

# NOVEMBER MEETING

— 2nd Speaker —

## Voices from a Village

### A St Margaret's Oral History Project

A Talk by Christine Waterman - Reported by Alan Lee

Christine commenced her talk by detailing the background to the project from when they won a grant from Up On The Downs to the start of the project. She said that the talk would concentrate on four major parts of the project.

#### **Maria Kingsford Wood of Holly Lodge**

This, the earliest voice, in diary form, detailed her life in the centre of the village. She started her diary in 1819 and continued until her death, aged 63, in 1853. Born Maria Loud in 1790 she lived in Holly Lodge, adjacent to the White Cliffs Hotel, from 1818. It was this year that she became the second wife of Thomas Kingsford Wood who was 23 years older than her. He farmed the 245 acre Westcliff Farm.

Incidentally Thomas's niece, Mary Kingsford was married to George Hatton Loud, the largest landowner in the village.

He bought the estate of William Kingsford when he went bankrupt in 1834. This land was later to become Coombe Valley Road and also the site of the workhouse, later Buckland Hospital. At present her diary only covers up to 1829. The St Margaret's History Society would dearly love to find the later years of the diary.

#### **Mabel Evan's Diary**

Mabel known as Maisie was born in 1867, one of five daughters. Her mother Agnes, widowed in 1897, bought Holly Lodge and 4 acres of land overlooking the sea at St Margaret's in 1898. She had a house built and named it Platt Seline after a beach in Alderney. This was to be run as a sanatorium for schoolboys from Kings School in Canterbury. Designed by Mr Alport the house was constructed from compressed paper and card. Expected to only last for 20 years it was still going 40 years later.



*Mr Claringbould and his Plough Team at Westcliff St Margaret's*  
© St Margaret's History Society



*Maisie aka Mabel Evens about 1917*  
© St Margaret's History Society

Maysie was living there at the outbreak of the war in 1914 and had started her diary just prior to that. An early entry notes that boys aged 17 years that she had known from Kings were already commissioned officers stationed at Fort Burgoyne. It was at this time that St Margaret's was rumoured to be a hotbed of enemy spies.

Her last major entry was of an air attack on the village during May 1918. The pilot was brought down near Dover and the headless body was buried the next day.

During WWII Maysie was moved out of Platte Seline because the house was near to the site of the cross channel gun POOH. Returning after the war she found that the house was derelict so she moved to Holly Lodge and lived there until she was 90, in 1957. Her sister remained living there until 1966.

### **Charles Croucher**

Born in 1920 he came to the village aged 5 as a foster child with the Newman family in Curling Cottages, Capel Lane. He lived there until he went to work in London in 1936.

Charles died in 1993 and in 1996 his widow published some of the manuscripts he had left her. The 140 page book was mostly devoted to the life of the village between 1925 and 1936.

A lucky chance saw a box of photo's donated to the archives. This contained many images of the Newman and Finnis families. One of the daughters had married one of the Finnis boys.

Charles played a full part in village life during the 20's and 30's. He attended the local school and was one of only three lads who gained a scholarship that year to the new Dover County School for Boys, now

the Dover Grammar School. At the time most of the pupils were fee paying.

He met a number of famous people in the village, his favourites were Hermione Gingold who lived in the village and Gracie Fields who is said to have had a cottage on the beach.

The final part of Christine's talk gave the audience an insight into the project and its aims. She then continued with a selection of slides of famous people who had lived in the village after 1925. These included Johnstone Forbes-Robertson and his American wife Gertrude, a famous acting couple of the early 20th century. They lived in Bay Hill House which they renamed Bloms. In WWII the house was requisitioned, first as a hospital and then as military accommodation. Lady Forbes-Robertson became very friendly with Noel Coward, another famous resident whom she had known for years. Their post war maids were interviewed as a part of the oral history project.

The Rev. John Winn, lives at Ringwould but his family once had a garage in Reach Road. This was run by the four sons of ex-lighthouse keeper Charles Winn.

A major aim of the project was to gather wartime memories. The Stone family were all interviewed with John Stone speaking about the railways crossing the village and the sighting of a great many doodlebugs. Geoff Cant remembered the early 50's and the times of great change and building work in the village.

Christine gave thanks to all of the volunteers and interviewees who had taken part in the project. She finished by showing a clip of a wartime Pathe film about farming during wartime.