

## **Sir Charlton and Lady Grace Briscoe.**

The Briscoes' lived at Lakenheath Hall from 1930 to 1960. This story covers all of their time living there so as to present a reasonably complete account.

**Sir (John) Charlton Briscoe Bt.** 3<sup>rd</sup> Baronet of Bourne Hall, Cambridgeshire. Succeeded to the title 1921. Married Grace Maud Stagg MD in 1909. Dob 8 April 1894. Died 28 Feb 1960.

*Note: There has only ever been one Baronet of Lakenheath, Sir William Dunn, who left no heirs. He lived in London and at The Retreat until his death.*

Sir Charlton Briscoe Bt. MD. FRCP. was the second son of the first baronet, Sir John James Briscoe of Bourn in Cambridgeshire. His eldest brother, Alfred, died childless. Always known as Charlton (because his father was John), he went to Harrow School and then won a Warneford Scholarship to the medical department of King's College, London, in 1892. He qualified in 1898 and eventually became an MD in 1903. He was a notable sportsman, playing for Kings at soccer, rugby and cricket. He was elected as a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1910, and was promoted to assistant physician at King's College Hospital in 1908, physician in 1915, later becoming a senior physician.

He was a keen golfer, which was how he met his wife, in a golfing tournament between King's and the Royal Free. He married Grace Maud Stagg (see below) in 1909 and they had two children, John Leigh Charlton b. 3 December 1911) and Richard Kynaston (b. 10 April 1914).

During WW1, he was a temporary major in the Royal Army Medical Corps. After the war he played an important part as Vice President of the Ministry of Pensions medical board for shell-shocked soldiers. He gave the Arris and Gale lectures at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1919. His main interest was in respiratory diseases and he wrote numerous papers on the subject. In 1927, he gave the Lumleian Lecture\* on the muscular mechanism of respiration and its disorders. He was also physician to the Hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth in St. John's Wood, London, and consulting physician to the Evelina Hospital of Sick Children, now part of St. Thomas's.

Sir Charlton purchased Lakenheath Hall, formerly The Retreat, and its associated farmland in 1930 as he was a keen shot and also wanted an interest for after he retired. After undergoing a major operation in 1935 he resigned all his full-time hospital posts and retired fully to devote his energies to improving his land which was then described as,

*".....un-productive, soil barren and unfertile.... he grew 'unusual crops'. Patient tilling of land and soil made the 'desert blossom as the rose'. Local farmers were astonished at his flocks, herds and crops".\*\**

Sir Charlton was described as a 'born countryman' by a contemporary. He greatly enjoyed shooting and other countryside pursuits, both on his land, and in Scotland. It's said that he liked nothing better than to sit by the fireside with a dish of walnuts and a decanter of port after a day in deep snow and a hot bath! In fact, he had planted a considerable number of walnut trees on the estate along the fen side of Station Road. Sadly, they're no longer there.

*\*The prestigious Lumleian Lecture is given annually under the auspices of the Royal College of Physicians.*

*\*\* Obituary in the British Medical Journal. 1960. 1.81*

**Lady Grace Maud Briscoe.** MD. FRCP. FSA. DOB 9 Feb. 1891, Died 3 Oct. 1973. Grace Maud Stagg was the fifth daughter of the Rev. Samuel William Stagg, vicar of Kirby le Soken, Essex, and his second wife Sarah Anne Mason. She was one of 12 children, falling in the middle of the family who later moved to Waveney House, Waybread, Suffolk. She was educated at Ipswich High School, and decided that she wanted to become a doctor.

At a time when women could not vote, and when it was unusual for a woman to enter a profession, she was accepted as a student in the second admission to the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine for Women, London.

Her studies had been partly sponsored by the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society and so, after graduating she went out to Quetta, Balochistan, to work with women living in purdah and provide them with medical care. Then in India, Quetta now lies in north-eastern Pakistan.

Grace had met Charlton Briscoe through their mutual interest in golf and they continue to correspond while she was in India. Eventually he wrote and proposed to her in 1908. According to her own account, she replied by sending him a telegram containing one word: 'Parabole'. She was using the Universal Telegraphic Phrase-book, which provided 'a code of cypher words for commercial, domestic, and familiar phrases in ordinary use in inland and foreign telegrams'. 'Parabole' translates to 'proposal is accepted'! They were married on 7 July 1909 in St. Andrews Church, Weybread, and honeymooned in North Wales.

Grace continued her medical career ultimately becoming MD. During WW1, she conducted a series of experiments at the Central RAF Laboratory in Hampstead, which aimed to identify pilots who could better withstand the lack of oxygen associated with very high flying. In 1915, she published her results in a paper entitled *Observations on the Respiration of Airmen*. In 1920's, she worked in partnership with George Fraser Fitzgerald Eagar (a mining engineer), she patented an 'apparatus for administrating oxygen and other gasses for respiration' (GB 137217). In the 1920's she worked in the Physiological Laboratory of the London School of Medicine for Women on the effects of curare on muscles.

Grace focussed her medical career on the improvement of women's health and medical treatment, becoming a physician at the Shoreditch Maternity Centre. While there, she became a founder member of the London committee of the Medical Women's Federation set up to investigate 'the therapeutic efficacy of radium in the treatment of cervical cancer' in 1924. The committee included several eminent female medical pioneers, such as Maud Chadburn, one the first women to become a surgeon, and some well-known suffragists. She was also involved in the establishment of the Marie Curie Hospital in Hampstead in 1929, acting as its first Treasurer, and so became a friend of Marie Curie herself.

Lady Grace retired from medical life in 1930, although she continued to work with the Marie Curie Hospital. With Sir Charlton, she moved to live in Lakenheath where she developed her interest in archaeology to the point where she was the significant figure in several regional discoveries which were recognised as being nationally important. In recognition of her work she was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. (FSA). She retained her interest in welfare work, and became a JP in 1937. At the beginning of WW2, she became the Chair of the West Suffolk Land Army Committee and served throughout the war. She also became a County Councillor.

Post-war, while leading a busy life, she undertook several important archaeological investigations, a number of which were in our locality. She was instrumental in the founding of the Mildenhall Museum and was a notable member of the influential Cambridge Antiquarian Society who publish several of her academic investigations including those from Lakenheath.

After Sir Charlton's death, she moved to Cambridge and continued to be involved with archaeological matters. Many of the students who studied Archaeology and Anthropology in the early 1960's recall her interest and inspiration. When Diana Briscoe was working at Porchester Castle, Hampshire, in 1969 on a training course, with the excavations led by Barry Cunliffe\*, on hearing her name, he instantly inquired whether she was related.

She regularly enlisted the help of local youngsters in her excavations, one of whom went on to be a well-known metal detectorist, Ron Morley.

*\*Professor Sr Barry Cunliffe, then Professor of European Archaeology at the University of Oxford.*

## The Briscoe's in the Village.



*Sir Charlton and Lady Grace at Lakenheath Hall.*

*Photo copyright of Diana Briscoe.*

The Hall remained an important influence in the village and both husband and wife were regular attenders at St. Mary's, sitting in the one remaining 17th century 'box' pew which was later removed. They supported efforts in the village towards the improvement of medical care and treatment of villagers, for example:



*Lakenheath Nurse's Cottage. 1937. The Bury Free Press Sat 27 November 1937.*

Nurse Ashley, nee Summer and her husband Eddie lived here. The house, much changed in appearance is still here. Before moving to the cottage it's thought they lived at the bottom of Mill Road.

Both Lady Grace and Sir Charlton were concerned to make possible the improvement of housing in the village as well as supporting and encouraging fund-raising for Addenbrookes Hospital.

the deficiency in the plans.

### LAKENHEATH HOUSING.

A letter was read from the Lakenheath Parish Council regarding housing, and complaining they were not getting a "square deal."

In the course of discussion it was pointed out that far from not getting a "square deal," much time, thought, and investigation had been given to the matter of houses for Lakenheath. Several visits had been paid to the village viewing, and in search of sites during the past few months, and much correspondence had transpired between owners and the Council as to the acquisition of suitable sites. The Lakenheath Parish Council were asked by the Council a considerable time ago to suggest sites, but no reply was received until the letter now under consideration.

The Clerk reported that the land owned by Mr. Scott Moir was subject to incidents of the Manor of Lakenheath, and that the owner was not prepared to extinguish them unless the Council would meet the cost. It was pointed out that the total cost under these conditions would amount to about £80 per acre (the price asked being £20 per acre), and the Council considered this price excessive.

A further letter was read from Sir Charlton Briscoe offering further sites in Lakenheath, and it was decided that the Clerk write and arrange for the Housing Committee (Messrs. J. W. Brown, G. S. Peeling, A. W. Neve, W. Nicolson, and Rev. A. J. S. Ard), with the addition of Mr. J. A. Dow, to meet Sir Charlton Briscoe at an early date.

The Clerk was instructed to acknowledge the letter from the Lakenheath Parish Council, pointing out the position.

*The Bury Free Press Feb. 14<sup>th</sup> 1931*

After WW2 the Government was in some doubt as to how best to develop the Fen farmland which it considered to be under-productive. (Food shortages continued to be a major political concern and food rationing continued for some basic commodities until 1954). Sir Charlton had been, and still was, interested in the development of scientific farming methods. The very serious floods of 1947 had influenced the government of the day to improve flood protection for the village but also there was a great concern to maximise farming efficiency to improve the productivity of the land.

This was undoubtedly the result of food shortages experienced during WW2. In 1950 the government ordered an investigation.



*Flooded farmland near Undley. The flooding of the Fen had been a problem for centuries*

In March 1951 following detailed investigations into the complex issues of flooding, drainage, roads, water supply, homesteads, buildings and cottages, the Agricultural Land Commission presented its report to the Minister of Agriculture recommending the compulsory purchase of 2,700 acres of the Fen. Not surprisingly, there was opposition from the fen farmers and a meeting at the Bell Hotel following a postal ballot took place with Sir Charlton Briscoe in the Chair.

The Report stated that a *“multiplicity of ownership and occupation in such an area could not be in the interest of full and efficient production”*. The Report also indicated the positioning of a proposed Drainage Relief Channel.

*Lakenheath Fen Investigation Report. HMSO.1952*

In opposition to the report, Mr. R H J Young stated that, *“people living in Lakenheath have owned the land ever since it was a fen”*, and that there were *“deliberate mis-statements in the report”*. Captain Kidner urged farmers to, *“carefully consider the report before deciding one way or the other”*. Sir Charlton Briscoe, *“thought that the Commission was trying to behave reasonably”*.

*The Bury Free Press, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1950.*

The Bury Free Press later reported some good news for the farmers in the regular article, *“ON AND OFF THE FARM”*.

## 1,700 acres: it’s up to the owners now.

“One of the most controversial area problems related to agriculture in the Lakenheath Fen now appear to have been solved.

Last week the Minister of Agriculture has announced the decision to de-requisition 1,700 acres of fen. Compulsory Purchase of Fen land was not to proceed”.....

“The Fen Owners Committee, led by Sir Charlton Briscoe, had opposed the compulsory purchase order ever since,

in August 1949, a meeting of owners had entrusted them with that task. The Committee backed by the Country Landowners’ Association and the National Farmers’ Union met the Agricultural Land Commission.....”

“By 1953, the lack of a decision by the Minister was causing very considerable hardship to owners...

“This has produced a very favourable result”

*Edited from the Bury Free Press, Friday, February 19<sup>th</sup> 1954.*

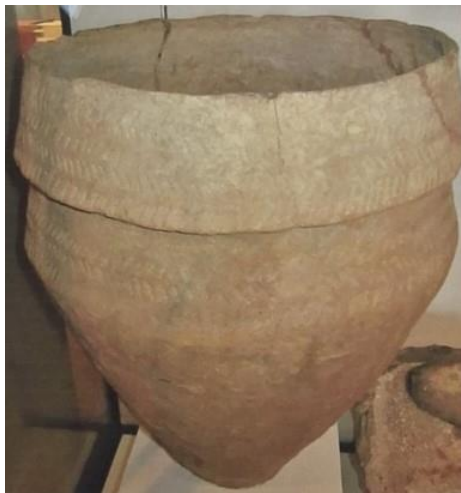
**Remembering Lady Briscoe.** ‘Roman’ Ron Morley.

*“I believe I was around ten years old with an interest in village history when a friend, John Allsop, took me to a local field his father farmed to show me where there was a lot of Roman pottery lying scattered on the field’s surface..... Having had my first taste of field-walking I started to walk that land together with a couple of fields lying by Sandy Drove that belonged to Sir Charlton Briscoe. After a few months I had a biscuit tin full of ‘finds’. These I took to Lakenheath Primary School to show Mr. Dent, the headmaster. He in turn told me to take them to the Hall to show them to Lady Briscoe.*

*Being very shy I had to pluck up my courage and pedalled to the Hall where I was greeted by her Ladyship who was interested to see what I had found. A few days later I was seated in her Wolsey 4-44 as she took me to the fields where I had made my finds. So began a friendship which lasted until she left the village.*

*On one memorable occasion in 1954 she took me to Leylands Farm in Hockwold. Here there was a very important discovery of a bronze crown and four diadems. These were thought to be the regalia of Romano-British priests on a site that was possibly dedicated to the Roman god Mithras. I was given a trowel and allowed to search through what had already been excavated. To my amazement I found a small decorated applique made of silver which had been part of one of the diadems. This has been fitted back in place and the whole thing is now on display in the British Museum in London.*

*Over the ensuing years I carried on searching the Briscoe estate finding many interesting artefacts which culminated in my finding of a huge bronze age cremation urn. Following her husband’s death she left the village and unfortunately I never met up with her again”.*



*A Bronze Age cremation urn found by ‘Roman Ron’ Morley.*

*Photo by permission of Mildenhall Museum.*

**Diana Briscoe writes:**

Although my grandfather died when I was only 11, I was always aware of how much he loved Lakenheath. In his last years, when his bed stood on the veranda next to the drawing room and he slept there throughout the summer and winter (protected by a large tarpaulin). I once asked my father why he was doing that. My father replied that he never wanted to leave Lakenheath and his greatest pleasure was to watch the farm and garden changing throughout the seasons.

*Briscoe biographical detail: Diana Briscoe.*