

Memories of my childhood in East Clandon 1939 –1947

By Geoff Wallis, MBE

There are a number of opportunities when writing memories of childhood to stray from the facts through to fantasies and clouded dreams. What day or what event are you actually conscious of, did something happen in your early life that maybe you cannot remember but nevertheless has had an effect on the way you grew up, or is it the first event that can be collaborated by fact.

Well will start with a few basic facts. Life began for me during the evening of September 15th 1939 in Daphne Cottage, Back Lane, East Clandon. I had been preceded in previous years by one sister and two brothers, I was to be last in line as my father had sadly died six months earlier, and another unrelated problem was that the second world war had just started, two huge events that could well have an effect on my development.

Perhaps I should also add that 'our' part of Daphne Cottage was 'two up and two down' the other half being an entirely separate dwelling, neither having mains drainage or electricity.

Another fact is that I was baptised by the Rev. Glynn on November 5th 1939 at the Parish Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury where my Father's funeral had taken place some nine months earlier.

Early 'clouded' memories included Italian prisoners of war working locally and being very friendly to the villagers and especially the children. My first (and only) toys were hand made by the Italians cleverly made from wood and included a 'monkey on a stick' etc. Children would wander the lanes fields and woods in comparative safety and at one time an Italian brought me home as he thought I had strayed too far!

It is worth noting that although this period of war and poverty sounds rather awful, I was comparatively lucky, as I had not known anything different unlike the adults and older children. And at least I had my elder siblings to care for me as well as my mother.

Later German prisoners of war arrived in the village and were 'employed' on the land mainly digging trenches in the fields for drainage. Not knowing about the atrocities of war we thought it quite cruel that they were made to work so hard with armed guards standing by them.

Our playground was the entire village including the woods of Tumbledown where we would gather bunches of primroses and wild strawberries during the appropriate seasons. We would also visit the nearby sawmill to gather firewood.

We would be excited by the army or local home guard when they came to the village during exercises sometimes throwing dummy hand grenades causing us to shriek and run away but all in good fun.

News would also get around that a military convoy would be passing along the Epsom Road. These were often Canadian troops and we would shout, "got any gum chum". I had no idea what it was but I remember that the soldiers would throw out sweets and on one

occasion I was lucky enough to get a whole tube of Rowntrees Fruit Gums, my first ever sweets!

There was a large ammunition store on both sides of Staple Lane, and once we were told that some boys from London had broke in and thrown some explosives into the fields. Looking back it is highly unlikely that boys from London or anywhere else for that matter would have dared or been able to do such a thing, and it was probably a story to warn us away from the area.

However another story concerning 'boys' did actually take place and what a to do it was. My brothers and some others had found a derelict boat in the Wix Hill area and decided that they would carry it to the Sheep Wash to float in a great adventure (apparently it was in such a state that it would have probably sunk immediately). The owner contacted the police and the whole matter eventually went to the Guildford courts, a terribly worrying time for the parents, causing a local outcry. However Mr. Grover a solicitor who lived in the village represented the boys and families (his son being among them) presented the facts to the presiding magistrate who to the relief of the large gathering present dismissed the case at once!

German bombers flying on their deadly missions to London often disturbed our nights. They would follow the railway line on moonlit nights and some other times incendiary bombs were dropped all around. Being disturbed during the night and having to go downstairs and shelter under the table (we didn't have an Anderson Shelter) would terrify me, and to this day I am not happy in the dark. We were always told to keep quiet as though there were people outside who may hear us, which added to the terror. The German bombers returning from their raids on London would drop any 'spare' bombs to reduce their weight and one night a bomb fell in Back Lane just at the end of our garden but on the other side of the road but still too close for comfort. By some marvellous piece of luck we did not suffer any damage, which was even more remarkable when it was heard that houses in West Clandon had some windows broken due to the blast going in that direction!

At one time a 'dog fight' was witnessed above the common at the end of Back Lane. My brothers and others gathered the empty shell cases.

On another occasion we saw a parachute drifting towards the village, it actually came to grief in a tree (no longer there) just across the road from Daphne Cottage. The local a.r.p. (Mr. Witney) arrived and declared it safe. There wasn't any person attached (or so I was told).

Daphne Cottage did not have electricity and the house was lit by candles and oil lamps. The radio was operated by a large battery and accumulators. The latter had to be charged regularly and we had to make the long trip to West Horsley (on foot) with these acid filled square glass jars with handles to Deadmans shop. On my fourth birthday my brother asked if we could purchase some jelly for a treat for me. He was refused, as we didn't purchase our groceries from there. On seeing my disappointment a pack was produced (well it was my birthday).

Paraffin was delivered to the village by the 'paraffin man' in an old box van, (Miss Burling also sold it but hers was more expensive). Miss Burling was a fierce character and we

children were terrified of her. She would serve cheese, butter etc all cut from large blocks and she never appeared to wash her hands. I can't remember a smile or a kind word (there must have been at least a few?). Then one day we were sitting on the footpath near her shop and she comes out shouting, "hey you boys I've got some chips". There was great excitement at the thought of this tasty treat but on purchasing the same the chips turned out to be a new comic. No one dared to comment! Also a Mr. Foreman from Kingfield near Woking also delivered groceries to the village by a Jowett van on Friday evenings writing next weeks order in a duplicate book. There were also pies and sausage rolls delivered to the village hall weekly and you had to be a member of the 'pie club' to purchase these items. Once a year members would step aboard up to three coaches to be taken on a trip to the seaside - Worthing, Bognor or Littlehampton. We would always stop at a pub on the way down and on the return journey and we would always sing songs especially on the return journey.

I remember also that as a result of the bomb dropping in Back Lane, the resultant crater gave us a good supply of fresh clay that we used to make all sorts of items. They would only last a few days before they dried and crumbled.

Another story that I can tell now without any fear of retribution is that myself and another boy from Back Lane were playing in the old barn (now a super house). We lit a small fire in the doorway which gradually got bigger. The other boy found a can of 'liquid' and threw it over the flames in the hope that they would be put out. The fire blazed immediately (the 'liquid' turned out to be paraffin)! We ran to get help, and in no time at all it seemed, a fire engine arrived to extinguish the flames and very little damage was done. Later my mother told me that she had been searching for me to show me the fire engine! And later.....
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Some of the other memories include the wonderful children's Christmas parties at Hatchlands, these were a real treat. We would have lots of food and there was an enormous Christmas tree and we would all get a present, a real treat indeed. Land Army ladies would also work in the village and one day we witnessed the most horrifying accident as the van carrying the ladies crashed into a farm lorry emerging from the farm opposite Miss Burling's shop. We would also walk up to the farm near the Epsom Road with a jug to collect our milk.

And then to school...

I was not quite five years old when I started school at East Clandon C of E school (now a residential property). Miss Lake was the headmistress, and on the first day we had to go into our 'air raid shelter', which consisted of two large cupboards pushed together in a corner of the room, no cover from overhead but protection from any blast. We now had the added horror of the flying bombs we called the 'doodlebugs', and we heard one fly over the school. There were apparently several that day and one fell at Burnt Common destroying a house with the unfortunate death of some of the Privett family who were friends of ours. The senior school (St. Bedes) was damaged by the blast and the older children, including my brothers and sister were sent home. During this time I had been 'pushed' into a puddle in the school playground and my returning siblings took me home, quite an eventful day!

The school had 10-12 pupils slightly boosted by the arrival of refugees in the village from

London and Portsmouth but never exceeded 22. School dinners would be delivered in an old estate car from Horsley and sometimes due to shortages we would have bread instead of potatoes (which I did not like). Mrs Illing, a school helper would walk up and down and insist that we ate everything. I hated tomatoes at the time and if I could not get them onto the plate of the person beside me they would have to go into my pocket! One special treat though was the Canadian pink salmon, which was served in quite large chunks.

We grew most of our own vegetables at Daphne Cottage and we picked the large quantity of apples into bushel baskets, which I presume were then sold or swapped. We also kept rabbits and chicken for food. The non-mains toilet was at the top of the garden with a huge walnut tree almost leaning on it.

The Huggins family operated a workshop in Back Lane and had a huge hand wound sandstone for sharpening tools etc. and the forge near the Queens Head still operated. The three bells in the Church were rung every Sunday, we would say to the tune of 'Old Alf Day' who would be one if not the only bell ringer. (Later on in my life I became a bell ringer at West Clandon Parish Church under the guidance of Mr. Grover the previously mentioned local solicitor). The winters were much harder then and we would often 'skate' on the Sheep Wash but any slides that we made on local roads were often soon blunted by ashes from Mrs. Illing's fire. On the occasional trip to Guildford on buses with open staircases at the back we could be waiting at the bus stop and the police would hail the odd passing car and arrange a free lift.

Mrs. Lake was the headmistress at the school and numbers never exceeded 22 and were often down to 10 or 12 (probably why the school is no more).

The farms that operated in the village (five I think) were of high quality, some of the 'racks' of hay and straw were built and thatched to perfection, as were the potato clamps. We would often help during the harvest stacking the freshly cut corn sheaths (thrashing was done later) and also hunting the wild rabbits that came to light as the fields were cut.

So it was a very poor childhood in monetary terms but as I said before we knew no different I certainly don't feel as though I carry any 'scars' today unless of course you can count not accepting waste, that still bugs me.

My family who lived in three houses in East Clandon (two in Ripley Road) as well as Daphne Cottage are no longer represented in the village. At the time of writing this article my mother now 98 years and six months old lives in residential care in Ash. There remains a gravestone in the cemetery in memory of my eldest brother now at rest in the same grave of my father who is also remembered on the same stone. Nearby in an unmarked grave lies my Grandmother.

Now a beautiful and relatively wealthy village East Clandon, like so many other English villages, is very different to that of my childhood, and looking back there is a very strong argument for time not standing still.

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July 2004