

Obituaries

David Bridges

David Bridges, soldier and land agent

Born: 20 June, 1919, in Edinburgh
Died: 31 August, 2003, in St Boswells, aged 84

DAVID Bridges was a land agent for more than half a century, nearly 30 years of which were spent managing the Marquis of Lothian's estates in the Scottish Borders. He was a passionate steward of the Borders rural landscape and strove to make it a good place in which to live, work and play.

As a conservationist, he was ahead of his time – Harestanes Countryside Visitor Centre, in the heart of the Lothian Estates, near Jedburgh, was one of his many initiatives.

Over the past 20 years, he was responsible for leading the redevelopment and regeneration of the community at Newtongrange, near Dalkeith. Described as "the village that no one wants" in a 1982 television documentary, Bridges proved all the doubters and critics wrong, with his relentless drive and commitment to improving a blighted urban environment.

David Bridges was born when the bells of peace were ringing to celebrate the signing of the treaty to end the Great War. He went to Flora Stevenson's School and Broughton Secondary, both in Edinburgh, and started his working life as a trainee with the British Oil and Cake Mills in Leith. He was a keen footballer, and kept goal for Raeburn Amateurs.

He joined the Territorial Army (Royal Artillery) and, after the German occupation of the Sudetenland, was embodied into the regular army. From 1939 to 1941 he served with mobile anti-aircraft batteries in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Wick, Bristol and Dover, and in London during the Blitz. During this period he was commissioned and held ranks up to acting major before the war ended.

In 1942, Bridges was sent to the Far East, serving with Indian

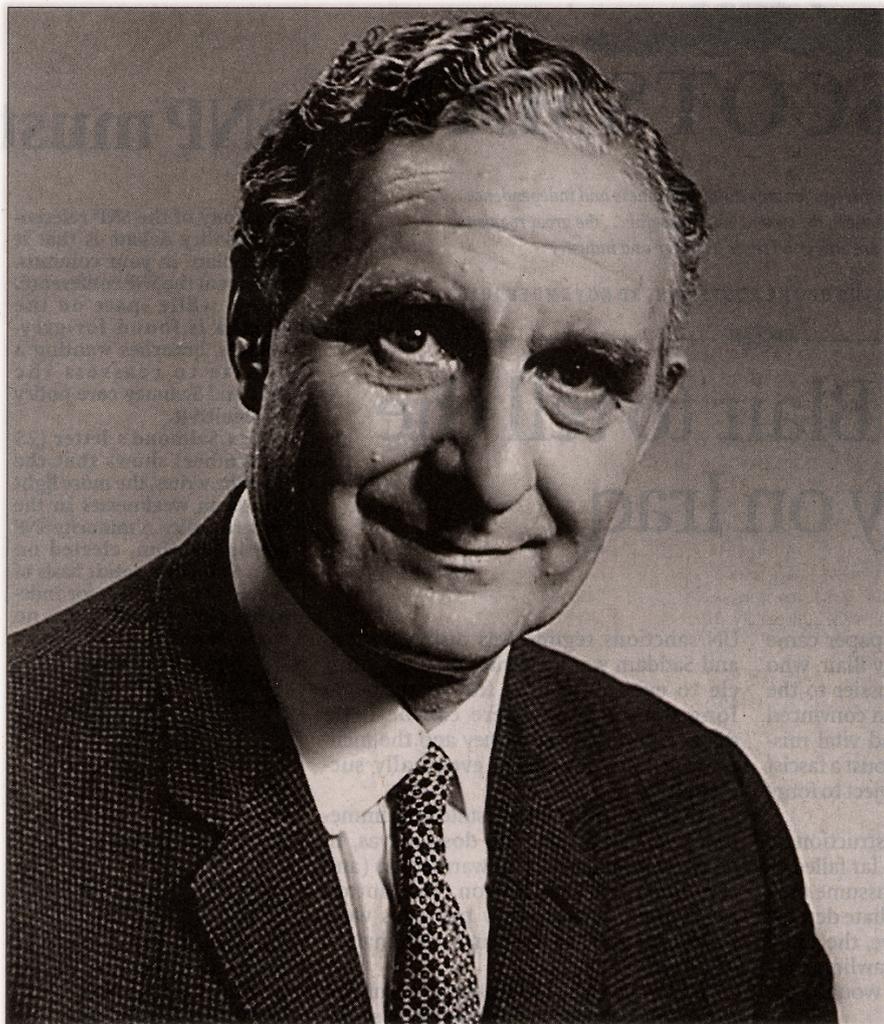
army anti-aircraft batteries in Calcutta and Assam. He became an army interpreter, in Urdu and Hindi, then volunteered for service with V-Force, a guerrilla army operating behind Japanese lines and supplying the British XIVth Army with intelligence. He reported on Japanese troop strengths as they crossed the Chindwin river to invade India on 15 March, 1944, and fell back to Kohima, which he reached just before the Japanese 31st division surrounded it. The siege of Kohima was a heroic defence that lasted for almost three weeks. Had the Japanese captured Kohima, they would have commanded a strategic position from which to attack Imphal, the main base of the British XIVth Army. A force comprising the 4th Battalion of The Royal West Kents, soldiers of the Assam Regiment and an assortment of native and irregular troops (a few hundred men in total) held out against more than 13,000 Japanese infantry.

Bridges fought at the siege of Imphal and later saw service with "Force 136" before the war with Japan ended. He was awarded the Military Cross in 1946 for "gallant and distinguished services in Burma".

After the war, Bridges joined the Forestry Commission as a trainee at Gatehouse of Fleet, gaining an expert knowledge of trees and arboriculture. He undertook a correspondence degree in estate management with London University, gaining a BSc in 1949.

After a spell as a pupil at Lothian Estates, he took up his first post as factor of Fotheringham Estate, Angus. He then became the agent for the Aldene and Alvanley Estate in Cheshire from 1952 to 1955, before returning to Lothian Estates as assistant factor, becoming factor in 1963, a post he held until 1984.

During his tenure, he was widely involved in the affairs of the Borders, being a member of Roxburgh County Council from 1969 to 1975. He was chairman of the planning committee from 1973 and the Tweedbank Development was implemented under his leadership. This



helped him develop sound experience of urban planning which was to serve him well, later on, at Newtongrange.

He was also chairman of the Borders Tourist Association and encouraged a whole generation of artists and craftsmen in the area. He was a friend of William Johnstone, one of Scotland's foremost painters, and met Hugh MacDiarmid. He initiated the opening of the Border Crafts Centre, by Lothian Estates, at Bonjedward – for a time, it was the only showcase for craft workers in the Borders.

At Lothian Estates, he also initiated Lilliardsedge Park, which became a noted ceilidh venue and had a flourishing garden centre.

A mark of his professional standing were the numerous posts he held over the years: chairman of the Scottish branch of the Landagents Society; chairman of the Scottish branch of the agriculture and land agency division of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors; member of

the RICS panel of arbiters, and River Tweed commissioner.

He was an honorary sheriff in Jedburgh, a major in the Civil Defence Corps (until it was disbanded in 1969), chairman of the committee that raised the money to replace the Laidlaw Memorial Baths, and a Redewire speaker in 1984.

When he retired from Lothian Estates in 1984, he became factor of Newtongrange until 1990 and was the chairman of Grange Estates from 1983 until he died. The last 20 years of his life saw his greatest achievement in rescuing the Newtongrange area from the despair that followed the closure, by the National Coal Board, of the Lady Victoria Pit. Initially, the inhabitants of this fiercely traditional community were sceptical that anyone really had their interests at heart, but Bridges did. The area is now a sought-after place to live in, and a fine example of successful urban redevelopment. During this period, he also chaired the Midlothian Campaign.

As if all that were not enough, he was also a passionate gardener, a skilled photographer and an elder of St Boswells Parish Church – he was session clerk from 1995 to 2001.

One story which encapsulates his approach to life concerns the loss of the two leading fingers from his right hand, at the age of 68, in a lawnmower accident. He picked up his two fingers, put them in his pocket and wrapped his bleeding hand in a towel. He then persuaded his daughter, Alison, to take him to hospital, without revealing to her the real extent of his injury. So cool and unconcerned did he appear that his wife blissfully continued peeling potatoes! The fingers were duly sown back on and, as part of his therapy, he taught himself to play the piano.

David Bridges is survived by his wife, Clare, to whom he was married for 47 years, his sons, Richard and Nigel, his daughters, Alison and Elspeth, and nine grandchildren.

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