

## ROSE PRETORIA

**I**T IS AN EXHILARATING experience for an interviewer to be inspired by a visit to a local character of note and this was indeed true of my visit to Mrs Burson of Milton, "Rose Pretoria" – obviously named after the famous battle in South Africa in late Victorian times. She was born in Westwood Hay near Newbury where her father was the local gamekeeper. There were 14 children in the family, six boys, of whom five became gamekeepers, and eight girls. The eldest child lived to be 100. Rose Pretoria had her 95th birthday on 18th May this year.

She referred to the fact that every member had his or her job contributing to the daily welfare. Her job was to help her father with the pheasant breeding and each morning, early, she damped the hay boxes with water and then placed 12 or so pheasant eggs among the sitting hens for future hatching. She declared herself very fond of the family donkey who seems to have had a character of his own. He declined to move unless the dog had jumped on his back.

The donkey was particularly fond of the ponies in the next field so the fence was securely fixed. Even so, the donkey got through and Rose worked out that he had rolled under the fence where the ground sloped down and once there found the return path impossible. When sent to fetch him, she managed to get him out but then he stubbornly poked his head into the bushes and a young girl had little chance of moving him.

She recalled the lost sounds of birds no longer so prevalent today, larks, thrushes and robins. During the First World War, Rose joined the Women's Land Army and worked, among other jobs, at Aston Rowant near Watlington, one of the largest gardens in the country, thus relieving men for soldiery. She went to Kent with a threshing gang, her job was to take the thatch off the rick and throw it to the bondmen.

She came to Milton-under-Wychwood to do farmwork which included milking the cows at Hartley's farm then owned by Groves of building fame. She remembers taking two fir trees to Cogges to be planted there in 1916 – she returned there with her granddaughter recently to visit Cogges Museum. She referred to the fact that today there is no chance of milking the cows by hand. Incidentally the trees were still there.

By the time of the Armistice in 1918 she had settled down in Milton and in 1923 she married Stanley Burson who was working as a stonemason for Groves. He had been gassed during the war and wounded twice. Spasmodically he had days of oblivion when he could not work because of these injuries, his tiny pension hardly supporting him. A daughter was born to them who later lived in Canada and twenty years later a son was born! He is now Chairman of the Milton Parish Council.

(continued overleaf)

Her mother-in-law joined the family and was with them for 43 years, dying when she was 102 years old. The family included three centenarians – a sister of 100 years, a sister-in-law of 102 and a mother-in-law, also 102.

Rose has dwelt in the Cotswolds for a long time moving from Milton High St to Green Lane and then back to the High Street where she is now in a bungalow with panoramic views at different angles from the windows. It is decorated with her beautifully worked cross-stitch pictures and as we talked rooks and magpies waited impatiently to feed.

Flowers decorated the house, bouquets left over from her grand birthday celebration of 95 years.

I said my visit was uplifting – it was an example to so many of us who grumble at the opportunities we have missed in life. Rose Pretoria did not grumble once – was grateful indeed for the blessings life has given her.

She has been a member of the Women's Institute for 71 years, the British Legion from its commencement and the Mother's Union for over 50 years.

I. McNeill.

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