

High Wych History - 15 – Elisabeth, Doris and Ada - Three Centenarians

Over the years three High Wych women have lived to the ripe old age of one hundred. The first of these and perhaps the most remarkable was Elisabeth Puckle. Born Elisabeth Smith, she was baptized on the 20th of September 1767 in Eastwick. Reports regarding her date of birth vary, some suggesting she was born two years before her baptismal date, based on the lady herself claiming she walked to her own baptism “in her pattens”. Elisabeth was the second in a family of seven children. Her parents were John and Susannah Smith (nee Rickett) of Eastwick. On the 23rd of April 1793 she married Timothy Puckle who in the 1840s was the High Wych Miller. The Windmill stood as many of you know on the corner of High Wych Road and Broadfields.

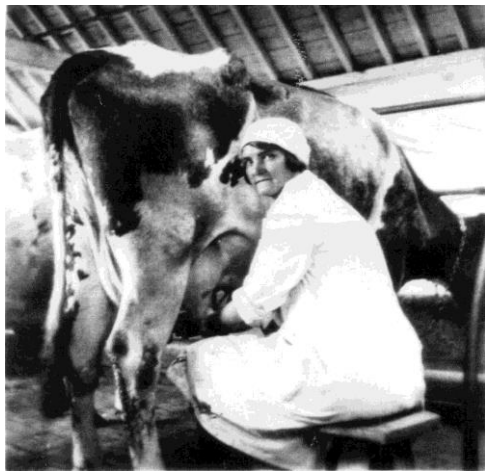
Timothy and Elisabeth had four daughters, Sarah, Mary, Susannah and Elisabeth plus one son, another Timothy. All were baptized in Sawbridgeworth. Timothy senior died on the 30th of May 1850 and was buried at Sawbridgeworth on the 5th of June following. Elisabeth herself lived to the great age of 105 and ended her days being cared for by her granddaughter Sarah Wise living at Judds Cottage, now Jeffs in Bakers Lane.



About a mile and a half from High Wych, a hamlet of the parish of Sawbridgeworth, there is now living an old lady named Elisabeth Puckle, the widow of a miller of that name. She is even now rosy and plump, and in good health, being able to read her Bible without the assistance of glasses. Her birth was registered at Eastwick, in Hertfordshire, the post town of which is Harlow, Essex, Sept. 13, 1767, so that she is now by her register 104 years old, but, by computation, 106. As she, being still lively and chatty, remembers walking to church in her pattens, at that time worn by everybody, she must then have been at least two years older than her register. In early life she was in service, and she has always been remarkable for her good temper. She is now living in a thatched cottage with clay walls and a floor of bricks; her bed is near the outer door of the cottage, and this is generally open in fine weather. Her memory is excellent, but her annals are short and simple, generally relating to her neighbours and friends. It is quite refreshing to see this old lady so different from persons of extreme old age, her smile so bright, and her chat about the grandfathers of septuagenarians so lively. She is supported by her children and grandchildren, and lives in comfort. In her younger days Mrs. Puckle filled the situation of nursemaid in the family of the grandfather of the present Mr. Rivers, of Sawbridgeworth Nurseries, and who is 74 years of age.

Elisabeth Puckle shortly before her death The St Peter Port Star writes about her,

Elisabeth Puckle's case was widely discussed. The Times newspaper of 1872 told its readers how "of plump and healthy appearance, she was still able to read her bible without the assistance of glasses". Author William John Thoms, also a librarian at the House of Lords, in a book entitled "Human Longevity its facts and fictions" devoted a chapter to her. Thoms actually did cast doubt on Elisabeth's longevity. All however agree that a child named Elisabeth was baptised in Eastwick in September 1767. Bishop Johnson confirmed it as did Thomas Rivers who wrote to the newspapers on the subject. Elisabeth was a nurse maid with the Rivers family. Thoms suggests there may have been two children named Elisabeth Smith, that the first one died and that a second one was born between 1772 and 1777 but not baptised in Eastwick. Frank (Bishop) Johnson in correspondence with Thoms does mention another child, Thomas, born but not registered between 1767 and 1772. Thoms attempted to find proof of his assertions but failed. On the whole therefore I'd agree with Johnson and Rivers: Elisabeth Puckle of High Wych lived well into her 106th year.



Doris Stowers (later Smith) as a milkmaid at Sayes park Farm

By the time Doris Stowers was born, in Gilston on 14th May 1896, record keeping was less open to challenges. Doris's father Ambrose was a farm worker from Coggeshall, her mother Elisabeth was a High Wych girl. By the time of the 1911 census the family had all moved to our village. Doris worked as a milkmaid at Sayes Park Farm where she met Emmanuel Smith, a farm worker there. Emmanuel, born in 1891 came from Arkesden in Essex. Doris and Emmanuel married around 1920. In the thirties they both went to work for the Wentworth Stanley family at the Grange, she as a housemaid, he as a gardener. The WS family also provided them with housing at the Lodge cottages. Doris often rode a bike around the village. Doris and Emmanuel did not have children themselves but when their nephew Ernie Collingridge needed a home, they provided him with one, raising him as their own.

Doris's 100th birthday in 1996 was a cause for much celebration. High Wych school children came from over the road to serenade her. The family laid on a special party as did High Wych's own Silver Lining Club. Doris died in November of that same year. Up to a few weeks before her death she lived on her own, looking after herself, just having the occasional visitor. She went hospital (for the first time ever) only a week or so before her death.



Doris Smith and members of the HW Silver Lining Club in September 1996

Ada Jane Wylds, nee Knight was born on 16th November 1910 in Hatfield Broad Oak. She went to school there until age 13 when she went into service as a Nanny with a doctors family, also in the same village. When her employers moved to Bideford in Devon Ada went with them. One can imagine that must have been quite a move for a young girl in those days! After a few years Ada, once again followed her employers, this time to Hoddesden. There it was that she met her husband Albert who was employed as a grocer, later manager at the International Stores, Sawbridgeworth.

Ada and Albert had 5 children, twins Joyce and Ron born in 1933, Shirley, Michael and finally Valerie born in 1940. Initially they lived in Bishops Stortford then moved to High Wych in the early thirties where they lived in Windmill Bungalow. It is strange perhaps to consider that in the garden of Windmill Bungalow were the remains of the Millers cottage where Elisabeth Puckle once lived. That cottage was most probably demolished prior to the family moving in.

In 1947 the Wylds family moved to a brand new council house in Mansfield where they lived for many years, until the late 80s in fact. In 1989, Ada's husband passed away and Ada moved into one of the bungalows in Broadfields. There she lived alone, happily and capably looking after herself for twenty more years . Her 100th birthday in 2010 was celebrated by her and her extended family at Down Hall Hatfield Heath. Shortly afterwards Ada moved to her present residence: Falcon House in Little Hallingbury.



Ada Wylds on her 100th Birthday in 2010

Thanks this time go to Dot Collingridge, Elizabeth Reeve, Valerie Ruse, Nina Elsdon, Janet van de Bilt and as always the people at HALS, aka County Archives. These articles would be impossible without your contributions, your memories, stories and photographs. Please get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468.