F.A.M. Webster was an innovative British athletics coach and a prolific author who lived in Biddenham during the 1920s and 1930s, and the presence of himself and his family has ensured that the village has an intriguing place in the historical development of the sport. Born in St Albans in 1886, Webster was an immensely energetic ex-Army officer whose particular sporting interests were in the jumping and throwing events, which in that era were disregarded by the ruling members of the Amateur Athletic Association who largely came from a track-running or cross-country background. Webster built facilities for pole vaulting, discus-throwing and javelin-throwing in the spacious back garden of his home and taught his three children – Dick (born in 1914), Joan (1916) and Peggy (1918) – the rudiments of the events from the age of four onwards.

This was forward thinking, indeed, at that time. The pole vault, for example, was not to be officially recognised as an event for women until almost 70 years later, but Peggy, aged nine, and Joan, 11, set what are now regarded as the first “British records”, achieved in unofficial events under their father’s watchful eye. Furthermore, their elder brother became the country’s leading pole-vault exponent, achieving in 1936 the highest placing by a Briton at the Olympic Games, equal 6th, which would not be surpassed until 2012. Their father also coached numerous boys from Bedford School during these back-garden sessions, including the winners of seven national junior titles and 19 Public Schools’ Championships titles during the 1930s. Another to join the Websters in their athletic activities was James MacKillop, the first Briton to throw the javelin further than 200 feet. F.A.M. Webster also arranged joint summer holidays for seven or eight families to the Norfolk resort of Bacton-on-Sea where all manner of athletics activities were organised on the beach for children and parents alike.

A charming description of the convivial sporting gatherings in Biddenham supervised by F.A.M. Webster was to be composed many years later by Joan Webster’s future sister-in-law, who wrote of her childhood: “I spent much of my time at the Websters’ house. Mrs Webster was very good to me and never minded me staying to meals with no notice. There was tennis, of course, if anybody had managed to cut and mark the court. In the paddock there were parallel bars and occupations like throwing the javelin or discus etc. Dick was often practising his pole vault or Captain Webster was coaching boys from Bedford School. He thought that Joan could have been coached into a first-class athlete, but she refused, declaring that she didn’t want to turn into a man!”

In one of his many books, F.A.M. Webster (his initials stood for “Frederick Annesley Michael”) wrote: “Up to 14 years of age children – boys and girls alike – should be encouraged to play at all forms of athletics, including, certainly, the pole vault. But that event should be dropped by girls the moment there is the slightest sign of bust development … by the time a girl is 18 her frame has become more set and her life is more regular, and it is then, but not before, that she may let herself go and really enjoy physical exercise”.

Nevertheless, Joan and Peggy Webster competed in other events at athletics meetings into their teens, and Joan was twice placed 3rd in the Women’s AAA Championships discus throw. In 1939 she married Eric Faulkner, who was the son of Sir Alfred Faulkner and Lady Faulkner, who were near neighbours at Grove House, in Biddenham. Graduating in history from Cambridge University, Faulkner went on to a highly successful banking career, becoming Sir Eric Faulkner, twice serving as chairman of the British Bankers’ Association and as chairman of Lloyd’s Bank from 1969 to 1976, and – astutely aware of the general ignorance of matters of high finance – he was instrumental in setting up the first public relations service to represent business interests in the city of London. Lady Joan Faulkner died in 1991, aged 74, and Sir Eric in 1994, aged 80.

Joan’s younger sister, Peggy, also competed at least until the age of 16 or so, and on 11 June 1935 there were even six events for women at the Bedfordshire county championships, which were undoubtedly inspired by their father, who had formed his own Biddenham Athletic Club, and his enterprise was duly repaid in what was largely a family affair. Bedfordshire would seem to be the first English county to have staged a mixed championships – probably 40 years or more in advance of anywhere else in the country!

Peggy won the javelin and was 2nd in the high jump and discus, while her brother, Dick, won the shot and javelin and was 2nd in the high jump, discus and hammer, having already taken the pole-vault title for the fifth successive year, held separately in Bedford in April. The Webster-dominated combined men’s and women’s championship meeting took place in the model village of Stewartby, which had been built for the employees of the London Brick Company, and even F.A.M. himself; who would celebrate his 49th birthday later that month, set a shining example for his off-spring by turning out and placing 2nd in the hammer.

F.A.M. Webster died in 1949. His son, Dick, who served as a Brigadier in the Royal Artillery during World War II, lived to the age of 94, dying in 2009.