

# Plus ca Change...

By Stella Abbey

## Walter Northcombe steps on to rostrum. Others grouped around.

**Walter N** : Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. You may have heard of me. In life I was Headmaster at Winsham School and I was Parish Clerk for 37 years. You can see my name commemorated in the lych gate of your church. Now I am here in spirit to congratulate you on 120 years of your parish council. It was one of the first to be set up in England. Our first chairman was Colonel Henley.

**Col. Henley** To you, people of the twenty-first century, 1894 may seem a long time ago. But many of the issues you discuss today were the same over a hundred years ago: footpaths, housing, water supply, recreation, communications...

**Walker**: You mentioned footpaths. Some of the paths in this parish are a disgrace.

Broadenham Lane is a morass; and going down from Fore Street to Court Street-it's so muddy you take your life in your hands.

**Col. Henley** Sir, the PC does all it can to keep paths clear. As early as 1899 two landowners were reprimanded for letting paths flood or be overgrown. They complied, and a new stile was erected at Verdhay.

**Walker** I'm glad to hear it. We don't want problems like this continuing till the present day do we?

**Villagers**: Quite right. About time. We have to walk to work

**Col. Henley** : Our village has always wanted better communications with the outside world. In 1896 the Parish Council wrote to the railway company asking for a station in Winsham.

**Carl Earl**: That will have been the London & South Western Railway! What was their reply?

**Walter N** : They said no - not enough demand.

**Col. Henley** : The request was repeated in 1919 and again in 1924.

**Walter N** : This was their reply:

**Carl Earl**: (Pompous railway official voice:-)"With reference to your letter received on the 12th ultimo, with regard to the provision of a railway station to serve the district of Winsham, the ...**blah blah blah**...in the absence of a guarantee that it would be a paying proposition...**blahblah**... we cannot favourably consider....

**Carl Earl**: So that was that ! All about profit!

**Villagers**: Shame! The trains go right past my house. Do they expect us to walk to Crewkerne?

**Walter N** : Other communications were greatly improved. An agreement was reached to set up a telegraph office. And boys in uniform on bicycles could be seen delivering around the parish.

And in 1904 a new post box was supplied at Whatley Cross to save walking all the way to the Post Office.

**Whatley resident:** That's why it says E VII R on the box, not modern E II R . Did you know that?

**John Sullivan** ; Nobody uses snail mail any more. What we want is faster broadband .

**Walter N** : (very puzzled) Broadband? I'm afraid I don't follow you sir.

**John Sullivan** ;. We need quicker communication ; you said so yourself.

**Walter N** : Let me assure you that the Parish Council does all it can. A public telephone is being provided at the Post Office. It can be used at any time of day or night with the co-operation of the Post Master, though he can charge a shilling after Post Office hours.

**Col. Henley** : And don't forget public broadcasting began in 1926 -after my time - and if you had a wireless you could listen to news broadcasts from Alexandra Palace for only the cost of a ten shilling licence fee.

**Villagers:** Telephone? Who would we be ringing? And PAY to hear news?Ridiculous..

**Walter N** : The water supply was a frequent bone of contention. Some householders had their own wells which you people can see in your own gardens, and there were stand-pipes along Fore Street. The main source of water was the village pump outside The George. This was a regular meeting place.

### **WOMEN GATHER WITH BUCKETS.**

**Village woman 1:** I've heard your Maisie has gone up to London with the Henley family. I bet they don't fetch water from a pump.

**Village woman 2:** Some people do. But she's lucky enough to have water piped to the house and a tap in the kitchen!

**Village woman 1:** That'll be the day! And sometimes our water isn't even clean!

**Walter N** : The worst case of water pollution was that of Mr Hodder in Fore Street. In 1901, As Parish Clerk, I was instructed to write complaining that rainwater was running off his roof and polluting the well of Mrs Gordon, next door.

### **MR & MRS HODDER APPEAR**

**Mrs Hodder:** Here's a letter for you from the Parish Clerk.

**Mr Hodder:** You read it-I haven't got my specs.

**Mrs Hodder:** The downpipe in our house is polluting Mrs Gordon's well next door.

**Mr Hodder:** Nonsense! None of their business. Throw it out.

**Walter N** : By 1903 the matter was still not resolved. So I was instructed to write again....

**Mrs Hodder** : Here's another letter from the Clerk

**Mr Hodder:** Who's that? Northcombe? Officious so-and-so. You deal with it.

**Walter N :** At a meeting in 1904, the matter was discussed AGAIN.

**Mrs Hodder :** Here's another letter. You've been on the council, you ought to do something about it.

**Mr Hodder:** Tell them I'll deal with it .Have you got my supper ready?

**Walter N :** Later that year, it was reported that the downpipe had been disconnected --after three years of trying!

**Villager:** That's how long it took to get things resolved. It wouldn't take so long in your time would it?

**Parish Councillor:** Oh no, not nowadays. Of course we won't mention the allotment site. That taken nearly three years.

### **MR WHEATON RUSHES IN**

**Mr Wheaton:** She's poisoned! She's dead!

**Walter N :** Mr Wheaton, what's the matter? Who's dead?

**Mr Wheaton:** She ate some berries from the Yew tree that overhangs my field from the cemetery. It's your fault!

**Walter N:** Mr Wheaton, what are you talking about?

**Mr Wheaton:** My lovely black mare. My Bess!

**Walter N:** I'm very sorry.(Pause) Are you claiming compensation?

**Mr Wheaton:** I most certainly am. The Parish Council owes me.

**Walter N:** Two months later the Parish Council agreed to pay £35 compensation for the loss of the black mare.

**Mr Wheaton:** I should think so.

**Parish Councillor:** Unfortunately it also cost the Council heavily in solicitors' fees-£9.6s.8p

**Walter N:** The cemetery had become the responsibility of the Parish Council when the church yard closed. A caretaker was appointed. (**Enter Peter with spade, shears,etc.**) Whenever there was a funeral the caretaker had to arrange for the path to be swept clear of cow-muck.

In 1905 there was a major change in the village. The Jubilee Hall had been built (as a reading room) by Lord Bridport, in the year of Queen Victoria's golden jubilee as you see on the corbels there.( **Indicates corbels on ceiling**).

Cricket St Thomas Estate had been sold to the Fry family in 1897, but Lord Bridport's heir retained the Hall. He now proposed to hand it over to the parish to be administered by a committee. The PC accepted with enthusiasm and a deed of conveyance was drawn up...

**Carl Earl:** More solicitors' fees!

**Walter N:** The committee formulated rules for the use of the Hall, and some surprising requests-were received.

**Mr Pym** I suggest we start a rifle club!

**John Sullivan:** No, Mr Pym. Much too dangerous.

**Mr Pym:** Well I wasn't suggesting live ammunition!

**Band Member:** I represent the village band. We'd like to practise in the Hall one evening a week.

**John Sullivan:** Certainly Miss Loaring .

**Miss Loaring:** Thank you Sir

**John Sullivan:** But not too late please. We've had complaints from neighbours about noise:

some dances and Whist drives don't finish till one 'o'clock in the morning!

**Villagers:** Shocking. We have to get up at five.

**Walter N:** The Jubilee Hall was very soon in need of repair; damp was rising through the floor, and the roof was no longer rainproof. Funds had to be raised.

**John Sullivan:(To Audience)** Do you wonder we have to do fund-raising events? The building is nearly 130 years old! And have you bought a lottery ticket yet? (**Wave a Lottery App form**).

**Walter N:** The Jubilee Hall needed a caretaker and in exchange for his duties, Mr Singleton was allocated the cottage at the south end of the Hall. (**Enter Caretaker with brooms and brushes**). He lived there comfortably with his daughter, until the committee asked him to retire. Understandably he refused. The daughter also refused to go and was allowed to remain there even after her father died. After that the hall no longer employed a resident caretaker.

The Parish Council and the Jubilee Hall committee fell out over one issue: the purchase of a billiard table. This was intended to keep the youth of the village occupied on winter evenings. But the PC refused to pay for it!

**Villagers:** Shame! How mean! What are the kids meant to do in the evening?

**Walter N:** The Jubilee Hall committee resigned 'en-bloc' **JS Steps off stage**

**Rev.Richardson:** I was Vicar of Winsham at the time. Keeping the children out of mischief was a familiar theme. In the twenties, we had a wonderful offer from Mr George Davies of Leigh House. He proposed to give us a piece of land across the road from the George Inn, as a village recreation ground.

**Walter N:** The PC was delighted by this "thoughtful and generous" offer and set about ordering play equipment: swings, a roundabout and a shunter. All these had to be ordered from a firm in the Midlands and sent by rail to Chard Junction. Thence they were transported to Winsham by horse and wagon.

**Villager 1:** A pity they didn't have E-bay then - would've been cheaper!

**Villager 2:** Or Amazon - door to door delivery.

**Walter N:** When the playground was officially opened in 1926, an oak tree was planted in commemoration of the event. It's a tree you are all familiar with.

**Richardson plants tree. Applause from all**

So far we have dealt with some of the lighter moments in the PC's history and not with the saddest and most important event of the early twentieth century: the Great War. I was still Clerk then, and Mr Fry was chairman. Because we both lost sons in those terrible years, I prefer to hand over my narrator role to a modern Paris Councillor who may be more dispassionate.

**Walter N retires to sit behind lectern**

**Parish Councillor:** Surprisingly, the War is very little mentioned in Parish Council meetings.

Except for those families directly involved perhaps it was not thought of as a parish issue. Many local men were spared active service, even when call-up became compulsory in 1916; they were in "reserved occupations".

Farming had declined badly since 1890 but now was seen as vitally important. Convoys were sent from Canada and the United States, but many ships were torpedoed. So rationing was introduced, at first voluntarily.

**WOMEN GATHER AT THE PUMP. ONE IS READING A NEWSPAPER.**

**WOMAN 1.** Listen. We're told to eat only *two and a half pounds of meat each week* and three quarters of a pound of sugar. I'd be lucky if I ever saw that much meat!

**WOMAN 2'**. And we shouldn't eat butter, only margarine.

**WOMAN 3.** Margarine? What's that?

**WOMAN 4.** It's that horrible vegetable stuff they bring in from America. Well, I make my own butter, and I'll keep doing it!

**WOMAN 1.** Eggs now thrupence or fourpence EACH! Good thing we've got our own hens.

**WOMAN 2.** But they will make rationing compulsory soon - you mark my words.

**WOMAN 1.** It's all down to this terrible war. Have you heard from your cousin lately, dear?

**WOMAN 4.** Yes, I had a letter the other day. It's terrible up there. Zeppelin raids most nights.

The house next door-but-one was destroyed completely.

**WOMAN 3.** Zeppelins? What are they?

**WOMAN 4.** They're frightful airship things that drop bombs.

**WOMAN 2.** Thank God we live down here, that's what I say.

**WOMAN 1.** And what about Maisie? How's she getting on in service?

**WOMAN 2.** Oh, she's not in service no more. She's working in a munitions factory.

**WOMAN 1.** A horrible dangerous job, that, making shells.

**WOMAN 4.** It is. lots of girls have been killed by explosions in other factories.

**WOMAN 3.** What's she do it for, then?

**WOMAN 4.** For the money, I reckon. She's earning many times what she did as a lady's maid, ain't she? And no missus telling her what to do in her time off.

**WOMAN 2.** And it's for the war effort. We should all do something.

**WOMAN 4.** 12 hour shifts they do. And they're all turning yellow!

**WOMAN 3** Turning yellow?

**WOMAN4.** From the sulphur you know.

**WOMAN 2.** It's not just the men suffering on the battlefields, is it, in these terrible times.

**Walter N** And it wasn't only humans either.

.. **FARMER RUSHES IN**

**FARMER** They've taken our Billy!

**Walter N** But you can't manage without him on the farm, can you?

**FARMER** No, we can't, Fred's too old, and he's often lame.

**Walter N** You mean, they just came and took him? He didn't volunteer?

**FARMER** No, they bundled him into a wagon and took him off to France to pull guns.

**Walter N** (Pause) You mean, your horse?

**FARMER** Yes, our wonderful shire horse, Billy. I'll never see him again.

**Walter N** You have our sympathy, but it's not a Parish Council matter. It's all part of this dreadful war.

**Villagers:** It's terrible for everyone. When will it end?

**SECOND FARMER** Have you seen what they've sent me to work in my fields? Women!

**WOMAN 1.** Women have always worked on the farms round here, specially at haysel and harvest.

**SECOND FARMER** Of course. But these are townies. They don't know one end of a cow from another.

**WOMAN 2.** And won't they get mucky with their long skirts and fine clothes?

**SECOND FARMER** Skirts? You should see them. They're wearing trousers!

**WOMEN mutter and sound shocked.** Disgusting!

**Woman 1** Wait till our boys come home and see that! " **LONG PAUSE** But when will our boys come home? It's nearly four years now.

**Parish Councillor:** And of course it was more than four years. And so many did not come home.

**PAUSE Music begins, softly in background. Track2 Dives & Lazarus**

Very soon after the war there was a nationwide movement to erect war memorials in each town and parish. An appeal went out for contributions to the cost. The local gentry were generous but many small contributions were made by ordinary people. By 1920 plans were well ahead and a patch of land transferred to parish ownership. The Memorial was officially unveiled on Armistice Day 1923. And these were the men who were honoured. **FADE OUT MUSIC**  
**LIST OF NAMES** read out one by one- each "actor" taking a turn.

*Frank Bridle dead at nineteen*

*Walter Bridle his father*

*Percy Bridle gardener at Cricket St Thomas*

*Augustus Brown dairy manager at Cricket St Thomas*

*Samuel Brown, the middle of 13 children, living in Church Street*

*Edwin Budge living at Broadenham*

*Sidney Butler, who had married Kate Russell*

*Ernest Cotterell, Who worked at the corn mill on the Axe near Thorncombe*

*Archibald Forsey, estate worker whose sister Mabel taught at Winsham School.*

*Alfred Fry. His father had bought Cricket St Thomas estate in 1897.*

*Charles Garrett, described as a motor cleaner at Cricket St.Thomas*

*Herbert Gill, known as Bert who kept a barber's shop, in Fore Street.*

*William Good, estate gardener and apprentice baker.*

*Fred Hawker, enlisted in 1911, but killed within 3 weeks of the outbreak of war.*

*Louis Loaring. Enlisted in Canada in1916.Died of shell wounds at Vimy Ridge in1917*

*William Northcombe, son of Walter Northcombe-killed at the Battle of Jutland.*

*John Perrott-farm worker living at Axwater*

*William Rowe, son of James Rowe, shepherd at Cricket.*

*Albert Russell, a carter at Cricket, one of eleven children.*

*John Spurdle, worked from age 13 as farm hand at Ammerham.*

*Sidney Spurdle, his cousin, a cowhand at Hollowells.*

*Frederick John Sylvester, whose father was Postmaster and shop-keeper in Winsham.*

*John Trott, volunteered for the Royal Navy, killed at the age of 17.*

*James White, originally from Hawkchurch, died from wounds at Arras*

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***POEM ( NO MUSIC)***

**Walter N** : So we moved into the 1920s - a time of contradictions and contrasts. New music and new fashions **appeared**. **Twenties Music-**

**(Flappers dance)** But for many a time of unemployment and depression. People asked what the war had achieved. Wages were low and housing conditions appalling. You've heard the phrase "homes fit for heroes" but where were they? At last, public housing was provided. The first of those in Winsham were 6 houses in Fore Street. Some were "parlour houses" to be rented at eight shillings a week and smaller ones ("non-parlour houses") at six shillings a week. It's pleasing to find that the first applications were from people whose names are still familiar in the village:

March, Spurdle, Grabham, Paull, Beer, Moore.

Other developments followed in Western Way, Bakersfield and Davies Close. The latest were the 28 new houses in Davies Close in 1976.

**CYNIC** And then most of them were sold off again in the 1980s by Mrs Thatcher's government.

**Walter N** :A great step took place in 1933 when electricity came to the village. Except for the lamp opposite Court Street that provided a safe route for workers at the cloth factory there had been no public lighting. The PC now suggested street lighting but the proposal was turned down. It was not until 1986 that the idea surfaced again under the Chairmanship of Mary Loaring. It was very controversial, many people claiming that we would no longer be able to see the stars. The PC organized a referendum and by a narrow margin street lighting was agreed. And we can still see the stars!

**Rev.RICHARDSON:** I was Chairman of the PC from 1925 . Dark clouds were appearing. Few people here could believe that another war was on the horizon despite deep political unrest in mainland Europe. But scarcely twenty years after the so-called "war to end all wars", men from Britain and the Commonwealth were being called to fight again. And this time there was serious fear of invasion. The Local Defence Volunteers (later called the Home Guard) were formed; tank traps were set up, which you can still see at Chaffcombe. Bombing raids, horrific enough in other parts of England, took place as near to us as Yeovil. We were fortunate that only one bomb fell in our vicinity--at Chard Junction.

**Parish Councillor:** One impact of the War for us was the stationing of part of an American Division, the 29th infantry, at Cricket St Thomas. Anyone who lived in the village at the time will remember the "sixpenny hops" in the Jubilee Hall

where they met the GIs with their strange uniforms, strange accents, and even stranger manners. And who provided the music?-Tony & Ivor(**Points them out**).

**Rev. Richardson:** Sadly, after the war, more names had to be added to the War Memorial: Douglas Brown, Graham Loveridge, William March, Ronald Davies.

They will not be forgotten. A new inscription was carved:

**POEM:** True love by life,  
True love by death is tried.  
Live thou for England,  
We for England died.

**Parish Councillor:** At long last, the dark clouds lifted. Victory parades and parties took place. The VE day and VJ celebrations were re-enacted on their anniversaries fifty years later. We held a street party with long tables in Back Street, with 40s music and wartime food. Many of you will remember the spam sandwiches and mashed parsnips masquerading as banana!

### **ANNE**

Winsham has always been good at celebrations. From Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, through four coronations in the 20th Century up to our present Queen's Diamond Jubilee, and the PC has always led the way..

Many people here remember the commemoration of the three hundredth anniversary of the Monmouth Rebellion. Everyone in Somerset had been encouraged to take part and in Winsham we dressed in seventeenth century costume and watched Monmouth's army , some on foot and some on horseback, march from the Dorset border and along Church Street. A full length play told the story of the Rebellion, from its optimistic beginning to its tragic end. Even the telephone box was included, being thatched for the occasion!

This was the origin of our very successful street fairs.

For the Millennium we produced two books which together depicted every building, person , activity and business in the parish in the year 2000.

**Parish Councillor:** Colin Slade was Chairman at the time. We have had some wonderful Parish Chairmen, including Miss Harding, whose memorial stained glass window you can see in the church; the Reverend Brian Bateson; Major Cameron ,and of course Roy Smart, who with his wife Janet, made possible the extension to the Jubilee Hall. (Waves in direction of the extension)

**Rev. Richardson:** Walter Northcombe had ceased to be Parish Clerk in 1932 and died in the year after.

**Walter N:** I am still here in spirit . I wish I could have lived to see the development of Winsham up to your time. My wife and I would have been proud to see the school continuing to provide a high standard of education and preparing children for the modern ,technological world; to see the church, well supported and well cared for; to see the village shop, thriving and busy.

And most of all to witness a close and active community, in which everyone, old families and newcomers alike, can play a part.

So here's to you, all of you, for making Winsham what it is!

**CAST APPLAUDS AUDIENCE-END**