

## Branscombe Voices From the 1940s.

### 6. More Traders - Coalmen.

From time to time in the early 1940s we heard the sound of heavy boots clumping up the school house path. I'm sure my parents were relieved to see that the boots belonged to men delivering our coal, not to a contingent of an invading German army. After all, this was a time of high tension. The new defences down by the beach were a constant reminder of the threat from the sea - barbed wire, pillars, mines in the pebbles and pill boxes manned by Branscombe's Home Guard.

From our windows we watched the coalmen, their backs weighed down under heavy loads - one hundredweight (50kg) sacks of coal. Dressed in black with leather waistcoats and covered in coal dust from head to foot, their tough appearance frightened my brother and me in the early days, but they turned out to be friendly enough, although unlike some of our other traders they said very little. They just wanted to get the job done.

What a job it was! Carrying these loads they had to make their way up two flights of steps, across cobbles and all round the house to the coal store at the back of our sheds. They were not young men - the younger ones had been claimed for military service - and as my mother pointed out they had to carry these loads all day every day in all winds and weather. This was my first encounter with hard manual labour and when they completed our delivery they did it all over again, carrying bag after 50Kg bag to the school coke store at the back of the classrooms. This time there were more steps and another long walk. While all this was going on I was told to keep out of the way, but seeing them bent down under these heavy loads I was thinking 'I do not want to be a coalman'.

From start to finish the coalmen were providing a vital service for us because the house was heated by one coal fire in the living room. It was my job to fill the coal scuttle so that my father could light the fire every morning. There was an art to this - with the fire pan he had to shovel out the ashes from the previous day, crumple up an old 'News Chronicle', put in some small sticks, then small lumps of coal and then some large ones. All being well the fire would catch quickly enough but sometimes it took some time to get going. During windy weather the smoke from the fire often blew back down the chimney, belching clouds of smoke and dust into the living room and leaving a lingering smell of coal smoke in the house with bad effects on our health.

Eventually a cowl was placed on the top of the chimney and this helped, but the problem was never solved. It was important to keep the chimney clear of soot in order to reduce this menace, so we called in Harry Layzell our sweep, who was also the village blacksmith. There was always an upheaval when he arrived with his rods, brushes, sheets and buckets for collecting the soot - which always came down the chimney in large quantities when Harry got to work. The two tiny Victorian fireplaces in the bedrooms were never used during the 19 years I lived in the schoolhouse, but sometimes on a Sunday afternoon in the winter months my father also lit a coal fire in the front room.

We all looked forward to those Sunday afternoons which began with my father opening up the blue HMV gramophone on the front room table. After dusting it all over with his special HMV brush he would check the needle for wear and replace it if necessary. Then he wound up the gramophone and began to play some 1920s and 1930s 78rpm records - great tunes, including Happy Feet (Cab Calloway 1930).....

Happy feet, I've got those happy feet!o

Give them a low down beat

And they begin dancing!

I've got those ten tap-tap-tapping toes.....

Other popular pieces were 'Little Brown Jug', 'The Laughing Policeman', 'The Parade of the Tin Soldiers' and one of my all time favourites 'The Grasshopper's Dance' composed by Ernest Bucalossi in 1906 and recorded by Jack Hylton and his orchestra in 1933 - now on YouTube. There were lots of other pieces and we got my father to put some of them on more than once. My parents loved all this and I caught some of their enthusiasm. Up in our loft I still have their collection of 78s in its original black case with a big strap across its top. I have no equipment for playing 78rpm records from the 1920s and 30s, but I can listen to these old gems on YouTube.

To finish off the afternoon my father would turn to the piano and play some of his favourite Handel and often some Dvorak- probably his version of 'Songs my Mother Taught Me', also popular tunes of the day - 'The Lambeth Walk', 'There'll be Bluebirds over The White Cliffs of Dover.'.....Then at teatime, we used our old brass toasting fork for toasted bread with home-made jam. Those cosy musical Sunday afternoons by the fire in the front room helped to give us the sense of security and solidarity we all needed during the war.

Saturday night was bath night and the living room fire played an essential part in it. Saturday was chosen so that my brother and I would be all clean, ready for our best clothes and church on Sunday morning. Grandma (1873-1964), used to tell us that 'Cleanliness is Next to Godliness'. As there was no bathroom or plumbing in the schoolhouse bath nights were old-fashioned performances which began with the retrieval of the galvanised bath from its nail on the lavatory wall across the back yard. Carried in through the scullery and placed in front of the fire in the living room, it was filled with hot water from kettles set up on iron trivets over the fire. These tripods were made for us by Harry Layzell in his forge just down the hill.

Usually there was a lot of grumbling about the water temperature - it seemed that everyone in the family had a different opinion about an acceptable temperature for the bath water and in order to get an agreed temperature there was always a bucket of cold water to hand from the pump outside the backdoor. Of course, as the water quickly cooled it had to be topped with more hot water from the kettles, and so on.... Also, there was an issue about who should have the privilege of the first bath. This was finally resolved by an agreement to take it in turns to go in first.

This weekly procedure continued for years and I now understand that our experience was similar to that of millions of people across Britain in the 1940s. Most people did not have a bathroom at that time. A government survey published by the Ministry of Works in 1950 showed that in the severe winter of 1947 only 46% of British households had bathrooms and over 30% had a portable bath like ours. I think that some people in the lower part of the village had bathrooms - there was mains drainage down there from pre-war days, but this service was not extended to rest of Branscombe until the late 1950s.

Through the 1940s and 50s Bradfords and Luffs were the coal merchants responsible for our coal deliveries and they were pretty reliable. However, in the severe winters of the 1940s deliveries were sometimes delayed by ice and snow on the roads and there were some anxious moments because we were reliant on coal deliveries for the house and the adjoining school. But in true wartime spirit the coalmen eventually got through to us - a 1940s version of Just in Time.

So much has changed since those days. The demise of King Coal and his hardworking coalmen is a well known story - from the 1940s output of about 200 million tons each year and the employment of 700000 people to the closure of the last deep mine at Kellingley, Yorkshire in December 2015. Now the concern is more about the pollution and health hazards associated with coal burning with Government Ministers targeting domestic fires, even suggesting the possibility of a ban on anything apart from smokeless fuel due to the danger of heart and lung diseases.

Having been brought up in a home where the chimney sometimes belched damaging clouds of smoke and dust into the living room, I find it difficult to disagree with that argument. On the other hand, there is something special and attractive about the cosy glow and flickering flames of a real coal fire. I still cherish my memories of those wartime winter Sunday afternoons in the front room of the schoolhouse with music and toast by the fire.

Geoff Squire 30/8/2018.



