Country Living

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

I was born in 1934 in a cottage at the lower end of Broadway, not far from Knapp. There were seven of us living there: mother, father, my sisters Florrie and Marjorie, my brother Jack, Granny Tett and me, the baby of the family.

Siblings with my mother and grandmother taken soon after my birth in 1934

I was the last baby to be born there although without doubt there had been many, many more before me. Granny Tett was the last person to die there, in 1944, aged 84.

The cottage was the first in a terrace of ten that generally followed the line of the roadway but they were in groups of two or three, each group being positioned from the road at a distance slightly bigger or smaller than its neighbouring groups, so giving a staggered frontage. Thus some cottages had doors that opened directly on to the roadway, there being no pavement, whilst others were set back a yard or two. None of the cottages had gardens but they each had a very small

With my mother at the Broadway cottage where I was born

back yard.

I can only guess at the age of our cottage at the time we lived there; two hundred years maybe, possibly more, but I tend to think it couldn't possibly be of any great age because it was so badly built. On the other hand, the fact that it was so badly built could have meant that it was indeed very old and merely reflected the standards of a bygone time.

Taken in a friend's garden in Lower Street

On the cottage step, with my mother's cousin

Siblings in the back yard. The shared toilet is in the background

On the cottage step again, with Granny Tett and my sisters' friend

Pictures from the family album

The walls of the cottage were of very rough, undressed stone. At the front, two upper windows matched two ground floor windows. The latched front door was offset to the right. There was no letterbox but a gap beneath the door was wide enough to permit the posting of letters and newspapers. It must have been a draughty old place but I don't recall that it was, it always seemed warm and cosy to me.

Immediately opposite, on the other side of the road, was a very high stone wall, a mere twenty feet or so away. The rear wall of our back yard was even closer, not more than eight feet away. Both walls are still standing to this day. Thus, the view from any window of the cottage was as far from being an idyllic rural scene as could possibly be imagined. There wasn't a tree, a shrub or a patch of grass in sight.

The front door of the cottage opened into the main living room. This was quite a large room by cottage standards but the wooden-board ceiling was very low, no more than six feet high. Like the rest of the house it was furnished, as befitted rural labouring people at that time, adequately but very modestly although the contents were somewhat enhanced when Granny Tett came to live with us. Coconut matting and homemade rag rugs covered most of the stone floor. A large oil-clothed table occupied the central area. There was an assortment of chairs - one with arms that was 'father's chair' - a chest of drawers, and a sideboard in which food was kept and on which was perched our very first 'wireless', a second-hand battery-powered Cossor that made its appearance around 1942. We also had a wind-up gramophone and a few large diameter HMV and Parlaphone records.

A large, cavernous fireplace with a cast-iron grate that included an oven set to one side dominated the room. A stone hob either side of the grate served as a resting-place for sooty kettles, cooking pots and pans. The chimney, starting some three or four feet above the fire basket, was so wide that even though it had a bend in it halfway up it was still possible to see the sky. When it rained, the raindrops fell directly from the heavens to end their uninterrupted journey with a plop and a hiss on the burning coals in the grate. And when the wind blew down the chimney, as it often did, it sent smoke billowing around the room.

An enduring memory of that fireplace is of blackened saucepans and kettles sometimes precariously perched on the coals or logs and tilting as the fire settled, spilling their contents into the flames with a hiss of steam and ascending feather-light ash. On one occasion this happened when the vicar, the Reverend Elwin, was there. He had called to tell my mother that we qualified for a Christmas charity handout that took the form of a bag or two of coal, or maybe the cash equivalent. My father was at work at the time, which was just as well because he was not the type to tolerate sanctimonious vicars, as the Reverend Elwin was inclined to be. It was as the vicar was halfway through a prayer, no doubt iterating on our behalf how grateful we were to the Almighty to be receiving this bountiful handout, when the kettle tilted. With much hissing, a steady jet of steam ascended up the chimney as the kettle gently poured its contents on to the flames. It was a situation that could not be ignored, prayer or no prayer, and so the vicar had to call a halt and start again when mother had stabilised the situation. As he got under way again, my brother Jack and I, sitting on stools opposite each other in the hearth recess,

squinted at each other through supposedly closed eyes above pressed-together palms, desperately fighting off a fit of giggles. Amen arrived just in time.

Because of the fire risk associated with thatched roofs it was essential that the chimney be regularly swept. Usually all of the neighbours had their chimneys swept on the same day; brush swept, there was no vacuum cleaning in those days. It was a dreaded business, for despite taking all possible precautions to contain the soot by suspending sheets in front of the fireplace and covering all the furniture, it still settled everywhere. It took my mother several hours of very hard work to get the place clean again. I hated chimney-sweep day.

Apart from the main living room, there were two other downstairs rooms. One was so small it was referred to as the 'little room'. It served as a further living area and I remember it as being very cosy, especially when playing in the deep window recess on wet wintry days. When Granny Tett died, she lay in her open coffin in this room until the day of her funeral, as was the custom back then. The day before the funeral, my mother took my brother and I in to see her, to say our last good-byes.

The other room, to the rear of the cottage, was a single-brick lean-to with a galvanised iron roof and one small window. Initially it had a floor of compacted earth, later replaced with concrete. It was called the 'back house'; a back house was once a common feature of rural cottages. Ours served as a kitchen and as a storeroom for all manner of things including four bicycles and, throughout the winter months, three or four hundredweight sacks of potatoes. During the war years, the back house also included, courtesy of Chard Rural District Council (the local authority at that time), a primitive air-raid shelter. This consisted of wooden pillars supporting a ceiling of galvanised iron. To complete our security my father had built a wall of sandbags – bags and sand supplied by the council - immediately outside the small window, resulting in a considerable loss of light of which there wasn't much in the first place.. During air raids, we sat in this primitive shelter safe and secure – or so I contentedly believed at the time - with the cat, pleased to have company in the middle of the night, gently purring and the smell of father's Woodbine cigarette drifting in through the open back door - waiting for the all-clear to sound. The siren was mounted on the roof of the fire station, in Church Street, Crewkerne and could be clearly heard in Merriott and the surrounding villages.

Immediately behind the front door of the cottage was another door that opened outwards into the living room to reveal a narrow, twisting stairway that led up to the main bedroom. At the top of the stair was a simple banister and directly across the room a door into a second bedroom, separated from the first by a flimsy lath and plaster partition. The ceilings partially followed the roofline, sloping down to the top of the windows of which there were two, one in each of the rooms. I was born in the outer room; Granny Tett died in the inner room. Before Granny Tett died, in these two small rooms slept seven people - in the latter years three adults, two teenage girls and two near-adolescent boys.

There was no electricity or gas connected to the cottage. Lighting was by oil lamp in the

main living room and by candles elsewhere. Cooking was carried out over the open fire or in the oven alongside until the oven side burnt through and it was no longer serviceable. Alternatively, and particularly during the summer months, cooking involved the use of a pair of matching Valor oil stoves that stood side by side in the back house in a special stand. Another Valor oil stove of different design, this one being tall and thin and having a wound-wire carrying handle, was used for heating the so-called little room, and this appliance is particularly memorable for the fascinating patterns the holes pierced in the top of it created on the ceiling. Paraffin was available from Mr Chedzoy who came with his van on Saturdays, or from the Co-op store at the bottom of the road.

Neither was there a piped water supply to the house. Water was obtained from a covered well situated immediately outside the back door. Two other cottages shared this facility. The occupants of one of these had direct access from their back yard into ours. For the people in the third cottage, fetching water meant a walk down the road and then gaining access to the well via a passage alongside our end cottage.

Drawing water required that the bucket be inverted before being dropped down the well, thus ensuring it would instantly take in water and sink. When the rope of the bucket broke, as it did from time to time, a grappling hook, complete with neatly coiled rope and kept hanging on the wall alongside the well ready for such mishaps, was brought into use. On most occasions the bucket would be recovered quite quickly but from time to time a bucket, the replacement of which could not readily be afforded, would sink into the mud at the bottom of the well and be lost forever.

When the water had been drawn from the well it was poured into a large galvanised bathtub that was kept on a table in the back house. When required for use the water was dipped out by using a large enamelled jug that was always left standing alongside the tub.

Waste water was disposed of first by throwing it into a slop bucket, also kept in the back house, and when this was full it was taken outside and poured down a drain situated a yard or two from the well.

Apart from the well, the yard also contained the outside toilet. This too was a shared facility, but only between two cottages. It consisted of an earthenware bowl of rather large diameter set below an expansive wooden seat. Either side of the bowl was kept a pile of newspaper torn into conveniently sized squares ready for use, one pile belonging to each of the sharing households. When the lavatory was being used, the occupant secured the badly fitting door by turning a centrally pivoted piece of wood, which was attached to the doorframe, through an angle of ninety degrees so that it overlapped the door and prevented it from being pushed open. There was no flushing facility other than the periodic bucket of water drawn from the well and thrown down the pan as and when deemed necessary.

These, then, were the domestic facilities enjoyed - or perhaps 'endured' would be a more appropriate word - by our family as we grew up. But however bad the conditions

were they were fairly typical at the time for many rural families. There were plenty of others just like ours in the village. The 'land fit for heroes' promised to the men lucky enough to survive the Great War, of whom my father was one, failed to materialise. Until the outbreak of the World War 2 work was scarce, wages were low. For many people there was job insecurity, unemployment and the means test. The rent for the few council houses built pre-war ostensibly to re-house families such as ours was unaffordable. But by the end of the war our family had grown up. Both my sisters and my brother were now working. Financially things had improved. We were no longer on the vicar's list for a charitable handout.

In July 1946, when I was twelve years old, we eventually moved to one of the pre-war Hitchen council houses, better late than never. We now had three bedrooms for six people. We had a separate in-door flush toilet all to ourselves. We had cold, running water in the kitchen and in the downstairs bathroom, but no hot water system except that in the bathroom was a 'copper', a large built-in bowl with a fire basket beneath it that enabled my mother to boil clothes on Monday washday. At the weekend we could dip out the hot water, pour it into the bathtub and have a nice bath. We had electric light in the living room, kitchen, the front bedroom and one of the back bedrooms. And there was a very, very large garden for growing vegetables. All in all, it was a major improvement on the cottage.

Mother, however, still had to cook on the living room fire or on oil stoves. It was still some time before the power supply was extended, at my parents' expense, so that we could dispense with the battery-powered Cossor radio or have an electric kettle and a cooker. But quite early on, my mother did have an electric iron that she plugged into the light socket. This meant that the two flat irons used for ironing, on the blanket-covered kitchen table, that had been a feature of our home life for so long were now more or less redundant. No longer did she have to heat them by propping them in front of the open fire, or by placing them atop a low burning oil stove, one iron being heated whilst the other was in use, the correct temperature being determined by a smart spit onto the surface of the hot iron. Instead, they became occasional doorstops and, sometimes, if my mother was steaming a pudding she placed a flat iron on the saucepan lid for extra weight, thus increasing the pressure inside the pan.

It was about ten years after we moved out that our old cottage was demolished as part of the infamous destruction of Broadway. The order from Chard Rural District Council to the owner and to the owners and tenants of fourteen other cottages was clear enough:

- If you are an owner, owner-occupier or tenant, get out within twelve months or be evicted.
- If you are an owner, pull your house down at your own expense or we will pull it down and charge you for our labours.

Why? Well, in 1939 Chard Rural District Council decreed the cottages were unfit for human habitation and had to be demolished. But then came the war and demolition was put on hold. Everyone stayed put, including my own family. In July 1946, as I have

mentioned, we eventually moved out. In following years, as more council houses were built, other families also moved from the cottages. But as we all moved out others moved in and so the condemned cottages remained occupied. Indeed, at considerable expense several of the cottages were upgraded and the amenities improved because the council had given assurances that if the cottages were improved they would not be demolished.

But then, in October 1956, the council changed its mind and issued its 'get out and demolish' edict. This caused uproar and gave rise to the widely accepted view that the council had an alternative agenda, which was to make road-widening possible without the expense of compulsory purchase orders except with regards to the narrow strips of cleared land either side of the road. The council denied this was their objective, saying that road widening was the responsibility of the county council, not the district council.

The objections to demolition were so vehement that a public enquiry was held in the Memorial Hall before a Ministry of Housing and Local Government inspector. He heard evidence from the council Medical Officer of Health, Dr A M McCall, who considered the cottages *'unfit for human habitation according to the standards laid down, due to severe dampness, lack of ventilation, bad lighting, dangerous stairways and uneven floors'*. Others described them as *'pleasant little cottages'* and *'not as black as they had been painted'*. Counsel for the Hastings and Thanet Building Society, as mortgagee of one property, said that in 1952 the cottage in which they had a financial interest had sold for £1650, a sum which suggested it was far from being the slum the council seemed to imply it was. One owner, a minister of the Elim Church, explained how the Council had actually passed plans for converting the two cottages he owned into one dwelling just a year or two previously and suggested that demolition, apart from being wilful destruction, was a gross breach of faith on behalf of the authorities.

When the public enquiry was over, the inspector visited the cottages to see for himself and then went away to make his decision. He eventually found in the council's favour. A year later demolition went ahead and the street was destroyed. The scars – and for me they are scars - remain to this day.

Looking back, and with the experience of having lived in one of the cottages for many years, I have to say that they were no better and no worse than many others in the village of which I once knew and a good number of which, appropriately modernised no doubt, still stand to this day. To condemn *all* the Broadway properties in such a dictatorial manner was, in my view, utterly outrageous and, I venture to say, somewhat undemocratic. What would happen today if South Somerset District Council suddenly decreed that, say, a dozen cottages in Lower Street of a similar age had to be demolished without compensation?

That said, imagine the original Broadway trying to cope with today's traffic. Clearly, something had to give.

I happened to be visiting the village in September 1956 when the demolition of Broadway was underway. The street resembled a wartime bombsite and the cottage that was once our home and where I was born lay in ruins. I happened to have a simple box camera with me and took the photographs reproduced below.

Willful destruction?