

THE STORY OF ROSE COTTAGE

Miss Jane Foster has lived in Rose Cottage, on the Town Path, since 1951 and so has seen many changes both on the Meadows and in Salisbury. We thought you would be interested in her story of the cottage:

Rose Cottage was condemned in 1938 - the reasons - no damp proof course, two feet below the level of the river, no water or sanitation laid on. Apparently this had not bothered the generations of previous inhabitants, the last of which was a family called Evans - the father being in charge of the hatches and meadows irrigation.

We knew none of this, when, also in 1938 we moved to Salisbury from Harrogate. My father, who had worked for the West Riding County Council at the County hall in Wakefield as an architect and land surveyor, took a job with the Southern Command at Radnor House, opposite St. Paul's church - designing army huts rather than farm cottages! From 1938 to the end of the war we rented a roomy three storey semi-detached house at the bottom of Devizes Road. After the war the landlord had plans to turn it and its neighbour into flats. So my parents started to look for "a small house with a large garden" as a retirement home. Rose Cottage was on the market, owned by Mrs Fox Pitt who was living there, before and during the war she owned The Old Mill Hotel and restaurant, the Old Mill Flats and the adjoining cottage, but had already sold those properties. She had acquired the Water Meadows on the far side of the storm channel to turn into a garden. She may have intended to make it a permanent home but was unable to obtain planning permission for alterations.

At that time the cottage consisted of two small downstairs rooms. A staircase with steps of uneven height went up to a wide landing with a door leading into a bedroom. (The Evans were said to have had eight children!) There was also a small lean-to kitchen, a "recent" addition about fifty years old.

I was teaching away from Salisbury throughout the war and for several years after but did go once when on holiday while the cottage was in that original state.

Mrs Fox Pitt, a somewhat eccentric lady, was mainly concerned on that occasion with a bantam which had fallen in the water (the channel normally had a regular if low flow through it). The bird was reposing, warmly wrapped, in front of the little kitchen boiler. (I believe it died - one can only speculate on its ultimate fate!)

Mrs Fox Pitt had been perfectly frank about the condemned status of the cottage, and had a robust view of the facilities - plenty of firewood could be dredged from the river, a standpipe and tap at the end of Island Cottage garden for drinking water and a galvanised iron hut outside for other essential needs. My mother thought the prospect hopeless, my father could see possibilities so the purchase went ahead. Sure enough, along came an official notice saying the building had to be demolished in such & such a time - giving the reasons (as mentioned earlier). My father's response was to put the town council in the county court. He spoke from 11 o'clock until 20 to 1.0 using his, by then, quite extensive experience (he was 66) to take each reason for demolition to cite precedents against them. He had the knowledge and memory to refer to "sub-section so and so of the eighteenth hundred and something housing act etc."

For example he took the "two feet below river level" saying there were houses sixteen feet below the river Ouse. He said he could see the "Old judge" smiling (his phrase, he was a much younger man) and at the end, the judge, after commenting that he had been brought up in a cottage without a damp proof course and it hadn't done him any harm, quashed the demolition order and said we could spend £100 (worth considerably more in 1946 than it is now). This was only the beginning, we had to keep on applying for licences, builders would come for three weeks and stay away three months through shortage of suppliers or trying to cope with many other customers.

There were also post-war restrictions. We could have the living room floor repaired but not renewed, so the carpenter put new boards everywhere, except for a patch by the fireplace. When a few weeks after we moved the backlegs of a chair went through the rotten wood that was replaced also! We were able to have an extension to the living room, because it was replacement of an "existing building" - which was an old wooden shed at the side of the house. After about four years we moved in, in January 1951. All the family (parents, two sisters and I) contributed to the cost. I started teaching at the old St Paul's school that autumn so remember what life was like during our early years at the cottage.

At night think "dark", the circle of the horizon broken only by two patches of light, the station and the old Infirmary. Coming from the town it was like a country lane. No cathedral illumination, buildings in the close not so near the river and masked by trees, no obvious street lights along Harnham Road, Old Blandford Road, Middle Street (housing development at Harnham had only just started after the war) where the "Old Mill Gardens" houses now face us across the river was the Old Mill garden. No Churchfields. In the daytime we could look along the river and see Bemerton Church. Town Path was narrower and rougher really only the edge of the fields fenced off. Long Bridge was a flat plank structure, on the same level as the path. It did have rails both sides but was barely wide enough for two to walk abreast.

The darkness was no problem to us, we had been coping quite cheerfully in the blackout a few years before. There was the bonus of seeing the stars clearly, Orion and Sirius sparkling on winter nights, or the full moon shining on the pool outside. They are still there, but the effect is much diminished.

There were many fewer people in Harnham, but the path was well used, even at night, by railway and P.O. sorting office staff, people walking dogs or going to and from the town. It was useful to have a torch to switch on to alert approaching cyclists or pedestrians of one's presence. Some carried lighted cigarettes, giving a little red glow in the darkness.

Changes have happened gradually over the years, a good one being greater appreciation of the achievements of the past. In the case of Rose Cottage its rise from condemnation to Grade II listed status!