

Branscombe Voices from the 1940s

9 Gerald Collier (1900-1987). Baker.

From our front bedroom window in the schoolhouse, my brother and I had a good view of the bakery, situated about 150 metres away at the bottom of the hill. Sometime in the early 1940s we found that a mirror held at the window on a sunny morning could be angled to form a moving spotlight on the front windows and door of the bakery down the hill. On the first occasion Mr Collier came to the front door bemused about what was going on, but he soon realised what we were up to and gave us a cheerful wave. Understandably, after a time he got fed up with this morning spotlight and I think we did too, so we stopped it, and that was that.

At the time of day when we were playing about with the spotlight, Mr Collier had been on his feet for four or five hours because he and his brother, Stuart Collier (1911-1994), always got up very early in order to get their wood-fired oven up to bake the bread for the whole village. Their father, George, who had been trained as a baker in London, set the standard. Born in Beer in 1864, he had moved into the bakery at Branscombe in the 1890s, so early mornings and long delivery days became routine for the Colliers for decades. Mervyn Tims has written an interesting account of the life of George Collier 'Master Baker of Branscombe' and it's available on the Branscombe Project's website under 'Articles'.

My own memory of the bakery, with its sweet aroma of freshly baked bread, goes back to the early 1940s when George and his wife Sarah were still alive. After they died Gerald and Stuart ran the bakery, which became National Trust property in 1965. In the early 1940s everything was still being done by hand in the bakery and nothing much had changed for a long time. But one day, soon after the end of the war, there was a surprise - a great black machine arrived. "It's a mixing machine," said Mr Collier, clearly pleased with his new asset. Looking at its size and shape I was surprised that anyone could get it through the bakery door - but there it was on the floor of the baking room complete with its wheels, belts, mixing arm and a huge bowl. Soon, I saw and heard it at work. As the mixer worked away at the dough, the sounds of its moving parts were enhanced by the low ceiling and stone floor of the bakery, giving the old place a more modern air and making life a bit easier for Mr Collier.

I believe that the mixing machine is still in the Old Bakery, one of the exhibits in the National Trust's collection of the Colliers' bread making equipment and display of family photographs. In 'Branscombe, Shops, Trade and Getting By Edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern (Branscombe Project 2000), Gerald Collier (p25/26), points out that it took a long time for other aspects of the bakery to be modernised. There was no sink, water heater, bath and no modern toilet until the 1960s. The landlord before the National Trust took over would not replace the well, which, Mr Collier said, was in a very poor state.

Something that did work well for the Collier brothers was their pre-war brown van. Dating from the mid 1930s it was rather like Corporal Jones's van in Dad's Army, but much smaller. Gerald used it to deliver to the western half of the village and Stuart covered the lower village and outlying farms. The schoolhouse was usually on Gerald's round so after leaving the bakery he drove up Bridge Hill, the van just managing to creep along. At the top of hill, opposite the junction with School Lane he stopped, got out and loaded up his basket with freshly baked loaves which he covered with a cloth. Next, with the basket on his arm, he walked up School Lane, up the steps to the schoolhouse and around to the back door, where, in his squeaky, singing voice he called out "Baker if you please M'am" - one of my very early memories. Gerald followed this pattern for many years and after visiting us he went on to see other customers further up the lane - a lot of walking.

Many years later, in the late 1970s or early 80s, I visited Branscombe with a group of undergraduates who were following a landscape study course. Thinking that they might find the bakery interesting we went in. Gerald was there in his white apron, surprised to see us and in his kindly, cheerful way, pleased to talk with the students about his time as a baker and the business of baking bread to serve the village. Then he showed us around and chatted about the faggot store outside, the wood-fired oven in the wall, the racks, tins and long - handled peels. He was very pleased to talk about the mixing machine - it had made a big difference to his life, he said.

All this was entirely new to most of the students, who were lucky to see one of the last wood-fired bakeries before it closed in 1987. As we were about to leave Gerald asked me where we were going next. "Up to Street and out on the cliffs" I replied. Then, with a smile, came his parting comment - "That's right Geoffrey (he always used my full name), learn all you can.....learn all you can". I never saw him again, but I have not forgotten him.

Geoff Squire. 29/10/2019.

