

BRANSCOMBE VOICES FROM THE 1940s.

3. The Horse-drawn Milk Cart.

The village Post Office, just down the road from the schoolhouse, was the setting for one of my earliest memories. One morning nearly eighty years ago, my father and I happened to be outside the Post Office when the clip-clop of a horse heralded the arrival of something quite new to me - a horse-drawn milk cart with big wheels. My father explained that Mr White was on his morning milk round down through the village.

The milk cart came to a halt just in front of us. As my father exchanged a few words with Mr White, I stood there wide-eyed, holding my father's hand, trying to take it all in. At the same time I was alarmed by the presence and appearance of the horse. I had never been so close to such a large animal - and he had big teeth. Sensing my unease, my father calmed me down by explaining that the horse was friendly and that he would wait quietly for Mr White to go through his daily routine - and that's exactly what happened.

Aware that Mr White had arrived, several ladies emerged from their cottages nearby carrying milk jugs and soon Mr White was ready to serve them from the tall milk churn up in the cart. Chattering away, the ladies moved in a line along the side of the cart and Mr White, using his special milk ladle, carefully filled each jug. The ladies paid for their milk and slipped back through their front doors. With his sales complete, Mr White moved back to his driving position. He pulled up the reins and spoke to his horse. Off they went, slowly down Bridge Hill to the next stop and then all the way down to the Square; the conclusion of a little drama repeated every day in Branscombe and countless times across the country. I know now that Mr White's horse was a well behaved pony, not a threatening monster!

It's likely that at after each stop someone would be ready to come along to scrape up anything the horse had left behind and put it over the garden wall, excellent compost for the vegetable garden. This was a familiar activity in earthy Branscombe at a time when almost everyone had a vegetable garden and there were so many horses in the village.

Before the war Mr White did his milk round twice a day, 8-10.30am and 4.30-6.30pm, but only once a day after rationing came in. He was one of many dairy farmers selling milk in Branscombe at that time so he would be keen to keep his customers in such a competitive world, an aspect of village life often overlooked. Some of the milk from Branscombe's dairy farms was collected by the Express Dairy and transported to London by rail from their depot at Seaton Junction. Every day their lorry rattled down through the village with its load of clanking milk churns held in place by sets of clattering chains - an unmistakable, resounding racket back in the 1940s! The Express Dairy company was also active in the development of electric milk floats which were first used in London in the mid 1930s. Electric milk floats gradually replaced horse-drawn milk carts, but as far as I know electric milk floats never reached Branscombe, a place not usually in the forefront of innovation adoption.

Having written that, an exception comes to mind - John Tucker of Branscombe is credited with the introduction of Branscombe Point Lace in the mid 1860s. This technique gave lace makers more options and it spread to other places in East Devon, but the market for Honiton lace declined in the second half of the 19th century*. It would be interesting to know about other innovations associated with Branscombe. I know that at least one of the ladies who bought milk from Mr White on that morning was a skilled lace maker. On warm summer evenings in the 1940s, I remember seeing Dora Layzell working away making lace in her doorway. Was she making Branscombe Point? I shall never know, but these memories of lace making, like those of the horse-drawn milk cart, are cherished echoes of old Branscombe.

The milk cart scene was over in a few minutes. It could be dismissed as a fragment, an isolated experience. On the other hand, this fleeting snapshot of life beyond the schoolhouse left a lasting impression on me and in all probability it began to show me just how daily life was carried on in Branscombe at that time.

Geoff Squire 5/3/2018.

* For more see 'The Branscombe Lace-Makers' Edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern. The Branscombe Project 2002.