

18. Branscombe in the 1940s. Broadening our horizons - films, maps and animals.

Once a month in the mid 1940s a man arrived at Branscombe Village Hall with rolls of film, a projector and a screen. By 7.30pm everything was set up and our film show began. After years of wartime isolation in Branscombe, this was the magic of cinema, something exciting that lived up to expectations and gave us new experiences of the world. There were funny Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy and George Formby films and I remember a romantic one - 'Waterloo Bridge'. In contrast, 'Naples is a battlefield' was a documentary about the destruction and reconstruction of Naples. I can still recall some of the images in that film. Films like those, shown to capacity audiences, were the main events of village hall film evenings. There was usually a 'B' movie too.

The 'B' movie was often an episode from 'Riders of Death Valley', known as Universal Pictures' 1941 million dollar super serial with an all-star cast and a thousand teeming thrills. Spectacular Wild West landscapes provided the settings for this western cliffhanger of stories about bands of heroes and outlaws battling over a lost gold mine. I had never seen anything like it - heroes pounding along on steaming horses while the ruthless gunslinging outlaws hid behind great outcrops of rock, ready to pick 'em off. The music enhanced the mood of each scene - exciting stuff for a Branscombe audience in 1945!

I remember asking the film man about the music. I found out that some of it came from Mendelssohn's Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave) - a good choice. When I hear The Hebrides Overture I'm reminded of 'Riders of Death Valley' and those Branscombe Village Hall film nights. I wonder what Mendelssohn would have made of the soundtrack of Riders and this use of his famous piece of music. Today, it's possible to watch nearly five hours of Riders of Death Valley on YouTube and it is said that Universal's 1941 serial influenced the production of later westerns.

These days I rarely hear about anyone collecting postage stamps, a popular hobby in the 1940s, with the possibility of links to the wider world. For a time Branscombe had a stamp club which met in the Vicarage Room, where we had opportunities to exchange stamps, build up our albums and search the world map to find the countries where the stamps came from and sometimes where they had been postmarked. The club was started by Mr FC Norman (1881 - 1964), a keen stamp collector. Mr Norman was one of the Branscombe School managers and on Sunday mornings he read the lesson in church. In a drawer upstairs I still have a large album of stamps. Eighty years ago they were very important to me but for decades I haven't even looked at them.

I learned more about world geography in my father's classroom, next door to the schoolhouse. One of the visual aids for this was Branscombe School's large wall map of the world. From time to time he would fix this map to the easel and using his long wooden pointer, take us on a world tour. He showed us continents and oceans, mountain ranges and rivers, countries and capitals - London, England and the British Empire stretching across the world in pink. Sometimes he moved on to animals and where they live: polar bears, whales, elephants, lions, tigers, monkeys and other exotic creatures - early lessons on world geography and biodiversity, followed by little quizzes to check on our knowledge. I must admit that I found all this more interesting than long division but I was always encouraged to do my sums.

At home we kept some less exotic animals; eight hens, two rabbits and a cat. They arrived in that order. As time went on my brother, Kingsley, and I learned more about looking after them - new experiences which helped us to understand their worlds and the natural world around us.

The hens came at the beginning of the war when we were threatened with serious food shortages and families were looking at ways of becoming as self sufficient as possible. Mr Lew Dowell of Mill Farm provided eight hens but before they could be brought up the road we needed a hen house and a run for them and this took a lot of preparation. At 88 I can't imagine taking on anything like that but at the time my parents hadn't turned 40. I suppose they still had the energy and determination to get on with it. These days I'm happy that I can still get up the stairs!

At the top of the garden they flattened a site for a large shed and marked out an extensive run up the slope at the back of the site and over rough ground with grassy patches towards Rising Sun Cottage. The run was fenced off by tall wire netting held firm by wooden poles driven into the ground. Then the shed arrived in wooden sections, unloaded from a lorry parked in the lane.

It took time to haul the sections over the hedge, fit them together and fix the roof with corrugated metal panels. When finished it looked good - a large overlap shed with a wooden floor at least 16 by 8ft. We christened it 'The Hut' and Grandma helped to give it a fresh coat of dark green paint. Inside, a large section was divided off for the chickens, their nest boxes and perches and it was made clear to my brother and me that the chickens were for eggs, not for eating.

At first the hens were wary of their new surroundings and reluctant to go through the hatch at the back of the hut and into the run, but soon they were all up there scratching away. We gave them pet names and at night we made sure that the hatch was secure - there were foxes around at the time. Up in the run they had a free range diet which we supplemented with grain and boiled kitchen scraps. In return they gave us a good supply of fresh eggs, so much better than wartime rations of packeted egg powder. Their egg laying squawks and clucks were always welcome.

Later on I took over the weekly task of cleaning out the chicken space, piling up their droppings outside for later use as a garden fertiliser since it was far too strong for immediate use. Every year the roof of the hut was used for drying off my father's onion crop - we had to get up there to cover the onions whenever rain came. One violent storm swept the whole roof off and it took us some time to put it back together again. In Branscombe we were always close to nature.

With the chickens confined to one end of the hut we were left with a considerable space for storage. On the floor were piles of my father's old copies of 'Teachers' World' and 'Amateur Gardening', tied up with string and never disturbed. Overhead, bunches of flowers grown in the garden were hanging from the roof supports, drying off to be made into posies and bouquets - statice...gypsophila....helichrysum....names I've almost forgotten! On a table I had my parents' 1920s HMV gramophone and their black case full of 78rpm shellac records - the material used for records before vinyl lps arrived in the 1950s. That heavy old record case is still up in our loft but now I have no means of playing 100 year old 78s. Back in the 1940s, it was a box of musical delights, full of instrumental and orchestral pieces, opera extracts and 1920s songs.

After a while the chickens were not the only creatures in the hut as we set up our wartime rabbit hutch over in the corner. I don't know what they all made of the music coming from the gramophone but I do know that our two rabbits had insatiable appetites for milky dashels - the Devon name for sow thistles and they ate piles of it - their favourite food. We spent a lot of time up in the wood and in the hedges and fields along School Lane searching for this tall dandelion - like plant with yellow flowers. We were happy to do this because the rabbits were our pets and we needed to look after them. They were called Snowball and Greycoat. They didn't like each other so they lived in separate sections of the hutch. Snowball was very cuddly with a fluffy white coat, large ears and pink eyes - probably an Angora rabbit. For many people, rabbit meat was an important source of protein during the war, but like the hens our rabbits were not for eating.

Support for rabbit keepers came from the Branscombe Rabbit Club's monthly meetings and advice sessions in the village hall. The club also organised socials and fund raising events. In 'Branscombe's War 1939-1945' (The Branscombe Project 2013), Sue Dymond refers her readers to a newspaper report about a rabbit club social evening when 'an enjoyable time was spent, refreshments were served and a cine show was followed by games and community singing'. Perhaps they included 'We'll meet again', 'The White Cliffs of Dover' and 'Run Rabbit Run'. The Secretary sent £1 to the Red Cross as a result of this effort. In May 1943 the rabbit club held a jumble sale and ran competitions during the 'Wings for Victory' fund-raising week.

Rabbit club meetings and socials were not the only wartime activities in the village hall. There were whist drives, dances, folk dancing classes and displays, film shows, fancy dress parades, WI meetings: popular events which drew people together, raised their spirits and provided money for the war effort, charities and other good causes. My mother was very keen on folk dancing. She had a lot of respect for the teacher, Margaret Grant, who came over from Sidmouth and was a founder of the Sidmouth Folk Festival in the mid 50s. My mother tried to get me involved in folk dance classes in the hall. I liked the tune of 'Sir Roger de Coverley', but that's as far as it went. The hall's billiard room had a full size Burroughes and Watts billiard table, a popular Saturday night venue for a group which included my father, myself, John Perry the postman, Harry Layzell the blacksmith and several others - there was always a convivial atmosphere in the billiard room.

At last, after almost six years, the surrender of Japan on August 15th 1945 brought the war to an end. My parents had the idea that another pet would be a good way of celebrating this news and this time it would not go into the hut or the hutch. This one would be a pet for the house! It just happened that a few days after VJ Day they heard that up the road at Grapevine, Mrs Woodrow's cat had given birth to kittens and they were ready for new homes.

News travelled quickly around the village in 1945 and after some discussion with Mrs Woodrow, Kingsley and I were given the all clear to collect a kitten. Off we went up the road to Grapevine, where we were expecting a straightforward transfer but there was no sign of a cat or kittens in the house. Instead Mrs Woodrow guided us out of the back door, up the hillside garden behind her house and through a gap in the hedge at the top. What had this to do with a kitten? Soon we found out.

After a few steps Mrs Woodrow stopped. "He's in there!" she said, pointing to a rabbit hole in the bottom of the hedge... With that she got down on her knees, plunged her arm into the hole and out came a tiny black and white ball of fur....Magic! - like a conjurer pulling a rabbit from a top hat in front of an astonished audience!

Mrs Woodrow stood up and gently passed the kitten to us. What a moment! We were really excited to hold him for the first time and Mrs Woodrow was pleased that she had found a new home for her kitten. It had all happened so quickly and it was something we didn't forget. Mrs Woodrow knew that the kitten in a rabbit hole would surprise us and she was right. But how did she know that the kitten was there? Of course like the rest of us she was living close to nature, so she knew. The kitten in the rabbit hole was a big story in our early lives - Kingsley and I talked about it again in 2015, just before he died.

At home everything went well. At first our new pet was a playful little bundle of mischief, climbing up curtains and so on, but he settled down and bonded well with us. My mother thought of the best name for him - 'Vicky', short for Victory because, she said, we were still so close to VJ Day and the end of World War 2. As time went on Vicky spent more and more time in his hunting ground - our large garden and the wood up behind the schoolhouse. He was always bringing home mice and small birds but one day he didn't come back from his travels. This had never happened before. Our concern increased when a second night passed with no sign of Vicky. Kingsley and I searched for him in the wood and fields on the hill above the schoolhouse in vain.

Sometime after that we heard loud cries and we saw Vicky struggling down the garden path, terribly injured and yowling in pain because one of his paws was mangled almost beyond recognition. He had been away for at least two nights and had just managed to make it home, somehow dragging himself along, trying to hold the wounded paw off the ground. We were all devastated to see and hear him in this pathetic state. Kingsley and I thought that he would never recover, but our parents were more optimistic and they knew how to treat his damaged paw. He slept a lot, responded well to their care and gradually recovered, but later on the same thing happened again and he came home with another paw smashed and bloody.

We realised that Vicky had been caught in traps set somewhere up in the fields, hedges and woods way above the schoolhouse. It seems that he didn't drag a trap with him, so did someone set him free? Were they gin traps? We could not answer those questions but we know that steel gin traps with powerful spring operated jaws were used to catch rabbits and foxes when Vicky was on his travels. Cruel gin traps were outlawed in 1958 but even now there are reports that cats and other animals are sometimes caught in them.

Vicky's story ended well. He survived those traumas and lived the second half of his life at a more leisurely pace in Sidmouth, where he enjoyed his large garden with lots of mice and no traps. My parents moved there in 1954, taking the hut and Vicky with them, but no chickens and no rabbits. Vicky lived on until 1962, seventeen years after Mrs Woodrow extracted him from the rabbit hole at Grapevine. In that time and in his own affectionate way, he was good for the family and like the films, maps, chickens and rabbits, he opened our young eyes to the wider world.

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