

Branscombe Voices from the 1940s
10. Even More Traders. Clothes and Groceries.

The Vellams.

In the 1940s we were visited twice a year by Mr and Mrs Vellam, a cheerful, enterprising couple from Monkton near Honiton. They arrived with the back seat and boot of their car packed with summer clothes and again, later in the year, with clothes for winter. Socks, shirts, vests, trousers, dresses.... my parents always found something attractive in their range, despite the restrictions imposed by rationing and austerity. Mr Vellam dealt with gents' clothes and Mrs Vellam looked after the ladies. They knew a lot about their trade and I seem to remember that Mr Vellam had connections in the Lancashire textile area which went back to pre-war days. He could well have spent his early life in that part of the country.

These visits often followed a routine which began with my father's order. I remember that my father was keen on long johns - long thermal underwear. He said that they did a good job in keeping him warm in the garden and Mr Vellam always had them on board. After a time my father and Mr Vellam often turned their attention to the garden, leaving my mother indoors with Mrs Vellam for a discreet chat about her purchases - winceyette nighties?

Tucked away in the area between the side wall of the schoolhouse and the hedge bordering school lane our well - manured plot was usually a profusion of vegetables, flowers and soft fruit bushes, plenty to interest Mr Vellam, who was a keen gardener. Soon they were strolling up and down the paths, pausing from time to time, my father proudly pointing to his rows of peas and beans, patches of cabbages and cauliflowers, displays of tall flowers and borders full of smaller ones. In summer the garden was full of the sounds of twittering house martins in the air and the chirring songs of numerous great green bush-crickets up to 7cm long in the flowers and grasses near the ground. Sometimes they all stridulated together in a chorus. Where are they now, in 2018? - not in our garden, unfortunately.

As they moved slowly from one part of the garden to another, I'm sure that my father was telling Mr Vellam about the disastrous effects of eelworm disease, which prevented him from growing potatoes. Anyone who came anywhere near our garden was told about the eelworm, so now I'll tell you about it!

This soil borne pest feeds on the roots of potato plants causing the crop to fail. Although my father tried to grow potatoes in different parts of the garden, the plants always withered, their roots covered in pinhead eelworm cysts. At that time there was no known cure for this nematode apart from not growing potatoes for many years. Eelworm was a big problem for anyone aiming at self sufficiency in vegetables, as advocated by the wartime 'Grow your Own' and 'Dig for Victory' campaigns. Also, there was the weekly radio advice from Mr C.H. Middleton. A highlight of the week was Mr Middleton's 15 minute talk 'In Your Garden', so we all had to keep quiet when he came on after Sunday lunch. The first gardening media celebrity and a household name with an audience of several millions, even Mr Middleton couldn't help us overcome the eelworm menace.

Vellam visits were rounded off with a cup of tea and a chat. During one of these conversations they happened to mention that their home at Monkton was quite close to the main railway line between Exeter and Waterloo and at night they could hear steam trains pounding up the bank towards the entrance to Honiton tunnel. This caught my attention because it was a reference to the world beyond the confines of Branscombe. Then I realised that they were talking about the trains on the railway line which had taken my father and me all the way to London and back just before the outbreak of war in 1939. After that, the line and the tunnel became features on the sketch maps I drew to record the places I knew about. For me, this was one of the ways in which the wider world unfolded.

Friendly and lively, the Vellams were always welcome at the schoolhouse. They brought a helpful service to our door since, as you can imagine, clothes were not readily available in the village and we rarely went 'town shopping' for clothes in the 1940s.

Mr Birch.

Every other Monday Mr Birch called on us. He was a portly, middle - aged representative of RH&J Follett of Colyton, an established household name in Branscombe. Folletts traded in groceries, hardware, household goods....everything from cheese and chutney to saucepans and paraffin. Mr Birch and his colleague Mr West arranged their separate rounds to cover the whole of the straggling village in one day. Mr Birch's round took him on foot from the distant western end of Branscombe through Street down to the schoolhouse. Mr West took the van to cover the lower part of the village - Seaside, the Square, Sellars Wood, Bank.....moving back to the schoolhouse.

As we were at the end of his round, Mr Birch usually reached us in the evening, well after normal working hours. By that time he was pretty weary, having padded his way all the way down the main road and along many garden paths*. However, on our doorstep he was still sedate in his brown suit, a seasoned Follett's representative and a far cry from the 1940s stereotype of the fast - talking spiv with a kipper tie flogging black - market nylons from door to door.

Coming into the house, Mr Birch exchanged a few laconic pleasantries with my parents before seating himself sideways on at the kitchen table. With his books open and a pen in his hand he was ready to take our order but this always took some time - my mother's prepared list had to be recorded and then Mr Birch needed to read out Follett's long list of additional items... Oxydol....Rinso...SR Toothpaste...Reckitts Blue... Izal medicated toilet paper. .. on it went, with Mr Birch pausing from time to time to sip his tea and exchange a few more pleasantries, making sure that everything had been covered and no trick had been missed. Many of his popular 1940s brands are now just names from the past but some are still available here or in other parts of the world.

One of our favourite items on Mr Birch's list was Camp Coffee, a sweet mixture of coffee and chicory. I was always intrigued by the colourful label on the bottle. I now know that the man on the left with the turban standing to attention was a Sikh servant and the man sitting on the right was his boss - a Scottish soldier, nonchalantly sipping his coffee. A more recent version of the Camp Coffee label shows the Sikh as a soldier, no longer standing to attention but with his own cup of coffee, sitting beside the Scottish soldier. How times change!

After checking the final order Mr Birch picked up his bits and pieces and disappeared into the night - to meet up with Mr West and travel home to Colyton, hopefully with a full order book. I suppose Mr West's round in the lower village had been slightly less demanding - he had the van, but there was still a lot of walking, given the dispersed layout of lower Branscombe. Perhaps, in other villages they found it easier to organise their rounds. After all, Branscombe does sprawl in and around its valleys and distances are considerable if you are on foot.

We know that Mr Birch had a cooked meal on his way down through the village. The evidence comes from Peggy Sweetland's comment on page 52 of *Branscombe*

Shops, Trades and Getting By Edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern (The Branscombe Project 2000). She says, "Mr Birch always came every other Monday - it was once a fortnight I remember - and mother always cooked him boiled potatoes and he'd sit down. He'd have new potatoes from out on the cliff if they'd got 'em, and salt, and a cup o'tea. H'ed take your order on a Monday and two other men came on Thursday delivering, and we always used to give them a glass of home -made wine". A good example of Branscombe generosity, well before the days of the breathalyser.

Folletts were always reliable and orders were delivered on time. A 1930s postcard photograph of their shop in Colyton shows that they had a prime position in the town and an impressive window display. Reaching us through their representatives Mr Birch and Mr West, Folletts were able to bring many products from the wider world to our doorstep but the firm no longer exists, having been dissolved in the 1970s. At the time though, like our other traders, they were actors on our stage at the choolhouse, fresh faces coming and going with all sorts of roles and stories as they tried to earn a living.

* In the Devon vernacular we could pose a question about Mr Birch's late arrival and slow walk - "What's 'e doin' polshin' an' paik'n 'bout 'ere arter dimpsy?" And for the Camp Coffee story - "tidden ort like 'twas you izzit?"

Geoff Squire 10/10/2018