

HISTORY SNIPS – GEOFF SQUIRE REMEMBERS BRANSCOMBE DURING THE WAR, PART TWO

We were fortunate to be in the middle of the village because living and working very close to us we had a number of friends who were pillars of the community and good role models. Together with the dozen or so Branscombe farmers they provided the goods and services that helped the village to survive as an entity in wartime and sometimes we could buy other items from visiting traders. My parents used the titles and surnames of these friends although we knew all their first names and we talked about them at home. Friendly, cheerful and chatty, they were born back in the 1800s and they all knew each other. Decades ago some of them had been pupils at Branscombe School, so it was all a bit like Camberwick Green and Trumpton.



Mrs Dowell & Brian

I have fond memories of Mr Perry, the postman; Miss Butter, postmistress; Mr Collier, baker; Mr Layzell, blacksmith; Mr Hansford, fishmonger; Mr Dowell, barber; Mr Taylor, cobbler; Mrs Restorick, my piano teacher; Mrs Hutchings and Mrs Dowell, shopkeepers and others. At the time, I felt that they had always been there and would be there in future, feelings of permanence and continuity. Then, in March 1950, all of a sudden, John Perry died. He was 59. I was shocked and very upset.

I had accompanied Mr Perry on some of his rounds and I often saw the others at work. They would talk about what they were doing and I learnt a lot from them. Like my Mum and Dad they could all remember World War 1 and the Great Depression and they knew something about survival in tough times. They made me feel that I belonged to a secure and stable community -



Terry & Dorothy Flay's wedding
Old Village Hall

something reassuring because as time went on, from the news on the radio and in the papers, I became increasingly aware of the ravages of war and what could happen to all of us. I regret that after leaving Branscombe in 1953 I didn't return for years and when I did, they had nearly all gone.

just down the road from the schoolhouse was the old wooden village hall. Put up 100 years ago on the site now occupied by the modern Branoc Hall, it served as Branscombe's centre for village activities for about 50 years. Conveniently situated in the middle of the village it was the place where people met up in the darkest days of the war for jumble sales, whist drives, folk dancing, Red Cross dances, fancy dress parades, the rabbit club, billiards. Entertainment evenings and socials contributed to national



Rene Croft

savings campaign - Wings for Victory, Salute the Soldier and Warship weeks. Produce shows and poster displays supported the Dig for Victory campaign which lasted for the entire war and was seen as vital for Britain's survival.

As secretary of the village hall my father arranged visits of the Flutterbyes, a concert party from Exeter. Their evenings were popular - something different - singers, actors, dancers, a story teller, a comedian.....all from big city! Towards the end of the war the village hall was



Geoff's mother, Mrs Squire, 3rd from right

always packed out for monthly film shows and there was a full house soon after VE Day when Cedric Drewe, the Conservative MP for Honiton, came to address the people of Branscombe ahead of the July 1945 General Election. I still remember the euphoric mood of that meeting. It introduced me to party politics at a time of high patriotic fervour.

Another memorable feature of the old wartime village hall was its atmosphere. When crowded, the hall had a warm smoky fug with little fresh air, a distinctive deodorant-free smell and blacked out windows. Cigarettes were not rationed. Craven A, a widely available brand was accompanied by the slogan "will not affect your throat" and it was said that smoking relieved the stresses of war....



Dad smoked Kensitas, and he often sent me up the road on my bike to Miss Parrett's house for a packet of 20. We were assured that Kensitas cigarettes were made of "The finest leaf" and they were "As good as really good cigarettes can be".

The Miss Parretts' were three chatty, cheerful and funny sisters - Netta, Elsie and Daisy - you could hear them all down the road! Born in 1888, 1890 and 1893 in Branscombe, they lived together in a house on Church Row and surprisingly they sold tobacco and cigarette. Dad also smoked Players and Woodbines and at one stage he took to rolling his own fags in Rizla cigarette papers using tobacco from Church Row. I'm sure that smoking seriously damaged his health.

Popular events-evenings in the village hall, a buzz of Devon accents, especially when people came in, chattering away as they greeted each other before settling down for some enjoyable entertainment - a mixture of singing, acting, comedy and story-telling. Sometimes this included a lively performance by a Branscombe girl of the old music hall song *'I'm Burlington Bertie ... I rise at ten thirty, and saunter along like a toff, I walk down the Strand with my gloves on my hand, Then I walk back again with them*

off'.....My father was keen on the amusing Devon dialect stories of Jan Stewer by AJ Coles (1876-1965). At entertainment evenings Dad would get up on the stage read a Jan Stewer story in a proper old Devon accent. I remember 'Jan's adventures in London'. This went down well with the village audience. John Betjeman considered that AJ Coles should be regarded as one of Britain's greatest humorists. Born in Woolwich, AJ Coles had a varied life - schoolteacher, soldier, journalist and newspaper editor but he was best known for his Jan Stewer stories in Devon dialect.

Dad told me that soon after he came to Branscombe School in April 1933, he took some boys down to the flat area behind the village hall to play football. Seeing an altercation between two boys he went over and heard one boy say to another "why vor thee be kickin I?". Dad knew he had a big task ahead of him!

The village hall's wartime story ended on a positive note in August 1945. After the end of the war in Europe there was a feeling that Branscombe wanted to honour Branscombe people who had been serving in the forces. Meetings were held in the hall to arrange welcome home celebrations for them. A Welcome Home Committee decided that an old-fashioned grand fete in the grounds of Barnells (Trafalgar House), would be a popular way of raising money. It was all planned for August 1st. Entrance cost a shilling (10p) and a chair half that. There were various games, stalls, dancing by Miss Howden's pupils from Sidmouth and tea on the lawn, which, we are told, was organised by seven lady members of the Committee. Then, an evening dance in the village hall, music by courtesy of Mr Peck's radiogram and no doubt, there was the usual 'very successful' raffle!

Wednesday August 1st. 1945 turned out to be a fine and sunny day and the fete attracted a lot of people. The money raised was added to that from a house-to-house collection and £112 was distributed to the 56 Branscombe members of the forces. At the final meeting of the committee in late August 1945, the organisers were thanked and there was a discussion about the future and the need for a new village hall and a playing field - developments which came to Branscombe about 30 years later.

For me, life has come full circle. From our house above Ansteys Cove in Torquay on a clear day I can look out across Lyme Bay to see Branscombe cliffs, Branscombe Mouth and the seaward end of the valley where it all happened, so many years ago.