

Biddenden Community

When we had gone to live in Biddenden there was a very close community. Most people were related, and strangers generally were not welcome until they had lived there about ten or twelve years. This was borne out by the remarks of a lady in the village who complained that some large houses were being built and local people could not afford them. When I said we needed this type of house to balance the council houses she said, "But this will bring in strangers from outside." When I pointed out that we were from outside she said, "But you've been here ten years. You're okay now."

We have always tried to get on with our neighbours, which usually works both ways and is good for peace of mind. At Edenbridge, Mrs Geel was very good and would babysit if we wanted to go out, which we did occasionally to a dance or other event. She never minded how late we were, whereas when we asked Eva's mother and sister Bunty, they would be waiting in the kitchen with their coats on when we got back.

In 1963 tragedy struck. Our youngest son Mark became seriously ill. At first the doctor thought it was kidney trouble, but he suddenly got worse and was taken into hospital where he went downhill rapidly. They were unable to find out what the problem was, but in retrospect I wonder if it was Weil's disease, which is caught from rats, as only a couple of weeks before he had bought a baby rat into the kitchen to play with. Mark died on the 13th February. This turned our lives upside down. Eva and I were devastated and, of course, it had a great effect on our other son William, who was nearly ten at the time.

After Mark died, Eva went into a clinical depression that lasted some time. This was particularly hard for William, who in our grief we struggled to care for as we should. My sister Ruth was a great help. She was very fond of William and he stayed with her in Leeds

after Mark died and during the school holidays, so they became very close.

We had two neighbours who were very kind and helpful to us. Molly Fisher, who lived with a very elegant lady called Vera Woodger, came to our rescue when our car wouldn't start after we came back from Mark's death at Hammersmith hospital. This was about 10pm. We were stuck in Headcorn car-park and didn't know who to call. There were no taxis. We called Molly and she came out and pushed our van with her car and it started. This is a friend indeed.

Farmer's wife in Channel bid



Mrs. Eva Stone

"Hard going"

MRS. Eva Stone, 34-year-old Biddenden farmer's wife, spent most of

Molly could be quite formidable, always wearing breeches and a jacket, but we got on well with her. I cut up all the wood for her fires. The two women kept two dogs, one of which was a boxer which would slobber all over you, the other was a husky or Samoyed, which kept scratching your leg with his foot. The boxer often made the most atrocious smells and had to be put out. There was a large exercise yard outside, like a tennis court with high wires. This was very good for the dogs as they could be left outside for a long time and they could not escape.

Molly was extremely tough. There was a footpath across her land, which she didn't like being used. The local council wouldn't take any steps to keep this path open. One day a person decided to walk this path. On being confronted he sat on the ground and said, "Now move me!" Molly had a hayfork in her hand, which she brought down about 6 inches away from his leg. He exclaimed, "You're nothing but an overgrown Teddy girl!" But he got up quickly and left.

Eva hadn't passed any A-levels at school, so she did these and went on to get a BA and MA, and gold medals in public speaking. When she was 34 she took part in a cross-channel relay swim. She didn't make it because the weather turned bad, and the sea became very rough. The paper reported that her husband said she was mad, but I don't recall that.

Amy Sinclair and her husband Tom and son Ian were extremely kind to us. Amy helped with the secretarial work when we were running the relief service, which we gave up when Eva started teaching. Ian was in the scouts with William and later came to work for us, becoming very competent before going to work at the Dungeness nuclear power station. Bob and Peter Brown had a drainage and contracting business just across the road from my farm, and they were always very helpful and would help with difficult calvings.

The other good local friend was Harry Elgie who lived at Smarden. Harry was diabetic and didn't look after himself very well. Because he didn't watch his sugar levels Harry could sometimes be almost in a state of collapse. He would come into our kitchen and look very bad until we gave him a biscuit or something sweet to revive him. He had a great sense of humour. He had a good wife called Anna, and two sons and a daughter. He referred to his sons as the old boys and we were surprised to find they were in their late teens.

Harry and Anna lived in a very nice old house in Smarden. One day a Rolls-Royce came by and the car stopped. The people were staring at the house. Anna, who was in the garden, curtsied. Another time they had visitors who stayed very late. Anna decided to go to bed and leave them to Harry. Harry had the same idea and had gone up the other staircase. He met Anna on the top landing, while the guests had been left alone downstairs.

One day Harry had to take a pig to the vet. He put it in a hessian sack. In the waiting room it started to go round and round the floor inside the sack. He said that all the people waiting with their pet

dogs and cats looked on in amazement. I asked him what he said or did and he replied, "Nothing."

In the winter of 1963 we decided to travel to Russia, to try and recover from the shock of losing Mark. We spent two weeks there; a week in Moscow and a week in Leningrad, in the depths of Russian winter.

Whilst in Russia I had a few interesting experiences of how their political system works. At one point I was taking photographs in a church. Because they were closing down churches at the time, there was an anti-church movement going on. The tour guide snatched my camera, but let it go with the warning not to take any more photographs. On another occasion we were very crossly told to go back to our pre-booked seats in the theatre when we took the opportunity to occupy the empty seats in front of our own. A woman in our group had a Woman's Own magazine confiscated, because it was Western propaganda.

During our journey between Moscow and Leningrad, a journey of many hours, our compartment was freezing cold as the heating wasn't working. The temperature outside was -25C. An old lady in our compartment was huddling up with blankets as it was so cold. I found the attendant and told her the heating was off. She said "The heating is on." I replied "No. The heating is off." After the next station she came and found us to let us know the heating was now off throughout the train, so we were all equal!

We travelled through lots of forests on the train. Each forest had giant sculptures which were covered with mounds of wood to protect them from the cold. We also saw women sweeping their paths of snow, only to reveal sheets of ice below.

One of the people on our trip had a suitcase full of jeans, which he sold, as they were worth ten times as much in Russia as we could buy them in the UK. I'm not sure how he managed to smuggle them in, but once he had sold them he found he couldn't spend the money he'd made, as the Beriozka shops where tourists were allowed to spend money would only take foreign currency. The only place to spend Russian currency was in their local shops, which

were very basic and poorly stocked. In the end he bought bottles of wine, which we all helped him drink.

We travelled by Aeroflot, who at the time hadn't got the best safety record, which had earned them the nickname of Aeroflop. On the final day there was a problem with the plane, so we were put up in a hotel where we were fed with eggs that tasted like they'd been boiled for a week. Returning to Heathrow we seemed to linger for longer at a higher altitude than seemed normal. The pilot must have spotted a gap, because he descended at speed. I thought we were going to crash! We were very relieved when we finally came to a halt on solid ground.

For twenty years I milked every Christmas day. On the twenty-first year Ian Sinclair, who was then working for me, offered to do it, and I accepted. It did mean though that I had to socialise with my in-laws instead!

Once the cows escaped into the next door orchard. The NFU paid my neighbour for thirty bushels of apples, which was a rough estimate of the loss. He just stood in the gateway and gave the first figure he thought of. That year there was a glut of apples, so he did quite well being. On another occasion the cows all escaped and went across the main road towards Todmartin. They returned on their own without doing any damage.

When we decided to give up milking I did wonder whether or not we could make a living. Eva was by now earning money outside farming by travelling to Ashford to teach. Eva had started with juniors, but quickly found she preferred further education, and taught English and American Literature to sixth formers. I started bailing straw and making hay for other people who mainly had small acreages of land and no equipment of their own. People said I'd never get my money, but most people were keen to settle as I left the field. I tried to please customers and always turned up when I said I would. Many people were let down by others who would take on too much work and then couldn't handle it.

The snag with haymaking was the dust, effectively counteracted by wearing a Racal helmet. This had a battery pack kept in a pocket in

the trousers, which drove a fan at the back of the helmet, and the air passed through filters. It was very effective. I used to get remarks about my helmet like, "Here comes the spaceman!" But better than suffering from too much dust in the lungs.

For some time I did all this work myself, looking after about eighty head of young-stock and making my own hay and silage. Then Brett came to work for me and he was first class. We had a system going for straw where I would bale and he would deliver. The bale sledge was on a tractor with a loader, which packed the bales into a square block, which could be picked up via a grab on the front loader of the tractor. This was very quick and efficient. One man could load the bottom two layers on his own, and then it took two to finish, making on average 200 bales each load. Obviously this needed two tractors and we had a Leyland 344, Nuffield 460 and another Fordson Major. Equipment by this time was getting more efficient and the disk mower could run very fast and a large acreage was cut in one day.

One year we had made all our hay and silage, and it wasn't yet time to start straw. There was a sale of standing grass at Ashford market and one piece of forty acres came up. Without even seeing it, I bid £1000 and got it. Bernard Thomas who owned the land was someone I knew. William knew his children. He came up to me and said, "You've overdone it, there is hardly anything there." However the weather was kind. We cut and baled the hay in less than a week, and sold it to a dealer for profit. We could have made more by carting it home, but this involved several journeys of 5 or 6 miles each way, part of which was down a very bumpy farm road.

One man owed me some money. As he was always short it was difficult to get payment from him. I sent him a poem requesting settlement, as it seemed this would work better than threats. Within a week a cheque arrived with the full amount accompanied by another poem.

The straw was purchased off the field behind the combine, but in the last years we were in Biddenden it was free, given by a local farmer, John Body. He became a very good friend and lent me his baler for no charge when mine broke down. He also gave us apple

juice by the gallon from his juice extracting plant in Smarden, where he was squeezing out 3000 gallons a day, all from local apples. This was sent to Devon where it was processed into Devonshire cider. One year the demand slackened but by this time there were large heaps of apples waiting to be processed. However the juice was needed in February. But this time some of the apples were rotten but they were still squeezed out and the juice sent off. There were no complaints. Unfortunately John died of a heart attack about two years after we left Biddenden.

We had a good relationship with our neighbours at Biddenden until Brian Summers started his car repair business and made a fearful noise with his pneumatic cutter.

One man, who lived at the other end of the farm, had a right to draw water from a large pond in the centre of our top field, using a pipe which ran underground from the pond to his house. The pond was a main attraction for fisherman who came on a regular basis. This man decided that he liked to see water running through the pond in his garden, and his gardener put me wise to this. Our pond, which was nearly half an acre, was going down by several inches a day.

As this particular person was very difficult to get on with, I decided the best thing to do was to block the pipe. I disconnected it and stuffed in rolled up plastic, pushed it well in and screwed the pipe together again. I met this chap in the village and he said his pipe was blocked. Perhaps the fishermen had somehow got plastic into it? He had obviously tried to clear it without success. He asked if he could dig a trench and put in a new pipe. I said I would agree only if he signed an agreement beforehand to say that any damage would be made good. Needless to say I never heard any more about it.

Our ponds sometimes attracted unwanted visitors. One day I came across some while going about my daily work. I was carrying a pitching bar on my shoulder as I was expecting to put some stakes in, and our worker Peter had gone across to open the gate on the other side to let the cows in for a change of pasture. So I said to these people "You can't fish here", and one of the men said "huh",

in a challenging way. So I took the pitching bar off my shoulder, which perhaps made him think better of it, so he said “we’ll go.” They started off just as Peter was letting the young cattle out from the other side of the field, and they came over as if the devil was after them. These people ran for their lives, clambered over the gate and shouted “You did that on purpose!” Which we hadn’t. But they never came back!

Gypsies used to come and eat the fish. As soon as they were turned out you knew they would be back. They would just wait. Then one day a gypsy woman came round to the house begging for clothes, so Eva gave her a coat. It was long on Eva and this woman was quite short, so it scraped along the ground, but it was a warm coat. So I said “Tell those people not to come on my land any more.” And they didn’t, because she was the matriarch. So we paid them some kindness and they didn’t bother us any more.

We had a local lad working for us called Joe. Every day he went to the local café for his midday meal. When we were clearing out the silage clamp, which got very smelly around the edges, he didn't bother to wash his hands or his boots before going off. I asked him what they thought in the café when this smelly person walked in. He said the people eating just moved to another table. This lad also used to repair his motorbike in his bedroom. Asked why, he said “Muvver wouldn't let me do it in the living room.”