

Violet Smith – The Full Circle.

IF ANYONE HAD TOLD the young Violet Smith (née Miles) that one day she would live at the old Shipton gasworks, she would have laughed as merrily as she does today at the thought of it. Sitting in her snug apartment at Bowerham, on the site of that very gasworks, she brandishes a Witney Gazette article setting out the Friends of the Earth warning about the toxic effects of old gasworks sites. "It says here "Poisonous or potentially explosive," she chuckles. "Nothing has happened yet!"

Violet, or Vi, as she is called by her friends, was born the daughter of Alfred and Millicent (née Bartlett) Miles. She arrived in 1910 when her family lived in one of a pair of cottages which now form Winterseeds on the corner of Church Path and Station Road. When Vi was 13 months old, her parents moved to 9 High Street. There, Vi's only sister, Sybil, was born three years later.

Alfred Miles was a skilled carpenter with an eye for opportunities. When Henry Coombes decided to give up his undertaking business, Alfred was ready and willing to assume the responsibility. In the 1920s, when the telephone exchange outgrew the post office on Church Street, there was Alfred shifting things about in his workshop to accommodate the batteries, and Millicent rearranging the front room to house the small manual exchange.

By this time Vi was 15 and had finished her studies at St. Mary's Church of England School.

Further education at Burford Grammar School was not available to her since the school accepted only boys. Sybil was one of the first Shipton girls to go there when the school changed its policy.

Vi was uncertain about what she wanted to do. She loved people then, as now, so she rather favoured shop work. There was a drapery emporium on Milton High Street owned by the Dangerfields which seemed a possibility, but nothing came of it. When her father took the telephone exchange, Vi found her vocation. She took the train to Chipping Norton in order to learn telephony. There were 43 subscribers to the telephone service including F.W.P. Matthews Ltd., The Countryman at Idbury, the Great Western Railway, Lord Latymer and Dr. Scott. Mr. and Mrs. Miles ran the exchange until 1947.

Vi sat at the switchboard in the family living room for six years, sharing the duties with a number of girls including Dulcie Arundell's sister, Doreen Shepherd. During this time Vi was "walking out" with young Walter Smith, who began his working life as an office boy at Matthews Mill and ended his career as manager.

On Monday afternoons when she was free of switchboard duties, Vi helped her mother with the library. Not surprisingly, the lending library was housed in the front hallway at No. 9. While locals wandered along the hall making their selections, Millicent sat behind a big table in the doorway checking volumes in and out.



Vi with her eldest grandchild Trudy

The county library saw to it that a variety of reading materials were available. Those in the know quite rightly called No. 9 High Street the hub of village activity.

Violet Miles and Walter Smith were married at St. Mary's Church, Shipton on 4 June 1932. They moved to a pair of cottages along Meadow Lane where they were living when their daughter Barbara was born in 1936 at Chipping Norton Hospital.

It was upon their homecoming from the hospital that Vi and Barbara made the important trip to the Red Horse public house. Here baby Barbara was placed in the arms of her 98-year-old great-great grandmother, Annie Longshaw who, according to a 1930 Oxford Times

article, was "The oldest licensee in the district and probably the country", when Mrs. Longshaw was a mere 92. She was still in charge of the pub when she died in 1937 at the age of 99..

Annie's deceased husband Robert had become the licensee of the Red Horse in 1891. However, before that he had worked for and become the manager of – you guessed it! – The Gasworks. Life does seem to come full circle for Violet Smith.

When little Barbara was a year old, the Smith family moved temporarily to a new bungalow on Bruern Road.

It belonged to Mr. Goss, the manager of Matthews Mill, and had been built for his retirement.

However, Mr. Goss died in the mill office and never lived in his home.

The Smiths moved again to Pike house, a mill property, in 1940, where they lived for 30 years. From Pike House Barbara left to become the bride of Colin Pearce in 1958 and it was at Pike House that the family gathered to mourn the death of Walt Smith in 1970. Vi faced a dilemma as well as deep grief when her husband passed away. A move from Pike House was a necessity because it belonged to the mill.

She and Walter had purchased their own retirement bungalow in Milton but they had let it in the meantime to their son-in-law's parents, Annie Martha and Edward Thomas Pearce.

Determined not to dislodge the Pearces, Vi settled in a flat above Pratley's Hardware Store, where she lived for five years. (Mrs. Pratley was Walt Smith's niece) When Edward Pearce died and Mrs. Pearce moved to a council flat, Vi's bungalow finally became her home.

Twenty-two years passed busily and happily. There were WI meetings, Bowls Club events, family get-togethers and the company of friends.

In November of 1963 Vi's mother, Millicent Miles had gone to live with Vi and Walt. This left No. 9 High Street on the market.

It seemed only right that the old family home should go to Colin and Barbara.

This was the perfect state of affairs for Vi.

She was able to return often to the familiar surroundings of her childhood and young womanhood to watch her daughter's burgeoning catering activities and the growth of her three grandchildren Stuart, Trudy and Karen. These young people now are married and there are great-grandchildren to cuddle and love.

The problem – and it became an increasingly worrying one to both Vi and Barbara – was the bungalow in Milton. It was suddenly too large and difficult to keep. When a small apartment on the ground floor at Bowerham became available, the solution was at hand. In November 1998 Vi moved.

She is now three doors from No. 9 High Street and joins Barbara and Colin for Sunday lunch and a visit every week. She is snug and warm with family pictures and favourite possessions around her. The handsome oak cabinet her father made has pride of place.

There may no longer be five generations of Vi Smith's family living in Shipton but the two generations that are left (Vi and Barbara) still carry on the Miles tradition of community involvement, friendliness and good will that make the Wychwoods such a wonderful place to live.

Many happy years at the old Shipton Gasworks, Vi!

Trudy Yates



Telephone : 92.
Oxford 4191

POST OFFICE
OXFORD

Your Reference

P.O. Reference
H.P.

30th May, 1947.

Dear Mr. Miles,

It is now nearly two weeks since the Telephone Exchange at Shipton-under-Wychwood was converted to automatic working and you have at long last been afforded the relief you so much desired.

A matter of twenty years has elapsed since the time you took over the Telephone Exchange working and during that time you have, no doubt, seen many changes and surmounted plenty of difficulties, especially those associated with the circumstances affected by the war years.

I should like to take this opportunity of expressing to both you and Mrs. Miles my sincere appreciation of the services you have rendered to the Department and of your unstinted conscientious application to your duties.

I hope you will thoroughly enjoy the relief from official worries and cares which I know you have both been looking forward to for a considerable time.

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Mumtaz Ali
Head Postmaster.

A list of telephone subscribers is printed overleaf

SHIPTON TELEPHONE EXCHANGE - LIST OF SUBSCRIBERS

F. W. P. Matthews Ltd.	B. (?) Avery
W. Smith	J. Henman
Miss Bailey, Foxholes	F. Hartley
Dr. Scott	Mr. & Mrs. P. W. R. Haynes
The Countryman, Idbury	W. H. Edgington & Son
A. V. Mason, Ascott	W. H. Rawlins
G. Monteath, Fifield	J. W. Davey
Lord Latymer	Capt. Milne
Keith Cameron	Mr. & The Misses Batt
S. E. Groves	E. Hartley
K. G. Feiling	Mrs. Smith
Miss Langden	R. Avery
Miss Dalston	E. K. Meecham
Col. & Mrs. Hall	R. Hartley
Major Shaw	N. Heanly
T. Tayler	J. Griffin
P. Holloway	K. Strong
Mr. Hewlett & Miss Ward	Capt. Baker
H. A. Lambert	Pratt & Haynes
Great Western Railway	G.F. Clifford
R.J. Bradley	Mr. Hammett
	Mrs. Mawle

From the Old Form of Communication to the New

The following e-mail was received by Graham Nelson at the address he gave in his article about the Wychwood Project Web-site in the last issue.

From pimperl@aol.com. "I was so pleased to find Wychwood now has e-mail, and hope I can locate someone there to contact with, though I have been gone many years my roots are still well rooted there. The map from the Post Office around a walk I walked so many times down Lancut and sitting on the stile outside my home "Spring Cottage" then across the meadow to the kissing gate and across the green. It would be impossible to say the pleasure I got from it, and reading The Wychwood, though there are so many changes and names I do not recognise, as I knew everyone in Milton and most in Shipton. My most sincere Best Wishes to all that contribute to giving so much pleasure to those of us so far away.

Brenda Bishop (née) Brewerton, Florida U.S.A."

We have now established an e-mail address for the magazine – wychmag@aol.com – for the benefit of anyone able to use the service. Should any reader without the facilities wish to contact Brenda via e-mail, we would be pleased to send their message for them. Anyone wishing to use 'snail mail' could doubtless obtain the address from Doreen Barnes (see page 1).