

Beaver House . . . (Memories from Heather (née Beaver) Normand)

My grandfather was Arnold George Beaver, born in Syderstone, Norfolk in 1853. He was the eldest of a family of 7 children. (He was the son of Pleasance and George Beaver who was originally a bricklayer and became a Master Bricklayer!) When Grandad was 5 the family moved to East Rudham where he grew up with his brothers and sisters. In the 1871 Census, aged 18, he was in Southampton, learning to be a Draper's assistant, along with 11 others. He must have had a good mind, because eventually he began studying for the ministry, and in due course became a Baptist Minister, having studied at Rawdon College, Yorkshire. He learnt Greek, Latin and Hebrew. I don't know where he met my grandmother, but they married when he was 35.

My grandmother, Catherine Richardson Gooch, was the third daughter of Jane and Robert Parker Gooch who was a farmer and veterinary surgeon, later a publican in Reepham. Sadly, her two older sisters, Jane (who had married Mark Eglington) and Margaret Elizabeth, died at the ages of 24 and 17 within three months of each other, and are buried in the Reepham Whitwell cemetery, near their parents.

My grandmother, Catherine, was born in Reepham, in 1859, so must have been 29 when she married. To begin with, she and Grandad went to live in Liverpool, where he was Baptist Minister. Their first child, Daisy Gooch Beaver, was born, but only lived for 11 months, dying of whooping cough. She is buried between Granny's two sisters in Reepham Whitwell cemetery. Understandably, my Grandmother didn't want to leave Reepham, so her father bought what is now Beaver House for her in 1892. There was no living for my grandfather as a Baptist Minister in Reepham, so he decided to open a shop, and that's when Henry Hawes (I think that's the name) put on a shop front to the building. Previously it had been, at one time, a bank (hence the little opening through the wall to the hall).

The shop dealt in grocery, drapery, house furnishing and tea dealing. Grandad's younger brother, George Herbert Beaver, was a tea planter in India, so we assume that is where the tea tins came from. Arnold and Catherine went on to have three sons, Reginald Parker, George Heslop and Leslie Arnold. My father was known as Heslop Beaver in his youth.

At the 1911 Census, Arnold and Catherine had a 17 year old maid, Mildred Maud Eke, living in; she had been born just round the corner, in Bircham's Yard. Later that year, her younger sister, Blanche, came to

take her place as the maid, aged 14, and she stayed with our family until she died at Beaver House in 1983. I adored her and called her Baa.

The shop was closed about the time of the First World War; thereafter, Arnold became an Assessor and Collector of Taxes for the district around Reepham, and in 1922, he was appointed a Justice of the Peace for the Reepham Bench, Eynsforth Division, Norfolk.

He was much loved in Reepham. He died, aged 87, at Beaver House in 1941. He is buried at Whitwell Cemetery, together with Catherine (who died in 1956 when I was 18), and his youngest sister, Flossie (Florence).

Arnold and Catherine's three sons did not exactly follow in their father's footsteps! I believe there were 11 pubs in Reepham at the time, and they knew them all. They sucked in their breath when they kissed their mother goodnight!

All three boys went to Reepham village school and then to King Edward VI School in Norwich, bicycling there 12 miles and 12 miles back every day. All three joined up early in the war, as privates, but were later commissioned from the ranks as time went on.

Sadly, the youngest boy, Leslie, was killed in France just before the Armistice in 1918, at the age of 21. My father, Heslop, was also in France, and went to see his brother's grave in Gouzeaucourt, taking photographs for his mother. The eldest, Rex, served in Palestine during the war, and met his future wife, Jennie Archer Dean, an American doctor; they later went to the States, and lived in New Jersey, Rex becoming a Wall Street banker, and Jennie continuing to practise. They had two sons, my cousins, Dick and Dean.

In the 1911 census Rex was shown to be a clerk in an insurance company.

My father, Heslop, aged 17 in 1911, was to be found living in a boarding establishment in Norwich, apparently learning to become a draper's assistant. He then gained experience as a 'floorwalker' at Marshall and Snelgrove, a large department store in London, and lodged at 50 Hamilton Gardens, St John's Wood Road, London. He hated that job.

At the outbreak of the First World War, aged 20, he enlisted in the RAMC on 5th August 1914. He was drafted into the 1st 1st London Field Ambulance service and served in Malta for two years, and Salonika for a year. He attended Officer Training at Berkhamsted on 5th October 1917

and following that was in France, appointed to a temporary commission, 2nd Lt. in the 3rd S R Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment, in June 1918, and, I believe, saw action in the last few months of the war. He was involved with troop movements in the port of Calais at the end of the war and relinquished his Commission as Lieutenant on completion of service on 21st January 1921 – presumably his role in Calais kept him busy long after others were demobbed.

After discharge from the army he came home to Reepham to live, in an effort to make up to his parents for the loss of Leslie. He stayed in Reepham for seven years, and worked for his cousin, Sidney Eglington.

Sidney was the son of Catherine's eldest sister, Jane, who had married Mark Eglington and died, leaving two tiny boys, Mark and Sidney, who were separated and went to live with their respective maternal and paternal grandparents. So my grandmother, who had lost both her sisters when she was 13, was brought up with her small nephew.

Sidney was a 'larger than life' character (in girth as well!). He was the local undertaker – my father learnt to make coffins and lay people out after they had died – an agricultural machinery merchant, fire chief and special constable, we think, as he owned a pair of handcuffs which my son now has. After working for his cousin for seven years, Daddy decided to seek his fortune elsewhere, and went out to Cairo, Egypt in 1929, where he became the International Harvester Company's representative for the whole of the Middle East; this was a huge American company dealing in agricultural machinery. His territory stretched from Morocco to Afghanistan, and travel in those days was by donkey, train, taxi, desert bus and early aeroplanes. He had many adventures. He met my mother, an American, while on business in Geneva. I was born, their only child, in Cairo, in 1938.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother lived on in Beaver House. No modernisation was permitted. Nothing was thrown away. Hot water for washing was carried upstairs in a saucepan. There were jugs and basins and chamber pots in each bedroom, and Baa (Blanche) carried the 'slops' downstairs every morning, having stripped back the bedclothes and shaken up the mountainous feather beds to air, with the sash windows opened top and bottom. No bathroom, of course, and if you had more important business to do, you had to go downstairs and outside, around the path to the end of the garden where there was a little shed with a wooden seat, hole cut in it, and a 'long drop' toilet! This was emptied once a week at about 2 am by the Night Soil Men who would put a hand

through the letter flap of The Surgery (now the separated house next door, but originally part of the property) and catch hold of a piece of string which pulled open the latch of the door; they would crunch down the gravel path to do their nasty job. There was a cylindrical cardboard container of, probably, Fuller's earth, which was used as a deodoriser and shaken down the hole. There was no electric light 'down the garden' – one had to take a torch, and try not to freak out at the spiders and cobwebs in the small, damp shed. After the war, when I arrived for the first time to visit my grandmother, there was only shiny Izal loo paper which was horribly non-absorbent, and small sheets of cut-up newspaper on a string to throw down the hole on top of what you had produced. Quite horrible!

After Granny died in 1956, we put a bathroom into the old maid's bedroom. There was never a telephone installed by our family.

The property had no electricity until just before the first World War, when my father and Rex installed a central light in each room. I don't remember many sockets for lamps – there was possibly one in each room so that the new-fangled Hoover could be used. Baa used to plug her electric iron into the central light socket after she stopped heating flat irons on the cooking range.

The kitchen at Beaver House was in the little one-room building separated from the dining room by a greenhouse. There was no running water; one had to use the pump in the greenhouse – that was something I loved doing when I first went back to Reepham after WW2 at the age of 8. Although there was a range in the kitchen, it wasn't used once the war had started, and cooking was done on two paraffin stoves. Baking was done in a small oven placed over the two paraffin stoves.

Washing was done by Blanche by hand in the greenhouse with soft water collected from the rain barrels. The final rinse always had a 'blue bag' put in it (the blue, whatever it was, made the whites look whiter). The clothes and linen were then put through an enormous wringer, the handle of which I loved turning; buttons had to be carefully placed flat in case the wringer smashed them.

The present kitchen was originally the pantry. It is the oldest part of the house, and I have been told that it dates from some time in the 1400s. There was no fridge in it until long after I grew up. As milk was delivered every day by a man with a horse and cart (he used to ladle it out from a milk churn into a white enamel jug), it was always fresh.

For the whole of her life working for my grandmother, Blanche had her particular duties on each day: Washing on Monday, ironing on Tuesday, cleaning on Wednesday, polishing the brass on Thursday, baking for the weekend on Friday . . . Church twice on Sundays. (What happened on Saturday?!) Those duties were carried out in the mornings, and then after lunch, Blanche would put on her coat and hat, take a basket from under the stairs, and walk up to the market place to do the food shopping.

I used to love going with Blanche to the grocer's on the corner (originally run by cousins, the Roys, who later founded the enormous empire called Roys of Wroxham). Just after the war, many foods were still on rations, so the ration book had to be taken in the basket, and coupons for one's allowances of butter, cheese, sugar, tea etc, snipped out and paid for. Sugar and flour were weighed out and packets made with strong brown or blue paper to contain them. Greaseproof paper was used for butter or margarine and cheese. A small brown loaf of Hovis bread was usually bought. Blanche could cut the thinnest slices of bread, having first buttered the surface and then held the loaf against her bosom while she sawed away with her special bread knife. My father always said that the brown bread and butter was so thin he could read his newspaper through it!

I seem to remember that meat and fish were bought from small vans which called at the door, and certainly vegetables were brought by Johnnie (I've forgotten his other name) with his horse and cart.

In the little, walled garden at Beaver House there were three apple trees, each one planted by my grandparents when my cousins and I were born. There was a central oval of grass, a gravel path all the way round, a giant turkey fig tree on the wall outside the pantry, and flower beds all round against the walls. There was a green painted dovecote against one wall and Granny had two pet doves.

The Front Room was only used when people came to visit. There was an upright piano in it, and mirrored 'whatnot' shelving on one wall. There was a suite of red plush-covered furniture – a daybed, a gentleman's chair with arms, and a lady's chair which was armless. There was also a tiny Davenport (desk with a lift-up lid). Wallpaper on the walls and a figured ceiling paper are still there to this day.

The hall was long and had a barrel roof and was quite dark because there was only a fanlight over the front door (which was hardly ever used and

quite often stuck when you tried to open it). The flight of stairs was extremely steep, but I was pretty fit and used to leap up the stairs two at a time. Three of the bedrooms had fireplaces, but the back bedroom didn't have one; that was my nursery when I was brought to Reepham in 1938 for my grandparents' Golden Wedding. I believe we came back again in 1939, when I was walking, and I climbed out of the window wearing nothing but a vest, and started walking along the parapet of the window below; my mother, who had been distracted for a moment, turned round to see my bottom disappearing and reached out, grabbed my vest, and pulled me gently back into the room, whereupon she sat in a chair and shook with nerves. My grandmother always wanted the rooms to be aired with the sashes open top and bottom, but that room was never again aired in that way!

I loved coming to Reepham after the war, and was lucky enough to have two friends to play with. One was my slightly older cousin, Mary Gooch, who had beautiful red hair and usually visited her grandmother and aunt during the holidays, and the other was Bridget Lowe, the daughter of the Barclay's Bank Manager. She was a strawberry blonde. Both were a year or two older than I was, so I felt very honoured to be allowed to join them. All three of us had bicycles, and went for long rides. The two of them suggested we try a cigarette each, which we did, in the loft of Mary's grandmother's outhouse, with all sorts of flammable stuff round us. Needless to say, I choked and hated the taste, and have never smoked again.

Beaver House remained in the family until 1983 when Blanche (Baa) died. She had married Will Bacon and moved to a little cottage while still in service, but they had no children, and ended up coming back to live in Beaver house to take care of Granny after my grandfather died. Will died of lung cancer long before my grandmother, and Rex and Heslop wanted Baa to feel that Beaver House was her home for as long as she was alive.

Rex had already died in America, and my cousins did not want to keep any share in the Norfolk property, so Beaver House was eventually transferred to me; however, my husband and I felt that we could not take care of it adequately from a distance, so it was sold in 1984. Nothing had been thrown away in 92 years, and it was a labour of love to sort through everything and decide what to do with furniture, books, clocks, pictures etc.

Later, I corresponded with the new owner and believe she loved the house as much we had done. She lived there for some 10 years, and put in central heating. Since then it has moved on to two new owners and I understand that now it is likely to have yet another new owner who, I hope, will cherish it.

1984 was a difficult year for us, as my mother, Millie, died suddenly on 30th August in Beirut, and my father, Heslop, died on 15th November, two and a half months later.