

FRANCKLIN COTTAGE WESTLINGTON

These are Jill Bird's memories of Dinton and Westlington. Jill is a granddaughter of George Ricketts. George was the last member of the family to live in Francklin Cottage, Westlington [~1936-1967].



George and his (2nd) wife, Lilian Aletta nee Pearce, known as 'Mivvie' - Lilian died 8 Feb 1967 in Dinton - just four months before George, who died 2 Jun 1967.

The cottage stood at the end of the lane beyond the village green flanked by similar thatched houses with wicket walls not in any way gentrified as they would be in later years. Even then, there was a feeling of dropping into the past. This was the early days of the second world war which hadn't touched that area then but later we, my and cousin and I, were to watch without fully comprehending, the dog fights in the skies above the village.

Dinton, as it was always referred to, was purchased by Grandpy from his Aunt Annie Elizabeth Francklin after whom he named it 'Francklin Cottage.' The valuation was agreed between Grandpy and the executors. I loved it from the first moment I saw it and mourned its loss as a member of the family and part of my life when it was sold. A white washed low thatched building running at right angles to the road, it was really a row of four cottages forming a terrace. Three of the cottages were joined together as one, the fourth, nearest the road, was a one up one down roomed house in which Grandma's friend, Lil Stone lived.



L-R Annie Elizabeth Francklin (who lived at the Cottage before George Ricketts), Nellie Ricketts (wife of Richard Ricketts) with daughter Doris Ricketts, Kate Lydia Ricketts (1st wife of George Ricketts) and then Alice Francklin (nee Saunders) who was the wife of William Francklin and Aunt to Annie Elizabeth.

The kitchen was the hub of the cottage - low ceiling and entered by an even lower doorway which was hazardous to all adults of normal size. A large table dominated the room surrounded by dining chairs. The second most dominating feature was a Raeburn fire rarely allowed to go out as it was the main source of heating for cooking. Grandpy toasted the breakfast bacon on a long handled wire fork held in front of the red coals, the fat dripping into a drip tray placed on the floor beneath. The smell was guaranteed to rouse even the most sleepy visitor.

Only on high days and holidays was the dining room used, all other meals were eaten in the kitchen - table covered by a crisp white cloth. The news bulletins, all important at that crucial time, were listened to whilst seated round the table, news papers read there, food prepared on it.

Above the kitchen was a bedroom entered by a steep winding uncarpeted wooden staircase. Promptly at 6 in the morning the latch of the door would rattle and Grandpy's booted feet would clatter upwards and a cheerful voice would greet you with, 'Good morning, my old dear' as he passed you an early morning cup of tea. We children loved this early morning call; not so our parents hoping for a lie in.

The two middle cottages were joined together so that the kitchen led directly into the dining room and the first bedroom directly into the second. The fourth cottage had a hallway with what was called the front door. To the left of the hall was a room which, when Grandma's arthritis was to prevent her climbing stairs, was to become her bedroom. On the other side of the hall was the dining room door. At the rear of the hall was a second winding wooden staircase which rose to a small landing and a third bedroom. This bedroom was always referred to as the Bridal Suite as it was where my parents spent part of their honeymoon.

The discovering of a second staircase was one of the joys of Dinton. Hide and seek could be played to the full providing one crossed the uncarpeted bedrooms on tip toe and the floor boards didn't spoil it all by creaking. In that event, if the weather was fine, we were banished to the garden.

A narrow lean-to ran across the back of the house; it had two functions. A store for some of Grandpy's plumbing equipment and a scullery kitchen. In the scullery was a 'modern' cooker and a stone sink. Although this had running water, it had no drain in the early days. It took a while to remember to check that the big galvanised bucket was in place and that it was not too full. There were always two metal buckets beneath the sink, one in waiting, the other in use and these were emptied on the vegetables at the top of the garden by any of the able bodied men who happened to be about when required.

It was in the part of the scullery where Grandpy kept his plumbing tools that I made an amazing discovery. I discovered a large lock of my first grandmother's hair! It was secreted in one of the boxes amongst the plumbing joints – the fact that it was blond and very long didn't seem at all strange. It was not until several years later that I realised it was a material called tow, a flax-like fibre used for making joints watertight by wrapping around the threads of the screw!

The bathroom and lavatory at Dinton were, naturally, quite unique. Across the cobbled courtyard was a small barn with a red corrugated tin roof – it had a smell as you went in – not exactly of washing or water or carbolic soap, but a sort of mineral-like smell of all three. The floor of the barn, like the scullery floor, was covered by red quarry tiles. It was here that Grandma and Lil Stone did the weekly Monday wash, an event which took most of the day. In another room across the passage from the laundry was the bath, hand basin and lavatory. We all made a pilgrimage here each morning and evening. There was an outside WC for the children during the day, thus was fully plumbed as was the barn. Grandpy, too, was expected to use the outside loo as most of the time he was either gardening or doing outside jobs and dirty boots in the bathroom were not to be

encouraged. Outside the outside WC was a pump, under this, after it had been primed, Grandpy would wash his muddy hands. The pump was another special part of Dinton – especially if you were allowed to work it.

We visited Dinton mainly twice a year; at Christmas and in the summer holidays. Christmas was a short visit and magic. The dining room, low as it was, had paper decorations strung across the ceiling. The Inglenook fire place, from where, if the fire was out, you could look up the chimney and see the disc of the sky, would have a large log fire burning in it. The smell of wood smoke pervaded the whole of the cottage. With two fires lighted and the thick thatch covering us, we were very snug. Another aid to warmth was in the form of feather beds. In the winter time each of the normal horse hair mattresses was covered by one filled with feathers. In the mornings the feather mattresses were vigorously shaken so that if you were careful you could climb into the centre of the bed and the mattress would form a nest around you. Add to this a stone hot water bottle covered by a piece of woollen cloth and you were in the land of nod in no time.

Grandma was a wonderful cook and also very ingenious. She would choose a theme for Christmas and the old Victorian tea table would be covered by small figures, trees, houses and other items to illustrate this. She would make each of the children a Goodybag for Christmas morning with sweets, home made biscuits, small buns, nuts and fruit. Her Christmas cake, when most were fairly plain, and at a time when cake decoration was in no way as elaborate as it is today, was a marvel to behold.

After tea when the washing up had been done we would all play games. Bobby Bingo, pass the parcel and musical chairs. As we grew older we graduated to monopoly which became very competitive.

Summer visits were longer, usually a week or two. My parents, Uncle Jack and Aunt Betty, sometimes Aunty Kitty together with cousins would stay. Aunty Kitty hated Dinton as she believed it to be haunted and would use any excuse to avoid visiting, especially staying the night.

My father had served in the first world war and was in a reserved occupation, Uncle Jack was not one hundred percent fit and was exempt active service; they were also a little long in the tooth for the trenches. Uncle Percy, as a Civil Servant, was working for the Government and had, together with his colleagues, been evacuated to Llandudno in Wales and was rarely able to join us. The purpose of the holiday in those days was to help with the harvest.

The garden at Dinton was long – there was a summer house similar to a veranda with a short flight of wooden steps for access. This was set apart from the cottage and could be used as a retreat. It contained the garden chairs and small tables and was quite dry even in the heaviest shower of rain. The garden was divided between small lawns, grass and paved pathways, a large fruit cage, flower and vegetable beds – not forgetting Grandma's raised wall rock garden. There was a shrubbery archway which always seemed like a short tunnel to us. At the very end was a sturdy swing and solid see-saw both painted green, providing the shade in the summer time was a walnut tree. A very large old chestnut tree stood on the boundary of the garden and the adjacent fields. A small gateway led from one to the other. It was through this gate we would pass at harvest time as soon as the dew had lifted.

Harvesting in the late thirties and early forties was a long, slow business needing many people and much heavy labour. Most of the young men had been called up, hence the Ricketts involvement. The crop was cut using a reaping machine drawn by one of the heavy shire horses kept on the farm. The machine had huge revolving blades similar to a gigantic lawn mower of the older cylinder type. The field was cut from the outside to the centre; when the small central area was considered to be

just large enough to contain all the rabbits, mowing stopped. Dogs and beaters were used to encourage the rabbits to break cover – these were then despatched. War time meant scarcity – the rabbits were a welcome addition to the meat ration.

I don't know if the reaper had a binding attachment but I can remember the sheaves covering the whole field. This was where our work started – we were to pick up the sheaves and stook them ready for storing and threshing. The stooks looked like little wigwams of five or seven sheaves.

The worse crop to harvest was barley, not only did it scratch most horribly but the ears could break off and these would creep up shirt sleeves and trouser legs and worse still, into the ears of the dogs. Wheat and oats were child's play by contrast. If the weather was good, the sheaves would be loaded using pitch forks onto the carts which had side panels enabling the load to be quite high. One man would stand on the cart with his fork ready to catch the sheaves as the man on the ground pitched it. They were stacked neatly in a layered fashion until high enough, the horse waiting patiently in the shafts. At 10 or 11 years of age, I was considered old enough to lead the horse back to the farm. This worked very well until I managed to get one of the heavily loaded carts stuck by the wheel hub in the gateway. My labours were then confined to stooking. The threshing machine was contracted out by the threshers to the farms – I can't remember if the grain was bagged in large Hessian sacks, I fancy it was.

The farm harvest coincided with the harvest from the garden. This was women's work – being a bit of a tom boy, I was quite content to be in the fields with the men. Thinking back, I was probably less of a nuisance there than I would have been helping with the fruit picking. All that could be, was bottled, jammed or salted. Apples were cored, peeled, sliced and threaded onto string to be hung and dried. Other apples were examined for soundness, wrapped in wax paper and placed with care on shelves or trays.

Plums were picked, halved and closely layered in kilner jars. These were heated in the Raeburn for the right amount of time before covering with boiling syrup and sealed. Other plums, the less select, were jammed. Tomatoes were bottled - those which were slow to ripen were made into chutney. The beans were sliced and salted down in large pots and jars; the carrots were stored under sand and surplus eggs were put into a large crock and covered with a solution of water glass. Nothing was allowed to go to waste.

Somehow between all this activity, people were fed. This was not the era of the grazing meal known today, but a proper midday meal of meat when possible and two or three vegetables, followed by a proper pudding – all made possibly by the presence of my mother, the Aunts, Lil Stone and Grandma's splendid organisation.

About once a week the serious shopping needed doing. This was done at the local village shop – bread was also bought in the village. Vegetables, of course, were home-grown as was the fruit. Grandpy kept a few hens for eggs and as they became too old to lay, they were consigned to the pot. Milk was collected in a quart jug from the farm – two quart jugs were needed – one in the morning and one in the afternoon, when the family was about. Very occasionally, an excursion to the town of Aylesbury was undertaken and necessary items not available in the village could be purchased.

Within easy walking distance of Dinton was the village of Cuddington. It was here that we would go on 'fish days' to buy fish from a mobile fish monger. He drove a small van and on opening the rear doors, the fish could be seen displayed on beds of crushed ice which, as it melted, if you weren't careful, would drip all over your feet

Fridges were almost unheard of in the average home, food such as meat and fish were stored in a meat safe, a small cupboard ventilated by a fine zinc mesh-covered door. Cooked meat or food was placed beneath a meat cover, an oval, dome-like shape made of fine woven wire. These two storage units were kept in the coolest place in the house.

Flies could be an awful nuisance so in order to control their numbers from the ceiling in the kitchen and scullery would be huge fly papers. Sticky strips of brown paper which would eventually be covered by hundreds of black flies looking as if somebody had rolled the thing in currents. Every now and again someone forgot they were there and inadvertently backed into the gruesome objects giving someone else the job of extracting them and their hair from the revolting tacky mess.

Week days passed with plenty to do – either in the form of work or leisure. Sundays were another kettle of fish. The strictly religious non conformist family I had been born into not only believed in the commandment, 'Six days my work be done, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest holy to the Lord.' (Exodus Ch 31 V 15), but adhered to strictly, Sundays at Dinton were like no other Sundays anywhere that I had experienced.

Above are Jill Bird's memories of Dinton and Westlington. Jill is a granddaughter of George Ricketts. George was the last member of the family to live at Dinton, Francklin Cottage [~1936-1967].

From the flyleaf of the Family Bible:

John & Sarah Saunders Ricketts

A gift from their Aunt

Sarah Saunders Allnutt

Australia, Western Australia

November 17th 1898

Persons mentioned in text:

Aunt Annie Elizabeth Francklin: dau of Elizabeth Saunders & John Francklin & granddaughter of Joseph Saunders & Ann Bishop of Francklin Cottage – she lived most of her life in the cottage.

Grandpy: George Ricketts son of John Ricketts & Sarah Saunders Allnutt [1872-1967]

Grandma: 2nd wife of the above George Ricketts – Lilian nee Pearce [1872- 1967]

My parents: George M F Ricketts, son of the above George & his wife, Beatrice nee Stanley

Uncle Jack & Aunt Betty: John E Ricketts, son of the above George & his wife, Elizabeth nee Flatman

Aunty Kitty & Uncle Percy: Kitty Fruin nee Ricketts, dau of the above George Ricketts & her husband, Percy H Fruin OBE