

Was This Man A Spy?



The answer is a most definite no.....he was my great Uncle Jim and here is his story ☺

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**HE KEPT BACUP " LIT UP " FOR 37 YEARS
Corporation Official Retires Next Week**

The man who organised the changeover of Bacup's 1,240 street lamps from gas to electricity, supervised the erection of some of the first sodium lights in the country and has just completed new lighting systems, on two of the towns main roads is to retire next Friday. He is Bacup's street lighting Superintendent, Mr James Bentley, of 12 Mettle Cote, Bacup, who is at present the longest-serving official employed by the council. It was shortly after the first World War that Mr Bentley joined the street lighting department as a maintenance mechanic only a small number of the lights were powered by electricity and provided just enough work for two men to repair and replace them.

Mr Bentley has many memories of those early days. He and the other 50 per cent of the other departmental staff, Mr William Smith carried out most of their repairs from a folding tower which they pushed around on a hand cart. Many were the time that a gust of wind blew the tower over, but Mr Bentley cannot remember anyone being seriously hurt by it. Working steadily through the borough the gas lamps were eventually replaced by electricity and the number of work people grew. One of the biggest jobs they had to tackle was the pulling down of the old tram wires between Bacup and Waterfoot, and Bacup and Britannia, during 1932 and 1933.

This was again accomplished with the faithful but now rickety, handcart tower. Shortly after this was completed, members of the council decided that sodium lighting should be given a trial in Burnley Road. They were one of the first Local Authorities in the country to take the step and the erection of the new lights was entrusted to Mr Bentley who had by that time been promoted to foreman.

NEW LIGHTING TRIAL

The section of the road between the Irwell Inn and Dog pits was chosen for the trial. This was so successful that sodium lighting is now generally used on all the main roads in the town. The installation of new sodium lighting in Todmorden and Booth Road has been, in fact Mr Bentley's last major job. During his time with the street lighting department Mr Bentley had many unusual incidents. He was once called out to the Mechanics Hall when people giving a pantomime were using too many lights. This resulted in the wires being overloaded when Mr Bentley reached the building several of the pipes in the cellar were white-hot. Unfortunately, the building was crowded and the pantomime was in full swing. Not wanting to cause a panic, Mr Bentley ran a cable from his workshop in Irwell Terrace to the hall and held it in place for two hours amidst the smoke and fumes that were building up in the cellar. After this warning, much of the wiring was replaced.

Mr Bentley claims that he was probably one of the first wireless operators in the North of England. He got his first set in 1911 and because of his experience he was drafted into the Royal Flying Corps as a wireless operator soon after the start of the First World War. Serving in France, Belgium and Italy he was mentioned in despatches. One of his proudest possessions is a parchment scroll which he received for this.



WARTIME RADIO SERVICE

Too old for active service during the Second World War, he expected that he would have to serve in either the Royal Observer Corps or the Home Guard. But his experience as a wireless operator brought him a most unusual task. He was asked to use his radio for tracking down enemy agents both in this country and abroad.

Each day, the coded messages which he picked up were flown from Manchester to London to be deciphered by experts. In time he managed to "break" some of the more simple codes himself. One code baffled him for some time but he eventually found out that one agent was sending details to another on how to treat boils on the back of his neck. Mr Bentley cannot say how many agents he traced. He just sent his messages to London and was never told the outcome of them.

In fact, only two people in Bacup knew of his secret at the time and this list has not grown much over the years. He says that the necessary secrecy sometimes got him

into trouble. In case the country was invaded, he was supplied with a Royal Observer Corps uniform which he wore only when visiting superiors at Preston. He also had a car and large ration of petrol and this made people suspicious. He was reported to the Chief Constable several times, but the Chief Constable smoothed things out as he was the second person in on the secret.

Now that he is to retire, Mr Bentley thinks that he may take up radio as his hobby again. He says that once you have learnt Morse Code, it is impossible to forget it and immediately gave a brief demonstration. During the past two or three years however, he has not been too well and is at present off work. His wife Elsie said she thought he had been worrying too much about his work and now that he was retiring he would probably recover quite quickly.

CHAIRMAN'S TRIBUTE TO OFFICIAL OF MERIT

Chairman of the Street Lighting, Transport and Markets Committee, Councillor J B Walley, told of Mr Bentley's service with the Corporation and said that while working in the old Borough Electricity Department he had proved himself to be an officer of undoubted merit. " Over these long number of years Jim Bentley has carried out his duties in a most efficient manner and with unfailing courtesy," said councillor Whalley. I think it is true to say that in all he has undertaken his first concern has been the interest of the council, and providing a public lighting service which is now a credit to the town, and indeed may be looked upon with envy by larger and more prosperous undertakings.

His knowledge of underground electrical installations is such that it is legendary in the district and I know that he has been the recipient of many enquires from outside bodies as to the particular whereabouts of cables and their directions in the town. I have no doubt that even in his retirement he will still receive many calls from harassed electricians who are just wondering where to dig next. This desirable knowledge has been accumulated because of Mr Bentley's settled service with this authority, by no stretch of the imagination can anyone refer to him as a transient officer said the Chairman. Until his recent illness, Mr Bentley had had only three weeks absence through illness in 30 years with the corporation, a wonderful record, and in that time he had saved the authority many hundreds of pounds.

SPLENDID RECORD

Councillor Whalley said that a few weeks ago he had referred in council to the retirement of Mr D Todd after 36 years in the Street Lighting department. Thus between them, he and Mr Bentley had given over 72 years of service to the department- a splendid record. The Chairman ended by wishing Mr and Mrs Bentley a long and happy retirement. A former chairman of the committee, Alderman J H Hargreaves, added his tribute. He was in agreement with all that councillor Walley had said, for he had come to know something of Mr Bentley's work as Street Lighting Superintendent. He had said before at council meetings that he was not aware of any other person on the authority who had done so much for so little, "you may weight that up as you wish", it is true on examination said, Alderman Hargreaves. He felt sure they were losing a good servant, and he hoped that Mr Bentley might have better health than he had had for the past few years so that he and his good lady

could enjoy a happy retirement. The story above mentions that only two people knew about Uncle Jim's radio service during the war, one person being the Chief Constable as mentioned but I was curious as to who the second person was. So when I recently spoke to Uncle Jim's daughter I asked her if she knew.

She told me the second person that knew was the Postmaster at Bacup Post Office because Uncle Jim had to take his coded messages to the Post Office every day so they could be sent on to Manchester and then flown to London as stated in the above story.

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