

EILEEN'S STORY

Life in a Norfolk Village



Foreword to Eileen's Story

The village of Plumstead lies in the heart of the North Norfolk countryside, between the 2 small villages of Matlaske and Baconsthorpe. The village adjoins land belonging to the Barningham Hall estate. Some of the properties in the village belong to the estate, and, at one time, housed those employed on the estate farms and at the Hall. They are now rented out or occupied by the few remaining retired workers.

Over the 7 years I have lived in this village, I have had conversations with some of those who have lived here all their lives. It struck me one day that the memories they shared with me would be lost forever once they had gone, leaving only signs of the way things were in the past – a house called The Old Post Office, old wells or pumps in gardens, the wooden pumping handle beside the church organ. I asked Eileen if she would be willing to share her life story with me some day and she readily agreed. Lockdown, which began in March this year, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, provided me with a golden opportunity to put my idea into action. I interviewed Eileen on the telephone, as we were not allowed to meet in person. It brought pleasure to both of us during that strange time, when we were having to stay at home for all but doing the shopping and taking exercise locally.

Eleanor Faulkner November 2020

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In a small North Norfolk village, with around 100 residents, there remain just a few folk who have been born and brought up in the village and are still here today. Eileen Gibbons is one of these, as was her late husband,



Mervyn. Eileen arrived in the world at 44, The Green, Plumstead in 1943. Her parents, Tom and Christine Barrett, nee Scarfe, were both from well known local families. Tom was a Team Man i.e. he worked with the farm horses at Plumstead Hall Farm and Macks of Hempstead. Sadly for Eileen, her mother Christine succumbed to TB within 6 months of giving birth. TB was a common disease of the time, when no effective antibiotic had yet been found and before immunisation with the BCG vaccine was widely available. Christine was sent to Kelling Sanatorium where she will have been

nursed out of doors on the veranda, in the fresh air, and fed with nourishing food, but unfortunately, she died 6 months later. Her father, Tom, was unable to care for Eileen and she was taken into the family of her aunt, Mrs Reynolds, who lived at 33 The Green, now known as Lupin Cottage.

Eileen became part of a big family, with 3 new “brothers”. Her father visited her occasionally. She always knew that Mrs Reynolds was not her birth mother and called her Nanny Reynolds. The Reynolds family ran a steam thrashing business and owned 2 steam traction engines, which they took from farm to farm at harvest



time. Eileen loves the smell of steam engines and commented “I’ve been

told that my pram was sometimes placed between the 2 engines to keep me amused!”

The Reynolds also ran an egg collecting business, picking up eggs from the many small farms in the area. These were then transported to Aylsham to be sold at auction, to retailers such as Sainsbury’s. The Reynolds was a big extended family, some of whom rented land from the Barningham Hall estate. They had small, hedged fields near The Green and farmed them in a co-operative way, helping each other out with the seasonal work.

There was no running water in the village houses in the 1940s and 50s. Some houses had their own well and other families shared wells. The men usually collected water in buckets in the evenings and would congregate around the well for a mardle.

The village children made their own entertainment and Eileen remembers “playing rounders in the street and drawing chalk hop scotch grids on the road”. Many winters saw the pond, down at The Green, frozen and, although they didn’t possess skates, the children enjoyed walking on the ice. The pond was deeper then than it is now. As in many villages, an annual fete was held and Plumstead’s took place in the grounds of Orchard House (now Plumstead House).



Preparation for the fete started early in the year and, as a young girl, Eileen attended the preparatory meetings, when items for sale were knitted or sewn.

Village children went to either Matlaske or Baconsthorpe schools. At Matlaske School there were 2 classes of mixed ages and two teachers, Mrs White and Mrs Newton. Mrs White lived in Matlaske and Mrs Newton lived in School House. The boys and girls were separated for playtime, with one playground at the front of the school and one behind it and, of course, there were outdoor toilets. Eileen remembers well the free half pint bottles of milk that were provided for every school child in those days. Quite often in the winter,

the milk would be frozen with the creamy top pushing up out of the bottle, with the cap perched on top. The bottles would be placed in front of the fire to defrost before being given out to the children. Eileen, like many others of her generation, still doesn't like drinking milk to this day!

In their teens, the young people of the village used to go to dances in the surrounding villages. These were held on Friday and Saturday evenings in Hempstead Youth Club, Sharrington, West Runton and elsewhere, with music provided by live bands. To reach these villages, 3 or 4 of them would either cycle all the way, or as far as Holt, where they would catch a bus, and come home together in the same way late in the evening.

The Church played an important part in the life of the village and on Sunday mornings, a group of children and families would make their way from The Green to attend the morning services. There was a service in the church every week, either Morning or Evening Prayer, with a monthly, short Holy Communion service, held immediately after the morning service. Eileen was baptised as a baby and prepared for confirmation at the age of 13 or 14 by the Rev C Little, who lived at Baconsthorpe Rectory – Plumstead parish was joined with Baconsthorpe and Hempstead parishes in the mid 1950s. The confirmation service was held at the church at North Walsham.

Eileen, her friend Margaret Brind and other village children went to the Sunday School run by the church and, one year, they performed a Nativity play in the church which Eileen remembers well. The Methodist Chapel, where Carpenter's Cottage is now, was active then and the Misses Hines and Russell ran a Bible school on Tuesdays. They also organised Christmas parties to which the children had to bring their own plates and cutlery, marked in some way e.g. with a piece of coloured wool, so as to be easily reclaimed afterwards.

Eileen and Margaret were given the job of pumping the air into the organ using the wooden bar to the side of the organ (still in situ). Eileen recalled "It was hard work and we needed to wear light clothing so that we didn't overheat!" The aim was to keep a suspended weight at a certain level to ensure there was enough air pressure to make the notes sound. Eventually, an electric blower was installed, given in memory of John and Betty Coltart, who died within a few months of each other in 1964. The

inscription on the memorial plaque says “they worshipped God in this church and served their neighbours in the District”. They lived in Orchard House, and Betty was the church organist for many years, until arthritis in her hands prevented her from continuing to play. Eileen and Margaret had been having piano lessons in Edgefield for some time and so were asked to take over at the organ. Margaret moved away when she got married and Eileen continued to play for services for the next 50 years, apart from a 6 month spell when she lived in Edgefield!



Eileen went out to work from the age of 14 years old, starting at the Post Office at Matlaske, where she stayed for two and a half years. After that, she took a job in Sheringham in a café attached to The Picture House, where Sheringham Little Theatre is now. She cycled there for many years until she got a moped. After leaving that job, Eileen went to work for Peck's Millers in Edgefield and drove their large lorry around the villages, delivering animal food to people with small holdings or who kept a few pigs or chickens on their land. She then moved on to Itringham Mill where there was a vegetarian restaurant. There, they also served afternoon teas and Eileen became the pastry chef. These teas were so popular that coaches brought groups of people for the experience. During her time there, the café was visited by well known cook, Fanny Craddock, who later wrote in a magazine that the pastries she had tasted there were “mouthwatering”!! The restaurant closed down in 1980 and Eileen went to work behind the bar and as a cook, at The Pigs at Edgefield.

Apart from employment outside the village and on the local farms, some employment was to be found within the village. This included the growing and harvesting of blackcurrants, on the land now occupied by Oak Tree and Acorn Cottages. Much of the land, on either side of Cherry Tree Road road, was owned by the Coltarts of Orchard House. Fred Harmer was the tenant living in Stocks Bungalow. He ran a smallholding with pigs and

chickens, and looked after the black currants. Cherry Tree Road has probably changed more than the two other principal parts (Church Street and The Green) of the village over the years. The pub was closed around 1964 and the Coltart's land was sold on. The first council houses were built along one side of the road and up the Loke. 4 more were built at the top of the Loke at a later date. Private houses were gradually added to this road with Honeysuckle Cottage being built on the old Bowling Green, in 1976. Oak Tree and Acorn Cottages were the last to be built on the former blackcurrant field, in 1984. Other private houses were built in Church Street and a few more were added near The Green.

In 1962, Eileen was married in Plumstead Church, to Mervyn Gibbons. Mervyn was 12 years older than Eileen and was born in Church Farm House in 1931. Mervyn's father worked on the Barningham Hall estate, and Church Farm House was then an estate house for workers. The family moved to Vale Farm on The Heath (on the Edgefield road) where his father ran the farm. On the left of the road to Edgefield, there was a shooting range where they flew a red flag on a pole when firing practice was happening. Mervyn and his friends used to play there, and in the woods, with their cap guns. When Mervyn was about 12 years old, his father went back to work at Church Farm and the family returned to live in Church Farm House. When he was old enough, Mervyn started work on the estate at Dairy Farm, where his brother was foreman. He left Dairy Farm in 1968 to go to Plumstead Hall Farm where he stayed until his retirement.

During one of the winters in the 1960s, the village was cut off by snow and Dairy Farm provided a churn of milk, which was placed on the Gibbon's doorstep, so that locals could fill their jugs.

Mervyn went to Matlaske school, as did Eileen, but being 12 years older than her, they knew of each other only through living in the same village. They met socially for the first time as young adults, at The Cherry Tree pub. Mervyn used to play in the local darts team and joined others from the villages for a drink in the pub, for recreation. In the winter of 1961 there was a thick fog, which made it impossible for the dance-going young people to travel to that evening's village dance. "Instead, we went to the pub, where Mervyn and I got talking" and their future together began.

They married in 1962 and held their wedding reception at Matlaske Village Hall, which was then in the grounds of the estate – a building left from the war, where Italian prisoners of war were once housed. They moved out of Plumstead then, to Pimlico, for just 7 months after which they returned to the village, moving into one of the two Church Cottages.

After 9 years there, in 1971, they moved into Church View, one of 2 newly built estate bungalows, over the road and Eileen lives there still. Before the new houses were built along Church Street, Eileen and Mervyn kept 4 sows on the land and, at one time, she had 150 rabbits. The piglets were brought on and sold for meat, and the rabbits were taken to Aylsham Market for sale when they were 8 weeks old. There are several varieties of rabbits bred for meat and Eileen had large white rabbits and other breeds such as Dutch and Black rabbits and she continued to keep rabbits until the late 1990s.



Eileen and Mervyn had 2 sons, Martin and Neville. Martin was born in Longacre Maternity Home in West Runton and Neville was born at home. The Infant Welfare Clinics were held in Matlaske Village Hall. Matlaske



School closed in 1964, so the children went to Baconsthorpe School and then on to Sheringham for their secondary education. Martin went to work on one of the local farms whilst Neville started working at Edgefield Garage. He has now moved further afield in Norfolk.

Throughout her life, Eileen has played an active part in village life. As well as playing the organ for Sunday services, involvement in church life included helping to run fundraising events, being on the PCC and, for a time, being churchwarden with Mrs Ethel Brind, her good friend's mother. She also served for 30 years on the Parish Council.

For much of that time, she was Parish Clerk and, for some of that time, Mervyn was Chairman. Eileen chaired the Parish Council in the year 2000, when the 2000 Fund was set up to raise money for the new village sign. She was involved in the organisation and running of the Open Gardens event, which was held to raise money for that fund. “We were amazed at its success!” Eileen commented. “The village was buzzing. There were cars parked everywhere - we had no car park, and I think we raised £1300.” Since then there have been several more Open Garden events, all of which have been very successful.

Mervyn and Eileen were married for 55 years, until Mervyn died in July 2017. The church was filled to overflowing with mourners for his funeral, with many standing at the back of the church and even more standing outside. A new oak hymn board was made by one of Eileen’s young



relatives, in his memory, and a crab apple tree has been planted near his grave in the churchyard. Dogs have played an important part in Eileen’s life and she can often be seen walking along Church Street accompanied by her latest canine companion, 8 year old black Labrador, Monty.

