

## **Turning Back Time – Collecting Oral History of the Goring Gap**

History surrounds us all and not just in buildings and books, but in the living memories of older people in our own families and communities. We have only to ask and we can receive enough stories and information from the past to fill a library. This kind of history, the unwritten kind often of everyday life which rarely makes it into text books, can be rediscovered and stored through recording oral history. After a gap of several years, the Society has recommenced recording the reminiscences of Goring Gap's more senior people and we have called the project 'Turning Back Time'.

### **Introduction**

Historical works often concentrate on famous men and big events and tend to miss out on ordinary people talking about everyday affairs and the places where they grew up. Some people, particularly women and the poor of both sexes, have had their voices hidden and neglected throughout time. Yet everyone has fascinating stories to share and detailed information to relate about the people and places they have known. Recording oral history can help fill in some of these gaps and give us colourful and detailed stories, which are often humorous and entertaining, from all levels of society. As memories die when people die, if left unrecorded, they will be lost forever.

Of course, everyone forgets things as time goes by and we all remember some things better than others. However, memory is an astounding psychological trick. Not only are we capable of recalling facts, we are able to mentally transport ourselves back to a different place in time, conjuring images of the past, in an instant. Research has shown that many people actually remember their early years better as they get older, especially if they are encouraged to think and talk about the old days. In fact we tend to remember more clearly things that happened to us between the ages of 10 and 30 (a period the psychologists refer to as 'the reminiscence bump'). Even people who can't remember things that happened to them this morning can have vivid memories of when they were young and enthusiastically enjoy recalling these life experiences in great detail.

Each person automatically tunes into things that have value to him/her and blocks out the extraneous ones and of course memories are selective in the same way too; the things remembered are those that mean something special to each person. It is often fascinating to hear two different versions of the same incident but with entirely different dynamics and viewpoints. The results of each of the interviews conducted can show just one individual piece of a complex jigsaw which, when assembled, give a more complete view of the past.

### **Some memories of Goring and Streatley**

I'd now like to share some of the gems from the Society's bank of past interviews, some recent and some from the archives. We cannot of course guarantee complete accuracy of the information provided. However, if you have any corrections or further information on any of the items mentioned, please let me know.

## ***The Village Shop***

Sometime before 1876, the shop we now know as McColls in Goring High Street, was built as an impressive double-fronted, up market grocery store, when Alfred William Cocks, a grocer from Reading, set up business here. In addition to calling himself a Provision Merchant, his shop front proclaimed he was an Italian Warehouseman, selling fashionable goods from Italy, such as pasta, olive oil, pickles, perfumes and wine such as Chianti.



*A. W. Cocks shop (GSLHS Collection)*

Although Alfred Cocks employed six shop assistants, not many shoppers were seen during the week, but on Saturdays, the shop would suddenly become full at about 7.30 in the evening and stay open till 10.00 pm. We tend to forget that until after the Second World War, many people worked a 48 hour week, compared with 35 hours today and were paid weekly in cash. In the old days, agricultural workers didn't have a half day holiday on Saturdays; Christmas Day and Boxing Day were normal working days and 1 January did not become a Bank Holiday in England and Wales until as late as 1974.

By 1926 Alfred Cocks' shop had become the International Stores, and had two big brass strips, one each side of the central door and a further one above the front of the shop announcing the name. One man recalled that cleaning these signs with Brasso was one of his jobs when he started work there as a 14 year old boy in 1936. A lady who was employed there during the Second World War remembered the wooden counters (but a marble one for the cooked meat), the brass scales and a lethal bacon slicer (she still has the scars!). Purchases from different sections of the shop such as bacon and cheese were individually weighed and wrapped. Sugar was scooped into bags made of thick blue paper and loose tea into white bags. When the shopping was finished, buff coloured ration books for adults and the blue ration books for children were produced and the coupons presented to the cashier.



She totalled up the bill which was then settled, unless the customer was one of International's account holders. Such individuals usually had their shopping delivered by one of two men, each with a van, but the rest staggered home with heavy shopping bags as under the ration system, they were registered with one shop only for each category and tended to do all their shopping in one place.

From 1893 until 1915 Alfred Cocks also ran a drapery business from the adjacent old British School premises, but from 1915 until about 1982 the building was occupied by a branch of Jackson & Sons, who are still based at Jackson's Corner in Reading. They were originally a gentleman's outfitters but later diversified into ladies fashions, lingerie, foot wear, school wear and some toys. A Miss Hill from Cleeve ran the shop at one time but was later replaced by Miss Morphy who travelled daily from Reading. The building has since had varied uses and is now occupied by Diamond Floors.

By the 1980s, Mr Len Parker ran the grocery shop and Mrs Parker had a haberdashery and children's clothes department in the basement, following the departure of Jacksons.

*Without these recollections, our knowledge of the shop would be limited to entries in trade directories, the odd advertisement and a couple of old photographs.*

### **The Brewery Owner**

On May Days, after the First Great War Mrs Ann Gundry, the Goring Brewery owner, gave all the school children a new penny from a big wooden bowl placed by the white gates to the brewery in the High Street (where Thames Court is now). Some say she also gave them a bun and an orange, but others only remember the penny and some say it was a halfpenny. Perhaps it was all of these at different times. Originally each child took a garland of wallflowers and forget-me-knots and sang: "The first of May is Garland Day. Give me a



penny and send me away" but although this aspect gradually died out, the new penny custom continued until Mrs Gundry died in 1933.

*The Brewery House with its white gates, Goring High Street, now demolished (GSLHS Collection)*

Mrs Gundry was a familiar figure round the village. She always wore a 'mannish' shirt, a

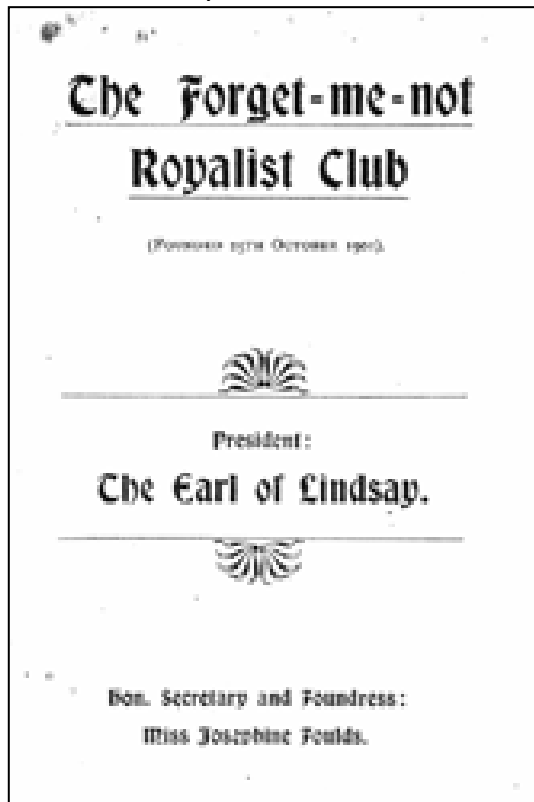
very short coat with a tight waist, and a long skirt reaching down to her elastic sided boots. She was short and round and wore a hard round felt hat, dressed her hair in a tight little bun and had a red face. Mr Gundry had died in 1928 and his widow ran the business herself with her manager and great nephew William Charles Arthur Pitman Parrett (but known to everybody as 'Bill'). When it was reported that that the price of beer was to be raised by one penny a pint, Mrs Gundry agreed that the brewery would absorb this increase, much to the appreciation of the locals. As the price of beer before the Second World War was about six old pence a pint (two and a half pence now), this was quite a saving.

When the children had their pennies from Mrs Gundry, they rushed round to Thatched Cottage next door to the school in Station Road, where Miss Rose Beckenham sold sweets from her front room window. Memories vary as to how many sweets each child got for his/her penny. One person thought she only received four aniseed balls (at a farthing each), another said 20 aniseed balls (at five for a farthing). Yet another said for his penny he got two gobstoppers (at a farthing for two), four aniseed balls (for a farthing) and 10 jelly babies (for a halfpenny). Obviously, sweets were a high point in this boy's life; but, regardless of how many sweets they received, it's wonderful to think that Mrs Gundry's simple act of kindness is still remembered by villagers nearly 80 years later.

*We know a lot about the brewery from documentary sources. It was a considerable business with many pubs and beerhouses throughout the area. Mrs Gundry must have been a tough character but these memories help to flesh out her personality and show a kind side to her nature. They also show how people's recollection of the same incident can vary greatly. Who do you believe?*

### **The eccentric lady**

For about 30 years from the mid 1920s, Mrs Elise Josephine Leslie-Moir lived at Glebe



Cottage, next to the Miller of Mansfield, with many cats. She was an eccentric old lady whom the children called the Queen of Sheba and some people thought was a Russian Princess who had fled the Revolution. Her house was in a dreadful condition and except for her weekly trips to London, she dressed like an old tramp. She often carried a kettle round the village and people said she kept her money in it. She used to get regular telegrams about the progress of the Spanish Civil War. If it was good news, she gave the telegram boy half a crown (today's twelve and a half pence) but if it was bad news only a shilling (today's five pence), which at the time was still a lot of money. One dark evening she locked herself out and asked the little girl who lived over the road, to climb through a small window to let her in. The little girl recalls, even now, climbing into the pitch dark room and being terrified to hear movement and breathing all round her, but it turned out to be only the resident cats!

*The Forget-me-not Royalist Club membership card (GSLHS Collection)*

Research revealed that in fact Mrs Leslie-Moir was rather a romantic old lady, born in Nuneaton and christened Eliza, whose husband appears to have been a Scottish poet who died before she moved to Glebe Cottage. When young, she had travelled extensively and mixed with aristocrats from England, Scotland, Europe, Russia and India. In 1901, she founded the Forget-me-not Royalist Club, which believed in the divine right of kings and whose aristocratic members met in her London home. However, on her death in 1956, she

was the sole member. As she bequeathed money to the club, unfortunately, she ended up leaving money to herself.

*As this story shows, impressions can be wrong and lead to completely erroneous conclusions being drawn. Recollections should be treated with caution and be backed up with facts when possible. In this case the truth is just as fascinating as the fiction.*

### **Different ways of life**

From the 1880s until the late 1960s, two unmarried sisters, Edith and Evelyn Beckenham, lived at Hazel Cottage in Station Road (next to the Catherine Wheel) for their entire lives. Evelyn worked for many years as the cashier at Colebrooks, the butchers and fishmongers in the High Street (now Davis Tate Estate Agents) and the other 'kept the house', occasionally taking in lodgers. Some years before, their widowed mother Hannah, took in washing from the people in the village. The pounding, rubbing, wringing and ironing of clothes, sheets and table linen was very tiring work indeed, using a copper, dolly peg, mangle and an iron, heated on the stove. They had a well in the garden (as did most of the houses in Station Road) but no running water or electricity. For light, they depended on gas and oil lamps with candles at bedtime. For heating, they had coal fires and for cooking a kitchen range. It would have been a hard and frugal life and the sisters admitted that as children, they knew little about Streatley as it cost a penny to cross the bridge!



*The Misses Beckenham at home in the 1960s (GSLHS Collection) The Misses Beckenham's simple lives illustrate how quickly things have changed over the past 50 years. But their lives were comfortable compared with those of some unlucky folk who scraped a living during these ladies' childhood days.*

A number of interviewees have told us about the poverty in the two villages but the most poignant story is by Mr Godwin Pearce of Gatehampton Farm, recounted not long before he died. Just over a hundred years ago, two women worked at the farm, going under the nicknames of Archangel and Hellcat. Nobody really knew their proper names but they were both widows whose husbands had met premature deaths, leaving them with children to bring up. They worked at any job they could get and during the winter months were reduced to stone picking in the fields. Doing this, they could earn just enough money to live

on but no more. The stones were put into heaps which were reputed to be one cubic yard. These were loaded onto carts in due course by farm workers and delivered to the Rural District Council to be used for the roads. One load of flints in those days, delivered to the road, cost three shillings (15 pence today).

These two unfortunate women were always clothed in black from head to foot. Although they could hold their own with the best of the men, for the same work they were paid less. Mr Pearce said that he could recall the death of one of them; he thought it was Archangel. She went missing and her body was eventually found under the hedge between Goring station and Gatehampton. When she was searched, a beautiful watch came to light which defrayed the cost of burial and so she was not buried in a pauper's grave but with some ceremony.

### **Local celebrities**

*Many well-known people have lived in Goring and Streatley. Stories recounted by local inhabitants can often shed a new light on their characters or show an interesting aspect to their lives.*

#### **1. 'Bomber' Harris**

In 1953, Marshall of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Travers Harris, who had been in charge of Bomber Command during World War 2, moved to Ferry House in Ferry Lane, Goring. He died in 1984, just before his 92nd birthday and was buried in the cemetery in Reading Road. His funeral was marked by an impressive RAF fly past which many people remember. He was a quiet and modest man, popular in the village, and was an active member of the local library, often popping in for books on... cookery!



The Goring Gap Bowmen, a local archery club, practised in 'Bomber' Harris's field at the back of the house from 1953 to 1978. Traditionally the annual rent charged was a small silver arrow head but he changed that to a bottle of whisky and later his wife changed it to a bottle of sherry; an arrangement that suited all.

*Picture of 'Bomber' Harris in the Bellême Room (GSLHS Collection)*

#### **2. Mike Hailwood**

Previous occupants of Ferry House were Stanley Hailwood and his wife, Nellie, who moved here at the end of the Second World War. He owned Kings Motorcycles of Oxford and one of the people we interviewed bought his first motor cycle there. Their son, Mike Hailwood, the Grand Prix motor cycle road racer and Formula One star lived at Ferry House for about seven years until the family moved when Mike was age 13. He was known as 'Mike the Bike' because of his natural riding ability and first learned to ride as a child on a mini motor cycle in the field at the back of his home. One person can remember her brother and his friends going round to see Mike and to ride his motor cycles round and round the field where the Goring Gap Bowmen later practised. He went to school at Pangbourne College but left early to work in the family business before his father sent him to work at Triumph motorcycles.

He later became one of the few men to compete at the Grand Prix level on motorcycles and in auto racing but his racing career started in a field in Goring. Sadly, he was killed in a traffic accident in 1981.

### **3. George Grossmith**

George Grossmith of the famous London theatrical family and co-author of *Diary of a Nobody*, had houses in Goring and around 1915 moved to Bridge House on the corner of Thames Road and the High Street.

Just after the First World War, George Grossmith arranged for a galaxy of stars from the London stage to provide a concert in the Village Hall, which was then called the Parish Church House, to aid the church tower restoration fund [nothing changes!]. The stars included Stanley Holloway, Leslie Henson, Phyllis Dare and Yvonne Arnaud.

When Bridge House was first built in 1891, it was called Willowside but the Grossmiths changed the name. A relative of theirs, living in the village, told us some years later, perhaps tongue in cheek, that this was not because of the nearby river bridge but because the Grossmiths played bridge here, incessantly. By coincidence, the Bridge Club now meet regularly in the Village Hall, just over the road from Bridge House.

George Grossmith also arranged for the midnight train from Paddington to stop at Goring by request. This was quite an achievement as although the train stopped at Reading to put down mail, no passengers were allowed to get off there! Goring was very proud of this privilege and any 'well to do' resident could see the guard at Paddington, give him five shillings and he would arrange for the train to stop at Goring. As the station was closed at this time of night and there were no street lights, it was pitch black and a certain Major Gibbs, perhaps having had an especially good supper, fell over the edge of the platform after the train had left and was quite badly hurt. However, as there were no Health and Safety regulations like today, the arrangement continued until nationalisation of GWR in 1948.

### **Amusing tales**

Before 1923 when the river bridge was rebuilt, it was a toll bridge. The price for a man crossing the river by foot was a penny but we are told that if he drove a herd of cattle or pigs over, he paid a halfpenny toll per calf or pig. And, so the story goes, one Goring farmer always took a small pig with him when he crossed the bridge to Streatley, thus paying only a halfpenny and not a penny. (However sadly, this story does not have any basis in truth and appears to be a joke told by Streatley people.)

In the 1940s and 50s, Mr Rupert Brooke who owned Brooke Bond tea business (there was never a Mr Bond) lived at the Temple in Cleeve and had an orchard next to his house. A Mrs Millett was allowed to walk through his land on her way to the shops. One day, as she walked to the village, he met her and said "Now Mrs Millett, would you like some plums?" "Oh yes please," she replied. When she returned, sure enough, 'Old Brooks' (as the villagers called him) was there with a bag of plums, but as he handed them over, he said "That'll be half a crown please" and he wasn't joking!

### **Goring vs Streatley/Streatley vs Goring!**

There has always been a certain antipathy between Goring and Streatley people and one former Streatley lad who was a choir boy in the early 1930s told us that there used to be

battles some Sunday nights after the service between his fellow choir boys and Goring choir boys on the river bridge. They would shout names at one another and sometimes pelt one another with apples to try and drive the opposing boys off the bridge.

Mrs Emily Morrell, the Squiress of Streatley House, also had little use for Goring and she insisted that Streatley's celebrations in 1935 for George V's Silver Jubilee were strictly confined to that village. A Streatley girl who worked for a Goring family and lived in, was not allowed to participate in the party even though her mother and father, Mr and Mrs Rollings, were the butler and housekeeper at Streatley House.

**Alan Winchcomb**