

The Burston School Strike is the longest strike in British history running from 1914 to 1939. The children of Burston's village school went on strike after their teachers, Annie and Tom Higdon, were dismissed by the school's management committee. Annie Higdon was headmistress and a progressive educator and objected to the conditions in the school and the landowners' continuing claiming of the children for farmwork. Tom Higdon was assistant teacher and an organiser for the agricultural workers' trade union.

On 1 April 1914 the children marched round the village with placards saying "we want our teachers back" and the Higdons established, with the support of the children's parents, an alternative school on the green. The labour and trade union movement raised funds in solidarity for a building (now a museum) to house the school.



Every September the Burston Strike School Rally Committee organises a celebration of the strike on the first Sunday in September. And since early 2013 we have also been working to ensure a fitting commemoration of the centenary of the longest strike in history.

## 1st April 2014

Two events took place on Tuesday 1 April: a celebration on the Green and the premiere of a play in Diss High School. The first invitation to partic-

pate went to Tony Benn, who supported the annual rally since its inception and last spoke in 2010. He immediately accepted but we were aware over the next year that his failing health made this increasingly unlikely. In the event, Tony died just two weeks before the celebration and he was in our thoughts during the day.

## On the Green

The day began at the Burston Community Primary School. Since the spring half term the children had been carrying out a project looking at their history and the history of their village's famous strike. This included having lessons in the Strike School Museum, recreating the conditions of the time.



# Burston centenary

Around noon 80 children paraded from the school, wearing clothing from 100 years ago, and carrying banners and placards they had made during the previous weeks. Accompanied by their teachers, also dressed as in 1914, and parents and local politicians, they retraced the route of the “candlestick” (a circular walk in Norfolk) before arriving at the Green.

The children didn't know in advance, but when they arrived, they were greeted by “Mr and Mrs Higdon”, the actors who were to perform in the play that evening in Diss. Tom Higdon then recreated the speech he gave 100 years ago praising the children's bravery in taking their stand for justice.



The event involved the whole community, with the school's Parent Teachers Association providing the buffet, many relatives of the child strikers in attendance, and the participation of the Parish Council, Diss High School, and the people of Burston.

The photograph of the children's march in 1914 was recreated and the rally was addressed by a range of trade union, political and community speakers:



- Mike Ward, chair of the Strike School Museum Trustees
- Megan Dobney, SERTUC regional secretary, who led reflection on the sad and recent deaths of Burston stalwarts Tony Benn and Bob Crow
- Peter Everard-Smith, Burston photographer, who presented two framed photographs of previous rallies to the Museum
- Maddy Carty, singer/songwriter, performed
- Ivan Crane, Unite London & Eastern regional officer
- Richard Edwards, PCS regional secretary, who presented the Trustees with a cheque for £500 towards SERTUC East of England Trade Union Network's target of £5,000 to support the fabric of the museum
- June Ford, daughter of the youngest striker Barney Ford (aged 7). Barney (Victor) went on to be a Trustee of the Museum and June is currently Mayor of Lowestoft
- Martin and Judith Welsh, who refurbished the maypole on the Green and are former Trustees
- Ian Gibson, former Labour MP for Norwich North

## By the church

The Higdon's are buried in the Burston church graveyard (they were in fact Christian Socialists and adherents of the Methodist church). Their graves had been a little dishevelled through commonplace subsidence, but the Trustees had them cleaned and reinstated to their former condition.



## School film

Students from Diss High School's Media Department filmed the primary school's march and by the evening had edited and added a sound track to complete a short film of the day. This was shown at the evening theatre event and is here: <http://youtu.be/QSmwMXHU3Tg>

## County records

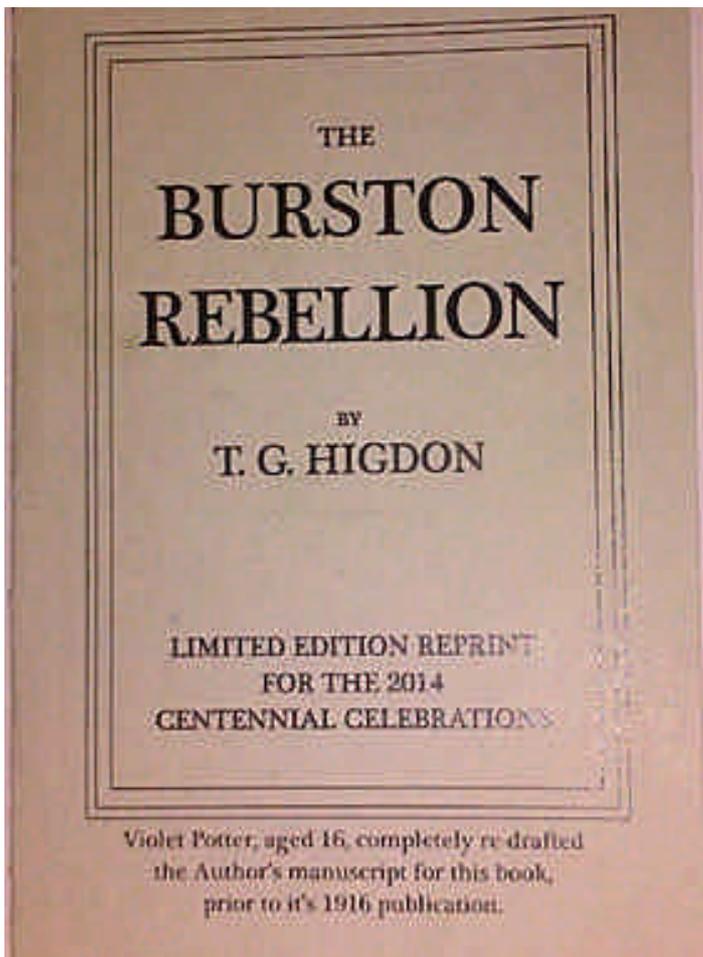
George Nobbs, the Labour leader of Norfolk County Council, arranged for the NCC Cabinet to meet in the Old Shire Hall (where the decision to sack the Higdon's was made 100 years ago to the day) on 28 February. They invited children from the Burston School, and George Nobbs read from the Minute Book recording the event. He asked the children if they should have sacked the teachers and they, along with the Cabinet, voted "No". George Nobbs presented the Museum with the original record books at the centenary event.

## Mugs and more

- We produced two souvenir mugs, one designed by one of the pupils at the Burston school. Every child under 16 who is either living in Burston, or a pupil at the Burston or Tivetshall schools, will receive one of the school-designed mugs as a souvenir



- David Berwick paid for and donated four reproduction historical postcards
- Anne May and her family donated reproductions of *The Burston Rebellion*, Tom Higdon's account of the school strike that was re-drafted by Violet Potter, aged 16, prior to its 1916 publication



- All the above will be sold to support the Museum and are available from Museum treasurer David Maclean [cemacl@hotmail.com](mailto:cemacl@hotmail.com)

## Theatre in Diss

In the evening The Stuff of Dreams Theatre Company premiered their new play *The Bricks of Burston*, written by Anthony Cule specially for the centenary. The school hall was packed and the play was extremely well received. The event was chaired by SERTUC regional secretary Megan Dobney, Mike Ward (chair of the Strike School Museum Trustees) introduced the strike issues, and after the students' film of the day in Burston was shown, Anne May, niece of Violet Potter (the leader of the strike) also addressed the audience.



*The Bricks of Burston* was initiated by Stuff of Dreams co-founder Cordelia Spence and starred Georgia Robson as Mrs Higdon, Tom Grace as Mr Higdon, and Alex Helm as the Reverend Eland.

## 2nd April 2014

Over the last months SERTUC has been working with Alfemax Films to produce three short films using the Burston story to elaborate three key issues: the rural condition in 1914, the children's action, and the importance of solidarity.

The films were launched to a trade union audience in the trade union studies rooms at the Colchester Institute in Witham on Wednesday 2 April and we were delighted to be welcomed by

Curriculum Manager Rody Kickham and trade union education coordinator Mark Andrew.

The films are available at <http://sertucresources.wordpress.com/sertuc-publications-general/>, along with tutors' notes to enable a one hour training session. SERTUC Regional Education Officer Rob Hancock will be pleased to give you any assistance required: [rhancock@tuc.org.uk](mailto:rhancock@tuc.org.uk)

## Other events

The centenary celebrations will continue throughout the year and include:

### *Embroidery*

The Diss Embroidery Group has created two hangings that are on display in the Diss Museum. One is based on the Candlestick map of the parade and the other recreates the blackboard on which Violet Potter wrote "We are going on strike tomorrow" along with children's slates with comments taken from the pictures of their placards. The Embroidery Group intends to bring the hangings to the Rally in September and will donate them to the Museum when the exhibition in Diss ends in October.

### *Lecture*

The annual George Edwards (founder and general secretary of the National Union of Agricultural Workers) Lecture will be on the Burston School Strike and will be delivered by historian Alun Howkins and Morris Philpott 12 noon to 4pm on 7 June, Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse Museum.

### *Walking*

The Churches Conservation Trust has consulted with SERTUC and is producing a leaflet advertising a circular walk in Norfolk. The 7.5 mile route takes in the Strike School and walkers are encouraged to visit the Museum.

### *More walking*

The Index for Inclusion has appointed an artist in residence for a walk to celebrate the School Strike; Jill Eastland will be joining a walk to promote values-led school improvement, following the Boudicca Way, from 7 to 15 July.

### *Film show*

SERTUC is looking at the practicalities of showing the film *The Burston Rebellion*, starring Eileen Atkins and Bernard Hill, in London.

### *Children's theatre*

SERTUC has previously worked with Theatre Train, a company that runs Saturday drama classes for children; we put on their musical about the Tolpuddle Martyrs (with 200 children participating) in 2012. TheatreTrain is working on a performance, involving between 50 to 60 children from the East of England, for the 2014 Rally. <http://www.theatrain.co.uk/>

### *Media coverage*

Local media (print, web, and radio) has provided good coverage of the events and the centenary generally. We know of:

- Teresa MacKay, chair of SERTUC's East of England Trade Union Network, on BBC Radio Suffolk
- Several news pieces in the *Diss Express*, *Eastern Daily Press*, and the *Evening News*
- Unite's *Landworker* delayed its copy date and sent a reporter for the day so the event will be covered therein. The *Country Standard* is also expected to feature the centenary events



## 2014 rally

The Burston Strike School Rally will take place, as usual, on the first Sunday in September. In 2014 this clashes with the beginning of TUC Congress in Liverpool, limiting the pool of trade union speakers; nonetheless the Committee is well into the arrangements. Although Bob Crow, who had committed to speak this year, will sadly not be doing so, RMT's Geoff Revell will be there, plus Owen Jones, writer and broadcaster, Jeremy Corbyn MP, TheatreTrain's performance, and music from the NASUWT brass band, Roy Bailey, Thee Faction, and Red Flags. The Rally, on Sunday 7 September, will be co-chaired by Megan Dobney SERTUC, and Laura Norris, Labour PPC for Great Yarmouth.

## Useful addresses

- Burston Strike School  
<http://burstonstrikeschool.wordpress.com/>
- Alfemax Films <http://alfemaxfilms.com/>
- Burston Community Primary School  
<http://www.burston.norfolk.sch.uk/>
- Churches Conservation Trust [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk)
- Diss High School <http://disshighsc.users26.interdns.co.uk/>
- Index for Inclusion walk  
<http://www.indexforinclusion.org/news/walking-the-boudica-way-celebrating-schools-and-communities>
- Maddy Carty <http://maddycarty.com/>
- Peter Everard Smith, photographer  
[info@photosmithuk.com](mailto:info@photosmithuk.com)
- Richard Edwards, convenor of SERTUC East of England Trade Union Network [richarde@pcs.org.uk](mailto:richarde@pcs.org.uk)
- Stuff of Dreams Theatre Company  
<http://www.stuffofdreamstheatre.com/>

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