

HISTORY OF THE PRUSSIAN QUEEN

1950 to 1965: FRANK AND VERA SEARBY

Frank Searby was born in Grimsby in July 1904. The second youngest of six children of William and Hannah Searby (nee Brogden). The family lived on Hamilton Street, where his father worked as a dock labourer and fish curer. He was christened at St Andrew's Church, and attended St John's School on the corner of Cleethorpes Road and Rutland Street. After his father died in 1914, his mother married fisherman, Percy Leggett and the family went to live on Montague Street, Cleethorpes. Frank worked as a tram driver for the Grimsby Corporation Tramways.

Vera Daniels was born in Sheffield in June 1905, the second daughter of Lawrence, a clerk, and Elizabeth Ann (nee Carrick). She was christened at Sheffield St Michael and All Angels, Neepsend. As a young child she moved to Cleethorpes with her parents and older sister, where they lived on Douglas Road. Here her father worked as a railway shunter and then a railway traffic inspector. In 1921 16-year-old Vera was working as an apprentice tailoress in Grimsby, her 17-year-old sister was a milliner in Cleethorpes.

In April 1937 Frank and Vera got married in Grimsby. They lived on Lestrangle Street, Cleethorpes. During the war Frank was in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) as a part-time warden. He later worked as a groundsman at a bowling green in Cleethorpes, before the couple moved to Alford where they had a grocery shop.

When Frank suggested to Vera that they take over the Prussian Queen, she was wary as it was not in a very good state structurally or financially. She'd never even been in a pub before! Up until then a pub had been taboo, she said *"mother was dead against anything like that and I had never been in a pub before, but I told Frank I would go if I could do some catering, and not serve in the bar"*. She later recalled that she was amazed at what they did there, just the two of them, whilst still having to cope with rationing. Vera said that she spent most of her time in the kitchen.

At this time, the Prussian Queen was owned by Hewitt Brothers Brewery of Grimsby. In March 1950 Frank was granted a protection order for the pub, and the licence was officially transferred to him in June 1950.

Breakfasts and Suppers

They soon established an excellent reputation for catering, regularly fully booked. One Sunday 100 people enjoyed breakfast there, typically consisting of half a slice of gammon, two eggs, sausage and fried bread, followed by hot scones and butter.

Frank wanted to revive the historic tradition of a big **Harvest Festival Supper**, as used to be held in village barns and old alehouses. The first at the Prussian Queen was in October 1950. The room and bar were decorated with sheaves of corn, bowls of fruit, and baskets of vegetables, giving a warm and festive appearance to what many considered to be the event of the year. 62 villagers sat down at trestle-tables filled with harvest produce and other foods, then enjoyed entertainment after the meal. The next day all the produce that had formed the decorations were taken to the Louth County Infirmary.



The first Harvest Supper at the Prussian Queen on 17th October 1950. Photo appeared in The Louth Standard on 21st October 1950

The Harvest Suppers became a beloved annual event. In 1951, ninety people attended the meal, which included ham and tongue, salad, trifles and cakes. Vera did all the catering; a few voluntary helpers assisted with serving. Reverend Carr-Gregg of St Clement's Church said grace, Archie Ingamells (who grew up at the pub) was toast master for the evening. After the tables had been cleared they had community singing and a concert. Frank called it a *little family gathering* and joked that if the numbers kept increasing, they would soon need the Town Hall at Louth! The next day a van load of produce was sent to the Lindsey Blind Home at Louth.

"PUB" HARVEST SUPPER AT SALTFLEETBY



Seated at well-laden tables are Saltfleetby residents who helped to continue the revival of the traditional harvest supper at the "Prussian Queen," on Friday evening.

Louth and North Lincolnshire Advertiser, 3rd November 1951

In 1952, 110 people attended, included esteemed guests such as both of the rectors of Saltfleetby, police chiefs and inspectors. Toasts were proposed and drunk to the new Queen, and to the host and hostess. A concert party from Grimsby provided the entertainment, and much produce, donated by guests, was given to the hospital.

The tradition continued each year, with large attendances, immaculately laid tablecloths, sumptuous decorations of produce and flowers, loyal toasts, musical entertainment, and generous donations of food for *The Sycamores Home for the Blind* in Louth.

100 attend harvest supper at Saltfleetby



Louth Standard 18th October 1957

Darby and Joan Club visits to Saltfleetby

Louth members of the popular club for elderly people were conveyed in three buses and several private cars for summer day trips to Saltfleetby. Here they attended services at St Clement's Church, led by Rev Carr-Gregg where they were welcomed to the village by the ringing of the church bells. Sometimes over 130 people went on to have a meal at the Prussian Queen where the Searbys provided an excellent supper. In June 1952 the nice weather allowed them to dine outside in the late evening sunshine, before being taken home, arriving back in Louth by 10pm.

The Night a Bomb Dropped on the Prussian Queen

On Wednesday 20th August 1952 one of RAF Binbrook's first jet-powered bomber planes left the air base, about 16 miles away from Saltfleetby. Number 9 Squadron had only been flying the new Canberra B2 since May. A crew of three flew through the night sky at 15,000 feet in a circuit pattern as they carried out bombing on the range at Donna Nook. The pilot, Flight Lieutenant Ted Flavell sat on his own in the cockpit, the navigators Sergeants Wilf Crank and Morris Rhodes were behind him side by side. For bombing one navigator had to crawl forward, past the pilot into the nose of the aircraft and lie prone looking out through the perspex nose-cone to take aim and release the bomb.



**English Electric Canberra B Mk.2
WD932, the plane that dropped a
bomb on the Prussian Queen**

The weather for night flying was good, with visibility of about 20 miles, a small amount of cloud 10,000 ft below the aircraft had thinned, the wind was just a light breeze. Sgt. Crank was in the nose-cone for the first half of the sortie dropping a single bomb on each attack run. The night targets on the coast were made up of a circle of lights for visual bombing. They dropped 25lb practice bombs that contained a small explosive charge that went off with a flash and a puff of smoke to aid ground staff on the range in their job of plotting the position of the bomb impact.

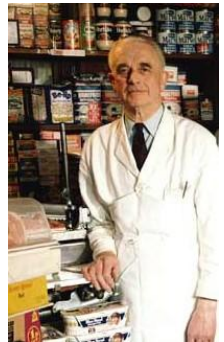
Just before 11pm Wilf climbed back into his seat behind the pilot, and Morris Rhodes went forward for his turn as bomber. They could see the countryside below them, the lights of houses and farms like small pinpricks of light in the inky blackness. The aircraft ran in towards the target and the circle of lights came into the bomb sight. Sergeant Rhodes pressed the bomb release button.....

Meanwhile the Prussian Queen had been full that evening with a mixture of local regulars, holiday makers and airmen from nearby RAF Theddlethorpe. Frank had called “time” nearly half an hour earlier. The customers had left except for a couple of friends who had stayed chatting over the bar. Vera and two helpers were clearing up empty glasses in the bar room.

Frank stood just inside the entrance to the pub. Shopkeeper Bill Platt, who ran *Platts Grocery Store* at 35 Eastgate in Louth (the one with the upside-down sign) walked round the corner to say “goodnight”, then left from the back door to fetch his car from the car park. He remarked “I’ve been watching the airplane”. Then there was a sudden loud explosion on the spot that he had just passed.

Frank later described: “We heard the bomber going over then there was a terrific flash and clouds of smoke”.

When the glare went from their eyes, they saw that the ladies’ toilet three feet away from them, had been severely damaged. They rushed out to find it in a state of ruin, with a hole where the window had been, the cistern and lavatory pan a pile of rubble on the floor. Bill Platt stood a few yards away, shaken but unhurt.



Bill Platt in his Louth grocery shop in 1982

The 25lb flash bomb had gone through the window, smashing glass, blowing out brickwork and twisting the metal window. No one was injured.

Frank told reporters “It was just lucky that Bill walked by that split second earlier. It was like a small gun going off. I did not think it was as near as that. It happened so quickly. I thought maybe it had dropped in a field”. “If the bomb had dropped a yard to one side it would have come through the door

and then some of us might have been badly hurt". Mr Platt said "it was a narrow escape, I had been watching the very plane that dropped the bomb".

An emergency call was made to the RAF authorities at the bombing range, and a bomb disposal squad turned out to recover the bomb. Frank commented to the Grimsby Evening Telegraph the following day "It was a narrow squeak, but it was business as usual again today. Only the toilet was damaged".

It seems that by a chance in a million, the lights in the pub car park were arranged in a circle, and were mistaken for the target on the range, just a short distance on to the east and the practice bomb had scored a direct hit right in the middle!



Grimsby Daily Telegraph
21st August 1952



Lincolnshire Standard and Boston
Guardian 23rd August 1952

Villagers had been awakened by the explosion. Mr Geoffrey Cabot, who lived nearby, commented to the Standard: "There are lights on the bombing range and I wondered if they bombed the Prussian Queen by mistake. If so, it was good aiming". RAF officers and representatives of the brewery came out to examine the damage.

The following evening the crew of the Canberra bomber and some of their colleagues from RAF Binbrook visited the Prussian Queen to apologise for the damage caused. Navigator Wilf Crank later recalled: "when we realised there were no injuries, we did see the funny side of it". The RAF held a court of inquiry and the captain was reprimanded.



Sir Cyril Osborne
in 1962 (National
Portrait Gallery)

The accident was mentioned in Parliament when the issue of dangerous stray RAF bombs on the Lincolnshire coast was debated in the House of Commons on 19th November 1953. Louth's Conservative MP, Cyril Osborne said in his speech: *"Just after last August Bank Holiday a rather heavy smoke bomb was dropped on a public house called the "Prussian Queen." It went through the window of a lavatory. Had it dropped half an hour earlier someone would have been knocked out, or killed."*

On 1st December 1953 the Air Ministry announced that it would suspend the use of the bombing range near Saltfleet. When asked his opinion by the newspapers, Frank Searby said “Will it be permanent? I understand it would cost a lot of money to move the ranges. Look at the lads who go in the air. They are risking their lives for us every minute. Ours is just a flash in the pan. They cannot practice with pop guns”.

The bomber crew: Wilf Crank from Farnworth, became a master navigator and spent the last years of his RAF service as an air traffic controller at Strubby, retiring to Friskney. He died in 2015 age 94.

Newly-wed Morris Rhodes from Kirk Hammerton, Yorkshire, departed with 9 Squadron from Binbrook to Cyprus as part of the Suez operation in October 1956. Here his Canberra B6 plane developed an engine fire and crashed just short of the runway. All 3 crewmen were killed. He was 32-years-old.

Pilot Edwin “Ted” Flavell from Battersea, was promoted to Squadron Leader. On 11th October 1956 he made history by becoming the first British pilot to drop a live nuclear bomb. Flying a Valiant B1, during tests in South Australia, the bomb, equivalent to 10,000 tons of TNT, exploded above the ground. 200 miles away children in a school near Adelaide felt their building shake with the explosion. He was awarded the Air Force Cross for his part in the operation. He retired in 1968, moving to Dorset with his family, and died in 2014 age 91.



Squadron Leader Ted Favell after dropping an atom bomb in 1956, 4 years after he dropped a bomb on the Prussian Queen.

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II

The day before the coronation Frank Searby organised a *challenge Coronation tug-of-war* between teams from the Prussian Queen and the New Inn, offering the prize of a barrel of beer to the winners. Large crowds gathered to watch the matches in Saltfleet, and then at Saltfleetby in the evening, which were both won by the New Inn team.

A large crowd of locals of all ages gathered in the Prussian Queen to enjoy the historic event on 2nd June 1953.



Inside the Prussian Queen for The Coronation on 2nd June 1953

A Glider Champion Drops in for Tea

In July 1954 French gliding champion Gerard Pierre, who was competing in the world glider championship in Derbyshire, unexpectedly landed in a field near the Prussian Queen. He was helped to dismantle the glider and put it in the yard, then Frank phoned his team, who later arrived with a car and trailer.

Pierre had tea at the pub, then joined customers in the lounge where he was surrounded by excited autograph hunters, before being taken back to Derbyshire. Three days later he was declared the new world glider champion.



**Grimsby Evening
Telegraph, 2nd
August 1954**

Pierre stands smilingly beside his glider.

Celebration Dinners

The Prussian Queen hosted a variety of gatherings and meals, bringing together people from all over the region, enjoying Mrs Searby's famous catering and the pub's hospitality. There was an annual Christmas and New

Year party for **village children**, attended by 120 children in 1953, who each received a present from a heavily laden Christmas tree and watched a Punch and Judy Show. **Louth and District Farmers** held an annual dinner there, and also a farmers' wives' dinner.

A reunion of thirteen **RAF drivers** who were based in North Cotes during the second world war, took place in November 1958. It was the first time they had been together after 14 years.



A toast to absent comrades given by Mr. H. Sutcliffe (right) to former despatch riders stationed at R.A.F. North Cotes during the war, at the re-union at the Prussian Queen, Saltfleetby. Left to right: Messrs. J. Chapman, G. Wallace, J. Murdoch, A. Singfield, R. Harris, P. Bullock, R. O'Flaherty, R. W. Page, and H. Sutcliffe.

Grimsby Daily Telegraph 3rd November 1958

Churchwardens from 15 churches in the Louth East Deanery held an annual dinner every January, attended by about 50 people each year, including the Rural Dean.

Other organisations that held dinners included Alvingham Mother's Union, North Somercotes Women's Fellowship, Louth Boy Scouts Association and North Somercotes Police.

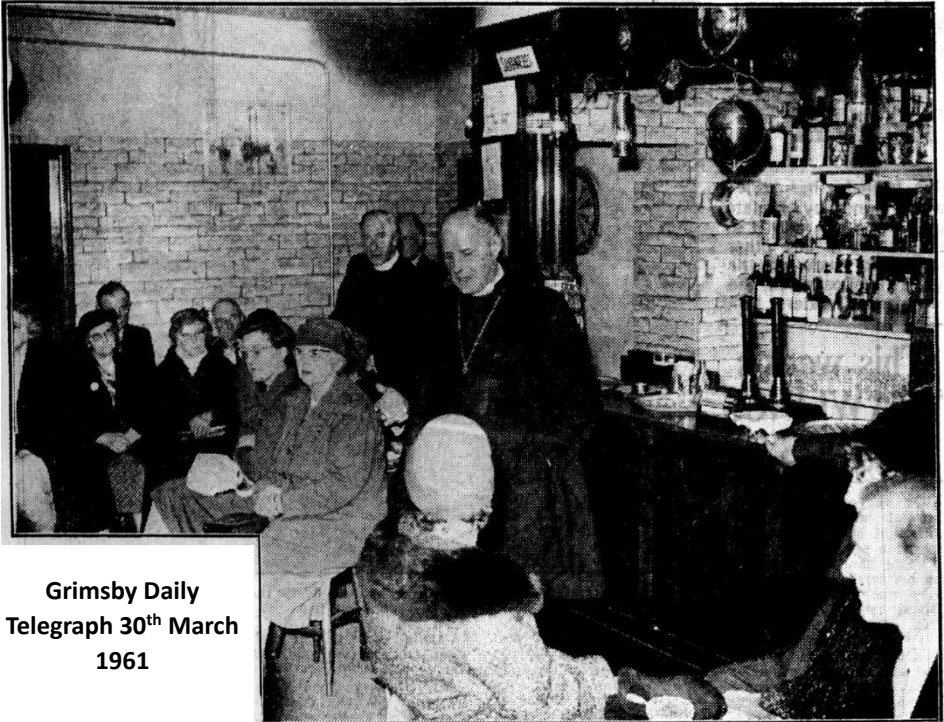
Churchwardens' dinner at Saltfleetby



Louth Standard 6th January 1961

Bishop of Lincoln, Rt. Rev Kenneth Riches toured the Deanery in March 1961. Including visiting Saltfleetby's St Peter's and All Saints Churches, where they had a picnic lunch. His tour of Marshland churches ended at the Prussian Queen, where a meal was held, attended by more than **60 clergy and church officials** from the surrounding parishes. The location for the meeting was chosen as it's the most central point in the deanery. Addressing the crowded pub whilst leaning against the bar, the bishop talked about changes needed to

bring the church up-to-date. After answering questions, the bishop chatted with villagers and joined them for sandwiches and coffee sitting around tables in the cosy lounge.



Grimsby Daily
Telegraph 30th March
1961

The Bishop of Lincoln speaking to clergy and officials from parishes in the Saltfleetby area at the Prussian Queen, Saltfleetby.



Sir Charles Tennyson
National Portrait Gallery

In August 1961 members of **The Tennyson Society** met at Locksley Hall in North Somercotes, where the poet's grandson, **Sir Charles Tennyson** gave an address. They then had tea at Prussian Queen where prestigious guests included the Society's secretary the Archdeacon of Lincoln, the Venerable A.C. Smith; the Sub Dean of Lincoln Cathedral, Canon A.M. Cook; and Mrs R. Tennyson d'Eyncourt. One guest, Mr Hunter cycled from Newark to join the event.

Drain Reeding Auction: The End of a Long Tradition

Our network of drainage dykes had to be cleared of reeds each year, some needed reeding twice a year to allow fresh water to get into the dykes in summer and then allow a free outward flow in winter.

The reeding was done manually by local men. It was not an easy job, often entailing standing with one leg in the water and the other on the drain-side to scythe the reeds and other vegetation, to keep the waterway clear. Local farmworkers could earn a lot of extra money by taking on the task.



Louth and North Lincolnshire
Advertiser, 26th May 1951

Traditionally contracts for this work were allocated to men who came along to the local pub to bid at the annual "*Ridding of the Reeds*" auctions. These were held at the end of May or beginning of June.

There used to be several such auctions in the area, the one in Saltfleetby was the last remaining, a unique tradition in our village.

The old custom of dyke-letting had been conducted for perhaps 300 years, believed to have been taking place at the Prussian Queen since the early 1800s. Around 50 or 60 local men gathered in the lounge of the pub to take part in a rare example of a **Dutch auction**, where the **lowest bid** won the contract. The pub landlord chalked up the bids on a blackboard.

The auctions used to be conducted by the **dyke-reeve**, a local appointed in each village to oversee work on the dykes and levy a rate for their upkeep from the landowners. The Louth Drainage Board, formed in 1938 was then responsible for this work. Fred Taylor of Thornton Farm, was the last dyke-reeve for our village, who attended as an observer while the drainage board engineer conducted the auctions in the 1950s.

The auctioneer called out the name of the dyke, such as: *Fishmere, Rabbitmere, Outgang, Greyfleet, Long Croft, Lowlands, Backstreet, Fleet Drain, The Aples, Little Mardyke* etc, and gave the length to be cleared in chains (one chain is about 20.1 metres). The bidders responded by shouting

out the price they were prepared to do the work for, starting high, until a lower bid was accepted for the contract.



An unusually optimistic bid brings a smile from "auctioneer" Mr. D. C. Morris, engineer to the Louth Drainage Board, and Mr. G. Murdy, the board's general foreman.

Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph 31st May 1956

Reeding veteran 65-year-old Ernest Clark, told the newspaper reporter: *"You've got to know how to swing a scythe – aye, and how to sharpen one too. Otherwise you can go home"*. He grinned as his next successful bid prompted a shout of: *"Are you saving to get wed?"*

Dyke-reeve Fred Taylor, puffing his pipe commented *"What shall we do when these old ones are gone? For the young men are not coming forward"*.

Mr Morris said that the drainage board *"are only too keen for it to continue, for it provides employment and is an excellent way of getting the work done"*. At the end of the auction the total cost of clearing the dykes in the 7,500 acre area came to £475.

In 1958 the total of bids came to £450. Frank thought that it may have ended up being the last, due to the declining number of bidders coming forward to

It was conducted with good humour, the pub crowded with bidders and onlookers, with choruses of laughter at optimistically high starting bids. *"What am I bid for Manby Middle Gate?"* called the auctioneer Mr Morris in 1956. To the first bid of £35, he replied *"We are letting, not selling you know!"*

Among the 1956 bidders were 73-year-old Edward Dring, who was pleased to win a contract for £19 15s.



A smile of triumph from a "wizard" of the scythe, 65-years-old Mr. Ernest Clarke. Among his successful bids was one for the Landlord's Dyke – and that includes free dinner and beer.

Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph 31st
May 1956: Ernest Clarke

take part, and the increasing mechanisation that was “*gradually cutting out the need for the men*”.



The landlord of the Prussian Queen, Mr. Frank Searby, chalks up the bids for one of the lots.

Grimsby Evening Telegraph 3rd June 1959: Farmworkers gather at the Prussian Queen to bid in the unique reed auction, and Frank Searby chalks up the bids.

Mr Morris commented that at the 1960 auction “*there were more people sitting at the auctioneer’s table than there were bidding*”. Because of lack of competition in bidding, Louth Drainage Board made the decision to end this centuries old tradition. They reluctantly declared that there would be no more Dutch auctions at the Prussian Queen. The 1960 auction was the last.

Frank Searby’s “Free Pass” Leaflet

From Louth
Museum

Phone: Saltfleetby 39

Free Pass

This pass is good in all bars, providing that the bearer walks, crawls and carries his own baggage and stops for all drinks and smokes at—

THE
PRUSSIAN
QUEEN
SALTFLEETBY
LOUTH

This pass is not transferable except to another man with money.

Licensee - Robin D. Evil
alias Frank Searby

TEN COMMANDMENTS

I—When thirsty thou shalt come to my house and drink. Thou shalt honour me and my barman, so that thou may live long in the land and continue to drink at my house for ever.

II—Thou shalt not take anything from me unjustly, for I need all I have and as much more as I can get.

III—Thou shalt not expect glasses too full or glasses too large, for I must pay my rent.

IV—Thou shalt not sing or dance too long for it is wasted drinking time.

V—Thou shalt honour me and mine, that thou mayst live long and see me often.

VI—Thou shalt not break or destroy anything on the premises, else thou shalt pay for double the value. Thou shalt not dare to pay me in bad money, “crook cheques,” “chalk,” “slate” or foreign currency.

VII—Thou shalt call at my place hourly. If unable to come, I shall

consider it an insult unless thou sendest a substitute or an apology.

VIII—Thou shalt not offend thy fellow customers, nor cast base insinuations upon their characters by hinting that they cannot drink too much.

IX—Thou shalt not take the name of my goods in vain by calling my beer “slops” or with a glance at the sky remarking “it looks like rain again,” for I always sell the best the market affords, and am always at home to my friends.

X—Thou shalt not forget thy most honourable position and high standing in the community as to ask the barman to “shout” but thou mayst “shout” for him (or me) often.

The Disasters that Happened to Three of my Customers

One said: “I’ll pay Saturday night as sure as I live.”—**He’s dead.**

Another said: “I’ll see you to-morrow.”—**He’s blind.**

The other said: “I will pay this week or go to hell.”—**He’s gone.**

Moral: The best-laid schemes, etc.

Many local couples came to Saltfleetby to hold their **wedding reception**. Marriages that took place at St Peter's, St Clement's and the East Methodist Chapel in the village, as well as at Manby, North Somercotes, Louth and Grimoldby, had receptions at the Prussian Queen, catered by Vera.

Louth Spire Road Racing **Cycling Club** frequently stopped over at the Prussian Queen as a break for refreshments during their long rural rides, enjoying tea by the fire before venturing out into the bad weather for the ride home.

The **darts** team played in the Louth, and the Mablethorpe & District Leagues. In 1954, they were presented with a wooden spoon with a red ribbon bow as a losers' prize, but came third overall in 1960. Frank did well in the pairs and individual competitions, and served as Louth league chairman from 1953-56. The league championship took place at the Prussian Queen in 1956, when Vera presented the prizes.

Frank and Vera's Retirement



Mr. and Mrs. F. Searby, who are retiring after 16 years as licensees of the Prussian Queen, Saltfleetby, with members of their staff and friends after presentations from the staff, customers and friends last night.

Grimsby Daily Telegraph 26th November 1965

After 16 years at the pub, Frank and Vera retired in November 1965. They went to live in South Cockerington, where Frank continued his keen interest in local history. He died in May 1980, age 75.

Vera treasured her scrapbook of memories from their golden era at the Prussian Queen, full of signatures of visitors from around the world, and photos of smiling faces sat at beautifully laden tables. Vera died in January 1993, age 88.