

SOMERSET CENTENARIANS

Kalina Newman

From Tiller girl to amateur photographer, the centenarians of Somerset have a rich and varied history. In this celebration of longevity, twenty centenarians living across the county share the stories and secrets of their long lives.

Having lived through two world wars, coronations, inventions, and other momentous events, the men and women featured in this book are now supported by Somerset Care either in residential homes or independently in their own homes.

Their stories of the past 100 years were captured by Kalina Newman. Her notes and recordings have been turned into a series of narratives about life in a century gone by, brought to life with additional factual information.

The stories are beautifully illustrated with photographs from the centenarians' own archives, coupled with bespoke contemporary portraits by photographer Anita Corbin.

This book is a celebration of the long and varied lives of a special group of Somerset residents, and as testament to this its production uses county-based resources – from the researchers to the photographer.



Anita Corbin



Kalina Newman

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Somerset Care is one of the leading independent not-for-profit healthcare providers in the UK and is based in Taunton, Somerset. It celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2011, and the production of this book forms part of its anniversary celebrations. The company has 31 care homes for older people in Somerset, Gloucestershire and on the Isle of Wight and provides support every day to many thousands of people living independently in the community.

Kalina Newman spent 20 years as a professional chef before taking a degree in English and Film at Exeter University. She lives in Watchet, Somerset.

Anita Corbin is an award-winning photographer whose portraits have been collected by the National Portrait Gallery. She lives in Wellington, Somerset.

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Above: Gwen sitting in a pretty dress, Folkestone, 1957.

Left: Hilda, 1930s.



Right: Vincent refilling batteries, South Wales, late 1930s.



GWENDOLINE BETTS

'I'm a dancer... I've danced all my life'

QUEEN WAS BORN at Berrington Road, Weston on April 16, 1909 and had three siblings, Mabel, Hugh and Vivian. Her father's name was Simmonds and he was a rubber plantation manager who spent a lot of time away from home in Africa. Gwen would always have fond memories of him and was very close to him as a child, but due to his constant absence a strain was put on his relationship with Gwen's mother Violet. Before Gwen and the children came along, Violet was an actress singing in many silent films and worked for the Simmonds Brothers.

BERTIE SIMMONDS 1889 - 1947
A pioneer of early cinema, Simmonds started out as a Lancashire cinema exhibitor before the onset of 'talkies' and built up the Somerset Group, the largest film equipment servicing company in the world. Born in Southport, he created Southall studios, one of the first film processing companies in the UK. In 1913, he produced an epic about the reign of Queen Victoria called *Queen Victoria's Coronation*, which he financed and helped produce at Ealing Studios. The following year he bought Winton Hall in Bournemouth and converted it into his studios and his first production was *Queen Victoria's Coronation*, which was a great success in the UK and sold to the US for a four-figure sum. Following the outbreak of WWI, he produced a fictionless newsreel called *The European War Day by Day*, which played to record audiences. He then went on to shoot several sentimental dramas based on literary classics such as *Little Women* and *Madame de Merteuil*. The immediate post war period was fairly difficult for the British film industry, mainly due to competition from growing film production in America.

Violet Simmonds was the archetypal matron and a force to be reckoned with. She worked until she was in her seventies as a housekeeper and cook. For all her toughness, she brought up five children meticulously, making sure they didn't want for anything. After spending a year in Whitstable living in a wooden bungalow, the family moved to Twickenham for a long period of time. During this time Gwen and the other children went to a little private school in London. There came a point when Simmonds faded from their lives and Violet met Alexander Butler, who

D.O.B. 04/04/1909

Row 1: Leslie Miles, Gwendoline Betts, Annie Isherwood, Edith Wilkinson
Row 2: Ivy Springham, Irene Hardwick, Hilda Grove, Alice Hansford
Row 3: Mabel Stuckey, Lady Margaret Tredgold, Ivy Adler, Vincent Cooper
Row 4: Bessie Barnes, Eve Monkton, Harold Dare, Minnie Taylor
Row 5: Winnie Weston, Hilda Goulding, Florence Yelland, Harry Patch



Example of a double-page spread.