

Imaging the Past

Written by

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One day in the 1890's, young Celia Simmons got on a train in Dover (alone or not?) and travelled to Romney Marsh, to Appledore, and was met by her great grandfather Charles Dengate with a pony and trap. He greeted her, and took her to his house in Wittersham, on the Isle of Oxley; slightly higher than the rest of the marsh. Behind his cottage was his bakery where he worked daily. In his cottage he had a grandfather clock made by Ballard of Lamberhurst, which he bought in 1834 when he was only 18. His photo sits inside his clock, a serious-looking man, but then with their photographic exposure times you did tend to look solemn. He died aged 78 in 1894, when Celia was 9.

Celia - my grandmother - told this to her son (James) Eric, who remembers taking her to try to find that cottage in the village in the 1980's, not long before she died. They hesitated outside a cottage called "Dengate" which seemed to be the right one; but did not ring the bell. Celia had inherited the clock (does this mean she was special for him?) and I remember its restful tick-tock in Folkestone, and after her death in 1975 it passed to Dad. It moved on the top of his car, and lives with him, and continues to keep time faithfully for him, as long as its weight is pulled up twice a week. It stopped for a while on the day of my mother's funeral in February 2005 though....maybe a gesture of respect.

On 14 October 2005, Helen and I drove Dad to Wittersham; and he remembered we needed to go down The Street. We explored and there on the right was Dengate, looking just the romantic image of a country cottage; one storey in brick, a slate roof, trim red door with exuberant flowering shrubs gloriously obscuring it. We went round the back to the usual entrance, and Dad knocked on the door. It was answered; a puzzled but curious expression greeted us as we introduced ourselves to Mick Marchant, who invited us in. We were lucky to catch him in, as he usually works away in Lincoln. His wife was in too; though only because she had broken her toe and was off work. They were fascinated to see our photos of the former resident and his family tree, and hear some stories. They were very welcoming, showed us their back room, and explained how they had converted it from the bakery; and the oven hole is still in the wall.

When Celia and Eric had stopped outside, it had been owned by an Oxford don as a holiday retreat; he had left the bakery as it had been, a separate building. The Marchants had converted it. Lots of bricks, clay pipes and small glass bottles had been found in the garden as this was indeed an industrial site. They have also found lots of little horseshoes which proved to be the metal heels for ladies' shoes; a later occupant of the bakery was a cobbler. We saw clay pipes; did Charles smoke these? They think the adjoining house may have been joined up with theirs. They were happy for us to take some photos.

They recalled that the man in the antique shop - the former grocer's store - had given them a copy of tokens which used to be exchanged in Dengate's bakery for a pound of bread. They were issued by the Kent Mendicity Society which was lead by local worthies who tried to persuade locals not to give to beggars as they would only spend the money on evil drink; instead food tokens would be issued.... But where are those tokens?....

We went to the shop and found Fred and Gillian Shepherd; she is a Simmons, and there are Dengates and Staplys about. He kindly gave us a copy of the Society's poster and tokens, and was interested to have a copy of Charles Dengate's photo later.

Charles (1816-94) married Celia Staply in 1836, and the Dengate family was large; we know of eight children; so two cottages seems right. Celia Sophia was one daughter who became the second wife (or was she in modern terms "partner"?) of Michael Walsh from Tralee (1821-77). He had returned from distinguished soldiery in India during the Mutiny, and his first wife had died in Calcutta of cholera. How did he meet Celia?

Celia Sophia Dengate became a Walsh, then, and we have her photo in her very smart clothes; by "W H Broad, Artistic Photography, 3 Townwall St Dover; All negatives kept." Michael's image only survives as a somewhat ghostly face in a blurry photo; by "Wilson and Son, 95 Harrow Road, Paddington Green, London; day and electric light studios. Copies of this can always be had"! Fascinating that their images are now in the latest megapixels in my computer too! Copies of these can always be had...

Their children included Charles (1863-1945), a boot maker (was he at Dengate?) who married Alice Mary Marsh (1863-1943), a Romney Marsh

association again, probably. She was one of 5 children left without her father William Alexander Young Marsh who was a Trinity House pilot was drowned off Dungeness on 14 March 1879, in good weather, when the steamer "Severn", not keeping a proper watch, rammed his cutter and it sank in 5 minutes, drowning many Dover pilots.

Charles and Alice had three surviving children, my great aunt Ivy (King), great uncle Charles Walsh, and grandmother Celia (1885-1975). Charles went off to S Africa and became a bigamist there, unbeknown to poor Alice, who had to bring up the children.

The village today is one of those which remains much as it was; it has a Victorian school, where the Dengate children must have learned to read and write, also a mill which ground flour for Charles; it has been restored and is open on summer Sundays. The church has a churchyard with very eroded gravestones, and Mrs Marchant has not found any Dengates. We had a look; a few blackberries clambering on leaning stones.

After we left the antique shop we made the 6 mile journey in Dad's car, on its last outing before he had to give it up to make way for a new form of transport in his garage, a buggy. We imagined Charles going down the lanes in his trap, down the hill, past the forges where the pony could have been shod. In one such, now another antique shop overflowing with all sorts of memorabilia, we had a refreshing cup of tea. We were surrounded by all those things which trigger memories of the daily life of grandmothers and aunts, as change subtly erodes the images of today's life for tomorrow's.....and then we reached the quiet station of Appledore, with its Victorian buildings and even a Victorian post box where Charles could have posted a letter...

Roger Simmons, October 2005