

Branscombe Voices from the 1940s

8. Ethel Butter (1879-1973). Postmistress.

There were six Branscombe landmarks within 200 metres or so of the schoolhouse - the Village School, Post Office, Parish Church, Forge, Bakery and Village Hall. As a school boy I found the Post Office a more interesting place than the Church. You could get sweets and chocolate from the Post Office, but the Church was mysterious and I didn't understand much of what went on there, although it did give me a liking for organ music. The Forge was full of activity and interest and at the Bakery, the scene of my first solo shopping trip, you could get Gerald Collier's freshly baked buns and scones.

A noisy smoke filled room, with wartime whist drives, folk dancing, the rabbit club, fund raising events for Salute the Soldier and Wings for Victory weeks - that's what I remember of the old Village Hall, with its primitive toilets. Oh yes, and there's also my memory of the big Conservative Party meeting held in the Village Hall in the run up to the July 1945 General Election, the first one since 1935. Imagine the scene: a hall full of people, in the centre of the stage the sitting MP (Cedric Drewe), flanked on each side by several local worthies, seated and pensive. Across the back of the stage there was a backdrop in the form of an enormous Union Jack, the biggest flag I had ever seen - I was beginning to learn about politics. Sometime after that a film about the liberation of Belsen was shown in the Village Hall for adults only. My parents found it very upsetting.

Apart from the Village School, the Post Office was our closest landmark, just down the lane and then a few metres along the main road at the end of Cliff View. An Edwardian picture postcard shows us that in the early part of the last century the Post Office was located at the bottom of Bridge Hill in Forge Cottage. Later, Ethel Butter and her step-mother, Sarah, moved the Post Office up the hill to this larger, more modern house. In 1937 Mrs Butter died and Ethel was left in charge of the Post Office, a post she retained until she retired several decades later.

In 'Branscombe Shops, Trades and Getting By' edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern, (Branscombe Project 2000), Wynne Clarke gives us a picture of Ethel Butter and her step-mother. She says "They were lovely, especially Miss Butter. Her mother was more like Queen Victoria style, with laced-up boots with little heels. Very upright. With this lace collar. She wore black always. But Miss Butter was more, like, thin blouses. She played the organ for a while.....and she used to sing in chapel". One could add that Ethel Butter had a sweet disposition and a willingness to help people. She was well known and well liked in the village, assets which made for a pleasant atmosphere in the Post Office - a keystone in the social structure of village life at that time.

Like many village people, we made almost daily use of the Post Office, one of the most important meeting places in Branscombe, where people chatted, caught up with the news and took advantage of the many services offered by the Post Office - telegrams, postal orders, national savings, pension payments for Grandma.....and so on. We collected our newspapers from the Post Office, they arrived on the 9.30am bus from Seaton - 'News Chronicle,' 'John Bull' and 'Pulman's Weekly News'. It was also my job to be down there in time to catch the outgoing afternoon post for our own letters and those my father sent off from the school.

In addition to the postal service, Branscombe Post Office provided us with an even more personal link with the wider world - the public telephone, but how many people made use of it? In 'Branscombe Shops, Trades and Getting By', Rita Saunders (1912-2012), puts it like this - "You'd go to the Post Office if you wanted to phone. I don't s'pose very many people ever went in, because they wouldn't know anything about telephoning". Rita lived the whole of her life in Branscombe. She died 20 days short of her 100th birthday. For many years her home was at Cliff View, adjacent to the Post Office, where she and her family were our neighbours and friends.

As there was no phone at the schoolhouse until the very end of the 1940s, all our calls were made from the Post Office. Local calls were usually straightforward, but before the introduction of Subscriber Trunk Dialling (STD), in the late 1950s, long distance calls took time, patience and the assistance of Miss Butter. So when my father needed to make a long distance 'trunk' call, off we went to the Post Office, prepared for delays and a little drama.....

Our destination was the phone booth over in the corner, past the curtain which led to Miss Butter's private rooms and beyond the counter with its tall protective grille. The telephone equipment was fixed to a wooden back board on the wall of the booth and it had of a candlestick receiver on a hook, a separate fixed mouthpiece (transmitter) and a dial. During a call the receiver was held to the ear by the caller. This GPO phone was probably installed some time after Miss Butter and her mother set up the new Post Office. On holiday in Greece in the 1980s we were surprised to come across a similar phone in a Post Office on the island of Andros.

To start with, Miss Butter went into the booth and placed the receiver to her left ear. She dialled the trunk call operator, saying in a clear voice "Branscombe 225 attended" and if she was lucky the operator successfully made the necessary links to reach the required number, allowing my father to go ahead with his call. If I promised to behave myself when my father was making his call, I was allowed to curl up on the floor of the phone booth and listen in to his conversation through an additional earpiece. I always looked forward to this - I could hear people talking to each other when they were dozens of miles apart - Amazing! - How was this done? After more than seven decades it's still a mystery to me! I'm not sure that the phone booth was really sound proof and usually there were other customers in the Post Office, so I doubt if I was the only person listening to his conversation.

However, for various reasons some long distance calls were less straightforward and often there were long delays, with communication between operators breaking down, leaving Miss Butter waiting and waiting - patiently repeating her call sign..... "Branscombe 225 attended"..... Eventually, rewarded with her connection, she would pass the receiver to my father and with a smile announce, "The line is clear, you can go ahead". These delays were irritating, especially when there were other customers waiting for Miss Butter's attention, but she carried on calmly treating it all as part of her working day.

Sometimes I was in the Post Office when Miss Butter was preparing the outgoing mail for the GPO mail van which came over from Seaton every day at about 4pm to collect it. After arranging the letters in piles she stamped each letter by hand, the date stamp repeatedly hitting the inking pad and then the letter, creating a brisk staccato rhythm which lingers in the memory. I'm sure that among my collection of Branscombe postcards there are some that were hand stamped by Miss Butter in the 1930s and 40s - I wonder what became of that Branscombe Post Office date stamp, used so often by Miss Butter. 'Branscombe, Seaton, Devon' it proclaimed to the world! I suppose that today, mail posted in Branscombe bears a very different mark - Exeter Mail Centre or Exeter District?

Branscombe Post Office closed a few years ago and the traditional Village Post Office with its welcoming atmosphere and its slice of life has been lost to the community, but I think it's important that memories are preserved and I'm sure that others still have recollections of it.

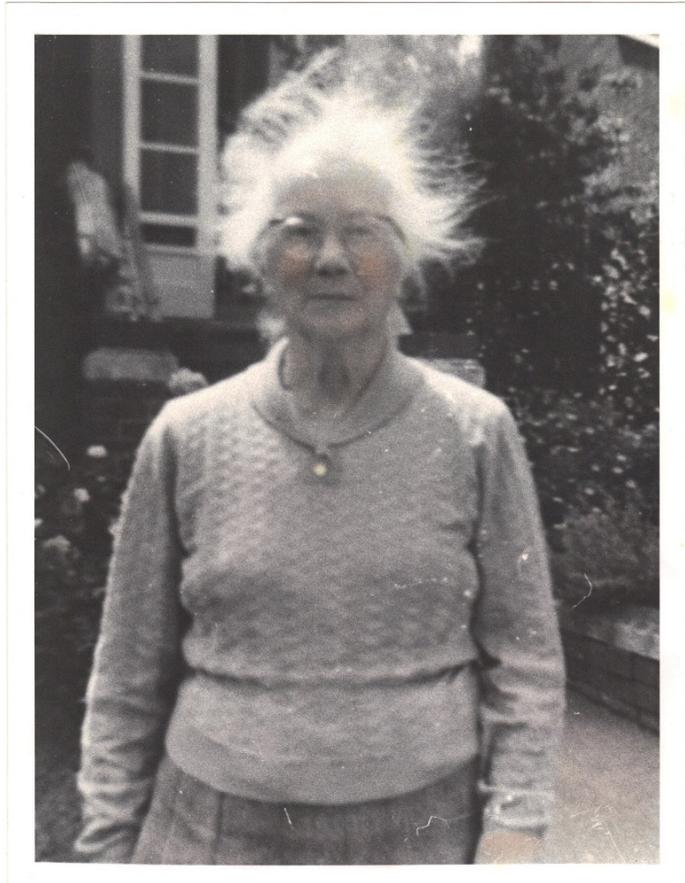
There is an intriguing possibility that Anthony Trollope the novelist visited Branscombe. In 'An Autobiography' published in 1883, he explains that as a Surveyor in the Post Office he was sent on a mission to improve rural postal services in the South West. He was there for two years from 1851. "Two of the happiest years of my life" he says. For some of the time he was based in Exeter and rode 40 miles a day checking up on the activities of rural postmasters.

"I have often surprised some small country postmaster who has never seen or heard of me before, by coming down upon him at 9 in the morning with a red coat, boots and breeches and interrogating him as to the disposal of every letter which came into his office". Trollope carries on in this vein for some time, giving insights into the difficulties of organising and supervising rural postal services in the early 1850s - some 10 years after the introduction of the penny post.

From the Branscombe perspective the most interesting passage comes when Trollope says "I began in Devon and visited I may say every nook in that county..." We know from his itineraries that he visited Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth. So, one day in 1851 or 1852 was Anthony Trollope seen riding down the steep, stony lanes of Branscombe in his red coat, breeches and boots, intent on interrogating one of Miss Butter's Victorian predecessors? I suppose we shall never know.



GPO 121F on back board



Ethel Butter

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