

Gladys Jean Ward Bennett

4 March 1918 to 6 November 2010

On the day Jean was born, 04 Mar 1918, the Spanish flu pandemic was affecting a huge proportion of the world's population, but thankfully, Surrey Street in Ryde seems to have missed out, and Jean was born safely at the home of Ellen BRIDLE, a HENLEY relative known as Aunt Nell. The flu virus is said to have helped tip the balance of power in the latter days of the First World War towards the Allied cause, but Jean and her family were unscathed.

Jean's birth certificate, obtained in October 2005, shows her birth parents to be Ethel Rose WARD, formerly SMITH, and William WARD, Private in 2nd Battalion Suffolk Regiment of Horingford, Arreton. She was named Gladys Jean WARD on her birth certificate. It is not known why her parents gave her up to be looked after by someone else, but her birth occurred towards the end of the First World War, and perhaps her father was wounded. Her parents went on to have a son, Maurice, but he died aged six months. They lived in Sedan Cottage on St. John's Hill, Ryde. Further research is being carried out to find information about her birth family: her Grandmother was Ellen TROSS, and her Grandfather Charles SMITH from Chale, IW.

Jean, as she came to be known, was "adopted" by Louisa (nee HENLEY) & Henry BENNETT, a Blacksmith and Wheelwright of Ryde. This was before statute law introduced adoption into England in 1926. They lived in St John's Wood Road, Ryde.

Henry and Louisa already had a son, Henry George BENNETT, born 1903, known to Jean as "Jidge"; he was Jean's beloved big brother. She told the family a story about how he threw her off the end of Ryde Pier when she was about 8 and told her "You know how to swim, so swim" which she duly did! This became the philosophy of her life and though she was often in the deep end, she always, through her dogged perseverance somehow made it back to the shallows. She became a strong swimmer and enjoyed being down on the beach with her two dogs, Paddy and Rex. "Jidge" died in 1958, but Jean kept in touch with his children, Tony, Wendy and Terry.

Jean was on the Cradle Roll of the Methodist Church - her mother Louisa was a lay preacher. Jean was loved and supported in her childhood by various aunts, uncles, and cousins in the BENNETT and HENLEY families; they were a close knit clan, who also supported Jean in her later life as a single parent. Jean's children spent their summer holidays with Phyllis (Jean's cousin) and Wilf COTTON, on their farm in Calbourne. Grace and Bill PACEY lived nearby and there were visits with Kate and Eddie BUCKETT. Roy HENLEY delivered bread to their home in St John's Wood Road from the bakery in St Helens, and Aunty Joyce (HERBERT/TOMLINSON), Aunty Gerty (DIMOND) and Aunty Daisy (BALL) who all lived in Ryde, were well known to the children.

Jean attended St John's Infant School, in Ryde, from 1923 to 1925; Upper Grade School, Benett St, Ryde, from 1926 to 1928, and Sandown Grammar School, Grove Road, Sandown, from 1928 to 1934. Jean did well at school; some certificates from her school days have recently come to light:

- A Certificate of Merit, Second Class, for excellence in reporting a lecture given by Mr A Jolliffe on "Alcohol and the Human Body", 2 July 1926 - Jean would have been 8 years old. She rarely drank alcohol in her life so this lecture may have had a lasting impression.

- A Certificate of Attendance - Jean attended Upper Grade School for a total of 426 times out of a possible 430, from 1 Dec 1926 to 30 Nov 1927, (from when she was eight and a half to when she was nine and a half). This strength of character and good health seems to have continued throughout her life, and she rarely saw a doctor.
- A certificate from the United Methodist Church, Dec 1931, Intermediate Division; Subject, Paul the Dauntless Pioneer; Jean passed the examination in the First Class, marks awarded 67% - she would have been aged 13. Paul was a character of perseverance - and so was Jean. Despite many hardships in her life, she kept smiling; even when words had left her at the end, she still smiled.
- A certificate for singing at the Isle of Wight Musical Competition Festival in 1934; the certificate was awarded to Jean for Girls Vocal Solo in Class 77; she would have been 16. Those who were lucky enough to hear her sing will remember her clear voice; she was often mistaken for a choirboy. Her love of music continued throughout her life, although we all have different memories of what her favourite music was!

Jean worked in various shops in Ryde:

- Mellish's, the Post Office in the High Street, Ryde
- Young's in Union Street, Ryde
- Bailey's shop in the Royal Arcade, Ryde
- Hills Stores, on the corner of Newport Street and the High Street, Ryde
- Brighton Rogers, which was at the bottom of Park Road, Ryde.

Jean also worked in stores in London: Selfridges in Oxford Street and Galleries Lafayette in Regent Street where she learned to dress the windows.



Jean was a fashion conscious lady, and was said to look like Greta Garbo! She apparently did some modelling for Pretty Polly - her legs were in a poster that was shown on billboards.

There are many photos of Jean at this time in her life (on the left) with her friend Bobbie Attrill (on the right). Jean had many male admirers - but she never revealed their names!



After War broke out, Jean signed up as a volunteer in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.). At first, she was based in Cosham as a clerk, moving swiftly through the ranks to a supervisor role. In 1941 she moved to a place called "Rosegarth", possibly in Winchester. She later achieved the rank of acting Regimental Sergeant Major. Her ATS record spans the period from Dec 1939 to Feb 1942, when she resigned as she was pregnant with Suzanne.

When Sue was about a year old, we believe Jean was called up to join the Intelligence Corps or Special Operations (SOE); this would have been from about 1943 to 1945, but

official records have not yet been located. She was reluctant to talk about her war time activities, but snippets of information have been revealed over the years that tell of an exceptional talent including:



- being parachuted into France on or even before D Day in June 1944;
- working from the attic of a farm house, sitting on a smelly cheese, to help direct the naval gun fire onto the beach positions for D Day;
- shooting a German with his own gun
- hiding from the Germans up a chimney in another farmhouse with several hams;
- being in a landing craft that was torpedoed on the way back to England;
- taking photographs of Winston Churchill
- being at Belsen in April 1945, when the camp was liberated by British and Canadian troops.
- being in Antwerp, possibly on leave after Belsen

Jean talked to few people about her war experiences; there is nothing definite about this history or her exploits but the research will continue.

Jean married John Hulme SHARP in March 1941, in Winchester. She was based in Winchester at the time; John (also known as Jack) was a private in the Army and previously a Road Transport Manager. They had a daughter, Suzanne, born in 1942; they lived for a while in Hampstead Garden Suburb. We believe he was also a Journalist, and may have worked for the County Press - perhaps that is how they met.

Suzanne was looked after by her Grandparents, Louisa and Henry, until Jean returned home to Ryde at the end of the war. It is not known when, how, or why Jean parted from John Sharp, and his death date cannot be found.

From some time in 1946/47, Jean lived with Jack Choat in Belfast, where Sally-Ann and Peter were born (in 1948 and 1949 respectively). Jack was a Lieutenant in the Fleet Air Arm. Jean and Jack had been at Sandown Grammar School together. They never married, but after he left Jean, in 1950, Jack kept in contact with the family until he passed away in December 2000. He married Mona Pat EVANS, and they had a daughter Sara. He was married before to Eileen WADE, and they had a son, Stephen; they divorced in 1943.

Jean, along with Sue, Sally-Ann, and Peter, returned to Ryde in May 1950, to live with her widowed mother Louisa Bennett, in St John's Wood Road. Sheelagh was born there in May 1951. There were close relationships with other families in the road, e.g. Mrs Marks and her daughter Marion; Kit and Bill Arnold, with their sons Roy and Ray; Betty Downer and her daughter Julia, and Mrs Long, who made lovely jam tarts.

The family moved to Sherbourne Avenue, Binstead in March 1956. Jean was divorced from John Sharp sometime around 1958, but the records have not yet been found. Jean brought up her four children with minimal support from Jack, and it was hard for her - she had very little to live on, and she often went without. The concept of make do and mend, perhaps from the war days, was part of her life.

Jean took a lead in encouraging families in Sherbourne Avenue to enter floats in Ryde Carnival at the end of each summer - King Neptune's Court, with Teddy Long as King Neptune won prizes. The children were garlanded with necklaces made up of seashells collected from Player's beach. The bonnet end of the lorries was covered in crepe paper flowers wired on a net or chicken wire frame; the flowers were made in their hundreds in the living room. "Noddy in Toyland" ended in a downpour, but the kids were cheered up by having a photo taken with a monkey!

Jean was firm friends with many people in Sherbourne Avenue - Pat and Pete Beard and their five children; Trudi and Bob Dale, and their two boys; Dorlie Daniels and their daughter; and the Lacey family, as well as the Jones family from around the corner in Maybrick Road. Jean also kept in contact with relatives such as her cousin Joyce Tomlinson (who later married John Cooper) and her two son's Derek and Michael; Gertie and Walter Dimond and their sons John and Ken. The family have good memories of parties at Auntie Gertie's, where they were warmly welcomed by other Aunts and Uncles, including Nancy and Francis from Godshill, the Fowlers from Brading, and the Henley's from St Helens.

Jean worked at Little Canada Holiday Camp, Wootton, from about 1959 to 1961, and ran the gift shop. Sally-Ann, Peter and Sheelagh used to catch the bus from Binstead to spend time there during their summer holidays. Sue also worked there part time.

Jean later worked as a Charge Hand at Columbia Products in Binstead (from 1963 to 1974). After that, she worked as a shop assistant in Transatlantic Plastics in Union Street.

Jean visited France in about 1970 to review some of the places she had been during the war, e.g. Rouen, and Paris. This must have brought back memories, but she did not talk about it.

Jean loved gardening, an interest that has been passed on to all her children. She often bought more than she could plant, and there were odd pots all over the garden.

Jean travelled to Ontario, Canada in June 1984, to visit Sally-Ann and her husband Michael, who had moved there in 1981. Jean kept a small journal which is being transcribed to share with others.

Jean was well known in the pub-quiz circuit during the eighties where her wide knowledge was appreciated and some of her friends from those days have kept in contact.

Jean continued to work for the Phelp's family in Dean's gift shops, working full time and then part time in the summers, until she was 82. Jean regularly walked to work, and it seems her health started to deteriorate after she stopped working.

Jean continued to live in Sherbourne Avenue, Binstead until she moved to Fairhaven Residential Home in November 2005. Jean moved to Kite Hill Nursing Home on 10th May 2010 as her health needs had changed. She was well looked after, but her horrid skin condition caused her a good deal of pain and her health suffered. In the four years before her death, she had two strokes, a broken arm, and suffered a general decline, with loss of hearing and sight. She almost stopped speaking, but would occasionally come out with a very appropriate phrase: she said, "That colour really suits you" to her daughter in law on a visit, and a question out of the blue one afternoon, "Does it snow in Singapore?". Even when words would not come, she still smiled when she opened her eyes and saw a face. Her smile made your day.

Jean died peacefully in the evening on 6th November 2010. Sheelagh and Sally-Ann were with her at the end. They sat with her, watching her shallow breathing and telling her it was time to let go. Fireworks were going off outside as it was bonfire night. Sheelagh said "Why don't you get hold of one of the rockets Mum, it will give you a head start", and just as Jean drew her last few breaths, a great big whoosh and bang went off right over the top of the building; the sky lit up with a huge bright light. They looked at one another and knew that she had taken the advice.

Many friends, relatives and family members gathered at the Crematorium on 29th November 2010 to celebrate Jean's life, and to say goodbye to a fine old lady. Her ashes were buried in Ryde Cemetery in the grave of Henry and Louisa Bennett, on 4th March 2011 – her birthday. The stone says "Remembered for her smile".