

17. Branscombe - The summer of 1945 and the end of the war!

Tuesday May 8th 1945 - Victory in Europe Day! It meant the end of nearly six years of war against Germany and after seventy - five years the jubilant mood of that day is still with me. At 3pm we were all in the living room of the schoolhouse, glued to our Philips radio for Mr Churchill's victory speech. His statement, "Hostilities will end officially at one minute after midnight tonight," was a defining moment for millions of people. As an eleven year old I had some understanding of what was going on, but back in the early stages of the war all I had was a feeling that my parents were disturbed by something very serious. Now, after all the anxieties of the war years, Mr Churchill's victory speech made them happy and I was very pleased about that.

Branscombe's lively response came quickly: flags, banners and bunting down through the village, music and dancing in the Square, parties in the pubs, thanksgiving services and prayers in the church and chapel. Beyond Branscombe, across the country millions of happy, rejoicing people were caught up in unforgettable celebrations. In May 2020, even with the Covid-19 restrictions, the seventy - fifth anniversary of VE Day has been marked by international celebrations.

At Branscombe School we had a three - day holiday, a church service and special lessons about the great events of the week. Evacuees from London, many of whom had been in the school since 1939 (6. Evacuees), were returning home. The last two left on June 28th.1945. By that time I was aware that after seven years, my time at the school was running out and things were going to change - no more walks of just a few paces from the schoolhouse into my father's classroom on the other side of the wall. Instead, my new school would be miles away and much bigger. I would be in a uniform with lots of new teachers, subjects, friends and routines.

But that new world was a few months away and in the meantime the country was facing a general election, the first for almost ten years. It turned out that the main schoolroom was the village polling station with my father as the presiding officer. By the time of the election on July 5th 1945 I had been to my first political meeting in the Village Hall (9. Ethel Butter Postmistress) - my introduction to party politics. The polling station in the school room next door told me a bit more about the practical aspects of general elections and the workings of democracy.

Part way through election morning we noticed a rather forlorn figure in a chair on the step leading up to the entrance of the polling station. He was a friend acting as a teller for the Conservative Party, but he wasn't doing much telling and he looked really fed up. My mother, who was always full of good ideas, offered him a cup of sweet tea which he readily accepted. She was slightly concerned when he asked for more sugar - a commodity in short supply which had been rationed since January 1940 and remained rationed until September 1953. After his very sweet cup of tea we noticed that he brightened up a lot. With the election over, we had to wait until July 26th for the result so that all the overseas votes could be counted. Many were surprised and shocked when it was announced - a landslide victory for Labour.

Some old people were alarmed at what might happen as a result of what they were hearing and my grandmother was one of them. By July 1945 she was living with us at the schoolhouse and she couldn't believe that Mr Churchill, her contemporary and hero, had lost the election - she kept on saying "after all he has done for us"..... Grandma lived for another 19 years but she never got over the result of the 1945 general election and Churchill's defeat. We read that the Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians heard the news while taking afternoon tea. They were so taken aback that they stood there in complete silence!

On August 1st 1945 the new parliament met. The record shows that as Mr Churchill entered the house for the first time as an ex-prime minister he was greeted by Tories singing "For he's a Jolly Good Fellow". Labour members responded by singing "The Red Flag". The re-elected Speaker said that he was not quite sure whether he was becoming Chairman of the House of Commons or the director of a musical show. While these great affairs of state were playing out in Westminster, what was happening 160 miles away in Branscombe on Wednesday August 1st?.

The answer is that on that day, Branscombe people were enjoying a celebratory garden fete and buffet tea on the lawns at Barnells (Trafalgar Barton); the result of much discussion and planning.

To learn more about the origins of the fete we need to look back at decisions taken during the weeks following VE Day. It seems that when the movers and shakers of Branscombe had got over the euphoria of that day, they turned their attention to welcoming home Branscombe men and women serving in the war. By 1945 Branscombe people had a record of supporting those in the Forces by raising money for them through annual house to house collections. In 1942, for example, forty-one recipients each received one pound four shillings (£1.20) - a considerable sum at that time. (Conversion tables show that £1 in 1942 would be equivalent in purchasing power to about £47 today). Letters received from the recipients showed how much these gifts from home meant to them. There was another successful collection in 1943 with named subscribers.

Now, in June 1945, with the war in Europe over, a public meeting was held in the Village Hall and a new Welcome Home Committee of ten women and seven men was formed, with Mr Ford as chairman and my father as secretary. Almost all members of the committee were from the middle and lower parts of the village. Subsequent meetings were chaired by Group Captain J.B.Graham.

At the second meeting there was unanimous agreement to a proposal from Mrs Graham of Hole House, seconded by my mother, "that a garden fete be held". This would be a big event for the village so it was agreed that my father would ask Mr and Mrs Lloyd if their lawns and grounds at Barnells would be available and if Miss Howden of Sidmouth would bring her pupils to give a display of dancing - echoes of 'Merrie England'..... At the next meeting on July 6th, it was agreed that the fete would be held on Wednesday August 1st. The committee heard that Mr and Mrs Lloyd had kindly consented to the use of their grounds and it was decided to ask Mrs Lloyd to open the fete. The entrance charge would be one shilling (5p) and a chair would cost half that. The vicar was named as one of four gatekeepers and it was agreed that another parish collection would be part of the Welcome Home Committee's fundraising programme.

The meeting moved on to identify members responsible for the various side shows at the fete: a fortune teller, a gift stall, a stall for up to date recipes and a produce stall. Others took charge of throwing games - darts, ringing the bottle and Aunt Sally. Miss Howden's dancing display would take place between 3.30 and 4.30 pm, transport to be arranged by Group Captain Graham. A buffet tea would be organised by seven lady members of the committee and it was decided to 'run' a dance in the evening. The secretary promised to ask Mr Peck if he would loan and operate his radiogram for the dance. It was agreed to advertise the fete and dance through posters in village and adverts in Pulman's Weekly News. Final arrangements were made on July 19th and this grand, old - fashioned garden fete went ahead at Barnells in fine weather on August 1st 1945. My parents were there, but at the time it was all too jolly for me and I was not keen on dancing.

Sometime after the great day, Mr L.C. Scawen, the treasurer of the committee, who was usually accompanied by 'Brutus', his fearsome Staffordshire Bullmastiff, turned up at the schoolhouse with bags of money - the proceeds of the fete, dance and collection. Mr Scawen and my father poured the money out on the table in the front room for counting and checking. Soon there were piles of one pound notes - five pound notes existed but were hardly ever seen. Then there were 10 shilling notes (2 to £1), and piles of coins: half crowns (8 to £1), florins (10 to £1), shillings (20 to £1) and so on down to farthings (4 for 1 penny and 960 to £1). I had never seen so much money.

The total receipts amounted to £123/12s/2p and after deduction of £10/ 14s/1p expenses the balance was £112/18s/1p. The money was held in the Westminster Bank Sidmouth and divided equally between 56 Branscombe members of the Forces, who received £2 each. At a committee meeting held on August 20th 1945, this result was seen as "very satisfactory" and the secretary agreed to send letters of thanks to all those who had helped to make the events a success. On behalf of the members, he thanked Group Captain and Mrs Graham for "the very active interest they had shown in ensuring the success of the effort". A week later there was a discussion about post-war plans for the village. Several members spoke of the need for a new Village Hall and a playing field. Was this the first mention of developments that came along about thirty years later?

Seventy five years on, we can see that the elation of VE Day, the well - supported garden fete, the parish collection and the discussions about the future were all part of Branscombe's enthusiastic response to the sensational global events of summer 1945. The war finally ended when Japan surrendered in mid-August, but for many of those serving, demobilisation and the resumption of civilian life took some time.

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