

## Harold "Rimble" Knapp - A Village Character

By John Clements

Harold Gladstone Knapp was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1898 in London, off the Harrow Road. His father had joined the Metropolitan Police and moved the family to London from Shrivenham, where the family had lived for over 100 years. It is known that his mother and the children returned to the village to live at Clifton House and Harold finished his education in the village school leaving when he was aged 14. Following this he worked for his grandfather who was building houses in Swindon.



In 1914 he enlisted in the Army lying about his age claiming to have been born in 1896. His daughter says that with seven other friends he took a train to Reading and joined the Royal Berks. He then went to Salisbury Plain for initial training and later transferred to the 26<sup>th</sup> Division Cyclist Company with the rank of Cyclist for initial training. Like many others he kept a diary even though this was

not allowed. In it he kept a record of his pay which started at 1 shilling a week but which rose at the end of the war to £2.50. He also included some information about aspects of his military life of his time in Salonica, Greece. He went via Warminster to Southampton where he joined the ship "*City of Lucknow*" which took him to Le Havre. Then he travelled on to Armiens and after a few days cycling around the Somme, he left for Marseilles where he was transported to Alexandria by the White Star liner "*SS Canada*" and then on to Greece.

Whilst in Salonica he was convicted of soiling a sacred place namely the General's latrine.

There is a poem regarding the shooting down of a Zeppelin by the Royal Navy which we think was written by Harold. The resulting conflagration was such that postcards were made of the fire. Initially it was thought that no-one could have survived the inferno but in fact only two people were killed. Because of the distance from its base, to save weight the numbers of officers on board had been reduced to twelve but I do not know whether this was the total complement of the airship.



Whilst in Salonica he was promoted to Lance Corporal but his fellow Cyclists told him that if he accepted this promotion they would make his life hell so he

reverted to the ranks. During this time he was able to be involved in his love of hunting as the Scottish Horse in Salonica founded *"The Struma Vale Hunt"*. In December 1968 he wrote an article for the *"Horse and Hound."* In 1918 he was hospitalised suffering from Malaria. At the end of the war he was involved in running the railway through Bulgaria to Russia. He was eventually discharged in March 1919 at Chiseldon. On his return to Shrivenham his mother, a nurse, would not let him into the house and he was sent to the outside privy to scrub himself all over to ensure he was not lousy before he could gain admittance to his home.

After the war he rented a small mixed farm, mainly dairy, from the Barrington Estate and took the opportunity to buy it when it came on the market in the mid 20's. He was one of three dairies in the village and for many years there was a sign over the dairy *"Knapps Dairy."* His daughter, Catherine, tells me that her father claimed the spelling was deliberate and it caused amusement encouraging people to come back. The locals just questioned his spelling. Some of the milk was sold to Express Dairies in Faringdon but the rest was either delivered by horse and cart or ladled out to customers in the dairy.



Harold was very athletic and involved in the sporting life of Shrivenham. His daughter says that his nickname Rible comes from his prowess of running very

fast with tincans on his feet. Another version as to how he got his nickname is that when at school the teacher asked the class what the top of a glass was called and he answered much to everyone's amazement "*a rim*". No-one else knew but his school mates called him Rible from that time on. After the Great War he was very involved with the cricket club (Letter from Barrington website) and served on the committee. He also was involved with the football club and was a very keen huntsman. His great passion was for racing pigeons which he described as "*poor man's racehorses*." He arranged for a system of mirrors between his house and White Horse hill so that he knew when the pigeons on the hill were being released. He was in constant competition with his great friend but deadly rival Mart Barker who lived opposite.

Annually the local landowners and their friends held the Great Shoot, when the nobbs harassed the local wildlife, the local farmers were invited to join them the following day. Rible recounts seeing a pheasant running across in front of and was told "*don't shoot whilst it is running*" to which he replied "*I'm waiting for the bugger to stop*"

He married Margery in 1937 and their daughter Catherine was born in 1941. During the WW2 they had help on the farm from Prisoners of War. To start with there were two Italians then two Germans. The family kept in contact with them for some time after the end of the war. At the end of the war he ordered a new milking machine but by the time it arrived a year later the cows were so used to hand milking it was never unpacked. A friend tells me that in fact Rible left the milking to his wife and daughter whilst he cared for his pigeons. He had an old Fordson tractor with spiked wheels which was not allowed on the roads and had to wait five years after the war before he could replace it but was able to use his two huge shire horses, Diamond and Violet. On the farm he built a concrete scarecrow, the remains of which are still in a field. In its raised hand it held a stick it sported a hat.



Rimble Knapp's Farm formerly stood where Catherine's Close now stands by Horne's Corner

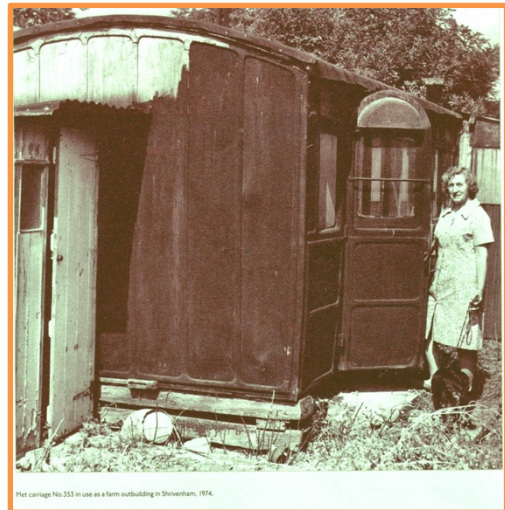
In the second world war Rimble was a Sergeant in the Home Guard and they used to practice on the Downs above Uffington. As he had the only car, a Riley 9, he used to transport the men from Shrivenham to join the Uffington Platoon of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Home Guard. Because the car had a leaking radiator, he filled it up with flour but it still needed filling with water every five miles and he always carried a bag of flour in the car. Later it is reported that the flour was replaced with cement. He wrote a letter to Lord Nuffield concluding with the sentence, "*don't write to say how sorry you are, you are not half as sorry as I am.*" So involved was he with the Home Guard that he missed his daughter's christening much to the annoyance of his wife. At the start of the war he and some friends went up to the White Horse. They put a row of stakes round the Horse then covered it with wire and then put turf over the wire. This removed a navigation point for the German bombers. In 1948 he removed all the covering and added chalk to the Horse itself.



Rimble Knapp with his car and a friend outside his barn  
where Catherine's Close now stands

In 1940 he bought a railway carriage from Swindon initially to hire out to the military tailors. He lived in a thatched house on the High Street but its condition deteriorated to such an extent that it needed reroofing and was replaced by a new tiled roof. Later it was discovered that in fact he had just covered the old thatch. Next to the house was a large attractive barn which was pulled down in the '70s. This was used by the local courting couples. The maid of one of the neighbouring families (Ada Lay), described as flighty, was found in the company of a black American by Rimble and was told never to go to the barn again. Unfortunately, she failed to take his advice and when he found them in the barn again, he threw a bucket of oil over the couple followed by a pail full of feathers. She was told that she should be ashamed of herself with a husband fighting the Japanese. She never returned. On another occasion he put a dead fox into his neighbour's chicken run (Mrs Hugh Smith) causing her great distress. She rushed over to Mart Barker to come and shot the animal. He picked up his 12 bore shot gun and rushed over. He then had to tell her when he got there that it was already dead. However, when her cat got into his pigeon loft he told her, "*Keep your bloody cat in or I'll shoot the bugger*". Two days later it was shot dead. His inability to get on with some of his fellow villagers is shown by another incident. (Mrs Cox) lived behind the church and kept chickens. These strayed into a field where Rimble had some pigs and he was upset

when he found out that the chickens were eating his pig feed. He said that he wanted a new 12 bore for Christmas and when it arrived he went round to slaughter the chicken. He had shot about a dozen before he was disarmed.



The Railway Carriage No 353 bought by Rimble Knapp & used for various purposes. It was subsequently purchased by London Transport and re-furbished

The next story is verifiable as I was told it by John Barker, son of Rimble's great friend who was there at the time. He had been renting fields from the College for his cattle but it was decided to turn the fields into a golf course. No-one told him but the grass was treated with a powerful weed killer and was no longer safe for grazing animals. He went up to the fields and towed away the machine used to spread the herbicide and locked it up in his barn. What happened next was that the General on his horse rode into Rimble's yard and stopped. He said, "*Knapp give me back my machine,*" at which Rimble turned to John Barker and said, "*This is the biggest arsehole in Shivenham.*" He rattled a milk can and shouted, "*You bugger off,*" at which the horse spooked and shot off. In another incident he shot the General's dog, a bull mastiff, which was very unpopular locally as it mated with any bitch on heat and turned nasty if interrupted. The General recovered the body and buried it with a memorial in the College grounds. An apocryphal story which still told in the village was that the General on his horse said, "*get out of my way you man,*" and when he repeated this, Rimble pulled him off the horse.

John Barker said he was an amazing man and extremely strong, able to carry two bags of barley under his arms. Every morning he would shout "*Cuckoo Cuckoo*". In his correspondence he called himself "*Harold Knapp, moo moo and gee gee breeder, Shrivenham*". I was told by a friend that when she was a young girl she was sometimes invited for tea. This was a very exciting event. Living on the camp she was not used to sharing the tea table with live chickens.

Distressed by the decisions of the referee during a football match he marched the referee 300 yards to a pond and threw him into it. The league took a dim view of this and imposed a fine which no-one would pay. This meant that Shrivenham Football Club was chucked out of the league. The players had to swallow their pride and reform as Watchfield Football Club.

One of our committee members, Neil Maw, has vivid memories of being clipped round the ear by Rimple on several occasions. He also tells the story of the motorcyclist who came off his bike on Horne's Corner and refused to ride it again. The bike was stored in the barn. Sometime later Neil bought the motorcycle but was not allowed to collect it until he had paid the cost of storage.

The dairy closed in the mid 50's.

Rimple died in 1971.

I am greatly indebted to Catherine Gould, nee Knapp, and her husband John who not only lent Rimple's personal folder for us to copy and publish on the Shrivenham Heritage Society website but generously gave of their time to add to the information that I had collected. Also, I would like to thank all the villagers who remember him for all the stories that they told me about him.

For more information on details mentioned in this presentation, please see the following in the Heritage Society's online Catalogue.

Harold Knapp N492

Catherine Gould N1261

The Railway Carriage N1271

There is also an interesting article on the refurbishment of the Railway Carriage in Swindon Heritage magazine issue Spring 2014 (Available at the Heritage Centre)