



Popular spot with Alresford youngsters in the 1930s.

# Lovely landmark memorial to a rich, full life

By LESLEY DREW

Photographs: Brian Champion

**I**F you seek his memorial, look around". That sentence, of course, relates to the great Sir Christopher Wren, yet throughout the country it can equally be applied to men and women who have neither achieved, nor sought, public stature. They lived their lives with a fullness which was natural to them, and often, unknowingly, left behind a heritage for England. One such man was Bryan Gush who died in July, 1986, in a cottage beside the churchyard in Alresford, Hampshire.

Born in Shoreham, Sussex, in 1903, Geoffrey Bryan Gush was brought up as a Londoner, the eldest of four children of a lawyer. Parental guidance was fairly strict, and very much regulated to the

class of society in which his father's profession put him. He attended prep school and was then sent to Gresham Public School in Norfolk, where he had a satisfactory but unremarkable boyhood. He moved almost automatically from school to work "in the city", joining Oppenheimers, the famous pipe makers.

Bryan had an inborn eagerness for things mechanical. Motorised transport was still relatively new to the world, and he had a friend, Jamie Birch, who was similarly minded. Together they built a motorbike in the attic of Jamie's home. Jamie belonged to a large, easy-going family of three sons and five daughters, and it was the youngest girl who caught Bryan's eye over the mess of nuts and bolts. He and Elinor became engaged to marry.

It is possible that life would have followed the pattern of his parents, had not illness intervened. Bryan was diagnosed as having kidney problems and doctors strongly recommended him to leave London and get into the country. He went first to stay on a farm at Heckfield and then later to another at Yateley near Camberley in Surrey. It was while observing the life of farmers that Bryan, keen to find a business life which could be carried on in rural parts, saw an opening for him in the mechanical transportation of milk. With one lorry, he started his own milk hauling business, which

*The garden: a visit from the television cameras.*



increased to include a partner and several more vehicles. However, in the 1920s, lorries were not reliable, and the two young men spent a great deal of their time on repair work and maintenance.

During the 1930s, with a friend, Bryan was building a racing car which they hoped might go into mass production. The car, when finished, was never reproduced; in its engine capacity class, it still holds some form of record at Brooklands.

Bryan decided to abandon the milk business and return to London to work on the sales of Lex Garage, Piccadilly. By now he and Elinor were married, and although they lived in a London flat, they had developed an abiding love for the countryside, which gave them a desire to always have "a place in the country". They were very far from affluent, but they managed to find a tiny cottage to renovate at Finchingfield, Essex, and lived in it at weekends and holidays. By 1939 they had acquired a larger place, an old farmhouse at Ropley in Hampshire, and they were at their home in Ropley with their young daughter Vilma, when they heard the radio announcement that England was at war with Germany.

Bryan Gush went back to London to dispose of their flat and transfer everything to Ropley. Once Elinor, Vilma and various other relatives were safely installed, he volunteered for army service. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1940 and joined the R.A.S.C., No. 5 Bridge Company. By May 1941 he was a Captain and Officer in Charge of Transport in the Canal Zone in Egypt. In September of the same year he became Workshop Officer, and in July 1942 as a Major, he was Inspector of Mechanical Transport with the 9th Army, serving in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. By March 1943 he was a Senior Inspector of Mechanical Transport of British Troops in Egypt, organising and operating workshops in El Tahaq where 5,000 R.A.S.C. vehicles were reconditioned for the invasion of Sicily and Italy. A year later he became Deputy Assistant Director of Transport for the Middle East Forces at GHQ, Cairo, and then Inspector of Mechanical Transport Southern Command U.K.

Once the war was over, Bryan Gush left the Army and returned home to Ropley with a war gratuity but little else, and no job. He and Elinor sold their home, bought a small block of flats in an old building which was once The George Inn in Alresford, and, living in one, they let the other two, plus a small dwelling at the rear. Bryan spent some of his money on an old car which he did up and sold, but then joined forces with an Army friend, Dickie Dent, and bought a Nissen hut in New Farm Road, Alresford, with the idea of setting up a business repairing agricultural machinery. This did not make them much of a living, so they began to look around for something they could



*Left; Bryan Gush at the Alresford H.Q. of his business; above; the Fulling Mill today.*

manufacture.

The solution came when a local farmer asked if they could make him some farm gates. This they did, using second hand tubular steel. It was the beginning of a manufacturing company which over the next six years developed a wide range of tubular steel farm equipment covering all types of animal pens and feeding equipment. The great majority of cattle markets in Britain today are equipped with these pens.

The Alresford factory had trebled its original area by 1954 and doubled that again by 1956. A Gush & Dent headquarters office block was built in Jacklyns Lane, Alresford, and factories were set up in Penrith, Leek, Torrington (Devon), Perth, South Wales, Bury St. Edmunds and Lincolnshire. A factory at Bramdean was established to manufacture steel pallets for industry, and another factory was established in Normandy, France.

Dickie Dent had left the partnership fairly early on in order to follow another line of business, and in 1962, most of the company's assets were sold to Thomas Tilling Ltd., with Bryan Gush remaining as Managing Director until his retirement in 1968. By then the firm had become Gascoigne Gush & Dent, operating from 50 locations in 12 different countries.

In Gush & Dent, Bryan Gush had made an unmitigated success of what some of his relatives had originally referred to as "another of his wild cat schemes". Bryan and Elinor had had some tough years, but he was a born optimist. Everything would turn out all right in the end.

There had been changes on the home front too while business was booming. Living in a flat did not suit Bryan and Elinor, as while in their two previous cottages, they had grown to love having a garden. It was during a walk along the footpath by the river at Alresford, with his long time friend and brother-in-law Jamie, that Bryan, looking at the deserted 13th century Fulling Mill straddling the river, announced it could have possibilities for conversion.

It was 1951 and the Mill had been uninhabited for many years. Its last use had been as a Scout Hut for the Alresford Scouts. It stood empty, decaying and unlocked. They looked it over. Minute windows made the interior very dark, the kitchen had a corrugated roof and the thatch needed re-doing. But the idea of

owning it appealed to Bryan's nomadic and pioneering instincts, and as ever, Elinor was prepared to back him and trust in his optimism as to its future. They and Jamie spent every weekend for six months, working on the interior, opening up the fireplace, and living in what Elinor described as a permanent state of chaos. Locals thought they were mad and told them so, but three jobbing builders were delighted to have the opportunity of earning 1/- (5p) an hour working with them at weekends. After six months, it was a home. A concrete raft had been built into the flooring to protect them from the river underneath and they used Japanese oak for the floor finish. Modernisation had been made simple, in an effort to ensure that the interior of the Mill should remain in keeping with its brightened black and white exterior.

During all this, Bryan had maintained his interest in restoring veteran cars, which he kept in an old barn. He took one of them on the London to Brighton run, but it was hard work with everything else, so he decided to sell them and take up photography instead.

After the restoration of the Mill, the Gush's set about creating a garden to provide the setting for their home which is now familiar to people world-wide, having been depicted on numerous calendars, in books, postcards and even table mats.

When Bryan retired at 65, he still had his restless energy to satisfy, and sharing the garden with Elinor was not enough. The garden became her job alone, and he bought the piece of land on the other side of the riverside footpath, next to the Mill. It was a wild, water-logged meadow of about three quarters of an acre, which Bryan set about draining.

He erected cages so that he could grow fruit and vegetables, hares and rabbits having made vegetable growing in the garden utterly impossible. A potting shed went up, a small stall for selling produce to passers-by, and then, eventually, greenhouses for bedding plants and pot plants. The whole scheme was run on full business methods, and a small nursery was born. All profits were donated to charities, five in all, but most notably the

R.S.P.C.A. and the N.S.P.C.C. Total donations over the years amounted to £28,845.

What their home, its garden and nursery gave to Elinor and Bryan was a way of life. Neither of them were interested in sitting doing nothing, a garden was something in which to be active, and holidays offered no temptations. They preferred being at home and "doing". As the years passed, the Mill became a Hampshire landmark, with hundreds of people walking the riverside footpath, pausing to look at it and the garden, take photographs, and wander into the nursery to take home a living memory. They became acquainted with countless visitors, many from overseas, and none were more thrilled than the Americans, when occasionally the Gush's offered to show them the interior of the Mill. Years later some of them would reappear and say "Do you remember me?"

When television cameras descended one day for the making of a garden programme, Elinor took flight to the safety of the bedroom and left Bryan to be the escort around the garden. This caused a problem, as neither had trespassed upon the other's domain. She knew nothing about the contents of his greenhouses and he knew nothing about her herbaceous borders. As the cameras moved away from him to each new patch of the garden, his voice was heard urgently asking of the open window, "What are those blue ones called?"

In 1985, with Bryan's health failing, he and Elinor acknowledged that the time had come to move home. They found a delightful little cottage by the parish church in Alresford, with just a tiny back garden and the trees of the churchyard for a view. They missed the sound of the water and the sight of moonlight on it, but they were content. Bryan lived there just a year before he died. His funeral was quiet and cremation private, just the way this lively, but strangely shy, reticent personality would have wished.

The riverside path by the old Fulling Mill has become Hampshire's most well-walked footpath. Though she doesn't look it, Elinor is now over 80, and she doesn't go down that way often. She thinks simply of the Mill as one of her and Bryan's old homes, and looks thoroughly surprised at the suggestion that they have created an English landmark.