

Obituary Margaret Bennett 1921 — 2000 (part 1)

We are very grateful to her son Andrew for submitting this article about her.

Margaret was born in the front bedroom at South Lodge, Park Lane, West Grinstead on January 8th 1921. So began a life which centred on West Grinstead but which had influence far beyond. Three years later a sister, Claire, arrived, also on January 8th Margaret, or Peggy as she was better known by her friends and family, grew up very much within the traditions of family and country life. Her mother, Lena Boniface, was the third daughter of John Boniface who farmed Griffins in Park Lane for around fifty-five years until his death in 1935. Lena married Archie Campbell who worked for J.P. Hornung at West Grinstead Park. Archie's family had moved south from Inverness when his father, Andrew Campbell, was invited by a former Duke of Norfolk to take over the running of his sporting estate at Arundel. The family story has it that, while on a trip to Scotland, the Duke saw Andrew competing at the highland games at Beaulieu, near Inverness, took a fancy to him, and then offered him the job! Thus it was that much of Margaret's early life was spent either on the family farm at Griffins, or on frequent visits to Arundel. She acquired a thoroughly good knowledge of country ways that never left her, and her mother Lena, who was an excellent naturalist, instilled a great love of nature into both girls. Margaret and Claire attended the convent school at the Priory. When the buildings were vacated by the nuns this eventually became St Thomas Moore's School. Both Margaret and Claire went on to Horsham High School during the time that Miss E. M. Marchant was headmistress. They travelled by rail from West Grinstead to Horsham, and quickly made friendships on the train and at the school which were to last throughout their lives. At the High School Margaret received a first class, old fashioned grammar school education which stood her in excellent stead and taught her many skills. These included reading widely, especially in good newspapers, learning by enquiry, the importance of maintaining personal relationships and a sense of fair play.

Even in these early days however, Margaret's horizons were widening. The Campbell aunts also had two adjacent flats in Chelsea, numbers 9 and 10 Beaufort Mansions. Both Margaret and Claire were regularly invited to stay there and with their cousins (there were lots of Campbell boys both in Arundel and in London) they got to know much about the city, its museums, galleries and theatres. There were lots of the Campbell boys' friends to meet as well, including a good-looking officer cadet, Jack Bennett, serving with the New Zealand Shipping Company. Relationships were beginning to develop but six years of war were to intervene. Fifteen years or so later Jack was to become Margaret's second husband. During these excursions to Chelsea Margaret developed a very sound working knowledge of London, and years later could accurately recall bus routes, tube interchanges and details of street markets. Margaret left Horsham High School in 1937 and shortly afterwards took a secretarial position at Lloyds of London, in the policy signing department. However she found office work of this type not to her liking and, encouraged by the Campbell aunts, enrolled as a student nurse at St Mary's Paddington. Working amongst the sick, in a deprived west London borough, was a total contrast to life in West Grinstead, but Margaret was very motivated by the challenge. The success of Sir Alexander Fleming's research into antibiotics and his discovery of Penicillin at St Mary's had permeated the whole hospital, and the nursing staff were enthusiastic about the improvements in the treatment of infections that it offered. With the outbreak of World War II, this discovery became all the more timely, as Penicillin offered real hope for the treatment of infected wounds. Margaret remained at St Mary's during the first part of the war and became heavily involved with nursing Blitz victims. She never discussed this very much with her family but on one occasion did comment about the difficulties of moving terminally ill patients to air raid shelters when the air raid warnings sounded. Some were too sick to be moved and individual nurses had to volunteer to remain behind in the ward with them during the raids. After a while things became too difficult at St Mary's and much of the hospital was evacuated to Park Prewett at Basingstoke. Margaret was transferred there and at that point her London war experiences ended.

In 1941 Margaret's widowed mother Lena Campbell and her sister Daisy Boniface, took over

the Post Office and Shop at the Burrell Arms at the junction of the A24 and the B2135. In those days there was quite a community in that part of the Parish, and with the war effort in full swing the office was particularly busy with telegram traffic for the Canadian soldiers quartered in Park House and Knepp Castle, as well as with the traffic for West Grinstead Lodge, where many of Montgomery's staff were quartered prior to the D-day landings.

The Post Office, with its extensive and well-tended old garden, became Margaret's West Grinstead base until her mother and aunt retired in 1956.

(to be continued in next magazine)