

Gladys Wetherill's story

Gladys Wetherill (nee.....)

(story as told to the Brompton Heritage Group)

When the War started, Gladys was 10 years old, living at Water End with her parents, 5 brothers and 1 sister, and attending Brompton school. Her Father did the driving for Mr Wilford, a mill owner who also lived at Water End, and who had 2 cars. A car was an unusual sight in the village. Her Mother took in other families' washing, though she already had 9 of her own family to wash for. At the beginning of the War, she gave a home to 2 boy evacuees, so the children had to sleep 2 to a bed – "top and tail". One of the evacuees turned out to be a "bad'un", though he looked angelic. When he was caught stealing money from his hosts, the authorities were notified and he was removed, but the other lad became a long term friend of the family.

Though there was no money to spare for toys, the children made their own fun and had a good time. The Water End Green and beck played a big part in this, especially in the summer, when the children paddled and fished in the water, dug in the mud and walked across the beck balancing on some pipes, frequently falling in.

When double summer time was introduced during the War, to help the farmers maximise the hours of daylight, the children played out till late, having games of rounders etc, while the adults took kitchen chairs to their front doorsteps and sat outside chatting. The Green was important in other ways. Cows and geese were kept there, as it was common land for anyone to use, and one farmer exercised his horses on it before selling them on to the army.

The beginning of the War was marked by the news bulletins on the radio. Adults did not explain to children what was happening, so they gleaned what they could by eavesdropping. One morning, the once familiar Green became transformed into a transit camp for soldiers who had been rescued from Dunkirk. They were washing themselves and their clothes in the beck, and boiling up water on camp fires. This was the Border Regiment, who was billeted in the village and church halls and Sunday schools. The soldiers baked bread under canvas, did PE on the recreation ground on Northallerton Road, and did training on the Greens. Villagers were asked to give them hot meals at midday. The officers occupied 2 cottages on Cockpit Hill, and a sentry was stationed on Water End Bridge.

The Borderers were here for some time, and made a big contribution to village life. They gave impromptu concerts in the village hall, and some of them married local girls. When they left, the villagers turned out to see them off, many of them in tears and singing a song made up for the occasion – "Bring Back the Brompton Border Boys". The tune and words can still be remembered by some. The Borderers were replaced by the East Lancashire Regiment and then the Northumberland Fusiliers, but these did not stay long enough to win the hearts of the villagers in the same way.

Other newcomers to the village, brought in by the circumstances of war, were some Polish men, who were billeted on Little Lane in Nissan Huts for a time. Some of these married local girls also. When they left, the same premises lodged Land Army girls, who worked on the surrounding farms, and also added to the social life of the village by giving parties, dances and fancy dress competitions. Then there were the evacuees, many of whom remained friends for life with the people who took them in. At the end of the War, these families each received a letter of thanks from the Queen, wife to King George VI.

Women's lives changed at this time. Many women turned out to help on local farms at peak times, such as harvest and threshing. Some of them got work in Northallerton to replace the men who went off to fight.

Going out into the fields to pick rosehips in the autumn was part of the war effort for village children. A child received 2d for a pound of rosehips, which were then sent off to be made into rosehip syrup, a rich source of vitamin C, which was much needed when oranges and many other fruits could not be brought in from abroad. As another means of making a few pennies, children would offer to do the shopping for neighbours, visiting the many Brompton shops and having to remember all the prices and bring back the exact amount of change, which did wonders for their mental arithmetic.

There were some very cold winters during the war years, and when the beck froze over, the children walked on the ice to school. Sometimes the ice broke, and some of them got a soaking.

Bits of Perspex, used for the windows in aircraft, could be found, and the girls strung pieces together for "jewellery". Mothers used parachute silk to make into underwear and even wedding dresses. Nothing was wasted.

Very few people had holidays even before the War. Soon after the War started, however, Gladys and her sister were sent off to Hartlepool to stay with relatives, but returned almost immediately, because the bombing raids began! A big excitement for the villagers was to go to local air fields for Open Days. Buses were provided, and nearly all the village went. As there was no petrol to spare, the buses ran on gas, which was held in containers on wheels and pulled along behind each bus. At the air fields, people could look inside the planes, some of which were riddled with bullet holes. It seemed amazing how many of them managed to fly, they were so flimsy looking. The Canadian Air force, stationed nearby, flew in the biggest treat – ice-cream, which couldn't be obtained normally. These outings were holidays to the villagers.

An average Brompton home had no bathroom. The toilet was in a shed in the garden, which was horrid to use at night, with only a candle, which often blew out. This could be terrifying for children, as rats were likely to be in attendance. At the back of the house was the wash-house with the boiler, where the women did all that laundry. This was also where the family had

baths, in a tin tub, starting with the youngest. If the weather was really bad, the tin tub was brought into the kitchen where it was warmer.

Villagers were allowed to keep a pig, hens and ducks in the garden, and they also grew a lot of vegetables. When the hens weren't laying, frozen eggs were delivered in enormous tins, which were placed in front of the fire to thaw out.

When Gladys was 14 or 15, she left school to start work in Northallerton with the Ministry of Agriculture. She couldn't afford the bus fare into work, and her great aim was to own a bike. Buying one outright was impossible, so, when funds allowed, she bought bits of bike piecemeal – a chain one week, a wheel another etc – and then her father put all of it together for her. She was very proud of the final article.

The traditional Whit sports and carnival managed to keep going right through the war years, and lasted 3 days, with long distance races, tugs of war, and even pillow fights across the beck.

It was unusual for the children of Water End to play with those from High End (Shop End). There was great rivalry, especially on Bonfire Night (not held during the War, of course) when each Green had its own bonfire. Everyone did come together, though, for major celebrations, such as those when the War ended in 1945, when there were tea parties and dances.

Though the War years were terrible in many ways, they did enrich the village with the widening of horizons through new experiences and meeting new people. Children were left very much to their own devices, and enjoyed the freedom to roam across the countryside, and to develop their own entertainment. Even the sounds of aircraft, seeing the search lights sweeping the sky, and having to hide under the table when there was an air raid warning, were somehow exciting.