

Mr. A. B. C. Kempe



ARTHUR Bloomfield Courtenay Kempe was born 1882 in Exeter to Arthur Wightman Kempe and Harriett Susan Kempe (nee Beauchant). Amongst his ancestry A.B.C. can boast an Archbishop of Canterbury and an Admiral who assisted in the capture of Quebec in 1759 and sailed with Captains Cooke, Byron and Furneaux on their celebrated voyages of discovery round the world.

A.B.C's father was a Physician and Medical Officer of Health in Exeter and A.B.C. became the North Devon Superintendent of the Royal London Mutual Insurance Society, living in Barnstaple. In the early 1930's he was promoted to take charge of the Society's East Kent Branch which had its Head Quarters in Ramsgate.

In 1933 A.B.C became a member of the Town Council and in 1935 he was elected to the bench of Aldermen. He became Mayor in 1938 and held the position continuously for a record five years.

Throughout his time in Ramsgate, A.B.C. was prominent in social activities raising money for charitable causes along the way. In his role as Carnival Organiser he raised much needed funds for Ramsgate Hospital and as a result he became a member of the management committee and a life governor of the hospital. Before the outbreak of war he became a national figure as the Top Hat Mayor of Ramsgate and did much to place Ramsgate in the fore-front of British seaside resorts.

Throughout the war years he continued to work arduously for Ramsgate and succeeded in bringing valuable assistance to Ramsgate. He was also instrumental in obtaining permission for Ramsgate's famous underground air raid shelter system. For his achievements in caring for and entertaining members of the Armed Forces he was made the district Welfare Officer with the honorary rank of Captain.

In recognition of his public service he was made a Freeman of the Borough at a ceremony held on the 23rd March 1950. A.B.C. continued his involvement in activities until his death in 1959.

This is what the National Press had to say:

Daily Express, Tuesday 3 September 1940:

'Mad' mayor's new toy saves lives of his townspeople

500-BOMBS RAID

Daily Express Staff Reporter HILDE AIARCHANT

THERE used to be two opinions of the Mayor of Ramsgate - Mr. A. B. C. Kempe. Some called him a clown or the mad mayor.

Others said the old man has got his head screwed on the tight way. Now the whole of Ramsgate says one thing - he has saved hundreds of lives.

Even his critics apologise and say it 'was not madness - just foresight and imagination.

For the mayor, his borough surveyor, his architect and a few friendly councillors got the best air raid shelter in the country built before the war began.

When German airmen dropped 500 bomb on the town, smashed a thousand houses, most of the town was deep under the ground in three and a half miles of tunneled chalk.

Since this savage mass raid thousands of people sleep in the tunnels and every night the mayor goes round saying goodnight, tucking the children into their cots, assured that his population is in the safest spot in Britain.

FOR 60,000 PEOPLE

The idea for the tunnels was put before Ramsgate Council on February 2, 1938. The plan was that if there were war the tunnels would hold 60,000 people in safety and comfort.

If there were no war the tunnels could be used as an underground railway to the disused harbour station. They would revive the harbour Channel trade.

The Scheme got a rough ride, but was passed. It was not entirely the mayor's, but his enthusiasm pulled it through.

On June 2 the Duke of Kent was taken through the first completed of the tunnels. By September 3 they were finished. But the underground railway was abandoned.

The tunnels cost £60,000, have independent electric light, ventilator shafts, washroom accommodation. Mr. Kempe took me over them a day or two ago. They are the twentieth century catacombs.

Hundreds of people from wrecked homes were sleeping on deckchairs and mattresses, with bundles of linen and clothes they had rescued.

They all knew Mr. Kempe as he walked through, and he knew them all and their children.

At first there were many who thought these tunnels were just another Kempe toy.

"Now we can say there are hundreds of people here alive, who might have been dead or maimed," said Mr. Kempe. .

He has been in many fights in his town. First was when he was a councillor and marched into a meeting in a suit of armour, helmet and with a battleaxe.

He had been rehearsing his part as Hengist in the festival. He was told to go home and change, but when the stir died down every one knew there was a summer festival in Ramsgate.

They made him mayor, and he began to publicise his town, attract visitors.

There were still critics who wanted to know why the mayor walked on the beach in a top hat, his chain, and a braided morning coat, saying good morning to the visitors.

He realised that a mayor had to be dignified and a credit to his town.

He gave tea for 1,000 visitors on the sands. He went bathing with a beauty queen and with a little boy from Rotherhithe who was given a free holiday for bravery.

THEY GET CREDIT TOO

There should be credit to the borough surveyor, the architect and the rest, but the real credit the town hands out is for its mayor, who carried through the idea when many said it was extravagant, and just one of the mayor's mad schemes.

He is the idol of his town, and as we walked through the streets people stopped him and talked the little incidents of their lives over.

I talked with one leading citizen, who said: "Oh, yes. Kempe used to clown around, but he is no fool."

No. Rather he has proved himself a man of sincerity and judgment. When he crawled out of a bombed building the other day he set about getting the town together, getting food and clothes for the homeless. He is a real city father.

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This is what the Local Press said:

Farewell tributes to ' A. B. C. '

LAST tributes to the late Mr. A. B. C. Kempe, a former Mayor of Ramsgate and Freeman of the Borough, were paid at a funeral service at St. George's Parish Church on Thursday. Mr. Kempe, who lived at Southwood-road, died in hospital last week.

The service was attended by the Mayor, Alderman E. G. Butcher, members of the Town Council and representatives of many local organisations.

As the coffin entered the church, members of the Ramsgate Old Contemptibles formed a guard of honour. The Vicar of Ramsgate, the Rev. John F. C. White, conducted the service.

In his address he said Ramsgate had lost a great man and a born leader. "We meet today to pay our last respects to an outstanding man, a great character, around whom, at one time, one can almost say the life of the borough revolved."

The Vicar added, "When men pass from our sight who have done so much for the community, as Mr. Kempe, both family and friends best remember them in this life by furthering the good work they have inspired, instigated and accomplished."

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Mr. A. B. C. Kempe

AN APPRECIATION

(from a newspaper article by Eddie Butcher
Mayor 1953-54)

ARTHUR Bloomfield Courtenay Kempe, popularly known as A.B.C. will surely rank as one of the most outstanding figures of Ramsgate's public life.

He entered the Council shortly after taking up a professional appointment here in the early 1930s, when efforts were being made to revive the town's prestige and popularity after years of nationwide depression. It became quickly apparent that A.B.C. had a tremendous flair for publicity and an intense enthusiasm for every job to which he set his hand.

Many will remember his part as Hengist in the brilliant Ramsgate Pageant of 1934, his top-hatted tea party for thousands of visitors on Ramsgate's sands and his tours to promote the Ramsgate - Coventry holiday plan.

After notable service as Chairman of the Entertainments and Publicity Committees, he was elected Mayor of the borough at a time when the town's prosperity was at its peak and an era of success seemed assured. He was quick to turn every possible opportunity for publicity to advantage, and Ramsgate's top-hatted Mayor was pictured in many countries. He was almost ebullient in the way he went about his civic work and for that found his critics, but his one desire was to serve the town to which he had been sent in the way that fitted him best.

Within little more than a year after election to the mayoralty. A.B.C. found himself Ramsgate's war-time leader, a position which he held for four anxious and exacting years. In those days A.B.C. revealed quite another side to his character. His resolution, forthrightness of approach and determination, amounting almost to obstinacy, were just the qualities needed in those dark days. Sir Winston Churchill, Lord

Morrison and Sir Eric Geddes were but a few of the national figures who came to Ramsgate in the early years of the war to hear in no uncertain terms from A.B.C. of the trials and tribulations to which the area was sub-jected.

He was authorised by the Ministry of Information to visit Guildford and other areas to further local needs, and his air raid distress fund brought support from the U.S.A. His war-time memoirs "Midst Bands and Bombs" had a wide sale.

Appointed military welfare officer for the forces billeted in and about the town, A.B.C. received the honorary rank of captain for those services. He worked tirelessly to bring entertainment to the service camps throughout 'Hell Fire Corner,' journeying with his concert party night after night when bombing and shelling was not infrequent. Nothing daunted Arthur Kempe in those days for on top of all that social work he was a most able first citizen, leading the Council well in its deliberations during war and for the rehabilitation afterwards.

With the war over, the strain of those years quickly began to show in the man despite his strong physique, and in the early post-war period it became apparent that after some 15 years of devoted work in numerous spheres A.B.C.'s health was failing. It was typical of the man that, realising the restrictions placed upon him by indifferent health, he decided to quit public life, since nothing was good enough for A.B.C. but the best and he could no longer give it.

His outstanding public work was recognised by the Council in 1950 when they conferred upon him the Honorary Freedom of the Borough. But even then A.B.C, could not sit back and watch life go by. He revived with considerable success Ramsgate's Sports Week, took a great interest in sport and the development of youth welfare, and in fact continued to take a very keen interest in the town's affairs. still doing what he could in the promotion of anything likely to add to its welfare.

Arthur Kempe died as he hoped he would, in a quiet corner of the town which he loved, removed from the turbulence of the life that had been his. So passes a grand old man whose friendship and fellowship were enjoyed by thousands.

EDDIE BUTCHER

Mayor.