



1. Phoebe at twenty-three.

A Bigness of Heart

Phoebe Cusden was born on 2 March 1887 in Reading, an ordinary red-brick industrial town with an unmerited reputation for dullness and an unsung record of tolerance and social concern.

Her full name, at birth, was Annie Phoebe Ellen Blackall, and her family always knew her as 'Nell'. Her father was a farrier, 'champion farrier of the country', in his daughter's fond estimation; her mother, until she married, had been a schoolteacher. They were Anglican (her mother devoutly so), right-thinking, Conservative-supporting rural tradesmen, although William Blackall, as a farrier, found work in both town and country.

The family moved around a lot. Before she was three years old, the family left their terraced house in Body Road (a respectable address, though barely five minutes' walk from the worst of the Coley slums), to the *Fox* at Cane End, then an attractive country pub some five miles outside the town along the Woodcote Road. Her father ran the pub alongside the forge – not an unusual combination in those days, and a handy arrangement for customers waiting for their horses to be shod.

The Blackalls soon moved again – to Somerset, where Phoebe's father took a job with the County Council, teaching his craft to would-be farriers in the villages. They returned to Berkshire in 1901, where Blackall worked in Windsor for the vet who tended the King's horses; and then, in 1906, back to run the forge and pub at Cane End once again. It seems that the Blackalls were on friendly terms with Squire Vanderstegen and his family, who owned both properties.

William Blackall was Treasurer of the local Sick Benefit Slate Club – 'The Pride of Cane End', a pride derived partly from the fact that its members drew on its resources very little:

'Whether the healthfulness of its members was conduced to chiefly by the situation of the beautiful beechwooded village or by the elixir of life that is dispensed at the old English hostelry, history recordeth not', wrote a local journalist after attending a merry meeting of the club in 1907. 'The dinner

was provided by Mr W B Blackall who, in addition to being host was also Treasurer of the club and the singer of a good song....'

By then Phoebe had already left home. When she was about fourteen years old, she went to work for the village postmaster and shopkeeper at Wargrave on the Thames, where her grandparents kept the *Old North Star*. Here she worked for the tiny sum of two shillings a week. 'Mr Sansom always said he liked me to serve his best customers', as she recalled. After a year she was offered an extra shilling a week. This she indignantly refused, and handed in her notice: this was not how a good worker should be treated.

Phoebe walked into the main Post Office in Reading (then on the corner of Broad Street and Chain Street), and was taken on then and there to work temporarily in the Telegraphy Department. Telegraphy was booming, as the world grew smaller and the technology better and faster – and the new trade brought with it a whole range of jobs available to women. Phoebe, working in the Wargrave Post Office, was certainly aware of this.

She soon mastered Morse telegraphy, and took the Civil Service exams that she needed to qualify for a permanent job. She was proud of that spirit of public service: 'we really felt that we were performing a vital public function'.

It was work she loved, indeed excelled at, and she was later to write with real affection of the buzz and the hum of the telegraph room, 'the air filled with the harsh metallic clicking of innumerable sounders, whose sharp dots and dashes spelled out unceasingly messages about every conceivable subject – work and play, business and pleasure, Life and Death – with cold impartiality'.

Special occasions, such as 'a speech by a Cabinet Minister, or a League football match played at home, would flood the office with pages of press telegrams, and the instrument room would become a humming hive of industry, Wheatstone transmitters buzzing loudly as they disposed of the traffic at the rate of three or four hundred words a minute'.

Phoebe rose swiftly through the ranks, and eventually became Assistant Supervisor, the top job then available to women, in charge of a staff of sixty women clerks and thirty girl messengers. She was very popular with her staff, who gave her the nickname of 'Bepa' (her initials reversed, perhaps an in-reference to her job, 'beeper?'), and set up technical classes for her colleagues, who then qualified for higher pay.

Her own qualifications (First Class Honours in the Telegraphy and Telephony City & Guilds exams in 1908 and 1909) she gained through evening classes at the new University Extension College, then housed in the ancient Hospitium of Reading Abbey behind the Town Hall.

The University Extension College, which later grew into the University of Reading, was at that time an unusual and exciting institution, which, its founder dreamed, might one day transform the town 'into some sort of local

