



# **THE COUNTRY BAKER**

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**BACKWELL**

**BY JOHN BRAIN**

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## THE COUNTRY BAKER

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To those of us who grew up in the Backwell of the 1930s the main characteristic of village life was its unchanging pattern. The big houses, their occupants still sometimes referred to as "the gentry" by older parishioners, the church, then with its greatly loved rector Prebendary Urch, the village school, and the tradespeople and professional men and women who lived and served the parish from the doctor at birth to the undertaker at death - the village in those days was largely self sufficient. My grandfather came to Chelvey in 1888 with his wife and their four young children; he was in the engineering line and spent his working life working for the *Bristol Waterworks Company* at Chelvey pumping Station, mainly as an engine driver, although his skills with machinery were called upon to deal with all sorts of problems in the station.

Grandfather was instrumental in setting up my father and uncle in business and about the turn of the century bought the bakery from a Mr Viner, which was then situated near to the bottom of Hillside Road, in West Town. The premises ultimately became a dairy, operated by a Mr Green, and

subsequently by Donald Owen and his wife, until it reverted to its present day private ownership.

Meanwhile grandfather had a new bakery built opposite the New Inn; the two young men Arthur and Bert became the proprietors and thus "*A & H Brain, Bakers*" was born, and was to serve customers with bread for almost 50 years, until they retired in 1947. It was not only bread that we sold; the shop attached to the premises sold all manner of groceries, sweets, ham, and a hundred and one other things, as all village shops did; in addition we sold maize, corn and bran, bearing in mind that in those days most people kept chickens, so there was a ready market for all these commodities.

The country baker, and indeed most tradespeople in those days were not in business to make money [not at four old pence for a 2lb loaf!] They were there to serve the community, and that was it, and that meant calling on them all, not like today where the customer has to come to the shop for his bread.

We had two extensive rounds to do: "Backwell" from the shop eastwards, to include the whole parish including Backwell Common, Farleigh, and Flax Bourton, as far as the "Jubilee" and the other "Cleeve" which took in Chelvey and Brockley, up to Backwell Hill House, the whole of Cleeve, right down through Claverham almost as far as the junction with Yatton High Street, then back along Claverham High Street to outlying houses and home via Brockley Elm. And remember we did those rounds every day until the war came, and petrol shortages cut the number of deliveries.

As country bakers the work was unremitting. My father was up and gone by 6am, and seldom home at night before 10 o'clock; my mother would work in the shop with my aunt, and then go out bread delivering, and I would do the same throughout most of my teens.

The customers, though, were our friends, and we never at any time let them down, even to the point of baking and delivering on a Sunday morning if we had run short on a Saturday night. Sunday was the oasis of the week - not for mother of course, who would have to provide Sunday dinner, but it was the one day in the week we would look forward to, and mother and I would go to church morning and evening, giving me an insight and love of church music and a membership of Backwell church choir which has lasted from 1935 to the present day - but that's another story.

Of course in pre war days there were families who had little money and not much work, and the inevitable bad payers. The difference between then and now was that you never dreamt of "chucking them up" as we termed it. They had to eat, and invariably they were given stale bread, which they accepted, and now and again they would pay 2/6d [12p] off the bill and that's how it went on. I once remember my father telling one bad payer who owed 6/- [a lot of money then] that we shouldn't call any more. This produced 1/6d [7p] and a promise of the rest, but we knew that was just a story - needless to say we still carried on serving them!

Easter was always an exciting time for me although not for the family. Father and Uncle and their wives were up all night on Maundy Thursday making Hot Cross buns; I used to sleep at the shop that night and get up about 6 o'clock Good Friday morning and go on the Cleeve round delivering the buns. We used to finish and be home to breakfast by 9 o'clock, which gave me good time to have a nap and then go up to church for the morning service at 11am. Parents were hard at work making Easter cakes (a Brain's speciality I might say) and baking enough bread to allow us to have an extra day off on Easter Monday, after an exhausting week end.

There were many other aspects of our trade which come to mind; cooking doughnuts every Wednesday; selling stale

cakes at 8 for 6d to itinerant gypsies - real ones in those days; cooking weekend joints in our ovens for neighbours on a Saturday night; bringing in buckets of coke for the ovens, and killing crickets which loved the warmth of the bakery - what would the health inspectors say today! - and so much more.

My abiding memories of bread delivering were the differences in the seasons, the country colours and flowers of spring and the maze of stars delivering during winter nights. Uncle Arthur and I knew a number of the star constellations by name and we would chart their paths across the sky as winter progressed, and think of how many houses were left to call on before that thankful arrival at West Town Bakery, a roaring fire, tea, toast and butter, whatever time it was, but seldom much before 9 o'clock - we weren't known as the "Midnight Bakers" for nothing. In my kitchen at home an old clock hangs on the wall. Instead of figures it bears the legend:

### **H-O-V-I-S B-R-E-A-D SOLD HERE**

and for many years it hung in our shop at West Town. It is a constant reminder to me of that hard working, and yet more honest and more gentle time in our village, and one of which I am so thankful to have been a part of, and still remember with great affection.

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