

South Ella Part 6

William Newland Hillas

Introduction

Major William Newland Hillas and his wife, Beatrice, and their family occupied South Ella from 1921 until early 1927. Like his predecessor at South Ella, William Hillas was a native of West Yorkshire, having been born in Leeds. By the time he purchased South Ella, William had become a successful businessman, owning his own timber merchanting company in Hull.

After moving to South Ella, William Hillas and his family soon became involved in the social life of Anlaby and Kirk Ella. He was a keen sportsman and a race-horse owner and a leading member of the Holderness Hunt.

Although his tenure of South Ella covered a relatively short period, William Hillas left an enduring legacy and, after leaving Anlaby for Etton in 1927, his son, Keith Newland Hillas, remained in the area and settled at The Beeches in Willerby. William Hillas died in Kirk Ella in 1960.

Early years

William Newland Hillas was a 'leap-year' child and was born in Headingley, Leeds, on 29th February 1876. His parents were John William and Annie Hillas (née Stanwix), who married in 1874 at St. Peter's Church, Leeds, where the parish register reveals that his father was a builder by trade.¹ William was baptised, around nine months after his birth at St. Michael's Church, Headingley. In 1879, he gained a sister, Dorothy Newland, but two years later, on 14th March 1881, Annie died, aged 31. Five years later, on 22nd May 1886, John William also died, aged 38. Thus, by the age of 10 years, William Newland Hillas and his sister, Dorothy, aged 7, were orphans and they became the wards of Annie's sister,



St. Michael's Church, Headingley,
where William Newland Hillas was baptised

¹ John William's father, John Newland Hillas, was a builder of some note. He was responsible for the building of the impressive St. Saviour's Church, Leeds, in 1842, and is named on the foundation stone alongside the Vicar and the architect of the building.

Gertrude, and her husband, John Thomson. They were living in Milton Road, Bedford, in 1891, and the census of that year reveals that the Thomsons had three children of their own. John Thomson, a native of Bolton, Lancashire, was a railway contractor by occupation and it is likely that his job had taken him and his enlarged family to Bedford.² However, William, at the age of 15, was not to be found at the family home in the town on the day of the 1891 census, but was a boarding pupil at nearby at Bedford School. The financial resources to fund



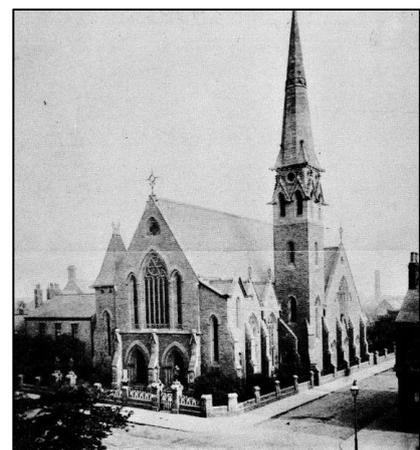
Bedford School, where William Newland Hillas received his education.

him at a public school were clearly available. Bedford School had just been rebuilt in the Gothic Revival style on a new site in the town and William would have been amongst the first pupils to enjoy the facilities of the impressive new building. Here, he would have met boys of his age from all over the country and also some from

abroad. Many of his peers went on to enjoy illustrious careers in many walks of life. Indeed, as we shall see, William went on to become a successful businessman and entrepreneur.

Marriage

It is not known how successful, academically, William Hillas was during his years of education and whether he went on to higher education. However, at the age of 23, he was operating as a timber merchant, possibly in partnership with others, in West Hartlepool in Co. Durham. Quite how he met Beatrice Gertrude Bristow, daughter of Charles Collingwood Bristow, grocer and tea merchant of Hull, is a matter of conjecture. However, he and Beatrice were married at Wycliffe Congregational Chapel on Anlaby Road, Hull, on 14th June 1899.



Wycliffe Congregational Chapel, Anlaby Road, Hull.

² John Thomson died in 1900 and Gertrude remained a widow for the rest of her life. She inherited £6,630 from her mother, Rachel Stanwix, who died in Robin Hood's Bay in 1905, and became a farmer at Manor Farm, Thurleigh, nr Bedford.

William returned to West Hartlepool with his bride, taking up residence in a large house in Grange Road, where they employed two servants – a cook and a housemaid. Whilst living in Grange Road, their first daughter, Dorothy Newland, was born on 21st May 1901. At the time of the census of that year, about two months before Dorothy's birth, Beatrice's younger sister, Hilda, was a visitor at the house in Grange Road. Had she travelled from Hull to be with her sister during the late stages of her pregnancy?

Soon after Dorothy's birth, William and his family moved to Eaglescliffe, a few miles south of Stockton. This was some 15-20 miles from West Hartlepool, suggesting that William's business may have relocated.

It was at Eaglescliffe that two more children were born to the Hillas family. John Philip Newland was born in 1904 and Keith Newland³ in 1906.

Timber Merchant

William Newland Hillas appears to have begun his career as a timber merchant in the late 1890s in the town of West Hartlepool, which, jointly with its immediate neighbour Hartlepool, was one of the four largest ports in England at that time. The port was a major importer of timber from Scandinavia and Russia. A map of West Hartlepool in 1897 shows the docks to be surrounded by timber yards and saw mills, all served by a network of railways, demonstrating the importance of this industry in the town. For an entrepreneur entering the timber industry, it must have been a perfect place to set up business.

Although substantial records have not survived, it appears that William Hillas, along with two partners, set up a timber merchanting business known as Hillas, Sherwood and Hewitt. However, the only record of this company is of its failure in October 1908. It is probable that the failure of the business in West Hartlepool prompted William Hillas to make his next move. In the aftermath, he formed his own company, Messrs. W. N. Hillas and Company Limited, and continued as a timber merchant although, reportedly, in "a fairly small way and in a weak financial position". He and his family relocated to Hull where William Hillas continued to pursue his fortunes in his wife's home town which, like West Hartlepool, was a large port hosting a thriving timber industry.

By 1911, the family had settled at Exeter House, Beverley Road, Hull, although at first, they had occupied a house in Newland Park where, in October 1908,

³ The Christian name Newland recurs many times in the Hillas family. It dates back to a marriage between Samuel Hillas, the great-grandfather of William, and Mary Newland, in Leeds in 1782.

shortly after their move to Hull, Beatrice was advertising in the Hull Daily Mail for an experienced cook.

In 1911, only Beatrice, the children and two servants were at home in Beverley Road on the date of the census in that year (2nd April). On the same date, William was a guest at the Imperial Hydro Hotel in Blackpool, his occupation listed as 'Wood Broker'. This was certainly a hotel in the grand style with '350 rooms, a magnificent lounge, recreation room, Turkish, Russian, and sea-water baths.' Another guest at the hotel was Herbert Bristow, Dental Surgeon, born in Hull, almost certainly a relative of William's wife. Therefore, it is likely that the two men had travelled to Blackpool together, perhaps with others, although the purpose of their visit to the Lancashire seaside town remains unknown.



Imperial Hydro Hotel, Blackpool, where William Hillas stayed in April 1911

A major turning point for William Hillas came around 1915 when his company was awarded £600,000 open and unsecured credit from the government. The man responsible for granting this windfall was Montague L. Meyer who had been appointed as Government Timber Buyer during the difficult early years of the First World War. This was seen by some as a risky loan, particularly as William Hillas, with others, had presided over a failed company in the past. The subject was even raised in Parliament. In the House, John Remer, MP for Macclesfield questioned the then President of the Board of Trade, Sir Philip Lloyd-Greame, as to the wisdom of Mr. Meyer in granting this high level of credit. He further proposed that a committee of inquiry be set up to fully investigate the details of this transaction. Maybe he felt something underhand had gone on. Sir Philip replied that he had "ascertained that Mr. W. N. Hillas was a partner in the firm of Hillas and Hewitt, which executed a deed of arrangement in the year 1908. The objects of W. N. Hillas & Co., Ltd., included the business of timber merchants as well as that of timber brokers. As regards the financial position of W. N. Hillas & Co., Ltd., the Hon. Member has already been informed in reply to a previous question that the company has paid off approximately 90 per cent of the credit given to them, and I do not propose to appoint a committee of inquiry".

The implication behind Remer's question was that Meyer, a timber merchant himself, might also have had an interest in William Hillas's business, thus compromising his integrity. Certainly, the level of credit provided (£600,000 is roughly equivalent to £15m in 2020) was generous but, maybe, justified at the time to support the war effort.

The loan certainly helped to boost the fortunes of William Hillas's business and enabled it to prosper. Soon, William Hillas would be able to afford to buy South Ella.

Military Matters

It was indicated in the Introduction that William Hillas was a Major in the armed forces. He began his army career in 1917, joining the Special Service Corps, founded at the beginning of the First World War in 1914 to provide specialists who were not attached to any other regiment or corps. He was attached to the Headquarters Unit and was quickly promoted to the rank of Captain on 18th March 1917, albeit at that time on a temporary basis. Later, William Hillas was seconded to the East Yorkshire Regiment. Here, he became an advisor in the British Army Forestry Unit, no doubt in order to utilise his knowledge of the timber industry to support the war effort. It was during his time with the East Yorkshires that he was promoted to the rank of Major. It is doubtful that William Hillas experienced any action against the enemy during the War and he received his discharge in 1920. From henceforth, he would always be known as Major Hillas, a title in which, no doubt, he took great pride.

South Ella

By around 1920, the house and estate at South Ella was for sale following the death of John Wilson. He had died in 1917 and the house had possibly remained empty for some time after his widow, Sarah, had vacated the premises. An indication that William and Beatrice Hillas had moved into South Ella with their family by the autumn of 1920 was an advertisement that appeared in the Hull Daily Mail in October for an experienced cook and kitchen maid at South Ella ('reply to Mrs. Newland Hillas giving wage, age and references'). That they had further reviewed their needs six months later was indicated by another advertisement the following May, this time seeking a parlourmaid ('give age, references and wages required').

By Christmas 1921, the Hillas family had been welcomed into the community and Beatrice and her daughter, Dorothy, were invited to be judges at the Kirk

Ella Fancy Dress Carnival. There was enthusiastic participation at the event with many attending in innovative costumes. Prizes were awarded for both children's and adult entries. Dinner was served and dancing was accompanied by Miss Edna Binning on the piano.

By the following year, Major Hillas had been elected as President of the Anlaby Sports Committee, and, in April, planning was going ahead for the annual sports day to be held in early July. The Hull Daily Mail of 11th July provided a full report of the proceedings:

ATHLETIC SPORTS AT ANLABY: GOOD ATTENDANCE

The members of the Athletic Club held their annual sports on Saturday, on the Croft ground. The weather had been unkind during the night, and the ground was in a heavy condition. At 2 p.m., before the time for opening, the general committee decided to abandon the children's sports and carry out the adults at 6 p.m. Meanwhile, the children from Anlaby and Anlaby Common were entertained to tea in the in the Memorial Hut, and were well looked after by the Ladies' Committee. At 5.45 p.m. a large number of spectators and competitors had already congregated, and the various officers were soon at work. The officers were: President, Major Hillas; Handicapper, Mr H. W. Barlow (Howden); Starter, Mr Kirk; Judges, Messrs Hood, T. Train, T. H. Church, A. E. Pickering and J. Abbott.

All the events were keenly contested, and good speeds maintained. The tug-of-war was well contested and Train's team merited the 1st prize. Sir Frank Sanderson's Cup changed hands from Mr N. Lisseter to C. C. Reid, and the new local cup presented by the president, Major Hillas, was secured by Mr E. W. Cariak, Springhead, for the present year. The Block Test had to be abandoned owing to the escapades of the animal, and the uncongenial weather. The mutton slashing contest caused great amusement, and after fifty well-merited attempts, Norman Wright secured a very useful joint. The prizes were presented by Mrs Hillas of South Ella, a vote of thanks being proposed to her by the chairman, T. Train, and seconded by Mr J. Abbott.

Which event the 'new local cup' was presented for is not made clear in the above report, but the fact that Major Hillas had inaugurated the award clearly shows that he was embracing his relationship with the local community.

Car Owner

Amongst the attractions promoted by the estate agent through whom South Ella was purchased by Major Hillas were garage facilities which had been installed by John Wilson some years earlier. There is no doubt, as we shall see shortly,

that Major Hillas was a motoring enthusiast and travelled the length and breadth of the country by car, driven on occasion by his chauffeur. Although most of his journeys occurred safely and without mishap, this was not always the case. During his time at South Ella his motoring escapades made the news on a number of occasions.

On the evening of 12th November 1923, Major Hillas was driving his car home to South Ella along Anlaby Road, when a Willerby bus heading towards Hull, driven by John William Archbutt, came straight towards him causing him to swerve sharply onto the grass on the left-hand side of the road to avoid a head-on collision. Later that month, Archbutt was brought before local magistrates to defend what was considered dangerous driving. He had already pleaded guilty to a speeding offence earlier the same day. In his defence he claimed that the headlights on Major Smithson's car had dazzled him and "he was confused by the glare of the powerful headlights". In this case, it was deemed that the evidence was inconclusive and the case was adjourned. However, the Chairman remarked that Major Hillas had survived "a narrow escape, and could congratulate himself that he was not killed". Archbutt was fined five-guineas for the speeding offence.

On another occasion the following year, Major Hillas was being driven by his chauffeur when an accident occurred on the York to Thirsk road. The mishap was recorded in detail in the Hull Daily Mail on 6th May 1924:

MAJOR NEWLAND HILLAS IN MOTOR SMASH

Major Hillas, of South Ella Hall, Kirkella, and Hull, and his chauffeur had a fortunate escape from serious injury in an accident near the Spital Hill corner on the York to Thirsk road on Monday afternoon. A ball race of one of the front wheels gave out, and the car collided with a telegraph pole and overturned, with the occupants trapped underneath. Two policemen going home from duty rendered assistance, and after having attention at the Lambert Memorial Hospital [in Thirsk] the Major and chauffeur were allowed to go home. The car was much damaged. Major Hillas told the Mail to-day that owing to the smashed condition of the car, it might be difficult to determine the cause of the accident, but he believed that the breaking of a ball race on the near side front wheel caused the wheel to come off. He was reading a paper at the time and the accident happened with great suddenness. Major Hillas is cut about the head has had a number of stitches inserted. His face was also bruised, but considers he and his chauffeur had very narrow escapes. They were travelling north, and were

about five miles outside Thirsk when the accident happened. The chauffeur sustained injury to his ribs.

A further altercation between Major Hillas and a bus on Anlaby Road was reported in the Hull Daily Mail in December 1924. Happily, he survived again to tell the tale!

Racehorse Owner and Huntsman

It is probable that when the accident occurred on the York to Thirsk road, Major Hillas was on his way to a race meeting or to visit his stables at Richmond. He was an owner of steeplechase horses.

His racehorses were stabled and trained, at least in part, at Richmond but ran at courses all over the country, from Perth and Ayr in Scotland to Brighton and Sandown Park in the south of England. In March 1923, his horse, *Trentino*, was entered in the Grand National at Aintree. The horse and jockey managed one circuit of the course but, regrettably, the horse fell at Beecher's Brook on the second circuit. Amongst the 'record crowd' at Aintree on that day was King George V, as was, no doubt, a disappointed Major Hillas.

His interest and enthusiasm for horse racing spanned the years between the two world wars with, perhaps, his most successful years being during the mid-1930s with winners including *Sonny*, *Forty Winks* and *Patriot*.

He was also a keen huntsman. He was joint Master of the Holderness Hunt and in December 1922, the hunt met at South Ella. An article in the Hull Daily Mail on 4th December described the progress of the chase through Hessle, Pickering Park, Anlaby, Tranby Croft, West Ella and Hessle Mount. Major Hillas was to remain heavily involved in 'The Holderness' throughout his time at South Ella and well beyond.

Family Matters

"The charming East Yorkshire village of Kirk Ella was quite *en fete* for to-day's wedding at St. Andrews Church. The bride was Miss Beatrice Dorothy Newland daughter of Major and Mrs W. Newland Hillas of South Ella Hall, and the bridegroom Captain Henry Neill Newsum, son of Mr and Mrs Clement Newsum, of Lincoln. The picturesque Early English church of St. Andrew had been chastely decorated by the jardenera of South Ella Hall."

So reported the Hull Daily Mail on Wednesday, 23rd April 1924. The church was packed and, as the time of the service approached, the assembled guests, who

had arrived from far and wide, eagerly awaited the arrival of the bride with her father following their short drive from South Ella. She appeared wearing an oyster-white gown of satin poplin, finely embroidered with pearls and hanging crystals and on her head wore a 'becoming coronet' of orange blossom, and carried a bouquet of lily of the valley. Certainly, no expense had been spared by Major Hillas for his daughter.

Like Major Hillas, the bridegroom was a timber merchant in a family business that had been established in Lincoln in 1856 by his grandfather.

After the church ceremony, a reception was held at South Ella where about 300 guests received lavish hospitality. The large ballroom with its splendid glass chandeliers would, no doubt, have been filled with happy laughter and animated chatter. Later in the day, the couple left for a honeymoon in Italy where they planned to stay in Venice and at the Italian Lakes. Afterwards, Henry and Beatrice Newsum returned and settled down to married life in Bracebridge Heath, a village located about two miles south of Lincoln.

By the time the younger son of Major Hillas and his wife, Keith Newland Hillas, married Margaret Joyce Smith in September 1932, the family was no longer resident at South Ella. In 1927, the couple had sold the house and moved to High Hall in the village of Etton about 4 miles north-west of Beverley.

South Ella Farm

During much of the time Major Hillas owned South Ella, the tenant of the farm on the estate was a man named A.G. Bray. By now, it was mainly a dairy farm and fresh milk was advertised for sale in the early 1920s, "to be collected at 7 a.m." when "20-30 gallons would be available". There is also some evidence that Mr. Bray also kept pigs.

In June 1925, one of the fields on the farm was made available by Mr. Bray for the annual Anlaby Athletic Sports Day for which a large and enthusiastic crowd turned out. This time, the weather was favourable and the children's events took place in the afternoon with events for the adults in the early evening.

The following year, Major Hillas planned to sell the farm and Mr. Bray left, although it seems not without a bit of a fight, involving a court case. The farm went to auction in March 1926 and the successful bidders were Robert Maurice l'Anson and Frederick William Scott, who were partners and owned other dairy

farms in the area. They were to remain as owners of South Ella Farm for many years to come.

Although there was one further owner, the sale of South Ella Farm by Major Hillas, spelled the beginning of the end for the South Ella Estate and in the following years, land around the perimeter of the estate began to be sold for housing development.

High Hall, Etton

In October 1926, an advertisement appeared in the local press announcing the forthcoming auction of High Hall, Etton, an “excellent brick and stone-faced residence.....comprising large entrance hall, dining, drawing and morning rooms, 8 principal bedrooms and 4 servants’ bedrooms, bathroom, lavatories, etc., linen room, attics, housekeeper’s room, servants’ hall, etc.” together with a Home Farm of over 500 acres. Amongst the bidders on auction day on 12th October 1926 was Major Hillas “of South Ella, near Hull” who managed to secure the property for £6,500 against “keen competition”.⁴



High Hall, Etton, near Beverley, purchased by Major Hillas in October 1926

The Hall had been previously occupied by Mrs Catherine Grimston, widow of the late Colonel William Grimston, who had died earlier that year.

Exactly when Major Hillas and his wife vacated South Ella and moved to Etton is not certain but by May 1927, South Ella was lying empty and was for sale. The agent described the house as “excellently situated in its own grounds, within four miles Hull, and about half a mile from Willerby Station. Near good golf links.”⁵ The accommodation comprises dining-room, lounge, smoke-room, and large drawing room, ball room, 8 bedrooms, 2 dressing-rooms (h. and c. laid on

⁴ More recently, in the 21st century, High Hall was described thus: Dream home: East Yorkshire. Got a spare £1.65m? Then take a look at this 10-bedder. High Hall in the village of Etton, near Beverley, comes with four acres of landscaped grounds and an annexe with leisure facilities including a gym, swimming pool and squash court. It was built by the Grimston family in 1756 and remained with them until 1927.

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/gallery/2010/jul/28/old-and-new-property-market>

⁵ Hull Golf Club had recently relocated to Kirk Ella and the new course opened in 1925.

in 3 bedrooms), bath-rooms, servants' bedrooms and bathroom, 2 kitchens, butler's pantry with strong room, servants' hall and 2 larders.”⁶ One wonders why the Hillas's wanted to move! They must have had their reasons. Perhaps it was the creeping encroachment of suburbia, as new houses for the middle classes were appearing in the villages of Anlaby and Kirk Ella during this inter-war period. Major Hillas had become a countryman and, maybe, he yearned for the wide, open spaces of the countryside that could be found surrounding Etton.

The villages of Anlaby and Kirk Ella would have missed the patronage of Major Hillas but what was their loss was Etton's gain. He and his wife threw themselves into the social life of the village where they had set up their new home. They quickly began to open the garden to visitors in aid of local charities, perhaps carrying on a tradition by the previous owner. Typically, admission was 6d and the garden was open from late morning to late afternoon on the last Tuesday in June.

Major Hillas continued in his role of Joint Master of the Holderness Hunt until 1930 when he resigned the position. However, throughout much of the 1930s and beyond he took on the position of Master of the Fox Hounds. He was also Chairman of the Hunt Committee for many years.

As we have already discovered, this was his most successful period as a racehorse owner and he was to be seen on many of the courses across the country on race days. At York races he was often seen “walking the paddock wearing his red carnation buttonhole”. Also, he is said to have had quite a large head and all this suggests that he would have cut quite a striking figure amongst all the other racegoers.

Timber Theft

While Major Hillas was spending much of his time visiting racecourses up and down the country, his timber business continued to thrive. However, there were occasions when petty theft from his timber yard were reported. Thomas Hutchinson of Spyvee Street, Hull, had been employed by Major Hillas at his timber yard for some fifteen years and was thought to be a reliable employee. However, on the morning of 26th March 1928 he was on the early shift and had secretly loaded a rully with about a ton of timber. He had offered this to Joseph Mann, a carter, and at 7.30 a.m. that same morning Cyril Nicholson, a colleague

⁶ Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, Saturday 21 May 1927, page 7

of Mann, appeared leading a horse into Hillas' timber yard on South Bridge Road. The horse was duly hitched to the rully, which Hutchinson had already loaded with timber and proceeded to leave. However, as the rully drew away from the yard, the theft discovered and Nicholson was apprehended.

In court, the following month, Hutchinson pleaded guilty to the offence but Mann and Nicholson, on Hutchinson's testimony, were seemingly both absolved from any blame, as they had been under the impression that the load they had agreed to collect was legitimate. No doubt, Hutchinson was summarily dismissed by Major Hillas, but it is not recorded what sentence he received from the court.

Another Family Wedding

Keith Newland, the second son of Major and Beatrice Hillas, joined his father's business following his formal education at Loretto School, near Edinburgh. Early on in his career he spent some considerable time in Sweden from where W.N. Hillas & Co. imported much of their timber. He also followed in his father's footsteps as a keen huntsman and horse racing enthusiast.

In his early 20s, he had been attracted by a young lady named Margaret Joyce Smith who was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Smith of Swanland House. She was said to be "fair-haired and typically English and a keen dancer, often to seen at the larger Hull functions". In March 1932, their engagement was announced and the wedding took place the following September at All Saints' Church, North Ferriby:

"The church, which was beautifully decorated with banks of fern, was crowded to its utmost capacity. Among those present were the Holderness Hunt servants from Rise Park. Blue and white was the colour scheme of the bridal retinue.....Masters Neill and David Newsum, nephews of the bridegroom acted as pages in long blue trousers buttoning onto white satin shirts..... Both families are well known in Hull business, social and sporting circles. Major Hillas is Joint Master of the Holderness Hunt..... past and present huntsmen attended and sounded "Gone away" on their bugles as the married couple left after the reception on their motoring honeymoon. They had been cheered on their drive from the church to Swanland House, where they received the congratulations of over 300 guests, by village folk and school children."

Once returned from their honeymoon, the newly-weds made their home at The Beeches on Main Street in Willerby. A report dated 1943 states of Margaret Joyce Hillas that, "she now has a girl and a boy, now at day school in Godalming,

Surrey”.⁷ The girl was Rosanne Dorothy Newland, born in July 1934, and the boy was Douglas Keith Newland, born in December 1936.

A few years after the children were born, came the start of the Second World War and Keith Hillas joined the armed forces. He enrolled in the Durham Light Infantry in which he, like his father, attained the rank of Major. In late 1942, he left England for North Africa and was away from home for a long time. He would not see his wife or children again until after the end of the war. We will continue with his story later.

WN Hillas & Co Ltd v Arcos Ltd

During the 1920s and early-30s, the Arcos Steamship Company was the UK agent for the State Mercantile Fleet of the USSR, and W.N. Hillas had dealings with them regarding importation of timber from Russia. In 1927, Arcos were suspected of smuggling Soviet secret agents into England and this subject was raised in Parliament by Reginald Clarry, MP for Newport who asked the Home Secretary “whether he is aware that Arcos steamships are engaged in a definite traffic of dumping anti-British agents in this country under the guise of legitimate seamen, utilising methods of intensive propaganda to pervert British seamen who are signed on in place of the agents left in British ports; and, if so, what steps he proposes taking to counteract these activities?” The Home Secretary replied that he was “not aware that the ships of the Arcos Steamship Company or any other ships trading with Russia are engaged in such traffic, and I do not think, in view of the precautions which are taken, that it would be possible for these ships to be used for such a purpose.”

However, it is not of matters of espionage that our story continues, but a court case in which Major Hillas sued Arcos for breach of contract.

W.N. Hillas & Co. had reached an agreement with Arcos to purchase 22,000 standards⁸ of timber from them in 1930, and negotiated a contract with Arcos to purchase 100,000 standards the following year at a 5% discount. Arcos reneged on this agreement the following year and it was for this reason that Major Hillas, on behalf of his company, took them to court. After a successful

⁷ Magazine of Prior’s Field School, 1943, where Margaret had been a pupil:

http://priorsfield.cook.websds.net/FileName.ashx?tableName=ta_priorsfieldmagazine&columnName=filename&recordId=54 (accessed 29 October 2020)

⁸ A standard or standard hundred was a measure of timber used in trade. The standard varied in number, size and composition from country to country, so the term is usually preceded by the region or port of origin.

outcome in favour of W.N. Hillas & Co., there were appeals and counter-appeals and, eventually the Court of Appeal awarded W.N. Hillas & Co. the sum of £30,000 damages and costs. According to a sequence of reports in the local press, the whole legal process rolled on for about two years but, in the end, victory went to Major Hillas.

Major Hillas seems to have been on a winning streak in 1933, as also in this year his horses achieved notable successes on the racecourse. On one occasion it was reported that at Newbury, "Major Newland Hillas, the East Riding sportsman, who resides at Etton Hall, Beverley, had his colours carried to victory to-day by his horse *Sonny*." However, nobody can win all the time and, at the same course a month later, *Sonny*, as co-favourite, was beaten to the line by four lengths.

Keith Newland Hillas - Prisoner of War



Keith Newland Hillas, 1940

Keith Newland Hillas, the younger son of Major and Mrs. Hillas, had attended public school in Scotland, and although originally commissioned with the Highland Light Infantry, joined the 16th Durham Light Infantry (DLI) in July 1940 soon after the Battalion was formed in Edinburgh. After much training and via moves to Dalkeith, Thetford, Folkstone and Rye, the Battalion sailed away to war on Christmas Day 1942 from Liverpool aboard the MV Staffordshire, as part of 139 Brigade of the 46th Infantry Division of the First Army.

Entering the frontline in the Green Hill sector of Northern Tunisia on January 17th 1943, the 16th DLI suffered grievous losses in the Battle of Sedjenane, which began for the DLI on the morning of February 27th 1943. Around 100 of the Battalion were taken as prisoners of war by German forces, including Major (as he had now become) Keith Newland Hillas.

However, the initial news reaching his family back in England was that Keith Hillas was missing in action. The worry that this report brought to his wife and family was soon turned to relief, when they received news that he had been taken as prisoner of war and was relatively safe. The prisoners were transferred to a camp in Italy but in the confusion following Italy's capitulation in July 1943, Keith Hillas and others managed to escape and headed north toward the Swiss frontier. However, before reaching Switzerland, he and his fellow fugitives were recaptured by German forces and, in late 1943, transferred to a newly created

camp for British officers, known as Oflag 79, in Brunswick, Germany. Here, one of his fellow prisoners was Bill Bowes, the Yorkshire fast bowler and, later, cricket commentator.

A radio was smuggled into the camp and this was used to communicate with the outside world. It was hidden behind a bookcase in one of the prisoner's quarters. Another item smuggled in was a camera, and photographs taken with this provided a unique record of life within the camp, although when and how the photographs were developed and printed is not known. There is also another story of the innovative use of ceramic tiles from the kitchen wall being used to produce lithographic printing plates, thus enabling the printing of maps of the locality to aid in a potential escape bid.

In late August 1944, the camp suffered collateral damage in a bombing raid by Allied air forces and several of the prisoners were killed and many injured in the raid. Keith Hillas survived and was finally liberated,



Kasernen des „Oflag 79“ bei Kralenriede nach dem amerikanischen Bombenangriff am 24. August 1944. Foto: Archiv Rolf Ehrenberg

Oflag 79 after the Allied bombing raid on 24th August 1944

along with his fellow prisoners, by the U.S.

Ninth Army on 12th April 1945, enabling him to make his way home to East Yorkshire and to his family.

John Philip Newland Hillas

Records of life events of the eldest son of Major and Beatrice Hillas are a little thin on the ground. No record of a marriage has been found.

At the age of about 22, he made a trip to the United States of America, and records reveal that, on his return journey, he was a passenger of the Cunard liner, *SS Berengaria*, when it docked at Southampton on 6th April 1926, having completed the voyage from New York. He was described as a “Timber Merchant” on the passenger list, so perhaps we can assume that he was working in the family business at the time. Whether his visit to the U.S.A. was for business or pleasure is not known.

It is a further seven years before John Philip Newland Hillas next appears in the records when, in March 1933, he was to be found dining at Powolny's⁹ restaurant in Hull with two of his friends. One of the friends, a man we only know as Mr. Potter, was an air pilot based at the Blackburn aircraft works at Brough. On his way home at the end of the evening, Potter was arrested by the police for driving a car while under the influence of alcohol. A report in the Hull Daily Mail on 16th March 1933 described the circumstances of Potter's arrest. He had stopped a policeman at a police box on Boothferry Road, Hull, and asked him to take over the driving of his car and take him home. He is reported to have said to the constable, "I say, old boy, will you take charge of my car? You see I have had quite enough. Take it to my garage, anywhere so long as I get rid of it."

The evidence described in the newspaper report clearly indicated that Potter had been drinking heavily, although John Hillas testified that when Potter left the restaurant he was "absolutely sober and fit to drive." The final outcome of the case does not seem to have been reported.

In 1935, John Hillas, himself, was in trouble with the law as the following report in the Hull Daily Mail of 8th July testifies:

MOTORIST FINED AT BEVERLEY

At Beverley Police Court today John Phillip Newland Hillas, of The Hall, Etton, pleaded guilty, through Dr T. C. Jackson, to driving car without due care and attention and failing to stop after an accident.

A charge of failing to report the accident was withdrawn, and a fine of £2 was imposed with an order pay the costs.

Although no further details of the circumstances of the offence are given, the report does confirm that, at the time, John Hillas was living at his parents' home in Etton.

At the end of September 1939, John Hillas had changed his address and was the sole resident at The Ship Inn, Sewerby, near Bridlington, where he described himself as a "General Farm Worker". What took him away from the opulent setting of High Hall in Etton and his apparent penchant for fine dining in Hull to more humble accommodation at Sewerby is an unknown in this story. One can only surmise that he was, maybe, helping with the war effort in which farming

⁹ Powolny's Restaurant in King Edward Street, Hull, popularly known as Polly's, reached its zenith between the wars. Polly's became a byword for style and excellence and was renowned for its luxuriously glamorous settings and cuisine masterminded by continental chefs. The Blitz in May 1941 robbed Hull of one of its major social and cultural attractions.

was a key industry in enabling the nation to be fed. Those involved in farming were exempt from military service.

Nothing further about John Philip Newland Hillas can be gleaned from public records until his death in Bridlington in early 1990.

Timber Trade Federation of Great Britain

No doubt the house building boom of the 1930s boosted the profitability of the business of W.M. Hillas, but how it fared during the Second World War and whether their timber yard suffered any bomb damage during the Hull blitz is not known. Nevertheless, in January 1945, a short time before the War came to an end, Major Hillas announced that he would be leading a trade delegation of representatives of the Timber and Paper Controls of the Ministry of Supply to Finland to negotiate for the purchase supplies of timber and wood pulp for the United Kingdom. On his return he reported that the visit had been a success and he had high hopes that a trade agreement would be reached.

In March 1947, Major Hillas had the distinction of being elected as president of the Timber Trade Federation of Great Britain, having previously been vice-president. This position enabled him to gain significant influence in the British timber industry. When in 1947, the British Government announced that it wished to cut the import of foreign timber by as much as £10,000,000, in view of the post-war economic crisis, Major Hillas spoke out strongly against this proposal, stating that the country needed to get building again and that wood was a vital commodity for the construction industry.

He took on the government for a second time the following July in a speech at a dinner in London hosted by the Timber Trade Federation. After dinner he spoke against the present Government policy of bulk buying of timber. He appealed to the Government to “remove the present system of bulk buying in the timber trade as soon as the time is ripe.” He added that “the Federation would help the Government in every way possible in pursuing such a course. I trust the time is not too far distant, when it will be possible that the timber trade be entrusted with its proper function of buying abroad and importing into this country its timber requirement.¹⁰ Whatever virtues bulk buying might have had during the war, these must eventually disappear. I am convinced there is one dominating

¹⁰ There were low levels of British-grown timber available throughout the War and this had been a matter of great concern. A wartime White Paper from the Government proposed that the State devote five million acres in the United Kingdom to timber production and this was to be managed by the Forestry Commission.

feature hindering Britain and the world and that is the cost of raw materials. This gets us nowhere except into trouble and only by bringing down prices of raw materials and costs generally should we get a solution to the problem.”

Major Hillas was on the offensive against the Government again in his acceptance speech when he was reappointed as president of the Timber Trades Federation in April 1948. He emphasised that timber was more economic than steel in the construction industry and would be a “great dollar saver”.

During this period, Major Hillas had also been appointed to the executive council of the Ballast, Sand and Allied Trades Association. Clearly, at the age of 72, William Newland Hillas was showing no signs of slowing down or retiring.

Master of the Fox Hounds

Major Hillas was Master of the Fox Hounds of the Holderness Hunt in 1950 when he was presented with a different kind of problem. The future of the Hunt, which had a history dating back to 1234, was in jeopardy. It had financial problems and was in danger of having to close down. Expenditure on kennels for the hounds had



The Holderness Hunt at Brandesburton

overstretched available funds and a serious bank balance warning had been issued. Several principal hunt officials had resigned and the whole organisation was in turmoil. Major Hillas called a meeting of all interested parties to be held at the Tiger Lane Rooms in Beverley in October 1950 to find a way forward and a means of keeping the hunt going. There seems to be no record of the immediate aftermath but the Holderness Hunt did survive to live another day. The Holderness Hunt still takes place today, although it now abides by modern rules and within the current law. As with most similar events, it is under constant surveillance by animal welfare activists. The hunt kennels where the hounds are housed remains in Etton.

Drewton Manor



Drewton Manor. Home of Major Hillas in the mid-1950s

Sometime around 1953, Major Hillas and his wife sold up at High Hall in Etton and moved to Drewton Manor near South Cave. Here he turned his hand to sheep farming and he caused quite a stir when, in mid-February 1954, it was reported in newspapers all over Yorkshire, from Bradford to Sheffield, that,

“English lamb will available for dinner in the East Riding this weekend and the man housewives have thank for bringing the joint three months earlier than usual is Major Newland Hillas, of Drewton Manor, South Cave, near Hull. Yesterday Major Hillas took 14 pedigree Dorset Horn lambs to the Beverley fat stock grazing market. He said they are believed to be the earliest lambs ever to appear in an East Riding market. Major Hillas bought fifty pedigree Dorset Horns a year ago with the idea of introducing early lambs to the East Riding. It is an experiment which, if successful, will tend to reduce the normal and sometimes inconvenient flush of lambs in June and July.”

Among British sheep, the Dorset Horn is the only breed capable of breeding throughout the winter and, clearly, Major Hillas had done his homework in importing this breed to East Yorkshire. Even at the advanced age of 78, he was seemingly still full of energy and innovative ideas. No doubt, he was proud of the results of his latest experiment and must have congratulated himself that he was the first in East Yorkshire to think of the idea.

The Final Years

His success with Dorset Horn sheep appears to have been Major Hillas’s final triumph. A few years later he had moved from Drewton Manor, downsizing to more modest accommodation in Kirk Ella where, in 1960, he was to be found living at “Holly Bush” in Church Lane. It was here that he passed his last days and the parish register at St. Andrew’s Church in the village records that he died on 10th November 1960 at the age of 84 years. His funeral service took place at the church a few days later and he was laid to rest in Mill Lane Cemetery. The inscription on his simple headstone reads:

IN
LOVING MEMORY OF
WILLIAM NEWLAND HILLAS

BORN FEBRUARY 29TH 1876

DIED NOVEMBER 10TH 1960

Keith Newland Hillas, died only a few months after his father on 25th January 1961 at the age of 54. His address at the time was The Croft, Greenstiles Lane, Swanland, and a note in the parish register of All Saints' Church, North Ferriby, where his funeral service took place, reads that he "died at De la Pole Hospital in Willerby". A memorial inside the church bears the simple inscription, "In Memory of Keith Newland Hillas, 1906-1961"

Following the death of her husband and younger son, Beatrice Hillas left East Yorkshire and moved to Lincolnshire to live with, or close to, her daughter, Dorothy, and son-in-law, Henry Newsum, near Lincoln. Henry Newsum died in 1968 and was buried in the cemetery at St. Peter's Church, Eastgate, Lincoln. In the church, there is a memorial window to his brother, who died in action during the First World War. Her son-in-law predeceased Beatrice by four years, she passing away on 22nd April 1972 at the grand old age of 95. Her funeral service took place at Lincoln Crematorium four days later, and her name is recorded in its Book of Remembrance:



John Philip Newland Hillas died in Bridlington in early 1990 at the age of 86.

Major William Newland Hillas and his wife, Beatrice Gertrude, during their long lives, spent only a few years at South Ella from 1921-1927. Despite this, Major Hillas, a larger than life figure, certainly left a lasting legacy to be enjoyed by the local community. His reputation as a forthright spokesman for the British timber industry, a successful racehorse owner and aficionado of the Holderness Hunt, and his many other attributes, ensured he was remembered as a much-respected figure throughout East Yorkshire and much further afield. This is, perhaps, the first time the story of his extraordinary life has been told.

Thanks go to many people, both members of AWAKE U3A and others, in helping to gather information for this episode in the life of South Ella. Special thanks are reserved for Christine Gibbs who spent many hours of tireless research to discover the genealogy of the Hillas family.

Francis Davies
November 2020