

Claydon with Clattercote Newsletter

Village History Supplement

September 2012

A LIFE IN CLAYDON Part 5

Continuing the recollections of Doris Beswick nee Bloomfield who has lived most of her life in the village, beginning at the Top Lock in 1925, with her father Ted, mother Beat and four brothers. Ted was the foreman of the stretch of canal from Fenny Compton to Banbury.

The War Years

Doris left school at the end of 1939. At this time World War II was not particularly evident. The boys were still at home, so there was plenty to do in helping Beat and no need to find employment elsewhere. However, it was not long before the situation changed. George went to work as lock-keeper at Banbury Lock. There was no lock cottage in Banbury to accompany the job, so he found lodgings in the town. Fortunately he was well away from the lock when it suffered a direct hit in 1942. The lock was out of action for several weeks. Ted and all of his crew from the northern flight were joined by the crew from the southern flight in working to bring the canal back into action as soon as possible.



Banbury Lock after the bombing in 1942

It was during the time of the repair that a lone enemy bomber swooped low over Banbury on one Market Day, when the town centre was at its busiest. Doris and Beat had completed their shopping and were waiting outside the Town Hall to board the bus to return home. There was panic amongst the crowd as everyone was well aware that a machine gun could have mowed them all down in seconds. Doris and Beat felt a further dread that a second bomb would be dropped on the lock and all of the men working there. There was much relief when the aeroplane flew off and dropped its cargo on the dummy aluminium factory at Great Bourton which had been built as a decoy from the real Northern Aluminium factory on the Southam Road.

Back in Claydon the nights were disturbed by the droning of the enemy aircraft on their bombing sorties into the industrial Midlands. The most noticeable and horrific of these was the attack on Coventry. It continued throughout the night with the glow from the burning city very evident in the distance. As spare bombs were often jettisoned in our locality following such attacks it was necessary for Ted to check for any damage along the length of the canal for which he was responsible. After the Coventry raid Doris accompanied him to find that a bomb had dropped in the canal and damaged part of the bank on the long straight between the winding circle and the Bottom Lock.

(Other damage reported at Clattercote by villagers during this time included the death of two cows and a petrol bomb ruining a field of kale across the canal near the pond.)

All too soon the boys had left home. Albert was married and moved to live and work at Sundial Farm. After a short time at Banbury Lock, George was called up into the Army to soon be followed by Sid and Arthur. Arthur was posted to Africa and it was to be four years before Doris would see him again. With much less to do at Top Lock Doris responded to an advertisement in the Banbury Guardian for an 'in-between maid' at St. Mary's Vicarage in Banbury for Canon Williams and his wife. Thus began the only time in Doris' life when she did not live in Claydon. Even so, on her days off, every Thursday and Sunday, she would cycle back to visit Beat and Ted.

Maid duties were not particularly onerous and initially there was a second maid, Vella, to help. The heavy cleaning work was undertaken by a cleaner who came in daily, while there was a footman to clean all of the shoes. Doris was soon promoted to parlour maid which involved answering the door, dusting the parlour and dining room and cleaning the bedrooms. She would also be required to wait at functions.

Doris found Mrs Williams to be a very good employer who would help with the work whenever necessary. This became more frequent after Vella was called up for war work but Mrs Williams was allowed to keep Doris, the cook and the cleaner.

Doris was allowed to stay at the Vicarage because the household included three evacuees who were working at the aluminium laboratories on the Southam Road. There was also Canon Williams' mother and a cousin plus their four children when they were not away at school. This all became very complicated when rations had to be allocated. At the Vicarage the meagre rations were split equally between everyone. Each person was allowed one pot of jam per month and a small weekly ration of sugar and butter. The sugar was dispensed into old jam jars and the butter into separate dishes. At mealtimes the table would be crowded with all of these individual jars and dishes. A treat would be a cake from Brown's Cake Shop, but it required a great deal of time in queuing by either Mrs Williams or Doris. In terms of clothes, Doris had a double allocation, as Mrs Grey, the cleaner at the Vicarage gave Doris her clothing coupons. There was also the option of recycling knitwear. It was quite common to wear a jumper or cardigan for several months and then completely unravel it and re-knit it into a different style. While in Claydon rationing had hardly been noticeable. The family were self-sufficient in vegetables, eggs and some meat. In fact, eggs were so plentiful that Beat pickled some of them. It was just fats and sugar that were mostly missed. However, thanks to the generosity of Mrs Hickson in the shop they were not deprived of sweets.

Every week Doris would accompany Mrs Williams to Banbury Station where they would make sandwiches and serve tea to the troops who were returning on packed trains for weekend leave.

Several of the village girls were called up for war work. Betty Bates, Olive Stanley and Peggy Hickman went to work at Northern Aluminium. At one stage Betty Bates also went to help out at Farnborough Hall which had been converted to a convalescent home for injured soldiers.

Both George and Sid were injured in action, George in the leg and Sid by shrapnel. Sid's life was saved by his cigarette case taking the main impact. George returned to resume work at Banbury Lock while Sid defied the family tradition and went to work at Fosters, the men's outfitters in Banbury. When Arthur returned, he went back to work as part of the Top Lock team and eventually took over as foreman when Ted retired.

To be continued

Many thanks to Doris Beswick

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