

## **Stanley Baker, 1924 to 2017: an appreciation**

Stanley Baker, known to most people as 'Stan', died in April 2017 aged 92. He was a remarkable person who, despite serious disability, made a major contribution to local history both in his village of Radley and more widely across Oxfordshire..

Stan was born on 27 August 1924 in Ashmore, a small village near Shaftesbury in Dorset. The family moved to Oxfordshire in 1935 and he won a scholarship to the City of Oxford High School for Boys. He left at 16 to help the family earnings, but by then he had learnt enough Latin to stand him in good stead later.

After wartime employment in a factory making aircraft parts and service as an air raid warden, he worked for Oxfordshire County Council as an assistant archivist, a job well suited to his talents. He continued in that role until 1960, but, remarkable though it might seem, the rules prevented him progressing further as an archivist because he lacked an honours degree. He trained instead as a legal executive, working in local government until retirement. Meantime he had married, had two sons and a daughter, and moved to Radley a few miles south of Oxford.

Stan's wife Mollie died in 1987, and then in 1996 he contracted Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a rare disorder of the nervous system, which initially manifested itself in falls and severely limited his mobility for the rest of his life. It did not however limit his mind and the less able he became to move around the more he seemed able to extract meaning from the most unpromising of documents. He embraced the new world of Information Technology, which enabled him to visit electronically what he could not visit in person, to zoom in on difficult texts and to generate material of his own.

The Radley History Club (RHC) was formed in 1997. Stan was one of the first members and joined the committee. After a spell as programme secretary he took charge of the Club's archive – what was at that point a grand title for not a lot. He continued as Club archivist until his death, by when he had built up a very rich and diverse repository of knowledge, all ordered and catalogued with meticulous care, building on his early professional expertise. As well as manorial records, estate records, maps, wills and probate documents, and Victorian photographs there is much about everyday life in more recent times and also a collection of discs on which are recorded the early memories of older Radley residents.

At the same time, Stan found time to help his old employer, Oxfordshire County Council, which was creating an electronic catalogue of its photographic archive, so that it was searchable online. He processed some 70,000 items, over half the collection.

In 2007 Stan's work for village and county was recognised by the British Association for Local History, which gave him its annual Award for Personal Achievement. Despite his failing mobility he was able to receive this in person in London. The award was accompanied by an appreciation of his work in Local History News (on which this piece draws) aptly entitled *A Tower of Strength*.

But he did not stop there!

In his last few years Stan turned his attention to the transcription of Radley manorial records, wills and probate documents – most from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. These had been sitting in national and county archives, but largely unexplored and unexploited. Some were in a terrible state, with much of the parchment eaten away by time. What could be read was often faint, in the unfamiliar handwriting of the time, and not only in Latin but in the coded version of that language which was used for such documents. His brilliant deciphering of this rich material enabled life in the village to be reconstructed and was crucial to the RHC's *Early Modern Radley 1547-1768*, published in 2014.

Also published by the RHC in 2014 was *The Changing Boundaries of Radley and Sunningwell*, a book which Stan himself co-researched and co-authored with Peter McWhirter. This again showed his ability to focus on fine detail and unconsidered fragments of evidence to unravel the past.

As well as being a key person in local history circles, Stan was a well-known and popular figure in his home village of Radley. In 2006 he received a *Contribution to the Community* award from his local MP. Many recall the monthly brain teasers which he set for Radley News and he was a leading light in Radley Retirement Group. He was to be seen out and about on his mobility scooter, which he drove a little too rashly, in the pub near his home and at local events. He was normally wearing a boyish smile as in the photo which accompanies this article.



Stan at the Radley History Club Christmas Dinner, 2004

Richard Dudding  
Chairman, Radley History Club  
May 2017