

BRANSCOMBE VOICES FROM THE 1940s

1.Charlie Taylor (1869-1958) Cobbler.

During the war-ravaged 'Make Do and Mend' years of the early 1940s we depended on Mr Taylor, Branscombe's village cobbler to keep our footwear in good order. So my destination, boots over the handlebars of my bike, was his workplace in the front room of his small stone - built cottage up the road at Street near the Fountain Head pub. My instructions: 'Boots to be soled and heeled, with Blakeys please Mr. Taylor'. My father favoured Blakeys because they prolonged the life of our boots. My brother and I liked them because of the noise and sparks they made.

Once again Mr Taylor was at home, working away at his tall last, making the most of the daylight coming in through his tiny front window - just where I had left him at the end of my last visit a few months ago. As usual, his room was filled with the distinctive smell of rubber, leather, glue and fumes from the heated black wax he used for waterproofing. On hand were his cutting, shaping and finishing tools and on the floor a jumble of rubber and leather offcuts, partly completed jobs, cans of various substances and other oddments.

Away from the window the recesses of the room were always pretty dark but I was aware of a few pieces of furniture. On the wall were several large framed pictures suspended on long strings from hooks on a high picture rail - panoramas of famous 19th century naval battles and other maritime scenes which looked like dusty reminders of Trafalgar days.... Had Mr Taylor served in the navy - another life in distant parts of the world?.....

I watched Mr Taylor as he cobbled away on his tall stool, finishing off a repair with the black wax he carefully brushed around the edge of the sole and heel - an elderly, grey man still taking a pride in his work. From previous visits I had the feeling that he did not welcome interruptions when he was completing a job, but after a time he stopped working. Taciturn but not unfriendly, he picked up my boots, looked them over, thought for a moment and then in his rather gruff Branscombe voice said 'Come back in a week and they'll be done'. With that he turned back to his tall last by the window and carried on cobbling. Mr Taylor needed this tall last because he was a very tall man. I said goodbye to him, closed the door, got on my bike and set off for home - all down hill from Street, except for the last bit up School Lane.

For many years Charlie Taylor provided an essential footwear repair service for the people of Branscombe and as far as I knew in the early 1940s that was his entire world. I was wrong - because 75 years later, I know that he was a Methodist Lay Minister. I was also surprised to learn that he was the postman for the western section of the parish, an extensive area of scattered farms and houses set in hilly terrain and connected by a network of long meandering footpaths and straggling lanes.

Comments by people who knew him well mention his legendary reputation for collecting and delivering the mail on time and the quiet dedication he needed to complete his rounds in all winds and weathers. It appears that in order to cope with the terribly muddy conditions of winter he wore old-fashioned wooden 'pattens' - wooden platforms attached to his boots enabling him to wade through thick mud.

Like many Branscombe people at that time Mr Taylor needed more than one job in order to get by. There is more about this and other aspects of village life before 1960 in the excellent Branscombe Project 2000 publication 'Branscombe Shops, Trades and Getting By' Edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern.

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