

ROSA'S STORY 1949

In 1949 I was twelve years old, living in East Ilsley where I was born. I lived next door to the village shop, owned by my uncle who was also the village baker. My father was his brother and my mother was the sister of his wife, my aunt.

The village shop was a thriving business in those days – a local spot for the exchange of gossip as well. My aunt served behind the counter, whilst my uncle baked the bread in their bakehouse. As well as serving the bread and lovely, sticky lardy cakes in the shop he made daily deliveries in the village and on certain days he would make extra deliveries to the villages of West Ilsley and Compton, all in his old green Ford van. It always took him ages as he was a welcome visitor at most homes where he would be invited in for a chat and a cup of tea. In bad winters, when the snow cut off the villages, we carried the bread across the fields in baskets and sacks.

The bakehouse was a lovely warm place in the early morning. The oven fire was lit early and my uncle would knead the dough and leave it to rise before baking the delicious bread. If I was lucky and went round to see him, there might be some sultanas left in the empty lardy cake tins and I was allowed to have these.

At Christmas time the oven was also used to bake the family turkey. We all sat down together for Christmas lunch in my uncle's house and stayed on for presents around the tree beside a bright roaring fire. There were stories to tell, relations calling in – there were quite a few in the village at that time. The hand bells were brought out and rung. Father Christmas always called in as well.

In 1949 I travelled each day to Newbury Girls School by bus. The journey was slow, with stops at Beedon and Chieveley en route –not a comfortable ride on wooden slatted seats. We would leave at eight in the morning and return home by five o'clock in the afternoon.

Like most children I had attended the village school since I was five years old. I was terrified of the Headmaster who seemed so huge to me. He taught the classes from seven years old and upwards. The infant teacher taught the younger children in the other classroom. The Headmaster's wife came in to teach sewing, knitting and handicrafts in the afternoon. She was always dressed in grey, wore her hair in a bun and had a pale complexion. Her voice was very quiet compared with that of her loud husband.



Rosa in a school
photograph, second row,
seated, 2nd from the right

I was made to stand in the corner quite often if I had lost my savings stamp money or wet my knickers in fright. There were no school dinners, and we went home for dinner. Each day there was morning assembly, register taking, singing and scripture. Lessons included the usual three Rs. The classrooms were heated by large black stoves. Midway through the morning we were given a small bottle of milk each. Sometimes, in winter, this was frozen as a result of being stood outside too long and we had to stand it by the stove to thaw it. After which it tasted awful! The toilets were crude Spartan buildings outside.

During the summer term a bus used to take us fortnightly to the Wantage open-air swimming baths, which were in Mill Street. The water was always very cold. The headmaster stood on the edge of the baths trying to teach us to swim. He would drag us in turn by a long pole, with a loop placed around our middles, until our feet could not touch the bottom any longer. When this happened to me, I clambered up the pole to reach 'dry land' and so he nearly fell in! It was a long time after before I gained confidence to swim.

Those children who did not go on to the schools in Newbury at eleven years old went instead by bus to the Senior mixed Secondary School at Compton, together with children from West Ilsley.

East Ilsley, West Ilsley, and Compton all had busy racing stables. There were four at East Ilsley. Mr. Pearce, who owned the Saddler's shop, was always kept busy. An article and photograph showing him working was published in a local newspaper. I was included in the photograph, watching him at work.

[Rosa watching Harry Pearce working](#)



There was also a busy butcher's shop in the High Street. If the butcher liked you, you received better cuts of meat than those he didn't like! The Post Office was further up the High Street – another meeting place for gossip. The postman was local and delivered the mail, which arrived from Newbury, on his bicycle. I lived opposite the Post Office and played with Jill who lived there. There were wonderful hiding places in the Post Office – huge cupboards under the counters and lots of dark corners. The rooms in the house were large and mostly empty. There were frogs in the cellars!

High Street was the main street through the village, and it was very narrow, with two-way traffic and no bypass. It was the main route for traffic travelling from the North to the South coast. Quite often the lorries trying to pass by each other collided or crashed into the Crown and Horns or the Lamb public houses. Once a potato lorry crashed into our house and was wedged under our bedroom window with its front end in the shop.

East Ilsley had five public houses along the High Street at that time, of which only three now remain.

Part of the village still did not have running water. There was an outside toilet (referred to as the 'sentry box') in the garden, which you hoped you would not have to visit in the night. My

father would tear up old spare paper and tie it neatly on a hook in the sentry box ready for use. The contents were disposed of weekly in a large hole at the bottom of the garden. First thing in the morning it would be a case of washing with cold water in a bowl on the washstand in the bedroom. During the winter it was so cold that sometimes the windows and walls were crystallised with frost. We were so used to this and thought nothing of it. Bath night was on Fridays, in the tin bath in front of the fire, the children went first before going straight to bed followed by the adults. The water was drawn from the well and heated on the cooker or the fire and it was saved afterwards to soak the clothes for washing.

Ilsley was an agricultural area with some fields always cultivated and used for crops. My father was allowed to go shooting over the fields and in the woods. Rabbits, hares and pigeons were a frequent meal. He kept ferrets and once had a pig for fattening up. Nearly everyone had a vegetable garden or allotment, and vegetables and fruit were grown all the year round for family use. Any surplus was shared amongst the neighbours. You could roam in the countryside in safety. I walked for miles with my aunt's dogs, across the gallops, over the Downs and through the woods. In those days the Downs were covered with long grasses, harebells, cowslips, primroses, buttercups, and daisies, all growing freely and in abundance. The skylarks were always soaring high above and singing out loud.

Every seven years the springs would rise up and flood the cellars in peoples' houses. The village pond and the ditches would be overflowing. It was fun to make rafts from barrels and planks to set sail on (and sometimes to fall in from).

Entertainment was self-made. There would be whist drives, concerts, craft sales and dances. All would be held in the Village Hall. This too was heated by a large black stove with a metal fire guard around it for safety.

Each year the annual Flower Show took place. There was fierce competition in all classes from the villagers. My father was the treasurer. He would fill in the little brown envelopes with the prize money which he kept in a cash box. I was allowed to help sometimes. One pound for the first prize, ten shillings for second, five shillings for third and two shillings for fourth. A cup was awarded each year to the person who had won the most points overall, and this would be inscribed later with their name. The winner was allowed to keep it for a year until the next show.

The annual Fete was held on the Rectory lawn. A brass band played and there was either country dancing or dancing round the Maypole. Stalls included coconut shies, darts, shooting, bowling for a pig and there were, of course, teas and home-made cakes. My uncle won a pig at a local fete one year and had to bring it home in his bread van. The van was full of people and a pig, quite a hilarious journey! I am not sure though about the hygiene conditions regarding the bread delivery round the next day!

I used to go to the weekly Youth Club where we played table tennis and darts, made toys and paper flowers for sales and cooked snacks. 'Sixpenny hops' were the highlight of our lives, and they were fun. Music was provided by records or by someone playing the piano. We dressed up and thought we were grown-up. Some of us bought make-up to put on in the cloakroom so that our Mums did not see. If my father had seen me, he would have said "Wipe that muck off your face!" we chatted amongst our friends afterwards as to who we had danced with, who we liked and who had walked home with us. Sometimes a visiting Film Show came, and old black and white films were shown. These occasions were well supported and there were frequent

cheers at various moments in the films! There was a village football team and a cricket team. My father was football captain a few times. Wives and girlfriends would turn out to support and cheer them on. The village sports day was also well supported and entertaining.

Very few people had cars and so shopping, apart from food, meant a journey into Newbury or Reading by bus. The Newbury buses were daily, but just once a week to Reading. The nearest railway station was at Compton. . The local coal-man collected the coal there and delivered it each week to the villages. He was also the Carrier for the bulky items which came by train. People cycled to Compton to catch the trains

Daily newspapers were delivered by Mr. Pearce from Chieveley. He collected them from Newbury station. A visiting Library from Reading delivered three crates of books every three months to the Village Hall. An aunt opened the 'Library' every Monday from 3.30 -4.30 pm. I used to help her stamp the books when they were issued and returned. I enjoyed this and remember the musty smell of the books.

Church was well attended. My aunt was the organist, and we had to take it in turns to pump the air into the organ to keep it going. She was trying to teach me and a friend to play as well. I had to attend three times a day. Sunday afternoon was the Sunday school slot. I had to cover for my sister who sometimes played truant. She would stay outside in the graveyard and join me when it was time to go home. The local grave digger would take two or three days to dig out a grave and return to fill it in afterwards.

Mrs. Wells, the midwife delivered the babies. She would arrive with her bag for the home deliveries. There was a thick rope in her bag which I understood was to pull or push with. My mother's words were "yes, my girl, a woman is between life and death during childbirth", which would not encourage you to look forward to having babies!

I had music lessons in the village in a little cottage which no longer exists. Two brothers and their sister lived there. I think they were all in their seventies. Herbert Wells was the music teacher and lessons were in his bedroom, which was also the music room. There was no room to move as it included the piano, which had a bag of sticky sweets on the end, if you had practiced you were given one of these. There was also a harmonium. Downstairs the cats roamed about, jumping on the table and eating off the plates, licking what they liked. Lloyd the other brother, made their mugs from empty tins. They were looked after by Annie, their sister. They were a lovely family and were real, old village characters.

People worked on the farm or travelled to Newbury to work. A.E.A. had started up in 1946 and people were beginning to go there for employment. Transport was provided there and back by their own buses. To travel in that direction from Ilsley was unusual and to go beyond Gore Hill was like travelling to a foreign country.

I left school in 1954 and, due to my previous interest in the Ilsley 'Library', I began work in the A.E.A. Library. Of course, it was vastly different, but I enjoyed every moment, and it was a pleasure to go to work. I was a clerical assistant, the lowest grade, earning £2 and 10 shillings a week. The Librarian was a Tartar who ignored the lowest grades and woe betide anyone who made mistakes – you were reprimanded in front of everyone. I had my meals in the canteen as I was under eighteen and had lunch vouchers. We went to the downstairs restaurant where we queued with our trays. Upstairs it was waitress service and for the higher grades. **They were good days!**