

DON WELCH AND HIS TIMES

11 APRIL 1921 – 11 JULY 2010

The Local History Society met in July 2011 to hear the about the life and recorded memories of Don Welch, who died last year.

Don had clear memories of his happy Whilton childhood. His father and grandfather were hand sewing shoemakers from Northampton, but Don was born in 1921 in Holly House, where his family had moved, and he remembered his father as a shoemaker and repairer with his shop in Rugby. When he was still small the family moved into the shop, now the Old Shop, on the corner of Buckby Lane. Don's mother, Flo, kept the shop there until she was over 80. Don was brought up living with the shop, which was curtained off from the front room. He was used to customers arriving at any time of the day or evening; his mother always had time for them.

Downstairs was the living room, curtained off from the shop and a little narrow pantry or larder. Up the winding narrow stairs were two rooms, one leading into another, and after another brother arrived, the three boys all slept in one bed. They went up to bed with a candle. There was no heating, but they kept each other warm. The wash place was by the cobbled yard, with a copper boiler heated by a fire below. Clothes being washed were prodded with a stick. Soft water for washing came from the roof and was caught in a barrel. Water for drinking was fetched from the well across the road behind what we now call the Old Post Office. This well was shared by several households. His mother cooked on a black leaded stove, with a hook over for the pot and a kettle to one side.



Don with his parents, Bill and Flo Welch, his older brother Lawrence and his younger brother Norman

He was particularly friendly with the Dunkley children at Martins Farm, now Church Farm. He reckoned that he and Bob Dunkley were the young tearaways of Whilton, riding horses up and down the street, and sometimes sheep too! He loved helping with the farm work, especially shocking up the sheaves to dry at harvest, and haymaking. He was interested in the Dunkleys' animals too, and had his own tortoise and angora rabbits at home.

His mother sold sweets and the Welch children were allowed to help themselves, on condition that they did not give them away – that would undermine mother’s profits! Not that Flo made much money. A packet of cigarettes was 11 ½ d, which left Flo with no profit, but Don reckoned she enjoyed the company of the half dozen or so who came in during a day. She had always been used to company, as she was one of 14 children. In his memories Stan Haynes described how the Haynes children liked being sent on an errand to visit the shop, perhaps for a quarter of cheese, adding: “Mrs Welch always seemed glad to see us.” She clearly enjoyed children’s company. Stan also recalled that sometimes a group of children would go foraging for dandelion leaves and take a bundle to Mrs Welch for their pet rabbits. “Hold out your hands,” she would say, and would fill each with half a dozen comfits, which she called “guinea pig mucks”!

We also heard how Don left Whilton School and trained as a carpenter in Daventry, sometimes going far afield for work during the difficult 1930s and receiving no pay when the weather was too bad for work. When war came he was involved in rebuilding the “gun shops” in Coventry by day after bombing by night. Later he was called up and was part of the invasion force, crossing the Channel in very rough weather in a flat bottomed American ship, with tanks which had broken loose. He then went through France, Holland, and Belgium in a Bren carrier, a small tank, coming to Arnhem where he witnessed the chaos a few days after the fighting there. He had to walk across the gliders which had landed there in order to cross a canal. As he said: “We were the support troops which did not make it.” After crossing the Siegfried Line, Don could find no words for what he saw at Belsen, and then went on to the River Elbe, to face the Germans fleeing from Russian bombing and revenge.

When at last he came home he took up his work again, and finally returned to Whilton, where he renovated and modernized the house he had lived in as a child. His craftsmanship and carpentry skills meant that he was much in demand, and there are few older houses in Whilton where he did not do any work. Thus we could say that he literally made his mark on our community.

His patience and hard work helped him through a number of difficulties, which included the sudden loss of his first wife, leaving him with four children, and a serious work injury, which he overcame. A good number of his family attended the meeting and were able to meet with old friends, all a sign of the respect in which Don was held all his life.

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