

A Village Childhood

By Terry Hadland

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One of my earliest memories is of lying in my little bed watching raindrops sliding down the telephone wires outside the window. There were only a couple of telephones in the village in those days and the wires connecting them were taken via telegraph poles which marched down the side of the hill on which we lived. The raindrops chased each other down the wires and I often wondered what happened to them when they reached the bottom of the hill. Sometimes, if I put my ear to the pole, I could hear a humming noise, which I was told was the sound of the messages being sent from far away. In those pre-school days I believed everything I was told.

Rambler Cottage and Bitham Hall

I was born in 1922, the second child in the family. My elder brother had preceded me by six years, having been born in 1916 in Ireland, where Mother had gone – to her home in Newbridge, Co. Kildare – while my father was at the war. By the time I was born Dad had returned to his job as chauffeur on the Bitham estate and we were living in Rambler Cottage, the middle one of the three, half way up Bitham Hill at Avon Dassett. Next door lived the gardener from Bitham Hall, Hubert Herbert and his family. The Spikes lived on the other side; they were not employed on the estate.

Mr Herbert – or Tubby, as he was called behind his back, was a dear man. He came from Gloucestershire and had never lost his accent. He had two daughters and a son, the daughters were grown up by the time I took notice, but the son was only a few years older than my brother and they were great pals. Mrs Herbert was a very delicate and fragile looking lady who died of cancer in the 1940s. Her sitting room was overflowing with Goss-type ornaments.

Another early memory is of the sweetbriar hedge in their front garden, which was kept close-clipped but seemed to tower over me. I recall the wafts of perfume that drifted from it after a shower, and how the raindrops sparkled like diamonds on the leaves. I was a very noticing child where nature was concerned but so very shy. I would try to hide behind my parents if anyone spoke to me and they would make things worse by insisting I answered. Dad would introduce me as his ‘shy little girl’. If they’d only left me unnoticed I would have grown out of it, but shyness has plagued me for many years.

Our cottage was called Rambler Cottage because long before our day there was a rambler rose there. I only remember a *kerria japonica*, which everyone called Bachelor’s Button in those days. There was a back entrance reached by going up steps behind the pump, which served the cottages, and across the Herberts’ garden. We had chickens in our garden; there was a plum tree in the middle of the run. I remember one hen we had that had a deformed leg and Dad named her Marcella after a partially crippled lady in the village. I don’t remember the lady, only the chicken.

Our garden was very steep and had a spinney on one side and a field on the other two. If one went out of the top of the garden one went straight into the small field surrounding Mr Norton’s house – the Mill Cottage. (There had been a windmill there that was blown down the year I was born; the millstone was in the yard at Bitham.)

The field was full of moon daisies and we were always sad when the hay was cut and they all lay flat. Mill and I tried to save as many as we could.

At the top of our garden by the spinney, Mother had a hammock strung between two trees. She used to say that she was able to rest in the hammock every afternoon until I was born because the weather was so nice, but after 13th October winter set in.

I seemed to be always falling and banging my nose on the skirting in that house. One of my earliest memories is helping Dad to decorate the front room while Mum went on an outing to Wembley for the great exhibition – I think I was about 2. Dad and Charl went on another day. [This was the British Empire Exhibition, 1924.] I recall distinctly helping strip the old wallpaper. I also remember a few years later when Queen Alexandra died – I must have heard Dad talking to someone because I went rushing in to Mother to tell her that Queen Alexandra was dead. Alexandra was always associated in my mind with Alexandra Rose Day when someone came round collecting and we got pretty little ‘wild roses’ made of material in return for our money (nowadays it’s a paper sticker). There was also something called a ‘pound day’ for the local hospital when everyone took gifts to the school where they were collected. One was asked to bring a pound of jam, or a pound of sugar, etc. Pre-NHS days.

Miss Perry was a lovely lady and a good employer but didn’t really have the money to keep up the estate in the way it had been run in her father’s day. I suppose the 1st War and the decline in agricultural profits had something to do with it. Many of the estate fields were rented by small farmers, most of whom were very poor. The days of the wealthy farmers had not yet come. They mostly had horses to do all the farm work although I remember the threshing machine and how we would all rush over to the farm where it was working to watch the proceedings and the rats.

To return to Miss Perry and Bitham, the gardens were looked after by the head gardener (Tubby Herbert), a ‘boy’ – George Wright, a very shy man, probably in his thirties – and occasional odd jobs done by one of the villagers who was mentally rather backward. They did a good job on the whole. The wide lawns were mown by Dad with the motor-mower, a very efficient one you walked behind. When the grass was being cut you could smell it all over the village, that lovely new grass smell. Motor-mowers being machines were the province of the chauffeur who also looked after the gasworks. The house was fitted with acetylene gas and Dad was the only one who knew how to work it. I remember the awful smell of this little place behind the stables, and the big tin drums of carbide. In addition, Dad’s main job really was looking after the car and driving Miss Perry about. He did all the servicing on the car including decoking the carburettor. I never recall the car going in to a garage for repair, nor do I remember him ever having an accident. Miss Perry was growing old and didn’t go out as much as she had done in younger days when she went to balls and dinners. I recall Dad driving her to London where she would stay for a few days. Dad liked this because he could stay with his brother who was in the Metropolitan Police. In the 1930s, as she grew older, she would go for a sedate afternoon drive with her lady’s maid, Miss Hobbs (who made a great fuss of myself and my sister). Sometimes they would take Mother and I for a ride, but Mother was a very poor traveller so it wasn’t her favourite outing. Once we went to Princethorpe where Miss Perry was calling on someone. Mum and I and Miss Hobbs went to the village shop to buy sweets and to this day I can hear the old girl who kept the shop telling them about her poor health and how she had no lining to her stomach. This must have been before

Mill was born, we wouldn't have been on a drive with her as she was always so car-sick.

In those days in the 20s Miss Perry used to have an annual tea for the village. Tables were laid in the big coach-house. I loved the cakes with hundreds and thousands on, Mother didn't really approve. She said they were baker's rubbish (the baker delivered by van from Mollington). I suppose we played games on the lawn afterwards, but I don't remember much about that.

I do remember spending a lot of time playing near the garage. I loved the rainbows the spilt petrol made in the puddles, and the tin seals from the petrol cans like little medals. I also loved to play on the mounting-block and jump on the pile of builder's sand which was always there waiting to be used by the carpenter (Horton from Warmington) who did all the estate. He was also the local undertaker.

The stables were fascinating places; I think there must have been stalls for about six horses although I never consciously counted them. I can see the iron manger now and the ladder to the loft – flat against the wall and a challenge to climb. The smell of horses was still strong there, I wonder if they ever got rid of it. I suppose there had been none there since before the 1st war. The coachman had been kept on to do odd jobs, like cleaning the boots. He still lived at the Lodge when I was small but must have died before I was six or maybe nearly seven. His widow moved out to live with her son and we moved to the Lodge, which had much more room than Rambler Cottage.

More of that later, I was writing about the stables. There used to be a brougham standing there and I would spend many happy hours sitting in it and pretending I was driving it. The harness room was another fascinating place, all the bits of the harness hung round the walls. There was a table and a fireplace and it was a sort of office for Dad. He used to collect the rents from the cottages. When there were dinner parties at the Hall, the chauffeurs would gather there.

By the side of the coach house – or garage, as it was often called – was a covered path leading to the kitchen garden. On the wall there were hung other horsey items including the leather shoes the ponies used to wear on their feet when they dragged the lawnmower, before the motor one. These stopped them marking the lawn. Robins used to build in them. Charl remembered the pony being borrowed from Canon Saville at Fenny.

The walled kitchen garden was a lovely place. One side held the long hothouses, how I loved the smell of them! There was the one where the big black grapes were grown and peaches, and others that grew exotic plants like gardenias and ferns and foliage plants. The front of the glasshouses lay along the front lawn and had a wide border between them and the lawn. Hundreds of violas used to be planted along the edges of these borders and at one end was an ornamental fish tank sunk into the ground and holding a few goldfish. I was often told, how in previous times, the large pond – more like a small lake – used to be cleared out every few years. As many fish as possible were caught and put into the tank until all the sludge had been dug out. It was never done in my time, but I was fascinated by the pond. When the sun shone it reflected the trees that leaned over it, the pink blossoms of horse chestnut floating on the water and all the grasses and forget-me-nots along the banks looking at their faces in the mirrored water. On a dull day the waters were dark and faintly menacing and I preferred not to linger there. Shoals of tadpoles floated below the banks in spring. It

always seemed to be deep and overflowing. Sadly, when I saw it last, it had shrunk considerably. After the war when tap water was laid on to every cottage, the spring that fed the pond was much reduced. They used to say that there were millions of gallons of water deep under the hill, and in the days when water was obtained from wells it obviously went untouched. Sometimes a well dried up in the summer and one had to go to a neighbour's to get water (or even to the tap at the bottom of the village), but in the main our clay soil remained damp.

But to return to the kitchen garden at Bitham – it was a real example of a Victorian one. It was on sloping ground with the greenhouses at the front as it were. The walled garden had plots for vegetables surrounded by railings, which supported peas and russet apples, and at their foot thousands of snowdrops in spring. It was the head gardener's job to supply cut flowers for the house. When there were dinner parties he would decorate the table. That was before the second war though. I recall the parlourmaid 'doing' the flowers every day, throwing out the ones going over and replacing them with fresh. Mum and Dad were married from Bitham Hall in 1915 and the gardener (Mr Herbert) decorated the table with double cherry blossom from a large tree in the grounds. (The tree was still there until about five years ago.) He also decorated the table for Charl's wedding and for ours. We had sprays of bridal wreath and fern on the table. The De Traffords gave roses too.

Leading off the fully walled kitchen garden, back to back, was another partly walled one, where plums and peas grew on the walls with white and red and black currant bushes. There were more beds surrounded by deer-park rails with espalier fruit and apple and plum trees. Off this garden and behind and above the stables was an area where nectarines and figs grew on the walls and large cold frames held sweet scented violets like Princess of Wales. Between the garden and the back of the stables was a large deep pit. Originally all the manure was put there to rot down, but it was all lawn clippings, etc by my time. A plank bridge over this led to the seed room where fruit was kept to ripen or kept cold to prolong its life. Very often, if he saw me about, dear old Tubby would say, "Come with me m'dear, I've got something for 'ee", and I would be given a ripe peach or pear. He was a darling. Always on my birthday he would send me a little basket with black grapes and ripe pears. Dot would get peaches, as her birthday was at the height of the peach season. I never eat black grapes without a pleasant little jolt of memory.

A thorny rose hedge screened the pit; I think they must have been Scots or Burnet Roses. Very thorny stems, small ferny leaves and exquisite tiny pink cabbage roses, with several heads on a stem, and with the most glorious scent. I've never seen it growing anywhere else.

We Sealey children had the run of the grounds so long as we didn't play in front of the house. Of course we didn't take the village children there and we weren't allowed to play with them outside school, they were rough and dirty according to Mother (they were, too!).

Avon Dassett School

I started school when I was five. It was only a couple of minutes from Rambler Cottage and the teacher was a lovely little Welsh lady who lived with her sister in one of the cottages at the top of the hill on the very edge of the village. She used to hold my hand and take me to school. She was gentle and kind and we learnt songs like 'Men of Harlech' from her. She retired when I was about 8, I should think. We always

wrote to each other at Christmas and I kept in touch with her long after I was married. In fact, she and her sister retired to Harrogate Road in Caversham and I occasionally visited her there. I took Anthony to see her when he was a baby. The last time I saw her was in a nursing home in Westcote Road. She and her sister had both been taken there. The sister died and she died not so long after. They were really old by then.

The village school was quite small. There were two rooms, known, oddly enough as the small room and the big room. At that time pupils up to 14 were taken and the older ones were in the big room. Once the room was being decorated and the floor had been opened up at one end. One of the big boys went down there and found a roll of wallpaper and some old exercise books. We all envied him.

We used to play in the small playground, which had a conker tree in it. Sometimes on really hot days we took chairs into the playground and did lessons under the tree. The toilets were bucket jobs as were all the toilets for the cottages. There was one for the boys at one side of the school and one for the girls at the other. Visiting there was known as 'going round the way'. A woman from a nearby cottage emptied the buckets every week in holes dug among the laurel bushes 'over the wall' of the playground. When fetching stray balls one had to be careful not to tread on patches of soil that looked soft.

There was one girl in the school who was a bully. She was a lot older and we were all glad when she had to go to Farnborough school at the age of 14 – a lot of children left at 14, but then the leaving age was raised. Mary Golder used to delight in giving one Chinese burns. I can still feel the pain.

We used to play games in the playground like 'Sheep, sheep come home' and 'The farmer's in his den' and 'What's the time Mr Wolf?' Then there was skipping and, in the spring, tops and whips. There were mushroom-like peg tops and flat-topped hemispherical chubby tops. The latter were easier to spin. We also bowled hoops, out of school. I was fond of bows and arrows. Dad would cut me a branch of yew and arrows were quite easy to make from elderberry twigs. Once Mr Herbert made me a lovely one from a bamboo cane with feathers on the end. I always had to watch where it fell because I couldn't bear to lose it.

When the older children had left the school and there were no more to take their place, we probably had less than a dozen children in all. The big room was used for things like dancing lessons. We would do country dancing, Sir Roger de Covely, etc. And I remember singing "If all the world were paper and all the seas were ink, and all the trees were bread and cheese, what would we have to drink?" as a sort of round game there.

By then our teacher was Miss Barrett. She came from a town, Coventry I think, and shared a house with her friend Miss Cox who was the schoolteacher at Northend. Miss Barrett wasn't as sweet as Miss Williams. I remember her smacking me for getting a sum wrong and then she found it was right after all. The sense of injustice has stayed with me all these years. She was a very plain lady.

She always looked so delicate and under-nourished that Mum took pity on her and she used to come to our house for her midday meal on the five days the school was open. Mother's cooking was famous. Her pastry melted in the mouth. I think Miss Barrett used to pay 6d [6 old pence = 2.5p] a day for her meal.

Once at school we made a Christmas pudding, everyone had to bring some ingredients towards it and we enjoyed mixing it and wishing Mother was given the

pleasure of cooking it for us, as the school stove was not the ideal cooker. She was horrified at the pale colour of it. I don't suppose there was any black treacle in it. We all enjoyed a piece of it before Christmas.

When I was rising 11, I had to go to Farnborough School, 1½ miles away, as then Avon Dassett School only took children up to 11. I was there for a year and then won a scholarship to Leamington College.

Avon Dassett School was the centre of the village. They had whist drives and socials in the 'big room'. How vividly I recall the butler from Avon Carrow playing his bagpipes at ear-splitting level as he walked round and round the small room. I often had to recite a poem.

Every morning school started with prayers and hymns. The three or four Catholics were not supposed to join in but there was nowhere to go, so we sat at our desks pretending to be deaf. For years I couldn't hear certain carols or hymns like 'There is a Green Hill far away' without feeling guilty at knowing them. It wasn't until ecumenism came into fashion that I felt able to enjoy them. 'The Holly and the Ivy' was one.

On Armistice Day, November 11th, everything in the village stopped at 11am. Most of the men had been in the war, like every other village, some of them had died. Their names were on a memorial in the churchyard, just above the road and we children joined the rest of the village in paying homage. (We usually had our own service in school at the same time.) It was a dangerous place to hold a service, just above the road, on a corner with no fence. I see the memorial has now been moved to the small village green – much more sensible.

Mother's brother Bobby had died in the war, being shot to pieces. She had been very upset and often talked about him. I suppose it made a big impression on me. I remember closing my eyes during one of the silences – when I was at Dassett School – and having a vivid vision of him lying in a hospital bed with the Sacred Heart standing over him. Strange really, his body was never found.

While we were still living at Rambler Cottage I remember either coming or going to school in darkness, which lasted for a few minutes – it was a total eclipse of the sun (1927).

Buck-up the magpie

My big brother Charles had won a scholarship to Leamington College at the age of 10 and had gone into lodgings in Leamington for the first year, being deemed too young to travel by train every day. I went with Mum and Dad to take him there, the first time I smelt town gas. In those days houses that had gas lighting and heating always smelt of it. I suppose one got used to it but it made a big impression on me.

It was nice when he was at home again. He was always very kind to his little sister who was always following him round. He and his pals put up with me with very good grace. They had a 'camp' in the spinney of old man's beard. I always had to copy Charl, if he climbed a tall tree I couldn't wait until I was big enough to negotiate the branches. The only tree I didn't try was the monkey-puzzle where he got a young magpie from its nest and brought it home as a pet. Mother didn't like it at all. She always disliked birds fluttering round her, although she loved song birds and would encourage the robins to come to the window sill by putting out crumbs of cheese. Once the robins pecked the crust on a pie that was cooling on the window sill. That

was after we moved to the Lodge. I am getting ahead of myself but I will finish the story about the magpie.

It was fully-fledged and about to fly when Charl brought it home. He kept it in a disused chicken coop. At first it had to be fed by hand. We gave it bread and milk from a silver spoon, much to Mum's disgust. It grew and thrived and became very tame, flying about all day and just being shut up at night because of the foxes. It would fly to meet Dad from work. It seemed to know the time, and would perch on his shoulder and ride home. It didn't like Dot at all and would try to peck her. Once we were picking pansies outside the greenhouses at Bitham when it flew down and pecked her near the eye. It also got into Miss Perry's bedroom and Dad was sent for to get rid of it. Of course, she didn't know it belonged to us, although she did remark that it seemed to know him. Miss Hobbs (her lady's maid) and Dad avoided each other's eyes but had a good laugh about it afterwards.

Mother had a lovely white lace bedspread. The magpie got in the window, got his claws in it and tore it to pieces! We had 'Buck-up' as he was called until just before the war when he sat on the roof one evening and wouldn't come down to be shut up safely. Dad and Charl threw tiny 'pig' potatoes at him and he took offence and flew off. We did see him occasionally. During the war he terrified Mum when she and Mill were alone in the house, by swooping down and tapping on the landing window. We had a large statue of Our Lady and Child there and as it was white we think he mistook the back of Our Lady's head for an egg and was trying to get it. I believe Buck-up got shot eventually.

Village life

But back to the days of the twenties when we lived at Rambler Cottage. In 1928 Mill was born. It was August, so Charl and I were both home from school. In those days you could pay in to a scheme – a very small sum – which enabled you to have a nurse living in the house from time the birth was due, and for a couple of weeks afterwards. I suppose it was a form of medical insurance. Nurse Mowland was very nice and we all liked her. On the day of the birth our old doctor, Dr Hasluck, spent the waiting time walking up and down counting the spiders on the wall opposite, which enclosed Bitham grounds. I was playing on the steps with Charl. I had a very nice tea-set – not really a doll's one, with flags of the nations of the world on it, and we were having a pretend tea party. Suddenly we heard this squalling from the window above us and Charl said – with all the wisdom of a 12-year-old – “that's the baby, it's been born”. As far as I remember she didn't stop squalling for some years. She weighed 6¾ lb and was regarded as small and delicate. When I came home from school I would put my head round the door and if baby was crying I'd be off up the garden before I had to spend precious play-time rocking the pram. (Charl used to rock me in my pram and did it so thoroughly I flew out on top of the cushions and pillows. I wasn't hurt but he always said I must have fallen on my head and that accounted for a lot!) Anne Sealey did the same to Anthony when she stayed with us when he was a baby. He wasn't hurt at all.

I was born in the same room as Mill – or Dot as Dad called her, as she was only a little dot compared to Charl and I. Mum was lying in bed with her new baby (me) alone in the house, when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. She called out but no-one answered, so she lay there in terror until old Mrs Watts, the village

postmistress, came into view. She was stone deaf and couldn't hear Mum calling. She had just come to admire the new baby; nobody locked their doors in those days.

Both Mrs Watts and her husband were deaf, although he wasn't quite so deaf as she was. It made transacting business in the general store cum post office rather difficult. Mena Herbert, the eldest daughter of the Herberts worked there when I was small, but she went away to work in service and eventually married. By the time I was shopping, Aggie, the younger daughter was there. She was a dear, she worked there for years, eventually taking over the shop and village taxi service until after the war, when she married a Polish man – I think he was a refugee. Goldlewski was his name. After her father died she went to Poland with him, where he had children from his first marriage, and stayed there until he died. She couldn't speak a word of Polish but if anyone spoke to her she would smile and show them her wristwatch, it seemed to work. There must have been an awful lot of Poles wanting to know the time!

The village post office was one of the thatched cottages next to Strank's Farm on the village street. There were a lot of thatched roofs in the village at that time but now they have all been replaced by tiles or slates. Mr Watts kept bees. As far as I can remember, it was 1 shilling or 1s 6d for a comb of honey and you got 6d back when you returned the wooden comb. Once the bees swarmed on our loganberries and I had to get Mr Watts to come and take the swarm in his straw skep, and wearing his straw hat and veil. Such excitement.

At the village shop you could get 1d squares of gingerbread and Blue Bird toffees at 2oz for 1d. Better sweets like bull's eyes were 4oz for 2d. At Christmas time they sold mini-crackers for the tree, two in a box, in red or green cellophane. It was disappointing when you took them out of the box because they were plain white.

One year in the late thirties I was at school at Leamington and left to catch the train at 8am as usual. I was away all day, so didn't know until the evening that the night before the post office had caught fire. The man from the farm next door tried to rouse the Watts but, being deaf, they didn't hear his shouts. He got a ladder and climbed in their window and got them out, earning himself a hero's reputation. The farmer was Frank Stranks. His wife gave us that pretty green plate with a basket of flowers on for a wedding present. They had a baby called Giles – he must be in his sixties now.

The fire brigade had to come all the way from Kineton, so the fire was well under way when they arrived. One of the firemen fell off a ladder into the water butt and hurt his back. The smell of burning hung about the village street for weeks but eventually the post office was rebuilt (with tiled roof). When the Watts retired, Aggie took it over and it was moved to the front room of their cottage next to Rambler Cottage. After the war, when Mr Herbert retired from Bitham, he and Aggie went to live in the house where the Mason's had lived, next to the post office that burned, so the post office went back next door to its original home.

The village street had a line of mature lime trees going down it from Bitham Gates to the end of the small village green. They were very large and were probably planted by Miss Perry's uncle who brought all the rare and unusual trees to the woods and spinneys round Bitham. When mains drainage was laid on after the war the trees had to be felled because the roots were in the way. I didn't go back for some years after the war, having no transport, but it was a shock to find them gone and replaced by saplings. Now, however, those saplings have grown and thickened up and in another 50 years will be as good as their predecessors. The village green was a small

triangular strip of grass where they had a shell-case several feet high from the first war, a prize awarded to the village for National savings. It disappeared during the war (1939-45) for scrap, I suppose. In Coronation year, 1937, a bench was bought for the green and was a welcome addition. Now they have a bus shelter.

Just past the village school, opposite the old rectory was a grassy bank, on top of which was a hawthorn hedge enclosing the small field known as 'The Close'. This bank was always covered with purple violets in spring. We used to pick little bunches on our way home from church.

The Old Rectory was supposed to be haunted. I always went past with my heart in my mouth but I never saw anything. It was a gracious building with wisteria climbing up the front and a laburnum tree that hung in chains. It was too rotten to stand alone but made a brave show in spring. The church stood next to it, surrounded by the churchyard held up by a retaining wall where robins nested in spring. This wall was a hazard for cyclists who came fast down the hill and, if not used to the bend, could crash there. One of the Spike boys from the cottage next to Rambler Cottage was a born acrobat. He would ride his bike full tilt down the hill and turn a somersault under the bar before he negotiated the churchyard wall. Many a nervous old lady suffered palpitations at the sight. Les and other young lads (I fear Charl also) used to ride their bikes on the bit of lawn outside Bitham Hall gates, to the detriment of the grass. With caps worn backwards – I suppose to be streamlined – they were a fearsome sight circling this small patch of lawn. Miss Perry offered to give them a tea-party if they desisted, but the dirt-track was more fun.

There was another farmhouse in the village street belonging to the Wadlands. (When I changed my name to Hadland during the war, our letters sometimes got mixed up. Before that, Sealey had been confused with Healey, a school governor who lived opposite the pub and wore a ginger wig.) When we lived at Rambler Cottage, we used to fetch our milk from there. I remember when I was two or three going with Charl to fetch it in a milk can and having to put on 'hat, coat and mackintosh' to go out in the rain. I had a sort of Red Riding Hood waterproof cape with hood but in a greyish-brown colour. Later we had our milk from Hick's farm. Mrs Hicks used to deliver but Mum was convinced they watered the milk. It was a blueish colour, probably skimmed. When Stranks started selling milk it came in bottles and you could see the cream on top, so we changed to them.

For 6d you could get a jug full of cream, which Mother would whip up – by hand, of course. We usually had cream on Sundays – peaches and cream for tea. Tommy Cooper, who had a sort of smallholding with a few cows, sometimes sold clotted cream. You could order sixpenn'orth.

Milk used to be collected by the milk lorry, which came round daily, usually about mid-morning, and picked up the churns from selected spots. When we lived at Bitham Lodge one pickup spot was a few yards down the road. A couple of farmers used to bring their milk by horse and cart down the track across the allotments and through the five-barred gate opposite us. One of them, old Hicks, used to swear at his horse so much we were kept out of the way when he was delivering. Another collection point was at the Turnpike where there was a sort of wooden table the churns stood on. Sometimes Mum would take us for a walk to the Turnpike to watch the cars go by on the Banbury-Leamington road. The table was handy for a rest. (Now the M40 goes under the road there.)

We always loved the five-barred gate opposite our house and would spend a lot of time leaning on it and admiring the view. We could see over to Farnborough – 1½ miles away by road. The church was readily visible, as was the monument on the terrace at Farnborough Hall.

I remember Mum's father, Grandad Fisher, coming to stay with us for a couple of weeks at Rambler Cottage. He was an awesome figure, very much the old Sergeant Major. He always wore a bowler hat. He would always give me 5 shillings when he came. He lived in Dover and married again to someone called Selina while we were still at Rambler Cottage. I never met her but she died from cancer soon after Mill was born. Mum went to visit them and said she was a very nice lady. She had a large house in Marine Terrace near the promenade in Dover where she took in guests. I remember her sending me a doll packed in a box with sticky nougat which somehow got mixed up with the doll's hair in the post. I called the doll Selina. Soon after Mill was born – or it could have been before – Selina got ill and Mum went to help nurse her just before she died. I know she was buried in Deal.

Tonsils

In the October after Dot was born, I had my tonsils out. I was always having sore throats but I didn't know what was going to happen to me. Dad took me into the hospital in the morning and left me there – Horton General in Banbury. I can still see the red blankets on the bed and smell the awful rubber mask they used to give the anaesthetic – then waking up and being very sick all over the white bedspread, bringing up black stuff. Dad came to fetch me that afternoon and took me home. He always got those sorts of jobs, like taking me to the dentist to have a tooth out. I was very much Dad's little girl and felt safe when he was there.

I was off school for a couple of weeks. I have memories of lying on the sofa being made a fuss of, and Baroness Profumo, who had not long moved into Avon Carrow, came to see me and brought me an armful of books. One of them was the tale of a naughty Kitty-Kat, which Dot and I always loved.

(Before the Profumos came to Avon Carrow, a family called Brotherton or Bretherton lived there. There was a young son, Mark, a year or two older than me. He used to play with Charl, so was probably more than that. He had a nanny and I used to be invited to nursery tea with him. I can remember we each had our own pot of jam, tiny ones. I was quite young, probably 3 or 4. I was given Mark's teddy bear while we were still at Rambler Cottage, probably when they moved away. It was larger than I was and used to sit on the sofa beside me. Eventually its stuffing started to come out and Mum used it to stuff cushions. She was quite unsentimental about toys. One Easter I was given an enormous chocolate egg, Mark had too many. It must have been a foot high and had a window in front and inside was a chicken sitting on a chocolate perch. Charl said Mark's surname was Bodley. Whether he was related to the Brothertons I don't know.)

I was sent to the seaside to recuperate. Mum's friend Mrs White – a war widow with two sons who used to play with Charl – was sent with me and we stayed with Grandad in Dover. It was after Selina died and he seemed to have a housekeeper running the place. Mrs White and I had a nice time. The sea air did me good, I suppose. I remember looking out of the side of the bay window and seeing the waves crashing over the promenade wall. When Mum had gone to Dover to help Grandfather, I had stayed with Mrs White in her thatched cottage at the bottom of the

village. I had a green leather beret and her dog chewed it up. They had a disused pigsty in the garden where Frank used to keep pigeons.

Bitham Lodge

In June 1929 we moved up to the Lodge after Mrs Moran – now widowed – moved away to her son's. Dad had to do a lot to the house before we could move in. The first thing was to cut back a giant cupressus that grew at the top of the steps to the raised garden. It shed dead needles everywhere and the backyard smelt of it. When cut back it still stood more than 12 feet high, with a flat top where Charl used to climb up and sit. We used to store garden tools in the roots. A smaller yew tree similarly treated made a seat for me – blackbirds built in a forked branch of the yew and one year there was a baby cuckoo in the nest. It got rid of the other nestlings; I can see its gaping beak now. I used to drop bits of food in to help its poor foster parents.

Dad also had to cut back the hedges. They were yew and snowberry and well above everybody's head – more than 6 feet tall. The garden was large, with a path leading to the terrace; turn left and it was a shortcut to Bitham Hall, over the rustic bridge which spanned the cutting where the back drive ran, and down through the Orchard Walk to the back entrance to the Hall. (The back drive went to the front door; it then became the front drive and went down to the village, opposite the church.) If you turned right from the garden, the terrace ran through woods and alongside a field to terminate near the summerhouse, a wooden and thatched tent-like building, even then starting to fall into ruins. The terrace had originally been all lawn, in the days of many gardeners. It was still mown grass in some parts but in others had worn away to earth. There were flowering trees like red may and deutzias and lilac and you could get through to the field where there was a giant chestnut tree. In the old days the butler and footmen used to take tea up to the summerhouse in baskets.

To return to the Lodge, dad had to do a lot of painting and decorating before we moved in. I would go with him and play outside while he was busy. Once I ran indoors to escape a herd of cows being driven along the road. I felt quite brave when I looked out of the window at them.

Mrs Moran had always terrified me. She wore black with a black bonnet and shawl and I thought she was a witch. Once she called Charl and I when we were walking by and gave me a box of beads. They were jet-black glass bugles. I was so frightened of her I hardly dared play with them. She was a nice old lady really but it took me a while to forget she lived there.

Long afterwards, when the family were in Cheltenham, probably in the 1970s, Nick Carter had to do a survey of the Lodge for his firm. Somebody was buying the house, levelling the garden so that it didn't need the retaining wall, and building an extension. They had to put in drainage. Nick took a Polaroid of the back door and when it developed there was a shadowy figure standing there. He gave it to Mill and I saw it. It looked like an old lady in a shawl. Charl and I both said "Mrs Moran". We thought she had come back from another world to see what was happening to her old home. Unfortunately the picture faded – the early Polaroids did that.

We moved to the Lodge in June. Charl was allowed a day off school to look after Dot and I. we went for a long walk along Farnborough Lane with Mill in the pram. She had her first birthday at the Lodge. Mum and I sat on a fallen tree outside and I remember giving her one of my soldier skittles as a birthday present.

I had a bit further to go to school – downhill there and a stiff climb home. Charl was a bit better off for getting to the railway station at Fenny Compton. He could leave a few minutes later. He would never leave before 20 past 8 for the half-eight train. Dad had a thing about punctuality and always set off in plenty of time. Charl would worry him by doing 2 ½ miles in 10 minutes downhill and still arriving before the train. When my turn came I was always away by 10 past 8. Charl was talking recently about the time he came off his bike by Smith's farm, damaging his knees and his bike. He plodded home where dad lent him his old bike to catch the next train. Charl got past the farm but on the next corner the handlebars came apart due to a faulty nut and he had another fall. He didn't get to school that day! I also came off near the farm once and was taken home in the trap by Mrs Smith.

Lots of farmers and other business people drove and horse and trap. Mr Hughes, a baker from Fenny, delivered his bread from one. The coal cart was drawn by horses. Our doctor, who had a chauffeur to drive him, was in Fenny. He did his own dispensing and anyone passing the surgery would call in and collect medicine for their village. I often did so on my way home from school in Leamington. The mail van would give people an unofficial lift to the doctor's and I remember once getting a lift home on the coal cart and Mum being very annoyed. Small wonder, as every part of the cart was thick in coal dust.

We had an idyllic life at the Lodge. We could walk out over the hills and be completely free. We hardly ever saw anyone there. When Charl joined the army in 1933, one of the first things he did with his money was to buy some fruit trees and plant them in the garden – apples and plums. They were still there a few years ago. We already had red and blackcurrants and gooseberries and loganberries and raspberries and strawberries. We kept hens and they had a large run, which would be moved a couple of times a year. The ground where it had been was free of weeds and bugs and well manured. The strawberries grown there were magnificent. I have seldom tasted such a flavour since.

The field behind our garden was farmed on the 3-year rotation system – one year pasture, one year corn, one year hay. When it was pasture we would see sheep and lambs there and occasionally cattle. In autumn, mushrooms grew there in profusion. We could pick a whole basket in time for breakfast – they had the real mushroom flavour. When the field was down to corn, of course, there were no mushrooms, but how we enjoyed playing in the field. The corn would be put in stooks, which made nice little tents to hide in. When the corn was cleared away, the fields would be full of birds eating the fallen grains – wood pigeons and occasional pheasants and partridges. Presumably there had been game preserves on the estate before the first war, as there were still pheasants, etc, in the wild.

Rabbits were very common. Oat Hill (where the magpie's nest was) adjoined that field and rabbits were there and in the next field, which sloped down towards the main road. We called it our picnic field because on certain occasions – such as Dot's birthday in August – Mum would take a picnic tea and we would have a lovely time in the field. There was a rabbit warren there and we would light a fire to boil the kettle in the mouth of a disused burrow. Mother would have made jellies in small jam jars, and scones and sandwiches and cakes. Dad would join us after work in time for tea. We feasted like royalty and played games like French cricket until evening came and the rabbits emerged to see who was disturbing their peace. Baby rabbits often sat

there frozen to the spot and one could pick them up, though it wasn't encouraged – wild rabbits have fleas.

This field was also known 'our blackberry field' because the hedges were loaded with succulent berries. We would fill baskets for Mother to make into jam and jelly and pies. (She made a lovely jelly using lemon jelly and strained blackberry juice.)

One side of the field led to the large covert, which was a dark and mysterious place where I was afraid to go alone when I was small. Foxes and rabbits and badgers and all sorts of birds lived there. Once I found a nest full of baby birds, still naked but with obvious hooked beaks. I thought they were eagles. (About 4 foot off the ground and in a nest smaller than a thrush's – probably a finch.) Dad and Charl would shoot pigeons and rabbits there and sometimes one would have poachers firing a shot at night but nobody worried much about them.

Foxes were very bold, especially the large dog foxes. They would try every way to get into our hen run. Even in the daytime the hens would make a commotion and we would run up there (the garden was up steps above the house) to scare them off. I remember Mother having great difficulty in scaring off a very persistent dog fox, waving a broom at it.

I also remember one very heavy rainstorm, when water poured down the steps from the garden and started coming into the house because the drain had got blocked. Mother rolled up the mats, put on her Wellingtons, planted my sister on the kitchen table and despatched me to find Dad at work and bring him back. On the way I met Tubby and George who were working in the back drive and they came back to help. Mother had opened the front and back doors, blocked the doorways to the other rooms and was sweeping the water out with a broom. It was soon under control and didn't get in our sitting room. Oddly enough, my sister can't remember it at all. I suppose she was too small.

In August, Miss Perry would let Bitham Hall and go to visit relations for six weeks or so. I recall one family who came more than once were Americans. They had a young son who read a lot of comics on the boat coming over, and I was presented with a pile of them – such largesse. (I would read everything in those days. We had a sort of travelling library – the County Library – at the school. A box of books was sent to the teacher and anybody in the village who wanted a book could go and choose one. I forget if it was two-weekly or monthly. It was never changed enough for me, I read very quickly.)

Some of the families who took Bitham Hall brought their own chauffeur with them and they would lodge with us. I remember one, Albert Hutt, who was a lovely man. He couldn't read or write but was a great chauffeur. He came from Oxford where he lived with his mother. He took quite a shine to my mother and would bring her chocolates. I think he must have been a freelance chauffeur. I remember he called in once or twice when he happened to be in our area on a job. The other lodger I remember was Bill Hill. His favourite tune was 'You are my heart's delight' and he would sing and whistle it when shaving. He liked to walk over the hills. Once or twice he brought back baby rabbits he had picked up. Being a townie, he thought we would like them as pets. Of course, they were too young to leave their mothers and usually died overnight.

When Miss Perry was away and the Hall wasn't let we could roam all over the grounds. We used to go there for our baths – all the servants were friends, it was like

a family. I loved to look behind the shutters on the outside of the house. There were usually bats roosting there. I loved to stroke their furry bodies and once I took a baby one home with me. Dad told me to take it back because its mother would be looking for it. My mother was very relieved. She was always nervous of bats. As soon as dark fell they would swoop down from the trees that surrounded the lodge. We were quite accustomed to their squeaking overhead – I wish I could hear it now! Country children have very acute hearing, or we did in those days. We didn't have loud traffic noises or thumping music. We could listen to all the squeaks and rustles in the grass and trees. We also made our own noises. We would sing as we wandered about and nobody heard us.

Radio and records

Our chief entertainment was the radio. Dad had made a crystal set when I was about two. I distinctly remember the excitement. For some reason he had an earthing wire in a china slop-pail; I'm told I was always going on about 'music in the bucket'. Later on, after we moved to the Lodge, we had a set with loudspeaker, which had been made by Fr. Phillips, our priest. Radios and clocks were his hobbies. Of course, the radios ran on accumulators, as there was no electricity then. Accumulators lasted for a week. They cost 6d a week to recharge and had to be taken to Fenny Compton. If you listened to a lot of radio it would run out before the week was up. Towards the end of the thirties we had a radio that ran on dry batteries – what luxury!

Sometime in the thirties, early on, we were given a wind-up gramophone with a horn, and some little records. I loved 'Me and Jane in a Plane', and my real favourite was 'The Photo of the Girl I left behind me'. The lyrics went like this:

*With the photo of the girl I left behind me,
I went to join the fighting full of glee.
Someone came up to remind me,
the doctor wanted to examine me.
When the doctor saw the locket next my heart he said to me,
whose photograph is this now that I find?
Is this the Captain's bulldog? I said 'No Sir, if you please Sir,
It's the photo of the girl I left behind.'*

Charl hated it and had to be coaxed to put it on for me. I think the 'Good Ship Yakka Hicka Doola' was on the other side. When Charl joined the army in 1933, he bought himself a portable wind-up gramophone and we were regaled with Bing Crosby and the Ink Spots.

The gramophone was given to us by the 'Ratley' Herberts, so called because we already had Herberts in the village and, as the newcomers came from the village of Ratley, they were given that title. They gave me an autoharp; you played it by numbers, the sheet music had the number of the appropriate string to be plucked on it. It occupied me for hours. I remember 'God Save the King' went something like 9, 9, 8, 7, 6, 4. 'Bluebells of Scotland' was another one. I can't remember what happened to it. I expect Mum sent it to a jumble sale.

Church life

A lot of our life centred round the church. Many – all the inside ones – of the servants at Bitham Hall were Catholics and there was a private chapel in the house where Mass was said once a week for the household. Miss Perry owned a lot of the houses in the

village and they housed estate workers or, in later years, tenants, who were Catholics. These were mostly widows or spinster ladies. The few other cottages were owned by Avon Carrow and a couple for workers. There were two farmhouses and I think six council houses at the bottom of the village.

We had our own priest at St Joseph's who lived in the presbytery joined onto the church. He also had to look after the parish of Kineton, a few miles away – they had a church made from a converted stable. We used to have a Communion service at 8.00am, then we went home to breakfast while the priest would say Mass at Kineton. Then we would be back for 10.30 Mass. Nobody except the priest went to Communion then - we had to fast from midnight, not even a drink of water. I made my First Communion at Midnight Mass, I think I was 9 or 10. I had a white velvet dress made by Mother, it had swansdown round the neck and sleeves. I was confirmed when I was 13 or 14, actually at Kineton – it was their turn that year.

The first priest I recall – though I've no idea what he looked like – was Fr Dobell. He had a housekeeper, Mrs Vance, who gave me a little white chair (which I still have) when I was 5. Then there was a Belgian priest, Fr Dillon – his English was not very good. He called one day when someone in the family had a bad cough and he said something about 'beaucoup cough'. Ever afterwards Dad would talk about 'boko coughs'. Fr Phillips was the next one, he was elderly and I think he was a Jesuit. He loved making clocks and radios; he made a clock that stood on our mantle shelf for years. Charl had it when Mum moved house after Dad died and now Anne has it. He had a housekeeper, Miss Philips – no relation – an elderly spinster who was very kind to us when we were children. She gave me my portable writing desk. She had a soft spot for Charl. When he was home on leave from the army she would invite him to tea and he would try every way to get out of it. She was a bit put out in the late thirties when everyone was praying for peace and she was exhorting Charl to do so and he said, 'What's the use of praying for peace when we're all praying for war?' Fr Phillips and Miss Philips lived at the cottage next to the church. He kept his big books in the Hall. When Fr P was very ill, Charl used to be sent to get them. Miss Philips stayed on in the village after Fr P retired and moved to a room at Stranks's Farm.

Fr Flannery entered our lives in the early thirties, before I went to Leamington to school. We did lots of exciting things then. He and his housekeeper, Miss Billings, would organise concerts in which everyone would take part, including him. I remember him as Jane the Mechanical Maid, when he acted like a robot and the mechanism went wrong. Mill, with other little girls, had to sing songs like 'Rag Dolls' Drill' and 'How'd you like to be a Baby Girl?' I remember it all so vividly. Once myself and another girl were dressed in emerald green satin pyjamas with berets to match and we had to draw the curtains round the stage. I think that was a St Patrick's Night concert. One year we had a Passion play, 'The Last Supper'. I was Our Lady. I can still remember my speech. Miss Billings did the make-up and for days afterwards people kept asking Dad if I was ill because I looked so pale – make-up, of course.

We had a lovely children's party at Christmas time in the hall by the church, which had been a school and was used again as one during the war when a Catholic school was evacuated to the village. We also had a party at the village school. The RC one was best; it was usually fancy dress. Once I went as a brown paper parcel and won first prize. There was a large Christmas tree with fairy lights lit from Father's car battery – no electric light in the village then – a lovely present for all of us.

We also had a procession every year for Corpus Christi. It was always on the Sunday and we walked from the church up Bitham Drive to where the altar had been erected under a large cedar tree. The first time June Kirk and I strewed flowers, we wore white dresses with blue sashes and carried baskets of flowers. Mum always picked a lot of flower heads from our garden. We had to walk backwards, strewing flowers every few paces in front of the Blessed Sacrament. In later years there were more little girls who wore yellow ribbons and walked forwards, turning round after several paces to genuflect and throw flowers. I can hear the hymns being sung now. All the villagers (well, the ones who lived in the village) turned out to watch.

We also had an annual fete at Bitham Hall, which was an event to look forward to. There were races, like the sack race and potato races and all sorts of stalls, and dancing on the lawn. Mum always made lots of cakes for refreshments and a big one for the raffle. I used to help on the white elephant stall. (When we had jumble sales, I always did the 'nothing over a penny stall'.) One year at the fete, when I was about 12, I did the 'Guess the name of the doll' contest and a woman from the village and I guessed the same name – it was Rosemary. We had to draw for it and I won; I still have the doll. It had been dressed by Mme Achard, who was lady's maid to the Baroness. The other lady had a consolation prize of a face flannel dolly. (Mum and I had made lots of these to sell.)

We also had whist drives in the village, some run by the Catholics in our hall and sometimes a Protestant one run by the few parishioners – not more than a dozen who went to the C of E church. (The parish was joined with Farnborough church where the canon lived and services were held on alternate Sundays.) Mum and Dad loved to play whist and quite often won a prize. I still have a wallet Dad won. Mum usually made cakes for the refreshments. They used to come home with tales of how so and so had revoked – a terrible crime – or trumped their partner's card. I have never dared to attend a whist drive!

Mentioning the C of E – St John's I think it was called – reminds me that we were never allowed to set foot inside it. It was many years later before I saw the inside and nowadays it is a redundant building and being kept locked all the time. I believe it was extremely difficult to even get permission to attend a wedding or a funeral of a close relation if you were RC. I recall a wedding there – Katy and Godfrey Golder – and standing at the bottom of the steps to see them coming down. The bride had a lovely white dress and the two bridesmaids, Ella Spike and Mary Golder, wore red velvet dresses and silver leaves in a wreath on their dark hair. I can see it now!

The Worralls

Sometime in the 1930s, about the time I started at Leamington, the Worralls came to live at Bitham Hall. Miss Perry was the eldest daughter of six (her father had planted a yew tree for each of his daughters on the front lawn – they were clipped into pyramids). Miss Pauline Perry was his heir and inherited the estate. Her heir was Mrs Worrall, daughter of her eldest sister who had married into the Mostyn family from Talacre Hall in Wales. Because of death duties, the estate had been made over to Mrs Worrall and when the Colonel retired from the army they came to live there. Things changed then; they were always about and we became very good at keeping out of sight if we heard them coming when we were up on the terrace. They had six children; the eldest, William, worked in London. (After the war he bought Avon Carrow and turned it into flats for old people. He committed suicide.) The second son,

Claude, was in the army. His wife was very nice, a niece of the Sumners who had bought Orchard Lodge. (The Welds had lived there – Jo Weld inherited Lulworth from his uncle, they were poor as church mice until then.) There were two Worrall daughters. Mary, the eldest, was a nun. During the war her order was evacuated to Bitham, so her family saw more of her than before – I think it was a semi-enclosed order. The other daughter, Helen, worked in London. She joined the WRAF during the war, afterwards she did a lot of work for Mother Teresa.

Then there were the twin sons, Pyers (known as Peter) and Tony. Peter was dark and Tony ginger, both with blue eyes. They were two years older than I was. We saw quite a lot of Tony when they were home from school. They went to Downside but weren't scholastic material. Tony liked to shoot and would go out shooting rabbits in the early morning and call into our house for a cup of tea. He used to pass on *Everybody's*, a magazine, to me and comics and books. He gave me the pirate omnibus, a large orange book. I read it avidly; it gave me nightmares and Mother hid it away.

Dad still drove Miss Perry around but the Worralls had their own car and drove themselves. When the boys were old enough they shared a little Austin. Tony used to drive like the clappers. I remember one very snowy winter – we had a lot of snow in those days and the village would be cut off – they had trouble with the kitchen chimney and the cook asked if I would mind walking down to Fenny to give the sweep a message. I didn't mind, I loved walking, especially through snow, though it was very slippery. I was on the return journey up the hill when my 'rescuer' hove into view – Tony driving his car, fast as usual and sliding from side to side of the road. I had a lift home but I'm glad Mum didn't see the way he was driving. Once Tony took Mr Herbert and I in to Banbury – I was going to the dentist and Mt H to buy seeds. He went home and forgot about us. We had to wait until he remembered and came back for us (luckily not too long!). He was quite a lad; as he got older he liked a drink and drove very fast, having several accidents. The worst one was on Warmington Hill, in the early days of the war. Edward, son of Squire Holbech of Farnborough Hall, was killed. Tony served in the army during the war, in Africa, with distinction I believe. He died in 1988. Peter was killed in a plane crash in Calcutta in 1942.

After the war, when the Colonel died, Claude took over the estate. His mother lived for a long while and when Claude died his wife and sons ran the estate. Bitham Hall was turned into apartments and sold off. Mrs Claude lived there until she died. The coach house and stables were sold to an architect, who turned them into a residence.

I have jumped ahead but I have to explain things while I remember them. Dad went to Bitham originally because he had gone to work for the Worrall family in Somerset as soon as he left school. (With nine children in the Sealey family and an invalid father they had to start earning as soon as possible.) Col Worrall's father was an invalid and Dad used to push his wheelchair. He was taught to drive and when the old man died he was found the position at Bitham. Dad was christened Harry but Miss Perry always called him Henry. (The twins loved him; they used to call him 'Hennus'. He often got them out of scrapes.) Dad had wanted to be a policeman like his four brothers but was half-an-inch too short. After the war, when the rules were relaxed and shorter policemen appeared, Dad used to feel very annoyed.

Farnborough School

Going back some years to the year when I was at Farnborough, 1933, it was a much larger school and pupils stayed to the age of 14. There was a kindergarten section and a very pretty lady called Miss Garrett looked after them. She knew Mother, having met her at whist drives and was always very kind to me. We used to be able to purchase a drink of Horlicks mid morning; I think it cost a ha'penny and it was very watery. This was prepared by Miss Garrett in the babies' classroom. We were very glad of it in the winter. We didn't have to go outside to the toilets there but they were still bucket ones and we had a bowl of water to wash our hands in. I think they must have had tap water there.

The head teacher was Miss Bennett, I got on well with her. For the first part of the year I was there I used to go to my friend June Kirk's house to eat my sandwiches and I left my bicycle there. In the summer I cycled home to lunch, leaving my bike behind Bitham gates opposite the churchyard to save pushing it up the hill (Dad was usually around). June's surname was really Miles, her father died when she was young and her mother married again and June took her stepfather's name – Kirk. Her mother had another daughter then, called Faith but the second husband died while they were living at Avon Dasset – he's buried in the churchyard there. June was at Dasset School for a couple of years. She was a couple of years older than me and really beautiful. Dad used to say she had a face like an angel. Her mother moved to Farnborough and opened a little sweetshop in the front room of their house. They still used to come to Mass at St Jo's. June married a Farnborough boy – surname Walker – and had two boys. I remember sending a present when they were born – I was in the army then. Years later both her mother and sister died of cancer and she lost her husband after many happy years. When she was much older, I can't recall the year, she married a widower from Avon Dasset, Vic Mason, and they lived in Fenny Compton and we exchanged Christmas greetings until a few years ago. I think they must have died now.

Back to Farnborough School – they still celebrated May Day there and the school had the maypole set up in the playground across the road. During the year we had a lesson on dancing the maypole every week. The maypole was kept in the Infants room. The May Day I was at the school, June was the May Queen and I was one of her attendants, dressed in white with a wreath of laurel. We had quite an audience of villagers – Farnborough was much bigger than Dasset.

Sometimes I cycled home along the bottom road (1½ miles) but that meant a long push up the hill – that's why I kept my bike at Bitham when I came home for lunch. If it was nice weather I would go home by Farnborough Lane (called Warwick Lane in Farnborough). In those days it was a fairly rough road with grass growing in the middle but a shorter journey. There was usually a field of broad beans by the side of the road and the perfume when they were in flower was wonderful. There were a couple of farms there, set well back from the road, and under the hedges by the roadside would be violets and cowslips in spring. Spraggett's pit was on one side near the end of the lane, where local rubbish was tipped. (We didn't have a collection very often – about every six months a lorry was sent to pick up tins, etc, from the houses. The rest we burnt or buried.) The pit was a magnet for the children. Charl and his friends, the White brothers, once found a sack of Brazil nuts. No doubt they were dumped because they were unfit for human consumption, but the gang (and Mrs

White) feasted and duly suffered. I also remember he found a pair of old scissors with which he could cut tin! A very useful acquisition.

Returning to my route home from school there was another reason for preferring the upper route – my fear of dogs. The Profumos kept dogs. They had a large one, I think it was a Borzoi (though I'm not really conversant with dog breeds, but it was large and white and could run very fast) and they also had a Pekinese. The two Profumo daughters, very fashionable ladies who were very slim and always heavily made-up, used to exercise them along that road. The girls were called Betsy and Maynah – I don't know how it was spelt. Behind their backs they were known as the 'Stinkpots' because of the heavy perfume they wore. One day as I rode home they emerged from the grounds of the Carrow, the big dog pushed me off my bicycle and the small one got in between the wheels so that I couldn't get away. Profuse apologies and the Baroness called in to see if I was all right. She brought me presents of books and chocs, a very nice lady. I was always very apprehensive when I used that lower road after that.

At Farnborough School we used to have regular visits from Canon Holbech. I presume he was a governor. I think he was retired; he lived with Miss Nancy Holbech, I think she was his daughter. She used to ride to hounds in full kit – black habit, hat with veil. She rode side-saddle. When the hunt met at Bitham I often saw her outside our house, where the hunt would gather informally before going over the fields. She and her father were, of course, relatives of the Holbech family who lived at Farnborough Hall.

The Canon gave a prize for an essay for which we all had to compete. I can't recall the subject; I think it was something to do with nature study. I know I won the prize, which was Rudyard Kipling's 'All the Mowgli stories' I loved that book. I practically knew it by heart. I had it until a few years ago when I gave it to Sarah.

I sat the Scholarship exam in spring 1934. I was the only entry from Farnborough School. Mother took me in to Leamington for the exam. I remember I was wearing a dark green tunic and a yellow jumper (like a daffodil). Of course I passed, I was good at exams. I actually won another scholarship to a Catholic school in a convent in Wolverhampton. That's another long story.

Miss Perry only employed Catholics and she used to get her kitchen maids from this convent, which was also an orphanage. The private school was quite small. Mum heard so much about it that she thought it would be good for me. As it was in a different county, I had to take another exam. I went by train on my own, was met by a sister from St Joseph's Convent (in St John's Square, Wolverhampton) and sat the exam. I can't remember much about it. I think I was the only entry. I know I stayed the night in the dormitory with the other girls – less than a dozen, I think. I remember meal times. They told me they weren't allowed to leave the table until all the food was eaten, but it would be all right because I was a visitor.

Anyway, I passed the exam but Mum had second thoughts about my being away from home in a smoky city (probably the cost came into it too). I think I was relieved. I'm sure I wouldn't have wanted to be so far away from home!

Leamington College

I duly started at Leamington College in September 1934. I had to go by train, 2½ miles to the station, downhill most of the way but a stiff pull up. No gears on bicycles

then – well, certainly not on the nice new Hercules the Education Committee provided me with. I also had a free pass for train travel.

Dad came down to the station with me the first morning and put me in the care of Laura Heath, Elsie's sister, who'd been there a year and knew the ropes. Elsie was just starting too, so we were in the same form and have been 'best friends' ever since. Elsie, of course, married Charl and we always said that was all through Dad.

It was quite a long day at school. I left home at 8.10, left my bicycle in a cattle shed near the station and caught the 8.32 to Leamington. The school was about 5 minutes walk from the station, we were usually there by 5 to 9. If the train was delayed by fog, we would miss assembly. That didn't really affect me; as one of the few Catholics in the school I was excused attendance at Morning Prayers. We waited outside the hall and just went in for the notices. (I was always allowed to go out of school to Mass on Obligation days, provided I brought a note from my parents beforehand. The church was only across the Pump Room Gardens.)

We shared the school buildings with an art school who had a couple of rooms on the top floor and the use of the hall. There were several statues around, life-size (or large) copies of 'David' and 'The Discus Thrower', all naked, and we used to dress them up in dusters while we were waiting for our art lesson to start. We also had singing lessons in the hall.

Another small room on the top floor was known as the 'Guide Room', because it was where the school pack of guides met. I longed to be a guide but their meetings began after our last train home had left. The room also served as a first aid post where anyone who was feeling ill was sent to lie down.

Our school playground also served as a netball court. I liked netball but I hated hockey, which we also played in winter. It was quite a long walk to the field where we played and a longer one home, carrying shoes caked in mud, hockey stick and case full of books. (I had to have a case rather than a satchel because it would strap onto the carrier on my bicycle, but it was more ungainly to carry.) I was ashamed of my hockey stick. We couldn't afford a new one but Dad got one from Bitham, goodness knows how old. It was without a grip, so Dad got a handlebar one and put it on – it was very conspicuous, being bright orange. Small wonder I hated hockey, although when I was in the ATS I was sometimes persuaded to make up a team. We didn't mind that, because it was something to do on our Saturday afternoon off and we always got a good tea, whether we were playing at home or away. I remember once playing in a mixed team when we lost 6-0.

To get back to schooldays, in summer we played rounders and tennis. Rounders was for the younger girls; that was played in the school playground. For tennis we used the courts in the park next to the school. I loved tennis; I played it quite a lot in the army. We also went to the swimming baths, which were a few minutes walk away. We had two champion swimmers in our school.

I mentioned some way back about leaving my bicycle in a cattle shed – that one belonged to a farmer Cottrill. His sons went to Leamington College for Boys and caught the same train as us. One evening when I got off the train, I found my back wheel had been trampled by the cows, which got into the shed. I don't think I could even push it home. After that, Dad arranged with another farmer to leave it in his shed, which was about 100 yards nearer to the station and no cows were kept in that field – Mr Sumner's. My cycle lamp was acetylene, which gave a good light even

going uphill. (A dynamo wouldn't have been much use there if one had been available.) Dad got the acetylene from the gas house at Bitham, where he looked after the gas that supplied the house. It was fine except in very frosty weather, when it froze and I had to thaw it at Elsie's house. I couldn't ride home through Fenny Compton village because I had to pass the police house and he was always looking out for lawbreakers. (What a change from today, when you could be knocked down by a cyclist without a bell or lights and nobody would care.)

I enjoyed my schooldays very much. I was good at essay writing and won the League of Nations prize in the junior section – I think it was 10 shillings. I had to go to a fete in the Jephson Gardens to receive it. Mum came with me. I would have liked to enter the next year in the senior section, where the prize was a sort of holiday scholarship to Geneva. However, I had to have several teeth out that Easter and wasn't feeling well enough to enter. That was 1939.

Our school prize giving was in the Town Hall. We spent a long time rehearsing songs to sing. It was held in the afternoon. We had the afternoon off to get ready and the 'dinner girls', as they called us, or the 'train girls' who had to stay at school, were farmed out to the houses of local girls until it was time to go to the Town Hall.

When Elsie and I were in the 4th form we noticed a new girl standing alone in the playground. This wasn't the time of year that we usually had new girls but her parents had just moved down from the North. We invited her to walk round with us, and we've been friends ever since. That was Nora Smith. Her father had bought a local business and also a farm outside Warwick. She certainly livened things up. She had no interest in learning and was up to all sorts of mischief. I recall several of us had water pistols (about 2d each from Woolworths). We had a teacher called Miss Letcher, who had no idea of how to control a class and behind her back we would be shooting water at each other. Nora sat near a notice-board and many of the notices began to run when she had ducked. Poor Miss L didn't last long. I believe she went back to college for more training. She was supposed to be teaching us Latin. The teacher who took her place was a good disciplinarian and stood no nonsense.

In 1939, before the war started, everyone knew it was coming and we had air raid drills. There was a sort of trench in the playground by the school's cellar windows and we had to go and stand down there until the rehearsal was over.

I left school in July. I would have loved to stay on and take Upper School certificate in the 6th form but Mill was starting that autumn and they couldn't afford to keep two of us at school.

Christmas at Bitham Lodge

One thing I haven't mentioned is Christmas time at Bitham Lodge. We had our holly sent up by Mr Herbert and Dad would go and cut the top off a yew tree in the Spinney; they always needed pruning. It would be set up in our front room and on Christmas Eve Charl would decorate the tree and put up the paper chains. Also set up the crib. (During the war, if I was home, I had the setting up job.) The door was locked and we girls weren't allowed in until after Midnight Mass. We had candles on the tree and when they were lit they had to be watched. They did set fire to the tree one year and one of the sugar animals melted. The tree was always loaded with all the Christmas chocolate figures and sugar mice, etc. Very overloaded, really! We loved it, we could hardly wait to get back from Midnight Mass and enter fairyland. Auntie Sal and Uncle Ern usually came to our Midnight Mass and would come back for a drink

(port) and a piece of Mum's famed Christmas cake. She always made one for them too – Sal never baked.

We always had a bit of a party on Boxing Day, a gorgeous tea with all Mum's goodies. I never had room for Christmas cake that day. We probably had Aggie and Edie Herbert – Edie was married to Mr Herbert's son. We had Elsie and her sister and one year a girl from school who was visiting her uncle at the pub. She was very fat and when we were playing a balloon game she managed to pull the paper chains down. We used to play games like 'The world is round and has two eyes and a mouth'. We would act out that bit with a walking stick, adding 'pass it on' as we passed the stick over. The trick was to change the hand that passed it on and the one who didn't was out.

Happy times to remember and they didn't cost a fortune. I'm sure we had more fun then than children today with their expensive entertainers.

It was always sad to take the tree down but we were comforted by sharing out the sweets from the tree.

Poor tree – it ended up on the bonfire.

We used to have a special trip in to Banbury, usually the week before Christmas, to buy our presents at Woolworths. Dad drove us in and Mother was able to get her last minute goodies from the market. I always bought a bunch of mistletoe (6d). One year it was foggy all week and we couldn't get there until Christmas Eve.

Of course we had our Christmas stockings on our beds. Santa came when we were at Mass. We always had a box of dates, a box of Turkish Delight, nuts and other goodies.

Such lovely memories.