

BAKING THE BREAD

Harry Bennett

When I was about 10 or 11 years of age I had a bread round to earn pocket money; we were living in Church Street then and the bakery was in the Lygon Arms. My first customer was Edwin Rimell who lived at the Barley Mow, a retired farmer who acted as a rent collector - he told me he once jumped a horse from the Sheppey across George Lane into the Recreation Ground while out hunting. The Rimells had a standing order so I just had to knock once, shout 'Baker' and put the loaf on the table. In the hall they had a picture it was a peculiar picture, it was on pleated paper if you looked at it from the right it was a vase of flowers. One day very daring I tiptoed down the hall to see what was on the left. I've forgotten now what it was. Next door to Rimells was Bob Guthrie, a blacksmith. He and his wife were about 80 and his nephew Tom Barnes lived with them and did all the work. I delivered the loaf one day and Bob Guthrie took it from me and said to me 'Good bread never hurt anyone did it?', and I like a fool said no. So he hit me on the head with the loaf.

The next call was two old ladies who lived in North End Terrace whose names I have forgotten and Reuben Howell who lived in a cottage further on. Reuben told me that when he was a boy he used to help to train the shin kickers, attacking their shins with a hammer to toughen them. I gathered from him the art of shin kicking was to keep out of the way. If one kick landed that was enough. Then I had to go all round Wolds End to get to the next customers at Woodbine Cottage.

The business was expanding and in 1923 a hand truck was ordered from Messrs Goodall in Evesham who were then wheelwrights. This truck is now in the Almonry Museum in Evesham, but I have a small replica of it and at this time also a bicycle was acquired so we could cover more ground and later a horse and trap was bought.



Harry with the delivery bicycle

In 1928 Campden's old stone drains were found to be inadequate so a new sewerage system was put in with a proper filtration plant in Station Road. The government gave a grant for this work provided part of the labour came from the high unemployment areas so about 20 Welsh miners came to do the digging. Needless to say they managed to form a choir and Land of my Fathers could be heard every lunch hour. Work took about two years and when it had finished a building and rehousing plan was put into operation. Council houses were built at Catbrook and Station Road and a lot of small substandard cottages in the town were condemned. Poppetts Alley, Lodging House Yard and George and Dragon Cottages were either demolished or made two or three into one and refurbished. All the tenants of this property were moved to the new council houses - this meant that delivery now covered much more ground and took much longer.

So far I have only written about the delivery work - the bread had to be made before it could be delivered. When we first started bread was made by the sponge dough method a sack of flour, 140lbs was tipped into the trough and the pen boards inserted. This was a board of the same section as the trough which could be pushed into the flour at any point to shut part of it off. The sponge consisted of about 28lbs of flour made into a very soft dough with yeast. This was made overnight and left to rise by the 11 morning it would have risen until it had collapsed it was then ready for use. The pen board was removed, the salt and the rest of the water added and the whole mixed to a smooth dough by hand. This took about 45 minutes hard work and the dust was terrible. I still suffer from asthma caused through inhaling it. The dough was then left to rise for about 4 hours while we got on with other work such as buns, rolls etc. known in the trade as morning goods. Cakes and other confectionery were done after the bread. If the sponge had not dropped when we arrived for work in the morning we had to hang about until it did which meant we were late all day. I soon found that if I got there first and the sponge had not dropped giving the side of the trough a sharp kick would do the trick.

I had learnt to set the sponge at a very early age so my father could go bowling in the evenings and not have to do it when he came back. One night I forgot to do it and when he lifted the lid the next morning there was no sponge - dropped or otherwise. So we had to make a straight dough which is one made up straight away using up twice as much yeast. He was familiar with this process from having used it in the army bakeries - the bread was quite satisfactory, and that, thank God, was the end of sponge doughs. This was the best mistake I had ever made. I think sponge doughs were used to save a few pence on the yeast, you didn't gain anything else. They may have been necessary when barm was the only medium available as a raising agent but with modern compressed yeast it was quite unnecessary. Another monotonous job was tin greasing. This had to be done daiiy or the bread would stick to the tin, it's now done by spraying a film of oil over the dough as it comes out of the moulding machine and before it drops into the tin. Some experimenting was done with silicone coating but this was unsatisfactory stacking the tins one inside the other ruined the coating.

Moulding was all done by hand one loaf in each hand with practice a perfectly round ball could be achieved very quickly. In those days we were still making a few quartern loaves at 41b each when baked. These were weighed at 4.5 lb each to allow for water evaporation whilst baking. I could roll one of these in each hand. Later the half quartern or 21b loaf became more popular. Very few 11b loaves were made, we only had six tins. The cottage loaf was very popular with the public but not with the bakers, as they could

only be moulded one at a time, top in one hand, bottom in the other. The tops were put on just before they were put in the oven and pushed hard down otherwise they would fly off. During the war the size of the standard loaf was reduced to one and 3/4lbs and 14oz respectively and that has remained ever since. Another dusty job was mixing baking powder - one part of bicarbonate of soda to two parts 13 cream of tartar sieved together. This was stored in large 71b biscuit tins. We also made our own self-raising flour for re-sale in our printed bags. 21b bags are always sold at the same price as a loaf of bread, fluctuating between 3.5 and 4 pence old money. All dried fruit was bought in 28lbs boxes and had to be washed and cleaned to remove all stalks and small stones. Candied peel was bought in caps, that is half fruits and had to be cut up by hand, slices of citron peel for decorating the top of the Madeira cakes had to be cut just right if too thin they would shrivel up and too thick they would sink into the cake. All these tasks are now carried out by the manufacturers and everything is bought ready to use.

About this time I began to have some trouble with my right hip which was starting to move out of position and cause a limp. I went to the doctor who sent me to a specialist in Cheltenham who advised a shoe slightly built up on the inside which would correct it. This did not work and it got worse. So Doctor Birch sent me to a man at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford. He decided to admit me while they x-rayed it and carried out various tests. Conditions were very strict there, blanket baths and bedpans were the order of the day and no-one was allowed out of bed under any circumstances which was monotonous. Breakfast was a mug of toa, a plate of porridge and a doorstep. For the uninitiated, a doorstep is a slice of bread about an inch thick thinly buttered. I was then transferred to the Wingfield Hospital. The surgeon Mr Foley performed an operation to straighten the joint and put it in plaster for about six weeks. This proved a very satisfactory cure but it took about 2 months of massage and exercise to get the joint moving again. On the whole I was not unhappy there, the food was good, and varied, those who were allowed to get up and dress each day were encouraged to do little jobs. When I got mobile I used to polish all the brass in the ward each morning - the pay for this was a second helping of pudding. I also collected betting slips from the men's ward and took them to a man in the workshop known as the camel - needless to say he had a humped back. I was used to this job as we used to collect them in the bakehouse which acted as a collecting place for the bookies. All very illegal but I do not think the Police took any notice.

There was a workshop attached to the Hospital making surgical boots and appliances all staffed by cripples. We got quite a lot of entertainment, TOC H, sent a party of visitors every night and Keeble College also adopted our ward. They would provide entertainment some evenings and took people who were allowed out to cricket matches and boat races on the Isis. There was always a good tea thrown in on these occasions. Towards the end of my stay plans were put in hand for a complete rebuilding: there was a fete in the grounds on the Easter Monday, opened by Sir William Morris the motor manufacturer. He later became Lord Nuffield who presented a cheque for about £35,000 to defray the cost of rebuilding the hospital was then called the Wingfield Morris. It has since had another major enlargement and is now known as the Nuffield Hospital. As a result of this our ward was the first to be demolished and we were rehoused in the recreation room. Soon after this I got my discharge and returned to work. The cure was quite satisfactory and lasted without any trouble for about 50 years. It then began to stiffen up and had to be replaced in 1987.