

Bear with me whilst I set the scene. I have to explain how I came to be involved with the Market 31 years ago. The husband, having been through the trauma of massive reorganisation at work, which had affected his health, was offered early retirement at which he jumped. He finished work at the end of January 1983. I was working full-time at an office in Corporation Street, Birmingham, and pondered the situation. It didn't seem right for a husband to be home on his own, so in a moment of madness I handed in the statutory 2 months notice. I bade the office goodbye at the end of March. At first it felt like being on holiday but I was quickly asking myself "What have I done?" To say I felt like a fish out of water would be an understatement. From dashing off each morning to catch the 8-o'clock into Brum and the 5-o'clock back at night, I was suddenly adrift. Husband was happy as a lark pottering in the garden but I was all at sea. I confessed my feelings to my dear friend Anne Kettle and she promptly said "Why don't you get involved with the Market?" Modesty prevents me from passing her judgement on my cooking, suffice it to say she thought I would be a more than welcome recruit. I was a member of Dorridge W.I. and so was Pam Hetherington, who was a big-wig at the Market. Before I knew it Anne had accosted her on my behalf. Pam suggested I come along to the Market on Friday morning, not too early, to meet the controller which, with much trepidation, is what I did. The controller at that time was Elizabeth Mulroy. I had a talk with her and she sold me a Market Handbook, an invoice book and a small supply of packaging i.e. foil plates, cellophane bags and labels.

The following Thursday saw me making my first offerings. I decided to do four apple pies and two orange and raisin cakes, following Elizabeth's advice not to do too much to start with. It took me all day, of course, and working out the selling price was a nightmare. I was told how to arrive at this, but to me it was difficult. Then the packing was a challenge as it had to be just right. I filled in the items in my invoice book, in triplicate, and after an almost sleepless night of worry husband took me down to St George & St Teresa's Catholic Church Hall, where the market was then housed. He helped me in then departed, saying he would return to collect me late morning.

My items were checked in, passed muster, and I was assigned to help on the cake table. There I met Valerie Paterson who was very kind to me, the new girl, showing me the ropes etc. My four apple pies sold and one of the orange and raisin cakes, which wasn't too bad a beginning. Had I but known it, it was the introduction of something that would take over my life.

I got to know the stalwarts. Elizabeth Mulroy, of course, who was instrumental in also setting up a Market in Balsall Common. Several Balsall Common producers attended the Dorridge Market as well, mainly craft producers. Other prominent people were Eleanor Browne, Kathy Holmes, Joan White, Ursula Bates and Ruth Walker. When I saw the boxes of stuff being carried in that some of them had produced, I thought I really needn't have bothered. But when I received favourable comments on my baking after people had tried it, and actually ordered more, I was elated. I was hooked. From those modest early days my output increased, due to what I think is called popular demand. I made fruit pies, Eccles cakes, Bakewell tarts, and savoury pies as well, chicken & mushroom, steak & kidney etc. Christmas times were especially busy as orders came in for literally dozens of mincepies. I was hard work but rewarding to receive words of appreciation afterwards.

Doris Lines and her husband Ken joined the market very soon after I did. Doris and I quickly became absorbed into the swing of things. At that time, Markets were under the umbrella of the National Federation of Women's Institutes which had extremely strict criteria. There were rules and regulations that must be adhered to and each year we attended Market Conferences, held in a variety of destinations. There was a lot to take in, but Dorridge Market was amongst the most successful in the country, and we were very proud of that.

A year after I joined at the Annual Meeting, I was elected on the Committee and my first job was a checker-in. Had to be very careful the goods tallied with the Invoice Book. Any discrepancies had to be referred to the Controller. Elizabeth by this time, had the role of Treasurer, a post she was to hold for many years, and Ursula Bates was Controller. It was coming up to the Market's 10th birthday and at a Committee Meeting this matter was discussed. I rushed in where angels fear to tread and offered to host a celebratory lunch at my home. Someone made a large birthday cake, and I was excused duties at the Market that Friday morning, to prepare the buffet. I had made several quiches, salads, etc. It was quite a gathering and seemed to go down well.

In 1985, husband and I celebrated our Ruby Wedding with a trip to America. Immediately on our return, I attended a Committee meeting, to find a certain John Poke had appeared whilst we were away, with some surplus lettuces. Instead of putting them on the compost he wondered if they would be suitable for sale. Indeed they were. His virtues were extolled, what a willing man he was, helping with sweeping-up after the Market and making himself generally useful. His wife Ena had also come along with him, and was going to do some baking. The following Friday I made their acquaintance, and thus began a most fabulous friendship.

Shortly after this, we put on a Market at Knowle Fun Day in Knowle Park, and husband Leslie transported me. Instead of disappearing, he decided to stay, and was roped in selling plants. He so much enjoyed the experience, he decided to become a shareholder. He paid his 5p and duly enrolled. He formed a rock solid friendship with John and it wasn't long before he became an enthusiastic marketer. He took plants along that he had grown, and when they sold, he was chuffed.

When a vacancy arose for a book-keeper, he, good with figures, volunteered. Every Friday he would bring the invoices home, and every Friday afternoon was spent working on them. Nothing, but nothing, got in the way of this commitment. He often found mistakes which he drew to Elizabeth's attention, and actually saved the Market quite a bit of money. We never arranged holidays at the end of the month, because that was a very busy time for him, totalling the invoices, writing the cheques to pay the producers for what they had sold, less 10% for Market running costs. Elizabeth then took over, to sign the cheques, with one other signatory, complete the pay slips, etc. and hand the envelopes to the producers.

After awhile, at a later Annual Meeting, I became Secretary and then Chairman, an office I was proud to hold for many years. Doris became Controller and a very good one she proved to be. She kept a steady ship, making sure standards were maintained, and dealing in a nice way, with any problems. We were a very happy Market. We knew the customers and listened to their news with genuine interest. We shared their highs and lows. There were many happy times. For Leslie's 70th birthday in August 1990, a surprise party was organised. The birthday boy had no inkling of this. It was held at John and Ena's lovely

home, haycock Farm, Bakers Lane, and everyone from the Market was invited. All brought a contribution, a plate of something, which was all pooled together, rather like an American Supper, only this was lunch. It was absolutely marvellous. The sun shone and it was a memorable occasion.

We had several altercations over the years with the powers that be at the Catholic Church, and the hall was too small anyway for our expanding needs, so we decided to explore other venues. Doris and I attended a Committee Meeting of Bentley Heath Community Hall, and they were more than happy with the prospect of a regular Friday booking from the Market. So we moved, lock, stock and barrel to our new abode. A bigger hall, much larger kitchen, and a good-sized stage on which the Order Department was housed. We quickly settled in, very happily.

Sometime afterwards, we were told a new floor was being laid in the Hall and we wouldn't be able to use it. We decided to put on the Market outside. Set the tables up on the strip of land adjoining the hall, and mercifully the weather was kind. It was a huge success, almost a garden party atmosphere, enjoyed by producers and customers alike.

We put on outside Markets at Dorridge Day, occupying a big corner of the marquee and what fun it was. We also did Markets at various WI functions and Knowle Fun Run

In January 1995, Leslie and I celebrated our Golden Wedding. We cleared with Mrs. Russell, the then booking secretary of the Hall, that it would be all right to extend our time on this particular Friday, and she was more than happy to permit this, as there were no afternoon bookings. After the Market had been put to bed, everyone was invited to stay on for a little buffet we provided. Some of the talented craft ladies presented us with little gifts they had made, and these are treasured still.

John became door-keeper. He stood at the entrance and handed out the cards to the queuing customers, on which their purchases would be written. He got to know them all by name, and each received a personal welcome which was lovely. He particularly liked greeting, in a very loud voice, a certain titled lady, as he thought it added tone to the Market. Dear John, if anyone added tone it was he. He fed half of the neighbourhood with his beautiful fresh vegetables. He would be sited on one side of the entrance doors and Leslie on the other, dealing with customers who wished to pay by cheque. They were like a pair of book-ends. Some newcomers actually thought they were security men, which maybe was no bad thing.

It is sobering to reflect on the number of people who have come and gone over the years. Too many to name individually, but each passing was deeply mourned, and they remain in our hearts.

It was a bombshell when the W.I., fearing it's charitable status was under threat by the very successful commercial markets, decided we could no longer be part of their organisation. So W.I. Markets ceased to be. What to be called? In the end it was decided to re-brand as Country markets and Dorridge W.I. Market morphed into Bentley Heath Country Market.

Although age and infirmity have overtaken me and prevent me from attending any longer I still have a great interest in Market matters and I am so pleased it continues to thrive. As it prepares to celebrate its 40th birthday, I wish it all good fortune. It provides not only quality home-produced goods but something not found in any supermarket. A real community service.

To sum up, my abiding memories of the Market are of fun and friendship. For that I will ever be grateful.

Joan Spriggs