

BRANSCOMBE PROJECT: *HISTORY SNIPS*

GEOFF SQUIRE:

Branscombe 1934-1950: the people and places of my early years.

Barbara: *Geoff says that this is the last piece in his series on Branscombe. That's as maybe ... he's said that before and then thought of something else that he remembers! ... Geoff is one of the last people who still has vivid memories of war-time Branscombe. As the school-master's son he was ideally placed to watch the comings and goings of village people and to also be aware of what was happening in the wider world. We think his memories should be cherished and are hoping to collect together the pieces he's written and publish them as a Project booklet.*



Geoff: At the age of 90 I've been thinking about my early years in Branscombe and the people around me at that time. It all began at about 9.30am on Tuesday January 9th 1934 when I was born in the front room of the schoolhouse - most births were at home back in the 1930s. My mother told me that the room was carefully set up and Miss Tryphena Woodrow the village midwife was there to support her. According to weather records, January 1934 was mainly sunny and mild.



Tryphena W., first

Like hundreds of other parents with new babies on that day across the country, Mum and Dad faced a number of challenges. At the time they were about thirty years old, energetic, optimistic and resilient, so they just got on with things.



I'm sure they were pleased that my brother Kingsley (1937-2015) and I were born in daylight hours because this was still in the era of oil lamps and candles. I have a candle holder which dates from that time in Branscombe. I remember my father lighting an oil lamp on our kitchen table and trimming the lamp wick in order to give a brighter, steadier light which didn't flicker. Electricity arrived at the schoolhouse just before the war but the school had to wait until the late 1950s. It was like that with the telephone. The

Kingsley & Geoff telephone reached the schoolhouse at the end of the 1940s but the school had to wait for years. In January 1934 there was no phone, no electric light and no running water in the schoolhouse and school.

Another challenge was what we would now consider to be primitive sanitation. The schoolhouse and school had always been served by bucket toilets. Ours was outside, across the yard from the back door, in an unheated shed with just a chink of daylight - not easy to visit at night, especially in the winter. Our portable tin bath was hooked up on the shed wall - the house had no bathroom. A crisis arose in Spring 1941 when more evacuees from London pushed the school roll up to over 100. To cope with this increase the managers proposed that the school buckets should be emptied in our garden just beyond our backdoor and close to the side wall of the schoolhouse. When she was told about this plan Mum went

ballistic. She made it clear that she would not accept this proposal that school toilet buckets would be frequently passing a footstep away from our backdoor. We heard nothing about this protest for a time, then the managers made a more acceptable suggestion, but the toilet bucket era continued until the late 1950s, when mains drainage and water arrived at the school and schoolhouse.

Perhaps the biggest issue for my parents in 1934 was the condition of their water supply. For the schoolhouse and school, taps and running water were decades away and everyone on the site had to rely on a Victorian hand pump positioned just outside our backdoor. The old pump was vulnerable to freezing up, especially in the severe winters of the early 1940s - January 1940 recorded the second coldest January of the 20th century. Water was piped to it from a shallow well on the spring line at the foot of the wooded hill just behind the schoolhouse.

For years there was a suspicion that the pump water was polluted because we often went down with bilious attacks. When Kingsley was born in April 1937 our Mum had a serious breast abscess, due to "bad water" according to the doctor. Ten years later in the mid 1940s we learnt the full story. A new test showed that our water supply carried dangerous E.coli bacteria and immediate steps were required to purify it. We were told to add Milton to the water to get rid of the bacteria and then another chemical to gradually remove the awful taste of Milton. These directions had to be carefully timed and applied to all the pump water used for drinking and other purposes in the house and the school. Children were sent down to the water shute along the road from the Post Office for extra supplies, but was that water also polluted?

Someone worked out that the E.coli bacteria in the well and pump water came from earlier years when the school's toilet buckets were emptied up in the wood above the well. It seems that for decades polluted water had seeped down into the well and nobody knew about it until scientific water testing came to Branscombe. It's interesting that E. coli was first identified in 1885, seven years after Branscombe School opened its doors - it took time for the information to reach us.

To be continued ...