

**BLUNTISHAM PARISH
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WE ARE NEARLY THERE!

**There's still time to "Buy a Brick" though!
(see page 9)**

My life in Bluntisham – the last 50 years as a Shop Proprietor.

When I left Ramsey Abbey Grammar School in 1948 at the age of 16, I started work with my father as Fruit grower and Smallholder. I continued with this work dealing in pigs and poultry, starting on my own from 17 when I passed my test and could drive a car.

By 1954 fruit growing had started to go into depression. For instance we always grew an acre of Raspberries. That year they produced a ton which was sold to Brooke Bond, who owned St.Ives Chicory, for £150. Cost of cultivation, fertiliser, pulling etc cost £132, £12 profit on an acre. My thoughts, plus those of my parents, it was time to diversify.

I had at this time been courting a young lady, Miss Gillian Barnett who was a student nurse at Addenbrookes Hospital and whose father and mother lived in Earith, being the local butcher, Mr and Mrs Frank Barnett.

We decided to marry after Gill had finished her training and passed her S.R.N. So we needed somewhere to live. My cousins, the Misses Baker kept the local shop and decided to get out, so I took over the shop from them in September 1954. We were married at Bluntisham church by the late Reverend Eddy in his wellington boots in June 1955.

The shop at that time was just one small room. Counters around two sides, home-made glass showcase in 1 corner for medical supplies, Beechams Powders, Andrews Liver Salts, Zambuck, Aspirin, Liquid Paraffin to name just a few. At the back of the counter on one side a full block of drawers, again home-made, for Sunlight soap, boxes holding tobacco, Digger Shag, Country Shag etc., cigarettes Woodbines and Players and snuff. The other side was plain shelving for chocolates, sweets, all loose, pens, pencils, writing paper and envelopes. In one other corner there was an old safe for cheese which came in 56lb rounds, wrapped in muslin, and 28lbs lard in boxes, butter in 1lb slabs and later ½ slabs produced by Eacocks of Sutton. Sugar which came in 1cwt Bags, that had to be weighed out in blue paper 1lb and 2lbs bags. Bacon which came by the side ½ pig which we had to bone and slice, bone out and cook hams and shoulders – those were the good old days for us. We also sold paraffin which was delivered into a 100 gallon tank in our shed outside and we drew gallons or 5 gallons into cans, 5 gallon mostly delivered.

To get back to our house, we had one room and one small kitchen at the back of the shop, and electric stove in the passage, sitting room upstairs over the shop, two small bedrooms at the back and an attic. No bathroom and an earth closet outside in a row of three because at this time there were three properties in the yard. The residue was collected once a week from a passage at the back of the toilets. Not a palace but our home and much pleasure did we have there.

At this time there were only 167 houses in Bluntisham and 112 in Colne but we had a good following of customers, very loyal and always have been throughout our business career, something of which we are very proud.

When we took the shop, we became members of Huntingdonshire Grocer Association and we were the youngest members at this time. Some of our local businesses gave us twelve months but we fooled them all having stayed 50 years!

Our seasons was Christmas, Easter and Fruit Pulling season. Fruit was still very big at this time, between 2000 and 3000 acres of plums and apples underplanted with gooseberries, few strawberries, raspberries, red and blackcurrants. When pulling fruit started quite a few ladies and children pulled the soft fruit and then plums when we had an influx of friendly gypsies. They all had a horse and wagons and later Bedford 30cwt lorries and caravans. As many as 200 families in the four villages around and they were mostly well-behaved, worked hard, earned good money and spent well.

Some I remember buying as much as 2lb cheese, 2lb bacon, 6 loaves of bread, most days, and Saturday nights they all met in the "Swan" opposite the shop.

There would be as many as 40 vans and lorries along the High Street and in front of the shop, often finishing at turning out time with a fight when they would make a ring and stand and cheer their respective favourites.

The biggest alteration between then and now, 90% of our customers had orders delivered once a week, some who were hard working small holders would say to me when the pulling season started – go into the pantry, have a look what we need and bring us what you think, so I shopped for at least 10 families 6 months of the year. I fetched their orders and delivered, very often never seeing anyone. Payment with them was once a year, carrying on an old farming tradition when payment was once a year after the corn was threshed and sold.

After 7 years of grocery, cigarettes and sweets, I had the opportunity to buy the local paper rounds which had previously been only home deliveries by Mr Percy Wells and Mrs Carter. So we became newsagents doing deliveries around Colne and Bluntisham with shop sales of magazines and papers. My mother and father were still in working gear and used to help deliver papers. At this time we had two vans delivering papers, groceries and selling sweets and cigarettes from the vans. A busy time plus we still kept 10 acres of orchard, 10 acres grass, and kept 500 hens, 25 sows and store pigs. Later I dropped poultry but increased pigs to 100 sows and their litters till 10 weeks old, around six to eight hundred.

Then the next big event was me having a heart attack in 1976 and was in Addenbrookes Hospital a month, but survived!

Whilst in hospital Gill sold the pigs so we just had the shop to run. We moved house to No.3 East Street and two years later when the next door property, No.29 High Street became vacant, we extended the shop as it is today. I moved house once more to Nos 9 – 11 East Street, back to where I was born.

So I stand before you, 50 years a Village Shop Keeper!

THE BELLS OF ST. MARY'S

The Bells of St Mary's have just been restored and will soon ring out full circle for the first time in nearly 150 years. They were last renovated when the Rector of St Mary's was the Revd Henry Sayers, father of the famous author Dorothy L Sayers, who is best remembered for her detective novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey.

It is thought that Dorothy's interest in bells and bell ringing was sparked off by the restoration of the bells at St Mary's undertaken by her father in 1910. One of her best-known books is *The Nine Tailors*, a murder mystery based on a Fenland church, involving clues connected with bells and change ringing. Many of the characters in the book have names such as Thoday, Godfrey and Tebbutt - names that are familiar in the villages today. *The Nine Tailors* was republished this year 70 years after its first publication.

When the restoration was done in 1910, the existing five bells were increased to a fine ring of eight. Unfortunately, the frame was never restored and until recently the bells have remained hung for chiming in an ancient wooden frame and fittings that became in very poor condition and threatened their safety.

In addition to the bell restoration it is planned to provide a display of information in the Church about the life and works of Dorothy L Sayers, to add to the local knowledge of the village's literary heritage.

What has been done

The bells have been rehung in a modern cast iron and steel frame, lower in the tower. This will reduce the forces on the tower and spire and the frame is carefully positioned to add strength to parts that date from the 14th century.

The restoration involved extensive replacement of the bell fittings, rehangng of the bells on modern bearings, and the provision of new wheels ropes and rope-guides. The bells will be rung from the ground floor.

The work, which includes some minor repairs to the tower, to be completed early next year, will cost in the region of £97,000.

Much of the funding is now in place but a new seventh bell has had to be cast and so additional funds are still needed. We were awarded a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund for £50,000. This together with grants and donations from the Ely Diocesan Association of Church Bell Ringers, The Manifold Trust, The Cambridge Historic Churches Trust / Entrust, The Sharpe Trust, The Council for the Care of Churches, The Dorothy L Sayers Society and generous individual donations and support given by many at fund raising events. Local bellringers and volunteers gave further support by helping remove and reinstall the bells saving up to £6000.