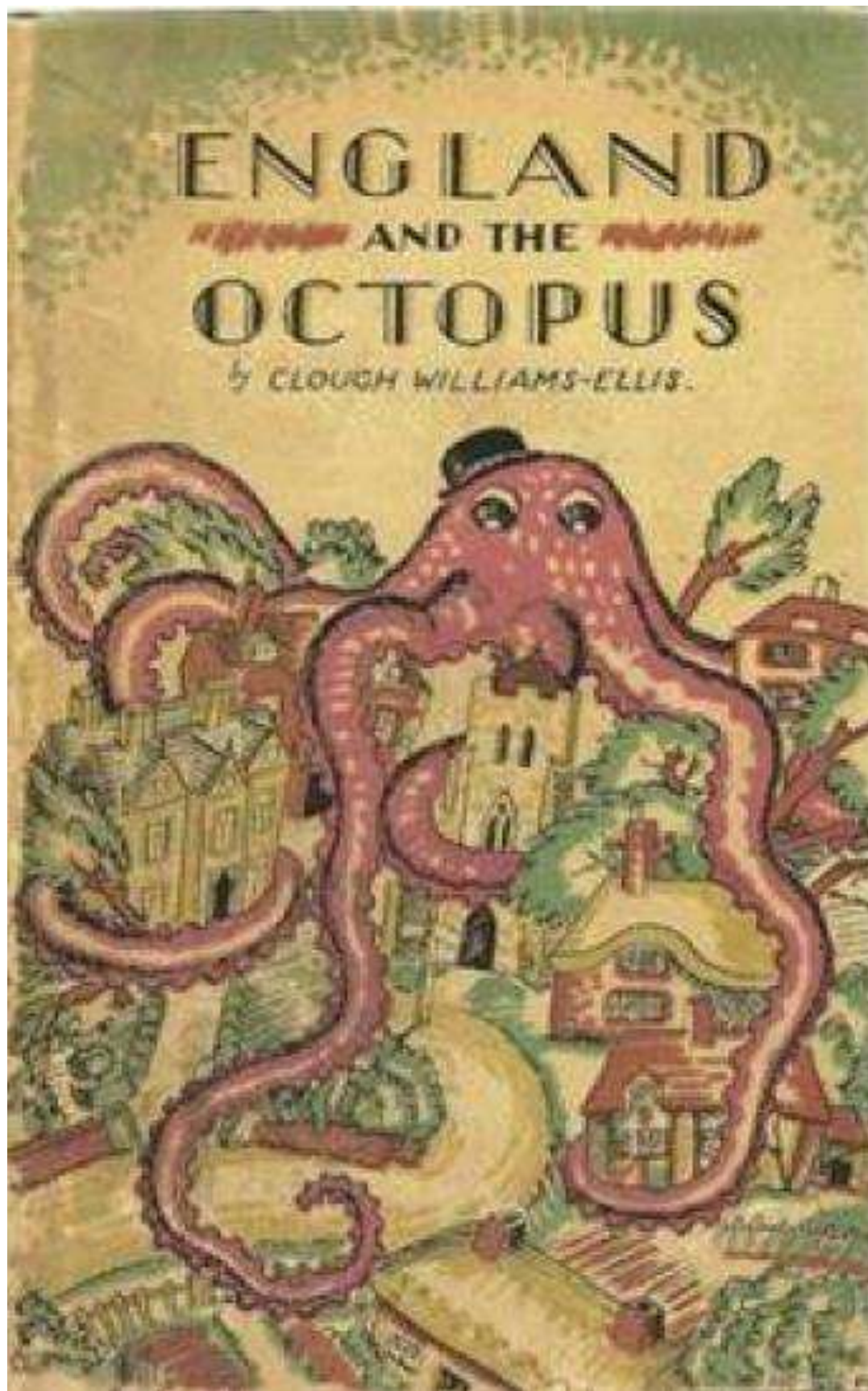
An example of a “Bill Stickers will be prosecuted” sign of the type from which the leader of Ferguson’s Gang took her pseudonym (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferguson>)

Their methods of collecting and handing over the money they obtained were always unconventional; initially they begged from their wealthy families and friends, which was always fruitful. New members, who wanted to fund raise and join in the fun, were charged large subscriptions. Kate O'Brien, who worked in an exclusive London hotel asked visiting residents for funds and Red Biddy stole the entire stock of toothpicks from the Dorchester Hotel after a raucous dinner and then ransomed them back for money.

In 1932, the Gang were able to save Shalford Mill, Guildford by way of an endowment fund. In fact, this was to become their ideal headquarters.

They were supported in their cause by Clough Williams-Ellis (the creator of the faux Italianate village of Portmeirion in North Wales). In 1927, he wrote a book entitled *England and the Octopus*,⁵ the *Octopus* being likened to the 1920s' London where development was expanding outwards at an alarming rate to the surrounding countryside, swallowing it all up as it went along.

This, in essence, was exactly what the Gang were protesting about and they really valued William-Ellis's support.



Clough Williams-Ellis's Book 'England and the Octopus' 1928⁵

Occasionally, despite living in different parts of the country, they organised meetings, lavish dinners or outings, probably to arrange their next 'hand over', which was always done anonymously. This somehow reached the newspapers. Here are some of the reports:



*Dundee Courier, Tuesday 2nd October, 1934
(British Newspaper Archive)*

"FERGUSON'S GANG" AND THE NATIONAL TRUST

A young man in a light raincoat, with a cap pulled over his eyes and a muffler over the lower part of his face, entered the office of the Secretary of the National Trust and handed over an envelope containing four Bank of England notes for £100, a card with his name, and another with a picture of masked men and women handing over Newtown Old Town Hall to the National Trust. The notes are believed to represent the last £400 of the £1,400 promised by "Ferguson's Gang" for the Newtown Old Town Hall.

*Gloucester Citizen, Wednesday 15th May 1935
(British Newspaper Archive)*

WELCOME "BOMB"

"Ferguson Gang" Again Help National Trust

Just before the annual meeting of the National Trust in London yesterday a "bomb" was delivered to the secretary, Mr. D. M. Matheson. It was a small metal ball on which spots had been painted and to which was attached a hook bearing a note.

Its receipt was disclosed by Lord Zealand, who, in presiding at the meeting, said: "It is my unexpected duty to acknowledge the receipt of what at first sight suggested to my mind that possibly the I.R.A. was proposing to take an interest in the National Trust. Happily it is not the I.R.A. but our very good friends the Ferguson Gang. The 'bomb' which they have thrown amongst us turns out to contain a very gratifying gift in the shape of a Bank of England note for £100."

The "Ferguson Gang" have made several gifts to the National Trust.

*Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail, Tuesday, 18th July, 1939
(British Newspaper Archive)*

Mystery Gang Leader Heard on the Radio

Ferguson the mystery leader of "Ferguson's Gang"—which for several years have sent masked men and women to the offices of the National Trust with money to buy historic properties—was heard on the wireless last night.

His identity is still a mystery, but it is known now that he has a cultured voice.

He made an appeal for subscriptions to the National Trust and to battle against the "octopus of ribbon development."

Dail Mirror, Monday 26th August, 1935
(British Newspaper Archive)

Incidentally, there never was a person called *Ferguson* in the Gang! *Ferguson* was just one of the members in disguise!

In 1930 Ruth qualified, intending to be a free-lance commercial artist in London. However, she felt uncomfortable competing against artists who were poor and therefore returned home to live with her family in Sutton in 1931, probably in relative luxury, as a freelance artist.

Smoking cigarettes was very popular at this time, but Ruth smoked a pipe – purely to keep her hands free for her work!

During the war, her grandmother, died, and Ruth's family moved into the smaller house. It is said that *Derrymore* (formerly *Rathmore*) was later used by the Fire Service as an administrative centre, although it is difficult to find any proof in view of the secrecy of the movements of the Civil Service at that time.

It was now that a new venture opened up for her and she became an ambulance driver.

Ruth Sherwood



The accompanying folder entitled *Civil Defence in Sutton Coldfield 1942, The Ambulance Service at Hill & Boldmere* by Albert Fentiman¹ sets the scene of Ruth's time as an ambulance driver.



*Some of members of the Ambulance Staff
(see the accompanying folder 'Sherwood Heads')*



This enabled her to make use of her artistic skills. Her sketches of the ladies of the Sutton Coldfield Ambulance Service in the Second World War at Hill (Mere Green) and Boldmere, and also at the Fire Station at Sutton Town Hall, appear in the separate folder *The Sherwood Heads* compiled by her brother, Adrian Sherwood, and Albert Fentiman.

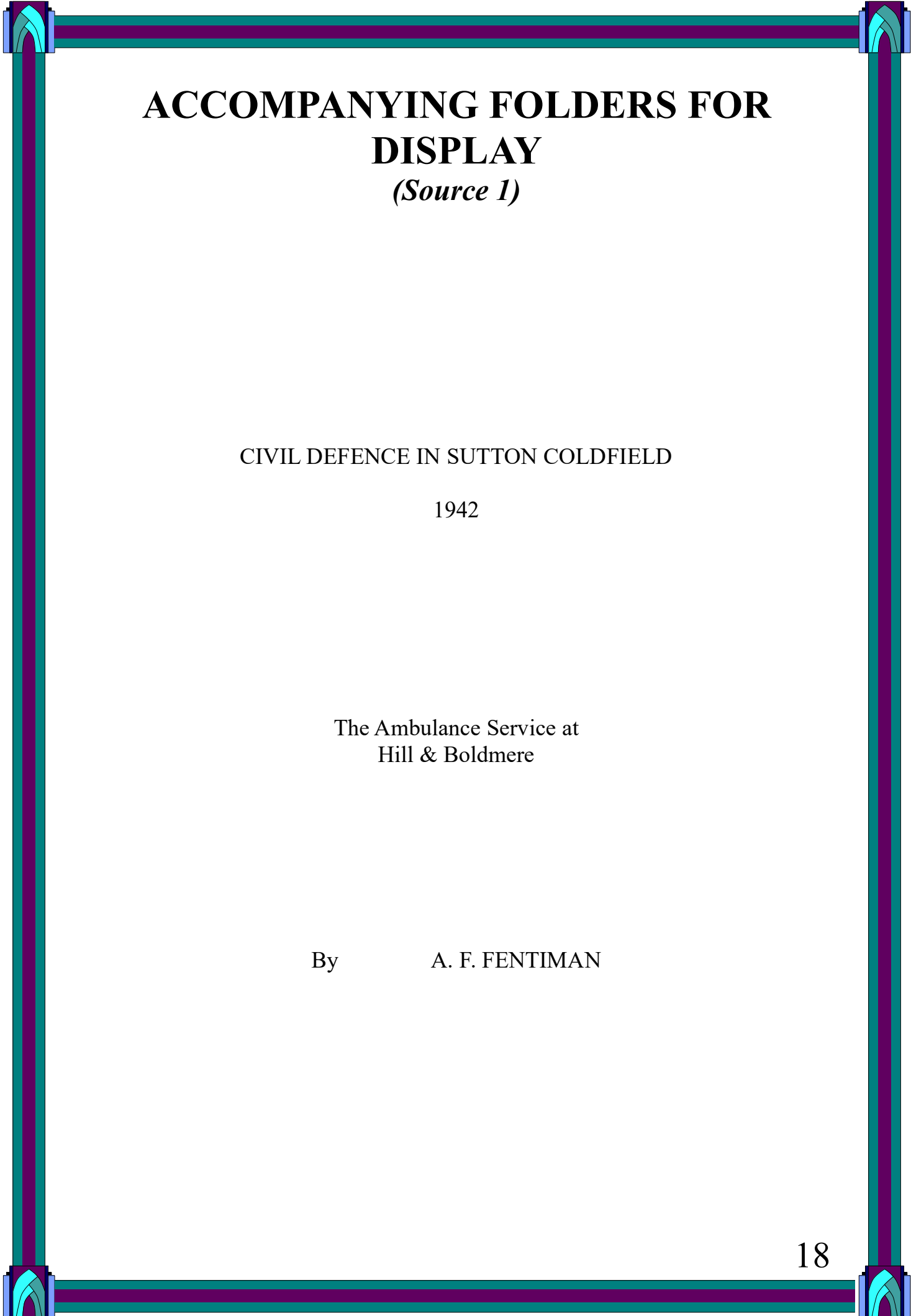
An early CD Ambulance

After the war, Ruth moved to Dartington, Devon to teach art at an Adult Education Centre although she continued to play her part in the Ferguson's Gang anonymously, which over time raised a tremendous amount of money for the National Trust.

She died on 27th September 1990 at Northfield Residential Home, Stroud.

Sources:

1. *Civil Defence in Sutton Coldfield 1942: the Ambulance Service at Hill & Boldmere*. Birmingham Archive and Collections Library (Sutton Coldfield Reference: QSH45.631)
2. *The Sherwood Heads*, Albert Fentiman's Collection, Box 14, Birmingham Archives and Collections Library
3. *Ferguson's Gang: The Maidens behind the Masks* by Anna Hutton-North, pub. Lulu Inc 2013
4. *Ferguson's Gang* by Polly Bagnall and Sally Beck, pub. National Trust Books Williams-Ellis in 1929
5. *England and the Octopus*, Urban Design Library | Urban Design Group, pub. Geoffrey Bles 1929



ACCOMPANYING FOLDERS FOR DISPLAY *(Source 1)*

CIVIL DEFENCE IN SUTTON COLDFIELD

1942

The Ambulance Service at
Hill & Boldmere

By A. F. FENTIMAN

CIVIL DEFENCE IN SUTTON COLDFIELD

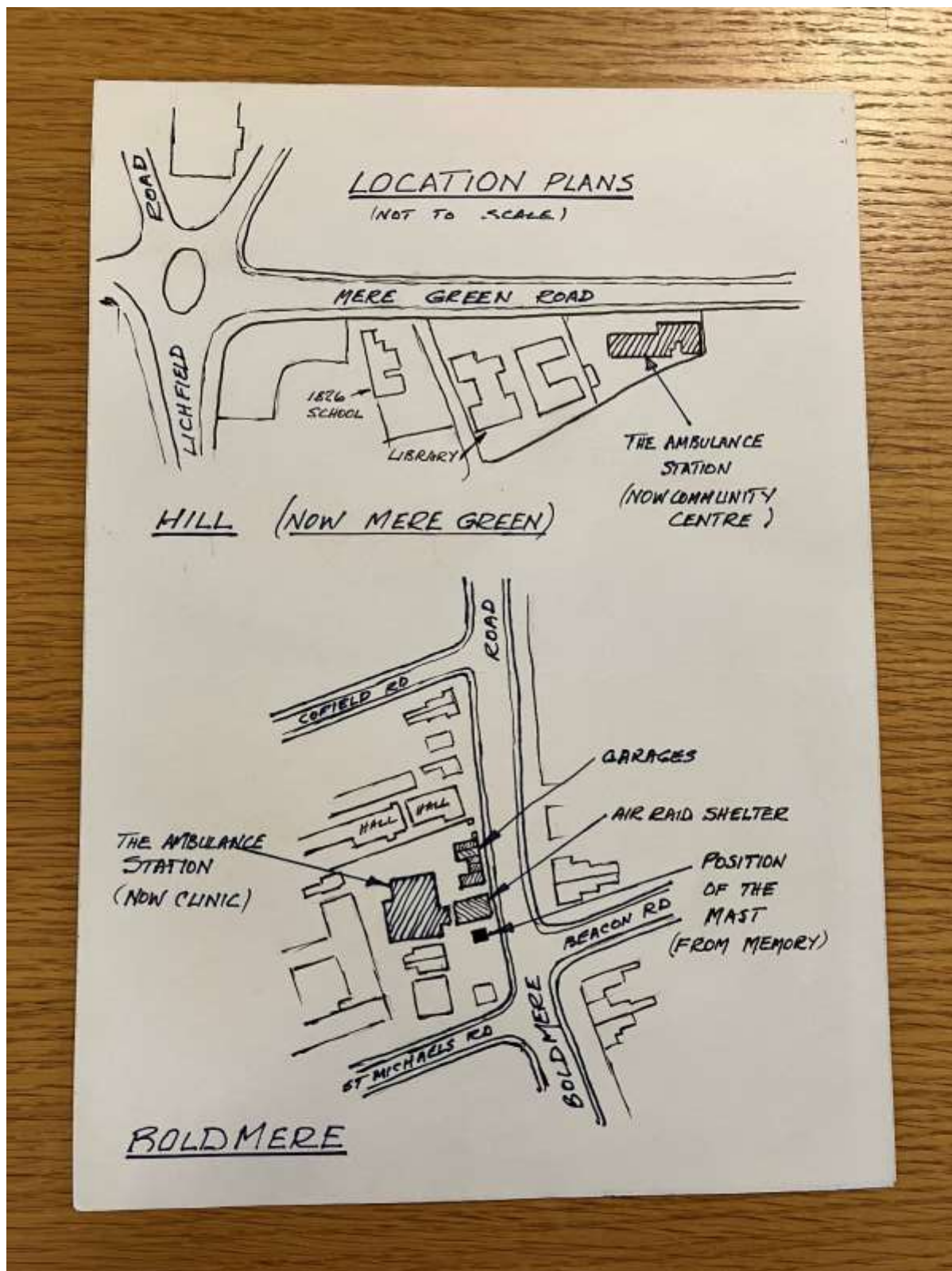
1942

The Ambulance Service at
Hill & Boldmers

By A. P. FENTIMAN

For the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group

1991



INTRODUCTION

There is a dearth of information about the Civil Defence Services in Sutton over the War period. There were quite a number of organisations controlled, it is believed, from a Command Post at the Town Hall as well as the Home Guard which probably acted independently. No written account seems to exist by any of the members of the Ambulance Service, the Air Raid Precautions group, Fire Watchers, Messenger Services or of the then Womens' Voluntary Service. Scraps of information gathered in conversations attempting to gain details of the histories of some Ambulance Service ladies portrayed in 1942 are assembled to give a very general description of that Service.

The Ambulance Service ladies who were the prime subject of this project were on the staff of War Time Stations at Hill (Mere Green) and Boldmere in 1942. One of their number Ruth Sherwood, a professional artist, has left a book of some thirty odd elegant sketches of her contemporaries. It was felt that these could well be supplemented by short histories before depositing the book in a library. Details of the Service itself arose as a sort of bye product of search for this historical material.

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Fig. 1 The Infants School at Mere Green



Fig. 2 The School at Boldmere with
Garages and Air Raid Shelter.

The Ambulance Service

It seems that there were two depôts at opposite ends of the Town, one at Hill and the other at Boldmere. Both were installed in infants' schools, the Hill Unit in Mere Green Road occupying what is now a Community Centre (Fig. 1) and the other in Boldmere Road itself just below St. Michael's Church but above Cofield Road, now a Clinic. There is no evidence at Hill of extra curricular activities but at Boldmere there are signs of war time occupation. Just inside the gateway (where the posts carry iron panels with the Warwickshire Coat of Arms) are five garages backing onto Boldmere Road (Fig. 2). These are of two different sizes the larger looking capable of housing a War Department type of Ambulance. In front of the main school building is a good sized air raid shelter and on its left, although it has long gone, there was until well after the War a lattice mast, like a small Eiffel Tower some thirty odd feet high. This was obviously feeding a wireless set in communication with the outside world and ambulances on the road. On the opposite side of Boldmere Road one of the two first residences in Beacon Road housed bicycle mounted messengers who (presumably) distributed the incoming messages in a world not lavishly supplied with telephones.

The Ambulance Staff were mostly female, some full time some part time, full time staff bearing the burden of night time shifts. A driver and a nurse formed a team but at night they had to be accompanied by a man. If stretcher cases were involved two men were sent with the ambulances to do the heavy lifting.



Fig. 3 The original Ambulance Station
at Hill (Now Mere Green)



Fig. 4 Drivers and Nurses at Hill
Miss Cottam second from left. José Woolley
on right.

At first it appears Hill had no ambulances but private cars supplemented by trailers for stretcher cases and indeed a driver informant remembers taking a prone American Serviceman on one of these from his billet in Anchorage Road to the American Hospital in Staffordshire.

Later as increasing numbers of men were conscripted the operation of the regular ambulance services was taken over by women auxiliaries driving conventional but sometimes ancient vehicles housed in the Fire Station adjacent to the Town Hall.

The first aid facilities were set up with medical supplies in advance of the war though initially the site at Hill, at least was shared with the School and the Auxiliaries had to make do with a furniture van for accommodation (Fig. 3). Later the whole school site was taken over and a small ward set up.

Uniforms were provided appropriate to personal occupations, blouses and slacks for the drivers and nurses uniforms for the nursing auxiliaries (Figs. 4 & 5). Training was given in nursing procedures at Oakhurst in Anchorage Road up to the St. John Ambulance Certificate standard supplemented by a weeks experience in a hospital and further lectures by Dr. McFarland, the District Medical Officer in the Old Technical School. At Hill the Controller was a qualified nurse, Nurse Taylor, able to cope with any problem outside the auxiliaries experience. At Oakhurst too some car maintenance instruction was given but actual vehicle maintenance was carried out by a team of fitters at Boldmere under the control of a Mr. Towers. Here too non-drivers were instructed in the art of steering mechanically propelled carriages.

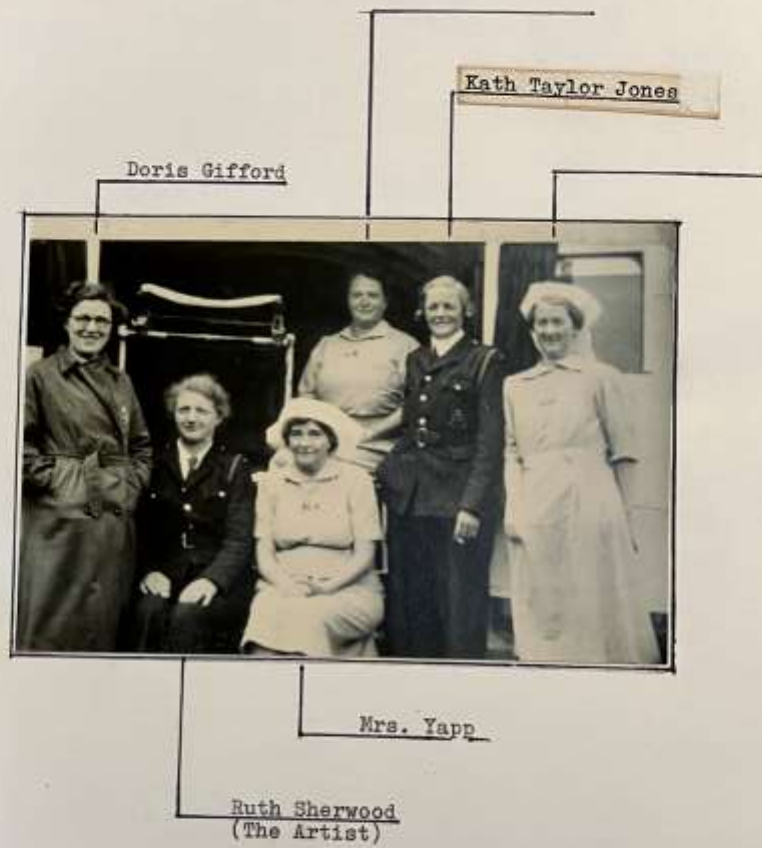


Fig. 5 Group at Hill

As the war lengthened and air raids diminished the need for emergency services declined and the Ambulance Staff were employed in taxiing elderly patients to medical facilities all over the Birmingham area. The staff at Hill dropped and eventually services were concentrated at Boldmere until with demobilisation the Regular ambulance staff resumed their duties.

Notes

I am indebted to the good memories of two ladies still active in the Mere Green area, Miss José Woolley and Miss Margaret Wylie, for the bulk of the information contained in these notes. Both were engaged in the Service at Hill (Mere Green) at the time in question, the former as a driver and the latter as a nurse. These ladies supplied the photographs, the basis of Figures 3-6

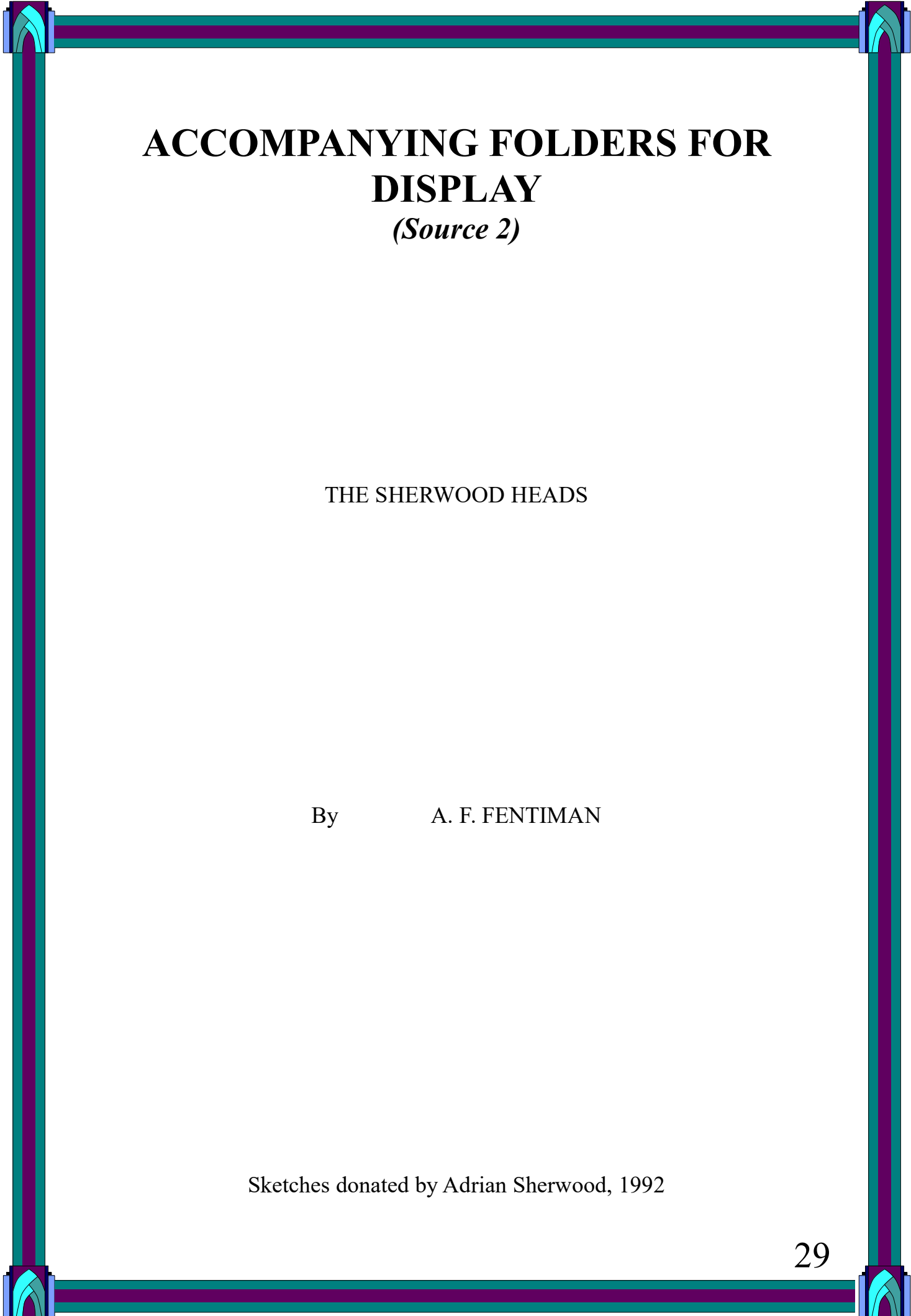
Mrs Horne of the St. Michael's Church Luncheon Club told me of the cycle mounted messenger service which she joined at the age of 16 and which otherwise would have disappeared into oblivion and Mr. Frank Titmus who either joined or returned to the Warwickshire Ambulance Services after the war was able to confirm the existence of the wireless mast which I was beginning to think was a figment of my imagination.

Finally, thanks to Mrs. Elizabeth Brewer a long time resident in the Hill area for interesting snippets and for typing the text.

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FIG 6 AN EARLY C.D. AMBULANCE



ACCOMPANYING FOLDERS FOR DISPLAY *(Source 2)*

THE SHERWOOD HEADS

By A. F. FENTIMAN

Sketches donated by Adrian Sherwood, 1992

THE SHERWOOD HEADS

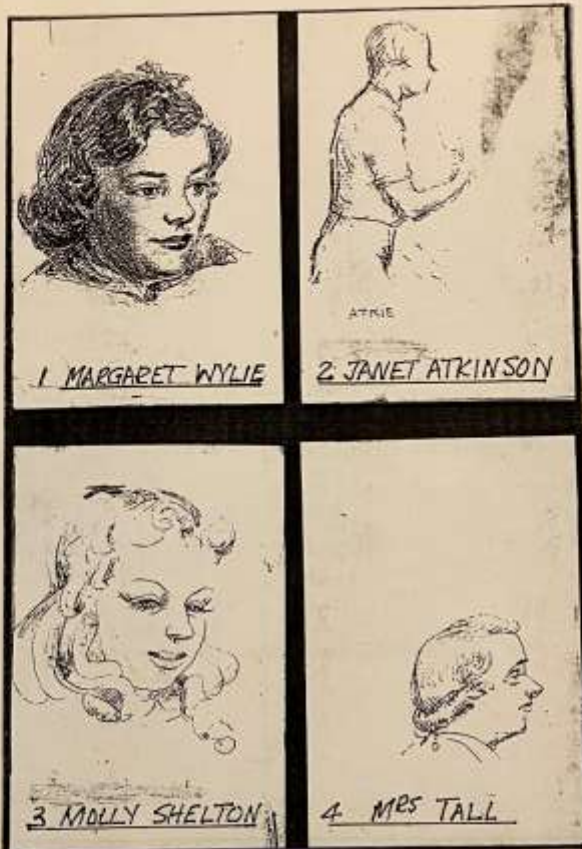
The sketches on the following pages are reproductions of those in Ruth Sherwood's sketch book but reduced to accommodate the accompanying script. True to size copies as the example below are kept in the Local Studies Department of the Sutton Coldfield Library and may be seen on request.

The information given with the titles depends to a large extent upon the memories of the two ladies already mentioned. Without their help the script would have been reduced to a list of names. As it is details are regrettably sparse.

The portraits are included by kind permission of Mr. Adrian Sherwood of 22 Lynton Road, London NW6 6BL who would be pleased to receive such additional information as is available. His telephone number is 071 624 2094.



Miss Cottam as sketched
See also figure 4 page 4



No. 1 Miss Margaret Wylie. Now living in Lichfield Road S/C
Nursing auxiliary, Hill & Boldmere, full time 1939-45

No. 2 Janet Atkinson thought deceased.
Driver, Hill, full time.

No. 3 Molly Skelton.

No. 4 Mrs. Tall



No.5 Miss. Evans

No.6 Margaret Rowland

Thought to have served at the Fire Station.

No.7 Jean Guthrie

Driver, Hill, part time.

No.8 Miss "Kip" Lloyd.

Nursing Auxiliary, Hill & Boldmere, full time.



No. 9 Miss Kath Taylor Jones, deceased

Driver, Hill & Boldmere.

No. 10 Miss Mabel Thomasine Lyde, deceased.

Driver, Hill & Boldmere, full time.

No. 11 Mrs. Ratcliff.

Driver, Hill, part time.

No. 12 Mrs. Dorothy Yapp, deceased.

Nursing auxiliary, Hill & Boldmere, full time.



- No.13 Miss Gwen Griffin, deceased
Nursing Auxiliary, Hill & Boldmere, full time.
- No.14 Miss Margery Wiggins, deceased.
Driver, Hill & Boldmere, full time.
- No.15 Miss? Lillie Gamble.
Nursing Auxiliary, Boldmere, full time.
- No.16 Miss Doris Gifford.
Nursing auxiliary, Boldmere,



17 NURSE TAYLOR



18 ZILPA MILNE



19 JOSÉ WOOLLEY

20 DOROTHY INSLEY



No. 17 Nurse Taylor, deceased, Controller at Hill
Previously District Nurse & Midwife.

No. 18 Zilpa Milne, deceased.
Nursing Auxiliary, Hill, full time.

No. 19 Miss José Woolley, Now living in Cremorne Road, S/C
Driver, Hill, full time.

No. 20 Miss Dorothy Insley, Believed to have married out of S/C
Nursing Auxiliary, Hill? full time.



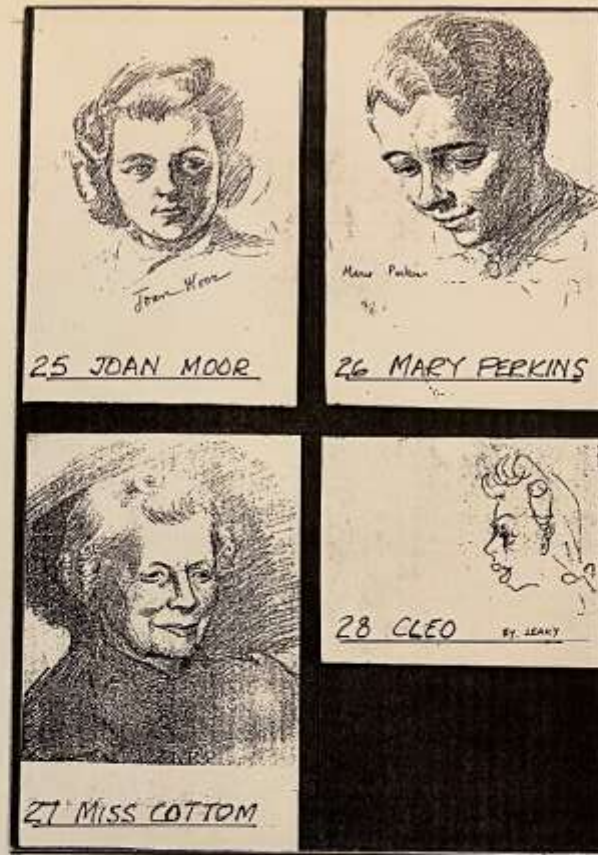
No. 21 Mrs. Dorothy Sinclair (Neé Canlette)
Nursing Auxiliary, Hill, full time.

No. 22 Mrs. Rosalind Stover

No. 23 Miss T. Spurr

Boldmere, evenings.

No. 24 Mrs. Routledge



No.25 Miss Joan Moore

Nursing Auxiliary, Hill, full time.

No.26 Miss Mary Perkins, deceased.

Nursing Auxiliary, Hill, evenings.

No.27 Miss Cottam, deceased

Nursing Auxiliary, Hill, full time.

No.28 "Cleo"

Sketch by Leaky No. 32



- No. 29 Miss Campbell "Scottie"
Nursing Auxiliary, Hill, full time.
- No. 30 Mrs. Gwendoline Hughes ("Hughie"). deceased.
- No. 31 Identity not known.
- No. 32 Miss Margaret "Leaky" Leak,
Driver, Hill & Boldmere, full time.