

AN EARLY AGE

HARRY BENNETT

I was born at a very early age at No 2 Woodbine Cottages, Back Ends on 11th February 1914. I was christened Henry Lennox, Henry after my paternal grandfather and Lennox was the surname of my mother's grandfather - an old reprobate who lived in the Lake District and hunted with John Peel. My father was a baker working in the family business with his father and two brothers Sam and Austen, and the business was carried on at Derby's House in the Square.



Mr & Mrs Enoch Bennett with baby Henry at Woodbine Cottages

My mother was born in Dalston, near Carlisle, and while working as a dressmaker was asked by Mrs St John-Hankin if she could come to London and work for her. When the Hankin's left London to live in Campden she came in with them and married the baker. They were married on October 22nd 1912 and set up house at No 2 Woodbine Cottages. It was a very warm February day when I was born. My father planted broad beans while awaiting my arrival - I never thought to ask him how they turned out. Our neighbours were Mr and Mrs Josiah Simmons, Josiah was an ex-cavalry man who won the South African war single handed - he was chauffeur to Doctor Dewhurst and later claimed to be the first man in Campden to drive a motor car.

The first important event in my life was the death of my grandmother Bennett on February 8th 1915. She was about 6ft tall and weighed 22 stone. Grandfather could not manage on his own and asked my parents to go and live with him and look after him, which they did. This upset Uncle Sam who thought father was getting preferential treatment and that he should have been asked to go so there was a family quarrel. Father left the business and answered Kitchener's appeal for volunteers for the army and we moved to No 1 Twine Cottages. Uncle Sam went to Redditch and set up business on his own. And Grandfather asked his only daughter, Mrs Gabb, to come and live with him. She moved up from Somerset with her husband and family and they eventually took over the business and continued to run it until quite recently. The family arguments were all soon forgotten and they all became good friends again.

We then left Twine Cottages and moved to Miles House in Leysbourne. This was then two small cottages. This is the first house I can actually remember - the bedroom had dark blue walls and there were some steps leading up from a courtyard to the garden. At one point during the war father was stationed at Blackpool and he took some furnished rooms for us. I can only remember a high wind and enormous waves coming over the sea front. I have a photograph of myself sitting on a donkey with Blackpool Tower in the background. Some time after this he was posted abroad and spent the rest of the war first in the Dardenelles and later in Egypt. Mother then decided to go back to Carlisle and live with her mother at number 14 Tait Street, a quiet backwater about fifty yards from the main shopping centre. It is still there almost unaltered.

Grandmother was widowed in 1883 when she was 43 and was left with 11 children. She had been living at Tait Street, with her daughter. Aunt Cathy whose fiancé had been killed in the early days of the war. She was housekeeper at Carlisle Castle, the headquarters of the Border regiment. Uncle Jack also lived at home. He had had polio in his youth which had left him with a lame leg. He worked as a tailor. Mother got a job at Carr's biscuit factory and I was left with grandmother during the day. This is when I first begin to remember things with some clarity. We used to have breakfast together after the others had gone to work sometimes this was porridge, good solid stuff made with real oatmeal and left to cook slowly on top the kitchen range all night. I used to get a knob of butter on mine but the rest just got it plain. Other times it would be a boiled egg - again - I got a knob of butter on mine. After breakfast we went out shopping, mostly at the Coop which was quite handy. I remember flour and oatmeal in 14lb bags being weighed up as required and bacon hanging from the beams over the counter. In the north these were usually boned and rolled and cut at time of sale. This bacon would keep for months without refrigeration. Occasionally as a great treat we would get two cream buns from Glaisters.

The main meal was in the evening when everybody got home from work. The ones I remember best were scotch broth, usually referred to as a Few broth - the base of this was shin beef although I believe in Scotland they use mutton. It was boiled for about two hours with split peas and pearl barley and then diced vegetables were added until it was nearly solid. Any vegetables could be used except potatoes. The beef itself was carved and served as a separate course with mashed potato. Another favourite was Cumberland sausage. This was sold in long lengths not in links - it went round and round in the frying pan like a Catherine wheel and then they cut it up when it was cooked. Saturday was at home day for everyone. Aunt Cathy cleaned and polished the house. She was what is known as an hereditary housemaid. Some of the polish is on the furniture to this day. She ruined the grandfather clock by having the face repainted because it showed signs of wear. It has just begun to look like an antique again.

Usually Uncle Jack went off to the local pub at lunchtime out of the way. Saturday always brought in grandmothers' friends from the country. Some of them were farmers wives who brought in baskets of eggs and butter to sell in the covered market, and then they used the money and the baskets to do the weeks shopping. One of the Saturday visitors was grandmother's sister in law. Aunt Ellen, a majestic woman. she entered the room like a duchess about to launch a battleship and was always in command. I never remember seeing her husband Tommy. On a visit to her once when I was very small I

was chased and frightened to death by a gander. I have never liked birds since, except for the oven ready variety. Other Saturday visitors were Aunt Belle and Uncle Ben. He was an engineer employed by the LMS railway company. They lived at Harrowby about a mile out of the town and there was also mother's brother Uncle Willy and his wife. Willy used to be chauffeur to a doctor. When the doctor died he left Willy the Rolls Royce so that he could start a taxi business - but Willy sold the Rolls and bought two smaller taxis which his sons drove while he lived happily on the profits. Another occasional visitor was Bob Miller, an engineer on a banana boat which docked at either Silloth or Port Carlisle and he would pop in on his way home to Brampton. He once brought us a whole stem of bananas which were hung in the basement kitchen and used as they ripened. He always gave me half a crown (12.5 pence) when he left.

One day a strange man appeared wearing a khaki uniform - I can still remember him sitting beside the fire and wondering who the hell he was and where he had come from. This must have been the first time I consciously saw my father. At the age of 5 I had to start school. There was an infant school quite close to Tait Street - it's now a DIY supermarket. I remember the first day the teacher gave me a slate and a slate pencil and asked me to write my name, which I could as I had been taught by grandmother. This impressed the teacher very much. The slate pencil makes the most excruciating screech when you write with them.

I have no other recollection of the school, the war was then over, father was discharged from the army and we returned to Campden. At this point I am a little vague. I have recollections of Tait Street which I think must have taken place when we went back on holiday which we did several times in the 1920's. Prior to the outbreak of war, my grandmother used to let her front sitting room and bedroom to music hall artistes who were appearing at the Palace of Varieties just round the corner. On one occasion when we were there, although she had retired from letting the rooms, she made an exception for one of her old regulars - George Formby Senior - father of the well-known George. I remember this funny man sitting in front of the kitchen range doing his railway porter routine using the oven door as his railway carriage door. Uncle Jack took me to the Palace sometimes - I saw the late Harry Tait doing his selling a car sketch - and an illusionist whose name I think was Maskeline. His illusions were much the same as those performed by Paul Daniels today. Cutting a lady in half, levitation, Chinese rings etc., there was also a visit to Aunt Maggie in Kirby Moorside in Yorkshire. Her husband was an undertaker. I can only remember a very dusty workshop where he made me a little stool. There was a visit to Uncle Joe in Newcastle. He worked at Hawthorne and Leslie Shipyard - he wore a blue uniform and sat in an office by the main entrance. I think he was some kind of a security man. There was great excitement once when we all went outside to see an aeroplane going over; a very rare sight in those days. At the corner of Tait Street and the Warwick Road was a little corner shop selling cigarettes, sweets etc. I do not ever remember going in there but some years later I read in the paper that the old lady who had kept it had been murdered for the contents of her till.

RETURN TO CAMPDEN

I think it would be about 1920 father left the army and we returned to Miles House. He was then faced with finding something to do and decided to start a bakery business of his own. There was a Mrs Grove living opposite the Eight Bells who had just been widowed and decided to go and live with her sister. Father went to see her and she

agreed to let him have the house which would have given him room for a shop and he hoped to build an extension to the rear to install a portable oven. Just about this time the two cottages comprising Miles House was sold to a Miss MacCauley, and she wanted to make the two into one and modernise it. One was already empty and she offered father £5 if he would move out. He accepted her offer not bothering to tell her he was going anyway. The house in Church Street now called Miller's Cottage was empty so he took that on a weekly tenancy thinking that would do until Mrs Grove was ready to move. But she changed her mind and decided to have her sister to live with her. This upset all the plans.

So father took a job at Moreton with a baker called Charles Smith. He lodged there during the week and came home at weekends. Charles Smith was due to retire and father was hoping to buy the business. But unfortunately Smith's son in law wanted it so he took it over and father was out of work. One day in the Lygon Arms he happened to mention to John Skey - the landlord - that he was looking for some premises to start a bakery. John Skey said he had a building that he was prepared to let for 5 shillings a week. It was a bit dark but big enough for the purpose so father took it and we were off. The building is now partly a ladies lavatory and partly office, part storeroom with a flat over it. Repairs and decorations were put in hand, Cox and Son of Hay Mill Birmingham were commissioned to install an oven. This was of the semi portable variety. The outer shell was of steel and asbestos construction and the fire box and oven sole of brick. It was a double decker - that is two baking chambers, one over the other, each 5' by 4'.



Working on the 'Homes for Heroes' in Aston Road

As this work was going to take about a month, father took a temporary job in the building trade working on the council houses on the Aston Road. They were short of labourers and paying high wages. Messrs Daniels of Birmingham supplied all the bread tins and equipment. Some of those tins were still in use when I gave up some 45 years later. We still have two of them. C Lucy and Nephew of Stratford supplied the flour and the United Yeast Company supplied all the other raw materials. Harry Ellis made the delivery baskets in his workshops, now the Salad Bowl - local gas works supplied the

coke for firing the ovens, transported from the gas works, now Ted Nobes coal yard in half ton lots by Happy Joe and his horse and dray.

In September 1922 business commenced. Leaflets were distributed in advance, half the living room in Church Street was converted into a little shop although most of the bread was sold or distributed from the bakery. All delivery was on foot in large baskets. While this was going on I commenced my education at St Catherine's School - why I don't know when it was at the other end of the town when the Church of England School was almost next door. It's now the Church Rooms. Perhaps mother thought I needed more exercise. The Church of England School would have saved a great deal of shoe leather and given me an extra 10 minutes in bed each morning.

School was not a success - I hated the place - the teachers and the system and everything - the pressure put on us to pass the eleven plus for the Grammar school was terrible. But this was for the prestige of the school and not for our benefit. As soon as we passed we were told it would be foolish to go there, it would be much better to stay where we were until we were fourteen. I think they were worried that if the numbers fell the school might be closed. I felt that if the Grammar School was like the RC I had no wish to go there anyway. Father did not encourage me, he was going to get my full time services two years earlier. With hindsight I can see that this was all a great mistake. I would have been much happier at the Grammar School with the science labs and bigger range of subjects.

After the 11+ they had taught us all they could and the next three years were complete boredom, so I left school at Easter 1928 being able to read and write and do arithmetic and knew a little geography and one hell of a lot of biased history and became a full time baker. Prior to this I had done a small part time round after school and worked on Saturdays and in school holidays.