

## **The Robins Family, wartime proprietors at Bennett's Shop**

### **Ewelme News, June-July 2009**

#### **Bennett's Shop at Kings Pool House – Memoir of Margaret Robins McCurley**

Bennett's shop (and sometime bakery) was located in Kings Pool House. It was one of the many shops serving the village that are now distant memories, but as interest is now focused on the newly opened Ewelme Stores next door, we were pleased to receive this memoir from Margaret Robins McCurley. The Robins arrived from the Slough area in 1945 and ran the shop until 1947 for Mr Bennett, who lived on a smallholding called "Woodside" on the Henley Road.

This is an extract from her childhood story, relating just to the family's time at Kings Pool House.



**Kings Pool House and Bennett's Shop viewed across the village pond.**

“At last we arrived at Kings Pool House in Ewelme in the village centre – a very old three storey building that was also a working general shop. Difficult to date - although after our time, the new owners, on making alterations, unearthed a boarded up bedroom and found a Roundhead's helmet!

We arrived at the weekend and the shop had to be opened on Monday. Everywhere needed a thorough cleaning and old stock destroyed – it had been much neglected. So beds were put up and basics arranged in the house. Fires were lit downstairs, including the enormous black kitchen range in the large kitchen. There was no heating of any kind upstairs, only hot water bottles and plenty of bedclothes!

Mum's worse fears were realised! Not only being in the country away from family, she had to deal with a large decrepit house with no piped water, no gas or electric cooking facility and an earth closet halfway up the yard! They had to get familiar with the shop right away and as rationing was still in

force the paperwork was phenomenal. They began cleaning the room at the rear of the shop. There was a baker's oven – obviously not used for some time - but there were numerous sacks of flour and cake making packets that filled the whole space. When they were disturbed, hordes of mice ran out! All the outbuildings around the yard were also infested. They had also invaded the house. My poor mum was terrified. The lovely big kitchen had built in cupboards the length of the back wall which made a super larder, these also had to have a spring clean. After this was done, mum had a wooden spoon on hand to bang the doors before she dared open up. We weren't completely free of these unwelcome guests - they held parties in the roof space!



**Bennetts Shop on left, looking up Parson's Lane**

There was a brick and glassed extension onto the kitchen that had a sink and draining board but no piped water to the sink. Mum hadn't realised this, she saw a sink complete with tap and assumed....! Dad had the decency to look uncomfortable when he handed her a galvanised bucket and led her across the road to the stream. The water was as clear as crystal, once dad put a bucket in and came out with a trout! It was delicious.

There were three bedrooms and a large attic which we used as playrooms. My room overlooked the front with mum and dad and baby Christine, whilst she was still in her cot, had the large corner room. At the back, across the width of the house, was a lovely large bedroom with floor to ceiling windows across the whole wall and another complete wall of fitted cupboards, but we could only have used this room during the summer as it was like walking into a fridge – it was so cold.

The neighbour on our left hand side was a farmer. [Lower Farm, now Fields End]. Mr Jim Orpwood was a bachelor and was looked after by a live-in family with two sons, Norman and Donald Lansley, who were part of my group of friends. We had great fun helping with the farm work – lambing, harvesting, feeding the animals, and probably making nuisances of ourselves if the truth be told. At weekends and holidays, we would be away all day playing quite far away from home. Our mothers

would make us a sandwich and give us a small bottle of lemonade, water or milk. We didn't have any bicycles, just walked. How wonderful if children could be as free nowadays.

There was a very large garden beyond the yard that dad put mostly to vegetables. He also kept chickens and a pig named Frances (after mum). Frances, the pig, was bought to share with the Lansley's at the farm. We already had a pigsty that was in good condition, so she lived in our garden. She became quite a pet, but we happily waved her goodbye when she went to the abattoir, and we ate the meat and bacon. Our chickens had a perfect roost and nest box right at the top of the garden in a Shepherd's Hut (a 'caravan' for the shepherd to live in when the flocks were lambing). My friend, Kathleen Winfield [Baker], who lived opposite, and I often played in the hut when it was empty and before the next batch of chickens arrived. One summer it was very hot so we had ended up in vest and knickers playing 'house'. We were hot and scratching ourselves. Mum called us in for tea – took one look and pushed us outside – stripped us naked and scrubbed us from top to toe. We were smothered in chicken fleas!

Dad had a small Morris van that he used to deliver groceries and paraffin oil to outlying customers. This paraffin was stored in one of the outhouses in a large tank. The room was fairly large, it had a lowered floor. One afternoon, Christine went missing. Mum and dad and I searching for her. We found her at last in the paraffin store where she had managed to turn on the tap. She had probably been there for at least twenty minutes and was paddling up to her ankles in paraffin!

Having the shop helped our integration into village life. Dad had become involved with the cricket and football teams and mum was recruited to help with making the tea during the summer and hot suppers in the winter. I went to Ewelme School. Mr Quixley was our headmaster was very strict and pretty scary as he had been in the Army before he took up teaching. During the long summer holiday, some of the children went potato picking. We waited at the village centre where the farmer collected us at 9 o'clock. We trundled off sitting on a flat trailer pulled by his tractor. We worked until lunchtime and then we were brought home. I earned one shilling! It was probably against the law being child labour - as I was only eight! My employment didn't last long – just three days. It was very hot and back-breaking, so I resigned.

Village life was busy and we all joined in. Most of my friends and I were in the church choir. Rector Jenkins arranged lots of social outings for us – picnics and parties. We had a reputation as a good choir and were often invited to sing in neighbouring churches. There were Magic Lantern shows in the Village Hall. In the summer, I was a fat little fairy in the production put on in the Manor House farm garden of 'A Midsummer Nights Dream'. There were always masses of things we found to do.

How dad managed to cope with the shop and work as Mr Bennett's chauffeur/handyman amazes me now! Mum had to help serving in the shop most of the time, cleaning Mr Bennett's cottage, and looking after me, my sister Christine and the house. Finally, mum and dad found it too difficult juggling the shop and working for Mr Bennett so we moved to Benson, although I still attended Ewelme School, riding to and each day on my bike."

Although Margaret lived in Ewelme for a comparatively short time, she often comes over to visit.

*Ewelme Archive*