FEATURE

Tribute to a 'guiding light' gets worldwide audience

When Charlie Underwood died he left behind a partly-finished book. His children were not sure what to do with it until Adrian, the youngest, had an idea. **Sheena Grant** reports

LIKE most sons, Adrian Underwood is fiercely proud of his father. Charlie Underwood worked long hours holding down four jobs so that he and his wife could give their six sons a better life.

One of those jobs was attendant of Orfordness Lighthouse, a post he held for almost 30 years and for which he was awarded the MBE. He was also a part-time firefighter in his home village of Orford and a plant attendant at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) on Orfordness.

In between those three demanding roles he somehow managed to fit in a fourth job, as a painter and decorator and doing small house repairs.

Work and family life didn't leave much time for anything else, but Charlie had another interest.

His love of local history and the lighthouse with which he was so intimately connected led him to write a book, *The Great Light*, an account of Orfordness and its lighthouses.

He was in the process of writing another, this time about the village of Orford and his life there, when he died suddenly in 1997. The unfinished work seemed destined never to see the light of day.

But Adrian, 40, the youngest of Charlie's children, who is an engineer for a mobile phone company and now lives and works in Dublin with his wife and two young children, had other ideas.

With the agreement of his brothers he embarked on a labour of love, putting together a website dedicated to his father and his home village.

As well as photographs of the area, '*Orford Piece*' contains an unpublished addendum to *The Great Light* and '*My Orford*', the book Charlie was working on when he died.

The original website went online about three years ago but has this year been redeveloped and launched in a new format.

"I feel that it is a fitting tribute to the man I am proud to call dad," said Adrian. "To me and my five brothers he was, and always will be, our guiding light."

My Orford is a personal cherished history for the Underwood family but it carries a meaning beyond that: as an authoritative local and social history for the rest of us to dip into and learn from.

There are chapters on the castle, the church, life at the local school in the 1930s, Orfordness, the village in war time and in the post-war period as well as the devastating 1953 floods, the fire service and Charlie's life.

"There was a lot more information dad was planning to put into the book but unfortunately he didn't get around to it," said Adrian. "However, the last chapter he wrote was a fitting tribute to him as a father to the six of us. It was read out at his funeral because it seemed so pertinent."

In that excerpt Charlie recalls how on one occasion he worked a shift at AWRE, went to the lighthouse for his daily visit and then continued painting a house he was working on when the fire siren sounded and he turned out to a blaze: all four jobs in one day.

"The point of it all was to give our sons a decent upbringing, an improved way of life, better than we had had," he wrote. "I have been told by one of my sons that he would have liked to see more of me but he realises why I did all the work.

"Looking back in later years my wife and I sometimes wondered if it was worthwhile, the long hours I was working, the apple picking and other part time jobs she did in addition to bringing up six sons. Then we would look at the boys, each successful in his chosen career and know that we did the right thing."

Charlie Underwood retired from his job as attendant of Orfordness Lighthouse in 1994 at the age of 70, a year after receiving the MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for more than 28 years service. He collected his award from Prince Charles at an investiture at Buckingham Palace in December the same year.

"I think the lighthouse held a special place in dad's heart," said Adrian. "He took over from the last keeper of the lighthouse when it became automated and he was there for so long."

In 1992, he even organised guided tours of the lighthouse to mark its bicentenary. It was before the National Trust had taken over the 10-mile long shingle spit and there was no routine public access as there is today.

Adrian named the website *Orford Piece* because he grew up in a road called Nightingale Piece in the village.

"I have named my house in Ireland *Orford Piece* as well and it seemed the right name for the website: it's my piece of Orford while I am away," he said.

"I just felt that my dad was such a brilliant father to all of us and very inspirational, considering we grew up in a council house in a small village in Suffolk. The hard work he and my mother put in have stood us in good stead."

All of the brothers have now left Orford; two still live in Suffolk but, said from Adrian, the others have ended up in Lancashire, Norfolk and Australia.

"As well as a tribute to dad I wanted the website to be seen by local people and for my children to have as a reference point," said Adrian. "Since I have had children it has got me thinking about my own family history. I think dad would have been pleased I have done it."

■ Adrian's website can be found at www.orfordpiece.com

'A SHINING LIGHT': Adrian Underwood, inset left, and his father Charlie, inset right, who was the attendant of Orfordness Lighthouse for almost 30 years

Photographs: JOHN KERR AND CONTRIBUTED

1953 FLOODS

ON Saturday morning 31st January 1953 I was working, with others, on the low lying marshes at Gedgrave. A gale had been blowing for two days and the water had lapped over the top of the river bank at high tide.

That night came the worst disaster the country had known in peace time, it has gone down in history as the night of the East Coast Floods. A terrific gale held up the water in the North Sea, this, combined with a spring tide caused massive flooding from Lincolnshire to Kent. 307 people lost their lives, as did thousands of cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry. 32,000 people were evacuated from their homes and 1,000 miles of coastline were flooded. Orford did not have any casualties, but many homes were flooded.

At Gedgrave the river banks gave way under the weight of wind and water, breaches hundreds of yards long appeared. The water swept over the low-lying land, flooding some houses at Gedgrave before reaching Quay Street where it entered houses causing flooding to a depth of over two feet.

An American family living in Quay Street were marooned in their bungalow. Ralph Brinkley waded through the flood water taking each of the three children, one at a time, from their parents and handed them to helpers on the road. They slept happily on while this operation took place. Their father then carried his wife to safety.

Meanwhile, knowing there were two Air Ministry security policemen on the island, Reg Partridge and Vic Brinkley mounted a rescue operation. Together with others they went down river in Reg's motor boat and then up Stony Ditch. It was a hazardous journey in gale force wind with large pieces of debris floating everywhere. They eventually located the policemen, Harry Brown and Bill Riches on the roofs of two separate buildings. Reg took one rowing boat and Vic took the other and succeeded in bringing both policemen to the motor boat. They then retraced the hazardous journey back to the quay. For their heroic action Reg was awarded the BEM and Vic was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Bravery.

The local fire brigade, of which I was a member, were called out at daybreak and our first job was to rescue a disabled man and his daughter by getting them out of a bedroom window. We then spent the rest of the day pumping the salt water from the homes in Quay street and going to Butley to pump out the grain pits at Butley Mill.

Hundreds of acres of low lying land from Iken to the Town Marsh (now the car park) in Quay street and from Gedgrave to Quay street were under water. Cattle at Gedgrave which had been grazing in the flooded area had been swept away, some were drowned but several were marooned on the river bank and were rescued by landing craft.

Hundreds of sheep which had been grazing on the island were drowned. The task of plugging breaches in the river banks and getting rid of the flood water looked tremendous when we started work on the Monday morning. A crude shelter made of straw bales was erected and the women who worked on the farm made tea continually throughout the very cold days.

Work started on removing the water from the vast area affected. Six of us led by our employer, Sir Peter Greenwell, worked throughout one night digging a trench and laying pipes through the river bank to make a sluice. Massive pumps were moved in and worked day and night pumping the flood water into the river.

All these activities took place during very cold and often wet conditions and went on for several weeks.

When the flood water had been cleared the massive task of ridding the land of the salt which had been deposited began. It took years to get the land back to normal.

■ Extract from *My Orford*

SCHOOL DAYS

MY first recollection was when I was only two years old. I remember being taken by my mother in a pushchair, in company with some other mothers and children to the bottom of the first hill past Mill Field Cottages known as Megbeggar Hill to watch the arrival of a Royal Horse Artillery detachment as they entered Sudbourne Hall park through an entrance between the trees. I was later told that this happened in 1926 on the occasion of the General Strike when the Army were deployed to strategic positions around the country.

I started school in 1929.

During the winter months the school was heated by a fireplace in each classroom, the teacher's desk was always nearest the fire and the pupils at the back of the class did not get much benefit from the fire and sometimes had to wear greatcoats and mittens to keep warm.

■ Extract from *My Orford*

ORFORD NESS

AT the outbreak of war the island was again used as an experimental station, not as an airfield but for gunnery and ammunition trials and aircraft were brought through the village and taken to the island to be fired at with various guns and ammunition. They were brought on 60-foot long articulated low loaders known as Queen Marys, the fuselage and wing stubs on one and the wings on another. When a Stirling bomber was brought in there was some difficulty in getting it past the King's Head where the road was very narrow, there being a row of houses opposite at that time with a telegraph pole to complicate it further. We always tried to get something off these planes as a souvenir and on this occasion my brother Jack acquired four large bolts. Later he heard that enquiries were being made over the loss of the wing bolts and the police were being brought in. That night after dark, Jack quietly returned the bolts to the quay.

■ Extract from *My Orford*

POST-WAR ORFORD

UPON my release from the RAF on 8th April 1946 I obtained a job on the farms at Gedgrave and Sudbourne Hall which were part of Sir Peter Greenwell's estate. Sir Peter had by this time been repatriated from the prisoner-of-war camp.

Farming at this time was still labour intensive; about 10 of us were cycling to Gedgrave from the village and there was a further seven or eight who lived in the tied cottages. Some horses were still being used although the use of the tractor was increasing.

The corn was cut with a binder which cut and tied the corn into bundles called sheaves. We would then pick up the sheaves, tuck one under each arm and stand them up with the bottoms about a foot apart and the ears leaning together. Eight or 10 pairs were stood together to form a stook, known locally as a shock. The air could then flow through the stook to dry the straw before it was taken on trailers to the stack yard.

Farming methods started to change fairly quickly during the early post-war years, acres of marshland, previously used for grazing and hay making,

were ploughed up using crawler tractors to pull the plough through the heavy soil.

With the increase in mechanisation advances were also being made on the chemical side of farming. As new artificial fertilisers were developed to suit individual crops, the farm became less dependent on livestock to produce the organic manure which had been used hitherto.

■ Extract from *My Orford*