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# SPREAD A LITTLE HAPPINESS

*She wakes them up in the morning, delivers their messages and brings them smiles along with their letters and parcels. Six days a week, come rain or shine, postwoman Blanche Ravenscroft will be out cycling on her rounds and keeping an eye on the village*

BY WALTER CLAPHAM



Photograph by Chris Holland

**T**he hedgerows may be starred with dog-roses or humped high with snow, but it's all the same to Blanche Ravenscroft. For the past 10 years she has cycled eight miles a day as a country postwoman in Staffordshire. And for 10 years before that she took over the round whenever the regular was sick or away.

In all the years Blanche has been doing the job she's had only three days off for illness. Out in all weathers, up hills and along wind-

ing lanes, she serves the 700 people of the village of Colton and its outlying farms.

All this seems remarkable enough but in fact it's only a part of her impressive life of dedicated service to the village.

For instance, riding round some leafy corner she may notice a knot of children setting off to play. She would know at once where they were going.

At last the village of Colton has its own children's play area and—having done a two-year stint as

chairman of the parish council—Blanche would be able to reflect on this with pride.

## *Keeping an eye on her village*

Further along, a glimpse of dahlias in a cottage garden may set her wondering just how many entries the class for decorative dahlias will attract at this year's village flower show: she's the secretary of the show. Or sunlight on a beehive may

start her thinking about honey and preserves. She's also the treasurer of the village Produce Guild.

In some ways Blanche Ravenscroft seems to be the heart of Colton—and she's certainly its ears and eyes. As she cycles along on her round she can't help but keep an eye on her village. Mud on the road left by a farm vehicle, rubbish dumped where it shouldn't be, or an ugly pile of hedge clippings—her eye has taken note.

And, as she delivers her letters  
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## SPREAD A LITTLE HAPPINESS

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and packets, her ears are attuned to complaints. Couldn't the council do something about those barking dogs? Why haven't the dustbins been emptied this week? Surely something should be done about that right of way?

"Put it in writing!" says Blanche, "and it'll go on the agenda." Unless, of course, she knows there's an immediate remedy. She has always been well versed in council procedure: her husband was clerk to the council for 25 years.

By regularly popping letters through letter-boxes she keeps people in touch with each other. Equally important, perhaps, is the way she helps them to communicate informally—by passing on messages about village activities. "Blanche, don't forget to tell Mrs. So and So about the produce committee meeting, will you?" That's the way it goes all through the village.

### When the alarm doesn't go off

Her day begins when most people are still fast asleep. By 6.15 a.m. she is in the village post office sorting out her mail and by just after 7 a.m. she's on her way—seen off by Pixie, her grey and white cat.

Pixie waits at Holly Cottage (their joint home) to see her mistress ride by and follows loyally for the first 50 yards or so. Then she retreats, climbs up the yew tree outside the cottage and plops through the bedroom window. No one seems to remember when she last used a door.

In a few hours' time she will welcome Blanche home. Pixie seems to know the postal schedule by heart, and sometimes shows her anxiety that it should be strictly adhered to. For instance, when the alarm has failed to go off—or Blanche hasn't woken up—Pixie has rescued the situation by knocking things over to attract her attention.

Blanche has a few regulars who use her as their alarm clock: she wakes them up by knocking on their doors and windows. And, if curtains are closed when they shouldn't be, Blanche knows that a particular sleeping mum isn't getting herself ready for work or her children ready for school—and she knocks before moving on.

There's another bit of ritual about the start of Blanche's journey. When she's delivering along the straggling main street, and comes to the house of her daughter Gwen, she has her grandson to remember, four year old Justin. He gets more "post" than most children.

Blanche has a stock of used envelopes she's addressed to him and inside there's always a little note. Soon, no doubt, there'll also be messages for Justin's sister, Josephine, who is now a year old.

And then it's out of the village proper into the lanes and the outlying parts. Blanche began working as postwoman through an accident.

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"Well, I suppose it was rather strange how I got into the job," she said.

"An old lady had been doing it for many years—right through the war—and then one very bad winter, with thick snow and ice, she fell and broke her wrist.

"Several people had a go and then, when I heard that someone who'd only been doing the job for a week wasn't going to carry on with it, I thought: 'Now I've a good mind to have a shot at that.' It seemed a challenge.

"At that time I was just the mother of two young children—Ruth, my elder daughter, was at school but Gwen, who was about three then, was still at home. I thought, if my neighbour could look after Gwen while I was on the round, I'd have a try. She said she would, so I popped down to the Post Office and I told them I would be able to do it.

"Very relieved they were. This was towards the end of January and it was a bad winter. I had to use my own bicycle—I was quite used to cycling: I'd been riding a bicycle all my life.

"They wouldn't give me a bicycle when I started because it was supposed to be a walking round, which was ridiculous. I remember I was told by the post lady I'd succeeded: 'You mustn't ride that bike, you know—you're not supposed to ride that.'

"Later a man who took over from me while I was on holiday tested the whole route and found that it came to eight miles. So eventually they did allocate a bike, and I'm now using their third." After 10 years as a temporary, Blanche had started work for the Post Office on a regular basis.

### Finding conkers for her grandsons

She notices the weather more than most people. "It's always been lovely in the summer—perhaps especially in the early morning.

"The lanes are winding and just slightly hilly—there's one quite stiff climb—and there are trees most of the way. Oak, ash, sycamore, elm, beech and horse chestnut."

In the early autumn she usually finds time to gather a few conkers for her grandsons. As well as Justin there's Mark, aged seven, and Adrian, four, the sons of Blanche's elder daughter, Ruth, who lives in Stoke.

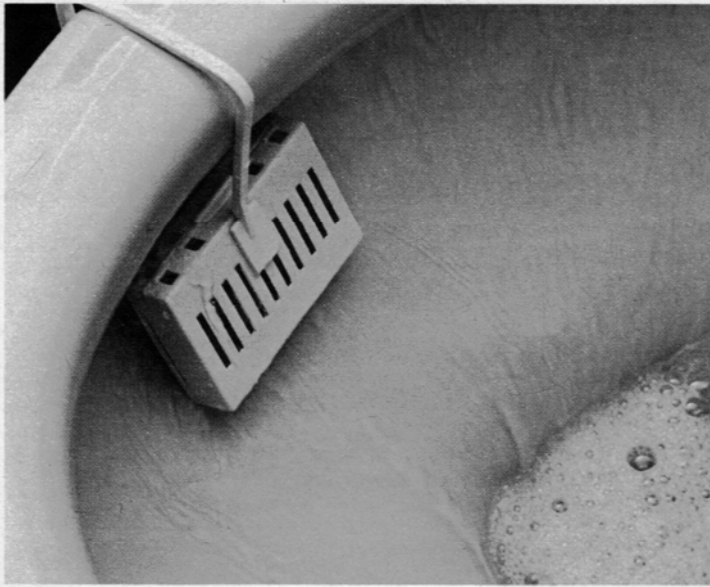
"There are always plenty of wild flowers," Blanche went on, "though perhaps not as many primroses as there used to be. I really don't know why—perhaps it's because of the spraying.

"And not quite as many wild violets—they're more of the weedy type now. But plenty of honeysuckle in the hedgerows.

"It's really nice as you go riding along through the lanes in the sunshine, hearing the birds and seeing the flowers. There are always lots and lots of squirrels and you see the occasional rabbit or hare."

At least, that's the sunny side of

*please turn to next page*



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Stockists for fashion on pages 26-27

## WHERE BEAUTIFUL CLOTHES BEGIN



**Marks & Spencer bra and French knickers:** Major branches of Marks & Spencer.

Peking glass bangles, £11.50 each, Neal St. Shop (see address below); pendant and chain, £3.50, Adrien Mann.



**Wolsey cami-slip:** Rackhams, Birmingham; Eaden Lilley, Cambridge; D. H. Evans, Oxford St. London W1.

Jade animal pendant on chain, Gay Design, about £2.65; two Peking glass bangles, £11.50 each, Neal St. Shop; one plastic dark jade bangle, £3, Gay Design.



**Marks & Spencer slip:** Major branches of Marks & Spencer. Green beads,

two rows, £2 each, Adrien Mann; green bangles, from 20p each, Baggage & General, Top Shop, Oxford Circus, London W1.



**Dorothy Perkins straight nightie:** Main branches of Dorothy Perkins.

Green bead on silver chain, about 35p, and jade ring, from £5.75, both from Neal St. Shop.



**Wolsey short nightie:** Watt & Grant, Aberdeen; Eaden Lilley, Cambridge; Bentalls,

Bracknell, Ealing, Kingston; Mary Lee, Tunbridge Wells; D. H. Evans, Oxford St. London W1.

Jade heart pendant, £2.40 plus 25p for gilt chain, Neal St. Shop; jade and silver bangle, about £15, Adrien Mann.

**Neal St. Shop jewellery:** Neal St. London WC2.

**Adrien Mann jewellery:** From most jewellery counters in boutiques and big dept. stores.

**Gay Design jewellery:** Most big dept. stores.

## SPREAD A LITTLE HAPPINESS

*continued from previous page*

it. "But, of course, I also remember the bad times. I've been caught in blizzards and all sorts—horrible!—although, mind you, we haven't seen that kind of winter so much lately.

"I remember once leaving my cycle outside a farm because it was so icy and when I came to pick it up it had frozen solid—the wheels just wouldn't go round. So I had to tug and push it home as best I could.

"Sometimes, when the snow is really bad I haven't been able to take the cycle out—you wouldn't even be able to push it. I've had to walk the whole eight miles. And then there are the floods. There's a little bridge just before you come into the village—the bridge over Moreton brook—and we always get flooding around there.

"Time after time I've had to cycle through those floods—even when cars can't get through. I just ride through it with the water halfway up the wheels. You've just got to keep moving. If you stopped pedalling you'd be off. So far I haven't fallen off my bike into the water—not yet.

"But I've been blown off. I'd got to one farm in a terrific wind and when I was just about to start the journey back a gust fetched me right off. But somehow I landed on my feet.

"How I did it I'll never know. I looked down at all the mud and I thought: Good gracious! I might

have landed face downwards in all that." Ruth remembers the winters. "I remember my mother getting back late from the round because of all the ice and snow and how her hair, under her hat, would be white with frost.

"She'd come back absolutely frozen and we'd be building the fire up, trying to get it to go well, so she could thaw out. At that time she used to wear her own clothes. And she wouldn't wear trousers."

Ruth remembers, too, how, when her mother was working temporarily, she could be called out at a moment's notice.

"One morning she said: 'Oh, I'm so glad I haven't got to do the post-round this morning, I don't feel all that well.' I said: 'Well, don't speak too soon,' and almost at once there was a knock on the door. We were told that the post-lady had been taken ill some two miles out and Mum would have to finish her round."

## Hunting for wild flowers

Gwen recalls the summer scene—the times when she rode on the round with her mother, with the object of gathering wild flowers so that she could enter the children's collection of wild flowers class at the flower show.

"While Mum would be delivering letters I'd be hunting in the hedgerows and fields for the different wild flowers, and she'd get cross because I was holding her up. I

used to fill the postbag with wild flowers and poor Mum had to carry them back.

"But I always used to get first prize in that class."

Blanche is used to being asked about the postman's occupational hazard—the fierce dog. "Bitten three times," she says promptly. "Each time by an alsatian—and each time by a different alsatian."

Then there are the minor hazards. "Well, of course, I've had my tyres let down—by boys. When I've questioned the only boys I can see—no, they haven't done it. But I do carry a pump with me."

Punctures, however, are a different matter and mean a long push home for repairs carried out by Mr. Ravenscroft.

Letters, packets, parcels—Blanche tries to accommodate the lot on the carrier of her bicycle.

But some of the things she is expected to deliver are problem packets—to say the least.

### The parcel that nobody wanted

"There was a time when people on holiday, say in Grimsby or Yarmouth, used to send presents of kippers back and I'd have to take these out, all smelly, on my carrier. Then there were gifts of pheasants. They'd come with nothing else but labels stuck round their necks—with just the name and address and a stamp.

"I used to dangle them on the handlebars and hope that a cat or dog wouldn't make a grab at them as I cycled through the village on my round.

"But the most awful thing was when a parcel came one morning and it smelt to high heaven. The postmistress said: 'Oh, put that outside,' and I thought: 'Now I'm certain I'm going to have all the dogs in the village following me.'

"Well, it wasn't quite so bad in the open air but when I got to the house to deliver it I warned them: 'You won't want this indoors because it smells absolutely terrible.'

"I learned afterwards that they'd buried it straight away. It seemed that it was a couple of ducks that a son-in-law had sent. They must have been on their way to them for ages."

At Christmas the gifts she gets herself often consist of farm produce: one regular Christmas box is a sack of potatoes.

Blanche is a practically minded woman and when you talk to her about the changing face of the English village she tends to reply with hard facts. For instance, she knows that country people in 1975 are convinced that the telephone is a necessity. She knows because she has to lug round their telephone directories.

"Oh, they're so much bulkier and heavier, and there are many more of them. I would say, when I started, there'd be about a dozen directories to deliver and they were nowhere near as thick.

"Well, two years ago I had 80-odd to deliver and last year it must have been 118. It takes days to get them

around. I can only manage 80 many at a time on my carrier.

"Almost every villager seems to be on the phone now. It's one of the biggest changes I've noticed."

But Blanche doesn't think that people in her village have changed. "No, I don't think they've changed a bit. Basically they're the same—nice."

She looks upon her rise to parish council chairman as the climax of a gradual process. She has been on the council for 13 years and she has long been actively involved in village affairs.

"You know there was a time when I wouldn't have had the confidence to speak in public. I always remember when I was suddenly asked, at a Mothers' Union meeting, to propose a vote of thanks. I really don't know how I did it but somehow I managed."

One thing—one organisation—led to another. "I don't think I could have done parish council work or been chairman, if I hadn't been in these other organisations."

Blanche is, above all, a country-woman. Born in a neighbouring parish, she has lived in the area for almost the whole of her life.

She is proud of country values and sees them expressed in such traditions as the Women's Institute, the Produce Guild and the flower show which is run jointly in Colton by the Guild and the WI.

These things mean much to her. For instance, she is proud of the fact that her daughters joined the Produce Guild as toddlers and are members to this very day. She remembers with particular pleasure a summer's day in 1973.

"I had to present the trophies at the flower show that year, as chairman of the parish council, and we'd come to the ladies' trophy—that is, the highest points in the show for everything: stuff from the garden, handicraft, cooking, everything.

### Why Blanche prefers village life

"Usually, you're told beforehand who's won, but this time nothing had been said, and I began wondering.

"Then, when they said it was Mrs. Gwen Johnson—my daughter—oh! I was so full. For a while I just couldn't say anything to her. It was such a thrill for me—something absolutely outstanding!

"You see, if I had my time over again, I'd still choose the village. I think people are closer. I don't think I could have been as happy in a town. Here, I really think I can say I know everybody and everybody knows me.

"As for the job, I'll keep on doing it as long as I can, because I enjoy it. It must keep me fit. I enjoy the fresh air and, if I wasn't doing my round, would I go out every day for a long walk or cycle ride? It's questionable whether some days I'd go out at all. But now I've got to go and so I'm sure of the exercise and the fresh air.

"You see, I'm interested in my life. It's all been most satisfying—rewarding you could say." » »

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## Jus-rol

### Recipe of the month

(No. 5 in a continuing series in this magazine)

#### TURKEY PUFFS

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13 oz. Jus-rol puff pastry  
1/4 lb. chopped cooked turkey  
2 tablespoons chestnut purée  
1 1/2 oz. chopped button mushrooms  
3/4 oz. butter  
Beaten egg. Seasoning

Mix turkey with purée and seasoning. Fry mushrooms in butter, add to turkey. Cool. Roll out pastry, cut into 6 squares. Divide mixture into squares, dampen pastry edges and fold diagonally into triangles. Glaze with egg. Bake for 15-20 minutes at 400°F (Mark 6).

Jus-rol for perfect pastry.

# TIO PEPE

THE Sherry



by **GONZALEZ BYASS**