

Call the Midwife

One of the most popular drama series on TV at the moment is 'Call the Midwife', which is not just another 'soap', but almost a serious documentary. As the storyline progresses through successive years, it illustrates the development of the service in a changing world.

By coincidence, Dorothy Lewis, the oldest native of Bicton, was also once a midwife during those very same 'TV' years, even cycling to calls around east London. The reason for raising this story now is that she has just celebrated her one hundredth birthday and still has vivid memories of that time.

Dorothy was born 25th February 1920, youngest child of Ernest and Blanche Lewis of 'Milnsbridge', Shepherd's Lane. The story of this family has already featured several times in this history series also partly thanks to Dorothy's memory.

Dorothy's arrival added more pressure on an already crowded household, which included one sister and three brothers aged 4-14, two parents, one grandmother and even a wartime 'landgirl' working at The Woodlands. Such a situation was not uncommon in those times.

Likewise in many such rural cottages facilities were very basic, without mains water or electricity until the following decade and perhaps all this had contributed to the death of another child some years before, during a cold spell. Otherwise, mother managed well on the traditional kitchen range, since she had been cook at the vicarage when she first met Ernest.

Dorothy's christening was somewhat delayed by a gap in the succession of vicars in Bicton, but Miss Milbank of the Hall arranged it to be carried out by Rev'd Fletcher at Oxon instead.

Incidentally, Miss Milbank was also involved in managing the local nursing service, which was financed by subscription. In this context, Dorothy was later amused by the story of an innocent little girl, who, upon hearing her parents discussing this payment, concluded that her new siblings were being bought from Miss Milbank at 15 shillings and 6 pence a time.

Otherwise, it was a case of self medication, avoiding an expensive doctor. No wonder Dorothy was to become a fan of the NHS when it came about.

Dorothy followed her siblings through Bicton School and as the oldest survivor from such times she was invited to the ceremonial opening of the present building in 2007 (recorded on a plaque). Secondary education was limited to the 'Lancasterian' in Castle Fields, which left her envious of sister Mary winning a scholarship to the Priory, while the boys had gone to Allat's School in Murivance (with help from Miss Milbank).

After leaving school at 14, Dorothy stayed a while at home to help her mother before starting nursing training at the Royal Salop Infirmary in 1937. Further midwifery training continued in Birmingham, before a post at St Thomas' Hospital in London. By this time it was facing obvious wartime problems and therefore Dorothy actually carried out most of her work at its 'outposts' in such places as Woking. With the return of peace, normal work brought her back to London (as on TV).

By now, she had witnessed the problems of urban poverty as well the rural poverty of her early years and in particular was upset at the unkind treatment of unmarried mothers. As a result, it was no surprise that Dorothy looked out for posts in more pleasant environments and eventually became a district midwife at Leamington Spa. Here, her professional qualities were appreciated and after a time promotion was even suggested.

However, by now family responsibilities were looming so that Dorothy chose instead to return nearer home, taking up a similar post in Shrewsbury, based at The Elms, near Shirehall. At least one current Bicton resident was delivered by her and perhaps there may be more.

Indeed, family commitments were to become increasingly dominant in her life, such is often the lot of any unmarried youngest daughter. She thus sacrificed her career. Sister Mary, by now a teacher, had married a colleague working for oil company schools and in this connection Dorothy spent some time with them in Venezuela.

All went well at first, but Mary developed cancer and had to return to their new home next to Milnsbridge. Thus Dorothy switched from caring for her widowed mother, who died in 1961, to caring for her sister till her death soon after. Now Dorothy moved into their home and became surrogate mother to Mary's children, allowing their father to remain working overseas.

As the children were able to 'fly the nest', Dorothy went back to Milnsbridge to care for her unmarried brothers, until their own deaths in 1976 and 1988.

After all this, Dorothy was to spend the next thirty years living on her own in this house, with company from dogs, geese and chickens as a sort of replacement family. Now, after caring for others, she is enjoying being cared for in Bowbrook residential home where, with phone and iPad, she still keeps in contact with friends and relations far and near.





