

Branscombe Voices From the 1940s

5. Traders. Mr Kensdale.

In the 1940s there was always a buzz in the schoolhouse when traders arrived on the doorstep - new voices from the outside world, ever ready to chat about the weather, their interests, the state of the world and so on. Then they would offer us all sorts of goods and services, many of which were not available in the village. Traders moved through in carts, vans, lorries and cars and for me, in the early days at least, there was the mystery of where they came from and how they found their way to us. I know now that they were mainly from places quite close to us - Sidmouth, Honiton and Colyton, but at that time I thought that they had arrived from somewhere far away from our familiar patch in Branscombe.

Many traders kept to the main road through the village, but some of them turned up at the schoolhouse, which was situated up School Lane, slightly away from the main road. I know that Fords of Sidmouth were regular callers, selling household goods and Mr Manley, a chemist from Honiton also found his way to us, but I have hardly any memories of them. A representative of the National Deposit Friendly Society, a provider of medical insurance, also called on us - Mr Plowman, I think.

I have clearer memories of Mr Kensdale, a dapper, middle-aged man with a fruit and a green grocery shop near the Radway Cinema in Sidmouth. Mr Kensdale often came round whistling away and sounding happy. At that time whistling was often heard, but today it is unusual. I see that a 2015 YouGov poll found that it may be dying out - nearly half of the people polled said they found whistling irritating with younger people finding it annoying. Explanations of the decline of whistling include the view that it is a response to the faster pace and increased pressure of modern life.

Mr Kensdale soon revealed his wider interest in music with hints that he had been a performer, possibly on the clarinet in a dance band. So there was a lot of chat about music which included our plans to go to a concert in Exeter. This was a piano recital in the Civic Hall by the famous pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch. At 15 and a struggling learner, I was really looking forward to it - my first experience of a piano recital - a big occasion.

The highlight of the concert was Moiseiwitsch's delightful performance of Rachmaninoff's transcription of the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a suite of music which includes the famous Wedding March. I was amazed that anyone could possibly play such fiendishly difficult music so brilliantly. Moiseiwitsch's fine recording of the Scherzo is now on YouTube and it is regarded by some critics as one of the best piano recordings of all time. In the Civic Hall concert he also included Robert Schumann's composition *The Prophet Bird*, which I had never heard before. At the time I thought it was a very strange piece, but since then I've got to know it better and I now regard it as a complement to what I've written about my experience of growing up in the natural world of Branscombe. In the years following that Moiseiwitsch concert I went to piano recitals and concerts by at least twenty of the leading pianists of the second half of the 20th. Century and some of them still stand out in my memory. Unfortunately I missed Arrau, Rubinstein and Richter and now I doubt if I shall ever be able to go to a Martha Argerich or a Gregory Sokolov concert but I suppose the chances would be greater if we still lived in Berkshire.

Back in Branscombe, Mr Kensdale wanted to know about the concert and our reactions to it. He also took an interest in another one we signed up for, this time in the Manor Hall Sidmouth. The Programme included a violin and piano version of Mendelssohn's celebrated violin concerto played by the great violinist Alfredo Campoli and accompanied by Eric Gritton - another memorable musical experience from the late 1940s.

We were always pleased to see Mr Kensdale. Our conversations and his interest in those two concerts, with their capacity audiences, led me to think that there might be quite a lot of people out there with a passion for classical music, which was hitting me like a thunderbolt.

Geoff Squire 30/4/2018

For more on Traders see 'Branscombe Shops, Trades and Getting By' Edited by Barbara Farquharson and Joan Doern, Branscombe Project 2000. In *Deliveries from Outside* (p 51-56), local people recall memories of traders who came through Branscombe in the decades before 1960.

