

Email from Pat Wallace (edited) - Wartime Memories

Received after my letter to the Greenwood Tree (Journal of the Somerset & Dorset Family History Society) was published in November 2000. Some invaluable first-hand information here! Thanks, Pat.

***Researchers please note: Pat has since sadly passed away.**

Hello Sue Osborne,

I was very interested to read your letter in the Greenwood Tree and to learn of the work you have done with the Merriott records. My interest arises from the fact that, although I was born in London, I was brought up in Merriott and lived there from 1934 until 1949 and so the village had a considerable impact on me throughout my formative years. My grandparents, John and Selina Richards moved there in 1906 to take over the Manor Farm so none of my Family names will appear in your researches.

I thought however, as you had never been to the village, that you might be interested to hear a little about it. As an aside I would mention that last year I met up with an old friend whom I'd not seen for nigh on 50 years, and as we walked around the village and along the lanes we talked incessantly about the years we had spent, before, during and after the War, and hardly mentioned our lives, careers or families. That's old men for you !

Merriott is an unusual village in that it does not lie on a street, nor at a cross-roads but is in the form of a circle or square about 1 mile around with no fewer than 8 roads leading off it to other villages, hamlets and to one market town, Crewkerne. Its existence almost certainly arises from the fact that it lies on the River Parrett and there appear to have been, at one time, 3 water mills and a factory which for more than a century produced sailcloth, including the sails for Nelson's 'Victory' ! More recently the factory has produced Bakelite products.

As a boy, before the War, the village was populated to a considerable extent by people bearing the names to which you refer in your letter. I understand that at the 1931 census there were no fewer than 73 Mrs. Lawrence's and certainly 75% bore one of the twelve most common names. I recall a number of Osborne families, including one of the two village butchers, a Mr. Ernie (Ernest) Osborne, born c 1880 whose wife was Dorcas. He had two sisters, both unmarried (not unusual after the 1st World War). One, Polly, was a great friend of my mother and grandmother. Ernie had four sons, Henry who was killed in the last War, Abie (Abraham) a smallholder and cattle dealer, Charlie who took over the business and then moved into farming, and Leslie. The eldest three certainly had children but I don't know anything of them now.

The factory provided work for a number of the wives of the farm workers so many of the families had two incomes and the children returning from school had a grandmother near at hand to look after them so they were well cared for. After the War, (sorry to keep on about it but it did change the character of the village) there was far less work for the returning farm workers, the tractor having come on the scene, and in any event many of them did not want to come back to agricultural work anyway ! There was, and still is a thriving Scotts' Nurseries, which used to be run by people called Wallis (no relation) where significant employment exists. Employment was mainly on the land with about ten or a dozen smallish farms, from 100 to 200 acres. The soil is rich so there were a lot of dairy cattle, sheep , pigs and poultry as well as corn of all types, root crops and hay.

At the higher side of the village (north) is, not surprisingly, Higher Street, where lies the All Saints Church with its Norman Tower dating from 14th or 15th century. The village school, now juniors only, lies nearby. Also in Higher Street is the Kings Head public house. At the lower side of the village is Lower Street where there used to be two chapels and one Public House, the Swan, where I enjoyed a nice lunch beside a roaring fire earlier this year.

To the West, linking Higher and Lower Street is Broadway which provides the main road for through traffic to or from Crewkerne and the circle is completed to the East by Shiremoor Hill. The centre of

the village, which until 1935 was entirely agricultural land, mainly grass fields, but there has been some building in the past 50 years, but not too much to spoil the open aspect. I must mention one road, known as Boozer's Pit (leading from the top of Shiremore Hill towards Stoke-under-Ham 4 miles away) which as you might have guessed at one time contained a number of ale houses, but there are none today.

Also a prominent feature is Knapp, the crossroads which links Broadway (or Broady as the locals used to call it) and Lower Street. I well recall the men of the village at the time of high unemployment in the 30's standing there just yarning and watching the few cars pass through. There were of course the usual village shops with the 'Co-op' Stores, the Post Office, a barber's shop and a newsagents at Knapp corner as well as a number of other small village shops spaced around the village. Most of these have long since gone. There was, and still is, a garage and petrol filling station but most of the residents travel away to work. There is a good private 'bus service so that going to Crewkerne, 2 miles away, is not difficult.

Sadly most of the people I knew in the village have died or moved away but I still have a couple of friends who lived there after I had left and who might be able to give me some information on the villagers if you have a specific problem or enquiry. I hope you will find these few facts of interest so that when you visit you will have some idea of what to expect.. .
Patrick (Pat) Wallace