

I remember.

Excerpts from memories of some older Chinnor Residents

Duck Square

Originally Duck Square was made up of very simple lathe and plaster cottages built around three sides of the square. The fourth side was a row of sheds. These were demolished some time after World War 11

Mary Darmody remembers what it was like to live in one of the cottages in Duck Square in the 1940's. There was no electricity and no sanitation. It was a wonderful collection of little cottages and sheds, some of them half hidden underneath rambler roses, elder blossom and stinging nettles.

There was a lovely orchard full of ancient apple trees and dotted around underneath them were Walt's pigstys and chicken houses. The hens and ducks wandered around freely during daytime but were all shut up at night to help protect them from the ever hopeful fox.

In the middle of the square there was a well, the life's blood of the square as it were. Every single drop of water that was used for people and animals had to be drawn from it. It had a very long rope on the end of which was a large hook to hang the bucket on. Mum would put her bucket on the hook and let it drop down into the dark green, mossy depths of the well. Then she would wind it up again, full of freezing cold sparkling water. Sometimes when the bucket came to the top there was a little lizard like creature in it. Mum tossed them back into the water, she said they helped to keep it clean.

Mary Darmody

A full transcript of Mary Darmody living in Duck Square are available in Chinnor Library – but you can read on here

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DUCK SQUARE by Mary Darmody.

I would like to take you for a walk, a walk back in time, will you come?. Come with me and look and listen - it's not very far, just along Station Road.

There is a dreadful noise coming from Duck Square, even the cows in Coniger field are lining the fence and lazily scratching their backs on the barbed wire as their attention is drawn to the square opposite.

The squealing of pigs is commonplace in Duck Square. The landlord, Mr. Walter Hopkins breeds them. The pigstys always seem to be inhabited by dozens of little piglets. They are very sweet, forever pushing and jostling each other for their mother's milk and anything else which comes their way. Sometimes you can hear the strident squeals of a poor unfortunate pig being dragged by a rope and pushed from behind by Walter Hopkins to be slaughtered. In his brown smock and gaiters, Mr. Hopkins is rather a stern little man. Up the yard they go followed by an excited band of children, all eager to see the poor pig meet his untimely end.

The man who comes to do the killing puts a small shot in the side of the pig's head, it is all over in a matter of seconds. The throat is then slit open and all the blood flows out. In the meantime, Walt sets light to a nearby heap of straw so that the hair can then be scorched off the body. After this comes the part we all eagerly await - the butchering and carving up of the carcass. This is very skilfully carried out in no time at all and the bladder is blown up by Mr. Hopkins's grandson and is usually kicked merrily around the yard with great energy. When darkness falls and we are all ready for bed we know Mrs. Hopkins will be along with half a pig's head for us. Mum uses it to make into a delicious brawn and how we enjoy it! You see, being wartime there is not much meat about so this is all the more welcome.

The pig's head is not the only thing that comes our way under cover of darkness. Eggs should all be handed over to the Ministry but a few manage to find their way to our breakfast table now and again, thanks to dear Mrs. Hopkins.

All the baby chicks come under her care. Oh! they are lovely. We feed them on mashed hard-boiled eggs and soon they are chicks no longer but are strutting and squabbling around the orchard with all the other hens. The cockerel is another noise associated with Duck Square. It is always crowing noisily when we wake up. Once, not so long ago we were woken up in the middle of the night by a frantic Walter Hopkins. The foxes were after the chickens, you never heard such a commotion in all your life and we all gave chase at dead of night in our nightwear. It was great fun but the crafty fox got away and quite a few poor hens were left dead.

To be continued.....

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Tantalising let's see what the next edition may tell us

DUCK SQUARE by Mary Darmody.

Although there was a war on I don't really remember going hungry. Dad was a wonderful provider and used to catch numerous rabbits which were delicious in a pie or stuffed and roasted. Mum could skin them in a flash and the fur would come off all in one piece, just like peeling a jumper off a child.

Sometimes on a Sunday morning Dad would wake Bridget and me up at the crack of dawn and take us mushrooming along Mill Lane. It was great to be out while most people were still in bed, with the dew still heavy on the grass and the birds singing madly. Dad would burst into song as well, lovely old Irish melodies. He had a wonderful voice and it sounded beautiful in the quiet of the morning.

When we had gathered enough mushrooms Dad used to run with us all the way home, through the gate at the side of the cherry orchard and down through the allotments. Mum fried us a most tasty breakfast with the mushrooms, tomatoes and slices of apple.

In the evenings Walt Hopkins used to light up an old copper in one of his sheds to boil potatoes for the pigs. Needless to say, some of them never got as far as the pigs trough. Jan and Colin Croxford who were Mr. & Mrs. Hopkins' grandchildren would run down the road and join Bridget and I and we all squeezed into the hot dusty shed and waited until they were ready. Then Walt would give us one or two each for our supper. They really tasted good with a sprinkling of salt on them.

Mum managed to produce some super meals, all cooked over an open fire or in the adjoining oven. In all seasons and weather the fire had to be kept going. Sometimes when she was cooking something in an open pot a lump of soot would fall out of the chimney into it. It was all skimmed off and the meal carried on cooking. You could not afford to waste a single crumb.

We were very fortunate in having the orchard. There were always plenty of apples and we had them nearly every day for pudding in the winter. Sometimes in a pie or baked whole in the oven or made into an apple batter. Looking back I think rabbits and apples were our staple diet.

Almost everyone in the village had a piece of allotment behind Station Road. In the evenings they would all be out there in force, digging and planting and exchanging news. Dad spent every spare minute he had on his garden. He grew an enormous amount of potatoes and stored them for the winter in a clamp. This was made by heaping the potatoes up into a mound and then covering them with alternate layers of earth and straw.

To be Continued .....

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DUCK SQUARE - by Mary Darmody.

Washing Day was utter chaos in our little cottage. It was also a fantastic feat of organisation and sheer hard work for Mum. First of all the water had to be carried in by the bucketful from the well and put into a heavy cast-iron boiler which was suspended over the fire on a massive hook in the chimney.

The first lot of water to be heated was put into a tin tub and Mum set to, washing the clothes, up to her elbows in soapsuds.

Then all the whites were put into the boiler hanging over the flames. While this was progressing more water was carried in from the well and poured into another tin bath for rinsing. We had an old stone sink in the scullery but it was not much use as it only ran into a bucket underneath. The floor was flooded many times because it had been forgotten.

When the washing was finished all the water had to be carried outside again and poured down a drain in the middle of the yard.

Poor Mum, she used to get so hot and tired and sometimes, understandably, very cross. We still had a hot dinner at mid-day though, and sometimes a sharp slap if we were not careful.

I sometimes popped across to Mrs. Hopkins to help her with the pegging out of the washing on the line.

"Come 'ere my gel" she would say. "Catch hold of t'other end of this 'ere sheet".

When the washing was dry it all had to be ironed. of course and having no electricity meant heating two flat irons in front of the fire and using them alternately. I can remember Mum spitting on them to see if they were hot enough.

The clothes were then put to air on the fireguard and over a line which hung underneath the mantleshelf. It was miserable if it was freezing cold because we could not see the fire or feel its warmth.

We had to frequently wear handed down clothes which always seemed to be too long, but we had new things for Sundays which came off the minute we got back from church.

Mrs. Harris used to knit our jumpers, and all wool, very itchy vests with sleeves in, which we were made to wear underneath a liberty bodice, right until the end of May, with knickers with pockets in which buttoned on to the liberty bodice.

Heavens, we did feel warm and exchanged many angry words with Mum about the need for them. "Don't cast a clout till May is out" was all she would say.

To be continued.....

DUCK SQUARE by MARY DARMODY.

The fire in our cottage had to be kept going all the year round, however hot it became as it was our only means of cooking and heating the water. Every Saturday morning, before it was lit, Mum used to blacklead it with 'Zebra' polish. One of us girls had to clean the enormously long poker and tongs with emery paper. I quite enjoyed doing that and cleaning the brass trimming on the fender with 'Brasso'.

We spent some lovely evenings in the winter doing toast on a long toasting fork and cooking jacket potatoes. The wind used to howl and whistle down the wide chimney and sometimes we had to sit in our coats to keep warm.

Nevertheless, it was not always as bad. Bathtime in a tin tub in front of the fire was bliss, and we always had a scorching hot towel to wrap around us. The only drawback was the total lack of privacy. The one and only door into the cottage opened straight into the living room and if anybody knocked Mum asked them to come in.

The amount of wood and coal needed to keep the fire going was incredible. We always seemed to be having a delivery of coal from Mr. Fortnam. He used to bring it round in a horse and cart. That old horse knew exactly where it was going and stopped outside all the correct houses with hardly any word of command. Just a "Whoa there" and a "Gee up". He would stand quietly munching oats from a nosebag while the coal was unloaded.

Dad and I used to go to Siareys wood yard every Saturday morning to buy firewood. He had made himself a very large truck for the purpose and he used to give me and Michael Barry a ride in it on the way there and then we helped to push it home when it was full. I loved going up to the woodyard and watching the electric saws severing the giant trees. Dad used to buy all the odds and ends which nobody needed. We packed it all neatly into our woodshed, block by block, starting at the back and working forward until the shed was full and we could just about close the door.

Even though we always had a good fire going it was still agony going to bed in the winter as there was no heating anywhere else in the house. Bridget and I shared a bed and also a hotwater bottle. We used to fight over it a lot and when it was exceptionally cold we went to bed with cardigans and socks on and Dad would cover us over with his 'Homeguard' coat.

The eaves of the house sloped up over the top of our bed and the little oil lamp cast weird shadows on the wall. I remember feeling quite scared, lying there listening to the birds fidgeting in the thatch and the wind sighing in the trees and owls hooting mournfully. Sometimes a very daring little mouse would dash across the lino. We could hear his delicate little toes scratching the shiny surface. I rather hoped he would not venture downstairs as Mum set traps for them every evening before going to bed.

to be continued.....

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