

Catherine Gould

I was born to Margery and Harold Knapp in January 1941. The family name is almost as old as our village being of Saxon origin. It can mean “ a worker in flint” and some of our forebears were stonemasons in Shrivenham in the last 100 years. I arrived a little bit early during the 2nd World War at home in Shrivenham. We lived at what was then no 15 High Street. Dr McNamara and Nurse Donnocks together with Mrs Clements helped my mother, and I weighed in at just over 5 pounds. My grandmother came down from Aston to look after us for a week or two whilst my mother was in bed. In those days newly delivered mothers always spent several days in bed.

My father was Harold G. Knapp, known to his friends as Rimple. He had a small mixed farm, but mainly dairy, in Shrivenham. Milk was 6d a pint. He had been a tenant farmer for several years and this farm, Shrivenham Farm, was part of the Beckett Estate which was sold in the 1920s. My parents happily bought it. My father was also a tenant farmer of some land at the College that is now the Golf Course, the pasture land that became Arnhem Camp, the Orchard in the Longcot road and Horse Close which was again part of Beckett Park. Of course this was more than 20 years before I was born. My Uncle Len owned the land where the cemetery is today and Coppidthorne Meadow down to the canal. He also kept stock on what is Common Close and Days Ground which was then known as Daisy Ground. We lived in a cottage on the High Street, next door to Bill Hammond’s father’s shop and adjacent to the farm.

For many years the board outside the farm had written on it “Knapps Diary”. My father said it caused amusement and people never forgot it and would come back for more milk or whatever. Having transport on the farm in the form of a Riley 9 car helped us enormously in the days of World War II. However, it had its downside. My father who had seen service in World War I was a sergeant in the Home Guard and being the only one with transport used to take some of the others in his car when they had to go on exercise away from the village. Hence he missed my christening in St Andrew’s Church on 22 March 1941 because he was on one of these exercises. Apparently my mother was extremely annoyed.

Our cows were milked by hand and later the cooled milk was put into 10 gallon churns to be collected by Cadels lorries and taken to the Express Dairies in Faringdon. A few people would come to collect their milk in jugs from us straight from the churn. All our weights, measures and scales were regularly inspected and checked by an Inspector in the Men’s Institute close by. I sometimes used to help with this and measured out the pint in the jug from the churn. Before the war he would deliver the milk by horse and cart. In fact cart horses were widely used in the fields because of the difficulty in obtaining anything mechanical. I remember with great affection our huge shires, Diamond and Violet. They really were gentle giants and I frequently had rides on them from an early age.

I learned to hand milk a cow before I was 4 years old. I’ll explain this rather astonishing statement by saying that we had girls from the Women’s Land Army to help on the farm during the war. One of them was so slow that one day the cow lay

down before she had finished milking her. I begged to have a go for she was just at the right height for me. And was delighted when the milk began to spurt into the pail. The Land Girls were accommodated in Shrivenham in the old Manor House close to the Church. It was demolished in 1966 to make way for Manor Close.

On the farm during the war we also had prisoners of war to help. At first we had 2 Italians, Lesbo and Gino, then 2 Germans, Fritz and Ada and lastly a young man called Zepp. We regularly exchanged Christmas cards for about 10 years until, sadly we heard that Lesbo had been electrocuted on his farm in Italy and Zepp married and his English as then forgotten.

As I was so young during the war I have few memories, but I do recall that the whole village was shocked when a lady was killed on Horne's corner by an Army tank. Later I learned it was Vic Day's grandmother. Soon after this sad incident another military vehicle ran into the farm wall. Both of these sad incidents were so close to our house. The result was that I wasn't allowed to walk down the path on my own for a while.

What I do remember clearly is VE night, May 8th 1945 after Germany had capitulated. Everyone gathered outside the Barrington Arms. It was such a happy night with lots of laughter. I well remember the big circle of people dancing across the road doing the Okey Cokey and the Knees up Mother Brown.

During the war it was impossible to get new equipment for the farm. Our family wanted the new Alpha Laval milking machine so our order was placed immediately after hostilities had ceased. It arrived exactly one year later. Sadly, by that time our heifers were used to being milked by hand and the milking machine, that would have made life easier, was never unpacked. I remember my father's joy in 1948 when he took possession of a brand new Fordson major tractor that had been ordered at the end of the war. It replaced the old Fordson with spiked wheels. This tractor had been banned from the roads because of the damage the spiked wheels did to the surface. I can remember driving round the fields at hay making time. We grew Mangolds for cattle fodder and another memory is that of potatoes being stored in a clamp in the fields. The clamp was a dug out pit and when it was filled with potatoes it was covered with a layer of straw and then the dug out soil was placed on top. The clamp then became frost-free. When my father opened it up for the first time his relief that the potatoes were undamaged showed in his big smile.

With rationing in war time our diet was limited. Rabbits were a real boon and a great addition to our meals. They were caught in nets having been chased out of their burrows by ferrets and sold for 2 shillings and 6 pence (12 ½ pence in today's money).

My first schooldays were at Miss Pratt's private school just below Coplow House so I did not have far to walk. Miss Pratt was the daughter of Dr Pratt the eye surgeon in Swindon and the family lived in Coplow House. I was there until the school closed in 1946 when Miss Pratt married an American who was at the college when it was an American University for a short while. I then attended Shrivenham School from 1946 – 1952. Mr Friend was the Headmaster at the time and I recall Mrs Mollie Mallon who lost her temper with us one day and hurled knives, forks and spoons one lunch

time at noisy schoolchildren. I was surprised when this teacher then went on to write a book on how to teach children.

As a child I remember regularly going to the cinema in a hangar on the airfield in Watchfield every Sunday night. This was long before the Bromhead Cinema at the College was built. My husband recalls that soon after the opening of this cinema the film about the Graf Spee was being shown. There was plenty of noise from the action but there was additional action that night because all the newly placed tiles on the walls fell off. Another memory I have is in the days before the Pressed Steel transporter trucks regularly plied their way through Shrivenham village. My friend Ann Tubb and I used to play tennis on the road at Horne's Corner. We would have been about 12 or 13 at that time. Another lovely memory I have is the celebrations at the College for the Coronation on 2 June 1953 when in the evening a huge ox was roasted on a spit. The huge slices of thick beef were sumptuous. A car was raffled that day at 5/- a ticket. Someone from the College won it. Earlier that day there had been a fete in the Recreation Ground. I also remember that in June 1953 I was in the First Form at the Elms Grammar School and the girls in our year were chosen to form a guard of honour at Shrivenham Railway station where the Queen was to get on a train. I think she had been to Swindon. I do recall how cold it was that June day. We girls had to wear only our matching dresses no cardigans were allowed. We stood in a long line along the Bourton Road.

There was a lovely old thatched cottage that stood at the end of the little lane in front of Fern House in Manor Lane. It was removed for the new classrooms which were built in 1949/50. After leaving Shrivenham School I went on to the Elms Grammar School for Girls. When I was 13, I was diagnosed with diabetes and the insulin I needed could only be obtained from the Swindon Health Centre in the Faringdon Road. During my school days homework came as a hard knock. I really enjoyed the sports there and played hockey, tennis and netball with great enthusiasm. I was more inclined to the scientific subjects and at one time considered becoming a vet. I had a long chat with Mr Rogers, the local vet, who persuaded me that not all large farm animals were as quiet as ours and while he had no doubt I could do it the physical toll would be too great.

I left the Elms with A-levels in Chemistry, Pure Maths and Applied Physics and went to work for the Agricultural Research Council in Wantage. I quite enjoyed my time there spent in measuring windscales at first before moving on to observing and recording the data involved with growing plants. After 3 years I applied to become a Scientific Assistant at the Royal Military College of Science. I was one of the first girls to apply and be taken on in that capacity in 1962.