

ROWLANDS CASTLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

STANSTED TAPES

**MRS HEATHER WITHERS (nee WEBB)  
6 MAGPIE COTTAGES  
IDSWORTH**

**Interviewed 05-10-2004**

Aged 16, she was taken on as permanent staff at the naval orphanage but wanted more experience. Admiral Little's wife who was on the orphanage committee said 'The only place where she will learn good quality cooking is at Stansted Park'

I was taken by the matron met by Mrs Jackson the cook. She had been with the Bessboroughs since 1936 and had worked in the London house. She came from Eksdale in Cumbria a very, very nice lady. I had raging toothache and later Mrs Jackson said 'if two people had applied you would not have got the job and I would have lost the best kitchen maid I ever had' She was called Mrs Jackson, a courtesy title because she was a 'miss'. I was with her for 2-3 years before she had to go home to look after her sister. Things were never the same after that.

Monday –cleaning the copper pans with sand, vinegar and I think flour, cleaned by hand, and they looked so good afterwards on the shelf. Pans for stew were lined with tin when worn they were sent to be re-tinned.

Mrs Jackson made splendid puff pastry, started on Friday or Saturday night and took 24 hours to make. We were used to Lady Bessborough coming down to pass the menu every day.

Cleaning was mainly done when the family was away including the Spring Cleaning. The kitchen was downstairs; the upper kitchen was used as a scullery. A man came every ..... bringing grouse, partridge, teal and venison. Mr Chase came from the farm to dress game, hares and pheasant. I learnt so much. When there were three of us in the kitchen we had to do it ourselves. A grouse was sent from Scotland one August, the things were crawling but you still did them, you got used to doing it.

The gardener came in every morning to ask what fruit and vegetables we needed. Everything came in half past eight to nine o'clock. Once a week we used to get a bowl of butter or cream sent up from the farm not every day. Lady Bessborough was tough about keeping to the rules on rationing in a way. We had chicken off the farm when we needed them. Meat was plentiful. At Christmas we actually had turkey. We used to get up at 6.30; first job was servants' breakfast. It was just after the war and rationing was still in place, everyone had their own butter on a saucer, in differently coloured dish, to last a week.

There were 9-10 staff, odd job man came in every day. There was a cook, butler one footman, housekeeper, housemaid, I have left someone out, it is the ladies maid, most important not to forget the ladies maid. I met Ethel Miles, Doble, as she was then. We shared a bedroom at one time. Before Ethel came I had a room of my own top room on the top floor with the round window looking towards the cricket pitch. For some reason I was moved round the corner. When Ethel came she and I shared a room. She was older; she had been in the A.T.S. I learnt about people. Being brought up in an all female household you do not realise what it is to go into a house where there are men working. I had no idea! It sounds a bit daft but I learnt an awful lot about the seedy side of men's life

She was cleaning the house so I did not see much of her during the day. Sometimes we went down the village in the afternoons, we both had bikes, I did not learn to ride when I went up there so did not learn until I was 18. We had a good laugh!