

PEOPLE OF THE PAST

Winifred Emily (Winnie) Fitch (1888 – 1972)

This is the story of a young woman who found herself plunged into the horrors of the Great War, moving home from London to rural Gloucestershire, making a long and happy marriage, with her descendants still resident in the area. It is a story which is not unlike many others of her generation.

Winifred was born into a well-to-do family living in Finchley, the second daughter of Oswald, a master printer and Helen, his Scottish wife. With her sister Gladys (who was just over a year older) she enjoyed a good education, finally attending the Hornsey School of Art. This school and residence opened in 1882 as a series of private classes under Frank Swinstead; it was in Waverley Road, Crouch End, around the corner from the house in which the Fitch family were living by 1891. By the time the girls attended, the residential part of the property had been taken over by the school, and it was part-funded by Middlesex County Council. Both Gladys and Winnie retained an avid interest in art throughout their lives and many excellent examples of their work, especially watercolours, remain in the family.



In the 1911 Census the family are still living in a house called Woodhouse Eaves at Crouch End, with Oswald the only wage earner, but employing a cook, parlour maid and general maid. The house appears to be a large Victorian semi-detached villa, and it is possible the family moved there when it was first built. Change came rapidly in April 1915, when Oswald died. When probate was granted his effects were valued at £26,742, and this sum enabled Helen, his widow, and the two girls to purchase a property at Besbury (although they spelt it Bestbury) and move there later that year. Why they chose to move to Gloucestershire remains a mystery, although perhaps Mrs. Fitch, who had grown up in rural Scotland, wished to return to the countryside.

The girls soon became assimilated into the local community, making friends with others of the same age in the Playne and Beale families. Of course, the young men were fighting overseas, and it was this that spurred on their womenfolk to undertake war work. Gladys, Winnie, Noel Playne and other Minchinhampton women all volunteered to work making munitions at the Phoenix Works in Thrupp. Many of the foundries of the Stroud area produced brass shell cases that were sent by rail to Quedgeley to be filled with explosives. The female workforce, who were well paid by the standards then prevailing, all wore identical khaki clothing, with their heads covered – a far cry from the usual garb of the Fitch sisters to judge by their photograph albums. They worked long days – twelve-hour shifts were the norm – but were quick to learn the skills of drills, lathes and other heavy machinery.

In March 1917 Winnie married Colin Forbes Mackenzie, a Major in the Indian Army, the third generation of his family to serve in that sub-continent. Although he was born in Cheltenham, it seems likely that they met in London, and they were married in St. George's Church, Hanover Square, well known for its military connections. Colin returned to active service, and over the next few years Winnie raised their three children here in Minchinhampton, whilst her husband served overseas, eventually retiring with the rank of Lt. Colonel. He predeceased her by some thirteen years, but Winnie, and her sister (who never married) enjoyed a long and happy association with Besbury.