

Family Studies, 1 -

Doris Clarke, a life.



Richard Clarke

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Doris died in the night, very early on 15th November, 2008 at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn, Norfolk of an “Ischaemic stroke”, having also suffered from rheumatoid arthritis since the late 1980s and, latterly, a heart valve defect which had caused her to lose weight and become very weak. Her half sister ‘Greta’ (see later) died exactly one month earlier, 15th October, in the same hospital.

Doris was born on the 6th October, 1924, her birth certificate dated 8th November was issued by the Downham Registration District, south-west Norfolk (see Fig. 1). Our parent’s marriage certificate records the date of their wedding at Boughton parish church as 20th September, 1924 and is dated 8th March 1978, the significance of the accompanying phrase ‘pursuant to the Marriage Act, 1949’ is unclear. The marriage certificate records the father Sydney Walter Clark (wrongly spelled) as being 25 (born 1899), a “husbandman” and his father as “merchant”. Our mother Annie Rix was 22 but no information is given as to her ‘rank’, ‘father’s name’ or ‘father’s rank’. Annie already cared for a child ‘Greta’, then just five years old.



Fig. 1 Picture of Doris as an infant, found among papers after her death.

The young family lived in a semi-detached cottage, '2up, 2 down', at the western end of the village of Boughton, south-west Norfolk – the cottage survives. The extended family living there included the grandparents on father's side and both Doris and Greta could recollect 'Grandad Clarke', who may well have been the 'character' of the household. Both grandparents died at separate points in the 1930s but I have been unable to find surviving headstone in the churchyard (the village has no civil cemetery). It is interesting that father in the marriage certificate is defined as 'husbandman' as in one of the census enumerator returns relating to grandfather he is defined as 'market gardener'. Neither Doris nor Greta had any recollection of this. However I believe father had a few acres of land near this cottage and a piece of land in Church Lane. It seems both were sold in the 1920s. The few acres near the cottage may have been a veteran's allotment, father having served in the Tank Corps 1917-1919 and in the Occupation of the Rhineland to 1921 (see Family Studies – Sidney Walter Clarke).¹

The two half-sisters grew up together and, although memory is selective, a repeated theme of the sister's recollections of those early years was of 'picking wild flowers' and delighting in them. After Doris's death, having the job of clearing the house, among Doris' papers I discovered a few photos from these early years. Of these four (Figs. 2, 3, 4 and 5) show the sisters through childhood.



Fig. 2 Greta (left) and Doris as young children (1925).

¹ By the terms of the Small Holdings (Colonies) Act, 1916 and 1918. The issue of 'veteran's holdings' has been studied for the book Dakers, C. *The Countryside at War 1914-1918* (Constable, 1987, 195-198). Falling agricultural prices in the 1920s hit hard ex-soldiers with allotments as they had no cushion of war-time profits to fall back on.



Fig. 3 Greta (left) and Doris with dog, early 1930s.



**Fig. 4 Greta and Doris in 'Sunday best', standing beside a high coursed flint wall
c 1930.**

Fig. 5 shows the young sisters, behind Doris is Phyllis who became Mrs. Turner and whose late husband had printed his recollections of a life working in the Fens (*Tales of a Fen Farmer*, 1995) and whose son Rod. attended both funerals and who has worked at Methwold Secondary School for 50 years! Phyllis was Doris and Greta's mother's half sister.



Fig.5 Doris (left) and Greta with Phyllis H-. The other lady I just remember visiting as a child. I think she was called Mrs. Anderson and she and her husband lived in a two-up, two-down terrace cottage in Wretton (long demolished), c mid 1930s.



Fig. 6 Doris as a young woman. The location is the north-east corner of what had been the garden of the Post Office (later the Old Post Office). See the article on the history of the Post Office, Boughton. I think this must have been taken in the late 1930s or early in Second World War.



Fig. 7 Three sepia like portraits. Numbers written on back suggest they may have been taken by a school photographer, possibly at Boughton School. Who is the person on the right? It may be Greta who stayed at Boughton school until she left at the age of 14 (no secondary education system for working families). She occasionally spoke of being made unhappy by verbal bullying relating to her being illegitimate.

Greta (Greta Rix) would have attended Boughton village school from c. 1924 to the mid 1930s (see Appendix). She left aged 14 and like many contemporaries did not attend a secondary school. With father working as a farm labourer and mother as a cleaner and farm labourer family poverty may have been a factor. Doris would have attended the village school from 1929 to 1935. She then attended Downham Grammar School until the age of 16. Like myself, as I did between 1959 and 1966, she cycled to Stoke Ferry to catch the school bus.²

So from September 1936 to July 1941 Doris attended the Norfolk County Grammar School at Downham Market. This School, opened in 1931, survives with the main buildings much as Doris knew them – it is now a sixth-form college. Among Doris's papers was a copy of the printed programme for 'A Commemoration Service on the occasion of The Twenty-first Anniversary of the opening of Downham Market Grammar School', held at St. Edmund's church on 20th May, 1952. I guess she went.

² Sadly Norfolk County Archives, Norwich Castle have very few archives deposited from either Boughton school or Downham Grammar school.

Three specific archives relating to Doris's time at secondary school were found – a hardback school report book in which are 15 single page reports, from Dec. 1936 to July 1941, secondly a scroll school photograph in a cardboard tube (much damaged) and thirdly her School Certificate Examinations report, July 1941. A section of the photograph clearly shows Doris standing on the back row, the date is missing but she looks comparatively young so I would guess it to be 1937, maybe 1938. The Report Book shows Doris got off to a flying start coming second out of a form of 35 in December 1936. Throughout the comments were favourable but between Christmas 1937 and Easter 1938 she was absent through illness (not defined), and for the rest of 1938 she struggled. In 1940 her form was 'IV Lower' suggesting some streaming although she again came second. The one recurring criticism is exemplified by the comment in her final report, "Does not show much interest in games and sports", this a woman who, as it turned out, in later years cycled many thousands of miles as the village post-mistress. Despite gaining a credit in English Language and Literature Doris sadly failed the overall Certificate Examination by the terms of what now seems a brutally rigid system.

Doris retained an active interest in her 'old school' for over a decade and retained at least one school friend for the rest of her life. Her papers included four Downham Grammar School magazines, 1948/'49/'50 and 1953. The 1948 one, under 'News of Old Pupils', records, "Doris Clarke, Sub P. Mistress, is in the Post Office, Boughton", (see below). A letter dated 1949 shows she was on the organising committee, while a surviving Programme shows she attended the service in 1952 on the occasion of the unveiling of the Memorial Plaque, "Of ex-pupils of the School who fell during World War II 1939-'45".

I do not know exactly when Doris became the sub post-mistress. She had a certificate from the Post Office on her retirement dated October 1984 (a separate letter confirms it as the 5th). It compliments her service 'over more than 35 years' which would give her a starting date somewhere in 1949 (although the phrase 'more than' may have referred to a number of years). However I think Greta had left home before this so Doris may have started a year or two before, an idea supported by the magazine reference above. I

don't recall any mention of Doris having any other job between leaving school and taking on the post office.

Doris's papers revealed two official forms regarding a vacancy at Boughton sub-office and dated 1st and 4th of April 1936! One document details the business done at the post-office, the other confirms the appointment of S.W. Clarke, our father, as sub-postmaster. For some reason he had this position in name (I was aware of this when younger) but to the best of my knowledge always worked as a farm labourer after returning to the village from the Occupation of the Rhineland, c.1921/22. I remember him talking of working at Hall Farm, but during my life he worked for R.G. Robinson who lived in what is now 'Harwin House'. So had perhaps Greta worked at the village post office (she always worked for the Post Office in King's Lynn after leaving Boughton, as did Stanley her husband) until Doris took over? Papers relating to the house 'Old Post Office' show our mother received the house from her relative Mrs. Rix (mother?) in 1944, but had they moved to live in the house before this?, I thought they had gone there in the late 1930s, but am not sure why I thought this.

Four items from the 'official forms' of 1936 were of particular interest. Among the listed items belonging to the Post Office and received by S.W. Clarke were 10 brass weights and a spring balance. My recollections, from late 1950s onwards, include one of Doris taking these weights and the cash balance upstairs each night to put under her bed. Secondly the opening hours which seem strange – 8-15am to 8-30am, 9am to 1pm, 3-30pm to 6-15pm, with Tuesday half-day closing. Tuesday remained so until Doris' retirement. Thirdly the letter box was defined as the property of the Postmaster-General – this was at the side of the house and set into the wall, and it tended to be a source of domestic irritation when people posted letters and then didn't shut the gate! It was removed and the space bricked up when Doris retired. Finally a reference to, "A continuous telephone service", when younger I was told the telephone was Post Office property and not for making personal calls, although it meant we were one of the few households locally with a telephone.

In June 1939 Doris was awarded a British Red Cross Society certificate in 'Home Nursing', while after the Second World War she was awarded a certificate for her voluntary work at the 'Service's Canteen' in Stoke Ferry. This was awarded by the Methodist Church which along with the Baptists had organised the canteen. Clearly by this time she was a very active Methodist and a letter dated March 1946 shows she was organising the Boughton 'Squad' connected to the Methodists and the Downham Market Circuit. A number of photos survive showing large groups of mostly young adults and in the past Doris had spoken fondly of Methodist Youth Fellowship holidays and outings. During my younger life the family regularly attended the Wesleyan chapel which stood next to our house. After Sunday tea Doris would leave first as she played the organ. The parents and I followed, walking through the gate in the fence to the side entrance of the chapel. We always sat in the same pew, third from the front in line with the pulpit. Doris, Greta and our mother all played the piano and, although she had been unable to play for some years due to rheumatoid arthritis, the piano remained in the 'front' room until after Doris' death. After the chapel closed Doris often attended the parish church and often played the organ there, albeit with increasing difficulty.

An early medical card survives showing that Doris became a patient of Dr. Calder of Stoke Ferry from May 1942. Issued by the Norfolk Insurance Committee (it pre-dating the National Health Service) this suggests she was paying a subscription, and therefore in work?

Two more discoveries dating from the War years were of particular interest. A National Registration Identity Card survives for our father dated Nov. 1943 – interestingly at the address Post Office, Boughton. It was certified by one Edith Marks and I am sure that this was the farmer he worked for before working for R.G. Robinson. Mrs. Marks describes herself as Senior Casualty Worker and some of the wording suggests he had some Home Guard role, but I have no further evidence. Secondly, three photos survive of the crew of a Wellington bomber. Of course the airfields at Bexwell, Marham and the landing strip between Boughton Fen and Barton Bendish would have led to many airmen being in the district. Another photograph shows a serviceman's wedding with All Saints church, Boughton in the

background. Doris stands far left, mother far right and Greta second right, front row. I do not know anything of the occasion.

So certainly from the early-mid 1940s the household was as I came to know it as a child. Father was a farm worker at Robinson's farm, Fen Road, Boughton. When I started working there in school holidays c.1962 there were 33 workers based at the site, sadly now derelict at top of Oxborough Road (then known as Fen Rd.). Basic hours were 7-30am – 12 midday, 12-30pm – 4-30pm, and father would come home midday for a cooked 'dinner'. Mother often worked in the 'big house' as and when needed, cleaning etc. but was also a part time farm worker, particularly in the large orchard which then stood, along with various small piggeries, north-west of the Rectory garden and east of Church Lane, (half way down to the 'Common'). Doris had to attend to the sub-post office through the day while often getting dinner ready as well. When a customer came in the front door a loud bell rang through the house. At 4-30 a.m. she got up, wheeled the post office cycle from the outbuilding and cycled to Wereham post office, then near the village pond. The 'mail' came by van from Kings Lynn, was sorted and then delivered by bike. Until sometime in the 1970s she also went off at 4-30 p.m. to collect and deliver the second delivery, although not then delivering to outlying properties.

In the morning cycling up from Wereham she would deliver to Gibbet Lane, Fincham Road, Barton Road, through the village to the pond, Church Lane and through to Stoke Road and Fen Road. The cycles were red with a large front carrier, heavy and unstable. It was a memorable moment when she was eventually issued with a new bike with a 'three speed'. Such a work ethic seems hardly credible now.

Doris also did other things in the community. As stated previously she played the organ in the chapel. She was also the returning officer for the parish at election time when voting took place in the primary school. Doris also 'did the books' for R.G. Robinson and on Saturday mornings he would walk up to the house to discuss this, and world affairs generally. He came in the back door (no tradition of knocking) but was not invited in beyond the kitchen ('them and us'). At about the same time Frank Savage would

deliver groceries from the village shop (long gone), Doris having delivered 'the list' earlier in the week.

For some of this time it was a six day week including Saturday mornings. Doris would, perhaps once a fortnight, catch at 2p.m. on Saturday the one bus a week to Kings Lynn. She tended to buy nice clothes and always had a full wardrobe. Sometimes mother went also. Father never went, much preferring, by the 1960s, to watch wrestling on the television and see to the garden. We had a television quite early on, I have a vague memory of 'Fabian of the Yard' being on when I came home from primary school, but otherwise Doris always had the Light Programme on the 'wireless' – Worker's Playtime, I later discovered, being a hangover from wartime.

Holidays however were not a big part of our life. Clearly Doris had been on some group 'Fellowship' holidays as a young woman but in my recollection she only took holidays when invited by others, e.g. Betty and David in Stoke Ferry or relatives in London. Her papers contain some diaries kept of holidays when a young woman. I remember twice going on holiday with my parents to a caravan in Hunstanton. One of these was cut short when mother was taken into hospital to have her gall-bladder removed.

Mother's death in 1977 was a serious blow. Father had retired some years before and was then still able to care for the garden and help deliver letters some times. He had no tradition of doing housework so Doris had little time for herself, particularly as he became increasingly ill. Her retirement in 1984 gave her more time for caring duties, but little else. It was a cruel twist of fate that having devoted herself to an evolving caring situation, soon after father's death in 1987 she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis from which she increasingly suffered. It was a further tragedy that in 2008, while in hospital and having finally resigned herself to the fact that she could not return to the house and cope, that she then suffered the stroke that proved fatal.

Throughout her life, to the best of my knowing, Doris was a committed Methodist, not only ethically but socially as well in that she was well known in the Circuit and helped with floral arrangements and arrangements for lay

preachers etc. Mother and her use to clean the chapel. I believe her faith gave her strength to cope with radical change, loneliness and disability.

At different stages of her retirement she was helped and supported by various people in the village which had changed completely from a mixed farming community to a dormer village. Especially was this true of 'Horry' Stannard who was so helpful across many years. In later years Doris valued the Dial a Bus service which made it just possible for her to get her groceries, first in Kings Lynn and more recently in Downham. She also joined the 'Mardlers' group in Stoke Ferry and I have personally thanked them for their support.

The condition of the Old Post Office had deteriorated and, as she was worried about keeping it maintained, in 1994 Doris had accepted an offer for the whole of the garden from the new private owners of the ex-chapel next door.

Doris died in November 2008, aged 84. Just before suffering the stroke she told me she had led, "A quiet life". Following cremation her remains were interred in our parent's grave on the north side of All Saint's churchyard, Boughton. A commemorative public seat was subsequently erected on the east side of the village pond.

Having catalogued Doris' school archives discovered in the Old Post Office after her death I donated them and my school archives to Downham Market museum at the Town Hall (2013). They were lodged in the Downham Market Grammar School file.

Appendix

Boughton's primary (elementary) village school was sited west of the village pond, the exterior of the original building survives but is now a private house. Among Doris' papers I discovered a few photos from the early 20th century, some of which show the school playground.



Fig. 8 This photograph has written on the reverse 'Boughton School girls, 1909'. One child may be my mother – born 1902 and thus a pupil from 1907 to c. 1915. However, sadly I do not know which one she is.



Fig. 9 Four photographs which appear to record Empire Day celebrations, 1909.



Fig. 10 A photograph dated 1908 on the reverse, includes my father, back row far left (I believe). He would have been a pupil from 1904/05 to 1912/13. He once told me he left early because he passed the leaving test early. The lad back row, far right is 'Ally', (never knew his real name), during my childhood lived in a wooden hut on Robinson's farm and was that farmer's last horseman.

