

MRS REX AITKENS - HORSTED KEYNES

Mrs Rex Aitkens lived at Strouds, down Church Lane. It was only much later in life that her first name of Phyllis was used. Mrs Aitkens was widowed early and the correct form of address for a widowed lady was to use her husband's first name, which Mrs Aitkens always did - it was simply a matter of correct protocol. Lt Albert Reginald Knight Aitkens (known as Rex) died in France in May 1915, aged 30. Nowadays that strict adherence to what is correct is not generally followed quite so rigorously.

Mrs Aitkens played a central role in life in Horsted Keynes and took part in many activities.

The earliest of any recorded activity is an event which has largely been forgotten now, this was the 1929 Pageant of Ashdown Forest in which Horsted Keynes took part to raise funds for local hospitals. - the village was represented in Episode 5 - Charles II and the Earl of Dorset. - [Nell Gwynn Saves a Poacher.] Mrs Aitkens took a principal role representing Nell Gwynn and it is through her pleading that a poacher caught by the foresters is released from custody, at which stage Nell Gwynn leads the King off into the Forest for a dance.

The story continues that ale flows freely among the commoners, while Courtiers mingle with the crowd in the shades of the forest. John Plawe the poacher, is taken away to be tried by the King, and Nell Gwynn takes his part and pleads for him with Charles, who orders his release upon which the beautiful Court favourite herself cuts his bonds and sets him free. The Royal Party is entertained by folk dancers, at the conclusion of which the orchestra strikes up. Nell Gwynn finds herself without a partner, and with a laugh runs to the King and drags him, weakly protesting, to complete the figure to the delight of the whole assembly.

Throughout their episode the Horsted Keynes contingent



EPISODE FIVE.
A.D. 1660.

Nell Gwynn invites
Charles II to dance.

seems to find the opportunity to quaff ale - (several times) in comparison to the Danehill contingent who are ironworkers and have no such merriment in their episode - they are labourers.

This photo above is of a sketch taken from the programme and represents Nell Gwynne. We then jump on to June 1934 when there is a prominent newspaper article about Mrs Aitkens and it was headlined:-

Woman who Clothes Stars.

It's commented that woven fabrics made in Horsted Keynes were being worn by famous film stars in Hollywood studios and describes the scene.



Mrs. Rex Aitkens at work.

Mrs Rex Aitkens started a weaving business in Horsted Keynes in about 1932 and today [1934] she employs 5 highly skilled weavers and 30 spinners in various parts of the country. She plans the designs and supplies many large London stores. A wholesale firm in Chicago buys the fabric from her and sends them on to Hollywood.

Practically all the wool used comes from the famous Andalusian herd of sheep owned by Sir Merrick Burrell of Floodgates, near Horsham. So rare and valuable are these animals that some of them are to be repatriated by Sir Merrick as there are none now left in Spain.

In a pleasant room overlooking the village green, Mrs Aitkens and her assistants are busily engaged at looms, weaving the fabrics which

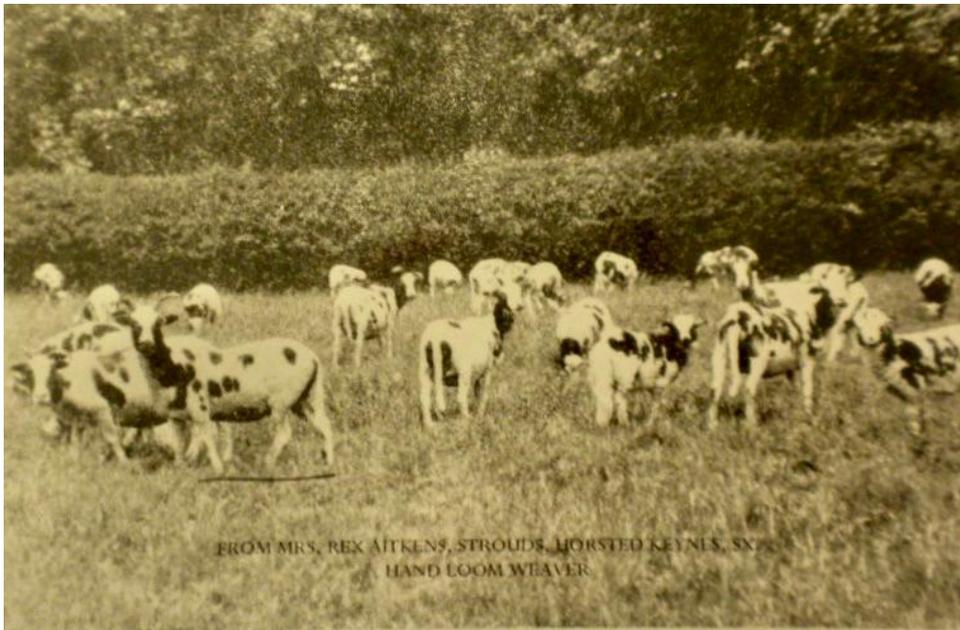
are used for so many purposes.

Way ahead of her time Mrs Aitkens used natural dyes, such as Oak Tree dye and she produced a yellow fabric dyed with lichen obtained from these trees. The tweed from the Andalusian sheep produce a fine close tweed which can only be produced from their wool. The wool was particularly suitable because so many natural shades could be obtained without using dyes and she produced undyed wool in 7 distinct shades of brown, grey and white.

Another fabric of a peculiarly vivid red was dyed from an extract taken from Caithness seaweed. In pre-war days this dye was made fast with raw alcohol, and the material thus treated was made up into hunting pink, which was waterproof. But the use of raw alcohol is now forbidden so an aniline dye has to be used for hunting coats.

From the the late Peter Kirby's photo album I found a postcard entitled "From Mrs Rex Aitkens, Strouds, Horsted Keynes". It depicts a herd of sheep which are probably Andalusian. [next page]

In 1937 Mrs Aitkens took part in a debate held at the Parish Room in connection with the motion that 'This meeting is of the opinion that service with the armed Forces of the Crown



provides the best opportunities for the youth of the nation' submitted by Lt-Col Ralph Clarke. Mrs Aitkens stepped in at very short notice to take the place of Mrs Corbett Fisher who had to unexpectedly cancel her part in leading the opposition to the debate. Mrs Aitkens (who said she was not pretending

that the points of view she put forward were her own, but she was doing it only to start a debate) led the opposition.

On being put to the meeting the motion was lost by a substantial majority. An amended motion that service in the Armed Forces of the Crown provided excellent opportunities for the youth of the nation was carried by 30 votes to 23.

Turning now to July 1938. There are few recorded instances of Horsted Keynes and Danehill coming together, but support for the Danehill and Horsted Keynes Nursing Association is one prime example.



This Association benefited everyone but they were always in need of funds. Local people with big houses and gardens often offered their premises for summer fetes to raise much needed money. Keysford in Horsted Keynes owned by Mr and Mrs Ronald Hardy was one summer venue in July 1938. A large marquee on the lawn contained several attractive stalls. Mrs Rex Aitkens entertained a large number of 'guests' at her bottle parties but these took the form of hoopla for prizes ranging from bottles of ink to champagne! Mrs Aitkens was assisted by Dr T A Andrews and Mr T D W Duker.

At intervals there was radio music to entertain the visitors and late in

Ronald Hardy on the water chute

the afternoon the morning room in the house was filled with an appreciative audience for a concert arranged by Mrs Aitkens.

There were prizes based on entrants' tickets at the gates and one prize was 'An afternoon on the water shute at Keysford Lake' which was won by Miss Ella Patnell from Horsted Keynes.

The approximate net proceeds from the fete raised the excellent sum of £115.

In addition to helping raise funds for the Nursing Association Robert Fry recalled that later in life she was called Phyllis and she did a lot for the older people - whom she referred to as the 'old people' yet she was the oldest of them all.