

Grannie West of Benson

Grannie West lived in a terrace of tall red brick houses on the curve of the High Street which were built about 1750 (according to Pevsner) The curve of the houses continued in a long, high wall behind which was a large yard with numerous buildings. These were Frank West's father's workshops, he having bought them from his father who had taken them over from his uncle, so the Wests' had been the local builders for several generations. Our visits to see Grannie West were frequent and always pleasurable for she was such a dear person and known as 'Grannie' to the whole village and beyond for quite often the schoolchildren who walked the several miles from Roke Marsh and Berrick Salome would go along to her during their midday school break to eat their sandwiches, always assured that they would be given a warm drink in cold weather and a cool one at other times.

She spoke in the soft, lilting Oxfordshire local dialect, an old-fashioned countrified use of language. The final 'g' of words would be dropped such as 'fishin' and 'mornin'. Pennyworth of sweets became 'pennorth' of sweets, 'them' was used instead of 'they', 'us'll' instead of 'we', with a prolific use of 'thee', 'thy', 'I be', 'us be'. If we were asked to sit down for tea it became 'sit thee down childun and us'll have tea'. There were many double negatives and corruption of words; turnips became 'turmits', a chimney was 'a chimbley', a woman was 'oman', 'weskit' for waistcoat, 'sidders' for scissors. It was not at all offensive to the ear and was common usage amongst the older villagers.

One entered her living room directly from the High Street and one's attention was immediately drawn to the table lamps and the cooking range. There were at least four oil lamps, the brass oil containers so highly polished they reflected images like distorting mirrors. The glass chimneys we called lamp glasses and the white opaque shades were polished without the slightest smear and the wicks trimmed clean and even. The kitchen range provided the only heat for the room as well as for cooking. It had been black-leaded and polished daily for so many years that it too shone brightly and reflected the light of the lamps from the oven door knob and other protruding and angled surfaces. The oven had other attractions for us. Grannie rarely opened the Street door to a knock but would call "come in" in a loud, clear welcoming voice so that she would not have to leave the large Windsor wheel-back chair - we called it 'the Grannie chair' - drawn up to one side of the range. There she sat with a large brown woollen shawl around her shoulders. When she did rise from the chair one saw she was slimly built but being of slightly more than average height for women

in those times, looked quite tall. It was the thick, voluminous woollen shawl worn all the year round which filled out the Grannie chair.

Her face was rather thin and she had youthful, rosy cheeks without the heavy creases of old age. Her iron-grey hair was drawn tightly into a bun low down on the back of the head. If she knew we were to visit her there was usually an appetising, mouth-watering aroma as we entered. We learned early on not to make reference to it while she went through the courtesies of welcome and enquiries about everyone's health, about school or church, etc. while we sat in an orderly manner giving no sign of impatience or anticipation, for if we did the conversation would be even longer drawn-out. Then at last Grannie would leave her chair, there would be a rattle of plates and then the oven door would be opened to display the most delicious pastry tarts and quite often mince pies. Grannie was renowned for her lovely, light pastry and this was provided not only for her grandchildren, but for the many other children and visitors who called and were made equally welcome. She had a quiet, impish, fairy-godmother-like sense of fun and making the children wait for her to produce the plates as they politely talked with her while surreptitiously glancing longingly at the oven door gave her considerable pleasure, made evident by the smiles and teasing remarks as the goodies were passed around.

She rarely left her home but when she did wore a black bonnet with long ribbons tied under the chin, a heavy waist-length cape, a voluminous long skirt and black boots with a long row of fastening buttons. She walked till the end of her life with an upright, sturdy, almost youthfully defiant gait and while she looked old and we treated her with the respect required of the young to the old, such was her demeanour, sense of fun and humour that there seemed to be a strong bond of youth between us. She was indeed a dear person. Grandad West had died when I was very young and I can remember him only as a very old man with a long white beard, sitting in a small summer house in a garden next to the entrance to the builder's yard, his hands clasped on the head of a walking stick and a tobacco pipe between his lips which had stained part of his beard to a shade of brown. We had lasting memories of both these grandparents for they were buried just inside the iron gates leading into the churchyard. The mound was well tended by Uncle Charles who lived with Grannie and had continued to live in the same house till the end of his life.