

PHYLLIS GAINEY - Maid to Prince Doria and family

Phyllis was born in 1910 and lived in Shepherdswell in her childhood, but at the age of 15 she rode over to Birchington with her father to take up the position of maid to Prince Doria's family while they were holidaying at Minnis Bay in about 1925. Her father then cycled back to Shepherdswell, once he had seen her safely into her new employers' care. The Prince and his family were (and probably still are) the richest family in Italy, after the Pope. Not long before their arrival in Birchington the Prince had married an English lady while he was studying here and he fell in love with the country. This encouraged him to rent and then buy a property in Minnis Bay on the corner of Grenham Bay Avenue and Harold Road. He then bought the plot beside it and built two houses, one for himself and his wife and daughter and one for his sister-in-law.

While they were in England for two or three months each summer, they lived very simply, much to the delight of his wife and child, but to the annoyance of those Italian staff who had accompanied him. They did not like English food, the English weather or, what they considered, the cramped conditions of the properties in Harold Road, after the palaces they all occupied in Italy.

On Phyllis's days off she would cycle all the way back home to Shepherdswell and back - 22 miles each way! Hopefully she had more than one day off at a time. While she was working for the family she ate with the cook in the kitchen and developed a taste for spaghetti in wonderful sauces. She probably helped out in the kitchen, which gave her the chance to learn the secrets of some of those sauces. When she eventually married, her family were treated to some of these delicious dishes every so often. She would also buy up the stale cheese (and sometimes send her children to the grocer to get it, if she were busy), as the stale cheese grated so much better for those sauces. Her son John clearly remembers the fact that his family often had spaghetti instead of the potatoes, which all his friends ate.

Phyllis's father worked on the land and was therefore quite hard on his footwear. Prince Doria discovered this and used to donate his own (or perhaps some of his staff's, slightly used boots for Phyllis's father, which she would then transport back to Shepherdswell on her days off.

Phyllis died in 1996, having tried several times with John and his wife to try and locate the Prince's house. All three of the houses in Harold Road are hidden behind high hedges now.