

Interview with Leonard Cripps (1st June 2004)

Len Cripps was born on 19th September 1907, at the Windmill. He was the son of Ezra Amos Cripps (1872-1957) and Rosina Bannister (1874-1969). There had been an older son who had died before Len was born. He also had a sister, Rosa Catherine, known as Cassie.

His father, Ezra Amos (1872-1957) was a miller. Although he ground com for many of the local farmers in his own mill at Wheatley, until the First World War, he was chiefly employed as the miller at Grubb's Mill (Castle Mill) in Oxford. He walked to and from Oxford every day. However, Mr Grubb gave up the business when his son, Sid, was killed early in the First World War, and Ezra had to find alternative employment elsewhere.

Like many of the young men in Wheatley, Ezra went to work in Cooper's brickyard in Littleworth, where he looked after the big traction engine. This traction engine was commandeered by the army during the First World War and Ezra was employed to drive it over to the Army Depot at Bramshot/Bramshall, on Salisbury Plain, and then he stayed to run it.

When Coopers Brickworks closed after the war, Ezra went to work for Cullum's, the builders and stonemasons and, once again he was responsible for the traction engine in the stonepit. He was paid 15/- a week.

Ezra Cripps was a talented violinist and he ran a dance band which played for special events in Wheatley and the surrounding villages including: Great Milton, Piddington, Cuddesdon, Waterperry and Waterstock. Nomina Sheldon, who lived in London Road, used to take them all round, with their instruments, in his huge Essex van. The dances were traditional: waltzes, the Military Twostep, the Boston Twostep, and the Lancers. They were a very musical family: Uncle Obadiah used to make violins in the windmill, and Uncle George at High Wycombe used to make them as well.

Len used to go round with the musicians, fetching and carrying for them. His sister, Cassie, would play the accordion or the piano; his Dad, Ezra, with Ernie Soanes, and Mrs Fenton from Littleworth Road, played violin; Herbie Wild played banjo; and Ernie Clements from Blenheim played the drums. The band also played for dances in Merry Bells - which was a Temperance Hotel at that time, run by Mr and Mrs Baldwin. Len remembers being able to buy penny cups of tea and penny buns from a window at the front of what is now the Coffee Room of the Merry Bells! These Old Tyme Dances were very popular, and they were always very crowded. It cost 1/- to get in, and the musicians were paid £1.10.0 a night - 10/- each!

Windmill cottage was next to the windmill, but Len was born in an older building on the opposite side of the lane, next to the post-mill 200 yards north-east of the tower mill. It was known as The cottage, Mill Lane, Wheatley. It was pulled down after the war, and replaced by a small modern house where Cassie and her husband Alf Paintin lived.

When Len was a boy, his Dad and Uncle Tom (1854-1929) used the mill, regularly, to grind the com brought in by local farmers, including the Curtis, Shepherd and the Bell families of Wheatley; Andrew Bell from Cuddesdon, and the Walkers from Horspath. Tom was also responsible for the watermill at Holton, which was owned by Robert ?, who married Gert Avery. The last time that the Wheatley mill was used for grinding com was in 1914. While Ezra was away looking after the traction engine in Bramshot, the local farmers bought small Bamford Mills so that they could grind their own com.

Johnnie Curtis from Horspath was one of Len's special friends. They went to school together in Wheatley, until they were fourteen, and Len remembers the Headmaster, Mr Leyshon, as 'a very good man - although he was strict.' Len and Johnnie both played in the Wheatley Boys Football Team which once famously beat the men's team 3-0! At first the boys did not have their own ground, but they went to see General Miller at Shotover House, who allowed them to use some of the level ground in Westfield, and the Stanley's made the goalposts for them. The team included:

Len Cripps

Sid Crick, whose father was a Carter on the Shotover estate

Jack Smith, whose father kept the Red Lion pub in Wheatley
Bill Lowe, who was killed in the war
Ian Cruikshank, whose father was the Estate Manager at Shotover
Phil Harris, from Breach Cottages
Bill Tombs, who lived in the Manor

Len also played cricket with Tommy Barlow and his brother Dick.

When he left school Len used to deliver newspapers in Wheatley, Cuddesdon, Garsington and Horspath. They arrived on the train and were sorted at Mrs Eyles' Newsagents and Post Office at the corner of Station Road and the High Street, opposite Gosticks Stores (Mrs Gostick bred Airedale Terriers). Mrs Eyles was assisted by her sister, Miss Radford, and Elsie Coles from Cuddesdon. There was a telephone booth in the Post Office, and Elsie was employed as a telephonist. She had to take down telegram messages and then asked the lads to deliver them - for which they were paid 6d a time!

Later, Len worked in Billy Cole's market-garden in Littleworth, and was responsible for taking the produce by horse and cart to be sold in Oxford. His cousins, Bert and Arthur Barrett, who lived towards the top of Shotover Old Road, were involved in the market gardening business too, and they shared three acres of ground with Len's father.

For a while Len was employed as an apprentice electrician for Bannisters in Magdalen Road, Cowley, for 30/- a week. Later he moved to the Pressed Steel Company managed by Edward G Budd. Here he did piecework including making instrument panels for cars. When Len enquired how much he was going to be paid he was told that he would earn 12/6 the first day, 17/6 the second day, 22/6 the third and so on! By the time he was 20, Len was an accomplished welder, and metal-straightener. Bob Dover, from Wheatley was the Foreman. But, during this time, Len had to have six months off work for a stomach condition - believed to have been caused by lead poisoning.

Later Len was appointed to supervise 100 men at nights, teaching them 'straightening'. The Fridge section of Pressed Steel moved to Swansea - but the Welsh workers were not as successful as those at Cowley. Len had to go to supervise them, staying Monday - Friday in a local hotel.

Len married Phyllis Shurmer of Littlemore, in 1934 (*check*). At first they lived with his family at the Windmill, but bought their present house, 19 Gidley Way, Horspath, in 1939. They have two children: Roy, who lives with his family in the Isle of Man, and Mavis, who lives in the cottage by the Windmill with her husband, Gilbert Ramsden, and their son, Neil.

During the Second World War, Len was an air-raid warden. He had to go round the village every evening to make sure the blackout was all in order. Although no bomb fell on Wheatley or Horspath, he remembers seeing the bombers going over on the night of the Coventry Blitz, and he and his fellow warden were up all night. The only bomb which landed in Wheatley was the one that fell in garden of the Bridge Hotel, and another landed at the Barley Mow Hotel in Clifton Hampden, and a third near the railway line towards Milton Common.

The Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society was formed in 1976 and although progress was very slow in the early years, because the sums of money which were raised were very small, Len has been actively involved. Every time the Mill has been open to the public, in good weather and in bad, Len has been there to tell people about the workings of the mill and what it was like in his father's time. Even in his 97th year, he climbs up to stand on the platform at the top of the Mill, to point out the local landmarks to the brave visitors who have scrambled up three ladders to see the view, and explains the significance of the new weathervane shaped like a violin!