

A Lost Soul of Mow Cop - Frank Lakin Jepson 1917-1970



Frank Lakin Jepson was my father and this is his story.

Frank, during his youth and, perhaps, also his childhood was referred to by some members of his clan as being the 'black sheep' of the family. Perhaps this was true. After all he played truant from school, he spent time in a Borstal institution and was jailed for a number of burglaries; all before his twenty-fourth birthday. His Army record was also something not to be proud of. Having such a chequered history you, the reader, may well ask why I would want to highlight my father's unsavoury past. Well, basically, I want to set the record straight, whilst also wanting to make sure that he is not forgotten.

Frank lived a short and turbulent life and his 'black sheep' reputation, was caused by a lack of love and care during his childhood and youth. Despite this turbulent life he left a legacy that is to be proud of and I write his story having the deepest respect and love for him for having been my father.

Thanks to the 'Mow Cop Interactive Website' (for which I will be forever grateful), we, my Wife and I, have established links with some of Frank's long-lost relatives. We have also established strong family bonds with three of Frank's cousins whom we regularly visit. From our 'get-togethers' we have learned a lot more about Frank's turbulent childhood than we could have ever imagined.

This story of Frank is written from what I have managed to ascertain to date. It will always be a work in progress. Hopefully, it will be of interest to 'Mow Cop Interactive' readers and will also continue to jog some local memories.

Frank was born the son of Frances Elizabeth Jepson (1898) in Mow Cop on 7th May 1917. Francis, better known as 'Lizzie', was the daughter of Charles Lakin Jepson (1874) and Sarah Jane Minnie Jepson (née Wardle - 1874). Charles, a coal miner, (also reportedly an accomplished Piano Accordionist and Trombone player) and daughter Lizzie and all her siblings were also born in either Mow Cop

or within the area of Biddulph.

Firstly, before embarking on Frank's story I would like to add a little more about his family and in particular about his Grandparents and Uncles and Aunts. I do not need to tell you much about the life and times of working-class folk in pre 20th Century Britain, other than to say that survival was a challenge; even more so if you were a coal miner or from a coal mining family. Charles and Sarah had a total of twelve children. Three of their children died at or soon after birth, one died at the age of three and a fifth child died with Peritonitis in her teenage years. There were seven survivors; four girls and three boys. Lizzie, Frank's mother, was the second oldest.

In the 1950's, when I was a young lad, no more than nine years old, my father, Frank, would occasionally take me with him when visiting some of his Uncles and Aunts. They would sometimes give me 'two shillings' or 'half a crown' and on some occasions I would return home with as much as 'seven bob' (35p in today's money) which I would always give to my mother. We were also a working-class family that put good use to every penny received. I remember the names of Uncle Charlie (Charles Wardle Jepson -1905), Uncle Teddy (Hugh Bourne Jepson - 1907), Auntie Kath (Kathleen Ivy Jepson - 1910) and Uncle Chris (Christopher Maxfield - 1907 - Kath's husband). Hugh Bourne being nick named 'Teddy' is a humourous tale. The family were 'Methodists' and his parents, Charles and Sarah, decided to name him after the famous Mow Cop Methodist Preacher 'Hugh Bourne'. It is reported that the young Hugh did not think much of his name and, being 'curly' haired as a boy, inherited the name 'Teddy'. Note: anyone visiting Mow Cop can view the commemorative plaque to 'Hugh Bourne', which resides near Mow Cop Castle.

Unfortunately, Frank Lakin Jepson was born illegitimate. His Birth Certificate did not name the father. Giving birth to an illegitimate child was still a major sin in the first half of the 20th Century and being 'base born' you were considered unworthy.

As Frank's Christian name included 'Lakin', I had given thought to his father's surname being 'Lakin'. It was not uncommon for a mother to name her illegitimate child with the father's surname in his or her title. There had been many Lakins in the area where Frank had been born and at one stage, I had researched the option of Frank's father being, believe it or not, a milkman by the name of Arthur Lakin. After further investigations, however, I discovered that the name 'Lakin' was, indeed, born out of an 'illegitimate' situation but not that of my father's. A third great grandmother of mine had also been born out of wedlock and sometime after her birth her mother married a Charles Lakin. Hence the Christian name 'Lakin' had been passed down through the family to

both Lizzie's father and to her son Frank.

Frank was baptised at the Wesleyan Methodist Church at Hillside, Mow Cop on 23rd May 1917. The 'Staffordshire Archives' confirmed that his parents had been 'Elizabeth Jepson' of Mow Cop and one 'Joseph Sherwin' from Packmoor, Newchapel, Staffordshire. Just a little bit of trivia - Joseph, believe it or not, was born on the 4th July 1897 (American Independence Day) in America Street, Tunstall.

The 1911 Census confirmed that Joseph Sherwin, then aged 14, living at home, in Packmoor, with his parents and two of his nine siblings. At the time the Sherwin abode was also home to five boarders that worked in a nearby Ironworks; probably the Goldendale Iron Company at Goldenhill. Here, one can only make assumptions of how Lizzie and Joseph met. Lizzie had been employed as a Domestic Servant at the time of Frank's birth in 1917. By 1917 Joseph's parents, now in their later years, needed help with the running of their boarding house. It is said that Lizzie provided some of that help, and subsequently met and then succumbed to the charms of Joseph. Lizzie's Uncle Frederick Ernest Jepson (1882), brother to her father lived in the same street in Packmoor and he may have helped Lizzie with securing a job at the Sherwins and may even have provided Lizzie with lodgings.

Again, digressing a little from Frank's story - the previously mentioned Great Uncle Frederick had also been born in Mow Cop, where he worked in the coal mines. Sometime between the date of Frank's birth in 1917 and 1920 and following the death of his first wife, Frederick moved to Durham where he continued to mine coal and married twice more. The significance of the Mow Cop born Frederick Ernest Jepson is that at the age of 68 he was the oldest coal miner to die in the Easington, Durham pit disaster that claimed 83 lives on 29th May 1951.

Returning to Frank and his story - strangely, Joseph Sherwin, his biological father, forsook Lizzie for another woman (an Elizabeth Jane Bateman - 1894). And, he married this other woman on 3rd May 1917, just four days before the birth of his own son Frank. Joseph, however, did attend his son's baptism which was solemnised at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on 23rd May. Family stories confirm that Joseph's parents disapproved of the Jepson clan, considering them to be a low working-class family. The Sherwins, it would seem, were keen to see their son married to Miss Bateman before he had a chance of doing the honourable thing. The word, however, is that Lizzie was not the only lass to fall for Joseph's charms. Frank may not have been the only child not to have inherited the 'Sherwin' surname.

For the first three infant years of Frank's life he lived with his mother, Lizzie, at the home of her parents and his grandparents, Charles and Sarah, in Mow Cop.

In 1920 Lizzie again became pregnant out of wedlock and on this occasion, she did marry the man she had 'dallied' with to spare her family of yet another scandal. Lizzie's husband to be was a George Ralph Stanway (1898), who, like the Jepson clan was another born and bred Mow Cop coal miner.

However, moving to a new home, although not so far away from the happy Jepson abode, did not go down well with young Frank. Soon after moving the newlywed's lost the child that had given rise to their hasty marriage. Unfortunately, the baby, whom they had named Jessie, died within a few days of being born. It was unlikely, however, that Frank's life would have been any easier even if he had been blessed with a baby sister. Stepfather George was a strict disciplinarian as would be testified by Frank and other family members in years to come. For Frank they were very unhappy times. He had been wrenched away from a 'safe and friendly' Jepson environment and cast into a new and alien world. And with George and Lizzie having two more children prior to Frank's eighth birthday he became increasingly treated as the 'outcast' of the family. As a consequence, he would regularly run back to the home of his grandparents, where he felt safe.

As a child he had a fondness for his Grandfather, Charles. Aeroplanes were still in their infancy in the early 1920's and Frank was fascinated by them. His Granddad had told him the story of a plane that had crashed in Mow Cop in the year that Lizzie, his mother, was born. One of Frank's favourite fables was of the day that he dragged a fallen branch back home in the hope that his Grandfather would be able to make him an Aeroplane out of it. Unfortunately, Grandfather saw Frank's asset as something quite different, subsequently cutting it up for firewood.

Frank commenced school at Mow Cop Castle County Primary. Here he regularly had to withstand jibes from other children about his parentage. Hence, an angry young Frank grew up with a chip on his shoulder and often got into frights. The shame of his being 'base born' was something that would trouble Frank for the majority of his life.

The years 1929 and 1930, in particular, proved to be extremely difficult ones for young Frank. In January 1929 his grandmother Sarah Jane, who had probably been more of a mother to him than his own mother,



died at the age of 55. In the years that had passed Lizzie had been quite content for her son to live with her parents. After all, they lived nearby, and it saved her son from the wrath of his stepfather and it was also one less mouth to feed. It had been a convenience. However, following her mother's death, she had no choice other than take charge of her own son. In 1930, to ease the situation, the Stanway's decided to move to Nottinghamshire and take their two sons and a distraught Frank with them. And so, in less than a year, this young boy had experienced the collapse of his world. He had lost his grandmother and had also been deprived of other members of his 'Mow Cop' family with whom he had formed a loving relationship. He had to say goodbye to his Uncle Charlie and Auntie Kath. Leaving Kath was a significant loss to him for she was just seven years older than him and more like a big sister than an Aunt. Initially, the only consolation for Frank was the fact that his Grandad, Charles and his Uncle Teddy also moved to Nottinghamshire and lodged with the Stanway's. This consolation, however, was short lived. Both Grandad and Teddy could not tolerate the wrath that young Frank continued to suffer and being unable to do anything about it, decided to return home to Mow Cop.

In 1930, whilst the Stanways lived in Nottinghamshire, Lizzie and husband George had a fourth child, a son whom they named Arthur. At the time of Arthur's birth Frank was still only a twelve-year-old. When asked, Arthur, who was 82 in February 2012, stated that he had little memory of Frank. All he could recall, or believed, was that Frank lived with his grandfather and his grandfather's family more than he did with him or his mother.

Records confirm that Frank both started and left Bilsthorpe School, Nottinghamshire in December 1930, at the age of thirteen. It is believed that these were Frank's last schooling days.

It is reported that, soon after his Grandfather's and Uncle Teddy's departure, Frank finally left the Stanway home in Nottinghamshire and returned to Mow Cop to live with his Grandfather.

This is probably true for in later years Frank was more in touch with his Jepson family and, with the exception of Arthur, rarely visited the Stanway's. Unfortunately, although Arthur is my Uncle and Frank's brother, his family did not wish to re-visit the past and have declined further contact.

It is reported that Frank, after leaving school, became another Jepson Coal Miner. Where he commenced his coal mining career is uncertain but thought to be near to his home in Mow Cop. From tales told by Frank in later years, he was quite the strong guy. Stories include; the carrying of hundredweight bags of coal, one on each shoulder, and using his back to hold up ceiling props whilst

other miners inserted prop shafts.

Frank certainly continued living with his Grandfather, Charles, during some of his early teenage years. The fond relationship shared by the two during Frank's childhood, however, had eroded. Charles had turned to 'the bottle' following the loss of his wife Sarah and it has been said that he spent much of his time propping up the Bar at the nearby 'Ash Inn'. He would regularly confiscate Frank's hard-earned wages to finance this addiction. For a while Frank escaped and lodged with a 'Mrs Tudor' but, unfortunately, he still lived too close to his Grandfather who continued to take advantage of him. As a consequence of being fleeced, the young Frank turned to a life of minor crime. In 1935, aged 18, having been caught stealing on more than one occasion he was sentenced to spell in a Borstal Institution, from which he would often escape.

Frank's reputation of being the 'black sheep' of the family started to grow. At the age of 19, he was arrested for burglary and of holding a Policeman at gunpoint. Subsequently, he was sentenced to eighteen months hard labour. Surprisingly, he escaped being sent to jail and was returned to Borstal.

At some point during the mid to late 1930's his mother 'Lizzie' and the Stanways had moved from Nottinghamshire to the Staffordshire Moorlands. Although Frank respected his mother, he still could not muster a good relationship with his Stepfather. Bad memories ran deep. The 'black sheep' of the family was not welcomed back into the Stanway household; not that Frank would have wanted to return anyway.

Following another escape from Borstal he found lodgings in Chatterley and took up employment at the Chatterley-Whitfield Colliery in Tunstall. He then enlisted as a soldier with the North Staffordshire Regiment. However, he continued his life of larceny and the 1939 Wartime Register confirmed that the law had finally caught up with him for he was listed as an 'inmate' at the notorious 'Old Elvet' prison in Durham.



In July 1940 Frank, now aged twenty-three, was conscripted into the 11th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment at Hereford. However, the still very troubled, Frank would often go AWOL and continued to break the law. He was eventually arrested for another burglary for which he was again sentenced to hard labour. With World War Two now well underway, the Army needed every soldier it could muster and so his sentence was cut short and he was returned to his

regiment. Private Frank Jepson, despite arrests, detentions, fines and the threat of further time at His Majesty's pleasure, would continue to go AWOL.

In May 1942 Frank was transferred to the Pioneer Corps, located at Craven Arms in Shropshire. Whilst there he met his wife to be: Rebecca (Becky) Price. After a short courtship they married in Shrewsbury in September 1942. One month later he, with his regiment, embarked for North Africa.

Frank told very few stories about his time in Africa. Probably this was for obvious reasons. Perhaps, like for many soldiers; war was something you did not talk about. He did mention that on one occasion he almost killed another soldier. A fight broke out and he punched the soldier, knocking him out of the back of a moving lorry. His defence was that he had hit the man for being disrespectful of another Staffordshire born soldier's dubious birth - a subject that still troubled him immensely. He told stories of scorpions in sleeping bags, snakes in rucksacks, sandstorms, broken down vehicles and much more but never mentioned any conflict with the enemy. His only conflict had been in the boxing ring where he had learned another skill for looking after himself.

Whilst in Africa, Frank continued his wandering ways and was either AWOL, absent from his patrol or had lost his kit so many times that the Army finally gave up on him. He was sentenced to five years Penal Servitude. Had he have been a First World War soldier there is no doubt that he would have been shot for desertion. Subsequently, in October 1943, he was shipped back to England where he would serve out the remainder of the Second World War in prison. He was released in November 1945, having served just over two years of his sentence. Surprisingly his Army Record confirmed that he had been awarded with the African Star.

Following release, Frank returned to wife Becky. Initially they were provided with board and lodgings at the home of one of Becky's sisters who lived in Eaton Constantine in Shropshire. Although having married Frank in 1942, Becky had little knowledge of Frank's past. His turning up again in November 1945 had been a complete shock to her. Having not returned following the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, she did not know whether he was alive or had been killed in action. Frank had not contacted her since embarking for North Africa three years earlier.

Frank and Becky moved into their first home at the Grange Lane, near Donnington in Shropshire in 1946. Meanwhile, Frank returned to what he knew best which was coal mining at the nearby Grange Pit. In December of that year the couple had their first of eight children (a son - me) and eleven months later came the first daughter. In 1949 the Family moved to a 'post war' prefabricated

home at Priorslee, near Oakengates in Shropshire. Whilst at Priorslee, Frank continued to mine but was also a Coal Deliveryman. Meanwhile the family was expanded by two more sons.

In 1950, soon after the birth of the second son, Frank again got itchy feet and attempted to return to soldiering. Fortunately, for the family at least, the 'King Shropshire Light Infantry' rejected his application. It can only be assumed that his war time military record helped scupper this planned escape from family life.

In the early 1950's Frank developed an 'ear' abscess. An operation followed. Coal mining, it seemed, was beginning to have an adverse effect on his health. Subsequently he came out of mining. In 1953 the family moved to 'Old Field', Sibdon, near Craven Arms, still in Shropshire; the place of Becky's childhood and youth and close to where her mother lived. Here Frank became a farm labourer.

The family's stay at Old Field lasted a mere five months, during which time the tiny house in which we lived was severely damaged by fire. The family's next move was to Cubbington in Warwickshire where Frank became a Cowman and his wife, Becky, gave birth to child number five and daughter number two. The stay in Warwickshire was also short; perhaps no more than about a year. Frank decided he wanted to return to coal mining.



The family's next move was closer to Frank's roots in Staffordshire, to Chesterton near Newcastle-under-Lyme, where he worked at the Parkhouse Colliery. The 'new home, new baby' syndrome continued with the birth of child number six and daughter number three in 1955. Unfortunately, the ear infection returned and Frank was again forced to look for work outdoors.

Weston Jones, near Newport in Shropshire was the family's next destination and another 'Cowman' job for Frank. This was another short adventure before moving on to a similar position at 'The Lye', near Morville, Bridgnorth, Shropshire.

In 1958, whilst living at The Lye, Frank had a motor cycle accident that would



hospitalise him for the biggest part of three years. Initially the hospital stay was for a broken leg. He returned home in plaster but wanted his bike back. Impatiently, he decided to push it home himself from the farm where he had worked and where it had been stored following the accident. Having only one good leg proved fatal. He dropped the bike on his plastered leg and did more damage than was done by the original accident. After another spell in hospital, more pins in his leg and more plaster he again returned home. Unfortunately, this ordeal would trigger a lengthy psychological break down which almost brought the family to its knees. For his wife, Becky, having not long given birth to their seventh child and fourth daughter and who during the same period had lost her mother, it was one of the most distressing times of her life. Frank moved through a period of being excessively aggressive towards her to one of being in fear for his own life. The second of these two-character changes resulted in a prolonged stay for Frank at a psychiatric hospital.

At the time of his accident, Frank had already given notice to the farmer and another farm job beckoned back in Craven Arms. Naturally, the Farmer at the Lye wanted his house back for another cowman. The family would have become homeless had it not been for Becky. She managed to secure a Council House in nearby Monkhopton. Becky swore that this would be her last move with Frank. In 1959 she gave birth to her eighth and final child and fifth daughter, conceived during those late troublesome Lye days. Becky was true to her word. Frank, who returned home in late 1961, was never allowed to uproot the family again. For the next nine years, until his death in 1970, he would again be a farm worker. He would make concrete slabs and saucepans and work on the building of a power station, be it for only half a day, and finished his working life employed in the carpet making industry. Yes, he continued to change jobs, but the family stayed rooted to Monkhopton. He never knew that the initially 'Agricultural tied' Council House had been obtained in his name. Becky never allowed him sight of the rent book.

Frank, during his life, had never settled down. His childhood had been turbulent. His youth had been troublesome. His Army experiences had been hell. With Becky he had fathered eight children. With each child that was born their appeared to be an 'upping of sticks' and a move to new pastures and a new job. Shropshire > Shropshire > Shropshire > Warwickshire > Staffordshire > Shropshire > Shropshire and then finally to Monkhopton in Shropshire. Bucket

toilet > flush toilet > bucket toilet, ditto, ditto, ditto. With the bucket toilet came a tin bath, the boiler in the outhouse and paraffin lamps and candles. Old Field's water supply was from a pump in the back-yard or from a nearby stream. The Lye was slightly better, initially having a solitary tap into a Belfast sink and Calor gas lighting. Life for Frank's wife, Becky, had been far from a bed of roses.

Frank, during his married life, had always been in employment, apart from the times when he was hospitalised or recovering. He would always hand over his wage packet to Becky. He did not drink but could not live without a fag. It could not be said that he was a real family man for he never played with his children, except perhaps for a game of draughts or cards. He was; however, the great protector and it was God help anyone that caused anxiety for either his wife or children. A point proved on more than one occasion. Frank loved motorbikes and considered himself an expert on their mechanics although this was far from being the truth. He enjoyed football and as a lad myself, when living in Chesterton, I remember him taking me to see Port Vale and occasionally to see Stoke City. In 1957 I even remember a trip with him to see the, then, famous Wolverhampton Wanderers.



Frank Lakin Jepson, born in Mow Cop in 1917, died in Bridgnorth Hospital following a severe stroke in January 1970 aged 52. Sadly, it is possible that he never knew who his real father was (although his Uncle Teddy did know Joseph Sherwin as they shared an interest in Racing Pigeons). He, perhaps, did not know that he had a

sister named Dora; the daughter of Joseph and Elizabeth. It is also sad that he, perhaps also did not know of the death of his mother 'Lizzie'. She had died three years earlier in 1967. Frank lost touch with all of his family during those raw late, turbulent, 1950's.

Frank's wife, Becky, outlived him by 40 years, passing away in the same Bridgnorth hospital at the age of 92 in February 2010.

Whilst many of the words I have written about my father are words not to be proud of, it is easy to understand how his life turned out the way it did. He was born illegitimate. His father deserted him prior to birth. He loved his Grandmother, who was more of a mother to him than his real mother, but she

died when he was eleven. He suffered the wrath of a stepfather which forced him to run away from home. When he started work, the Grandfather he loved as a child robbed him of his wages to spend on booze. He chose a life of crime to survive. He rejected authority, both in the Army and in civilian life. In the Army he would abscond; in civilian life he was always on the move. In his mind, the only way to survive was to stay on the move and this continued throughout the whole of his life.

At his death Frank left his wife Becky, eight children (aged between ten and twenty-three) and two grandchildren. Becky, who died forty years later, left behind the same eight children, plus twelve grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren. These numbers have been expanded by at least another four since her death, making a total of thirty-four 'Frank and Becky' descendants and still counting. They include University Graduates, an Accountant, Computer Analysts, Sales Personnel, Legal Aids, Forensic Scientist, Administrators, Carers, Factory Workers and Entrepreneurs. So far there have been no bad apples. Not a bad legacy for someone once referred to as the 'Black Sheep' of the family.

Christopher Charles Jepson (1946)

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