

"My Brompton Days" by Vera Brittain

Story as told by Vera Brittain (nee Barker) to Brompton Heritage Group



Vera's life has been closely linked with Brompton and Northallerton for over 80 years. During World War Two, from 1940 to 1946 she joined the WAAFS and spent time in Shropshire and Northern Ireland before returning to Brompton, marrying Harry Brittain and working at Yeoman's Mill and later at the Golden Lion Hotel, Northallerton.

She was one of four children (2 brothers, 1 sister) living in a house at Waterend with Mum, Dad, Gran and Grandad. Her father worked at the linoleum factory in Northallerton, and, before her marriage, her mother had worked at Yeoman's Mill.



Left: John Albert is at the back with left to right, Vera, Edna and George Edward pictured around 1927

Right: Vera's Mum & Dad, Daisy nee Lunn and John Jackson Barker probably in 1915. John Jackson is in the uniform of the Yorkshire Regiment

Vera's childhood was fun and full of interest. The girls at Water End played together on the green, making their own entertainment with little celluloid dolls which cost 6d each. The girls used empty Woodbine cigarette boxes scrounged from local shops, for dolls' cots and prams. The latter had no wheels, of course, just a piece of string slotted through holes which was used for pulling the "pram" along the ground. Dolls' clothes were made from oddments of material left over from Mum's sewing. Another favourite occupation was playing "shop" on Wilford's bridge, using mud from the becks to make pies to sell in the shop.

As a rule the boys played separately from the girls, in their own gangs. Vera remembers the boys damming the beck at the deepest bit, somewhere alongside the present playing field, called the Butts, and bathing in the pool they made.

On fine Sunday mornings, Vera and her sister joined their brothers and other friends (8-10 of them altogether) to walk through the fields. They enjoyed finding the wild flowers in their season – birdsfoot trefoil, which they called ladies' fingers, harebells, violets, marsh marigolds and, in the spring, they walked as far as Cotcliffe Woods to pick bluebells.

A great source of amusement was a parrot owned by someone on Lead Lane, which was often kept in the garden, and which shouted "pretty polly" at the children as they passed.

Vera's Dad, like many others, had an allotment where he grew marvellous rhubarb, as well as the usual vegetables. The children often helped him with the work.

The various Sunday Schools in the village did a lot for the children, who all went, as soon as they were able to toddle there, wearing their Sunday best clothes. Vera and her family attended the Bethel Methodist chapel (the Primitive Methodists) on Cockpit Hill. The Sunday school was on Station Road. The children had to be quiet in class but they enjoyed it and, once a year, there was the joint Brompton and Northallerton Sunday Schools' outing, when all the children and their parents piled onto a special train at the village station to go off for the day to Redcar. Once there, they usually stayed on the beach, no matter what the weather was like. They took their own picnic food, and there were donkey rides, roundabouts, swings, a helter-skelter and ice-creams etc, all on the beach.

Sometimes, Vera's Mum took her children by bus to Osmotherley for picnics. They would walk to Chequers and back.

Village children had plenty of freedom, spending as much time as possible outdoors, creating their own fun. There was very little crime and the children were often out until 8 or 9 o'clock at night. They frequently fell in the beck, especially when balancing on a pipe which went across it. There was a village policeman who was known to everyone, of course. House doors were never locked and villagers trusted each other and helped each other in times of need. There was one notorious murder in the village, however, when a couple who lived in one of the houses (since demolished) on Station Road beside The Crown, killed their lodger with an axe, sometime in the 1950s.

Life at school, however, was strict. The children sat with their hands on the desk to make sure there was no fidgeting. Vera remembers Mr Verrill as Headmaster (1925), Mrs Sheehan, who taught sewing, and Miss Peacock, who was especially strict. There were 20-25 children in a class, and the punishment for misbehaviour (usually not paying attention) was to be sent to stand outside the classroom, or to have a rap across the

knuckles with a ruler. Boys, not girls, could be caned for really bad offences. The toilets were outside in the yard, and there were no facilities for PE.

As the children grew older, they could play tennis on the village courts behind Cockpit Hill, and there was a football pitch for boys between Rose Cottage farm and Redhills, which was moved further towards Redhills in the 1950s.

Vera very much enjoyed being a Girl Guide, especially when they were able to go camping. Ruth Yeoman, the unmarried daughter of the mill owner, was Guide Captain, and she held their meetings in a wooden hut near the old laundry opposite The Close, the Yeoman's house. There were usually between 25-30 girls there.

Entertainment was also provided by the 2 cinemas in Northallerton, and dances, whist drives, domino drives and WI meetings at the village hall.

The Carnival was a major event in the village calendar. "Jazz Bands" came from County Durham and Teesside. The marching girls changed their clothes in the buses that brought them in, and there were portable toilets at Waterend. There were competitions for decorated shire horses, decorated floats, and fancy dress. The boys in particular, started preparing early for the latter. One of Vera's brothers made an aeroplane, and the other a racing car as part of their fancy dress. Families came from near and far. The fair on Church Green had swings, coconut shies, roll the penny, and there were sports for the children held at Waterend.

Vera remembers the number of shops in Brompton, which provided for most of the needs of the villagers. At Waterend there was a general store, a wallpaper and decorator's shop, and another shop selling "bits and pieces". Vera's Mum opened a shop next door to their house, where she sold sweets and bundles of firewood chopped by Vera's brothers, but kept it for only one year. On Cockpit Hill there was the bakery, Mrs Dennis's shop which sold "everything, especially sweets", (you could buy a little snowball for half a penny) and the post office before it moved. At Shop End there was Husthwaites, selling tobacco, a butcher's shop and slaughter house, Pinfold Stores and another butcher. The corner shop was a general store. To the left of the church was the fish and chip shop. Harry Smith had a general store behind the church which sold toys amongst other things and was where you could join a Christmas club. There were at least 2 other general stores and then, on Station Road, a blacksmith's and a barber shop. There were 6 pubs, The Black Swan at Waterend (now The Village Inn), The Green Tree on the Stokesley Road, The Three Horseshoes, The Crown and The Queen Catherine at the crossroads, The Masons Arms (once called The Weavers) to the right of the present Methodist Chapel. The Queen Catherine by Vera's day had become a house where Vera's family and her granddad Lunn lived for a time.



Left: This delightful picture shows Vera's Grandfather John Lunn (1858-1935) outside what was the Queen Catherine Inn.



Right: This 1941 picture shows Vera on leave from the RAF in Limavady Northern Ireland with her sister Edna



Left: This 1945 picture shows Vera's eldest brother John Albert in Coldstream Guards uniform. He saw action during World War 2 including at Monte Casino in Italy



Right: George Edward Barker was a Sgt Electrician in the Royal Air Force

Yeoman's Mill

Vera started work at Yeoman's Mill after she was demobbed in 1946. Her family were then living near Stone Cross so she cycled to work, which started at 7.30am, with a group of other mill workers, then home for lunch and back, and finally, after the whistle had sounded, at 5pm. Her first job was as a twister, then she moved on to bobbin winding and eventually to weaving – the best paid job. Weaving demanded considerable skill. The weavers, standing on duck boards, back to back, had to mind several looms at once, checking them constantly. When a thread broke the machine (driven by a belt from the ceiling) stopped automatically. The weaver then took a shuttle back to the break, and used a small metal comb to pull the thread back to the warp, mended it, then set the machine going again by pulling a lever. Vera still has her metal comb as a souvenir. The noise from all the machines was deafening, speech was impossible so everyone learned to mime and lip read. In her day the weavers were all women. Men did the maintenance work. The overseer was Mr Peacock. Weather was important. If it was too warm the thread would snap, so sacks were placed over the beam to keep the thread cool and damp. New Northrop machines, which were more efficient, were brought in while Vera worked at Yeoman's. The bobbins were changed automatically instead of by hand. The factory then produced a lot of tartan, which made work more interesting because the weaver had to know the pattern exactly. Vera was good at her job and the number of looms she had to attend went up to 5. Some weavers had only 2 but were paid the same. When Vera was asked to take on a 6th loom she decided enough was enough. This was exploitation and she left in 1952.



Left: Vera pictured here on the right with her former WRAF colleague Eva of Chester-le-Street, paying tribute to Australian airmen at RAF Binbrook

Vera in retirement

From Yeoman's she got work at the Golden Lion in Northallerton and worked her way up to become housekeeper, staying there for 27 years until retirement.

Vera, now in her 90's, is an integral part of Brompton Village and is one of the few villagers remaining who worked in the Linen Mills.