

Transcripts of Sonya Teale's interview with Miss Dorothy Sweetnam 2nd April 2004

Words in *italics* are those of the interviewer.

Interview recorded 2nd of April 2004.

This is about Rowlands Castle and a little about life in the village in the 1930s. Lord Bessborough had a mansion in Rowlands Castle set in many acres of parkland and though it was owned by the Bessborough's, there were many footpaths that cut through. He also owned a mansion and large estate in County Kilkenny in Southern Ireland. It was there that my father first came into contact with Lord Bessborough. He, my father, was a policeman in the Royal Irish Constabulary in the 1920s when Ireland was under British rule and was stationed for a time in Kilkenny. As part of the duties of the police at that time of unrest in Ireland was to patrol and protect the English landlords. The Royal Irish Constabulary was disbanded when Southern Ireland became a Republic, and my father was pensioned off.

My parents came to Rowlands Castle and my father became a park keeper and a courier for Lord Bessborough. His duties included collecting Lord Bessborough's mail and newspapers from the village post office and newsagents in the mornings and delivering them personally to Lord Bessborough. Likewise in late afternoon he would collect Lord Bessborough's personal mail and post it at the village post office.

We had a very happy childhood at Stansted Lodge close to the village and about 2 miles from Stansted House until 1941 when my father died, and we moved to Redhill Road, Rowlands Castle to the house he had bought some years before.

No one was allowed to picnic in the park in those days and my father had to turn away would be people who tried.

Looking back, it was an idyllic place to grow up. The village green was the heart of activities along with the rec, the recreation ground. The motor car was quite a rare sight. We were fortunate to have a railway station on the main Portsmouth to Waterloo line, but the main means of transport was the bicycle. In the summer there were day outings to the seaside by coach or charabancs in those days, Bournemouth, Weymouth, Brighton et cetera.

There were two working bake houses making very tasty crusty bread. George Farr was one baker whose daughter, Daphne Farr, now Mrs Cross, has been my friend since I was about five years old. We used to watch him make delicious doughnuts and fried them in a large iron oval shaped saucepan. He quite often gave us a doughnut each which we had watched him cook and, in the winter, we spent many a chilly day in the cosy warm bake house amid the delightful aroma of baking bread. We loved to watch him get the big built in brick ovens heated up with bunts, which were large bunches of twigs tied together. The other baker in the village who made his own bread et cetera was Charlie Ronalds(?). They don't seem to make crusty bread like it these days.

There were four pubs in the village, The Castle Inn, where the British Legion band used to practise, and we would sit on the wall opposite and listen to them. The Fountain Inn and The Railway Hotel now the Robin Hood on the green and the Staunton Arms near the church.

At the top of the green stands to this day the chapel for the United Reformed Church, also Saint John the Baptist Church of England opposite the Church of England school, a beautiful solid flint building which all our family attended from age 5 to 14 years. Opposite the church was the rectory a large flint house which is now privately owned.

On patronal festival day of Saint John the Baptist we, the children of the school, danced country dances on the rectory lawn in front of our parents. The old school building was recently converted into private homes.

Miss White ran a children's dancing school in the church hall, which was recently demolished and replaced due to its dilapidated state. All our family attended and really enjoyed it. Miss White put on concert in the Parish Hall which were usually well attended much to our delight.

There was an area near the rec which was allotments. My mother had one of those after my father died and grew all kinds of lovely vegetables. With food shortages during the war people were encouraged to grow as much as possible. Dig for victory posters were a common sight countryside. For some years now rows of houses which became The Fairway have stood in the area which had been allotments.

The big annual social event of the year for the children was the Flower Show which was held up the rec. There was a big marquee, a fair, power organ, coconut shies, roll a penny, children's races, all kinds of competitions also the best arrangement of wild flowers et cetera. A lovely festival atmosphere which seemed to go on all day. A similar country fun day was the village fair held on the green to this day.

The village became a very different place when World War Two approached. Beautiful Stansted Park became a military area with firstly English troops, then a Canadian medical training school. Battersea Boys' School was evacuated to the village. During the war the classrooms were in the available accommodation, all available accommodation, the Parish Hall, Church Hall et cetera and the children were housed with families willing to take them on.

The Parish Hall was a hive activity, dances were regularly held and well attended. There were many small bands which provided the music, and the dances were great fun. The Forestside Hut about 2 miles from the village, near Stansted House, a wooden hut on the edge of the woods was also a venue for regular dances, they too were very good fun.

For weeks before D-Day and the invasion of France, the village green was covered with large boxes of shells and ammunition. All the roads in the village were lined with trucks, tanks, half track vehicles et cetera with one or two soldiers in each vehicle waiting for what you found out later were for the orders to proceed to the ports for embarkation to France.

The Bessborough's had four children, Lord Duncannon, Lady Moira, Master Desmond and Master George. Master George had a French nanny who would take him out in a small lovely black pony and

trap. She would sometimes take Daphne Farr, now Daphne Cross and I for rides with them peace(?) was playing in the park.

Master Desmond was tragically killed by the bough of the tree as a young boy as he rode his horse along the avenue in the park. Years later Master George was killed in a traffic accident when about 19 years old in Germany while he was doing his two years national service which was compulsory in those days.

While living in Stansted Lodge we often used to witness dog fights with the Spitfires from Thorney Island and Tangmere which were RAF bases when the German bombers came over after the siren had sounded. This was during the Battle of Britain.

When I was about 13 years old, I belonged to a club, village club, called the Youth Squad and part of the activities included knitting sea boot stockings and balaclava helmets for our sailors. The sea boot stockings were made of thick oiled wool. I still have the Youth Squad badge to this day.

Dorothy, what did your sisters do after they left the village school where did they go.

The four eldest girls went to Manor House School in Havant and they would go on the train which was a few minutes' walk from our house, Stansted Lodge, and then after that in those days to be a GPO telephonist was quite a sought after job. My father thought this would be a good idea for them and the four of them all became GPO telephonists. The two oldest ones went to work in Emsworth's telephone exchange and Margaret, she went to Portsmouth eventually, but I think she started off in Havant.

Then Eileen, next youngest one, she started in Havant, worked there until she married. Then that left the three young girls so after my father died, we couldn't afford to send them to Manor House School so mother sent us to commercial training college which was Tomlins(?) in Bedhampton, Mordern House it was called. We went there and had our training and after Connie left, the oldest one, she went to work at Portsmouth Aviation, stayed there for years. Vera went to work for the Admiralty, and I went to work for Belmonts in a small office in an exclusive gown shop in North End, Portsmouth.

After I left (?) typewriters I got a job in the Admiralty. Leigh Park House which was a big mansion between Rowlands Castle and Havant which has since been knocked down and a housing estate built on it and I was very happy there for about six months and after that I was made redundant and so I got a transfer into the Admiralty at Hazelmere where my sister works. We used to travel by train from Rowlands Castle to Hazelmere and when we arrived there was a coach to take us up to Night Hill (?) House which was a beautiful big mansion with beautiful gardens and I worked there for a few years, then I went to America as a nanny.

Dorothy what organisations and things did your mother belong to in the village

Oh, quite a few, women's fellowship, Mothers' Union, British Legion which included house to house collection she made quite a social event of and the Conservative Association and Parish Council for a few years.