

CICELY LUCAS



Cicely Lucas

Christine Cluley spoke to the Harbury Society on Tuesday 18th March about Cicely (rhymes with nicely) Lucas. She was an extraordinarily remarkable woman of outstanding courage who achieved her ambition to become a teacher and who made a great difference to her pupils' lives. She was outspoken, a woman of strong principles, overpowering in her manner and often admired rather than liked, but she inspired love and respect from her students and was well regarded in her local community.

She was born Cicely Neale in 1878. Her parents came from Dorset, her mother, Sarah, attended college at an early age and trained to become a teacher. Her father, Edwin Neale, came from a family of carpenters and also trained as a teacher.

Needing employment after they married, her parents moved to Westwood Heath, near Coventry, where her father became the headmaster of Westwood Heath Elementary School, for children over 5 years of age and funded by Lord Leigh of

Stoneleigh. Her mother also worked there as a sewing mistress. They lived in a large house that had originally been built as a vicarage on the estate of Lord Leigh, which they shared with the gamekeeper and his family. Cicely, was the third child of four born to the couple and the only girl. She had an unhappy childhood because being a girl meant that she was expected to do many of the chores, such as getting the breakfast, setting the table, washing up, making the beds, etc. and she described her role as that of an 'unpaid skivvy'. When Lady Leigh and her daughters visited the school Cicely would disappear because she was anti-royalty, anti-religion and anti-affluence – a view she held all her life. On these 'disappearances' she would go and meet the 'Black Patch Gypsies' whom she had befriended, having learnt their language and customs. Upon her return she would be reprimanded but still she returned time and again.

When Cicely was in her teens a scandal erupted, which tore the family apart, after it was discovered her father was having an affair with Ada, a teaching assistant. Her father returned to his family in Dorset, taking his youngest son with him and Ada was sacked. Sarah, her mother, was made headmistress and run the school with the proviso that Cicely assisted her as a monitor.

Ultimately Cicely realised she enjoyed teaching and decided to train to be one. She applied to a teachers' training college in Derby who informed her she didn't have enough qualifications. They suggested she enroll at a local college and get qualifications in French, Science and one other subject. So, aged about 16 or 17, she enrolled at Coventry College of Art and walked the four miles there and back each week to gain her qualifications. Still having her other duties to perform, the journey was arduous for her and she endured several incidents including a close call on a level crossing. Arriving at college one evening very upset, another student asked her what was wrong and offered to accompany her home. His name

was Ernest Lucas and, after becoming firm friends, he would later become her husband. At the end of the year she gained her qualifications and applied again at Derby and this time was accepted.

She applied herself at Derby and when she graduated in 1900 it was with an excellent double first.

Ernest went to university but, desperate and ill, he was struggling to complete his. He repeatedly asked Cicely to marry him, but possibly realising that as a married woman she would have to give up work she kept refusing him. Eventually she agreed to marry in secret at a registry office in Birmingham in 1902 but Ernest was sworn to secrecy about the marriage. He kept his word and it was ten years before they remarried publicly in 1912.



Christine Cluley

Her parents were reconciled and her father bought a small house in Birmingham and invited Cicely and Ernest to live with them.

In the meantime Cicely, aware of the inequalities between men and women, became interested in the suffragette movement. She knew all the leading suffragette ladies personally, including Christabel Pankhurst and, having a strong voice she also spoke at Hyde Park. She protested at Winson Green Prison where women suffragettes had been force-fed.

In 1912 Ernest announced that he had been offered a teaching post at a school run by the British Embassy in Paris and that Cicely would also be able to teach there. By this time Cicely's mother had died, so they sold the house in Birmingham and moved to Paris taking Cicely's father with them.

Cicely returned to England briefly in 1913 to give birth to their only child, which they also named Cicely, but she soon returned to Paris with the baby. Although Cicely taught some classes, she also did freelance translation work, and later went to work with Maximilian Berlitz at his language school.

While holidaying in Chantilly they heard that Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated, following which, news came that the Germans had invaded France. There was a desperate attempt to return to Paris, but news arrived that the school was closed, Ernest mysteriously disappears and with no help from the embassy, Cicely and the baby made their way back to England. Arriving at Dover with no money, the kindly station master lends her some so she was able to return to Westwood Heath, where they were taken in by her brother. With no means of support, other than her brother and his wife, she left the baby with them while she went to the Coventry Education Department seeking employment as a teacher and was offered a teaching position at Elmbank School for Boys at Coventry, where she taught for a couple of years.

Arriving home one day, she discovered that Ernest had returned, offering no explanation as to his previous whereabouts. He soon gained employment as a headmaster at Claverdon.

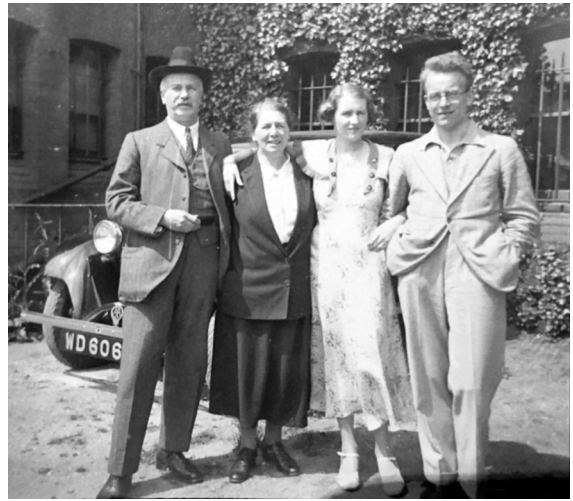
Cicely was offered the post of headmistress of Solihull Church of England School Girls School, where she was extremely happy, remaining there until her retirement in 1939. She was popular with her pupils and always managed to get the best out of those who she saw had potential. The couple moved to Claverdon and Cicely would travel to Solihull each day by train.

Cicely junior was at school in Warwick, she was a clever child and a teacher suggested that she apply to Girton College. Her mother was vehemently opposed to this idea and said that her daughter should go to teacher's training college. Cicely junior wisely ignored her mother and applied to Girton anyway, and was accepted. She was there for three years gaining a very good degree. She became a teacher at Westonbirt School, eventually marrying Norman Singleton, who her mother despised, and had two daughters of their own. She named them Elizabeth and Margaret (Christine felt sure this was to spite her mother's anti-royalist views).

After she retired, she continued to teach any child that required extra tuition and threw herself into village life by reporting and reviewing events which would be published in the Warwick Advertiser.

Ernest died in 1951 and someone said it was the first time they had seen Cicely cry. She decided to leave Claverdon and live with her married daughter who now lived in London, but this didn't work out so she moved to the Clarendon Hotel in Blackheath. Her health was now in decline, though she continued to tutor pupils and she would engage in conversation with the travelling salesmen staying at the hotel. But her sight and hearing were poor and one day in 1970 she was knocked down by a lorry after stepping off the kerb without checking first and died two weeks later from her injuries.

Although Cicely Lucas was a difficult woman, argumentative and opinionated at times, she is remembered with real love and affection by many of her students on whose lives she had the greatest influence.



Ernest, Cicely, daughter Cicely Jr and her husband, Norman Singleton



Cicely Lucas, Ernest, and Cicely Jr in the 1920s